Ciri, Child of Destiny

The Witcher

After watching the Netflix show, playing The Witcher 3 (the main story and only minimal side quests), I fell in love with the character of Ciri. But Ultimately ended up loving all the characters from Geralt, Triss, Yennifer, hell I should just name them all. I decided I wanted to know more about the characters, the world I found myself in and what the Witcher series was all about. So, I started reading the books… which have a huge problem. Flashbacks. You skip around in time so much without warning or expectation it is very confusing. Maybe I’m just stupid cause other people don’t seem to have a problem with this. But I’m having trouble keeping characters and events straight. This causes me a huge problem with understanding the events. Compounded with a lot of strange medieval terminologies that are used in the book it makes them very difficult to read and follow. I am fine with learning more about a character’s past through a flashback, but the narrative itself never makes it clear that we are in a flashback or a dream or what. To compound this dialog is often confused as to who is saying what. To this end I have decided to do a transcription of the books notating when flashbacks and dreams begin and end or what dialog belongs to who in confusing situations.



# The Last Wish

She came to him toward morning. She entered very carefully, moving silently, floating through the chamber like a phantom; the only sound was that of her mantle brushing her naked skin. Yet this faint sound was enough to wake the Witcher—or maybe it only tore him from the half-slumber in which he rocked monotonously, as though traveling through fathomless depths, suspended between the seabed and its calm surface amid gently undulating strands of seaweed.

He did not move, did not stir. The girl flitted closer, threw off her mantle and slowly, hesitantly, rested her knee on the edge of the large bed. He observed her through lowered lashes, still not betraying his wakefulness. The girl carefully climbed onto the bedclothes, and onto him, wrapping her thighs around him. Leaning forward on straining arms, she brushed his face with hair which smelled of chamomile. Determined, and as if impatient, she leaned over and touched his eyelids, cheeks, lips with the tips of her breasts. He smiled, very slowly, delicately, grasping her by the shoulders, and she straightened, escaping his fingers. She was radiant, luminous in the misty brilliance of dawn. He moved, but with pressure from both hands, she forbade him to change position and, with a light but decisive movement of her hips, demanded a response.

He responded. She no longer backed away from his hands; she threw her head back, shook her hair. Her skin was cool and surprisingly smooth. Her eyes, glimpsed when her face came close to his, were huge and dark as the eyes of a water nymph. Rocked, he sank into a sea of chamomile as it grew agitated and seethed.

## The Witcher

Later, it was said the man came from the north, from Ropers Gate. He came on foot, leading his laden horse by the bridle. It was late afternoon and the ropers’, saddlers’ and tanners’ stalls were already closed, the street empty. It was hot but the man had a black coat thrown over his shoulders. He drew attention to himself.

He stopped in front of the Old Narakort Inn, stood there for a moment, listened to the hubbub of voices. As usual, at this hour, it was full of people. The stranger did not enter the Old Narakort. He pulled his horse farther down the street to another tavern, a smaller one, called The Fox. Not enjoying the best of reputations, it was almost empty.

The innkeeper raised his head above a barrel of pickled cucumbers and measured the man with his gaze. The outsider, still in his coat, stood stiffly in front of the counter, motionless and silent.

“What will it be?”

“Beer,” said the stranger. His voice was unpleasant.

The innkeeper wiped his hands on his canvas apron and filled a chipped earthenware tankard. The stranger was not old but his hair was almost entirely white. Beneath his coat he wore a worn leather jerkin laced up at the neck and shoulders. As the stranger took off his coat those around him noticed that he carried a sword—not something unusual in itself, nearly every man in Vizima carried a weapon—but no one carried a sword strapped to his back as if it were a bow or a quiver.

The stranger did not sit at the table with the few other guests. He remained standing at the counter, piercing the innkeeper with his gaze. He drew from the tankard.

“I’m looking for a room for the night.”

“There's none,” grunted the innkeeper, looking at the guest's boots, dusty and dirty. “Ask at the Old Narakort.”

“I would rather stay here.”

“There is none.” The innkeeper finally recognized the stranger's accent. He was Rivian.

“I’ll pay.” The outsider spoke quietly, as if unsure, and the whole nasty affair began. A pockmarked beanpole of a man who, from the moment the outsider had entered had not taken his gloomy eyes from him, got up and approached the counter. Two of his companions rose behind him, no more than two paces away.

“There's no room to be had, you Rivian vagabond,” rasped the pockmarked man, standing right next to the outsider. “We don't need people like you in Vizima. This is a decent town!”

The outsider took his tankard and moved away. He glanced at the innkeeper, who avoided his eyes. It did not even occur to him to defend the Rivian. After all, who liked Rivians?

“All Rivians are thieves,” the pockmarked man went on, his breath smelling of beer, garlic and anger. “Do you hear me, you bastard?”

“He can't hear you. His ears are full of shit,” said one of the men with him, and the second man cackled.

“Pay and leave!” yelled the pocked man.

Only now did the Rivian look at him. “I’ll finish my beer.”

“We'll give you a hand,” the pockmarked man hissed. He knocked the tankard from the stranger's hand and simultaneously grabbing him by the shoulder, dug his fingers into the leather strap which ran diagonally across the outsider's chest. One of the men behind him raised a fist to strike. The outsider curled up on the spot, throwing the pockmarked man off balance. The sword hissed in its sheath and glistened briefly in the dim light. The place seethed. There was a scream, and one of the few remaining customers tumbled toward the exit. A chair fell with a crash and earthenware smacked hollowly against the floor. The innkeeper, his lips trembling, looked at the horribly slashed face of the pocked man, who, clinging with his fingers to the edge of the counter, was slowly sinking from sight. The other two were lying on the floor, one motionless, the other writhing and convulsing in a dark, spreading puddle. A woman's hysterical scream vibrated in the air, piercing the ears as the innkeeper shuddered, caught his breath, and vomited.

The stranger retreated toward the wall, tense and alert. He held the sword in both hands, sweeping the blade through the air. No one moved. Terror, like cold mud, was clear on their faces, paralyzing limbs and blocking throats.

Three guards rushed into the tavern with thuds and clangs. They must have been close by. They had truncheons wound with leather straps at the ready, but at the sight of the corpses, drew their swords. The Rivian pressed his back against the wall and, with his left hand, pulled a dagger from his boot.

“Throw that down!” one of the guards yelled with a trembling voice. “Throw that down, you thug! You're coming with us!”

The second guard kicked aside the table between himself and the Rivian.

“Go get the men, Treska!” he shouted to the third guard, who had stayed closer to the door.

“No need,” said the stranger, lowering his sword. “I’ll come by myself.”

“You'll go, you son of a bitch, on the end of a rope!” yelled the trembling guard. “Throw that sword down or I’ll smash your head in!”

The Rivian straightened. He quickly pinned his blade under his left arm and with his right hand raised toward the guards, swiftly drew a complicated sign in the air. The clout-nails which studded his tunic from his wrists to elbows flashed. The guards drew back, shielding their faces with their arms. One of the customers sprang up while another darted to the door. The woman screamed again, wild and earsplitting.

“I’ll come by myself,” repeated the stranger in his resounding, metallic voice. “And the three of you will go in front of me. Take me to the castellan. I don't know the way.”

*[A castellan is the governor of a castle and its surrounding territory referred to as the castellany]*

“Yes, sir,” mumbled the guard, dropping his head. He made toward the exit, looking around tentatively. The other two guards followed him out backward, hastily. The stranger followed in their tracks, sheathing his sword and dagger. As they passed the tables the remaining customers hid their faces from the dangerous stranger.

Velerad, castellan of Vizima, scratched his chin. He was neither superstitious nor fainthearted, but he did not relish the thought of being alone with the white-haired man. At last he made up his mind. “Leave,” he ordered the guards. “And you, sit down. No, not there. Farther away, if you please.”

The stranger sat down. He no longer carried his sword or black coat.

“I am Velerad, castellan of Vizima,” said Velerad, toying with a heavy mace lying on the table. “And I’m listening. What do you have to say to me, you brigand, before you are thrown into the dungeon? Three killed and an attempted spell-casting; not bad, not bad at all. Men are impaled for such things in Vizima. But I’m a just man, so I will listen to you, before you are executed. Speak.”

The Rivian unbuttoned his jerkin and pulled out a wad of white goat leather.

“You nail this crossways, in taverns,” he said quietly. “Is what's written here true?”

“Ah.” Velerad grunted, looking at the runes etched into the leather. “So that's it. And I didn't guess at once. Yes, it's true. It's signed by Foltest, King of Temeria, Pontar and Mahakam, which makes it true. A proclamation is a proclamation, Witcher, but law is law—and I take care of law and order in Vizima. I will not allow people to be murdered! Do you understand?”

The Rivian nodded to show he understood. Velerad snorted with anger.

“You carry the Witcher's emblem?” The stranger reached into his jerkin once more and pulled out a round medallion on a silver chain. It pictured the head of a wolf, baring its fangs. “And do you have a name? Any name will do, it's simply to make conversation easier.”

“My name is Geralt.”

“Geralt, then. Of Rivia I gather, from your accent?”

“Of Rivia.”

“Right. Do you know what, Geralt? This” Velerad slapped the proclamation...”let it go. It's a serious matter. Many have tried and failed already. This, my friend, is not the same as roughing up a couple of scoundrels.”

“I know. This is my job, Velerad. And that proclamation offers a three thousand oren reward.”

“Three thousand.” Velerad scowled. “And the princess as a wife, or so rumor says, although gracious Foltest has not proclaimed that.”

“I’m not interested in the princess,” Geralt said calmly. He was sitting motionless, his hands on his knees. “Just in the three thousand.”

“What times,” sighed the castellan. “What foul times! Twenty years ago who would have thought, even in a drunken stupor, that such a profession as a Witcher would exist? Itinerant killers of basilisks; traveling slayers of dragons and vodniks! Tell me, Geralt, are you allowed beer in your guild?”

“Certainly.”

Velerad clapped his hands. “Beer!” he called. “And sit closer, Geralt. What do I care?” When the beer arrived, it was cold and frothy.

“Foul times,” Velerod muttered, drinking deep from his tankard. “All sorts of filth has sprung up. Mahakam, in the mountains, is teeming with bogeymen. In the past it was just wolves howling in the woods, but now it's kobolds and spriggans wherever you spit, werewolves or some other vermin. Fairies and rusalkas snatch children from villages by the hundreds. We have diseases never heard of before; it makes my hair stand on end. And now, to top it all, this!” He pushed the wad of leather back across the table. “It's not surprising, Geralt, that you Witchers’ services are in demand.”

“The king's proclamation, castellan.” Geralt raised his head. “Do you know the details?”

Velerad leaned back in his chair, locked his hands over his stomach. “The details? Yes, I know them. Not firsthand perhaps, but from a good source.”

“That's what I want.”

“If you insist, then listen.” Velerad drank some beer and lowered his voice. “During the reign of old Medell, his father, when our gracious king was still a prince, Foltest showed us what he was capable of, and he was capable of a great deal. We hoped he would grow out of it. But shortly after his coronation Foltest surpassed himself, jaw-droppingly: he got his own sister with child. Adda was younger and they were always together, but nobody suspected anything except, perhaps, the queen…To get to the point: suddenly there is Adda with a huge belly, and Foltest talking about getting wed to his sister. The situation was made even more tense because Vizimir of Novigrad wanted his daughter, Dalka, to marry Foltest and had already sent out his envoys. We had to restrain Foltest from insulting them, and lucky we did, or Vizimir would have torn our insides out. Then, not without Adda's help—for she influenced her brother—we managed to dissuade the boy from a quick wedding.

“Well, then Adda gave birth. And now listen, because this is where it all starts. Only a few saw what she bore, but one midwife jumped from the tower window to her death and the other lost her senses and remains dazed to this day. So I gather that the royal bastard, a girl, as not comely *[attractive]*, and she died immediately. No one was in a hurry to tie the umbilical cord. Nor did Adda, to her good fortune, survive the birth.

“But then Foltest stepped in again. Wisdom dictated that the royal bastard should have been burned or buried in the wilderness. Instead, on the orders of our gracious king, she was laid to rest in a sarcophagus in the vaults beneath the palace.”

“It's too late for your wisdom now.” Geralt raised his head. “One of the Knowing Ones should have been sent for.”

“You mean those charlatans with stars on their hats? Of course. About ten of them came running later, when it became known what lay in the sarcophagus. And what scrambled out of it at night. Though it didn't start manifesting straight away. Oh, no. For seven years after the funeral there was peace. Then one night—it was a full moon—there were screams in the palace, shouting and commotion! I don't have to tell you; this is your trade and you've read the proclamation. The infant had grown in the coffin—and how! grown to have incredible teeth! In a word, she became a striga.

“Pity you didn't see the corpses, as I did. Had you, you'd have taken a great detour to avoid Vizima.”

Geralt was silent.

“Then, as I was saying,” Velerad continued, “Foltest summoned a whole crowd of sorcerers. They all jabbered at the same time and almost came to blows with those staffs they carry—to beat off the dogs, no doubt, once they've been set loose on them. And I think they regularly are. I’m sorry, Geralt, if you have a different opinion of wizards. No doubt you do, in your profession, but to me they are swindlers and fools. You Witchers inspire greater confidence in men. At least you are more straightforward.”

Geralt smiled but didn't comment.

“But, to the point.” The castellan peered into his tankard and poured more beer for himself and the Rivian. “Some of the sorcerers’ advice didn't seem so stupid. One suggested burning the striga together with the palace and the sarcophagus. Another advised chopping her head off. The rest were keen on driving aspen stakes into her body during the day, when the she-devil was asleep in her coffin, worn out by her night's delights. Unfortunately, one, a jester with a pointed hat and a bald pate, a hunchbacked hermit, argued it was magic: the spell could be undone and the striga would turn into Foltest's little daughter, as pretty as a picture. Someone simply had to stay in the crypt throughout the night, and that would be that. After which—can you imagine such a fool?—he went to the palace for the night. Little of him was left in the morning, only, I believe, his hat and stick. But Foltest clung to his idea like a burr to a dog's tail. He forbade any attempt to kill the striga and brought in charlatans from all corners of Vizima to reverse the spell and turn her into a princess. What colorful company! Twisted women, cripples, dirty and louse-ridden. It was pitiful.

“They went ahead and cast spells—mainly over a bowl and tankard. Of course, some were quickly exposed as frauds by Foltest or the council. A few were even hung on the palisades, but not enough of them. I would have hung them all. I don't suppose I have to say that the striga, in the meantime, was getting her teeth into all sorts of people every now and again and paying no attention to the fraudsters and their spells. Or that Foltest was no longer living in the palace. No one lived there anymore.”

Velerad paused, drank some beer, and the Witcher waited in silence.

“And so, it's been for seven years, Geralt, because she was born around fourteen years ago. We've had a few other worries, like war with Vizimir of Novigrad—fought for real, understandable reasons—over the border posts, not for some princess or marriage alliance. Foltest sporadically hints at marriage and looks over portraits from neighboring courts, which he then throws down the privy. And every now and then this mania seizes hold of him again, and he sends horsemen out to look for new sorcerers. His promised reward, the three thousand, has attracted any number of cranks, stray knights, even a shepherd known throughout the whole region as a cretin, may he rest in peace. But the striga is still doing well. Every now and again she gets her teeth into someone. You get used to it. And at least those heroes trying to reverse the spell have a use—the beast stuffs herself on the spot and doesn't roam beyond her palace. Foltest has a new palace, of course, quite a fine one.”

“In seven years” Geralt raised his head “in seven years, no one has settled the matter?”

“Well, no.” Velerad's gaze penetrated the Witcher. “Because the matter can't be settled. We have to come to terms with it, especially Foltest, our gracious and beloved ruler, who will keep nailing these proclamations up at crossroads. Although there are fewer volunteers now. There was one recently, but he insisted on the three thousand in advance. So, we put him in a sack and threw him in the lake.”

“There is still no shortage of fraudsters, then.”

“No, far from it,” the castellan agreed without taking his eyes off the Witcher. “That's why you mustn't demand gold in advance when you go to the palace. If you go.”

“I’ll go.”

“It's up to you. But remember my advice. As we're talking of the reward, there has been word recently about the second part of it. I mentioned it to you: the princess for a wife. I don't know who made it up, but if the striga looks the way they say then it's an exceptionally grim joke. Nevertheless, there's been no lack of fools racing to the palace for the chance of joining the royal family. Two apprentice shoemakers, to be precise. Why are shoemakers so foolish, Geralt?”

“I don't know. And Witchers, castellan? Have they tried?”

“There were a few. But when they heard the spell was to be lifted and the striga wasn't to be killed, they mostly shrugged and left. That's one of the reasons why my esteem for Witchers has grown, Geralt. And one came along, younger than you—I forget his name, if he gave it at all. He tried.”

“And?”

“The fanged princess spread his entrails over a considerable distance.”

Geralt nodded. “That was all of them?”

“There was one other.” Velerad remained silent for a while, and the Witcher didn't urge him on. “Yes,” the castellan said finally. “There was one more. At first, when Foltest threatened him with the noose if he killed or harmed the striga, he laughed and started packing his belongings. But then” Velerad leaned across the table, lowered his voice to almost a whisper “then he undertook the task. You see, Geralt, there are some wise men in Vizima, in high positions, who've had enough of this whole affair. Rumor has it these men persuaded the Witcher, in secret, not to fuss around with spells but to batter the striga to death and tell the king the spell had failed, that his dear daughter had been killed in self-defense: an accident at work. The king, of course, would be furious and refuse to pay an oren in reward. But that would be an end to it. The witty Witcher replied we could chase strigas ourselves for nothing. Well, what could we do? We collected money, bargained…but nothing came of it.”

Geralt raised his eyebrows.

“Nothing,” repeated Velerad. “The Witcher didn't want to try that first night. He trudged around, lay in wait, wandered about the neighborhood. Finally, they say, he saw the striga in action, as she does not clamber from her crypt just to stretch her legs. He saw her and scarpered that night. Without a word.”

Geralt's expression changed a little, in what was probably supposed to be a smile. “Those wise men,” he said, “they still have the money, no doubt? Witchers don't take payment in advance.”

“No doubt they still do,” said Velerad.

“Does the rumor say how much they offer?”

Velerad bared his teeth in a smile. “Some say eight hundred…”

Geralt shook his head.

“Others,” murmured the castellan, “talk of a thousand.”

“Not much when you bear in mind that rumor likes to exaggerate. And the king is offering three thousand.”

“Don't forget about the betrothal,” Velerad mocked. “What are you talking about? It's obvious you won't get the three thousand.”

“How's it obvious?”

Velerad thumped the table. “Geralt, do not spoil my impression of Witchers! This has been going on for more than seven years! The striga is finishing off up to fifty people a year, fewer now people are avoiding the palace. Oh no, my friend, I believe in magic. I’ve seen a great deal and I believe, to a certain extent, in the abilities of wizards and Witchers. But all this nonsense about lifting the spell was made up by a hunchbacked, snotty old man who'd lost his mind on his hermit's diet. It's nonsense which only Foltest believes. Adda gave birth to a striga because she slept with her brother. That is the truth, and no spell will help. Now the striga devours people as strigas do: she has to be killed, and that is that. Listen: two years ago, peasants from some godforsaken hole near Mahakam were plagued by a dragon devouring their sheep. They set out together, battered the dragon to death with stanchions *[a frame that holds the head of a cow in place, especially to facilitate milking],* and did not even think it worth boasting about. But we in Vizima are waiting for a miracle and bolting our doors every full moon or tying our criminals to a stake in front of the palace, praying the beast stuffs herself and returns to her sarcophagus.”

“Not a bad method.” The Witcher smiled. “Are there fewer criminals?”

“Not a bit of it.”

“Which way to the palace, the new one?”

“I will take you myself. And what about the wise men's suggestion?”

“Castellan,” said Geralt, “why act in haste? After all, I really could have an accident at work, irrespective of my intentions. Just in case, the wise men should be thinking about how to save me from the king's anger and get those fifteen hundred orens, of which rumor speaks, ready.”

“It was to be a thousand.”

“No, Lord Velerad,” the Witcher said categorically. “The Witcher who was offered a thousand ran at the mere sight of the striga, without bargaining. So, the risk is greater than a thousand. Whether it is greater than one and a half remains to be seen. Of course, I will say goodbye beforehand.”

“Geralt?” Velerad scratched his head. “One thousand two hundred?”

“No. This isn't an easy task. The king is offering three, and sometimes it's easier to lift a spell than to kill. But one of my predecessors would have done so, or killed the striga, if this were simple. You think they let themselves be devoured out of fear of the king?”

“Then, Witcher” Velerad nodded wistfully “our agreement stands. But a word of advice—say nothing to the king about the danger of an accident at work.”

Foltest was slim and had a pretty—too pretty—face. He was under forty, the Witcher thought. The king was sitting on a dwarf-armchair carved from black wood, his legs stretched out toward the hearth, where two dogs were warming themselves. Next to him on a chest sat an older, powerfully built man with a beard. Behind the king stood another man, richly dressed and with a proud look on his face. A magnate.

“A Witcher from Rivia,” said the king after the moment's silence which fell after Velerad's introduction.

“Yes, your Majesty.” Geralt lowered his head.

“What made your hair so gray? Magic? I can see that you are not old. That was a joke. Say nothing. You've had a fair amount of experience, I dare presume?”

“Yes, your Majesty.”

“I would love to hear about it.”

Geralt bowed even lower. “Your Majesty, you know our code of practice forbids us to speak of our work.”

“A convenient code, Witcher, very convenient. But tell me, have you had anything to do with spriggans?”

“Yes.”

“Vampires, leshys?”

“Those too.”

Foltest hesitated. “Strigas?”

Geralt raised his head, looking the king in the eyes. “Yes.”

Foltest turned his eyes away. “Velerad!”

“Yes, Gracious Majesty?”

“Have you given him the details?”

“Yes, your Gracious Majesty. He says the spell cast on the princess can be reversed.”

“I have known that for a long time. How, Witcher? Oh, of course, I forgot. Your code of practice. All right. I will make one small comment. Several Witchers have been here already. Velerad, you have told him? Good. So, I know that your specialty is to kill, rather than to reverse spells. This isn't an option. If one hair falls from my daughter's head, your head will be on the block. That is all. Ostrit, Lord Segelen, stay and give him all the information he requires. Witchers always ask a lot of questions. Feed him and let him stay in the palace. He is not to drift from tavern to tavern.”

The king rose, whistled to his dogs and made his way to the door, scattering the straw covering the chamber floor. At the door he paused. “If you succeed, Witcher, the reward is yours. Maybe I will add something if you do well. Of course, the nonsense spread by common folk about marrying the princess carries not a word of truth. I’m sure you don't believe I would give my daughter's hand to a stranger?”

“No, your Majesty. I don't.”

“Good. That shows you have some wisdom.”

Foltest left, closing the door behind him. Velerad and the magnate, who had been standing all the while, immediately sat at the table. The castellan finished the king's half-full cup, peered into the jug and cursed. Ostrit, who took Foltest's chair, scowled at the Witcher while he stroked the carved armrests. Segelin, the bearded man, nodded at Geralt.

“Do sit, Witcher, do sit. Supper will soon be served. What would you like to know? Castellan Velerad has probably already told you everything. I know him, he has sooner told you too much than too little.”

“Only a few questions.”

“Ask.”

“The castellan said that, after the striga's appearance, the king called up many Knowing Ones.”

“That's right. But don't say striga, say princess. It makes it easier to avoid making a mistake in the king's presence… and any consequent unpleasantness.”

“Was there anyone well-known among the Knowing Ones? Anyone famous?”

“There were such, then and later. I don't remember the names. Do you, Lord Ostrit?”

“I don't recall,” said the magnate. “But I know some of them enjoyed fame and recognition. There was much talk of it.”

“Were they in agreement that the spell can be lifted?”

“They were far from any agreement” Segelin smiled “on any subject. But such an opinion was expressed. It was supposed to be simple, not even requiring magical abilities. As I understand it, it would suffice for someone to spend the night: from sunset to the third crowing of the cock by the side of the sarcophagus.”

“Simple indeed,” snorted Velerad.

“I would like to hear a description of the…the princess.”

Velerad leapt up from his chair. “The princess looks like a striga!” he yelled. “Like the most strigish striga I have heard of! Her Royal Highness, the cursed royal bastard, is four cubits high, shaped like a barrel of beer, has a maw which stretches from ear to ear and is full of dagger-like teeth, has red eyes and a red mop of hair! Her paws, with claws like a wild cat's, hang down to the ground! I’m surprised we've yet to send her likeness to friendly courts! The princess, plague choke her, is already fourteen. Time to think of giving her hand to a prince in marriage!”

“Hold on, Velerad.” Ostrit frowned, glancing at the door. Segelin smiled faintly.

“The description, although vivid, is reasonably accurate, and that's what you wanted, isn't it, Witcher? Velerad didn't mention that the princess moves with incredible speed and is far stronger for her height and build than one would expect. And she is fourteen years old, if that is of any importance.”

“It is,” said the Witcher. “Do the attacks on people only occur during the full moon?”

“Yes,” replied Segelin, “if she attacks beyond the old palace. Within the palace walls people always die, irrespective of the moon's phase. But she only ventures out during the full moon, and not always then.”

“Has there been even one attack during the day?”

“No.”

“Does she always devour her victims?”

Velerad spat vehemently on the straw.

“Come on, Geralt, it'll be supper soon. Pish! Devours, takes a bite, leaves aside, it varies—according to her mood, no doubt. She only bit the head from one, gutted a couple, and a few more she picked clean to the bone, sucked them dry, you could say. Damned mother's—!”

“Careful, Velerad,” snarled Ostrit. “Say what you want about the striga but do not insult Adda in front of me, as you would not dare in the king's presence!”

“Has anyone she's attacked survived?” the Witcher asked, apparently paying no special attention to the magnate's outburst.

Segelin and Ostrit looked at each other.

“Yes,” said the bearded man. “At the very beginning, seven years ago, she threw herself at two soldiers standing guard over the crypt. One escaped...”

“And then,” interrupted Velerad, “there was another, the miller she attacked near the town. You remember…?”

[The next day]

The following day, late in the evening, the miller was brought to the small chamber above the guardhouse allocated to the Witcher. He was led in by a soldier in a hooded coat.

The conversation did not yield any significant results. The miller was terrified; he mumbled and stammered, and his scars told the Witcher more than he did. The striga could open her jaws impressively wide and had extremely sharp teeth, including very long upper fangs—four of them, two on each side. Her claws were sharper than a wildcat's, but less curved. And it was only because of that the miller had managed to tear himself away.

Having finished his examination Geralt nodded to the miller and soldier, dismissing them. The soldier pushed the peasant through the door and lowered his hood. It was Foltest himself.

“Sit, do not get up,” said the king. “This visit is unofficial. Are you happy with the interview? I heard you were at the palace this morning.”

“Yes, your Majesty.”

“When will you set about your task?”

“It is four days until the full moon. After that.”

“You prefer to have a look at her yourself beforehand?”

“There is no need. But having had her fill the—the princess will be less active.”

“Striga, master Witcher, striga. Let us not play at diplomacy. She will be a princess afterward. And that is what I have come to talk about. Answer me unofficially, briefly and clearly: will it work or not? Don't hide behind your code.”

Geralt rubbed his brow. “I confirm, your Majesty, that the spell might be reversed. And, unless I am mistaken, it can be done by spending the night at the palace. The third crowing of the cock, if it catches the striga outside her sarcophagus, will end the spell. That is what is usually done with strigas.”

“So simple?”

“It is not simple. First you must survive the night. Then there are exceptions to the rule, for example, not one night but three. Consecutively. There are also cases which are…well…hopeless.”

“Yes,” Foltest bristled. “I keep hearing that from some people. Kill the monster because it's an incurable case. Master Witcher, I am sure they have already spoken to you. Am I right? Hack the man-eater to death without any more fuss, at the beginning, and tell the king nothing else could be done. I won't pay, but they will. Very convenient. And cheap. Because the king will order the Witcher beheaded or hanged and the gold will remain in their pockets.”

“The king unconditionally orders the Witcher to be beheaded?” Geralt grimaced.

Foltest looked the Rivian in the eyes for a long while. “The king does not know,” he finally said. “But the Witcher should bear such an eventuality in mind.”

Geralt was silent for a moment. “I intend to do what is in my power,” he said. “But if it goes badly, I will defend my life. Your Majesty, you must also be prepared for such an eventuality.”

Foltest got up. “You do not understand me. It's obvious you'll kill her if it becomes necessary, whether I like it or not. Because otherwise she'll kill you, surely and inevitably. I won't punish anyone who kills her in self-defense. But I will not allow her to be killed without trying to save her. There have already been attempts to set fire to the old palace. They shot at her with arrows, dug pits and set traps and snares, until I hung a few of her attackers. But that is not the point. Witcher, listen!”

“I’m listening.”

“After the third crowing of the cock, there will be no striga, if I understand correctly. What will there be?”

“If all goes well, a fourteen-year-old girl.”

“With red eyes? Crocodile's teeth?”

“A normal fourteen-year-old. Except that…”

“Well?”

“Physically.”

“I see. And mentally? Every day, a bucket of blood for breakfast? A little girl's thigh?”

“No. Mentally…There is no telling. On the level, I think, of a three- or four-year-old child. She'll require loving care for a long while.”

“That's obvious. Witcher?”

“I’m listening.”

“Can it happen to her again? Later?”

Geralt was silent.

“Aha,” said the king. “It can. And what then?”

“Should she die after a long swoon lasting several days, her body will have to be burned. Quickly.”

Foltest grew gloomy.

“I do not think it will come to that,” added Geralt. “Just to be sure, I will give you some instructions, your Majesty, to lessen the danger.”

“Right now? Is it not too soon, master Witcher? And if...”

“Right now,” interrupted the Rivian. “Many things may happen, your Majesty. It could be that you'll find a princess in the morning, the spell already broken, and my corpse.”

“Even so? Despite my permission to defend yourself? Which, it seems, wasn't that important to you.”

“This is a serious matter, your Majesty. The risk is great. That is why you must listen: the princess should always wear a sapphire around her neck, or better, an inclusion, on a silver chain. Day and night.”

“What is an inclusion?”

“A sapphire with a pocket of air trapped within the stone. Aside from that, every now and then you should burn juniper, broom and aspen in the fireplace of her chamber.”

Foltest grew pensive. “I thank you for your advice, Witcher. I will pay heed if—And now listen to me carefully. If you find the case is hopeless, kill her. If you undo the spell but the girl is not…normal. If you have a shadow of a doubt as to whether you have been entirely successful, kill her. Do not worry, you have nothing to fear from me. I’ll shout at you in front of others, banish you from the palace and the town, nothing more, Of course I won't give you the reward, but maybe you'll manage to negotiate something from you know who.”

They were both quiet for a while.

“Geralt.” For the first time Foltest called the Witcher by his name.

“Yes.”

“How much truth is there in the rumor that the child is as she is because Adda was my sister?”

“Not much. A spell must be cast, they don't cast themselves. But I think your congress with your sister was the reason the spell was cast, and this is the result.”

“As I thought. That is what some of the Knowing Ones said, although not all of them. Geralt? Where do such things come from? Spells, magic?”

“I don't know, your Majesty. Knowing Ones study the causes of such phenomena. For us Witchers the knowledge that concentrated will can cause such phenomena is enough. That and the knowledge to fight them.”

“And kill them?”

“Usually. Besides, that is what we're usually paid for. Only a few demand the reversal of spells, your Majesty. As a rule, people simply want to defend themselves from danger. If the monster has men on its conscience, then revenge can also come into play.”

The king got up, took a few paces across the chamber, and stopped in front of the Witcher's sword hanging on the wall. “With this?” he asked, not looking at Geralt.

“No. That is for men.”

“So I heard. Do you know what, Geralt? I’m going to the crypt with you.”

“Out of the question.”

Foltest turned, his eyes glinted. “Do you know, sorcerer, that I have not seen her? Neither after she was born, nor later. I was afraid. I may never see her, am I not right? At least I have the right to see my daughter while you're murdering her.”

“I repeat, it's out of the question. It is certain death. For me as well as you. If my attention, my will falters—No, your Majesty.”

Foltest turned away, started toward the door. For a moment Geralt thought he would leave without a word, without a parting gesture, but the king stopped and looked at him.

“You inspire trust,” he said, “although I know what a rogue you are. I was told what happened at the tavern. I’m sure you killed those thugs solely for word to spread, to shock people, to shock me. It's obvious that you could have dealt with them without killing. I’m afraid I’ll never know whether you are going there to save my daughter, or to kill her. But I agree to it. I must agree. Do you know why?”

Geralt did not reply.

“Because I think,” said the king, “I think that she is suffering. Am I not right?”

The Witcher fixed his penetrating eyes on the king. He didn't confirm it, didn't nod, didn't make the slightest gesture, but Foltest knew. He knew the answer.

[A few days later]

Geralt looked out of the palace window for the last time. Dusk was falling rapidly. Beyond the lake the distant lights of Vizima twinkled. There was a wilderness around the old palace—a strip of no-man's land with which, over seven years, the town had cut itself off from this dangerous place, leaving nothing but a few ruins, rotten beams and the remains of a gap-toothed palisade which had obviously not been worth dismantling and moving. As far away as possible—at the opposite end of the settlement the king had built his new residence. The stout tower of his new palace loomed black in the distance, against the darkening blue of the sky.

In one of the empty, plundered chambers, the Witcher returned to the dusty table at which he was preparing, calmly and meticulously. He knew he had plenty of time. The striga would not leave her crypt before midnight. On the table in front of him he had a small chest with metal fittings. He opened it. Inside, packed tightly in compartments lined with dried grass, stood small vials of dark glass. The Witcher removed three.

From the floor, he picked up an oblong packet thickly wrapped in sheep's skins and fastened with a leather strap. He unwrapped it and pulled out a sword with an elaborate hilt, in a black, shiny scabbard covered with rows of runic signs and symbols. He drew the blade, which lit up with a pure shine of mirror-like brightness. It was pure silver.

Geralt whispered an incantation and drank, one after the other, the contents of two vials, placing his left hand on the blade of the sword after each sip. Then, wrapping himself tightly in his black coat, he sat down on the floor. There were no chairs in the chamber, or in the rest of the palace.

He sat motionless; his eyes closed. His breathing, at first even, suddenly quickened, became rasping and tense. And then stopped completely. The mixture which helped the Witcher gain full control of his body was chiefly made up of veratrum, stramonium, hawthorn and spurge. The other ingredients had no name in any human language. For anyone who was not, like Geralt, inured to it from childhood, it would have been lethal poison.

The Witcher turned his head abruptly. In the silence his hearing, sharpened beyond measure, easily picked out a rustle of footsteps through the courtyard overgrown with stinging nettles. It could not be the striga. The steps were too light. Geralt threw his sword across his back, hid his bundle in the hearth of the ruined chimney-place and, silent as a bat, ran downstairs.

It was still light enough in the courtyard for the approaching man to see the Witcher's face. The man, Ostrit, backed away abruptly; an involuntary grimace of terror and repulsion contorted his lips. The Witcher smiled wryly—he knew what he looked like. After drinking a mixture of banewart, monk's hood and eyebright the face takes on the color of chalk, and the pupils fill the entire iris. But the mixture enables one to see in the deepest darkness, and this is what Geralt wanted.

Ostrit quickly regained control.

“You look as if you were already a corpse, Witcher,” he said. “From fear, no doubt. Don't be afraid. I bring you reprieve.”

The Witcher did not reply.

“Don't you hear what I say, you Rivian charlatan? You're saved. And rich.” Ostrit hefted a sizeable purse in his hand and threw it at Geralt's feet. “A thousand orens. Take it, get on your horse and get out of here!”

The Rivian still said nothing.

“Don't gawp at me!” Ostrit raised his voice. “And don't waste my time. I have no intention of standing here until midnight. Don't you understand? I do not wish you to undo the spell. No, you haven't guessed. I am not in league with Velerad and Segelin. I don't want you to kill her. You are simply to leave. Everything is to stay as it is.”

The Witcher did not move. He did not want the magnate to realize how fast his movements and reactions now were. It was quickly growing dark. A relief, as even the semi-darkness of dusk was too bright for his dilated pupils.

“And why, sir, is everything to remain as it is?” he asked, trying to enunciate each word slowly.

“Now, that” Ostrit raised his head proudly “should really be of damn little concern to you.”

“And what if I already know?”

“Go on.”

“It will be easier to remove Foltest from the throne if the striga frightens the people even more? If the royal madness completely disgusts both magnates and common folk, am I right? I came here by way of Redania and Novigrad. There is much talk there that there are those in Vizima who look to King Vizimir as their savior and true monarch. But I, Lord Ostrit, do not care about politics, or the successions to thrones, or revolutions in palaces. I am here to accomplish my task. Have you never heard of a sense of responsibility and plain honesty? About professional ethics?”

“Careful to whom you speak, you vagabond!” Ostrit yelled furiously, placing his hand on the hilt of his sword. “I have had enough of this. I am not accustomed to hold such discussions! Look at you—ethics, codes of practice, morality?! Who are you to talk? A brigand who's barely arrived before he starts murdering men? Who bends double to Foltest and behind his back bargains with Velerad like a hired thug? And you dare to turn your nose up at me, you serf? Play at being a Knowing One? A Magician? You are scheming Witcher! Be gone before I run the flat of my sword across your gob!”

The Witcher did not stir. He stood calmly.

“You'd better leave, Lord Ostrit,” he said. “It's growing dark.”

Ostrit took a step back, drew his sword in a flash.

“You asked for this, you sorcerer. I’ll kill you. Your tricks won't help you. I carry a turtle-stone.”

Geralt smiled. The reputation of turtle-stone was as mistaken as it was popular. But the Witcher was not going to lose his strength on spells, much less expose his silver sword to contact with Ostrit's blade. He dived under the whirling blade and, with the heel of his hand and his silver-studded cuff, hit Ostrit in the temple.

[A couple of hours later]

Ostrit quickly regained consciousness and looked around in the total darkness. He noticed that he was tied up. He did not see Geralt standing right beside him. But he realized where he was and let out a prolonged, terrifying howl.

“Keep quiet,” said the Witcher. “Otherwise you'll lure her out before her time.”

“You damned murderer! Where are you? Untie me immediately, you louse! You'll hang for this, you son of a bitch!”

“Quiet.”

Ostrit panted heavily. “You're leaving me here to be devoured by her! Tied up?” he asked, quieter now, whispering a vile invective.

“No,” said the Witcher. “I’ll let you go. But not now.”

“You scoundrel,” hissed Ostrit. “To distract the striga?”

“Yes.”

Ostrit didn't say anything. He stopped wriggling and lay quietly. “Witcher?”

“Yes.”

“It's true that I wanted to overthrow Foltest. I’m not the only one. But I am the only one who wanted him dead. I wanted him to die in agony, to go mad, to rot alive. Do you know why?”

Geralt remained silent.

“I loved Adda. The king's sister. The king's mistress. The king's trollop. I loved her—Witcher, are you there?”

“I am.”

“I know what you're thinking. But it wasn't like that. Believe me, I didn't cast any spells. I don't know anything about magic. Only once in anger did I say…Only once. Witcher? Are you listening?”

“I am.”

“It's his mother, the old queen. It must be her. She couldn't watch him and Adda… It wasn't me. I only once, you know, tried to persuade them but Adda—Witcher! I was besotted, and said…Witcher? Was it me? Me?”

“It doesn't matter anymore.”

“Witcher? Is it nearly midnight?”

“It's close.”

“Let me go. Give me more time.”

“No.”

Ostrit did not hear the scrape of the tomb lid being moved aside, but the Witcher did. He leaned over and, with his dagger, cut the magnate's bonds. Ostrit did not wait, for the word. He jumped up, numb, hobbled clumsily, and ran. His eyes had grown accustomed enough to the darkness for him to see his way from the main hall to the exit.

The slab blocking the entrance to the crypt opened and fell to the floor with a thud. Geralt, prudently behind the staircase balustrade, saw the misshapen figure of the striga speeding swiftly and unerringly in the direction of Ostrit's receding footsteps. Not the slightest sound issued from the striga.

A terrible, quivering, frenzied scream tore the night, shook the old walls, continued rising and falling, vibrating. The Witcher couldn't make out exactly how far away it was—his sharpened hearing deceived him—but he knew that the striga had caught up with Ostrit quickly…. Too quickly.

He stepped into the middle of the hall, stood right at the entrance to the crypt. He threw down his coat, twitched his shoulders, adjusted the position of his sword, pulled on his gauntlets. He still had some time. He knew that the striga, although well fed after the last full moon, would not readily abandon Ostrit's corpse. The heart and liver were, for her, valuable reserves of nutrition for the long periods spent in lethargic sleep.

The Witcher waited. By his count, there were about three hours left until dawn. The cock's crow could only mislead him. Besides, there were probably no cocks in the neighborhood. He heard her. She was trudging slowly, shuffling along the floor. And then he saw her.

The description had been accurate. The disproportionately large head set on a short neck was surrounded by a tangled, curly halo of reddish hair. Her eyes shone in the darkness like an animal's. The striga stood motionless, her gaze fixed on Geralt. Suddenly she opened her jaws—as if proud of her rows of pointed white teeth—then snapped them shut with a crack like a chest being closed. And leapt, slashing at the Witcher with her bloodied claws.

Geralt jumped to the side, spun a swift pirouette. The striga rubbed against him, also spun around, slicing through the air with her talons. She didn't lose her balance and attacked anew, mid-spin, gnashing her teeth fractions of an inch from Geralt's chest. The Rivian jumped away, changing the direction of his spin with a fluttering pirouette to confuse the striga. As he leapt away, he dealt a hard blow to the side of her head with the silver spikes studding the knuckles of his gauntlet.

The striga roared horribly, filling the palace with a booming echo, fell to the ground, froze and started to howl hollowly and furiously. The Witcher smiled maliciously. His first attempt, as he had hoped, had gone well. Silver was fatal to the striga, as it was for most monsters brought into existence through magic. So, there was a chance the beast was like the others, and that boded well for lifting the spell. While the silver sword would, as a last resort assure his life.

The striga was in no hurry with her next attack. She approached slowly, baring her fangs, dribbling repulsively. Geralt backed away and, carefully placing his feet, traced a semi-circle. By slowing and quickening his movements he distracted the striga, making it difficult for her to leap. As he walked, the Witcher unwound a long, strong silver chain, weighted at the end.

The moment the striga tensed and leapt the chain whistled through the air and, coiling like a snake, twined itself around the monster's shoulders, neck and head. The striga's jump became a tumble, and she let out an ear-piercing whistle. She thrashed around on the floor, howling horribly with fury or from the burning pain inflicted by the despised metal. Geralt was content—if he wanted, he could kill the striga without great difficulty. But the Witcher did not draw his sword. Nothing in the striga's behavior had given him reason to think she might be an incurable case. Geralt moved to a safer distance and, without letting the writhing shape on the floor out of his sight, breathed deeply, focused himself.

The chain snapped. The silver links scattered like rain in all directions, ringing against the stone. The striga, blind with fury, tumbled to the attack, roaring. Geralt waited calmly and, with his raised right hand, traced the Sign of Aard in front of him.

The striga fell back as if hit by a mallet but kept her feet, extended her talons, bared her fangs. Her hair stood on end and fluttered as if she were walking against a fierce wind. With difficulty, one rasping step at a time, she slowly advanced. But advance she did.

Geralt grew uneasy. He did not expect such a simple Sign to paralyze the striga entirely but neither did he expect the beast to overcome it so easily. He could not hold the Sign for long, it was too exhausting, and the striga had no more than ten steps to go. He lowered the Sign suddenly and sprung aside. The striga, taken by surprise, flew forward, lost her balance, fell, slid along the floor and tumbled down the stairs into the crypt's entrance, yawning in the floor.

Her infernal scream reverberated from below.

To gain time Geralt jumped on to the stairs leading to the gallery. He had not even climbed halfway up when the striga ran out of the crypt, speeding along like an enormous black spider. The Witcher waited until she had run up the stairs after him, then leapt over the balustrade. The striga turned on the stairs, sprang and flew at him in an amazing ten-meter leap. She did not let herself be deceived by his pirouettes this time; twice her talons left their mark on the Rivian's leather tunic. But another desperately hard blow from the silver spiked gauntlet threw the striga aside, shook her. Geralt, feeling fury building inside him, swayed, bent backward and, with a mighty kick, knocked the beast off her legs.

The roar she gave was louder than all the previous ones. Even the plaster crumbled from the ceiling.

The striga sprang up, shaking with uncontrolled anger and lust for murder. Geralt waited. He drew his sword, traced circles with it in the air, and skirted the striga, taking care that the movement of his sword was not in rhythm with his steps. The striga did not jump. She approached slowly, following the bright streak of the blade with her eyes.

Geralt stopped abruptly, froze with his sword raised. The striga, disconcerted, also stopped. The Witcher traced a slow semi-circle with the blade, took a step in the striga's direction. Then another. Then he leapt, feigning a whirling movement with his sword above her head.

The striga curled up, retreated in a zigzag. Geralt was close again, the blade shimmering in his hand. His eyes lit up with an ominous glow, a hoarse roar tore through his clenched teeth. The striga backed away, pushed by the power of concentrated hatred, anger and violence which emanated from the attacking man and struck her in waves, penetrating her mind and body. Terrified and pained by feelings unknown to her she let out a thin, shaking squeak, turned on the spot and ran off in a desperate, crazy escape down the dark tangle of the palace's corridors.

Geralt stood quivering in the middle of the hall. Alone. It had taken a long time, he thought, before this dance on the edge of an abyss, this mad, macabre ballet of a fight, had achieved the desired effect, allowed him to psychically become one with his opponent, to reach the underlayers of concentrated will which permeated the striga. The evil twisted will from which the striga was born. The Witcher shivered at the memory of taking on that evil to redirect it, as if in a mirror, against the monster. Never before had he come across such a concentration of hatred and murderous frenzy, not even from basilisks, who enjoyed a ferocious reputation for it.

All the better, he thought as he walked toward the crypt entrance and the blackness that spread from it like an enormous puddle. All the better, all the stronger, was the blow received by the striga. This would give him a little more time until the beast recovered from the shock. The Witcher doubted whether he could repeat such an effort. The elixirs were weakening, and it was still a long time until dawn. But the striga could not return to her crypt before first light, or all his trouble would come to nothing.

He went down the stairs. The crypt was not large; there was room for three stone sarcophagi. The slab covering the first was half pushed aside. Geralt pulled the third vial from beneath his tunic, quickly drank its contents, climbed into the tomb and stretched out in it. As he had expected, it was a double tomb—for mother and daughter.

He had only just pulled the cover closed when he heard the striga's roar again. He lay on his back next to Adda's mummified corpse and traced the Sign of Yrden on the inside of the slab. He laid his sword on his chest, stood a tiny hourglass filled with phosphorescent sand next to it and crossed his arms. He no longer heard the striga's screams as she searched the palace. He had gradually stopped hearing anything as the true-love and celandine began to work.

[A couple of hours later]

When Geralt opened his eyes, the sand had passed through the hourglass, which meant his sleep had been even longer than he had intended. He pricked up his ears and heard nothing. His senses were now functioning normally.

He took hold of his sword and, murmuring an incantation, ran his hand across the lid of the sarcophagus. He then moved the slab slightly, a couple of inches.

Silence.

He pushed the lid further, sat, holding his weapon at the ready, and lifted his head above the tomb. The crypt was dark but the Witcher knew that outside dawn was breaking. He struck a match, lit a miniature lamp and lifted it, throwing strange shadows across the walls of the crypt.

The room was empty.

He scrambled from the sarcophagus, aching, numb, cold. And then he saw her. She was lying on her back next to the tomb, naked and unconscious.

She was rather ugly. Slim with small pointed breasts, and dirty. Her hair, flaxen red, reached almost to her waist. Standing the lamp on the slab, he knelt beside her and leaned over. Her lips were pale and her face was bloody where he had hit her cheekbone. Geralt removed his gloves, put his sword aside and, without any fuss, drew up her top lip with his finger. Her teeth were normal. He reached for her hand, which was buried in her tangled hair. Before he took it, he saw her open eyes. Too late.

She swiped him across the neck with talons, that had not yet turned back into fingernails, cutting him deeply. Blood splashed onto her face. She howled, striking him in the eyes with her other hand. He fell on her, grabbing her by the wrists, nailing her to the floor. She gnashed her teeth—which were now too short—in front of his face. He butted her in the face with his forehead and pinned her down harder. She had lost her former strength; she could only writhe beneath him, howling, spitting out blood—his blood—which was pouring over her mouth. His blood was draining away quickly. There was no time. The Witcher cursed and bit her hard on the neck, just below the ear. He dug his teeth in and clenched them until her inhuman howling became a thin, despairing scream and then a choking sob—the cry of a hurt fourteen-year-old girl.

He let her go when she stopped moving, got to his knees, tore a piece of canvas from his sleeve pocket and pressed it to his neck. He felt for his sword, held the blade to the unconscious girl's throat, and leaned over her hand. The nails were dirty, broken, bloodied but…normal. Completely normal.

The Witcher got up with difficulty. The sticky-wet grayness of early morning was flooding in through the crypt's entrance. He made a move toward the stairs but staggered and sat down heavily on the floor. Blood was pouring through the drenched canvas onto his hands, running down his sleeve. He unfastened his tunic, slit his shirt, tore and ripped rags from it and tied them around his neck, knowing that he didn't have much time, that he would soon faint…

He just managed to wrap finish tying the rags around his neck when he fainted. In Vizima, beyond the lake, a cock, ruffling his feathers in the cold damp, crowed hoarsely for the third time.

[Two days later]

He saw the whitened walls and beamed ceiling of the small chamber above the guardroom. He moved his head, grimacing with pain, and moaned. His neck was bandaged, thickly, thoroughly, professionally.

“Lie still, Witcher,” said Velerad. “Lie, do not move.”

“My…sword…”

“Yes, yes. Of course, what is most important is your Witcher’s silver sword. It’s here don't worry. Both the sword and your little trunk. And the three thousand orens. Yes, yes, don't utter a word. It is I who am an old fool and you the wise Witcher. Foltest has been repeating it over and over for the last two days.”

“Two…”

“Oh yes, two. She slit your neck open quite thoroughly. One could see everything you have inside there. You lost a great deal of blood. Fortunately, we hurried to the palace straight after the third crowing of the cock. Nobody slept in Vizima that night. It was impossible; you made a terrible noise. Does my talking tire you?”

“The prin…cess?”

“The princess is like a princess. Thin. And somewhat dull-witted. She weeps incessantly and wets her bed. But Foltest says this will change. I don't think it'll change for the worse, do you, Geralt?”

The Witcher closed his eyes.

“Good. I take my leave now. Rest.” Velerad got up. “Geralt? Before I go, tell me: why did you try to bite her to death? Eh? Geralt?”

The Witcher was asleep.

## The Voice of Reason

“Geralt.”

He raised his head, torn from sleep. The sun was already high and forced blinding golden rays through the shutters, penetrating the chamber with tentacles of light. The Witcher shaded his eyes with his hand in an unnecessary, instinctive reflex which he had never managed to shake off—all he needed to do, after all, was narrow his pupils into vertical slits.

“It's late,” said Nenneke, opening the shutters. “You've slept in. Off with you, Iola.”

The girl sat up suddenly and leaned out of bed to take her mantle from the floor. Geralt felt a trickle of cool saliva on his shoulder, where her lips had been a moment ago.

“Wait…” he said hesitantly. She looked at him, quickly turned away. She had changed. There was nothing of the water nymph in her anymore, nothing of the luminous, chamomile-scented apparition she had been at dawn. Her eyes were blue, not black. And she had freckles—on her nose, her neckline, her shoulders. They weren't unattractive; they suited her complexion and reddish hair. But he hadn't seen them at dawn, when she had been his dream. With shame he realized he felt resentment toward her, resentment that she hadn't remained a dream, and that he would never forgive himself for it.

“Wait,” he repeated. “Iola…I wanted…”

“Don't speak to her, Geralt,” said Nenneke. “She won't answer you anyway. Off with you, Iola.”

Wrapped in her mantle, the girl pattered toward the door, her bare feet slapping the floor—troubled, flushed, awkward. No longer reminding him, in any way, of….. Yennefer.

“Nenneke,” he said, reaching for his shirt. “I hope you're not annoyed that… You won't punish her, will you?”

“Fool,” the priestess snorted. “You've forgotten where you are. This is neither a hermitage nor a convent. It's Melitele's temple. Our goddess doesn't forbid our priestesses anything. Almost.”

“You forbade me to talk to her.”

“I didn't forbid you. But I know it's pointless. Iola doesn't speak.”

“What?”

“She doesn't speak. She's taken a vow. It's a sort of sacrifice through which…Oh, what's the point of explaining; you wouldn't understand anyway. You wouldn't even try to understand. I know your views on religion. No, don't get dressed yet. I want to check your neck.” She sat on the edge of the bed and skillfully unwound the linen bandages wrapped thickly around the Witcher’s neck. He grimaced in pain.

As soon as he had arrived in Ellander, Nenneke had removed the painfully thick stitches of shoemaker's twine with which they had stitched him in Vizima, opened the wound and dressed it again. The results were clear: he had arrived at the temple almost cured, if perhaps a little stiff. Now he was sick again, and in pain. But he didn't protest. He'd known the priestess for years and knew how great her knowledge of healing was, how rich and comprehensive her pharmacy was. A course of treatment at Melitele's temple could do nothing but good.

Nenneke felt the wound, washed it and began to curse. He already knew this routine by heart. She had started on the very first day and had never failed to moan when she saw the marks left by the princess of Vizima's talons.

“It's terrible! To let yourself be slashed like this by an ordinary striga. Muscles, tendons—she only just missed your carotid artery! Great Melitele! Geralt, what's happening to you? How did she get so close to you? What did you want with her? To mount her?”

He smiled faintly.

“Don't grin like an idiot.” The priestess rose and took a bag of dressings from the chest of drawers. Despite her weight and low stature, she moved swiftly and gracefully. “There's nothing funny about it. You're losing your reflexes, Geralt.”

“You're exaggerating.”

“I’m not exaggerating at all.” Nenneke spread a greenish mush smelling sharply of eucalyptus over the wound. “You shouldn't have allowed yourself to get wounded, but you did, and very seriously at that. Fatally even. And even with your exceptional powers of regeneration it'll be months before your neck is fully mobile again. I warn you, don't test your strength by fighting an agile opponent during that time.”

“Thank you for the warning. Perhaps you could give me some advice, too: how am I supposed to live in the meantime? Rally a few girls, buy a cart and organize a traveling house of ill-repute?”

Nenneke shrugged, bandaging his neck with quick, deft movements. “Am I supposed to give you advice and teach you how to live? Am I your mother or something? Right, that's done. You can get dressed. Breakfast's waiting for you in the refectory [a room used for communal meals in an educational or religious institution]. Hurry up or you'll have to make it yourself. I don't intend to keep the girls in the kitchen to midday.”

“Where will I find you later? In the sanctuary?”

“No.” Nenneke got up. “Not in the sanctuary. You're a welcome guest here, Witcher, but don't hang around in the sanctuary. Go for a walk, and I’ll find you myself.”

“Fine.”

[A bit later]

Geralt strolled—for the fourth time—along the poplar alley which led from the gate to the dwellings by the sanctuary and main temple block, which merged into the sheer rock. After brief consideration he decided against returning to shelter and turned toward the gardens and outbuildings. Umpteen priestesses, clad in gray working garments, were toiling away, weeding the beds and feeding the birds in the henhouses. Most of them were young or very young, virtually children. Some greeted him with a nod or a smile in passing. He answered their greetings but didn't recognize any of them. Although he often visited the temple once or even twice a year, he never saw more than three or four faces he knew. The girls came and went—becoming oracles in other temples, midwives and healers specializing in women's and children's diseases, wandering druids, teachers or governesses. But there was never a shortage of priestesses, arriving from all over, even the remotest regions. Melitele's temple in Ellander was well-known and enjoyed well-earned fame.

The cult of Melitele was one of the oldest and, in its day, one of the most widespread cults from time immemorial. Practically every pre-human race and every primordial nomadic human tribe honored a goddess of harvest and fertility, a guardian of farmers and gardeners, a patroness of love and marriage. Many of these religions merged into the cult of Melitele.

Time, which was quite pitiless toward other religions and cults, effectively isolating them in forgotten, rarely visited little temples and oratories buried among urban buildings, had proved merciful to Melitele. She did not lack either followers or sponsors. In explaining the popularity of the goddess, learned men who studied this phenomenon used to hark back to the pre-cults of the Great Mother, Mother Nature, and pointed to the links with nature's cycle, with the rebirth of life and other grandiloquently named phenomena. Geralt's friend, the troubadour [bard] Dandelion, who enjoyed a reputation as a specialist in every possible field, looked for simpler explanations. Melitele's cult, he deduced, was a typical woman's cult. Melitele was, after all, the patroness of fertility and birth; she was the guardian of midwives. And a woman in labor must scream. Apart from the usual cries—usually promising never to give herself to any bloody man ever again in her life—a woman in labor must call upon some godhead for help, and Melitele was perfect. And since women gave birth, give birth and will continue to give birth, the goddess Melitele, the poet proved, did not have to fear for her popularity.

“Geralt.”

“Nenneke. I was looking for you.”

“Me?” The priestess looked at him mockingly. “Not Iola?”

“Iola, too,” he admitted. “Does that bother you?”

“Right now, yes. I don't want you to get in her way and distract her. She's got to get herself ready and pray if something's to come of this trance.”

“I’ve already told you,” he said coldly, “I don't want any trance. I don't think a trance will help me in any way.”

“While I” Nenneke winced “don't think a trance will harm you in any way.”

“I can't be hypnotized. I have immunity. I’m afraid for Iola. It might be too great an effort for a medium.”

“Iola isn't a medium or a mentally ill soothsayer. That child enjoys the goddess's favor. Don't pull silly faces, if you please. As I said, your view on religion is known to me, it's never particularly bothered me and, no doubt, it won't bother me in the future. I’m not a fanatic. You've a right to believe that we're governed by Nature and the Force hidden within her. You can think that the gods, including my Melitele, are merely a personification of this power invented for simpletons so they can understand it better and accept its existence. According to you, that power is blind. But for me, Geralt, faith allows you to expect what my goddess personifies from nature: order, law, goodness. And hope.”

“I know.”

“If you know that, then why your reservations about the trance? What are you afraid of? That I’ll make you bow your head to a statue and sing canticles? Geralt, we'll simply sit together for a while—you, me and Iola—and see if the girl's talents will let her see into the vortex of power surrounding you. Maybe we'll discover something worth knowing. And maybe we won't discover anything. Maybe the power and fate surrounding you won't choose to reveal themselves to us, will remain hidden and incomprehensible. I don't know. But why shouldn't we try?”

“Because there's no point. I’m not surrounded by any vortex or fate. And if I were, why the hell would I delve into it?”

“Geralt, you're sick.”

“Injured, you mean.”

“I know what I mean. There's something not quite right with you. I can sense that. After all, I have known you ever since you were a youngster. When I met you, you came up to my waist. And now I feel that you're spinning around in some damned whirlpool, tangled up in a slowly tightening noose. I want to know what's happening. But I can't do it myself. I have to count on Iola's gifts.”

“You want to delve too deeply. Why the metaphysics? I’ll confide in you, if you like. I’ll fill your evenings with tales of ever more astounding events from the past few years. Get a keg of beer so my throat doesn't dry up and we can start today. But I fear I’ll bore you because you won't find any nooses or vortexes there. Just a Witcher’s ordinary tales.”

“I’ll willingly listen to them. But a trance, I repeat, would do no harm.”

“Don't you think” he smiled “that my lack of faith makes such a trance pointless?”

“No, I don't. And do you know why?”

“No.”

Nenneke leaned over and looked him in the eyes with a strange smile on her pale lips. “Because it would be the first proof I’ve ever heard of that a lack of faith has any kind of power at all.”

## A grain of Truth

Several black points moving against a bright sky streaked with mist drew the Witcher’s attention. Birds. They wheeled in slow, peaceful circles, then suddenly swooped and soared up again, flapping their wings.

The Witcher observed the birds for a long time, then—bearing in mind the shape of the land, density of the wood, depth and course of the ravine which he suspected lay in his path—calculated the distance to them, and how long he would take to cover it. Finally, he threw aside his coat and tightened the belt across his chest by two holes. The pommel and hilt of the sword strapped across his back peeked over his shoulder.

“We'll go a little out of our way, Roach,” he said. “We'll take a detour from the highway. I don't think the birds are circling there for nothing.”

The mare walked on, obedient to Geralt's voice.

“Maybe it's just a dead elk,” said Geralt. “But maybe it's not. Who knows?”

There was a ravine, as he had suspected; the Witcher scanned the crowns of the trees tightly filling the rift. But the sides of the gully were gentle, the riverbed dry and clear of blackthorns and rotting tree trunks. He crossed it easily. On the other side was a copse [small group of trees] of birches, and behind it a large glade, heath and undergrowth, which threw tentacles of tangled branches and roots upward.

The birds, scared away by the appearance of a rider, soared higher, croaking sharply in their hoarse voices.

Geralt saw the first corpse immediately… the white of the sheepskin jacket and matt-blue of the dress stood out clearly against a yellowing clump of sedge. He didn't see the second corpse, but its location was betrayed by three wolves sitting calmly on their haunches watching the Witcher. His mare snorted and the wolves, as if at a command, unhurriedly trotted into the woods, every now and again turning their triangular heads to watch the newcomer. Geralt jumped off his horse.

The woman in the sheepskin and blue dress had no face or throat, and most of her left thigh had gone. The Witcher, not leaning over, walked by her. The man lay with his face to the ground. Geralt didn't turn the body over, seeing that the wolves and birds hadn't been idle. And there was no need to examine the corpse in detail—the shoulders and back of the woolen doublet were covered with thick black rivulets of dried blood. It was clear the man had died from a blow to the neck, and the wolves had only found the body afterward.

On a wide belt next to a short cutlass in a wooden sheath the man wore a leather purse. The Witcher tore it off and, item by item, threw the contents on the grass: a tinderbox, a piece of chalk, sealing-wax, a handful of silver coins, a folding shaving-knife with a bone handle, a rabbit's ear, three keys and a talisman with a phallic symbol. Two letters, written on canvas, were damp with rain and dew, smudged beyond readability. The third, written on parchment, was also ruined by damp, but still legible. It was a credit note made out by the dwarves’ bank in Murivel to a merchant called Rulle Asper, or Aspen. It wasn't for a large sum.

Bending over, Geralt lifted the man's right hand. As he had expected, the copper ring digging into the swollen, blue finger carried the sign of the armorers’ guild: a stylized helmet with visor, two crossed swords and the rune “A” engraved beneath them.

The Witcher returned to the woman's corpse. As he was turning the body over, something pricked him in the finger—a rose, pinned to the dress. The flower had withered but not lost its color: the petals were dark blue, very dark blue. It was the first time Geralt had seen such a rose. He turned the body over completely and winced.

On the woman's bare and bloody neck were clear bite marks. And not those of a wolf.

The Witcher carefully backed away to his horse. Without taking his eyes from the forest edge, he climbed into the saddle. He circled the glade twice and, leaning over, looked around, examining the ground closely.

“So, Roach,” he said quietly, “the case is reasonably clear. The armorer and the woman arrived on horseback from the direction of the forest. They were on their way home from Murivel, because nobody carries an uncashed credit note for long. Why they were going this way and not following the highway? I don't know. But they were crossing the heath, side by side. And then—again, I don't know why—they both dismounted, or fell from, their horses. The armorer died instantly. The woman ran, then fell and died, and whatever attacked her—which didn't leave any tracks—dragged her along the ground, with her throat in its teeth. The horses ran off. This happened two or three days ago.”

The mare snorted restlessly, reacting to his tone of voice.

“The thing which killed them,” continued Geralt, watching the forest's edge, “was neither a werewolf nor a leshy. Neither would have left so much for the scavengers. If there were swamps here, I’d say it was a kikimora or a vypper…but there aren't any swamps here.”

Leaning over, the Witcher pulled back the blanket which covered the horse's side and uncovered another sword strapped to the saddlebag: one with a shining, ornate guard and black corrugated hilt.

“Well, Roach. We're taking a roundabout route; we'd better check why this armorer and woman were riding through the forest, not along the highway. If we pass by ignoring such incidents, we won't ever earn enough for your oats, will we?”

The mare obediently moved forward, across the heath, carefully sidestepping hollows.

“Although it's not a werewolf, we won't take any risks,” the Witcher continued, taking a bunch of dried monkshead from a saddlebag and hanging it by the bit. The mare snorted. Geralt unlaced his tunic a little and pulled out a medallion engraved with a wolf with bared jaws. The medallion, hanging on a silver chain, bobbed up and down in rhythm to the horse's gait, sparkling in the sun's rays like mercury.

[A few hours later]

He noticed the red tiles of the tower's conical roof from the summit of a hill as he cut across a bend in the faint trail. The slope, covered with hazel, dry branches and a thick carpet of yellow leaves, wasn't safe to descend on horseback. The Witcher retreated, carefully rode down the incline and returned to the main path. He rode slowly, stopped the horse every now and again and, hanging from the saddle, looked out for tracks.

The mare tossed her head, neighed wildly, stamped and danced on the path, kicking up a storm of dried leaves. Geralt, wrapping his left arm around the horse's neck, swept his right hand, his fingers arranged in the Sign of Axia over the mount's head as he whispered an incantation.

“Is it as bad as all that?” he murmured, looking around still holding the Sign. “Easy, Roach, easy.”

The charm worked quickly but the mare, prodded with his heel, moved forward reluctantly, losing the natural springy rhythm of her gait. The Witcher jumped nimbly to the ground and went on by foot, leading her by the bridle. He saw a wall.

There was no gap between the wall and the forest, no distinct break. The young trees and juniper bushes twined their leaves with the ivy and wild vines clinging to the stonework. Geralt looked up. At that same moment, he felt a prickle along his neck, as if an invisible, soft creature had latched on to his neck, lifting the hairs there.

He was being watched.

He turned around smoothly. Roach snorted; the muscles in her neck twitched, moved under her skin. A girl was standing on the slope of the hill he had just climbed down, one arm resting on the trunk of an alder tree. Her trailing white dress contrasted with the glossy blackness of her disheveled hair, falling to her shoulders. She seemed to be smiling, but she was too far away to be sure.

“Greetings,” he said, raising his hand in a friendly gesture. He took a step toward the girl. She turned her head a little, following his movements. Her face was pale, her eyes black and enormous. The smile—if it had been a smile—vanished from her face as though wiped away with a cloth. Geralt took another step, the leaves rustled underfoot, and the girl ran down the slope like a deer, flitting between the hazel bushes. She was no more than a white streak as she disappeared into the depths of the forest. The long dress didn't appear to restrict her ease of movement in the least.

Roach neighed anxiously, tossing her head. Geralt, still watching the forest, instinctively calmed her with the Sign again. Pulling the mare by the bridle, he walked slowly along the wall, wading through burdock up to the waist.

He came to a sturdy gate, with iron fittings and rusty hinges, furnished with a great brass knocker. After a moment's hesitation Geralt reached out and touched the tarnished ring. He immediately jumped back as, at that moment, the gate opened, squeaking, clattering, and raking aside clumps of grass, stones and branches. There was no one behind it—the Witcher could only see a deserted courtyard, neglected and overgrown with nettles. He entered, leading Roach. The mare, still stunned by the Sign, didn't resist, but she moved stiffly and hesitantly after him.

The courtyard was surrounded on three sides by a wall and the remains of some wooden scaffolding. On the fourth side stood the mansion, its façade mottled by a pox of chipped plaster, dirty damp patches, and festooned with ivy. The shutters, with their peeling paint, were closed, as was the door.

Geralt threw Roach's reins over the pillar by the gate and slowly made his way toward the mansion, following the gravel path past a small fountain full of leaves and rubbish. In the center of the fountain, on a fanciful plinth, a white stone dolphin arched, turning its chipped tail upward.

Next to the fountain in what, a very long time ago, used to be a flowerbed, grew a rosebush. Nothing but the color of the flowers made this bush unique—but the flowers were exceptional: indigo, with a faint shade of purple on the tips of some of the petals. The Witcher touched one, brought his face closer and inhaled. The flowers held the typical scent of roses, only a little more intense.

The door and all the shutters of the mansion flew open at the same instant with a bang. Geralt raised his head abruptly. Down the path, scrunching the gravel, a monster was rushing straight at him.

The Witcher’s right hand rose, as fast as lightning, above his right shoulder while his left jerked the belt across his chest, making the sword hilt jump into his palm. The blade, leaping from the scabbard with a hiss, traced a short, luminous semi-circle and froze, the point aiming at the charging beast.

At the sight of the sword, the monster stopped short, spraying gravel in all directions. The Witcher didn't even flinch.

The creature was humanoid, and dressed in clothes which, though tattered, were of good quality and not lacking in stylish and useless ornamentation. His human form, however, reached no higher than the soiled collar of his tunic, for above it loomed a gigantic, hairy, bear-like head with enormous ears, a pair of wild eyes and terrifying jaws full of crooked fangs in which a red tongue flickered like flame.

“Flee, mortal man!” the monster roared, flapping his paws but not moving from the spot. “I’ll devour you! Tear you to pieces!” The Witcher didn't move, didn't lower his sword. “Are you deaf? Away with you!” The creature screamed, then made a sound somewhere between a pig's squeal and a stag's bellowing roar, making the shutters rattle and clatter and shaking rubble and plaster from the sills. Neither Witcher nor monster moved.

“Clear off while you're still in one piece!” roared the creature, less sure of himself. “Because if you don't, then…”

“Then what?” interrupted Geralt.

The monster suddenly gasped and tilted his monstrous head. “Look at him, isn't he brave?” He spoke calmly, baring his fangs and glowering at Geralt with bloodshot eyes. “Lower that iron, if you please. Perhaps you've not realized you're in my courtyard? Or maybe it's customary, wherever you come from, to threaten people with swords in their own courtyards?”

“It is customary,” Geralt agreed, “when faced with people who greet their guests with a roar and the cry that they're going to tear you to pieces.”

“Pox on it!” The monster got himself worked up. “And he'll insult me on top of it all, this straggler. A guest, is he? Pushes his way into the yard, ruins someone else's flowers, plays the lord and thinks that he'll be brought bread and salt. Bah!” The creature spat, gasped and shut his jaws. The lower fangs protruded, making him look like a boar.

“So?” The Witcher spoke after a moment, lowering his sword. “Are we going to carry on standing like this?”

“And what do you suggest instead? Lying down?” snorted the monster. “Put that iron away, I said.”

The Witcher nimbly slipped the weapon into its scabbard and, without lowering his arm, stroked the hilt which rose above his shoulder. “I’d prefer you,” he said, “not to make any sudden moves. This sword can always be drawn again, faster than you imagine.”

“I noticed,” rasped the monster. “If it wasn't for that, you'd have been out of this gate a long time ago, with my boot print on your ass. What do you want here? How did you get here?”

“I got lost,” lied the Witcher.

“You got lost?” repeated the monster, twisting his jaws in a menacing grin. “Well, un-lose your way. Out of the gate, turn your left ear to the sun and keep walking and you'll soon get back to the highway. Well? What are you waiting for?”

“Is there any water?” asked Geralt calmly. “The horse is thirsty. And so am I, if that doesn't inconvenience you.”

The monster shifted from one foot to the other and scratched his ear. “Listen you,” he said. “Are you really not frightened of me?”

“Should I be?”

The monster looked around, cleared his throat and yanked up his baggy trousers. “Pox on it, what's the harm of a guest in the house? It's not every day I meet someone who doesn't run away or faint at the sight of me. All right, then. If you're a weary but honest wanderer, I invite you in. But if you're a brigand or a thief, then I warn you: this house does what I tell it to. Within these walls I rule!”

He lifted his hairy paw. All the shutters clattered against the wall once more and deep in the dolphin's stone gullet, something rumbled. “I invite you in,” he repeated.

Geralt didn't move, scrutinizing him.

“Do you live alone?”

“What's that to do with you?” said the monster angrily, opening his jaws, then croaked loudly, “Oh, I see. No doubt you'd like to know whether I’ve got forty servants all as beautiful as me. I don't. Well, pox, are you going to make use of my generous invitation? If not, the gate's over there.”

Geralt bowed stiffly. “I accept your invitation,” he said formally. “I won't slight the right of hospitality.”

“My house is your house,” the monster said in return, just as formally, although a little offhandedly. “This way please, dear guest. And leave the horse here, by the well.”

The interior was in need of extensive repair, although it was reasonably clean and tidy. The furniture had been made by skilled craftsmen, if a very long time ago. A pungent smell of dust hung in the dark rooms. “Light!” growled the monster, and the torch in its iron bracket burst into flames and sooty smoke.

“Not bad,” remarked the Witcher.

The monster cackled. “That's it? I see you won't be amazed by any old trick. I told you this house obeys my commands. This way, please. Careful, the stairs are steep. Light!” On the stairs, the monster turned. “What's that around your neck, dear guest?”

“Have a look.”

The creature took the medallion in his paw, lifted it up to his eyes, tightening the chain around Geralt's neck a little. “The animal has an unpleasant expression. What is it?”

“My guild's badge.”

“Ah, you make muzzles, no doubt. This way, please. Light!” The center of the large room, completely devoid of windows, was taken up by a huge oak table, empty apart from an enormous brass candlestick, slowly turning green and covered with trickles of hardened wax. At the monster's command, the candles lit and flickered, brightening the interior a little.

One wall was hung with weapons, compositions of round shields, crossed partisans [a type of polearm/spear], javelins and guisarmes [a type of polearm], heavy sabers and axes. Half of the adjacent wall was taken up by an enormous fireplace, above which hung rows of flaking and peeling portraits. The wall facing the entrance was filled with hunting trophies: elks and stag antlers whose branching racks threw long shadows across the grinning mounted heads of wild boar, bear and lynx, over the ruffled and frayed wings of eagles and hawks. The place of honor was filled by a rock dragon's head, tainted brown, damaged and leaking stuffing. Geralt examined it more closely.

“My grandpa killed it,” said the monster, throwing a huge log into the depths of the fireplace. “It was probably the last one in the vicinity when it got itself killed. Sit, my dear guest. You're hungry?”

“I won't deny it, dear host.”

The monster sat at the table, lowered his head, clasped his hairy paws over his stomach, muttered something while twiddling his enormous thumbs, then suddenly roared, thumping the table with his paw. Dishes and platters rattled like pewter and silver; chalices jingled like crystal. There was a smell of roast meat, garlic, mint and nutmeg. Geralt did not show any surprise.

“Yes.” The monster rubbed his hands. “This is better than servants, isn't it? Help yourself, dear guest. Here is some fowl, here some boar ham, here terrine of…I don't know what. Something. Here we have some hazel grouse. Pox, no, it's partridge. I got the spells muddled up. Eat up, eat up. This is proper, real food, don't worry.”

“I’m not worried.” Geralt tore the fowl in two.

“I forgot,” snorted the monster, “that you're not timid. What shall I call you?”

“Geralt. And your name, dear host?”

“Nivellen. But they call me Degen or Fanger around here. And they use me to frighten children.” The monster poured the contents of an enormous chalice down his throat, after which he sank his fingers in the terrine, tearing half of it from the bowl in one go.

“Frighten children,” repeated Geralt with his mouth full. “Without any reason, no doubt?”

“Of course not. Your health, Geralt!”

“And yours, Nivellen.”

“How's the wine? Have you noticed that it's made from grapes and not apples? But if you don't like it, I’ll conjure up a different one.”

“Thank you, it's not bad. Are your magical powers innate?”

“No. I’ve had them since growing this. This trap, that is. I don't know how it happened myself, but the house does whatever I wish. Nothing very big; I can conjure up food, drink, clothes, clean linen, hot water, soap. Any woman can do that, and without using magic at that. I can open and close windows and doors. I can light a fire. Nothing very remarkable.”

“It's something. And this…trap, as you call it, have you had it long?”

“Twelve years.”

“How did it happen?”

“What's it got to do with you? Pour yourself some more wine.”

“With pleasure. It's got nothing to do with me. I’m just asking out of curiosity.”

“An acceptable reason,” the monster said, and laughed loudly. “But I don't accept it. It's got nothing to do with you and that's that. But just to satisfy your curiosity a little, I’ll show you what I used to look like. Look at those portraits. The first from the chimney is my father. The second, pox only knows. And the third is me. Can you see it?”

Beneath the dust and spiderwebs, a nondescript man with a bloated, sad, spotty face and watery eyes looked down from the painting. Geralt, who was no stranger to the way portrait painters tended to flatter their clients, nodded.

“Can you see it?” repeated Nivellen, baring his fangs.

“I can.”

“Who are you?”

“I don't understand.”

“You don't understand?” The monster raised his head; his eyes shone like a cat's. “My portrait is hung beyond the candlelight. I can see it, but I’m not human. At least, not at the moment. A human, looking at my portrait, would get up, go closer and, no doubt, have to take the candlestick with him. You didn't do that, so the conclusion is simple. But I’m asking you plainly: are you human?”

Geralt didn't lower his eyes. “If that's the way you put it,” he answered after a moment's silence, “then, not quite.”

“Ah. Surely it won't be tactless if I ask, in that case, what you are?”

“A Witcher.”

“Ah,” Nivellen repeated after a moment. “If I remember rightly, Witchers earn their living in an interesting way—they kill monsters for money.”

“You remember correctly.”

Silence fell again. Candle flames pulsated, flicked upward in thin wisps of fire, glimmering in the cut-crystal chalices. Cascades of wax trickled down the candlestick.

Nivellen sat still, lightly twitching his enormous ears. “Let's assume,” he said finally, “that you draw your sword before I jump on you. Let's assume you even manage to cut me down. With my weight, that won't stop me; I’ll take you down through sheer momentum. And then it's teeth that'll decide. What do you think, Witcher, which one of us has a better chance if it comes to biting each other's throats?”

Geralt, steadying the carafe's [water pitcher] pewter stopper with his thumb, poured himself some wine, took a sip and leaned back into his chair. He was watching the monster with a smile. An exceptionally ugly one.

“Yeeees,” said Nivellen slowly, digging at the corner of his jaws with his claw. “One has to admit you can answer questions without using many words. It'll be interesting to see how you manage the next one. Who paid you to deal with me?”

“No one. I’m here by accident.”

“You're not lying, by any chance?”

“I’m not in the habit of lying.”

“And what are you in the habit of doing? I’ve heard about Witchers—they abduct tiny children whom they feed with magic herbs. The ones who survive become Witchers themselves, sorcerers with inhuman powers. They're taught to kill, and all human feelings and reactions are trained out of them. They're turned into monsters in order to kill other monsters. I’ve heard it said it's high time someone started hunting Witchers, as there are fewer and fewer monsters and more and more Witchers. Do have some partridge before it's completely cold.”

Nivellen took the partridge from the dish, put it between his jaws and crunched it like a piece of toast, bones cracking as they were crushed between his teeth. “Why don't you say anything?” he asked indistinctly, swallowing. “How much of the rumors about you Witchers is true?”

“Practically nothing.”

“And what's a lie?”

“That there are fewer and fewer monsters.”

“True. There's a fair number of them.” Nivellen bared his fangs. “One is sitting in front of you wondering if he did the right thing by inviting you in. I didn't like your guild badge right from the start, dear guest.”

“You aren't a monster, Nivellen,” the Witcher said dryly.

“Pox, that's something new. So, what am I? Cranberry pudding? A flock of wild geese flying south on a sad November morning? No? Maybe I’m the virtue that a miller's buxom daughter lost in spring? Well, Geralt, tell me what I am. Can't you see I’m shaking with curiosity?”

“You're not a monster. Otherwise you wouldn't be able to touch this silver tray. And in no way could you hold my medallion.”

“Ha!” Nivellen roared so powerfully the candle flames fell horizontal for a moment. “Today, very clearly, is a day for revealing great and terrible secrets! Now I’m going to be told that I grew these ears because I didn't like milky porridge as a child!”

“No, Nivellen,” said Geralt calmly. “It happened because of a spell I’m sure you know who cast that spell.”

“And what if I do?”

“In many cases a spell can be uncast.”

“You, as a Witcher, can uncast spells in many cases?”

“I can. Do you want me to try?”

“No. I don't.” The monster opened his jaws and poked out his tongue, two span long, and very red. “Surprised you, hasn't it?”

“That it has,” admitted Geralt.

The monster giggled and lounged in his armchair. “I knew that would,” he said. “Pour yourself some more, get comfortable and I’ll tell you the whole story. Witcher or not, you've got an honest face and I feel like talking. Pour yourself more.”

“There's none left.”

“Pox on it!” The monster cleared his throat, then thumped the table with his paw again. A large earthenware demijohn in a wicker basket appeared next to the two empty carafes, from nowhere. Nivellen tore the sealing wax off with his teeth.

“As no doubt you've noticed,” he began, pouring the wine, “this is quite a remote area. It's a long way to the nearest human settlement. It's because, you see, my father, and my grandfather too, in his time, didn't make themselves particularly loved by our neighbors or the merchants using the highway. If anyone went astray here and my father spotted them from the tower, they lost—at best—their fortune. And a couple of the nearer settlements were burnt because Father decided the levies were being paid tardily. Not many people liked my father. Except for me, naturally. I cried awfully when what was left of my father after a blow from a two-handed sword was brought home on a cart one day. Grandpa didn't take part in robbery anymore because, ever since he was hit on the head with a morningstar, he had a terrible stutter. He dribbled and rarely made it to the privy on time. As their heir, I had to lead the gang.”

“I was young at the time,” Nivellen continued, “a real milksop, so the lads in the crew wound me around their little fingers in a flash. I was as much in command of them as a fat piglet is of a pack of wolves. We soon began doing things which Father would never have allowed, had he been alive. I’ll spare you the details and get straight to the point. One day we took ourselves as far as Ghelibol, near Mirt, and robbed a temple. A young priestess was there too.”

“Which temple, Nivellen?”

“Pox only knows, but it must have been a bad one. There were skulls and bones on the altar, I remember, and a green fire was burning. It stank like nobody's business. But to the point. The lads overpowered the priestess and stripped her, then said I had to become a man. Well, I became a man, stupid little snot that I was, and while I was achieving manhood, the priestess spat into my face and screamed something.”

“What?”

“That I was a monster in human skin, that I’d be a monster in a monster's skin, something about love, blood…I can't remember. She must have had the dagger, a little one, hidden in her hair. She killed herself and then… We fled from there, Geralt, I’m telling you—we nearly wore our horses out. It was a bad temple.”

“Go on.”

“Then it was as the priestess had said. A few days later, I woke up and as the servants saw me, they screamed and took to their heels. I went to the mirror…You see, Geralt, I panicked, had some sort of an attack, I remember it almost through a haze. To put it briefly, corpses fell. Several. I used whatever came to hand… and I’d suddenly become very strong. And the house helped as best it could: doors slammed, furniture flew in the air, fires broke out. Whoever could get out ran away in a panic: my aunt and cousin, the lads from the crew. What am I saying? Even the dogs howled and cowered. My cat, Glutton, ran away. Even my aunt's parrot kicked the bucket out of fear. I was alone, roaring, howling, going mad, smashing whatever came to hand, mainly mirrors.”

Nivellen paused, sighed and sniffed.

“When the attack was over,” he resumed after a while, “it was already too late. I was alone. I couldn't explain to anyone that only my appearance had changed, that although in this horrible shape, I was just a stupid youngster, sobbing over the servants’ bodies in an empty manor. I was afraid they'd come back and kill me before I could explain. But nobody returned.”

The monster grew silent for a moment and wiped his nose on his sleeve. “I don't want to go back to those first months, Geralt. It still leaves me shaking when I recall them. I’ll get to the point. For a long time, a very long time, I sat in the manor, quiet as a mouse, not stirring from the place. If anyone appeared, which rarely happened, I wouldn't go out. I’d tell the house to slam the shutters a couple of times, or I’d roar through the gargoyle, and that was usually enough for the would-be guest to leave in a hurry. So that's how it was, until one day I looked out of the window one pale dawn and—what did I see? Some trespasser stealing a rose from my aunt's bush. And it isn't just any old rosebush: these are blue roses from Nazair. It was Grandfather who brought the seedlings. I flew into a fury and jumped outside.”

“The fat trespasser, when he got his voice back lost it when he saw me. He squealed that he only wanted a few flowers for his daughter, that I should spare him, spare his life and his health. I was just ready to kick him out of the main gate when I remembered something. Stories Lenka, my nanny—the old bag used to tell me. Pox on it, I thought, if pretty girls turn frogs into princes, or the other way around, then maybe… Maybe there's a grain of truth in these stories, a chance… I leapt four yards, roared so loud wild vine tumbled from the wall, and I yelled, ‘Your daughter or your life!’ Nothing better came to mind. The merchant, for he was a merchant, began to weep, then confessed that his daughter was only eight.” He looked at Geralt. “Are you laughing?”

“No.”

“I didn't know whether to laugh or cry over my shitty fate. I felt sorry for the old trader. I couldn't watch him shake like that. I invited him inside, made him welcome and, when he was leaving, I poured gold and precious stones into his bag. There was still a fair fortune in the cellar from Father's day. I hadn't quite known what to do with it, so I could allow myself this gesture. The merchant beamed and thanked me so profusely that he slobbered all over himself. He must have boasted about his adventure somewhere because not two weeks had gone by when another merchant appeared. He had a pretty large bag ready with him. And a daughter… also pretty large.”

Nivellen extended his legs under the table and stretched until the armchair creaked. “I came to an understanding with the merchant in no time,” he continued. “He'd leave her with me for a year. I had to help him load the sack onto his mule; he wouldn't have managed by himself.”

“And the girl?”

“She had fits at the sight of me for a while. She really thought I’d eat her. But after a month we were eating at the same table, chatting and going for long walks. She was kind, and remarkably smart, and I’d get tongue-tied when I talked to her. You see, Geralt, I was always shy with girls, always made a laughingstock of myself, even with wenches from the cowshed with dung up to their knees, girls the lads from the crew turned over this way and that at will. Even they made fun of me. To say nothing of having a maw like this. I couldn't even make myself say anything about why I had paid so dearly for a year of her life. The year dragged like the stench following marauding troops until, at last, the merchant arrived and took her away.”

“I locked myself in the house, resigned, and didn't react for several months to any of the guests who turned up with daughters. But after a year spent with company, I realized how hard it was to live without anyone to talk to.” The monster made a noise which was supposed to be a sigh but came out more like a hiccup.

“The next one,” he said after a while, “was called Fenne. She was small, bright and chirpy, a real gold-crest. She wasn't frightened of me at all. Once, on the anniversary of my first haircut, my coming of age, we'd both drunk too much mead and…ha, ha. Straight after, I jumped out of bed and ran to the mirror. I must admit I was disappointed, and despondent. The trap was the same as it ever was, if with a slightly more stupid expression. And they say the wisdom of ages is to be found in fairy tales. It's not worth a shit, wisdom like that, Geralt.”

“Well, Fenne quickly tried to make me forget my worries. She was a jolly girl, I tell you. Do you know what she thought up? We'd both frighten unwanted guests. Imagine: a guest like that enters the courtyard, looks around, and then, with a roar, I charge at him on all fours with Fenne, completely naked, sitting on my back and blowing my grandfather's hunting horn!”

Nivellen shook with laughter, the white of his fangs flashing. “Fenne,” he continued, “stayed with me for a year, then returned to her family with a huge dowry. She was preparing to marry a tavern owner, a widower.”

“Carry on, Nivellen. This is interesting.”

“You think so?” said the monster, scratching himself between the ears with a rasping sound. “All right. The next one, Primula, was the daughter of an impoverished knight. The knight, when he got here, had a skinny horse, a rusty cuirass and incredible debts. He was as hideous as cow dung, I tell you, Geralt, and spread a similar smell. Primula, I’d wager my right hand, was conceived while he was at war, as she was quite pretty. I didn't frighten her either, which isn't surprising, really, as compared to her parent I might have appeared quite comely. She had, as it turned out, quite a temperament and I, having gained some self-confidence, seized the moment by the horns. After two weeks Primula and I already had a very close relationship. She liked to pull me by the ears and shout, ‘Bite me to death, you animal!’ and ‘Tear me apart, you beast!’ and other equally idiotic things. I ran to the mirror in the breaks, but just imagine, Geralt, I looked at myself with growing anxiety. Less and less did I long to return to my former shape. You see, Geralt, I used to be a weakling and now I’d become a strapping fellow. I’d keep getting ill, I’d cough, my nose would run, but now I don't catch anything. And my teeth? You wouldn't believe how rotten my teeth had been! And now? I can bite through the leg of a chair. Do you want me to bite a chair leg?”

“No, I don't.”

“Maybe that's good.” The monster opened his mouth wide. “My showing-off used to amuse the girls and there aren't many whole chairs left in the house.” Nivellen yawned, his enormous tongue rolling up into a tube.

“This talking has made me tired, Geralt. Briefly: there were two after Primula, Ilka and Venimira. Everything happened in the same way, to the point of boredom. First, a mixture of fear and reserve, then a thread of sympathy thy reinforced by small but precious gifts, then ‘Bite me, eat me up,’ Daddy's return, a tender farewell and an increasingly discernible depletion of the treasury. I decided to take longer breaks to be alone. Of-course, I’d long ago stopped believing that a virgin's kiss would transform the way I looked. And I’d come to terms with it. And, what's more, I’d come to the conclusion that things were fine as they were and that there wasn't any need for changes.”

“Really? No changes, Nivellen?”

“It's true. I have a horse's health, which came with the way I look, for one. Secondly, my being different works on girls like an aphrodisiac. Don't laugh! I’m certain that as a human, I’d have to give a mighty good chase to get at a girl like, for example, Venimira, who was an extremely beautiful maid. I don't suppose she'd have glanced twice at the fellow in the portrait. And thirdly: safety. Father had enemies, and a couple of them had survived. People whom the crew, under my pitiful leadership, had sent to their graves, had relatives. There's gold in the cellar. If it wasn't for the fear inspired by me, somebody would come and get it, if only peasants with pitchforks.”

“You seem quite sure,” Geralt remarked, playing with an empty chalice, “that you haven't offended anyone in your present shape. No father, no daughter. No relative or daughter's betrothed…”

“Leave off, Geralt.” Nivellen was indignant. “What are you talking about? The fathers couldn't contain themselves for joy. I told you, I was incredibly generous. And the daughters? You didn't see them when they got here in their dresses of sackcloth, their little hands raw from washing, their shoulders stooped from carrying buckets. Even after two weeks with me, Primula still had marks on her back and thighs from the strap her knightly father had beaten her with. They walked around like princesses here, carried nothing but a fan and didn't even know where the kitchen was. I dressed them up and covered them with trinkets. At the click of a finger, I’d conjure up hot water in the tin bath Father had plundered for my mother at Assengard. Can you imagine? A tin bath! There's hardly a regent, what am I saying, hardly a lord who's got a tin bath at home. This was a house from a fairy tale for them, Geralt. And as far as bed is concerned, well…Pox on it, virtue is rarer today than a rock dragon. I didn't force any of them, Geralt.”

“But you suspected someone had paid me to kill you. Who would have?”

“A scoundrel who wanted the contents of my cellar but didn't have any more daughters,” Nivellen said emphatically. “Human greed knows no limits.”

“And nobody else?”

“And nobody else.”

They both remained silent, gazing at the nervous flicker of the candle flames.

“Nivellen,” said the Witcher suddenly, “are you alone now?”

“Witcher,” answered the monster after a moment's hesitation, “I think that, in principle, I ought to insult you, take you by the neck and throw you down the stairs. Do you know why? Because you treat me like a dimwit. I noticed how you've been cocking your ears and glancing at the door. You know perfectly well that I don't live alone. Am I right?”

“You are. I’m sorry.”

“Pox on your apologies. Have you seen her?”

“Yes. In the forest, by the gate. Is she why merchants and daughters have been leaving here empty handed for some time?”

“So, you know about that too? Yes, she's the reason.”

“Do you mind if I ask whether…”

“Yes, I do mind.”

Silence again.

“Oh well, it's up to you,” the Witcher finally said, getting up. “Thanks for your hospitality, dear host. Time I was on my way.”

“Quite right.” Nivellen also got up. “For certain reasons, I can't offer you a room in the manor for the night, and I don't encourage you to spend the night in these woods. Ever since the area's been deserted, it's been bad at night here. You ought to get back to the highway before dusk.”

“I’ll bear that in mind, Nivellen. Are you sure you don't need my help?”

The monster looked at him askance. “You think you could help me? You'd be able to lift this from me?”

“I wasn't only thinking about that sort of help.”

“You didn't answer my question. Although…you probably did. You wouldn't be able to.”

Geralt looked him straight in the eyes. “You had some bad luck,” he said. “Of all the temples in Ghelibol and the Nimnar Valley, you picked the Church of Coram Agh Tera, the Lionheaded Spider. In order to lift the curse thrown by the priestess of Coram Agh Tera, you need knowledge and powers which I don't possess.”

“And who does?”

“So, you are interested after all? You said things were fine as they are.”

“As they are, yes. But not as they might be. I’m afraid that…”

“What are you afraid of?”

The monster stopped at the door to the room and turned. “I’ve had enough of your questions, Witcher, which you keep asking instead of answering mine. Obviously, you've got to be asked in the right way. Listen. For some time now I’ve had hideous dreams. Maybe the word ‘monstrous’ would be more accurate. Am I right to be afraid? Briefly, please.”

“Have you ever had muddy feet after waking from such a dream? Conifer needles in your sheets?”

“No.”

“And have…”

“No. Briefly, please.”

“You're rightly afraid.”

“Can anything be done about it? Briefly, please.”

“No.”

“Finally. Let's go. I’ll see you out.”

In the courtyard, as Geralt was adjusting the saddlebags, Nivellen stroked the mare's nostrils and patted her neck. Roach, pleased with the caress, lowered her head.

“Animals like me,” boasted the monster. “And I like them, too. My cat, Glutton, ran away at the beginning but she came back later. For a long time, she was the only living creature who kept me company in my misfortune. Vereena, too…” He broke off with a grimace.

Geralt smiled. “Does she like cats too?”

“Birds.” Nivellen bared his teeth. “I gave myself away, pox on it. But what's the harm. She isn't another merchant's daughter, Geralt, or another attempt to find a grain of truth in old folk tales. It's serious. We love each other. If you laugh, I’ll sock you one.”

Geralt didn't laugh. “You know your Vereena,” he said, “is probably a rusalka?”

“I suspected as much. Slim. Dark. She rarely speaks, and in a language I don't know. She doesn't eat human food. She disappears into the forest for days on end, then comes back. Is that typical?”

“More or less.” The Witcher tightened Roach's girth-strap. “No doubt you think she wouldn't return if you were to become human?”

“I’m sure of it. You know how frightened rusalkas are of people. Hardly anybody's seen a rusalka from up close. But Vereena and I…Pox on it! Take care, Geralt.”

“Take care, Nivellen.” The Witcher prodded the mare in the side with his heel and made toward the gate. The monster shuffled along at his side.

“Geralt?”

“Yes.”

“I’m not as stupid as you think. You came here following the tracks of one of the merchants who'd been here lately. Has something happened to one of them?”

“Yes.”

“The last was here three days ago. With his daughter, not one of the prettiest, by the way. I commanded the house to close all its doors and shutters and give no sign of life. They wandered around the courtyard and left. The girl picked a rose from my aunt's rosebush and pinned it to her dress. Look for them somewhere else. But be careful; this is a horrible area. I told you that the forest isn't the safest of places at night. Ugly things are heard and seen.”

“Thanks, Nivellen. I’ll remember about you. Who knows, maybe I’ll find someone who” Geralt was cut off.

“Maybe yes. And maybe no. It's my problem, Geralt, my life and my punishment. I’ve learned to put up with it. I’ve got used to it. If it gets worse, I’ll get used to that too. And if it gets far worse, don't look for anybody. Come here yourself and put an end to it. As a Witcher. Take care, Geralt.”

Nivellen turned and marched briskly toward the manor. He didn't look round again.

[later]

The area was deserted, wild and ominously inhospitable. Geralt didn't return to the highway before dusk; he didn't want to take a roundabout route, so he took a shortcut through the forest. He spent the night on the bare summit of a high hill, his sword on his knees, beside a tiny campfire into which, every now and then, he threw wisps of monkshood. In the middle of the night he noticed the glow of a fire far away in the valley; he heard mad howling and singing and a sound which could only have been the screaming of a tortured woman. When dawn had barely broken, he made his way there to find nothing but a trampled glade and charred bones in still-warm ashes. Something sitting in the crown of an enormous oak shrieked and hissed. It could have been a harpy, or an ordinary wildcat. The Witcher didn't stop to check.

About midday, while Roach was drinking at a spring, the mare neighed piercingly and backed away, baring her yellow teeth and chewing her bit. Geralt calmed her with the Sign. Then he noticed a regular ring formed by the caps of reddish mushrooms peering from the moss.

“You're becoming a real hysteric, Roach,” he said. “This is just an ordinary devil's ring. What's the fuss?”

The mare snorted, turning her head toward him. The Witcher rubbed his forehead, frowned and grew thoughtful. Then he leapt into the saddle, turned the horse around and started back, following his own tracks.

“Animals like me,” he muttered remembering Nivellians words. “Sorry, Roach. It turns out you've got more brains than me!”

The mare flattened her ears against her skull and snorted, throwing up earth with her hooves; she didn't want to go. Geralt didn't calm her with the Sign; he jumped from the saddle and threw the reins over the horse's head. He no longer had his old sword in its lizard-skin sheath on his back; its place was filled with a shining, beautiful weapon with a cruciform and slender, well-weighted hilt, ending in a spherical pommel made of white metal.

This time the gate didn't open for him. It was already open, just as he had left it.

He heard singing. He didn't understand the words; he couldn't even identify the language. He didn't need to—the Witcher felt and understood the very nature, the essence, of this quiet, piercing song which flowed through the veins in a wave of nauseous, overpowering menace.

The singing broke off abruptly, and then he saw her.

She was clinging to the back of the dolphin in the dried-up fountain, embracing the moss-overgrown stone with her tiny hands, so pale they seemed transparent. Beneath her storm of tangled black hair shone huge, wide-open eyes the color of anthracite [hard coal].

Geralt slowly drew closer, his step soft and springy, tracing a semi-circle from the wall and blue rosebush. The creature glued to the dolphin's back followed him with her eyes, turning her petite face with an expression of longing, and full of charm. He could still hear her song, even though her thin, pale lips were held tight and not the slightest sound emerged from them.

The Witcher halted at ten paces. His sword, slowly drawn from its black enameled sheath, glistened and glowed above his head.

“It's silver,” he said. “This blade is silver.”

The pale little face did not flinch; the anthracite eyes did not change expression.

“You're so like a rusalka,” the Witcher continued calmly, “that you could deceive anyone. All the more as you're a rare bird, black-haired one. But horses are never mistaken. They recognize creatures like you instinctively and perfectly. What are you? I think you're a moola, or an alpor. An ordinary vampire couldn't come out in the sun.”

The corners of her pale lips quivered and turned up a little.

“Nivellen attracted you with that shape of his, didn't he? You evoked his dreams. I can guess what sort of dreams they were, and I pity him.”

The creature didn't move.

“You like birds,” continued the Witcher. “But that doesn't stop you biting the necks of people of both sexes, does it? You and Nivellen, indeed! A beautiful couple you'd make, a monster and a vampire, rulers of a forest castle. You'd dominate the whole area in a flash. You, eternally thirsty for blood, and he, your guardian, a murderer at your service, a blind tool. But first he had to become a true monster, not a human being in a monster's mask.”

The huge black eyes narrowed.

“Where is he, black-haired one? You were singing, so you've drunk some blood. You've taken the ultimate measure, which means you haven't managed to enslave his mind. Am I right?”

The black-tressed head nodded slightly, almost imperceptibly, and the corners of her mouth turned up even more. The tiny little face took on an eerie expression.

“No doubt you consider yourself the lady of this manor now?”

The time the nod was clearer.

“Are you a moola?”

A slow shake of the head. The hiss which reverberated through his bones could only have come from the pale, ghastly, smiling lips, although the Witcher didn't see them move.

“Alpor?”

She shook her head.

The Witcher backed away and clasped the hilt of his sword tighter. “That means you're…”

The corners of her lips started to turn up higher and higher; then they flew open…

“A bruxa!” the Witcher shouted, throwing himself toward the fountain.

From behind the pale lips glistened white, spiky fangs. The vampire jumped up, arched her back like a leopard and screamed. The wave of sound hit the Witcher like a battering ram, depriving him of breath, crushing his ribs, piercing his ears and brain with thorns of pain. Flying backward, he just managed to cross his wrists in the Sign of Heliotrop. The spell cushioned some of his impact with the wall but even so, the world grew dark and the remainder of his breath burst from his lungs in a groan.

On the dolphin's back, in the stone circle of the dried-up fountain where a dainty girl in a white dress had sat just a moment ago, an enormous black bat flattened its glossy body, opening its long, narrow jaws wide, revealing rows of needle-like white teeth. The membranous wings spread and flapped silently, and the creature charged at the Witcher like an arrow fired from a crossbow.

Geralt, with the metallic taste of blood in his mouth, shouted a spell and threw his hand, fingers spread in the Sign of Quen, out in front of him. The bat, hissing, turned abruptly, then chuckled and veered up into the air before diving down vertically, straight at the nape of the Witcher’s neck. Geralt jumped aside, slashed, and missed. The bat, smoothly, gracefully drew in a wing, circled around him and attacked anew, opening its eyeless, toothed snout wide. Geralt waited, sword held with both hands, always pointed in the creature's direction. At the last moment, he jumped—not to the side but forward, dealing a swinging cut which made the air howl.

He missed. It was so unexpected that he lost his rhythm and dodged a fraction of a second too late. He felt the beast's talons tear his cheek, and a damp velvety wing slapped against his neck. He curled up on the spot, transferred the weight of his body to his right leg and slashed backward sharply, missing the amazingly agile creature again.

The bat beat its wings, soared up and glided toward the fountain. As the crooked claws scraped against the stone casing, the monstrous, slobbering snout was already blurring, morphing, disappearing, although the pale little lips which were taking its place couldn't quite hide the murderous fangs.

The bruxa howled piercingly, modulating her voice into a macabre tune, glared at the Witcher with eyes full of hatred, and screamed again.

The sound wave was so powerful it broke through the Sign. Black and red circles spun in Geralt's eyes; his temples and the crown of his head throbbed. Through the pain drilling in his ears, he began to hear voices wailing and moaning, the sound of flute and oboe, the rustle of a gale. The skin on his face grew numb and cold. He fell to one knee and shook his head.

The black bat floated toward him silently, opening its toothy jaws. Geralt, still stunned by the scream, reacted instinctively. He jumped up and, in a flash, matching the tempo of his movements to the speed of the monster's flight, took three steps forward, dodged, turned a semi-circle and then, quick as a thought, delivered a two-handed blow. The blade met with no resistance…almost no resistance. He heard a scream, but this time it was a scream of pain, caused by the touch of silver.

The wailing bruxa was morphing on the dolphin's back. On her white dress, slightly above her left breast, a red stain was visible beneath a slash no longer than a little finger. The Witcher ground his teeth—the cut, which should have sundered the beast in two, had been nothing but a scratch.

“Shout, vampire,” he growled, wiping the blood from his cheek. “Scream your guts out. Lose your strength. And then I’ll slash your pretty little head off!”

You. You will be the first to grow weak, Sorcerer. I will kill you.

The bruxa's lips didn't move, but the Witcher heard the words clearly; they resounded in his mind, echoing and reverberating as if underwater.

“We shall see,” he muttered through his teeth as he walked, bent over, in the direction of the fountain.

I will kill you. I’ll kill you. I’ll kill you.

“We shall see.”

“Vereena!” Nivellen, his head hanging low and both hands clinging to the doorframe, stumbled from the mansion. He staggered toward the fountain, waving his paws unsteadily. Blood stained the cuff of his tunic. “Vereena!” he roared again.

The bruxa jerked her head in his direction. Geralt, raising his sword to strike, jumped toward her, but the vampire's reaction was much faster. A sharp scream and another sound wave knocked the Witcher from his feet. He tumbled onto his back and scraped against the gravel of the path. The bruxa arched and tensed to jump, her fangs flashing like daggers. Nivellen, spreading his paws like a bear, tried to grab her but she screamed straight into his face, throwing him back against the wooden scaffolding under the wall, which broke with a sharp crash and buried him beneath a stack of timber.

Geralt was already on his feet, running, tracing a semi-circle around the courtyard, trying to draw the bruxa's attention away from Nivellen. The vampire, fluttering her white dress, scurried straight at him, light as a butterfly, barely touching the ground. She was no longer screaming, no longer trying to morph. The Witcher knew she was tired, and that she was still lethal. Behind Geralt's back, Nivellen was clattering under the scaffolding, roaring.

Geralt leapt to the left, executing a short moulinet with his sword to confuse the bruxa gliding toward him—white and black, windblown, terrible. He'd underestimated her. She screamed. He didn't make the Sign in time, flew backward until he thumped against the wall. The pain in his spine shot all the way to the tips of his fingers, paralyzed his shoulders, cut him down at the legs. He fell to his knees. The bruxa, wailing melodiously, jumped toward him.

“Vereena!” roared Nivellen.

She turned—and Nivellen forced the sharp broken end of a three-meter-long pole between her breasts. She didn't shout. She only sighed.

The Witcher shook, hearing this sigh.

They stood there: Nivellen, on widespread legs, was wielding the pole in both hands, one end firmly secured under his arm.

The bruxa, like a white butterfly on a pin, hung on the other end of the stake, clutching it with both hands. The vampire exhaled excruciatingly and suddenly pressed herself hard against the stake.

Geralt watched a red stain bloom on her back, on the white dress through which the broken tip emerged in a geyser of blood: hideous, almost obscene. Nivellen screamed, took one step back, then another, retreating from her, but he didn't let go of the pole and dragged the bruxa behind him. One more step and he leaned back against the mansion. The end of the pole scraped against the wall.

Slowly, as if a caress, the bruxa moved her tiny hands along the stake, stretched her arms out to their full length, grasped the pole hard and pulled on it again. Over a meter of bloodied wood already protruded from her back. Her eyes were wide open, her head flung back. Her sighs became more frequent and rhythmic, turning into a ruckling wheeze.

Geralt stood but, fascinated by the scene, still couldn't make himself act. He heard words resounding dully within his skull, as if echoing around a cold, damp dungeon.

Mine. Or nobody's. I love you. Love you.

Another terrible, vibrating sigh, choking in blood. The bruxa moved further along the pole and stretched out her arms. Nivellen roared desperately and, without letting go of the stake, tried to push the vampire as far from himself as possible—but in vain. She pulled herself closer and grabbed him by the head. He wailed horrifically and tossed his hairy head. The bruxa moved along the pole again and tilted her head toward Nivellen's throat. The fangs flashed a blinding white.

Geralt jumped. Every move he made, every step, was part of his nature: hard-learned, automatic and lethally sure. Three quick steps, and the third, like a hundred such steps before, finished on the left leg with a strong, firm stamp. A twist of his torso and a sharp, forceful cut. He saw her eyes. Nothing could change now. He heard the voice. Nothing. He yelled, to drown the word which she was repeating. Nothing could change. He cut.

He struck decisively, like hundreds of times before, with the center of the blade, and immediately, following the rhythm of the movement, took a fourth step and half a turn. The blade, freed by the half-turn, floated after him, shining, drawing a fan of red droplets in its wake. The streaming raven-black hair floated in the air, floated, floated, floated…

The head fell onto the gravel.

*There are fewer and fewer monsters?  
And I? What am I?  
Who's shouting? The birds?  
The woman in a sheepskin jacket and blue dress?  
The roses from Nazair?  
How quiet!  
How empty. What emptiness.  
Within me.*

Nivellen, curled up in a bundle, sheltering his head in his arms and shaking with twitches and shivers, was lying in the nettles by the manor wall.

“Get up,” said the Witcher.

The young, handsome, well-built man with a pale complexion lying by the wall raised his head and looked around. His eyes were vague. He rubbed them with his knuckles. He looked at his hands, felt his face. He moaned quietly and, putting his finger in his mouth, ran it along his gums for a long time. He grasped his face again and moaned as he touched the four bloody, swollen streaks on his cheek. He burst out sobbing, then laughed.

“Geralt! How come? How did this—Geralt!”

“Get up, Nivellen. Get up and come along. I’ve got some medicine in my saddlebags. We both need it.”

“I’ve no longer got…I haven't, have I? Geralt? Why?”

The Witcher helped him get up, trying not to look at the tiny hands—so pale as to be transparent—clenched around the pole stuck between the small breasts which were now plastered with a wet red fabric.

Nivellen moaned again. “Vereena…”

“Don't look. Let's go.”

They crossed the courtyard, holding each other up, and passed the blue rosebush. Nivellen kept touching his face with his free hand. “Incredible, Geralt. After so many years? How's it possible?”

“There's a grain of truth in every fairy tale,” said the Witcher quietly. “Love and blood. They both possess a mighty power. Wizards and learned men have been racking their brains over this for years, but they haven't arrived at anything except that..”

“That what, Geralt?”

“It has to be true love.”

## The Voice of Reason

“I’m Falwick, Count of Moën. And this knight is Tailles, from Dorndal.”

Geralt bowed cursorily, looking at the knights. Both wore armor and crimson cloaks with the emblem of the White Rose on their left shoulder. He was somewhat surprised as, so far as he knew, there was no Commandery of that Order in the neighborhood.

Nenneke, to all appearances smiling lightheartedly and at ease, noticed his surprise.

“These nobly born gentlemen,” she said casually, settling herself more comfortably in her throne-like armchair, “are in the service of Duke Hereward, who governs these lands most mercifully.”

“Prince.” Tailles, the younger of the knights, corrected her emphatically, fixing his hostile pale blue eyes on the priestess. “Prince Hereward.”

“Let's not waste time with details and titles.” Nenneke smiled mockingly. “In my day, only those with royal blood were addressed as princes, but now, it seems, titles don't mean so much. Let's get back to our introductions, and why the Knights of the White Rose are visiting my humble temple. You know, Geralt, that the Chapter is requesting investitures for the Order from Hereward, which is why so many Knights of the Rose have entered his service. And several locals, like Tailles here, have taken vows and assumed the red cloak which becomes him so well.”

“My honor.” The Witcher bowed once more, just as cursorily as before.

“I doubt it,” the priestess remarked coldly. “They haven't come here to honor you. Quite the opposite. They've arrived demanding that you leave as soon as possible. In short, they're here to chase you out. You consider that an honor? I don't. I consider it an insult.”

“The noble knights have troubled themselves for no reason.” Geralt shrugged. “I don't intend to settle here. I’m leaving of my own accord without any additional incentives, and soon at that.”

“Immediately,” growled Tailles. “With not a moment's delay. The prince orders…”

“In this temple, I give the orders,” interrupted Nenneke in a cold, authoritative voice. “I usually try to ensure my orders don't conflict too much with Hereward's politics, as far as those politics are logical and understandable. In this case they are irrational, so I won't treat them any more seriously than they deserve. Geralt, Witcher of Rivia, is my guest. His stay is a pleasure to me. So, he will stay in my temple for as long as he wishes.”

“You have the audacity to contradict the prince, woman?” Tailles shouted, then threw his cloak back over his shoulder to reveal his grooved, brass-edged breastplate in all its splendor. “You dare to question our ruler's authority?”

“Quiet,” Nenneke snapped, and narrowed her eyes. “Lower your voice. Have a care who you speak to like that.”

“I know who I’m talking to!” The knight advanced a step. Falwick, the older knight, grabbed him firmly by the elbow and squeezed until the armor-plated gauntlet grated. Tailles yanked furiously. “And my words express the prince's will, the lord of this estate! We have got soldiers in the yard, woman…”

Nenneke reached into the purse at her belt and took out a small porcelain jar. “I really don't know,” she said calmly, “what will happen if I smash this container at your feet, Tailles. Maybe your lungs will burst. Maybe you'll grow fur. Or maybe both, who knows? Only merciful Melitele.”

“Don't dare threaten me with your spells, priestess! Our soldiers...”

“If any one of your soldiers touches one of Melitele's priestesses, they will hang, before dusk, from the acacias along the road to town. And they know that very well. As do you, Tailles, so stop acting like a fool. I delivered you, you shitty brat, and I pity your mother, but don't tempt fate. And don't force me to teach you manners!”

“All right, all right,” the Witcher butted in, growing bored. “It looks as though I’m becoming the cause of a serious conflict and I don't see why I should. Sir Falwick, you look more levelheaded than your companion who, I see, is beside himself with youthful enthusiasm. Listen, Falwick, I assure you that I will leave in a few days. I also assure you that I have no intention to work here, to undertake any commissions or orders. I’m not here as a Witcher, but on personal business.”

Count Falwick met his eyes and Geralt realized his mistake. There was pure, unwavering hatred in the White Rose knight's eyes. The Witcher was sure that it was not Duke Hereward who was chasing him out, but Falwick and his like.

The knight turned to Nenneke, bowed with respect and began to speak. He spoke calmly and politely. He spoke logically. But Geralt knew Falwick was lying through his teeth.

“Venerable Nenneke, I ask your forgiveness, but Prince Hereward will not tolerate the presence of this Witcher on his lands. It is of no importance if he is hunting monsters or claims to be here on personal business—the prince knows that witches do not undertake personal business. But they do attract trouble like a magnet filings. The wizards are rebelling and writing petitions, the druids are threatening…”

“I don't see why Geralt should bear the consequences of the unruliness of local wizards and druids,” interrupted the priestess. “Since when has Hereward been interested in either's opinion?”

“Enough of this discussion.” Falwick stiffened. “Have I not made myself sufficiently clear, venerable Nenneke? I will make it so clear as can't be clearer: neither the prince nor the Chapter of the Order will tolerate the presence of this Witcher, Geralt, the Butcher of Blaviken, in Ellander for one more day.”

“This isn't Ellander!” The priestess sprang from her chair. “This is the temple of Melitele! And I, Nenneke, the high priestess of Melitele, will not tolerate your presence on temple grounds a minute longer, sirs!”

“Sir Falwick,” the Witcher said quietly, “listen to the voice of reason. I don't want any trouble, nor do I believe that you particularly care for it. I’ll leave this neighborhood within three days. No, Nenneke, don't say anything, please. It's time for me to be on my way. Three days. I don't ask for more.”

“And you're right not to ask.” The priestess spoke before Falwick could react. “Did you hear, boys? The Witcher will remain here for three days because that's his fancy. And I, priestess of Great Melitele, will for those three days be his host, for that is my fancy. Tell that to Hereward. No, not Hereward. Tell that to his wife, the noble Ermellia, adding that if she wants to continue receiving an uninterrupted supply of aphrodisiacs from my pharmacy, she'd better calm her duke down. Let her curb his humors and whims, which look ever more like symptoms of idiocy.”

“Enough!” Tailles shouted so shrilly his voice broke into a falsetto. “I don't intend to stand by and listen as some charlatan insults my lord and his wife! I will not let such an insult pass unnoticed! It is the Order of the White Rose which will rule here, now; it's the end of your nests of darkness and superstitions. And I, a Knight of the White Rose...”

“Shut up, you brat,” interrupted Geralt, smiling nastily. “Halt your uncontrolled little tongue. You speak to a lady who deserves respect, especially from a Knight of the White Rose. Admittedly, to become one it's enough, lately, to pay a thousand Novigrad crowns into the Chapter's treasury, so the Order's full of sons of moneylenders and tailors—but surely some manners have survived? But maybe I’m mistaken?”

Tailles grew pale and reached to his side.

“Sir Falwick,” said Geralt, not ceasing to smile. “If he draws his sword, I’ll take it from him and beat the snotty-nosed little brat's ass with the flat of his blade. And then I’ll batter the door down with him.”

Tailles, his hands shaking, pulled an iron gauntlet from his belt and, with a crash, threw it to the ground at the Witcher’s feet. “I’ll wash away the insult to the Order with your blood, mutant!” he yelled. “On beaten ground! Go into the yard!”

“You've dropped something, son,” Nenneke said calmly. “So, pick it up; we don't leave rubbish here. This is a temple. Falwick, take that fool from here or this will end in grief. You know what you're to tell Hereward. And I’ll write a personal letter to him; you don't look like trustworthy messengers to me. Get out of here. You can find your way out, I hope?”

Falwick, restraining the enraged Tailles with an iron grip, bowed, his armor clattering. Then he looked the Witcher in the eyes. The Witcher didn't smile. Falwick threw his crimson cloak over his shoulders. “This wasn't our last visit, venerable Nenneke,” he said. “We'll be back.”

“That's just what I’m afraid of,” replied the priestess coldly. “The displeasure's mine.”

## The Lesser Evil

As usual, cats and children noticed him first. A striped tomcat sleeping on a sun-warmed stack of wood, shuddered, raised his round head, pulled back his ears, hissed and bolted off into the nettles. Three-year-old Dragomir, fisherman Trigla's son, who was sitting on the hut's threshold doing his best to make dirtier an already dirty shirt, started to scream as he fixed his tearful eyes on the passing rider.

The Witcher rode slowly, without trying to overtake the hay-cart obstructing the road. A laden donkey trotted behind him, stretching its neck and constantly pulling the cord tied to the Witcher’s pommel tight. In addition to the usual bags, the long-eared animal was lugging a large shape, wrapped in a saddlecloth, on its back. The gray-white flanks of the ass were covered with black streaks of dried blood.

The cart finally turned down a side street leading to a granary and harbor from which a sea breeze blew, carrying the stink of tar and ox's urine. Geralt picked up his pace. He didn't react to the muffled cry of the woman selling vegetables who was staring at the bony, taloned paw sticking out beneath the horse blanket, bobbing up and down in time with the donkey's trot. He didn't look round at the crowd gathering behind him and rippling with excitement.

There were, as usual, many carts in front of the alderman's [member of a municipal council] house. Geralt jumped from the saddle, adjusted the sword on his back and threw the reins over the wooden barrier. The crowd following him formed a semi-circle around the donkey.

Even outside, the alderman's shouts were audible.

“It's forbidden, I tell you! Forbidden, goddammit! Can't you understand what I say, you scoundrel?”

Geralt entered. In front of the alderman, small, podgy and red with rage, stood a villager holding a struggling goose by the neck. “What—By all the gods! Is that you, Geralt? Do my eyes deceive me?” And turning to the peasant again: “Take it away, you boor! Are you deaf?”

“They said,” mumbled the villager, squinting at the goose, “that a wee something must be given to his lordship, otherways…”

“Who said?” yelled the alderman. “Who? That I supposedly take bribes? I won't allow it, I say! Away with you! Greetings, Geralt.”

“Greetings, Caldemeyn.”

The alderman squeezed the Witcher’s hand, slapped him on the shoulder. “You haven't been here for a good two years, Geralt. Eh? You can never stay in one place for long, can you? Where are you coming from? Ah, dog's ass, what's the difference where? Hey, somebody bring us some beer! Sit down, Geralt, sit down. It's mayhem here because we've the market tomorrow. How are things with you, tell me!”

“Later. Come outside first.”

The crowd outside had grown twofold but the empty space around the donkey hadn't grown any smaller. Geralt threw the horse blanket aside. The crowd gasped and pulled back. Caldemeyn's mouth fell open.

“By all the gods, Geralt! What is it?”

“A kikimora. Is there any reward for it?”

Caldemeyn shifted from foot to foot, looking at the spidery shape with its dry black skin, that glassy eye with its vertical pupil, the needle-like fangs in the bloody jaws. “Where…From where…?”

“On the dyke, not some four miles from town. On the swamps. Caldemeyn, people must have disappeared there. Children.”

“Well, yes, true enough. But nobody… Who could have guessed… Hey, folks, go home, get back to work! This isn't a show! Cover it up, Geralt. Flies are gathering.”

Back inside, the alderman grabbed a large jug of beer without a word and drank it to the last drop in one draught. He sighed deeply and sniffed. “There's no reward,” he said gloomily. “No one suspected that there was something like that lurking in the salt marshes. It's true that several people have disappeared in those parts, but…Hardly anyone loitered on that dyke. And why were you there? Why weren't you taking the main road?”

“It's hard for me to make a living on main roads, Caldemeyn.”

“I forgot.” The alderman suppressed a belch, puffing out his cheeks. “And this used to be such a peaceful neighborhood. Even imps only rarely pissed in the women's milk. And here, right next to us, some sort of felispectre. It's only fitting that I thank you. Because as for paying you, I can't. I haven't the funds.”

“That's a shame. I could do with a small sum to get through the winter.” The Witcher took a sip from his jug, wiped away the froth. “I’m making my way to Yspaden, but I don't know if I’ll get there before the snows block the way. I might get stuck in one of the little towns on the Lutonski road.”

“Do you plan to stay long in Blaviken?”

“No. I’ve no time to waste. Winter's coming.”

“Where are you going to stay? With me perhaps? There's an empty room in the attic. Why get fleeced by the innkeepers, those thieves. We'll have a chat and you can tell me what's happening in the big, wide world.”

“Willingly. But what will Libushe have to say about it? It was quite obvious last time that she's not very keen on me.”

“Women don't have a say in my house. But, just between us, don't do what you did during supper last time in front of her again.”

“You mean when I threw my fork at that rat?”

“No. I mean when you hit it, even in the dark.”

“I thought it would be amusing.”

“It was. But don't do it in front of Libushe. And listen, this…what's it called…kiki...”

“Kikimora.”

“Do you need it for anything?”

“What would I want it for? You can have them throw it in the cesspool if there's no reward for it.”

“That's not a bad idea. Hey, Karelka, Borg, Carrypebble! Any of you there?”

A town guard entered with a halberd on his shoulder, the blade catching the doorframe with a crash.

“Carrypebble,” said Caldemeyn. “Get somebody to help you and take the donkey with that muck wrapped up in the horse blanket, lead it past the pigsties and chuck the kikimora in the cesspool. Understood?”

“At your command. But…Alderman, sir...”

“What?”

“Maybe before we drown that hideous thing...”

“Well?”

“We could show it to Master Irion. It might be useful to him.”

Caldemeyn slapped his forehead with his open palm. “You're not stupid, Carrypebble. Listen, Geralt, maybe our local wizard will spare you something for that carcass. The fishermen bring him the oddest of fish—octopedes, clabaters or herrongs—many have made some money on them. Come on, let's go to the tower.”

“You've got yourselves a wizard? Is he here for good or only passing?”

“For good. Master Irion. He's been living in Blaviken for a year. A powerful magus, Geralt, you'll see that from his very appearance.”

“I doubt whether a powerful magus will pay for a kikimora,” Geralt grimaced. “As far as I know, it's not needed for any elixirs. Your Irion will only insult me, no doubt. We Witchers and wizards don't love each other.”

“I’ve never heard of Master Irion insulting anyone. I can't swear that he'll pay you but there's no harm in trying. There might be more kikimoras like that on the marshes and what then? Let the wizard look at the monster and cast some sort of spell on the marshlands or something, just in case.”

The Witcher thought for a moment. “Very well, Caldemeyn. What the heck, we'll risk a meeting with Master Irion. Shall we go?”

“We're off. Carrypebble, chase the kids away and bring the floppyears. Where's my hat?”

The tower, built from smoothly hewn blocks of granite and crowned by tooth-like battlements, was impressive, dominating the broken tiles of homesteads and dipping-roofed thatched cottages.

“He's renovated it, I see,” remarked Geralt. “With spells, or did he have you working at it?”

“Spells, chiefly.”

“What's he like, this Irion?”

“Decent. He helps people. But he's a recluse, doesn't say much. He rarely leaves the tower.”

On the door, which was adorned with a rosace inlaid with pale wood, hung a huge knocker in the shape of a flat bulging-eyed fish-head holding a brass ring in its toothed jaws. Caldemeyn, obviously well-versed with the workings of its mechanics, approached, cleared his throat and recited:

“Alderman Caldemeyn greets you with a case for Master Irion. With him greets you, Witcher Geralt, with respect to the same case.”

For a long moment nothing happened; then finally the fish-head moved its toothed mandibles and belched a cloud of steam.

“Master Irion is not receiving. Leave, my good people.”

Caldemeyn waddled on the spot and looked at Geralt. The Witcher shrugged. Carrypebble picked his nose with serious concentration.

“Master Irion is not receiving,” the knocker repeated metallically. “Go, my good...”

“I’m not a good person,” Geralt broke in loudly. “I’m a Witcher. That thing on the donkey is a kikimora, and I killed it not far from town. It is the duty of every resident wizard to look after the safety of the neighborhood. Master Irion does not have to honor me with conversation, does not have to receive me, if that is his will. But let him examine the kikimora and draw his own conclusions. Carrypebble, unstrap the kikimora and throw it down by the door.”

“Geralt,” the alderman said quietly. “You're going to leave but I’m going to have to...”

“Let's go, Caldemeyn. Carrypebble, take that finger out of your nose and do as I said.”

“One moment,” the knocker said in an entirely different tone. “Geralt, is that really you?”

The Witcher swore quietly. “I’m losing patience. Yes, it's really me. So what?”

“Come up to the door,” said the knocker, puffing out a small cloud of steam. “Alone. I’ll let you in.”

“What about the kikimora?”

“To hell with it. I want to talk to you, Geralt. Just you. Forgive me, Alderman.”

“What's it to me, Master Irion?” Caldemeyn waved the matter aside. “Take care, Geralt. We'll see each other later. Carrypebble! Into the cesspool with the monster!”

“As you command.”

The Witcher approached the inlaid door, which opened a little bit—just enough for him to squeeze through—and then slammed shut, leaving him in complete darkness.

“Hey!” he shouted, not hiding his anger.

“Just a moment,” answered a strangely familiar voice.

The feeling was so unexpected that the Witcher staggered and stretched out his hand, looking for support. He didn't find any. The orchard was blossoming with white and pink, and smelled of rain. The sky was split by the many-colored arc of a rainbow, which bound the crowns of the trees to the distant, blue chain of mountains. The house nestled in the orchard, tiny and modest, was drowning in hollyhocks. Geralt looked down and discovered that he was up to his knees in thyme.

“Well, come on, Geralt,” said the voice. “I’m in front of the house.”

He entered the orchard, walking through the trees. He noticed a movement to his left and looked round. A fair-haired girl, entirely naked, was walking along a row of shrubs carrying a basket full of apples. The Witcher solemnly promised himself that nothing would surprise him anymore.

“At last. Greetings, Witcher.”

“Stregobor!” Geralt was surprised.

During his life, the Witcher had met thieves who looked like town councilors, councilors who looked like beggars, harlots who looked like princesses, princesses who looked like calving cows and kings who looked like thieves. But Stregobor always looked as, according to every rule and notion, a wizard should look. He was tall, thin and stooping, with enormous bushy gray eyebrows and a long, crooked nose. To top it off, he wore a black, trailing robe with improbably wide sleeves, and wielded a long staff capped with a crystal knob. None of the wizards Geralt knew looked like Stregobor. Most surprising of all was that Stregobor was, indeed, a wizard.

They sat in wicker chairs at a white marble-topped table on a porch surrounded by hollyhocks. The naked blonde with the apple basket approached, smiled, turned and, swaying her hips, returned to the orchard.

“Is that an illusion, too?” asked Geralt, watching the sway.

“It is. Like everything here. But it is, my friend, a first-class illusion. The flowers smell, you can eat the apples, the bee can sting you, and she” the wizard indicated the blonde “you can…”

“Maybe later.”

“Quite right. What are you doing here, Geralt? Are you still toiling away, killing the last representatives of dying species for money? How much did you get for the kikimora? Nothing, I guess, or you wouldn't have come here. And to think that there are people who don't believe in destiny. Unless you knew about me. Did you?”

“No, I didn't. It's the last place I could have expected you. If my memory serves me correctly, you used to live in a similar tower in Kovir.”

“A great deal has changed since then.”

“Such as your name. Apparently, you're Master Irion now.”

“That's the name of the man who created this tower. He died about two hundred years ago, and I thought it right to honor him in some way since I occupied his abode. I’m living here. Most of the inhabitants live off the sea and, as you know, my specialty, apart from illusions, is weather. Sometimes I’ll calm a storm, sometimes conjure one up, sometimes drive schools of whiting and cod closer to the shores with the westerly wind. I can survive. That is,” he added, miserably, “I could.”

“How come ‘I could’? Why the change of name?”

“Destiny has many faces. Mine is beautiful on the outside and hideous on the inside. She has stretched her bloody talons toward me...”

“You've not changed a bit, Stregobor.” Geralt grimaced. “You're talking nonsense while making wise and meaningful faces. Can't you speak normally?”

“I can,” sighed the wizard. “I can if that makes you happy. I made it all the way here, hiding and running from a monstrous being that wants to murder me. My escape proved in vain—it found me. In all probability, it's going to try to kill me tomorrow, or at the latest, the day after.”

“Aha,” said the Witcher dispassionately. “Now I understand.”

“My facing death doesn't impress you much, does it?”

“Stregobor,” said Geralt, “that's the way of the world. One sees all sorts of things when one travels. Two peasants kill each other over a field which, the following day, will be trampled flat by two counts and their retinues [advisors] trying to kill each other off. Men hang from trees at the roadside; brigands slash merchants’ throats. At every step-in town you trip over corpses in the gutters. In palaces they stab each other with daggers, and somebody falls under the table at a banquet every minute, blue from poisoning. I’m used to it. So why should a death threat impress me, and one directed at you at that?”

“One directed at me at that,” Stregobor repeated with a sneer. “And I considered you a friend. Counted on your help.”

“Our last meeting,” said Geralt, “was in the court of King Idi of Kovir. I’d come to be paid for killing the amphisboena which had been terrorizing the neighborhood. You and your compatriot Zavist vied with each other to call me a charlatan, a thoughtless murdering machine and a scavenger. Consequently, not only didn't Idi pay me a penny, he gave me twelve hours to leave Kovir and, since his hourglass was broken, I barely made it. And now you say you're counting on my help. You say a monster's after you. What are you afraid of, Stregobor? If it catches up with you, tell it you like monsters, that you protect them and make sure no Witcher scavenger ever troubles their peace. Indeed, if the monster disembowels and devours you, it'll prove terribly ungrateful.”

The wizard turned his head away silently. Geralt laughed. “Don't get all puffed up like a frog, magician. Tell me what's threatening you. We'll see what can be done.”

“Have you heard of the Curse of the Black Sun?”

“But of course. Except that it was called the Mania of Mad Eltibald after the wizard who started the lark and caused dozens of girls from good, even noble, families to be murdered or imprisoned in towers. They were supposed to have been possessed by demons, cursed, contaminated by the Black Sun, because that's what, in your pompous jargon, you called the most ordinary eclipse in the world.”

“Eltibald wasn't mad at all. He deciphered the writing on Dauk menhirs, on tombstones in the Wozgor necropolises, and examined the legends and traditions of weretots. All of them spoke of the eclipse in no uncertain terms. The Black Sun was to announce the imminent return of Lilit, still honored in the East under the name of Niya, and the extermination of the human race. Lilit's path was to be prepared by ‘sixty women wearing gold crowns, who would fill the river valleys with blood.’”

“Nonsense,” said the Witcher. “And what's more, it doesn't rhyme. All decent predictions rhyme. Everyone knows what Eltibald and the Council of Wizards had in mind at the time. You took advantage of a madman's ravings to strengthen your own authority. To break up alliances, ruin marriage allegiances, stir up dynasties. In a word: to tangle the strings of crowned puppets even more. And here you are lecturing me about predictions, which any old storyteller at the marketplace would be ashamed of.”

“You can have your reservations about Eltibald's theories, about how the predictions were interpreted. But you can't challenge the fact that there have been horrendous mutations among girls born just after the eclipse.”

“And why not? I’ve heard quite the opposite.”

“I was present when they did an autopsy on one of them,” said the wizard. “Geralt, what we found inside the skull and marrow could not be described. Some sort of red sponge. The internal organs were all mixed up, some were missing completely. Everything was covered in moving cilia, bluish-pink shreds. The heart was six-chambered, with two chambers practically atrophied. What do you say to that?”

“I’ve seen people with eagles’ talons instead of hands, people with a wolf's fangs. People with additional joints, additional organs and additional senses. All of which were the effects of your messing about with magic.”

“You've seen all sorts of mutations, you say.” The magician raised his head. “And how many of them have you slaughtered for money, in keeping with your Witcher’s calling? Well? Because one can have a wolf's fangs and go no further than baring them at the trollops in taverns, or one can have a wolf's nature, too, and attack children. And that's just how it was with the girls who were born after the eclipse. Their outright insane tendency to cruelty, aggression, sudden bursts of anger and an unbridled temperament were noted.”

“You can say that about any woman,” sneered Geralt. “What are you driveling on about? You're asking me how many mutants I’ve killed. Why aren't you interested in how many I’ve extricated from spells, freed from curses? I, a Witcher despised by you. And what have you done, you mighty magicians?”

“A higher magic was used. Ours and that of the priests, in various temples. All attempts ended in the girls’ deaths.”

“That speaks badly of you, not the girls. And so we've now got the first corpses. I take it the only autopsies were done on them?”

“No. Don't look at me like that; you know very well that there were more corpses, too. It was initially decided to eliminate all of them. We got rid of a few…autopsies were done on all of them. One of them was even vivisection.”

“And you sons of bitches have the nerve to criticize Witchers? Oh, Stregobor, the day will come when people will learn, and get the better of you.”

“I don't think a day like that will come soon,” said the wizard caustically. “Don't forget that we were acting in the people's defense. The mutant girls would have drowned entire countries in blood.”

“So, say you magicians, turning your noses up, so high and mighty with your auras of infallibility. While we're on the subject, surely you're not going to tell me that in your hunt for these so-called mutants you haven't once made a mistake?”

“All right,” said Stregobor after a long silence. “I’ll be honest, although for my own sake I shouldn't. We did make a mistake—more than one. Picking them out was extremely difficult. And that's why we stopped…getting rid of them and started isolating them instead.”

“Your famous towers,” snorted the Witcher.

“Our towers. But that was another mistake. We underestimated them. Many escaped. Then some mad fashion to free imprisoned beauties took hold of princes, especially the younger ones, who didn't have much to do and still less to lose. Most of them, fortunately, twisted their necks...”

“As far as I know, those imprisoned in the towers died quickly. It's been said you must have helped them somewhat.”

“That's a lie. But it is true that they quickly fell into apathy, refused to eat…What is interesting is that shortly before they died, they showed signs of the gift of clairvoyance. Further proof of mutation.”

“Your proofs are becoming ever less convincing. Do you have any more?”

“I do. Silvena, the lady of Narok, whom we never managed to get close to because she gained power so quickly. Terrible things are happening in Narok now. Fialka, Evermir's daughter, escaped her tower using a homemade rope and is now terrorizing North Velhad. Bernika of Talgar was freed by an idiot prince. Now he's sitting in a dungeon, blinded, and the most common feature of the Talgar landscape is a set of gallows. There are other examples, too.”

“Of course, there are,” said the Witcher. “In Yamurlak, for instance, old man Abrad reigns. He's got scrofula, not a single tooth in his head, was probably born some hundred years before this eclipse, and can't fall asleep unless someone's being tortured to death in his presence. He's wiped out all his relatives and emptied half of the country in crazy… how did you put it? attacks of anger. There are also traces of a rampant temperament. Apparently, he was nicknamed Abrad Jack-up-the-Skirt in his youth. Oh, Stregobor, it would be great if the cruelty of rulers could be explained away by mutations or curses.”

“Listen, Geralt...”

“No. You won't win me over with your reasons nor convince me that Eltibad wasn't a murdering madman, so let's get back to the monster threatening you. You'd better understand that, after the introduction you've given me, I don't like the story. But I’ll hear you out.”

“Without interrupting with spiteful comments?”

“That I can't promise.”

“Oh well” Stregobor slipped his hands into the sleeves of his robe...”then it'll only take longer. Well, the story begins in Creyden, a small principality in the north. The wife of Fredefalk, the Prince of Creyden, was Aridea, a wise, educated woman. She had many exceptional adepts of the magical arts in her family and—through inheritance, no doubt—she came into possession of a rare and powerful artifact. One of Nehalenia's Mirrors. They're chiefly used by prophets and oracles because they predict the future accurately, albeit intricately. Aridea quite often turned to the Mirror...”

“With the usual question, I take it,” interrupted Geralt. “’Who is the fairest of them all?’ I know; all Nehalenia's Mirrors are either polite or broken.”

“You're wrong. Aridea was more interested in her country's fate. And the Mirror answered her questions by predicting a horrible death for her and for a great number of others by the hand, or fault, of Fredefalk's daughter from his first marriage. Aridea ensured this news reached the Council, and the Council sent me to Creyden. I don't have to add that Fredefalk's firstborn daughter was born shortly after the eclipse. I was quite discreet for a little while. She managed to torture a canary and two puppies during that time, and also gouged out a servant's eye with the handle of a comb. I carried out a few tests using curses, and most of them confirmed that the little one was a mutant. I went to Aridea with the news because Fredefalk's daughter meant the world to him. Aridea, as I said, wasn't stupid…”

“Of course,” Geralt interrupted again, “and no doubt she wasn't head-over-heels in love with her stepdaughter. She preferred her own children to inherit the throne. I can guess what followed. How come nobody throttled her? And you, too, while they were at it.”

Stregobor sighed, raised his eyes to heaven, where the rainbow was still shimmering colorfully and picturesquely. “I wanted to isolate her, but Aridea decided otherwise. She sent the little one out into the forest with a hired thug, a trapper. We found him later in the undergrowth…without any trousers, so it wasn't hard to recreate the turn of events. She had dug a brooch-pin into his brain, through his ear, no doubt while his attention was on entirely different matters.”

“If you think I feel sorry for him,” muttered Geralt, “then you're wrong.”

“We organized a manhunt,” continued Stregobor, “but all traces of the little one had disappeared. I had to leave Creyden in a hurry because Fredefalk was beginning to suspect something. Then, four years later I received news from Aridea. She'd tracked down the little one, who was living in Mahakam with seven gnomes whom she'd managed to convince it was more profitable to rob merchants on the roads than to pollute their lungs with dust from the mines. She was known as Shrike because she liked to impale the people she caught on a sharp pole while they were still alive. Several times Aridea hired assassins, but none of them returned. Well, then it became hard to find anyone to try—Shrike had already become quite famous. She'd learned to use a sword so well there was hardly a man who could defy her. I was summoned, and arrived in Creyden secretly, only to learn that someone had poisoned Aridea. It was generally believed that it was the work of Fredefalk, who had found himself a younger, more robust mistress—but I think it was Renfri.”

“Renfri?”

“That's what she was called. I said she'd poisoned Aridea. Shortly afterward, Prince Fredefalk died in a strange hunting accident, and Aridea's eldest son disappeared without a word. That must have been the little one's doing, too. I say ‘little’ but she was seventeen by then. And she was pretty well-developed.

“Meanwhile,” the wizard picked up after a moment's break, “she and her gnomes had become the terror of the whole of Mahakam. Until, one day, they argued about something. I don't know what—sharing out the loot, or whose turn it was to spend the night with her—anyway, they slaughtered each other with knives. Only Shrike survived. Only her. And I was in the neighborhood at the time. We met face-to-face: she recognized me in a flash and knew the part I’d played in Creyden. I tell you, Geralt, I had barely managed to utter a curse—and my hands were shaking like anything—when that wildcat flew at me with a sword. I turned her into a neat slab of mountain crystal, six ells by nine [an ell is 45 inches]. When she fell into a lethargy, I threw the slab into the gnomes’ mine and brought the tunnels down on it.”

“Shabby work,” commented Geralt. “That spell could have been reversed. Couldn't you have burnt her to cinders? You know so many nice spells, after all.”

“No. It's not my specialty. But you're right. I did make a hash of it. Some idiot prince found her, spent a fortune on a counter-curse, reversed the spell and triumphantly took her home to some out-of-the-way kingdom in the east. His father, an old brigand, proved to have more sense. He gave his son a hiding, and questioned Shrike about the treasures which she and the gnomes had seized and which she'd hidden. His mistake was to allow his elder son to assist him when he had her stretched out, naked, on the executioner's bench. Somehow, the following day, that same eldest son—now an orphan bereft of siblings—was ruling the kingdom, and Shrike had taken over the office of first favorite.”

“Meaning she can't be ugly.”

“That's a matter of taste. She wasn't a favorite for long. Up until the first coup d’état at the palace, to give it a grand name—it was more like a barn. It soon became clear that she hadn't forgotten about me. She tried to assassinate me three times in Kovir. I decided not to risk a fourth attempt and to wait her out in Pontar. Again, she found me. This time I escaped to Angren, but she found me there too. I don't know how she does it. I cover my traces well. It must be a feature of her mutation.”

“What stopped you from casting another spell to turn her into crystal? Scruples?”

“No. I don't have any of those. She had become resistant to magic.”

“That's impossible.”

“It's not. It's enough to have the right artifact or aura. Or this could also be associated with her mutation, which is progressing. I escaped from Angren and hid here, in Arcsea, in Blaviken. I’ve lived in peace for a year, but she's tracked me down again.”

“How do you know? Is she already in town?”

“Yes. I saw her in the crystal ball.” The wizard raised his wand. “She's not alone. She's leading a gang, which shows that she's brewing something serious. Geralt, I don't have anywhere else to run. I don't know where I could hide. The fact that you've arrived here exactly at this time can't be a coincidence. It's fate.”

The Witcher raised his eyebrows. “What's on your mind?”

“Surely it's obvious. You're going to kill her.”

“I’m not a hired thug, Stregobor.”

“You're not a thug, agreed.”

“I kill monsters for money. Beasts which endanger people. Horrors conjured up by spells and sorceries cast by the likes of you. Not people.”

“She's not human. She's exactly a monster: a mutant, a cursed mutant. You brought a kikimora here. Shrike's worse than a kikimora. A kikimora kills because it's hungry, but Shrike does it for pleasure. Kill her and I’ll pay you whatever sum you ask. Within reason, of course.”

“I’ve already told you. I consider the story about mutations and Lilit's curse to be nonsense. The girl has her reasons for settling her account with you, and I’m not going to get mixed up in it. Turn to the alderman, to the town guards. You're the town wizard; you're protected by municipal law.”

“I spit on the law, the alderman and his help!” exploded Stregobor. “I don't need defense. I need you to kill her! Nobody's going to get into this tower—I’m completely safe here. But what's that to me? I don't intend to spend the rest of my days here, and Shrike's not going to give up while I’m alive. Am I to sit here, in this tower, and wait for death?”

“They did. Do you know what, magician? You should have left that hunt for the girls to other, more powerful, wizards. You should have foreseen the consequences.”

“Please, Geralt.”

“No, Stregobor.”

The sorcerer was silent. The unreal sun in its unreal sky hadn't moved toward the zenith but the Witcher knew it was already dusk in Blaviken. He felt hungry.

“Geralt,” said Stregobor, “when we were listening to Eltibald, many of us had doubts. But we decided to accept the lesser evil. Now I ask you to make a similar choice.”

“Evil is evil, Stregobor,” said the Witcher seriously as he got up. “Lesser, greater, middling, it's all the same. Proportions are negotiated, boundaries blurred. I’m not a pious hermit. I haven't done only good in my life. But if I’m to choose between one evil and another, then I prefer not to choose at all. Time for me to go. We'll see each other tomorrow.”

“Maybe,” said the wizard. “If you get here in time.”

[That Evening]

The Golden Court, the country town's elegant inn, was crowded and noisy. The guests, locals and visitors, were mostly engaged in activities typical for their nation or profession. Serious merchants argued with dwarves over the price of goods and credit interest. Less serious merchants pinched the backsides of the girls carrying beer, cabbage and beans. Local nitwits pretended to be well-informed. Harlots were trying to please those who had money while discouraging those who had none. Carters and fishermen drank as if there were no tomorrow. Some seamen were singing a song which celebrated the ocean waves, the courage of captains and the graces of mermaids, the latter graphically and in considerable detail.

“Exert your memory, friend,” Caldemeyn said to the innkeeper, leaning across the counter in order to be heard over the din. “Six men and a wench, all dressed in black leather studded with silver in the Novigradian style. I saw them at the turnpike. Are they staying here or at The Tuna Fish?”

The innkeeper wrinkled his bulging forehead and wiped a tankard on his striped apron. “Here, Alderman,” he finally said. “They say they've come for the market, but they all carry swords, even the woman. Dressed, as you said, in black.”

“Well.” The alderman nodded. “Where are they now? I don't see them here.”

“In the lesser alcove. They paid in gold.”

“I’ll go in alone,” said Geralt. “There's no point in making this an official affair in front of them all, at least for the time being. I’ll bring her here.”

“Maybe that's best. But be careful, I don't want any trouble.”

“I’ll be careful.”

The seamen's song, judging by the growing intensity of obscene words, was reaching its grand finale. Geralt drew aside the curtain—stiff and sticky with dirt—which hid the entrance to the alcove. Six men were seated at the table. Shrike wasn't with them.

“What'd’you want?” yelled the man who noticed him first. He was balding and his face was disfigured by a scar which ran across his left eyebrow, the bridge of his nose and his right cheek.

“I want to see Shrike.”

Two identical figures stood up—identical motionless faces and fair, disheveled, shoulder-length hair, identical tight-fitting black outfits glistening with silver ornaments. And with identical movements, the twins took identical swords from the bench. “Keep calm, Vyr. Sit down, Nimir,” said the man with the scar, leaning his elbows on the table. “Who d'you say you want to see, brother? Who's Shrike?”

“You know very well who I mean.”

“Who's this, then?” asked a half-naked athlete, sweaty, girded crosswise with belts, and wearing spiked pads on his forearms. “D’you know him, Nohorn?”

“No,” said the man with the scar.

“It's some albino,” giggled a slim, dark-haired man sitting next to Nohorn. Delicate features, enormous black eyes and pointed ears betrayed him to be a half-blood elf. “Albino, mutant, freak of nature. And this sort of thing is allowed to enter pubs among decent people.”

“I’ve seen him somewhere before,” said a stocky, weather-beaten man with a braid, measuring Geralt with an evil look in his narrowed eyes.

“Doesn't matter where you've seen him, Tavik,” said Nohorn. “Listen here. Civril insulted you terribly a moment ago. Aren't you going to challenge him? It's such a boring evening.”

“No,” said the Witcher calmly.

“And me, if I pour this fish soup over your head, are you going to challenge me?” cackled the man sitting naked to the waist.

“Keep calm, Fifteen,” said Nohorn. “He said no, that means no. For the time being. Well, brother, say what you have to say and clear out. You've got one chance to clear out on your own. You don't take it; the attendants will carry you out.”

“I don't have anything to say to you. I want to see Shrike. Renfri.”

“Do you hear that, boys?” Nohorn looked around at his companions. “He wants to see Renfri. And may I know why?”

“No.”

Nohorn raised his head and looked at the twins as they took a step forward, the silver clasps on their high boots jangling.

“I know,” the man with the plait said suddenly. “I know where I’ve seen him now!”

“What's that you're mumbling, Tavik?”

“In front of the alderman's house. He brought some sort of dragon in to trade, a cross between a spider and a crocodile. People were saying he's a Witcher.”

“And what's a Witcher?” Fifteen asked. “Eh? Civril?”

“A hired magician,” said the half-elf. “A conjurer for a fistful of silver. I told you, a freak of nature. An insult to human and divine laws. They ought to be burned, the likes of him.”

“We don't like magicians,” screeched Tavik, not taking his narrowed eyes off Geralt. “It seems to me, Civril, that we're going to have more work in this hole than we thought. There's more than one of them here and everyone knows they stick together.”

“Birds of a feather.” The half-breed smiled maliciously. “To think the likes of you walk the earth. Who spawns you freaks?”

“A bit more tolerance, if you please,” said Geralt calmly, “as I see your mother must have wandered off through the forest alone often enough to give you good reason to wonder where you come from yourself.”

“Possibly,” answered the half-elf, the smile not leaving his face. “But at least I knew my mother. You Witchers can't say that much about yourselves.”

Geralt grew a little pale and tightened his lips. Nohorn, noticing it, laughed out loud.

“Well, brother, you can't let an insult like that go by. That thing that you have on your back looks like a sword. So? Are you going outside with Civril? The evening's so boring.”

The Witcher didn't react.

“Shitty coward,” snorted Tavik.

“What did he say about Civril's mother?” Nohorn continued monotonously, resting his chin on his clasped hands. “Something extremely nasty, as I understood it. That she was an easy lay, or something. Hey, Fifteen, is it right to listen to some straggler insulting a companion's mother? A mother, you son of a bitch, is sacred!”

Fifteen got up willingly, undid his sword and threw it on the table. He stuck his chest out, adjusted the pads spiked with silver studs on his shoulders, spat and took a step forward.

“If you've got any doubts,” said Nohorn, “then Fifteen is challenging you to a fistfight. I told you they'd carry you out of here. Make room.”

Fifteen moved closer and raised his fists. Geralt put his hand on the hilt of his sword.

“Careful,” he said. “One more step and you'll be looking for your hand on the floor.”

Nohorn and Tavik leapt up, grabbing their swords. The silent twins drew theirs with identical movements. Fifteen stepped back. Only Civril didn't move.

“What's going on here, dammit? Can't I leave you alone for a minute?”

Geralt turned around very slowly and looked into eyes the color of the sea.

She was almost as tall as him. She wore her straw-colored hair unevenly cut, just below the ears. She stood with one hand on the door, wearing a tight, velvet jacket clasped with a decorated belt. Her skirt was uneven, asymmetrical reaching down to her calf on the left side and, on the right, revealing a strong thigh above a boot made of elk's leather. On her left side, she carried a sword; on her right, a dagger with a huge ruby set in its pommel.

“Lost your voices?”

“He's a Witcher,” mumbled Nohorn.

“So what?”

“He wanted to talk to you.”

“So what?”

“He's a sorcerer!” Fifteen roared.

“We don't like sorcerers,” snarled Tavik.

“Take it easy, boys,” said the girl. “He wants to talk to me; that's no crime. You carry on having a good time. And no trouble. Tomorrow's market day. Surely you don't want your pranks to disrupt the market, such an important event in the life of this pleasant town?”

A quiet, nasty giggle reverberated in the silence which fell. Civril, still sprawled out carelessly on the bench, was laughing.

“Come on, Renfri,” chuckled the half-blood. “Important…event!”

“Shut up, Civril. Immediately.”

Civril stopped laughing. Immediately. Geralt wasn't surprised. There was something very strange in Renfri's voice—something associated with the red reflection of fire on blades, the wailing of people being murdered, the whinnying of horses and the smell of blood. Others must also have had similar associations—even Tavik's weather-beaten face grew pale.

“Well, white-hair,” Renfri broke the silence. “Let's go into the larger room. Let's join the alderman you came with. He wants to talk to me too, no doubt.”

At the sight of them, Caldemeyn, who was waiting at the counter, broke off his quiet conversation with the innkeeper, straightened himself and folded his arms across his chest.

“Listen, young lady,” he said severely, not wasting time with banal niceties, “I know from this Witcher of Rivia here what brings you to Blaviken. Apparently, you bear a grudge against our wizard.”

“Maybe. What of it?” asked Renfri quietly, in an equally brusque tone.

“Only that there are tribunals to deal with grudges like that. He who wants to revenge a grudge using steel—here in Arcsea—is considered a common bandit. And also, that either you get out of Blaviken early in the morning with your black companions, or I throw you into prison, pre—How do you say it, Geralt?”

“Preventively.”

“Exactly. Understood, young lady?”

Renfri reached into the purse on her belt and pulled out a parchment which had been folded several times. “Read this, Alderman. If you're literate. And don't call me ‘young lady.’”

Caldemeyn took the parchment, spent a long time reading it, then, without a word, gave it to Geralt.

“’To my regents, vassals and freemen subjects,’” the Witcher read out loud. “’To all and sundry. I proclaim that Renfri, the Princess of Creyden, remains in our service and is well seen by us; whosoever dares maltreet her will incur our wrath. Audoen, King’ Maltreat is not spelled like that. But the seal appears authentic.”

“Because it is authentic,” said Renfri, snatching the parchment from him. “It was affixed by Audoen, your merciful lord. That's why I don't advise you to maltreat me. Irrespective of how you spell it, the consequences for you would be lamentable. You are not, honorable Alderman, going to put me in prison. Or call me ‘young lady.’ I haven't infringed any law. For the time being.”

“If you infringe by even an inch” Caldemeyn looked as if he wanted to spit “I’ll throw you in the dungeon together with this piece of paper. I swear on all the gods, young lady. Come on, Geralt.”

“With you, Witcher.” Renfri touched Geralt's shoulder. “I’d still like a word.”

“Don't be late for supper,” the alderman threw over his shoulder, “or Libushe will be furious.”

“I won't.”

Geralt leaned against the counter. Fiddling with the wolf's head medallion hanging around his neck, he looked into the girl's blue-green eyes.

“I’ve heard about you,” she said. “You're Geralt, the white-haired Witcher from Rivia. Is Stregobor your friend?”

“No.”

“That makes things easier.”

“Not much. Don't expect me to look on peacefully.”

Renfri's eyes narrowed. “Stregobor dies tomorrow,” she said quietly, brushing the unevenly cut hair off her forehead. “It would be the lesser evil if he died alone.”

“If he did, yes. But in fact, before Stregobor dies, several other people will die too. I don't see any other possibility.”

“Several, Witcher, is putting it mildly.”

“You need more than words to frighten me, Shrike.”

“Don't call me Shrike. I don't like it. The point is, I see other possibilities. It would be worth talking it over…but Libushe is waiting. Is she pretty, this Libushe?”

“Is that all you had to say to me?”

“No. But you should go. Libushe's waiting.”

[AFTER DINNER]

There was someone in his little attic room. Geralt knew it before he even reached the door, sensing it through the barely perceptible vibration of his medallion. He blew out the oil lamp which had lit his path up the stairs, pulled the dagger from his boot, slipped it into the back of his belt and pressed the door handle. The room was dark. But not for a Witcher.

He was deliberately slow in crossing the threshold; he closed the door behind him carefully. The next second he dived at the person sitting on his bed, crushed them into the linen, forced his forearm under their chin and reached for his dagger. He didn't pull it out. Something wasn't right.

“Not a bad start,” she said in a muffled voice, lying motionless beneath him. “I expected something like this, but I didn't think we'd both be in bed so quickly. Take your hand from my throat please.”

“It's you.”

“It's me. Now there are two possibilities. The first: you get off me and we talk. The second: we stay in this position; in which case I’d like to take my boots off at least.”

The Witcher released the girl, who sighed, sat up and adjusted her hair and skirt. “Light the candle,” she said. “I can't see in the dark, unlike you, and I like to see who I’m talking to.” She approached the table—tall, slim, agile—and sat down, stretching out her long legs in their high boots. She wasn't carrying any visible weapons. “Have you got anything to drink here?”

“No.”

“Then it's a good thing I brought something,” she laughed, placing a traveling wineskin and two leather tumblers on the table.

“It's nearly midnight,” said Geralt coldly. “Shall we come to the point?”

“In a minute. Here, have a drink. Here's to you, Geralt.”

“Likewise, Shrike.”

“My name's Renfri, dammit.” She raised her head. “I will permit you to omit my royal title but stop calling me Shrike!”

“Be quiet or you'll wake the whole house. Am I finally going to learn why you crept in here through the window?”

“You're slow-witted, Witcher. I want to save Blaviken from slaughter. I crawled over the rooftops like a she-cat in March in order to talk to you about it. Appreciate it.”

“I do,” said Geralt. “Except that I don't know what talk can achieve. The situation's clear. Stregobor is in his tower, and you'd have to lay siege to it in order to get to him. If you do that, your letter of safe conduct won't help you. Audoen won't defend you if you openly break the law. The alderman, guards, the whole of Blaviken will stand against you.”

“The whole of Blaviken would regret standing up to me.” Renfri smiled, revealing a predator's white teeth. “Did you take a look at my boys? They know their trade, I assure you. Can you imagine what would happen in a fight between them and those dimwit guards who keep tripping over their own halberds?”

“Do you imagine I would stand by and watch a fight like that? I’m staying at the alderman's, as you can see. If the need arises, I should stand at his side.”

“I have no doubt” Renfri grew serious “that you will. But you'll probably be alone, as the rest will cower in the cellars. No warrior in the world could match seven swordsmen. So, white-hair, let's stop threatening each other. As I said: slaughter and bloodshed can be avoided. There are two people who can prevent it.”

“I’m all ears.”

“One,” said Renfri, “is Stregobor himself. He leaves his tower voluntarily, I take him to a deserted spot, and Blaviken sinks back into blissful apathy and forgets the whole affair.”

“Stregobor may seem crazy, but he's not that crazy.”

“Who knows, Witcher, who knows. Some arguments can't be denied, like the Tridam ultimatum. I plan to present it to the sorcerer.”

“What is it, this ultimatum?”

“That's my sweet secret.”

“As you wish. But I doubt it'll be effective. Stregobor's teeth chatter when he speaks of you. An ultimatum which would persuade him to voluntarily surrender himself into your beautiful hands would have to be pretty good. So who's the other person? Let me guess.”

“I wonder how sharp you are, white-hair.”

“It's you, Renfri. You'll reveal a truly princely—what am I saying, royal magnanimity and renounce your revenge. Have I guessed?”

Renfri threw back her head and laughed, covering her mouth with her hand. Then she grew silent and fixed her shining eyes on the Witcher. “Geralt,” she said, “I used to be a princess. I had everything I could dream of. Servants at my beck and call, dresses, shoes. Cambric knickers. Jewels and trinkets, ponies, goldfish in a pond. Dolls, and a doll's house bigger than this room. That was my life until Stregobor and that whore Aridea ordered a huntsman to butcher me in the forest and bring back my heart and liver. Lovely, don't you think?”

“No. I’m pleased you evaded the huntsman, Renfri.”

“Like shit I did. He took pity on me and let me go. After the son of a bitch raped me and robbed me.”

Geralt, fiddling with his medallion, looked her straight in the eyes. She didn't lower hers.

“That was the end of the princess,” she continued. “The dress grew torn, the cambric grew grubby. And then there was dirt, hunger, stench, stink and abuse. Selling myself to any old bum for a bowl of soup or a roof over my head. Do you know what my hair was like? Silk. And it reached a good foot below my hips. I had it cut right to the scalp with sheep-shears when I caught lice. It's never grown back properly.”

She was silent for a moment, idly brushing the uneven strands of hair from her forehead. “I stole rather than starve to death. I killed to avoid being killed myself. I was locked in prisons which stank of urine, never knowing if they would hang me in the morning, or just flog me and release me. And through it all, my stepmother and your sorcerer were hard on my heels, with their poisons and assassins and spells. And you want me to reveal my magnanimity? To forgive him royally? I’ll tear his head off, royally, first.”

“Aridea and Stregobor tried to poison you?”

“With an apple seasoned with nightshade. I was saved by a gnome, and an emetic I thought would turn my insides out. But I survived.”

“Was that one of the seven gnomes?”

Renfri, pouring wine, froze holding the wineskin over the tumbler. “Ah,” she said. “You do know a lot about me. Yes? Do you have something against gnomes? Or humanoids? They were better to me than most people, not that it's your business. Stregobor and Aridea hunted me like a wild animal as long as they could. Until I became the hunter. Aridea died in her own bed. She was lucky I didn't get to her earlier—I had a special plan for her, and now I’ve got one for the sorcerer. Do you think he deserves to die?”

“I’m no judge. I’m a Witcher.”

“You are. I said that there were two people who could prevent bloodshed in Blaviken. The second is you. The sorcerer will let you into the tower. You could kill him.”

“Renfri,” said Geralt calmly, “did you fall from the roof onto your head on the way to my room?”

“Are you a Witcher or aren't you, dammit? They say you killed a kikimora and brought it here on a donkey to get a price for it. Stregobor is worse than the kikimora. It's just a mindless beast which kills because that's how the gods made it. Stregobor is a brute, a true monster. Bring him to me on a donkey and I won't begrudge you any sum you care to mention.”

“I’m not a hired thug, Shrike.”

“You're not,” she agreed with a smile. She leaned back on the stool and crossed her legs on the table without the slightest effort to cover her thighs with her skirt. “You're a Witcher, a defender of people from evil. And evil is the steel and fire which will cause devastation here if we fight each other. Don't you think I’m proposing a lesser evil, a better solution? Even for that son of a bitch Stregobor. You can kill him mercifully, with one thrust. He'll die without knowing it. And I guarantee him quite the reverse.”

Geralt remained silent.

Renfri stretched, raising her arms. “I understand your hesitation,” she said. “But I need an answer now.”

“Do you know why Stregobor and the king's wife wanted to kill you?”

Renfri straightened abruptly and took her legs off the table. “It's obvious,” she snarled. “I am heir to the throne. Aridea's children were born out of wedlock and don't have any right to...”

“No.”

Renfri lowered her head, but only for a moment. Her eyes flashed. “Fine. I’m supposed to be cursed. Contaminated in my mother's womb. I’m supposed to be…”

“Yes?”

“A monster.”

“And are you?”

For a fleeting moment she looked helpless, shattered. And very sad. “I don't know, Geralt,” she whispered, and then her features hardened again. “Because how am I to know, dammit? When I cut my finger, I bleed. I bleed every month, too. I get bellyache when I overeat, and a hangover when I get drunk. When I’m happy I sing and I swear when I’m sad. When I hate someone I kill them and when… But enough of this! Your answer, Witcher.”

“My answer is no.”

“You remember what I said?” she asked after a moment's silence. “There are offers you can't refuse, the consequences are so terrible, and this is one of them. Think it over.”

“I have thought carefully. And my suggestion was as serious.”

Renfri was silent for some time, fiddling with a string of pearls wound three times around her shapely neck before falling teasingly between her breasts, their curves just visible through the slit of her jacket. “Geralt,” she said, “did Stregobor ask you to kill me?”

“Yes. He believed it was the lesser evil.”

“Can I believe you refused him, as you have me?”

“You can.”

“Why?”

“Because I don't believe in a lesser evil.”

Renfri smiled faintly, an ugly grimace in the yellow candlelight. “You don't believe in it, you say. Well you're right, in a way. Only Evil and Greater Evil exist and beyond them, in the shadows, lurks True Evil. True Evil, Geralt, is something you can barely imagine, even if you believe nothing can still surprise you. And sometimes True Evil seizes you by the throat and demands that you choose between it and another, slightly lesser, Evil.”

“What's your goal here, Renfri?”

“Nothing. I’ve had a bit to drink and I’m philosophizing. I’m looking for general truths. And I’ve found one: lesser evils exist, but we can't choose them. Only True Evil can force us to such a choice. Whether we like it or not.”

“Maybe I’ve not had enough to drink.” The Witcher smiled sourly. “And in the meantime, midnight's passed, the way it does. Let's speak plainly. You're not going to kill Stregobor in Blaviken because I’m not going to let you. I’m not going to let it come to a slaughter here. So, for the second time, renounce your revenge. Prove to him, to everyone, that you're not an inhuman and bloodthirsty monster. Prove he has done you great harm through his mistake.”

For a moment Renfri watched the Witcher's medallion spinning as he twisted the chain. “And if I tell you, Witcher, that I can neither forgive Stregobor nor renounce my revenge then I admit that he is right, is that it? I’d be proving that I am a monster cursed by the gods? You know, when I was still new to this life, a freeman took me in. He took a fancy to me, even though I found him repellent. So, every time he wanted to fuck me, he had to beat me so hard I could barely move, even the following day. One morning I rose while it was still dark and slashed his throat with a scythe. I wasn't yet as skilled as I am now, and a knife seemed too small. And as I listened to him gurgle and choke, watched him kicking and flailing, I felt the marks left by his feet and fists fade, and I felt, oh, so great, so great that…I left him, whistling, sprightly, feeling so joyful, so happy. And it's the same each time. If it wasn't, who'd waste time on revenge?”

“Renfri,” said Geralt. “Whatever your motives, you're not going to leave here joyful and happy. But you'll leave here alive, early tomorrow morning, as the alderman ordered. You're not going to kill Stregobor in Blaviken.”

Renfri's eyes glistened in the candlelight, reflecting the flame; the pearls glowed in the slit of her jacket; the wolf medallion spinning round on its chain sparkled. “I pity you,” she said slowly, gazing at the medallion. “You claim a lesser evil doesn't exist. You're standing on a flagstone running with blood, alone and so very lonely because you can't choose, but you had to. And you'll never know, you'll never be sure, if you were right…And your reward will be a stoning, and a bad word. I pity you…”

“And you?” asked the Witcher quietly, almost in a whisper.

“I can't choose, either.”

“What are you?”

“I am what I am.”

“Where are you?”

“I’m…cold…”

“Renfri!” Geralt squeezed the medallion tightly in his hand.

She tossed her head as if waking up, and blinked several times, surprised. For a very brief moment she looked frightened. “You've won,” she said sharply. “You win, Witcher. Tomorrow morning I’ll leave Blaviken and never return to this rotten town. Never. Now pass me the wineskin.” Her usual derisive smile returned as she put her empty tumbler back on the table. “Geralt?”

“I’m here.”

“That bloody roof is steep. I’d prefer to leave at dawn than fall and hurt myself in the dark. I’m a princess and my body's delicate. I can feel a pea under a mattress… as long as it's not well-stuffed with straw, obviously. How about it?”

“Renfri” Geralt smiled despite himself “is that really befitting of a princess?”

“What do you know about princesses, dammit? I’ve lived as one and the joy of it is being able to do what you like. Do I have to tell you straight out what I want?”

Geralt, still smiling, didn't reply.

“I can't believe you don't find me attractive.” Renfri grimaced. “Are you afraid you'll meet the freeman's sticky fate? Eh, white-hair, I haven't got anything sharp on me. Have a look for yourself.” She put her legs on his knees. “Pull my boots off. A high boot is the best place to hide a knife.” Barefoot, she got up, tore at the buckle of her belt. “I’m not hiding anything here, either. Or here, as you can see. Put that bloody candle out.”

Outside, in the darkness, a cat yawled.

“Renfri?”

“What?”

“Is this cambric?”

“Of course, it is, dammit. Am I a princess or not?”

[The next day]

“Daddy,” Marilka nagged monotonously, “when are we going to the market? To the market, Daddy!”

“Quiet, Marilka,” grunted Caldemeyn, wiping his plate with his bread. “So, what were you saying, Geralt? They're leaving?”

“Yes.”

“I never thought it would end so peacefully. They had me by the throat with that letter from Audoen. I put on a brave face but, to tell you the truth, I couldn't do a thing to them.”

“Even if they openly broke the law? Started a fight?”

“Even if they did. Audoen's a very touchy king. He sends people to the scaffold on a whim. I’ve got a wife, a daughter, and I’m happy with my office. I don't have to worry where the bacon will come from tomorrow. It's good news that they're leaving. But how, and why, did it happen?”

“Daddy, I want to go to the market!”

“Libushe! Take Marilka away! Geralt, I asked Centurion, the Golden Court's innkeeper, about that Novigradian company. They're quite a gang. Some of them were recognized.”

“Yes?”

“The one with the gash across his face is Nohorn, Abergard's old adjutant from the so-called Free Angren Company—you'll have heard of them. That hulk they call Fifteen was one of theirs too and I don't think his nickname comes from fifteen good deeds. The half-elf is Civril, a brigand and professional murderer. Apparently, he had something to do with the massacre at Tridam.”

“Where?”

“Tridam. Didn't you hear of it? Everyone was talking about it three…Yes, three years ago. The Baron of Tridam was holding some brigands in the dungeons. Their comrades—one of whom was that half-blood Civril—seized a river ferry full of pilgrims during the Feast of Nis. They demanded the baron set those others free. The baron refused, so they began murdering pilgrims, one after another. By the time the baron released his prisoners they'd thrown a dozen pilgrims overboard to drift with the current—and following the deaths the baron was in danger of exile, or even of execution. Some blamed him for waiting so long to give in, and others claimed he'd committed a great evil in releasing the men, in setting a pre—precedent or something. The gang should have been shot from the banks, together with the hostages, or attacked on the boats; he shouldn't have given an inch. At the tribunal the baron argued he'd had no choice; he'd chosen the lesser evil to save more than twenty-five people—women and children—on the ferry.”

“The Tridam ultimatum,” whispered the Witcher. “Renfri!”

“What?”

“Caldemeyn, the marketplace!”

“What?”

“She's deceived us. They're not leaving. They'll force Stregobor out of his tower as they forced the Baron of Tridam's hand. Or they'll force me to…They're going to start murdering people at the market; it's a real trap!”

“By all the gods—Where are you going? Sit down!”

Marilka, terrified by the shouting, huddled, keening, in the corner of the kitchen.

“I told you!” Libushe shouted, pointing to the Witcher. “I said he only brings trouble!”

“Silence, woman! Geralt? Sit down!”

“We have to stop them. Right now, before people go to the market. And call the guards. As the gang leaves the inn, seize them and hold them.”

“Be reasonable. We can't. We can't touch a hair of their heads if they've done nothing wrong. They'll defend themselves and there'll be bloodshed. They're professionals; they'll slaughter my people, and it'll be my head for it if word gets to Audoen. I’ll gather the guards, go to the market and keep an eye on them there”

“That won't achieve anything, Caldemeyn. If the crowd's already in the square, you can't prevent panic and slaughter. Renfri has to be stopped right now, while the marketplace is empty.”

“It's illegal. I can't permit it. It's only a rumor the half-elf was at Tridam. You could be wrong, and Audoen would flay me alive.”

“We have to take the lesser evil!”

“Geralt, I forbid it! As Alderman, I forbid it! Leave your sword! Stop!”

Marilka was screaming, her hands pressed over her mouth.

Shading his eyes with his hand, Civril watched the sun emerge from behind the trees. The marketplace was coming to life. Wagons and carts rumbled past and the first vendors were already filling their stalls. A hammer was banging, a cock crowing, and seagulls screeched loudly overhead.

“Looks like a lovely day,” Fifteen said pensively.

Civril looked at him askance but didn't say anything.

“The horses all right, Tavik?” asked Nohorn, pulling on his gloves.

“Saddled and ready. But, there's still not many of them in the marketplace.”

“There'll be more.”

“We should eat.”

“Later.”

“Dead right. You'll have time later. And an appetite.”

“Look,” said Fifteen suddenly.

The Witcher was approaching from the main street, walking between stalls, coming straight toward them.

“Renfri was right,” Civril said. “Give me the crossbow, Nohorn.” He hunched over and, holding the strap down with his foot, pulled the string back. He placed the bolt carefully in the groove as the Witcher continued to approach. Civril raised the crossbow.

“Not one step closer, Witcher!”

Geralt stopped about forty paces from the group. “Where's Renfri?”

The half-blood's pretty face contorted. “At the tower. She's making the sorcerer an offer he can't refuse. But she knew you would come. She left a message for you.”

“Speak.”

“I am what I am. Choose. Either me, or a lesser.’ You're supposed to know what it means.”

The Witcher nodded, raised his hand above his right shoulder, and drew his sword. The blade traced a glistening arc above his head. Walking slowly, he made his way toward the group.

Civril laughed nastily, ominously.

“Renfri said this would happen, Witcher, and left us something special to give you. Right between the eyes.”

The Witcher kept walking, and the half-elf raised the crossbow to his cheek. It grew very quiet.

The bowstring hummed, the Witcher’s sword flashed and the bolt flew upward with a metallic whine, spinning in the air until it clattered against the roof and rumbled into the gutter.

“He deflected it…” groaned Fifteen. “Deflected it in flight...”

“As one,” ordered Civril. Blades hissed as they were drawn from sheaths, the group pressed shoulder to shoulder, bristling with blades.

The Witcher came on faster; his fluid walk became a run; not straight at the group quivering with swords but circling it in a tightening spiral.

As Geralt circled the group, Tavik's nerve failed. He rushed the Witcher, the twins following him.

“Don't disperse!” Civril roared, shaking his head and losing sight of the Witcher. He swore and jumped aside, seeing the group fall apart, scattering around the market stalls.

Tavik went first. He was chasing the Witcher when he saw Geralt running in the opposite direction, toward him. He skidded, trying to stop, but the Witcher shot past before he could raise his sword. Tavik felt a hard blow just above his hip, fell to his knees and, when he saw his hip, started screaming.

The twins simultaneously attacked the black, blurred shape rushing toward them, mis-timed their attack and collided with each other as Geralt slashed Vyr across the chest and Nimir in the temple, leaving one twin to stagger, head down, into a vegetable stall, and the other to spin in place and fall limply into the gutter.

The marketplace boiled with vendors running away, stalls clattering to the ground and screams rising in the dusty air. Tavik tried to stumble to his trembling legs and fell painfully to the ground.

“From the left, Fifteen!” Nohorn roared, running in a semi-circle to approach the Witcher from behind.

Fifteen spun. But not quickly enough. He bore a thrust through the stomach, prepared to strike and was struck again in the neck, just below his ear. He took four unsteady steps and collapsed into a fish cart, which rolled away beneath him. Sliding over the slippery cargo, Fifteen fell onto the flagstones, silver with scales.

Civril and Nohorn struck simultaneously from both sides, the elf with a high sweeping cut, Nohorn from a kneeling position, low and flat. The Witcher caught both, two metallic clangs merging into one. Civril leapt aside and tripped, catching himself against a stall as Nohorn warded off a blow so powerful it threw him backward to his knees. Leaping up, he parried too slowly, taking a gash in the face parallel to his old scar.

Civril bounced off the stall, jumping over Nohorn as he fell, missed the Witcher and jumped away. The thrust was so sharp, so precise, he didn't feel it; his legs only gave way when he tried to attack again. The sword fell from his hand, the tendons severed above the elbow. Civril fell to his knees and shook his head, trying and failing to rise. His head dropped, and among the shattered stalls and market wares, the scattered fish and cabbages, his body stilled in the center of a growing red puddle.

Renfri entered the marketplace.

She approached slowly with a soft, feline step, avoiding the carts and stalls. The crowd in the streets and by the houses, which had been humming like a hornet's nest, grew silent. Geralt stood motionless, his sword in his lowered hand. Renfri came to within ten paces and stopped, close enough to see that, under her jacket, she wore a short coat of chain mail, barely covering her hips.

“You've made your choice,” she said slowly. “Are you sure it's the right one?”

“This won't be another Tridam,” Geralt said with an effort.

“It wouldn't have been. Stregobor laughed in my face. He said I could butcher Blaviken and the neighboring villages and he wouldn't leave his tower. And he won't let anyone in, not even you. Why are you looking at me like that? Yes, I deceived you. I’ll deceive anyone if I have to; why should you be special?”

“Get out of here, Renfri.”

She laughed. “No, Geralt.” She drew her sword, quickly and nimbly.

“Renfri.”

“No. You made a choice. Now it's my turn.” With one sharp move, she tore the skirt from her hips and spun it in the air, wrapping the material around her forearm. Geralt retreated and raised his hand, arranging his fingers in the Sign.

Renfri laughed hoarsely. “It doesn't affect me. Only the sword will.”

“Renfri,” he repeated. “Go. If we cross blades, I—I won't be able...”

“I know,” she said. “But I, I can't do anything else. I just can't. We are what we are, you and I.”

She moved toward him with a light, swaying step, her sword glinting in her right hand, her skirt dragging along the ground from her left. She leapt, the skirt fluttered in the air and, veiled in its tracks, the sword flashed in a short, sparing cut. Geralt jumped away; the cloth didn't even brush him, and Renfri's blade slid over his diagonal parry. He attacked instinctively, spinning their blades, trying to knock her weapon aside. It was a mistake. She deflected his blade and slashed, aiming for his face. He barely parried and pirouetted away, dodging her dancing blade and jumping aside again. She fell on him, threw the skirt into his eyes and slashed flatly from short range, spinning. Spinning with her, he avoided the blow. She knew the trick and turned with him; their bodies so close he could feel the touch of her breath as she ran the edge across his chest. He felt a twinge of pain, ignored it. He turned again, in the opposite direction, deflected the blade flying toward his temple, made a swift feint and attacked.

Renfri sprang away as if to strike from above as Geralt lunged and swiftly slashed her exposed thigh and groin from below with the very tip of his sword.

She didn't cry out. Falling to her side, she dropped her sword and clutched her thigh. Blood poured through her fingers in a bright stream over her decorated belt, elk-leather boots, and onto the dirty flagstones. The clamor of the swaying crowd, crammed in the streets, grew as they saw blood.

Geralt put up his sword.

“Don't go…” she moaned, curling up in a ball.

He didn't reply.

“I’m…cold…”

He said nothing. Renfri moaned again, curling up tighter as her blood flowed into the cracks between the stones.

“Geralt…Hold me…”

The Witcher remained silent.

She turned her head, resting her cheek on the flagstones and was still. A fine dagger, hidden beneath her body until now, slipped from her numb fingers.

After a long moment, the Witcher raised his head, hearing Stregobor's staff tapping against the flagstones. The wizard was approaching quickly, avoiding the corpses. “What slaughter,” he panted. “I saw it, Geralt. I saw it all in my crystal ball…” He came closer, bent over. In his trailing black robe, supported by his staff, he looked old. “It's incredible.” He shook his head. “Shrike's dead.”

Geralt didn't reply.

“Well, Geralt.” The wizard straightened himself. “Fetch a cart and we'll take her to the tower for an autopsy.” He looked at the Witcher and, not getting any answer, leaned over the body.

Someone the Witcher didn't know found the hilt of his sword and drew it.

“Touch a single hair of her head,” said the person the Witcher didn't know, “touch her head and yours will go flying to the flagstones.”

“Have you gone mad? You're wounded, in shock! An autopsy's the only way we can confirm...”

“Don't touch her!”

Stregobor, seeing the raised blade, jumped aside and waved his staff. “All right!” he shouted. “As you wish! But you'll never know! You'll never be sure! Never, do you hear, Witcher?”

“Be gone.”

“As you wish.” The wizard turned away, his staff hitting the flagstones. “I’m returning to Kovir. I’m not staying in this hole another day. Come with me rather than rot here. These people don't know anything, they've only seen you killing. And you kill nastily, Geralt. Well, are you coming?”

Geralt didn't reply; he wasn't looking at him. He put his sword away. Stregobor shrugged and walked away, his staff tapping rhythmically against the ground.

A stone came flying from the crowd and clattered against the flagstones. A second followed, whizzing past just above Geralt's shoulder. The Witcher, holding himself straight, raised both hands and made a swift gesture with them. The crowd heaved; the stones came flying more thickly but the Sign, protecting him behind an invisible oval shield, pushed them aside.

“Enough!” yelled Caldemeyn. “Bloody hell, enough of that!” The crowd roared like a surge of breakers but the stones stopped flying. The Witcher stood, motionless. The alderman approached Geralt. “Is this,” he said, with a broad gesture indicating the motionless bodies strewn across the square, “how your lesser evil looks? Is this what you believed necessary?”

“Yes,” replied Geralt slowly, with an effort.

“Is your wound serious?”

“No.”

“In that case, get out of here.”

“Yes,” said the Witcher. He stood a moment longer, avoiding the alderman's eyes. Then he turned away slowly, very slowly.

“Geralt.”

The Witcher looked round.

“Don't come back,” said Caldemeyn. “Never come back.”

## The Voice of Reason

“Let's talk, Iola.”

“I need this conversation. They say silence is golden. Maybe it is, although I’m not sure it's worth that much. It has its price certainly; you have to pay for it.”

“It's easier for you. Yes it is, don't deny it. You're silent through choice; you've made it a sacrifice to your goddess. I don't believe in Melitele, don't believe in the existence of other gods either, but I respect your choice, your sacrifice. Your belief. Because your faith and sacrifice, the price you're paying for your silence, will make you a better, a greater being. Or, at least, it could. But my faithlessness can do nothing. It's powerless.”

“You ask what I believe in, in that case.”

“I believe in the sword.”

“As you can see, I carry two. Every Witcher does. It's said, spitefully, the silver one is for monsters and the iron for humans. But that's wrong. As there are monsters which can be struck down only with a silver blade, so there are those for whom iron is lethal. And, Iola, not just any iron, it must come from a meteorite. What is a meteorite, you ask? It's a falling star. You must have seen them—short, luminous streaks in the night. You've probably made a wish on one. Perhaps it was one more reason for you to believe in the gods. For me, a meteorite is nothing more than a bit of metal, primed by the sun and its fall, metal to make swords.”

“Yes, of course you can take my sword. Feel how light it—No! Don't touch the edge; you'll cut yourself. It's sharper than a razor. It has to be.”

“I train in every spare moment. I don't dare lose my skill. I’ve come here—this furthest corner of the temple garden—to limber up, to rid my muscles of that hideous, loathsome numbness which has come over me, this coldness flowing through me. And you found me here. Funny, for a few days I was trying to find you. I wanted…”

“I need to talk, Iola. Let's sit down for a moment.”

“You don't know me at all, do you?”

“I’m called Geralt. Geralt of—No. Only Geralt. Geralt of nowhere. I’m a Witcher.”

“My home is Kaer Morhen, Witcher's Settlement. It's…It was a fortress. Not much remains of it.”

“Kaer Morhen…That's where the likes of me were produced. It's not done anymore; no one lives in Kaer Morhen now. No one but Vesemir. Who's Vesemir? My father. Why are you so surprised? What's so strange about it? Everyone's got a father, and mine is Vesemir. And so, what if he's not my real father? I didn't know him, or my mother. I don't even know if they're still alive, and I don't much care.”

“Yes, Kaer Morhen. I underwent the usual mutation there, through the Trial of Grasses, and then hormones, herbs, viral infections. And then through them all again. And again, to the bitter end. Apparently, I took the changes unusually well; I was only ill briefly. I was considered to be an exceptionally resilient brat…and was chosen for more complicated experiments as a result. They were worse. Much worse. But, as you see, I survived. The only one to live out of all those chosen for further trials. My hair's been white ever since. Total loss of pigmentation. A side effect, as they say. A trifle.”

“Then they taught me various things until the day when I left Kaer Morhen and took to the road. I’d earned my medallion, the Sign of the Wolf's School. I had two swords: silver and iron, and my conviction, enthusiasm, incentive and…faith. Faith that I was needed in a world full of monsters and beasts, to protect the innocent. As I left Kaer Morhen, I dreamed of meeting my first monster. I couldn't wait to stand eye to eye with him. And the moment arrived.”

“My first monster, Iola, was bald and had exceptionally rotten teeth. I came across him on the highway where, with some fellow monsters, deserters, he'd stopped a peasant's cart and pulled out a little girl, maybe thirteen years old. His companions held her father while the bald man tore off her dress, yelling it was time for her to meet a real man. I rode up and said the time had come for him, too—I thought I was very witty. The bald monster released the girl and threw himself at me with an axe. He was slow but tough. I hit him twice—not clean cuts, but spectacular, and only then did he fall. His gang ran away when they saw what a Witcher’s sword could do to a man….”

“Am I boring you, Iola?”

“I need this. I really do need it.”

“Where was I? My first noble deed. You see, they'd told me again and again in Kaer Morhen not to get involved in such incidents, not to play at being knight errant or uphold the law. Not to show off, but to work for money. And I joined this fight like an idiot, not fifty miles from the mountains. And do you know why? I wanted the girl, sobbing with gratitude, to kiss her savior on the hands, and her father to thank me on his knees. In reality her father fled with his attackers, and the girl, drenched in the bald man's blood, threw up, became hysterical and fainted in fear when I approached her. Since then, I’ve only very rarely interfered in such matters.”

“I did my job. I quickly learned how. I’d ride up to village enclosures or town pickets and wait. If they spat, cursed and threw stones, I rode away. If someone came out to give me a commission, I’d carry it out.”

“I visited towns and fortresses. I looked for proclamations nailed to posts at the crossroads. I looked for the words ‘Witcher urgently needed.’ And then there'd be a sacred site, a dungeon, necropolis or ruins, forest ravine or grotto hidden in the mountains, full of bones and stinking carcasses. Some creature which lived to kill, out of hunger, for pleasure, or invoked by some sick will. A manticore, wyvern, fogler, aeschna, ilyocoris, chimera, leshy, vampire, ghoul, graveir, werewolf, giant scorpion, striga, black annis, kikimora, vypper…so many I’ve killed. There'd be a dance in the dark and a slash of the sword, and fear and distaste in the eyes of my employer afterward.”

“Mistakes? Of course, I’ve made them. But I keep to my principles. No, not the code. Although I have at times hidden behind a code. People like that. Those who follow a code are often respected and held in high esteem. But no one's ever compiled a Witcher’s code. I invented mine. Just like that. And keep to it. Always…”

“Not always.”

“There have been situations where it seemed there wasn't any room for doubt. When I should say to myself, ‘What do I care? It's nothing to do with me. I’m a Witcher.’ When I should listen to the voice of reason. To listen to my instinct, even if it's fear, if not to what my experience dictates.”

“I should have listened to the voice of reason that time…”

“I didn't.”

“I thought I was choosing the lesser evil. I chose the lesser evil. Lesser evil! I’m Geralt! Witcher…I’m the Butcher of Blaviken…”

“Don't touch me! It might…You might see…and I don't want you to. I don't want to know. I know my fate whirls about me like water in a weir. It's hard on my heels, following my tracks, but I never look back.”

“A loop? Yes, that's what Nenneke sensed. What tempted me, I wonder, in Cintra? How could I have taken such a risk so foolishly… ?”

“No, no, no. I never look back. I’ll never return to Cintra. I’ll avoid it like the plague. I’ll never go back there.”

“Heh, if my calculations are correct, that child would have been born in May, sometime around the feast of Belleteyn. If that's true, it's an interesting coincidence. Because Yennefer was also born on Belleteyn's…” [Belleteyn is a spring feast around “May Day”]

“Enough of this, we should go. It's already dusk.”

“Thank you for talking to me. Thank you, Iola.”

“No, nothing's wrong. I’m fine.”

“Quite fine.”

## A question of price

The Witcher had a knife at his throat. He was wallowing in a wooden tub, brimful of soapsuds, his head thrown back against its slippery rim. The bitter taste of soap lingered in his mouth as the knife, blunt as a doorknob, scraped his Adam's apple painfully and moved toward his chin with a grating sound.

The barber, with the expression of an artist who is conscious that he is creating a masterpiece, scraped once more for form's sake, then wiped the Witcher’s face with a piece of linen soaked in tincture of angelica. Geralt stood up, allowed a servant to pour a bucket of water over him, shook himself and climbed from the tub, leaving wet footmarks on the brick floor.

“Your towel, sir.” The servant glanced curiously at his medallion.

“Thanks.”

“Clothes,” said Haxo. “Shirt, underpants, trousers and tunic. And boots.”

“You've thought of everything. But can't I go in my own shoes?”

“No. Beer?”

“With pleasure.”

He dressed slowly. The touch of someone else's course, unpleasant clothes against his swollen skin spoiled his relaxed mood.

“Castellan?”

“Yes, Geralt?”

“You don't know what this is all about, do you? Why they need me here?”

“It's not my business,” said Haxo, squinting at the servants. “My job is to get you dressed...”

“Dressed up, you mean.”

“ get you dressed and take you to the banquet, to the queen. Put the tunic on, sir. And hide the medallion beneath it.”

“My dagger was here.”

“It isn't anymore. It's in a safe place, like your swords and your possessions. Nobody carries arms where you're going.”

The Witcher shrugged, pulling on the tight purple tunic. “And what's this?” he asked, indicating the embroidery on the front of his outfit.

“Oh yes,” said Haxo. “I almost forgot. During the banquet, you will be the Honorable Ravix of Fourhorn. As guest of honor, you will sit at the queen's right hand, such is her wish, and that, on the tunic, is your coat of arms. A bear passant sable, damsel vested azure riding him, her hair loose and arms raised. You should remember it—one of the guests might have a thing about heraldry. It often happens.”

“Of course I’ll remember it,” said Geralt seriously. “And Fourhorn, where's that?”

“Far enough. Ready? Can we go?”

“We can. Just tell me, Haxo, what's this banquet in aid of?”

“Princess Pavetta is turning fifteen and, as is the custom, contenders for her hand have turned up in their dozens. Queen Calanthe wants her to marry someone from Skellige; an alliance with the islanders would mean a lot to us.”

“Why them?”

“Those they're allied with aren't attacked as often as others.”

“A good reason.”

“And not the sole one. In Cintra women can't rule. King Roegner died some time ago and the queen doesn't want another husband: our Lady Calanthe is wise and just, but a king is a king. Whoever marries the princess will sit on the throne, and we want a tough, decent fellow. They have to be found on the islands. They're a hard nation. Let's go.”

Geralt stopped halfway down the gallery surrounding the small inner courtyard and looked around.

“Castellan,” he said under his breath, “we're alone. Quickly, tell me why the queen needs a Witcher. You of all people must know something.”

“For the same reasons as everyone else,” Haxo grunted. “Cintra is just like any other country. We've got werewolves and basilisks and a manticore could be found, too, if you looked hard enough. So a Witcher might also come in useful.”

“Don't twist my words, Castellan. I’m asking why the queen needs a Witcher in disguise as a bear passant, with hair loose at that, at the banquet.”

Haxo also looked around, and even leaned over the gallery balustrade.

“Something bad's happening, Geralt,” he muttered. “In the castle. Something's frightening people.”

“What?”

“What usually frightens people? A monster. They say it's small, hunchbacked, bristling like a Urcheon. It creeps around the castle at night, rattles chains. Moans and groans in the chambers.”

“Have you seen it?”

“No,” Haxo spat, “and I don't want to.”

“You're talking nonsense, Castellan,” grimaced the Witcher. “It doesn't make sense. We're going to an engagement feast. What am I supposed to do there? Wait for a hunchback to jump out and groan? Without a weapon? Dressed up like a jester? Haxo?”

“Think what you like,” grumbled the castellan. “They told me not to tell you anything, but you asked. So, I told you. And you tell me I’m talking nonsense. How charming.”

“I’m sorry, I didn't mean to offend you, Castellan. I was simply surprised…”

“Stop being surprised.” Haxo turned away, still sulking. “Your job isn't to be surprised. And I strongly advise you, Witcher, that if the queen orders you to strip naked, paint your ass blue and hang yourself upside down in the entrance hall like a chandelier, you do it without surprise or hesitation. Otherwise you might meet with a fair, amount of unpleasantness. Have you got that?”

“I’ve got it. Let's go, Haxo. Whatever happens, that bath's given me an appetite.”

Apart from the curt, ceremonious greetings with which she welcomed him as “Lord of Fourhorn,” Queen Calanthe didn't exchange a single word with the Witcher. The banquet was about to begin and the guests, loudly announced by the herald, were gathering.

The table was huge, rectangular, and could seat more than forty men. Calanthe sat at the head of the table on a throne with a high backrest. Geralt sat on her right and, on her left, a gray-haired bard called Drogodar, with a lute. Two more chairs at the head of the table, on the queen's left, remained empty.

To Geralt's right, along the table, sat Haxo and a voivode [military commander] whose name he'd forgotten. Beyond them were guests from the Duchy of Attre: the sullen and silent knight Rainfarn and his charge, the chubby twelve-year-old Prince Windhalm, one of the pretenders to the princess's hand. Further down were the colorful and motley knights from Cintra, and local vassals.

“Baron Eylembert of Tigg!” announced the herald.

“Coodcoodak!” murmured Calanthe, nudging Drogodar. “This will be fun.”

A thin and whiskered, richly attired knight bowed low, but his lively, happy eyes and cheerful smirk belied his subservience. “Greetings, Coodcoodak,” said the queen ceremoniously. Obviously, the baron was better known by his nickname than by his family name. “We are happy to see you.”

“And I am happy to be invited,” declared Coodcoodak, and sighed. “Oh well, I’ll cast an eye on the princess, if you permit, my queen. It's hard to live alone, ma'am.”

“Aye, Coodcoodak.” Calanthe smiled faintly, wrapping a lock of hair around her finger. “But you're already married, as we well know.”

“Aaahh.” The baron was miffed. “You know yourself, ma'am, how weak and delicate my wife is, and smallpox is rife in the neighborhood. I bet my belt and sword against a pair of old slippers that in a year I’ll already be out of mourning.”

“Poor man, Coodcoodak. But lucky, too.” Calanthe's smile grew wider. “Lucky your wife isn't stronger. I hear that last harvest, when she caught you in the haystack with a strumpet, she chased you for almost a mile with a pitchfork but couldn't catch you. You have to feed her better, cuddle her more and take care that her back doesn't get cold during the night. Then, in a year, you'll see how much better she is.”

Coodcoodak pretended to grow doleful. “I take your point. But can I stay for the feast?”

“We'd be delighted, Baron.”

“The legation from Skellige!” shouted the herald, becoming increasingly hoarse.

The islanders—four of them, in shiny leather doublets trimmed with seal fur and belted with checkered woolen sashes—strode in with a sprightly, hollow step. They were led by a sinewy warrior with a dark face and aquiline nose and, at his side, a broad-shouldered youth with a mop of red hair. They all bowed before the queen.

“It is a great honor,” said Calanthe, a little flushed, “to welcome such an excellent knight as Eist Tuirseach of Skellige to my castle again. If it weren't for your well-known disdain for marriage, I’d be delighted to think you're here to court my Pavetta. Has loneliness got the better of you after all, sir?”

“Often enough, beautiful Calanthe,” replied the dark-faced islander, raising his glistening eyes to the queen. “But my life is too dangerous for me to contemplate a lasting union. If it weren't for that…Pavetta is still a young girl, an unopened bud, but I can see…”

“See what?”

“The apple does not fall far from the tree.” Eist Tuirseach smiled, flashing his white teeth. “Suffice it to look at you, my queen, to know how beautiful the princess will be when she reaches the age at which a woman can please a warrior. In the meantime, it is young men who ought to court her. Such as our King Bran's nephew here, Crach an Craite, who traveled here for exactly that purpose.”

Crach, bowing his red head, knelt on one knee before the queen.

“Who else have you brought, Eist?”

A thickset, robust man with a bushy beard, and a strapping fellow with bagpipes on his back, knelt by Crach an Craite. “This is the gallant druid Mousesack, who, like me, is a good friend and advisor to King Bran. And this is Draig Bon-Dhu, our famous skald. And thirty seamen from Skellige are waiting in the courtyard, burning with hope to catch a glimpse of the beautiful Calanthe of Cintra.”

“Sit down, noble guests. Tuirseach, sir, sit here.”

Eist took the vacant seat at the narrower end of the table, only separated from the queen by Drogodar and an empty chair. The remaining islanders sat together on the left, between Marshal Vissegerd and the three sons of Lord Strept, Tinglant, Fodcat and Wieldhill.

“That's more or less everyone.” The queen leaned over to the marshal. “Let's begin, Vissegerd.”

The marshal clapped his hands. The servants, carrying platters and jugs, moved toward the table in a long line, greeted by a joyful murmur from the guests.

Calanthe barely ate, reluctantly picking at the morsels served her with a silver fork. Drogodar, having bolted his food, kept strumming his lute. The rest of the guests, on the other hand, laid waste to the roast piglets, birds, fish and mollusks on offer—with the red-haired Crach an Craite in the lead. Rainfarn of Attre reprimanded the young Prince Windhalm severely, even slapping his hand when he reached for a jug of cider. Coodcoodak stopped picking bones for a moment and entertained his neighbors by imitating the whistle of a mud turtle. The atmosphere grew merrier by the minute. The first toasts were being raised, and already becoming less and less coherent.

Calanthe adjusted the narrow golden circlet on her curled ash-gray hair and turned to Geralt, who was busy cracking open a huge red lobster. “It's loud enough that we can exchange a few words discreetly. Let us start with courtesies: I’m pleased to meet you.”

“The pleasure's mutual, your Majesty.”

“After the courtesies come hard facts. I’ve got a job for you.”

“So I gathered. I’m rarely invited to feasts for the pleasure of my company.”

“You're probably not very interesting company, then. What else have you gathered?”

“I’ll tell you when you've outlined my task, your Majesty.”

“Geralt,” said Calanthe, her fingers tapping an emerald necklace, the smallest stone of which was the size of a bumblebee, “what sort of task do you expect, as a Witcher? What? Digging a well? Repairing a hole in the roof? Weaving a tapestry of all the positions King Vridank and the beautiful Cerro tried on their wedding night? Surely you know what your profession's about?”

“Yes, I do. I’ll tell you what I’ve gathered, your Majesty.”

“I’m curious.”

“I gathered that. And that, like many others, you've mistaken my trade for an altogether different profession.”

“Oh?” Calanthe, casually leaning toward the lute-strumming Drogodar, gave the impression of being pensive and absent. “Who, Geralt, makes up this ignorant horde with whom you equate me? And for what profession do those fools mistake your trade?”

“Your Majesty,” said Geralt calmly, “while I was riding to Cintra, I met villagers, merchants, peddlers, dwarves, tinkers and woodcutters. They told me about a black annis who has its hideout somewhere in these woods, a little house on a chicken-claw tripod. They mentioned a chimera nestling in the mountains. Aeschnes and centipedeanomorphs. Apparently a manticore could also be found if you look hard enough. So many tasks a Witcher could perform without having to dress up in someone else's feathers and coat of arms.”

“You didn't answer my question.”

“Your Majesty, I don't doubt that a marriage alliance with Skellige is necessary for Cintra. It's possible, too, that the schemers who want to prevent it deserve a lesson—using means which don't involve you. It's convenient if this lesson were to be given by an unknown lord from Fourhorn, who would then disappear from the scene. And now I’ll answer your question. You mistake my trade for that of a hired killer. Those others, of whom there are so many, are rulers. It's not the first time I’ve been called to a court where the problems demand the quick solutions of a sword. But I’ve never killed people for money, regardless of whether it's for a good or bad cause. And I never will.”

The atmosphere at the table was growing more and more lively as the beer diminished. The red-haired Crach an Craite found appreciative listeners to his tale of the battle at Thwyth. Having sketched a map on the table with the help of meat bones dipped in sauce, he marked out the strategic plan, shouting loudly. Coodcoodak, proving how apt his nickname was, suddenly cackled like a very real sitting hen, creating general mirth among the guests, and consternation among the servants who were convinced that a bird, mocking their vigilance, had somehow managed to make its way from the courtyard into the hall.

“Thus, fate has punished me with too shrewd a Witcher.” Calanthe smiled, but her eyes were narrowed and angry. “A Witcher who, without a shadow of respect or, at the very least, of common courtesy, exposes my intrigues and infamous plans. But hasn't fascination with my beauty and charming personality clouded your judgment? Don't ever do that again, Geralt. Don't speak to those in power like that. Few of them would forget your words, and you know kings—they have all sorts of things at their disposal: daggers, poisons, dungeons, red-hot pokers. There are hundreds, thousands, of ways kings can avenge their wounded pride. And you wouldn't believe how easy it is, Geralt, to wound some rulers’ pride. Rarely will any of them take words such as ‘No,’ ‘I won't,’ and ‘Never’ calmly. But that's nothing. Interrupt one of them or make inappropriate comments, and you'll condemn yourself to the wheel.”

The queen clasped her narrow white hands together and lightly rested her chin on them. Geralt didn't interrupt, nor did he comment.

“Kings,” continued Calanthe, “divide people into two categories—those they order around, and those they buy—because they adhere to the old and banal truth that everyone can be bought. Everyone. It's only a question of price. Don't you agree? Ah, I don't need to ask. You're a Witcher, after all; you do your job and take the money. As far as you're concerned, the idea of being bought has lost its scornful undertone. The question of your price, too, is clear, related as it is to the difficulty of the task and how well you execute it. And your fame, Geralt. Old men at fairs and markets sing of the exploits of the white-haired Witcher from Rivia. If even half of it is true, then I wager your services are not cheap. So it would be a waste of money to engage you in such simple, trite matters as palace intrigue or murder. Those can be dealt with by other, cheaper hands.”

“BRAAAK! Ghaaa-braaak!” roared Coodcoodak suddenly, to loud applause. Geralt didn't know which animal he was imitating, but he didn't want to meet anything like it. He turned his head and caught the queen's venomously green glance. Drogodar, his lowered head and face concealed by a curtain of gray hair, quietly strummed his lute.

“Ah, Geralt,” said Calanthe, with a gesture forbidding a servant from refilling her goblet. “I speak and you remain silent. We're at a feast. We all want to enjoy ourselves. Amuse me. I’m starting to miss your pertinent remarks and perceptive comments. I’d also be pleased to hear a compliment or two, homage or assurance of your obedience. In whichever order you choose.”

“Oh well, your Majesty,” said the Witcher, “I’m not a very interesting dinner companion. I’m amazed to be singled out for the honor of occupying this place. Indeed, someone far more appropriate should have been seated here. Anyone you wished. It would have sufficed for you to give them the order, or to buy them. It's only a question of price.”

“Go on, go on.” Calanthe tilted her head back and closed her eyes, the semblance of a pleasant smile on her lips.

“So, I’m honored and proud to be sitting by Queen Calanthe of Cintra, whose beauty is surpassed only by her wisdom. I also regard it as a great honor that the queen has heard of me and that, on the basis of what she has heard, does not wish to use me for trivial matters. Last winter Prince Hrobarik, not being so gracious, tried to hire me to find a beauty who, sick of his vulgar advances, had fled the ball, losing a slipper. It was difficult to convince him that he needed a huntsman, and not a Witcher.”

The queen was listening with an enigmatic smile.

“Other rulers, too, unequal to you in wisdom, didn't refrain from proposing trivial tasks. It was usually a question of the murder of a stepson, stepfather, stepmother, uncle, aunt—it's hard to mention them all. They were all of the opinion that it was simply a question of price.”

The queen's smile could have meant anything.

“And so, I repeat” Geralt bowed his head a little “that I can't contain my pride to be sitting next to you, ma'am. And pride means a very great deal to us Witchers. You wouldn't believe how much. A lord once offended a Witcher’s pride by proposing a job that wasn't in keeping with either honor or the Witcher’s code. What's more, he didn't accept a polite refusal and wished to prevent the Witcher from leaving his castle. Afterward, everyone agreed this wasn't one of his best ideas.”

“Geralt,” said Calanthe, after a moment's silence, “you were wrong. You're a very interesting dinner companion.”

Coodcoodak, shaking beer froth from his whiskers and the front of his jacket, craned his neck and gave the penetrating howl of a she-wolf in heat. The dogs in the courtyard, and the entire neighborhood, echoed the howl.

One of the brothers from Strept dipped his finger in his beer and touched up the thick line around the formation drawn by Crach an Craite. “Error and incompetence!” he shouted. “They shouldn't have done that! Here, toward the wing, that's where they should have directed the cavalry, struck the flanks!”

“Ha!” roared Crach an Craite, whacking the table with a bone and splattering his neighbors’ faces and tunics with sauce. “And so weaken the center? A key position? Ludicrous!”

“Only someone who's blind or sick in the head would miss the opportunity to maneuver in a situation like that!”

“That's it! Quite right!” shouted Windhalm of Attre.

“Who's asking you, you little snot?”

“Snot yourself!”

“Shut your gob or I’ll wallop you...”

“Sit on your ass and keep quiet, Crach,” called Eist Tuirseach, interrupting his conversation with Vissegerd. “Enough of these arguments. Drogodar, sir! Don't waste your talent! Indeed, your beautiful though quiet tunes should be listened to with greater concentration and gravity. Draig Bon-Dhu, stop scoffing and guzzling! You're not going to impress anyone here like that. Pump up your bagpipes and delight our ears with decent martial music. With your permission, noble Calanthe!”

“Oh, mother of mine,” whispered the queen to Geralt, raising her eyes to the vault for a moment in silent resignation. But she nodded her permission, smiling openly and kindly.

“Draig Bon-Dhu,” said Eist, “play us the song of the battle of Hochebuz. It won't leave us in any doubt as to the tactical maneuvers of commanders—or as to who acquired immortal fame there! To the health of the heroic Calanthe of Cintra!”

“The health! And glory!” the guests roared, emptying their goblets and clay cups.

Draig Bon-Dhu's bagpipes gave out an ominous drone and burst into a terrible, drawn-out, modulated wail. The guests took up the song, beating out a rhythm on the table with whatever came to hand. Coodcoodak was staring avidly at the goat-leather sack, captivated by the idea of adopting its dreadful tones in his own repertoire.

“Hochebuz,” said Calante, looking at Geralt, “my first battle. Although I fear rousing the indignation and contempt of such a proud Witcher, I confess that we were fighting for money. Our enemy was burning villages which paid us levies and we, greedy for our tributes, challenged them on the field. A trivial reason, a trivial battle, a trivial three thousand corpses pecked to pieces by the crows. And look—instead of being ashamed I’m proud as a peacock that songs are sung about me. Even when sung to such awful music.” Again, she summoned her parody of a smile full of happiness and kindness, and answered the toast raised to her by lifting her own, empty, goblet. Geralt remained silent.

“Let's go on.” Calanthe accepted a pheasant leg offered to her by Drogodar and picked at it gracefully. “As I said, you've aroused my interest. I’ve been told that Witchers are an interesting caste, but I didn't really believe it. Now I do. When hit, you give a note which shows you're fashioned of pure steel, unlike these men molded from bird shit. Which doesn't, in any way, change the fact that you're here to execute a task. And you'll do it without being so clever.”

Geralt didn't smile disrespectfully or nastily, although he very much wanted to. He held his silence.

“I thought,” murmured the queen, appearing to give her full attention to the pheasant's thigh, “that you'd say something. Or smile. No? All the better. Can I consider our negotiations concluded?”

“Unclear tasks,” said the Witcher dryly, “can't be clearly executed.”

“What's unclear? You did, after all, guess correctly. I have plans regarding a marriage alliance with Skellige. These plans are threatened, and I need you to eliminate the threat. But here your shrewdness ends. The supposition that I mistake your trade for that of a hired thug has piqued me greatly. Accept, Geralt, that I belong to that select group of rulers who know exactly what Witchers do, and how they ought to be employed. On the other hand, if someone kills as efficiently as you do, even though not for money, he shouldn't be surprised if people credit him with being a professional in that field. Your fame runs ahead of you, Geralt; it's louder than Draig Bon-Dhu's accursed bagpipes, and there are equally few pleasant notes in it.”

The bagpipe player, although he couldn't hear the queen's words, finished his concert. The guests rewarded him with an uproarious ovation and dedicated themselves with renewed zeal to the remains of the banquet, recalling battles and making rude jokes about womenfolk. Coodcoodak was making a series of loud noises, but there was no way to tell if these were yet another animal imitation, or an attempt to relieve his overloaded stomach.

Eist Tuirseach leaned far across the table. “Your Majesty,” he said, “there are good reasons, I am sure, for your dedication to the lord from Fourhorn, but it's high time we saw Princess Pavetta. What are we waiting for? Surely not for Crach an Craite to get drunk? And even that moment is almost here.”

“You're right as usual, Eist.” Calanthe smiled warmly. Geralt was amazed by her arsenal of smiles. “Indeed, I do have important matters to discuss with the Honorable Ravix. I’ll dedicate some time to you too, but you know my principle: duty then pleasure. Haxo!”

She raised her hand and beckoned the castellan. Haxo rose without a word, bowed, and quickly ran upstairs, disappearing into the dark gallery. The queen turned to the Witcher.

“You heard? We've been debating for too long. If Pavetta has stopped preening in front of the looking glass, she'll be here presently. So, prick up your ears because I won't repeat this. I want to achieve the ends which, to a certain degree, you have guessed. There can be no other solution. As for you, you have a choice. You can be forced to act by my command—I don't wish to dwell on the consequences of disobedience, although obedience will be generously rewarded—or you can render me a paid service. Note that I didn't say “I can buy you,’ because I’ve decided not to offend your Witcher’s pride. There's a huge difference, isn't there?”

“The magnitude of this difference has somehow escaped my notice.”

‘Then pay greater attention. The difference, my dear Witcher, is that one who is bought is paid according to the buyer's whim, whereas one who renders a service sets his own price. Is that clear?”

“To a certain extent. Let's say, then, that I choose to serve. Surely I should know what that entails?”

“No. Only a command has to be specific and explicit. A paid service is different. I’m interested in the results, nothing more. How you achieve it is your business.”

Geralt, raising his head, met Mousesack's penetrating black gaze. The druid of Skellige, without taking his eyes from the Witcher, was crumbling bread in his hands and dropping it as if lost in thought. Geralt looked down. There on the oak table, crumbs, grains of buckwheat and fragments of lobster shell were moving like ants. They were forming runes which joined up—for a moment—into a word. A question.

Mousesack waited without taking his eyes off him. Geralt, almost imperceptibly, nodded. The druid lowered his eyelids and, with a stony face, swiped the crumbs off the table.

“Honorable gentlemen!” called the herald. “Pavetta of Cintra!”

The guests grew silent, turning to the stairs. Preceded by the castellan and a fair-haired page in a scarlet doublet, the princess descended slowly, her head lowered. The color of her hair was identical to her mother's—ash-gray—but she wore it braided into two thick plaits which reached below her waist. Pavetta was adorned only with a tiara ornamented with a delicately worked jewel and a belt of tiny golden links which girded her long silvery-blue dress at the hips.

Escorted by the page, herald, castellan and Vissegerd, the princess occupied the empty chair between Drogodar and Eist Tuirseach. The knightly islander immediately filled her goblet and entertained her with conversation. Geralt didn't notice her answer with more than a word. Her eyes were permanently lowered, hidden behind her long lashes even during the noisy toasts raised to her around the table. There was no doubt her beauty had impressed the guests—Crach an Craite stopped shouting and stared at Pavetta in silence, even forgetting his tankard of beer. Windhalm of Attre was also devouring the princess with his eyes, flushing shades of red as though only a few grains in the hourglass separated them from their wedding night. Coodcoodak and the brothers from Strept were studying the girl's petite face, too, with suspicious concentration.

“Aha,” said Calanthe quietly, clearly pleased. “And what do you say, Geralt? The girl has taken after her mother. It's even a shame to waste her on that red-haired lout, Crach. The only hope is that the pup might grow into someone with Eist Tuirseach's class. It's the same blood, after all. Are you listening, Geralt? Cintra has to form an alliance with Skellige because the interest of the state demands it. My daughter has to marry the right person. Those are the results you must ensure me.”

“I have to ensure that? Isn't your will alone sufficient for it to happen?”

“Events might take such a turn that it won't be sufficient.”

“What can be stronger than your will?”

“Destiny.”

“Aha. So I, a poor Witcher, am to face down a destiny which is stronger than the royal will. A Witcher fighting destiny! What irony!”

“Yes, Geralt? What irony?”

“Never mind. Your Majesty, it seems the service you demand borders on the impossible.”

“If it bordered on the possible,” Calanthe drawled, “I would manage it myself. I wouldn't need the famous Geralt of Rivia. Stop being so clever. Everything can be dealt with… it's only a question of price. Bloody hell, there must be a figure on your Witchers’ pricelist for work that borders on the impossible. I can guess one, and it isn't low. You ensure me my outcome and I will give you what you ask.”

“What did you say?”

“I’ll give you whatever you ask for. And I don't like being told to repeat myself. I wonder, Witcher, do you always try to dissuade your employers as strongly as you are me? Time is slipping away. Answer, yes or no?”

“Yes.”

“That's better. That's better, Geralt. Your answers are much closer to the ideal. They're becoming more like those I expect when I ask a question. So. Discreetly stretch your left hand out and feel behind my throne.”

Geralt slipped his hand under the yellow-blue drapery. Almost immediately he felt a sword secured to the leather-upholstered backrest. A sword well-known to him. “Your Majesty,” he said quietly, “not to repeat what I said earlier about killing people, you do realize that a sword alone will not defeat destiny?”

“I do.” Calanthe turned her head away. “A Witcher is also necessary. As you see, I took care of that.”

“Your Maje...”

“Not another word, Geralt. We've been conspiring for too long. They're looking at us, and Eist is getting angry. Talk to the castellan. Have something to eat. Drink, but not too much. I want you to have a steady hand.”

He obeyed. The queen joined a conversation between Eist, Vissegerd and Mousesack, with Pavetta's silent and dreamy participation. Drogodar had put away his lute and was making up for his lost eating time. Haxo wasn't talkative. The voivode with the hard-to-remember name, who must have heard something about the affairs and problems of Fourhorn, politely asked whether the mares were foaling well. Geralt answered yes, much better than the stallions. He wasn't sure if the joke had been well taken, but the voivode didn't ask any more questions.

Mousesack's eyes constantly sought the Witcher's, but the crumbs on the table didn't move again.

Crach an Craite was becoming more and more friendly with the two brothers from Strept. The third, the youngest brother, was paralytic, having tried to match the drinking speed imposed by Draig Bon-Dhu. The skald had emerged from it unscathed.

The younger and less important lords gathered at the end of the table, tipsy, started singing a well-known song—out of tune—about a little goat with horns and a vengeful old woman with no sense of humor.

A curly-haired servant and a captain of the guards wearing the gold and blue of Cintra ran up to Vissegerd. The marshal, frowning, listened to their report, rose, and leaned down from behind the throne to murmur something to the queen. Calanthe glanced at Geralt and answered with a single word. Vissegerd leaned over even further and whispered something more; the queen looked at him sharply and, without a word, slapped her armrest with an open palm. The marshal bowed and passed the command to the captain of the guards. Geralt didn't hear it but he did notice that Mousesack wriggled uneasily and glanced at Pavetta—the princess was sitting motionless, her head lowered.

Heavy footsteps, each accompanied by the clang of metal striking the floor, could be heard over the hum at the table. Everyone raised their heads and turned.

The approaching figure was clad in armor of iron sheets and leather treated with wax. His convex, angular, black and blue breastplate overlapped a segmented apron and short thigh pads. The armor-plated brassards [arm plates] bristled with sharp, steel spikes and the visor, with its densely grated screen extending out in the shape of a dog's muzzle, was covered with spikes like a conker casing.

Clattering and grinding, the strange guest approached the table and stood motionless in front of the throne. “Noble queen, honorable gentlemen,” said the newcomer, bowing stiffly. “Please forgive me for disrupting your ceremonious feast. I am Urcheon of Erlenwald.”

“Greetings, Urcheon of Erlenwald,” said Calanthe slowly. “Please take your place at the table. In Cintra we welcome every guest.”

“Thank you, your Majesty.” Urcheon of Erlenwald bowed once again and touched his chest with a fist clad in an iron gauntlet. “But I haven't come to Cintra as a guest but on a matter of great importance and urgency. If your Majesty permits, I will present my case immediately, without wasting your time.”

“Urcheon of Erlenwald,” said the queen sharply, “a praiseworthy concern about our time does not justify lack of respect. And such is your speaking to us from behind an iron trellis. Remove your helmet, and we'll endure the time wasted while you do.”

“My face, your Majesty, must remain hidden for the time being. “With your permission.”

An angry ripple, punctuated here and there with the odd curse, ran through the gathered crowd. Mousesack, lowering his head, moved his lips silently. The Witcher felt the spell electrify the air for a second, felt it stir his medallion. Calanthe was looking at Urcheon, narrowing her eyes and drumming her fingers on her armrest.

“Granted,” she said finally. “I choose to believe your motive is sufficiently important. So—what brings you here, Urcheon-without-a-face?”

“Thank you,” said the newcomer. “But I’m unable to suffer the accusation of lacking respect, so I explain that it is a matter of a knight's vows. I am not allowed to reveal my face before midnight strikes.”

Calanthe, raising her hand perfunctorily, accepted his explanation. Urcheon advanced, his spiked armor clanging. “Fifteen years ago,” he announced loudly, “your husband King Roegner lost his way while hunting in Erlenwald. Wandering around the pathless tracts, he fell from his horse into a ravine and sprained his leg. He lay at the bottom of the gully and called for help but the only answer he got was the hiss of vipers and the howling of approaching werewolves. He would have died without the help he received.”

“I know what happened,” the queen affirmed. “If you know it, too, then I guess you are the one who helped him.”

“Yes. It is only because of me he returned to you in one piece, and well.”

“I am grateful to you, then, Urcheon of Erlenwald. That gratitude is none the lesser for the fact that Roegner, gentleman of my heart and bed, has left this world. Tell me, if the implication that your aid was not disinterested does not offend another of your knightly vows, how I can express my gratitude.”

“You well know my aid was not disinterested. You know, too, that I have come to collect the promised reward for saving the king's life.”

“Oh yes?” Calanthe smiled but green sparks lit up her eyes. “So you found a man at the bottom of a ravine, defenseless, wounded, at the mercy of vipers and monsters. And only when he promised you a reward did you help? And if he didn't want to or couldn't promise you something, you'd have left him there, and, to this day, I wouldn't know where his bones lay? How noble. No doubt your actions were guided by a particularly chivalrous vow at the time.”

The murmur around the hall grew louder.

“And today you come for your reward, Urcheon?” continued the queen, smiling even more ominously. “After fifteen years? No doubt you are counting the interest accrued over this period? This isn't the dwarves’ bank, Urcheon. You say Roegner promised you a reward? Ah, well, it will be difficult to get him to pay you. It would be simpler to send you to him, into the other world, to reach an agreement over who owes what. I loved my husband too dearly, Urcheon, to forget that I could have lost him then, fifteen years ago, if he hadn't chosen to bargain with you. The thought of it arouses rather-ill feeling toward you. Masked newcomer, do you know that here in Cintra, in my castle and in my power, you are just as helpless and close to death as Roegner was then, at the bottom of the ravine? What will you propose, what price, what reward will you offer, if I promise you will leave here alive?”

The medallion on Geralt's neck twitched. The Witcher caught Mousesack's clearly uneasy gaze. He shook his head a little and raised his eyebrows questioningly. The druid also shook his head and, with a barely perceptible move of his curly beard, indicated Urcheon. Geralt wasn't sure.

“Your words, your Majesty,” called Urcheon, “are calculated to frighten me, to kindle the anger of the honorable gentlemen gathered here, and the contempt of your pretty daughter, Pavetta. But above all, your words are untrue. And you know it!”

“You accuse me of lying like a dog.” An ugly grimace crept across Calanthe's lips.

“You know very well, your Majesty,” the newcomer continued adamantly, “what happened then in Erlenwald. You know Roegner, once saved, vowed of his own will to give me whatever I asked for. I call upon everyone to witness my words! When the king, rescued from his misadventure, reached his retinue, he asked me what I demanded, and I answered. I asked him to promise me whatever he had left at home without knowing or expecting it. The king swore it would be so, and on his return to the castle he found you, Calanthe, in labor. Yes, your Majesty, I waited for fifteen years and the interest on my reward has grown. Today I look at the beautiful Pavetta and see that the wait has been worth it! Gentlemen and knights! Some of you have come to Cintra to ask for the princess's hand. You have come in vain. From the day of her birth, by the power of the royal oath, the beautiful Pavetta has belonged to me!”

An uproar burst forth among the guests. Some shouted, someone swore, someone else thumped his fist on the table and knocked the dishes over. Wieldhill of Strept pulled a knife out of the roast lamb and waved it about. Crach an Craite, bent over, was clearly trying to break a plank from the table trestle.

“That's unheard of!” yelled Vissegerd. “What proof do you have? Proof?”

“The queen's face,” exclaimed Urcheon, extending his hand, “is the best proof!”

Pavetta sat motionless, not raising her head. The air was growing thick with something very strange. The Witcher’s medallion was tearing at its chain under the tunic. He saw the queen summon a page and whisper a short command. Geralt couldn't hear it, but he was puzzled by the surprise on the boy's face and the fact that the command had to be repeated. The page ran toward the exit.

The uproar at the table continued as Eist Tuirseach turned to the queen. “Calanthe,” he said calmly, “is what he says true?”

“And if it is,” the queen muttered through her teeth, biting her lips and picking at the green sash on her shoulder, “so what?”

“If what he says is true” Eist frowned “then the promise will have to be kept.”

“Is that so?”

“Or am I to understand,” the islander asked grimly, “that you treat all promises this lightly, including those which have etched themselves so deeply in my memory?”

Geralt, who had never expected to see Calanthe blush deeply, with tears in her eyes and trembling lips, was surprised.

“Eist,” whispered the queen, “this is different…”

“Is it, really?”

“Oh, you son of a bitch!” Crach an Craite yelled unexpectedly, jumping up. “The last fool who said I’d acted in vain was pinched apart by crabs at the bottom of Allenker bay! I didn't sail here from Skellige to return empty-handed! A suitor has turned up, some son of a trollop! Someone bring me a sword and give that idiot some iron! We'll soon see who...”

“Maybe you could just shut up, Crach?” Eist snapped scathingly, resting both fists on the table. “Draig Bon-Dhu! I render you responsible for his future behavior!”

“And are you going to silence me, too, Tuirseach?” shouted Rainfarn of Attre, standing up. “Who is going to stop me from washing the insult thrown at my prince away with blood? And his son, Windhalm, the only man worthy of Pavetta's hand and bed! Bring the swords! I’ll show that Urcheon, or whatever he's called, how we of Attre take revenge for such abuse! I wonder whether anybody or anything can hold me back?”

“Yes. Regard for good manners,” said Eist Tuirseach calmly. “It is not proper to start a fight here or challenge anyone without permission from the lady of the house. What is this? Is the throne room of Cintra an inn where you can punch each other's heads and stab each other with knives as the fancy takes you?”

Everybody started to shout again, to curse and swear and wave their arms about. But the uproar suddenly stopped, as if cut by a knife, at the short, furious roar of an enraged bison. “Yes,” said Coodcoodak, clearing his throat and rising from his chair. “Eist has it wrong. This doesn't even look like an inn anymore. It's more like a zoo, so a bison should be at home here. Honorable Calanthe, allow me to offer my opinion.”

“A great many people, I see,” said Calanthe in a drawling voice, “have an opinion on this problem and are offering it even without my permission. Strange that you aren't interested in mine? And in my opinion, this bloody castle will sooner collapse on my head than I give my Pavetta to this crank. I haven't the least intention...”

“Roegner's oath...” Urcheon began, but the queen silenced him, banging her golden goblet on the table.

“Roegner's oath means about as much to me as last year's snows! And as for you, Urcheon, I haven't decided whether to allow Crach or Rainfarn to meet you outside, or to simply hang you. You're greatly influencing my decision with your interruption!”

Geralt, still disturbed by the way his medallion was quivering, looked around the hall. Suddenly he saw Pavetta's eyes, emerald green like her mother's. The princess was no longer hiding them beneath her long lashes—she swept them from Mousesack to the Witcher, ignoring the others. Mousesack, bent over, was wriggling and muttering something.

Coodcoodak, still standing, cleared his throat meaningfully.

“Speak.” The queen nodded. “But be brief.”

“As you command, your Majesty. Noble Calanthe and you, knights! Indeed, Urcheon of Erlenwald made a strange request of King Roegner, a strange reward to demand when the king offered him his wish. But let us not pretend we've never heard of such requests, of the Law of Surprise, as old as humanity itself. Of the price a man who saves another can demand, of the granting of a seemingly impossible wish. ‘You will give me the first thing that comes to greet you.’ It might be a dog, you'll say, a halberdier at the gate, even a mother-in-law impatient to holler at her son-in-law when he returns home. Or: ‘You'll give me what you find at home yet don't expect.’ After a long journey, honorable gentlemen, and an unexpected return, this could be a lover in the wife's bed. But sometimes it's a child. A child marked out by destiny.”

“Briefly, Coodcoodak.” Calanthe frowned.

“As you command. Sirs! Have you not heard of children marked out by destiny? Was not the legendary hero, Zatret Voruta, given to the dwarves as a child because he was the first person his father met on his return? And Mad Dei, who demanded a traveler give him what he left at home without knowing it? That surprise was the famous Supree, who later liberated Mad Dei” from the curse which weighed him down. Remember Zivelena, who became the Queen of Metinna with the help of the gnome Rumplestelt, and in return promised him her firstborn? Zivelena didn't keep her promise when Rumplestelt came for his reward and, by using spells, she forced him to run away. Not long after that, both she and the child died of the plague. You do not dice with Destiny with impunity!”

“Don't threaten me, Coodcoodak.” Calanthe grimaced. “Midnight is close, the time for ghosts. Can you remember any more legends from your undoubtedly difficult childhood? If not, then sit down.”

“I ask your Grace” the baron turned up his long whiskers “to allow me to remain standing. I’d like to remind everybody of another legend. It's an old, forgotten legend—we've all probably heard it in our difficult childhoods. In this legend, the kings kept their promises. And we, poor vassals, are only bound to kings by the royal word: treaties, alliances, our privileges and fiefs all rely on it. And now? Are we to doubt all this? Doubt the inviolability of the king's word? Wait until it is worth as much as yesteryear's snow? If this is how things are to be, then a difficult old age awaits us after our difficult childhoods!”

“Whose side are you on, Coodcoodak?” hollered Rainfarn of Attre.

“Silence! Let him speak!”

“This cackler, full of hot air, insults her Majesty!”

“The Baron of Tigg is right!”

“Silence,” Calanthe said suddenly, getting up. “Let him finish.”

“I thank you graciously.” Coodcoodak bowed. “But I have just finished.”

Silence fell, strange after the commotion his words had caused. Calanthe was still standing. Geralt didn't think anyone else had noticed her hand shake as she wiped her brow.

“My lords,” she said finally, “you deserve an explanation. Yes, this…Urcheon…speaks the truth. Roegner did swear to give him that which he did not expect. It looks as if our lamented king was an oaf as far as a woman's affairs are concerned and couldn't be trusted to count to nine. He confessed the truth on his deathbed, because he knew what I’d do to him if he'd admitted it earlier. He knew what a mother, whose child is disposed of so recklessly, is capable of.”

The knights and magnates remained silent. Urcheon stood motionless, like a spiked, iron statue.

“And Coodcoodak,” continued Calanthe, “well, Coodcoodak has reminded me that I am not a mother but a queen. Very well, then. As queen, I shall convene a council tomorrow. Cintra is not a tyranny. The council will decide whether a dead king's oath is to decide the fate of the successor to the throne. It will decide whether Pavetta and the throne of Cintra are to be given to a stranger, or to act according to the kingdom's interest.” Calanthe was silent for a moment, looking askance at Geralt. “And as for the noble knights who have come to Cintra in the hope of the princess's hand…It only remains for me to express my deep regret at the cruel disrespect and dishonor they have experienced here, at the ridicule poured on them. I am not to blame.”

Amid the hum of voices which rumbled through the guests, the Witcher managed to pick out Eist Tuirseach's whisper. “On all the gods of the sea,” sighed the islander. “This isn't befitting. This is open incitement to bloodshed. Calanthe, you're simply setting them against each other...”

“Be quiet, Eist,” hissed the queen furiously, “because I’ll get angry.”

Mousesack's black eyes flashed, as with a glance, the druid indicated Rainfarn of Attre who, with a gloomy, grimacing face, was preparing to stand. Geralt reacted immediately, standing up first and banging the chair noisily.

“Maybe it will prove unnecessary to convene the council,” he said in ringing tones.

Everyone grew silent, watching him with astonishment. Geralt felt Pavetta's emerald eyes on him, he felt Urcheon's gaze fall on him from behind the lattice of his black visor, and he felt the Force surging like a flood-wave and solidifying in the air. He saw how, under the influence of this Force, the smoke from the torches and oil lamps was taking on fantastic forms. He knew that Mousesack saw it too. He also knew that nobody else saw it.

“I said,” he repeated calmly, “that convening the council may not prove necessary. You understand what I have in mind, Urcheon of Erlenwald?”

The spiked knight took two grating steps forward. “I do,” he said, his words hollow beneath his helmet. “It would take a fool not to understand. I heard what the merciful and noble lady Calanthe said a moment ago. She has found an excellent way of getting rid of me. I accept your challenge, knight unknown to me!”

“I don't recall challenging you,” said Geralt. “I don't intend to duel you, Urcheon of Erlenwald.”

“Geralt!” called Calanthe, twisting her lips and forgetting to call the Witcher Ravix, “don't overdo it! Don't put my patience to the test!”

“Or mine,” added Rainfarn ominously. Crach an Craite growled, and Eist Tuirseach meaningfully showed him a clenched fist. Crach growled even louder.

“Everyone heard,” spoke Geralt, “Baron Tigg tell us about the famous heroes taken from their parents on the strength of the same oath that Urcheon received from King Roegner. But why should anyone want such an oath? You know the answer, Urcheon of Erlenwald. It creates a powerful, indissoluble tie of destiny between the person demanding the oath and its object, the child-surprise. Such a child, marked by blind fate, can be destined for extraordinary things. It can play an incredibly important role in the life of the person to whom fate has tied it. That is why, Urcheon, you demanded the prize you claim today. You don't want the throne of Cintra. You want the princess.”

“It is exactly as you say, knight unknown to me.” Urcheon laughed out loud. “That is exactly what I claim! Give me the one who is my destiny!”

“That,” said Geralt, “will have to be proved.”

“You dare doubt it? After the queen confirmed the truth of my words? After what you've just said?”

“Yes. Because you didn't tell us everything. Roegner knew the power of the Law of Surprise and the gravity of the oath he took. And he took it because he knew law and custom have a power which protects such oaths, ensuring they are only fulfilled when the force of destiny confirms them. I declare, Urcheon, that you have no right to the princess as yet. You will win her only when…”

“When what?”

“When the princess herself agrees to leave with you. This is what the Law of Surprise states. It is the child's, not the parent's, consent which confirms the oath, which proves that the child was born under the shadow of destiny. That's why you returned after fifteen years, Urcheon, and that's the condition King Roegner stipulated in his oath.”

“Who are you?”

“I am Geralt of Rivia.”

“Who are you, Geralt of Rivia, to claim to be an oracle in matters of laws and customs?”

“He knows this law better than anyone else,” Mousesack said in a hoarse voice, “because it applied to him once. He was taken from his home because he was what his father hadn't expected to find on his return. Because he was destined for other things. And by the power of destiny he became what he is.”

“And what is he?”

“A Witcher.”

In the silence that reigned, the guardhouse bell struck, announcing midnight in a dull tone. Everyone shuddered and raised their heads. Mousesack watched Geralt with surprise. But it was Urcheon who flinched most noticeably and moved uneasily. His hands, clad in their armor gauntlets, fell to his sides lifelessly, and the spiked helmet swayed unsteadily.

The strange, unknown Force suddenly grew thicker, filling the hall like a gray mist.

“It's true,” said Calanthe. “Geralt, present here, is a Witcher. His trade is worthy of respect and esteem. He has sacrificed himself to protect us from monsters and nightmares born in the night, those sent by powers ominous and harmful to man. He kills the horrors and monsters that await us in the forests and ravines. And those which have the audacity to enter our dwellings.” Urcheon was silent. “And so,” continued the queen, raising her ringed hand, “let the law be fulfilled, let the oath which you, Urcheon of Erlenwald, insist should be satisfied, be satisfied. Midnight has struck. Your vow no longer binds you. Lift your visor. Before my daughter expresses her will, before she decides her destiny, let her see your face. We all wish to see your face.”

Urcheon of Erlenwald slowly raised his armored hand, pulled at the helmet's fastenings, grabbed it by the iron horn and threw it against the floor with a crash. Someone shouted, someone swore, someone sucked in their breath with a whistle. On the queen's face appeared a wicked, very wicked, smile. A cruel smile of triumph.

Above the wide, semi-circular breastplate, two bulbous, black, button eyes looked out. Eyes set to either side of a blunt, elongated muzzle covered in reddish bristles and full of sharp white fangs. Urcheon's head and neck bristled with a brush of short, gray, twitching prickles.

“This is how I look,” spoke the creature, “which you well knew, Calanthe. Roegner, in telling you of his oath, wouldn't have omitted describing me. Urcheon of Erlenwald to whom—despite my appearance—Roegner swore his oath. You prepared well for my arrival, queen. Your own vassals have pointed out your haughty and contemptuous refusal to keep Roegner's word. When your attempt to set the other suitors on me didn't succeed, you still had a killer Witcher in reserve, ready at your right hand. And finally, common, low deceit. You wanted to humiliate me, Calanthe. Know that it is yourself you have humiliated!”

“Enough.” Calanthe stood up and rested her clenched fist on her hip. “Let's put an end to this. Pavetta! You see who, or rather what, is standing in front of you, claiming you for himself. In accordance with the Law of Surprise and eternal custom, the decision is yours. Answer. One word from you is enough. Yes, and you become the property, the conquest, of this monster. No, and you will never have to see him again.”

The Force pulsating in the hall was squeezing Geralt's temples like an iron vice, buzzing in his ears, making the hair on his neck stand on end. The Witcher looked at Mousesack's whitening knuckles, clenched at the edge of the table. At the trickle of sweat running down the queen's cheek. At the breadcrumbs on the table, moving like insects, forming runes, dispersing and again gathering into one word: CAREFUL!

“Pavetta!” Calanthe repeated. “Answer. Do you choose to leave with this creature?”

Pavetta raised her head. “Yes.”

The Force filling the hall echoed her, rumbling hollowly in the arches of the vault. No one, absolutely no one, made the slightest sound. Calanthe very slowly collapsed into her throne. Her face was completely expressionless.

“Everyone heard,” Urcheon's calm voice resounded in the silence. “You, too, Calanthe. As did you, Witcher, cunning, hired thug. My rights have been established. Truth and destiny have triumphed over lies and deviousness. What do you have left, noble queen, disguised Witcher? Cold steel?” No one answered. “I’d like to leave with Pavetta immediately,” continued Urcheon, his bristles stirring as he snapped his jaw shut, “but I won't deny myself one small pleasure. It is you, Calanthe, who will lead your daughter here to me and place her white hand in mine.”

Calanthe slowly turned her head in the Witcher’s direction. Her eyes expressed a command. Geralt didn't move, sensing that the Force condensing in the air was concentrated on him. Only on him. Now he understood. The queen's eyes narrowed; her lips quivered…

“What?! What's this?” yelled Crach an Craite, jumping up. “Her white hand? In his? The princess with this bristly stinker? With this…pig's snout?”

“And I wanted to fight him like a knight!” Rainfarn chimed in. “This horror, this beast! Loose the dogs on him! The dogs!”

“Guards!” cried Calanthe.

Everything happened at once. Crach an Craite seized a knife from the table and knocked his chair over with a crash. Obeying Eist's command, Draig Bon-Dhu, without a thought, whacked the back of his head with his bagpipes, as hard as he could. Crach dropped onto the table between a sturgeon in gray sauce and the few remaining arched ribs of a roast boar. Rainfarn leapt toward Urcheon, flashing a dagger drawn from his sleeve. Coodcoodak, springing up, kicked a stool under his feet which Rainfarn jumped agilely, but a moment's delay was enough—Urcheon deceived him with a short feint and forced him to his knees with a mighty blow from his armored fist. Coodcoodak fell to snatch the dagger from Rainfarn but was stopped by Prince Windhalm, who clung to his thigh like a bloodhound.

Guards, armed with guisarmes and lances, ran in from the entrance. Calanthe, upright and threatening, with an authoritative, abrupt gesture indicated Urcheon to them. Pavetta started to shout, Eist Tuirseach to curse. Everyone jumped up, not quite knowing what to do.

“Kill him!” shouted the queen.

Urcheon, huffing angrily and baring his fangs, turned to face the attacking guards. He was unarmed but clad in spiked steel, from which the points of the guisarmes bounced with a clang. But the blows knocked him back, straight onto Rainfarn, who was just getting up and immobilized him by grabbing his legs. Urcheon let out a roar and, with his iron elbow-guards, deflected the blades aimed at his head. Rainfarn jabbed him with his dagger but the blade slid off the breastplate. The guards, crossing their spear-shafts, pinned him to the sculpted chimney. Rainfarn, who was hanging onto his belt, found a chink in the armor and dug the dagger into it. Urcheon curled up.

“Dunyyyyyyy!” Pavetta shrilled as she jumped onto the chair.

The Witcher, sword in hand, sprang onto the table and ran toward the fighting men, knocking plates, dishes and goblets all over the place. He knew there wasn't much time. Pavetta's cries were sounding more and more unnatural. Rainfarn was raising his dagger to stab again.

Geralt cut, springing from the table into a crouch. Rainfarn wailed and staggered to the wall. The Witcher spun and, with the center of his blade, slashed a guard who was trying to dig the sharp tongue of his lance between Urcheon's apron and breastplate. The guard tumbled to the ground, losing his helmet. More guards came running in from the entrance.

“This is not befitting!” roared Eist Tuirseach, grabbing a chair. He shattered the unwieldly piece of furniture against the floor with great force and, with what remained his hand, threw himself at those advancing on Urcheon.

Urcheon, caught by two guisarme hooks at the same time, collapsed with a clang, cried out and huffed as he was dragged along the floor. A third guard raised his lance to stab down and Geralt cut him in the temple with the point of his sword. Those dragging Urcheon stepped back quickly, throwing down their guisarmes, while those approaching from the entrance backed away from the remnants of a chair brandished by Eist like the magic sword Balmur in the hand of the legendary Zatreta Voruta.

Pavetta's cries reached a peak and suddenly broke off. Geralt, sensing what was about to happen, fell to the floor watching for a greenish flash. He felt an excruciating pain in his ears, heard a terrible crash and a horrifying wail ripped from numerous throats. On top of all this he heard the princess's even, monotonous and vibrating cry.

The table, scattering dishes and food all around, was rising and spinning; heavy chairs were flying around the hall and shattering against the walls; tapestries and hangings were flapping, raising clouds of dust. Cries and the dry crack of guisarme shafts snapping like sticks came from the entrance.

The throne, with Calanthe sitting on it, sprang up and flew across the hall like an arrow, smashing into the wall with a crash and falling apart. The queen slid to the floor like a ragged puppet. Eist Tuirseach, barely on his feet, threw himself toward her, took her in his arms and sheltered her from the hail pelting against the walls and floor with his body.

Geralt, grasping the medallion in his hand, slithered as quickly as he could toward Mousesack, miraculously still on his knees, who was lifting a short hawthorn wand with a rat's skull affixed to the tip. On the wall behind the druid, a tapestry depicting the siege and fire of Fortress Ortagar was burning with very real flames.

Pavetta wailed. Turning round and round, she lashed everything and everybody with her cries as if with a whip. Anyone who tried to stand tumbled to the ground or was flattened against the wall. An enormous silver sauceboat in the shape of a many-oared vessel with an upturned bow came whistling through the air in front of Geralt's eyes and knocked down the voivode with the hard-to-remember name just as he was trying to dodge it. Plaster rained down silently as the table rotated beneath the ceiling, with Crach an Craite flattened on it and throwing down vile curses.

Geralt crawled to Mousesack and they hid behind the heap formed by Fodcat of Strept, a barrel of beer, Drogodar, a chair and Drogodar's lute.

“It's pure, primordial Force!” the druid yelled over the racket and clatter. “She's got no control over it!”

“I know!” Geralt yelled back. A roast pheasant with a few striped feathers still stuck in its rump, fell from nowhere and thumped him in the back.

“She has to be restrained! The walls are starting to crack!”

“I can see!”

“Ready?”

“Yes!”

“One! Two! Now!”

They both hit her simultaneously, Geralt with the Sign of Aard and Mousesack with a terrible, three-staged curse powerful enough to make the floor melt. The chair on which the princess was standing disintegrated into splinters. Pavetta barely noticed—she hung in the air within a transparent green sphere. Without ceasing to shout, she turned her head toward them and her petite face shrunk into a sinister grimace.

“By all the demons—!” roared Mousesack.

“Careful!” shouted the Witcher, curling up. “Block her, Mousesack! Block her or it's the end of us!”

The table thudded heavily to the ground, shattering its trestle and everything beneath it. Crach an Craite, who was lying on the table, was thrown into the air. A heavy rain of plates and remnants of food fell; crystal carafes exploded as they hit the ground. The cornice broke away from the wall, rumbling like thunder, making the floors of the castle quake.

“Everything's letting go!” Mousesack shouted, aiming his wand at the princess. “The whole Force is going to fall on us!”

Geralt, with a blow of his sword, deflected a huge double-pronged fork which was flying straight at the druid. “Block it, Mousesack!”

Emerald eyes sent two flashes of green lightning at them. They coiled into blinding, whirling funnels from the centers of which the Force—like a battering ram which exploded the skull, put out the eyes and paralyzed the breath—descended on them. Together with the Force, glass, majolica, platters, candlesticks, bones, nibbled loaves of bread, planks, slats and smoldering firewood from the hearth poured over them. Crying wildly like a great capercaillie, Castellan Haxo flew over their heads. The enormous head of a boiled carp splattered against Geralt's chest, on the bear passant sable and damsel of Fourhorn.

Through Mousesack's wall-shattering curses, through his own shouting and the wailing of the wounded, the din, clatter and racket, through Pavetta's wailing, the Witcher suddenly heard the most terrible sound.

Coodcoodak, on his knees, was strangling Draig Bon-Dhu's bagpipes with his hands, while, with his head thrown back, he shouted over the monstrous sounds emerging from the bag, wailed and roared, cackled and croaked, bawled and squawked in a cacophony of sounds made by all known, unknown, domestic, wild and mythical animals.

Pavetta fell silent, horrified, and looked at the baron with her mouth agape. The Force eased off abruptly.

“Now!” yelled Mousesack, waving his wand. “Now, Witcher!”

They hit her. The greenish sphere surrounding the princess burst under their blow like a soap bubble and the vacuum instantly sucked in the Force raging through the room. Pavetta flopped heavily to the ground and started to weep.

After the pandemonium, a moment's silence rang in their ears; then, with difficulty, laboriously, voices started to break through the rubble and destruction, through the broken furniture and the inert bodies.

“Cuach op arse, ghoul y badraigh mal an cuach,” spat Crach an Craite, spraying blood from his bitten lip.

“Control yourself, Crach,” said Mousesack with effort, shaking buckwheat from his front. “There are women present.”

“Calanthe. My beloved. My Calanthe!” Eist Tuirseach said in the pauses between kisses.

The queen opened her eyes but didn't try to free herself from his embrace. “Eist. People are watching,” she said.

“Let them watch.”

“Would somebody care to explain what that was?” asked Marshal Vissegerd, crawling from beneath a fallen tapestry.

“No,” said the Witcher.

“A doctor!” Windhalm of Attre, leaning over Rainfarn, shouted shrilly.

“Water!” Wieldhill, one of the brothers from Strept, called, stifling the smoldering tapestry with his jacket. “Water, quickly!”

“And beer!” Coodcoodak croaked.

A few knights, still able to stand, were trying to lift Pavetta, but she pushed their hands aside, got up on her own and, unsteadily, walked toward the hearth. There, with his back resting against the wall, sat Urcheon, awkwardly trying to remove his blood-smeared armor.

“The youth of today,” snorted Mousesack, looking in their direction. “They start early! They've only got one thing on their minds.”

“What's that?”

“Didn't you know, Witcher, that a virgin, that is one who's untouched, wouldn't be able to use the Force?”

“To hell with her virginity,” muttered Geralt. “Where did she get such a gift anyway? Neither Calanthe nor Roegner...”

“She inherited it, missing a generation, and no mistake,” said the druid. “Her grandmother, Adalia, could raise a drawbridge with a twitch of her eyebrows. Hey, Geralt, look at that! She still hasn't had enough!”

Calanthe, supported by Eist Tuirseach's arm, indicated the wounded Urcheon to the guards. Geralt and Mousesack approached quickly but unnecessarily. The guards recoiled from the semi-reclining figure and, whispering and muttering, backed away.

Urcheon's monstrous snout softened, blurred and was beginning to lose its contours. The spikes and bristles rippled and became black, shiny, wavy hair and a beard which bordered a pale, angular, masculine face, dominated by a prominent nose.

“What…” stammered Eist Tuirseach. “Who's that? Urcheon?”

“Duny,” said Pavetta softly.

Calanthe turned away with pursed lips.

“Cursed?” murmured Eist. “But how...”

“Midnight has struck,” said the Witcher. “Just this minute. The bell we heard before was early. The bell-ringer's mistake. Am I right, Calanthe?”

“Right, right,” groaned the man called Duny, answering instead of the queen, who had no intention of replying anyway. “But maybe instead of standing there talking, someone could help me with this armor and call a doctor. That madman Rainfarn stabbed me under the ribs.”

“What do we need a doctor for?” said Mousesack, taking out his wand.

“Enough.” Calanthe straightened and raised her head proudly. “Enough of this. When all this is over, I want to see you in my chamber. All of you, as you stand. Eist, Pavetta, Mousesack, Geralt and you…Duny. Mousesack?”

“Yes, your Majesty.”

“That wand of yours…I’ve bruised my backbone. And thereabouts.”

“At your command, your Majesty.”

III

“…a curse,” continued Duny, rubbing his temple. “Since birth. I never found a reason for it, or who did it to me. From midnight to dawn, an ordinary man, from dawn…you saw what. Akerspaark, my father, wanted to hide it. People are superstitious in Maecht; spells and curses in the royal family could prove fatal for the dynasty. One of my father's knights took me away from court and brought me up. The two of us wandered around the world—the knight errant and his squire, and later, when he died, I journeyed alone. I can't remember who told me that a child-surprise could free me from the curse. Not long after that, I met Roegner. The rest you know.”

“The rest we know or can guess.” Calanthe nodded. “Especially that you didn't wait the fifteen years agreed upon with Roegner but turned my daughter's head before that. Pavetta! Since when?”

The princess lowered her head and raised a finger.

“There. You little sorceress. Right under my nose! Let me just find out who let him into the castle at night! Let me at the ladies-in-waiting you went gathering primroses with. Primroses, dammit! Well, what am I to do with you now?”

“Calanthe...” began Eist.

“Hold on, Tuirseach. I haven't finished yet. Duny, the matter's become very complicated. You've been with Pavetta for a year now, and what? And nothing. So, you negotiated the oath from the wrong father. Destiny has made a fool of you. What irony, as Geralt of Rivia, present here, is wont to say.”

“To hell with destiny, oaths and irony.” Duny grimaced. “I love Pavetta and she loves me; that's all that counts. You can't stand in the way of our happiness.”

“I can, Duny, I can, and how.” Calanthe smiled one of her unfailing smiles. “You're lucky I don't want to. I have a certain debt toward you, Duny. I’d made up my mind…I ought to ask your forgiveness, but I hate doing that. So, I’m giving you Pavetta and we'll be quits. Pavetta? You haven't changed your mind, have you?”

The princess shook her head eagerly.

“Thank you, your Majesty. Thank you.” Duny smiled. “You're a wise and generous queen.”

“Of course I am. And beautiful.”

“And beautiful.”

“You can both stay in Cintra if you wish. The people here are less superstitious than the inhabitants of Maecht and adjust to things quicker. Besides, even as Urcheon you were quite pleasant. But you can't count on having the throne just yet. I intend to reign a little longer beside the new king of Cintra. The noble Eist Tuirseach of Skellige has made me a very interesting proposition.”

“Calanthe...”

“Yes, Eist, I accept. I’ve never before listened to a confession of love while lying on the floor amidst fragments of my own throne but…How did you put it, Duny? This is all that counts, and I don't advise anyone to stand in the way of my happiness. And you, what are you staring at? I’m not as old as you think.”

“Today's youth,” muttered Mousesack. “The apple doesn't fall far...”

“What are you muttering, sorcerer?”

“Nothing, ma'am.”

“Good. While we're at it, I’ve got a proposition for you, Mousesack. Pavetta's going to need a teacher. She ought to learn how to use her gift. I like this castle, and I’d prefer it to remain standing. It might fall apart at my talented daughter's next attack of hysteria. How about it, Druid?”

“I’m honored.”

“I think” the queen turned her head toward the window “it's dawn. Time to…” She suddenly turned to where Pavetta and Duny were whispering to each other, holding hands, their foreheads all but touching. “Duny!”

“Yes, your Majesty?”

“Do you hear? It's dawn! It's already light. And you…”

Geralt glanced at Mousesack and both started laughing.

“And why are you so happy, sorcerers? Can't you see?”

“We can, we can,” Geralt assured her.

“We were waiting until you saw for yourself,” snorted Mousesack. “I was wondering when you'd catch on.”

“To what?”

“That you've lifted the curse. It's you who's lifted it,” said the Witcher. “The moment you said ‘I’m giving you Pavetta,’ destiny was fulfilled.”

“Exactly,” confirmed the druid.

“Oh gods,” said Duny slowly. “So, finally. Damn, I thought I’d be happier, that some sort of trumpets would play or…Force of habit. Your Majesty! Thank you. Pavetta, do you hear?”

“Mhm,” said the princess without raising her eyes.

“And so,” sighed Calanthe, looking at Geralt with tired eyes, “all's well that ends well. Don't you agree, Witcher? The curse has been lifted, two weddings are on their way, it'll take about a month to repair the throne-room, there are four dead, countless wounded and Rain-farn of Attre is half-dead. Let's celebrate. Do you know, Witcher, that there was a moment when I wanted to have you…”

“I know.”

“But now I have to do you justice. I demanded a result and got one. Cintra is allied to Skellige. My daughter's marrying the right man. For a moment I thought all this would have been fulfilled according to destiny anyway, even if I hadn't had you brought in for the feast and sat you next to me. But I was wrong. Rainfarn's dagger could have changed destiny. And Rainfarn was stopped by a sword held by a Witcher. You've done an honest job, Geralt. Now it's a question of price. Tell me what you want.”

“Hold on,” said Duny, fingering his bandaged side. “A question of price, you say. It is I who am in debt; it's up to me…”

“Don't interrupt.” Calanthe narrowed her eyes. “Your mother-in-law hates being interrupted. Remember that. And you should know that you're not in any debt. It so happens that you were the subject of my agreement with Geralt. I said we're quits and I don't see the sense of my having to endlessly apologize to you for it. But the agreement still binds me. Well, Geralt. Your price.”

“Very well,” said the Witcher. “I ask for your green sash, Calanthe. May it always remind me of the color of the eyes of the most beautiful queen I have ever known.”

Calanthe laughed and unfastened her emerald necklace.

“This trinket,” she said, “has stones of the right hue. Keep it, and the memory.”

“May I speak?” asked Duny modestly.

“But of course, son-in-law, please do, please do.”

“I still say I am in your debt, Witcher. It is my life that Rainfarn's dagger endangered. I would have been beaten to death by the guards without you. If there's talk of a price, then I should be the one to pay. I assure you I can afford it. What do you ask, Geralt?”

“Duny,” said Geralt slowly, “a Witcher who is asked such a question has to ask to have it repeated.”

“I repeat, therefore. Because, you see, I am in your debt for still another reason. When I found out who you were, there in the hall, I hated you and thought very badly of you. I took you for a blind, bloodthirsty tool, for someone who kills coldly and without question, who wipes his blade clean of blood and counts the cash. But I’ve become convinced that the Witcher’s profession is worthy of respect. You protect us not only from the evil lurking in the darkness, but also from that which lies within ourselves. It's a shame there are so few of you.”

Calanthe smiled. For the first time that night, Geralt was inclined to believe it was genuine.

“My son-in-law has spoken well. I have to add two words to what he said. Precisely two. Forgive, Geralt.”

“And I,” said Duny, “ask again. What do you ask for?”

“Duny,” said Geralt seriously, “Calanthe, Pavetta. And you, righteous knight Tuirseach, future king of Cintra. In order to become a Witcher, you have to be born in the shadow of destiny, and very few are born like that. That's why there are so few of us. We're growing old, dying, without anyone to pass our knowledge, our gifts, on to. We lack successors. And this world is full of Evil which waits for the day none of us are left.”

“Geralt,” whispered Calanthe.

“Yes, you're not wrong, queen. Duny! You will give me that which you already have but do not know. I’ll return to Cintra in six years to see if destiny has been kind to me.”

“Pavetta.” Duny opened his eyes wide. “Surely you're not...”

“Pavetta!” exclaimed Calanthe. “Are you…are you—?”

The princess lowered her eyes and blushed. Then replied.

## The Voice of Reason

“Geralt! Hey! Are you there?”

He raised his head from the coarse, yellowed pages of The History of the World by Roderick de Novembre, an interesting if controversial work which he had been studying since the previous day.

“Yes, I am. What's happened, Nenneke? Do you need me?”

“You've got a guest.”

“Again? Who's it this time? Duke Hereward himself?”

“No. It's Dandelion this time, your fellow. That idler, parasite and good-for-nothing, that priest of art, the bright-shining star of the ballad and love poem. As usual, he's radiant with fame, puffed up like a pig's bladder and stinking of beer. Do you want to see him?”

“Of course. He's my friend, after all.”

Nenneke, peeved, shrugged her shoulders. “I can't understand that friendship. He's your absolute opposite.”

“Opposites attract.”

“Obviously. There, he's coming.” She indicated with her head. “Your famous poet.”

“He really is a famous poet, Nenneke. Surely you're not going to claim you've never heard his ballads.”

“I’ve heard them.” The priestess winced. “Yes, indeed. Well, I don't know much about it, but maybe the ability to jump from touching lyricism to obscenities so easily is a talent. Never mind. Forgive me, but I won't keep you company. I’m not in the mood for either his poetry or his vulgar jokes.”

A peal of laughter and the strumming of a lute resounded in the corridor and there, on the threshold of the library, stood Dandelion in a lilac jerkin with lace cuffs, his hat askew. The troubadour bowed exaggeratedly at the sight of Nenneke, the heron feather pinned to his hat sweeping the floor.

“My deepest respects, venerable mother,” he whined stupidly. “Praise be the Great Melitele and her priestesses, the springs of virtue and wisdom...”

“Stop talking bullshit,” snorted Nenneke. “And don't call me mother. The very idea that you could be my son fills me with horror.” She turned on her heel and left, her trailing robe rustling. Dandelion, aping her, sketched a parody bow.

“She hasn't changed a bit,” he said cheerfully. “She still can't take a joke. She's furious because I chatted a bit to the gatekeeper when I got here, a pretty blonde with long lashes and a virgin's plait reaching down to her cute little bottom, which it would be a sin not to pinch. So I did and Nenneke, who had just arrived…Ah, what the deuce. Greetings, Geralt.”

“Greetings, Dandelion. How did you know I was here?”

The poet straightened himself and yanked his trousers up. “I was in Vizima,” he said. “I heard about the striga, and that you were wounded. I guessed where you would come to recuperate. I see you're well now, are you?”

“You see correctly but try explaining that to Nenneke. Sit, let's talk.”

Dandelion sat and peeped into the book lying on the lectern. “History?” He smiled. “Roderick de November? I’ve read him, I have. History was second on my list of favorite subjects when I was studying at the Academy in Oxenfurt.”

“What was first?”

“Geography,” said the poet seriously. “The atlas was bigger, and it was easier to hide a demijohn of vodka behind it.”

Geralt laughed dryly, got up, removed Lunin and Tyrss's The Arcane Mysteries of Magic and Alchemy from the shelf and pulled a round-bellied vessel wrapped in straw from behind the bulky volume and into the light of day.

“Oho.” The bard visibly cheered up. “Wisdom and inspiration, I see, are still to be found in libraries. Oooh! I like this! Plum, isn't it? Yes, this is true alchemy. This is a philosopher's stone well worth studying. Your health, brother. Ooooh, it's strong as the plague!”

“What brings you here?” Geralt took the demijohn over from the poet, took a sip and started to cough, fingering his bandaged neck. “Where are you going?”

“Nowhere. That is, I could go where you're going. I could keep you company. Do you intend staying here long?”

“Not long. The local duke let it be known I’m not welcome.”

“Hereward?” Dandelion knew all the kings, princes, lords and feudal lords from Yaruga to the Dragon Mountains. “Don't you give a damn. He won't dare fall foul of Nenneke, or Melitele. The people would set fire to his castle.”

“I don't want any trouble. And I’ve been sitting here for too long anyway. I’m going south, Dandelion. Far south. I won't find any work here. Civilization. What the hell do they need a Witcher here for? When I ask after employment, they look at me as if I’m a freak.”

“What are you talking about? What civilization? I crossed Buina a week ago and heard all sorts of stories as I rode through the country. Apparently, there are water sprites here, myriapodans, chimera, flying drakes, every possible filth. You should be up to your ears in work.”

“Stories, well, I’ve heard them too. Half of them are either made up or exaggerated. No, Dandelion. The world is changing. Something's coming to an end.”

The poet took a long pull at the demijohn, narrowed his eyes and sighed heavily. “Are you crying over your sad fate as a Witcher again? And philosophizing on top of that? I perceive the disastrous effects of inappropriate literature, because the fact that the world is changing occurred even to that old fart Roderick de November. The changeability of the world is, as it happens, the only thesis in this treatise you can agree with. But it's not so innovative you have to ply me with it and put on the face of a great thinker—which doesn't suit you in the least.”

Instead of answering, Geralt took a sip from the demijohn.

“Yes, yes,” sighed Dandelion anew. “The world is changing, the sun sets, and the vodka is coming to an end. What else, in your opinion, is coming to an end? You mentioned something about endings, philosopher.”

“I’ll give you a couple of examples,” said Geralt after a moment's silence, “all from two months this side of the Buina. One day I ride up and what do I see? A bridge. And under that bridge sits a troll and demands every passerby pays him. Those who refuse have a leg injured, sometimes both. So, I go to the alderman: ‘How much will you give me for that troll?’ He's amazed. ‘What are you talking about?’ he asks. ‘Who will repair the bridge if the troll's not there? He repairs it regularly with the sweat of his brow, solid work, first rate. It's cheaper to pay his toll.’ So, I ride on, and what do I see? A forktail. Not very big, about four yards nose-tip to tail-tip. It's flying, carrying a sheep in its talons. I go to the village. ‘How much,’ I ask, ‘will you pay me for the forktail?’ The peasants fall on their knees. ‘No!’ they shout. ‘It's our baron's youngest daughter's favorite dragon. If a scale falls from its back, the baron will burn our hamlet, and skin us.’ I ride on, and I’m getting hungrier and hungrier. I ask around for work. Certainly, it's there, but what work? To catch a rusalka for one man, a nymph for another, a dryad for a third…They've gone completely mad—the villages are teeming with girls but they want humanoids. Another asks me to kill a mecopteran and bring him a bone from its hand because, crushed and poured into a soup, it cures impotence”

“That's rubbish,” interrupted Dandelion. “I’ve tried it. It doesn't strengthen anything, and it makes the soup taste of old socks. But if people believe it and are inclined to pay…”

“I’m not going to kill mecopterans. Nor any other harmless creatures.”

“Then you'll go hungry. Unless you change your line of work.”

“To what?”

“Whatever. Become a priest. You wouldn't be bad at it with all your scruples, your morality, your knowledge of people and of everything. The fact that you don't believe in any gods shouldn't be a problem—I don't know many priests who do. Become a priest and stop feeling sorry for yourself.”

“I’m not feeling sorry for myself. I’m stating the facts.”

Dandelion crossed his legs and examined his worn sole with interest. “You remind me, Geralt, of an old fisherman who, toward the end of his life, discovers that fish stink and the breeze from the sea makes your bones ache. Be consistent. Talking and regretting won't get you anywhere. If I were to find that the demand for poetry had come to an end, I’d hang up my lute and become a gardener. I’d grow roses.”

“Nonsense. You're not capable of giving it up.”

“Well,” agreed the poet, still staring at his sole, “maybe not. But our professions differ somewhat. The demand for poetry and the sound of lute strings will never decline. It's worse with your trade. You Witchers, after all, deprive yourselves of work, slowly but surely. The better and the more conscientiously you work, the less work there is for you. After all, your goal is a world without monsters, a world which is peaceful and safe. A world where Witchers are unnecessary. A paradox, isn't it?”

“True.”

“In the past, when unicorns still existed, there was quite a large group of girls who took care of their virtue in order to be able to hunt them. Do you remember? And the rat-catchers with pipes? Everybody was fighting over their services. But they were finished off by alchemists and their effective poisons and then domesticated ferrets and weasels. The little animals were cheaper, nicer and didn't guzzle so much beer. Notice the analogy?”

“I do.”

“So, use other people's experiences. The unicorn virgins, when they lost their jobs, immediately popped their cherry. Some, eager to make up for the years of sacrifice, became famous far and wide for their technique and zeal. The rat-catchers…Well, you'd better not copy them, because they, to a man, took to drink and went to the dogs. Well, now it looks as if the time's come for Witchers. You're reading Roderick de November? As far as I remember, there are mentions of Witchers there, of the first ones who started work some three hundred years ago. In the days when the peasants used to go to reap the harvest in armed bands, when villages were surrounded by a triple stockade, when merchant caravans looked like the march of regular troops, and loaded catapults stood on the ramparts of the few towns night and day. Because it was us, human beings, who were the intruders here. This land was ruled by dragons, manticores, griffins and amphisboenas, vampires and werewolves, striga, kikimoras, chimera and flying drakes. And this land had to be taken from them bit by bit, every valley, every mountain pass, every forest and every meadow. And we didn't manage that without the invaluable help of Witchers. But those times have gone, Geralt, irrevocably gone. The baron won't allow a fork-tail to be killed because it's the last draconid for a thousand miles and no longer gives rise to fear but rather to compassion and nostalgia for times passed. The troll under the bridge gets on with people. He's not a monster used to frighten children. He's a relic and a local attraction—and a useful one at that. And chimera, manticores and amphisboenas? They dwell in virgin forests and inaccessible mountains…”

“So, I was right. Something is coming to an end. Whether you like it or not, something's coming to an end.”

“I don't like you mouthing banal platitudes. I don't like your expression when you do it. What's happening to you? I don't recognize you, Geralt. Ah, plague on it, let's go south as soon as possible, to those wild countries. As soon as you've cut down a couple of monsters, your blues will disappear. And there's supposed to be a fair number of monsters down there. They say that when an old woman's tired of life, she goes alone and weaponless into the woods to collect brushwood. The consequences are guaranteed. You should go and settle there for good.”

“Maybe I should. But I won't.”

“Why? It's easier for a Witcher to make money there.”

“Easier to make money.” Geralt took a sip from the demijohn. “But harder to spend it. And on top of that, they eat pearl barley and millet, the beer tastes like piss, the girls don't wash and the mosquitoes bite.”

Dandelion chuckled loudly and rested his head against the bookshelf, on the leather-bound volumes. “Millet and mosquitoes! That reminds me of our first expedition together to the edge of the world,” he said. “Do you remember? We met at the fête in Gulet and you persuaded me…”

“You persuaded me! You had to flee from Gulet as fast as your horse could carry you because the girl you'd knocked up under the musicians’ podium had four sturdy brothers. They were looking for you all over town, threatening to geld [castrate] you and cover you in pitch and sawdust. That's why you hung on to me then.”

“And you almost jumped out of your pants with joy to have a companion. Until then, you only had your horse for company. But you're right; it was as you say. I did have to disappear for a while, and the Valley of Flowers seemed just right for my purpose. It was, after all, supposed to be the edge of the inhabited world, the last outpost of civilization, the furthest point on the border of two worlds…Remember?”

“I remember.”

## The Edge of the World

### Part I

Dandelion came down the steps of the inn carefully, carrying two tankards dripping with froth. Cursing under his breath, he squeezed through a group of curious children and crossed the yard at a diagonal, avoiding the cowpats.

Several villagers had already gathered round the table in the courtyard where the Witcher was talking to the alderman. The poet set the tankards down and found a seat. He realized straight away that the conversation hadn't advanced a jot during his short absence.

“I’m a Witcher, sir,” Geralt repeated for the umpteenth time, wiping beer froth from his lips. “I don't sell anything. I don't go around enlisting men for the army, and I don't know how to treat glanders. I’m a Witcher.”

“It's a profession,” explained Dandelion yet again. “A Witcher, do you understand? He kills strigas and specters. He exterminates all sorts of vermin. Professionally, for money. Do you get it, alderman?”

“Aha!” The alderman's brow, deeply furrowed in thought, grew smoother. “A Witcher! You should have said so right away!”

“Exactly,” agreed Geralt. “So now I’ll ask you: is there any work to be found around here for me?”

“Aaaa.” The alderman quite visibly started to think again. “Work? Maybe those…Well…werethings? You're asking are there any werethings hereabouts?”

The Witcher smiled and nodded, rubbing an itching eyelid with his knuckles.

“That there are,” the alderman concluded after a fair while. “Only look ye yonder, see ye those mountains? There's elves live there; that there is their kingdom. Their palaces, hear ye, are all of pure gold. Oh aye, sir! Elves, I tell ye. ‘Tis awful. He who yonder goes, never returns.”

“I thought so,” said Geralt coldly. “Which is precisely why I don't intend going there.”

Dandelion chuckled impudently.

The alderman pondered a long while, just as Geralt had expected.

“Aha,” he said at last. “Well, aye. But there be other werethings here too. From the land of elves they come, to be sure. Oh, sir, there be many, many. ‘Tis hard to count them all. But the worst, that be the Bane, am I right, my good men?”

The “good men” came to life and besieged the table from all sides.

“Bane!” said one. “Aye, aye, ‘tis true what the alderman says. A pale virgin, she walks the cottages at daybreak, and the children, they die!”

“And imps,” added another, a soldier from the watchtower. “They tangle up the horses’ manes in the stables!”

“And bats! There be bats here!”

“And myriapodans! You come up all in spots because of them!”

The next few minutes passed in a recital of the monsters which plagued the local peasants with their dishonorable doings, or their simple existence. Geralt and Dandelion learned of misguids and mamunes, which prevent an honest peasant from finding his way home in a drunken stupor, of the flying drake which drinks milk from cows, of the head on spider's legs which runs around in the forest, of hobolds which wear red hats and about a dangerous pike which tears linen from women's hands as they wash it—and just you wait and it'll be at the women themselves. They weren't spared hearing that old Nan the Hag flies on a broom at night and performs abortions in the day, that the miller tampers with the flour by mixing it with powdered acorns and that a certain Duda believed the royal steward to be a thief and scoundrel.

Geralt listened to all this calmly, nodding with feigned interest, and asked a few questions about the roads and layout of the land, after which he rose and nodded to Dandelion.

“Well, take care, my good people,” he said. “I’ll be back soon; then we'll see what can be done.” They rode away in silence alongside the cottages and fences, accompanied by yapping dogs and screaming children.

“Geralt,” said Dandelion, standing in the stirrups to pick a fine apple from a branch which stretched over the orchard fence, “all the way you've been complaining about it being harder and harder to find work. Yet from what I just heard; it looks as if you could work here without break until winter. You'd make a penny or two, and I’d have some beautiful subjects for my ballads. So, explain why we're riding on.”

“I wouldn't make a penny, Dandelion.”

“Why?”

“Because there wasn't a word of truth in what they said.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“None of the creatures they mentioned exist.”

“You're joking!” Dandelion spat out a pip and threw the apple core at a patched mongrel. “No, it's impossible. I was watching them carefully, and I know people. They weren't lying.”

“No,” the Witcher agreed. “They weren't lying. They firmly believed it all. Which doesn't change the facts.”

The poet was silent for a while. “None of those monsters…None? It can't be. Something of what they listed must be here. At least one! Admit it.”

“All right. I admit it. One does exist for sure.”

“Ha! What?”

“A bat.”

They rode out beyond the last fences, on to a highway between beds yellow with oilseed and cornfields rolling in the wind. Loaded carts traveled past them in the opposite direction. The bard pulled his leg over the saddlebow, rested his lute on his knee and strummed nostalgic tunes, waving from time to time at the giggling, scantily clad girls wandering along the sides of the road carrying rakes on their robust shoulders.

“Geralt,” he said suddenly, “but monsters do exist. Maybe not as many as before, maybe they don't lurk behind every tree in the forest, but they are there. They exist. So how do you account for people inventing ones, then? What's more, believing in what they invent? Eh, famous Witcher? Haven't you wondered why?”

“I have, famous poet. And I know why.”

“I’m curious.”

“People” Geralt turned his head “like to invent monsters and monstrosities. Then they seem less monstrous themselves. When they get blind-drunk, cheat, steal, beat their wives, starve an old woman, when they kill a trapped fox with an axe or riddle the last existing unicorn with arrows, they like to think that the Bane entering cottages at daybreak is more monstrous than they are. They feel better then. They find it easier to live.”

“I’ll remember that,” said Dandelion, after a moment's silence. “I’ll find some rhymes and compose a ballad about it.”

“Do. But don't expect a great applause.” They rode slowly but lost the last cottages of the hamlet from sight. Soon they had climbed the row of forested hills.

“Ha.” Dandelion halted his horse and looked around. “Look, Geralt. Isn't it beautiful here? Idyllic, damn it. A feast for the eyes!”

The land sloped gently down to a mosaic of flat, even fields picked out in variously colored crops. In the middle, round and regular like a leaf of clover, sparkled the deep waters of three lakes surrounded by dark strips of alder thickets. The horizon was traced by a misty blue line of mountains rising above the black, shapeless stretch of forest.

“We're riding on, Dandelion.”

The road led straight toward the lakes alongside dykes and ponds hidden by alder trees and filled with quacking mallards, garganeys, herons and grebes. The richness of bird life was surprising alongside the signs of human activity—the dykes were well maintained and covered with fascines, while the sluice gates had been reinforced with stones and beams. The outlet boxes, which were not in the least rotten, trickled merrily with water. Canoes and jetties were visible in the reeds by the lakes and bars of set nets and fish-pots were poking out of the deep waters.

Dandelion suddenly looked around. “Someone's following us,” he said, excited. “In a cart!”

“Incredible,” scoffed the Witcher without looking around. “In a cart? And I thought that the locals rode on bats.”

“Do you know what?” growled the troubadour. “The closer we get to the edge of the world, the sharper your wit. I dread to think what it will come to!”

They weren't riding fast and the empty cart, drawn by two piebald horses, quickly caught up with them. “Woooaaahhh!” The driver brought the horses to a halt just behind them. He was wearing a sheepskin over his bare skin and his hair reached down to his brows. “The gods be praised, noble sirs!”

“We, too,” replied Dandelion, familiar with the custom, “praise them.”

“If we want to,” murmured the Witcher.

“I call myself Nettly,” announced the carter. “I was watching ye speak to the alderman at Upper Posada. I know ye tae be a Witcher.”

Geralt let go of the reins and let his mare snort at the roadside nettles.

“I did hear,” Nettly continued, “the alderman prattle ye stories. I marked your expression and ‘twas nae strange to me. In a long time now I’ve nae heard such balderdash and lies.”

Dandelion laughed.

Geralt was looking at the peasant attentively, silently.

Nettly cleared his throat. “Care ye nae to be hired for real, proper work, sir?” he asked. “There'd be something I have for ye.”

“And what is that?”

Nettly didn't lower his eyes. “It be nae good to speak of business on the road. Let us drive on to my home, to Lower Posada. There we'll speak. Anyways, ‘tis that way ye be heading.”

“Why are you so sure?”

“As ‘cos ye have nae other way here, and yer horses’ noses be turned in that direction, not their butts.”

Dandelion laughed again. “What do you say to that, Geralt?”

“Nothing,” said the Witcher. “It's no good to talk on the road. On our way, then, honorable Nettly.”

“Tie ye the horses to the frame, and sit yerselves down in the cart,” the peasant proposed. “It be more comfortable for ye. Why rack yer asses on the saddle?”

“Too true.”

They climbed onto the cart. The Witcher stretched out comfortably on the straw. Dandelion, evidently afraid of getting his elegant green jerkin dirty, sat on the plank. Nettly clucked his tongue at the horses and the vehicle clattered along the beam-reinforced dyke.

They crossed a bridge over a canal overgrown with water lilies and duckweed and passed a strip of cut meadows. Cultivated fields stretched as far as the eye could see.

“It's hard to believe that this should be the edge of the world, the edge of civilization,” said Dandelion. “Just look, Geralt. Rye like gold, and a mounted peasant could hide in that corn. Or that oilseed, look, how enormous.”

“You know about agriculture?”

“We poets have to know about everything,” said Dandelion haughtily. “Otherwise we'd compromise our work. One has to learn, my dear fellow, learn. The fate of the world depends on agriculture, so it's good to know about it. Agriculture feeds, clothes, protects from the cold, provides entertainment and supports art.”

“You've exaggerated a bit with the entertainment and art.”

“And booze, what's that made of?”

“I get it.”

“Not very much, you don't. Learn. Look at those purple flowers. They're lupins.”

“They's be vetch, to be true,” interrupted Nettly. “Have ye nae seen lupins, or what? But ye have hit exact with one thing, sir. Everything seeds mightily here, and grows as to make the heart sing. That be why ‘tis called the Valley of Flowers. That be why our forefathers settled here, first ridding the land of the elves.”

“The Valley of Flowers, that's Dol Blathanna.” Dandelion nudged the Witcher, who was stretched out on the straw, with his elbow. “You paying attention? The elves have gone but their name remains. Lack of imagination. And how do you get on with the elves here, dear host? You've got them in the mountains across the path, after all.”

“We nae mix with each other. Each to his own.”

“The best solution,” said the poet. “Isn't that right, Geralt?”

The Witcher didn't reply.

### Part II

“Thank you for the spread.” Geralt licked the bone spoon clean and dropped it into the empty bowl. “A hundred thanks, dear host. And now, if you permit, we'll get down to business.”

“Well, that we can,” agreed Nettly. “What say ye, Dhun?”

Dhun, the elder of Lower Posada, a huge man with a gloomy expression, nodded to the girls who swiftly removed the dishes from the table and left the room, to the obvious regret of Dandelion who had been grinning at them ever since the feast began, and making them giggle at his gross jokes.

“I’m listening,” said Geralt, looking at the window from where the rapping of an axe and the sound of a saw drifted. Some sort of woodwork was going on in the yard and the sharp, resinous smell was penetrating the room. “Tell me how I can be of use to you.”

Nettly glanced at Dhun. The elder of the village nodded and cleared his throat. “Well, it be like this,” he said. “There be this field hereabouts...”

Geralt kicked Dandelion—who was preparing to make a spiteful comment—under the table.

“ a field,” continued Dhun. “Be I right, Nettly? A long time, that field there, it lay fallow, but we set it to the plough and now, ‘tis on it we sow hemp, hops and flax. It be a grand piece of field, I tell ye. Stretches right up to the forest...”

“And what?” The poet couldn't help himself. “What's on that field there?”

“Well.” Dhun raised his head and scratched himself behind the ear. “Well, there be a deovel prowls there.”

“What?” snorted Dandelion. “A what?”

“I tell ye: a deovel.”

“What deovel?”

“What can he be? A deovel and that be it.”

“Devils don't exist!”

“Don't interrupt, Dandelion,” said Geralt in a calm voice. “And go on, honorable Dhun.”

“I tell ye: it's a deovel.”

“I heard you.” Geralt could be incredibly patient when he chose. “Tell me, what does he look like, where did he come from, how does he bother you? One thing at a time, if you please.”

“Well” Dhun raised his gnarled hand and started to count with great difficulty, folding his fingers over, one at a time...”one thing at a time. Forsooth, ye be a wise man. Well, it be like this. He looks, sir, like a deovel, for all the world like a deovel. Where did he come from? Well, nowhere. Crash, bang, wallop and there we have him: a deovel. And bother us, forsooth he doesnae bother us overly. There be times he even helps.”

“Helps?” cackled Dandelion, trying to remove a fly from his beer. “A devil?”

“Don't interrupt, Dandelion. Carry on, Dhun, sir. How does he help you, this, as you say...”

“Deovel,” repeated the freeman with emphasis. “Well, this be how he helps: he fertilizes the land, he turns the soil, he gets rid of the moles, scares birds away, watches over the turnips and beetroots. Oh, and he eats the caterpillars he does, they as do hatch in the cabbages. But the cabbages, he eats them too, forsooth. Nothing but guzzle, be what he does. Just like a deovel.”

Dandelion cackled again, then flicked a beer-drenched fly at a cat sleeping by the hearth. The cat opened one eye and glanced at the bard reproachfully.

“Nevertheless,” the Witcher said calmly, “you're ready to pay me to get rid of him, am I right? In other words, you don't want him in the vicinity?”

“And who” Dhun looked at him gloomily...”would care to have a deovel on his birthright soil? This be our land since forever, bestowed upon us by the king and it has nought to do with the deovel. We spit on his help. We've got hands ourselves, have we not? And he, sir, is nay a deovel but a malicious beast and has got so much, forgive the word, shite in his head as be hard to bear. There be no knowing what will come into his head. Once he fouled the well, then chased a lass, frightening and threatening to fuck her. He steals, sir, our belongings and victuals [food provisions]. He destroys and breaks things, makes a nuisance of himself, churns the dykes, digs ditches like some muskrat or beaver—the water from one pond trickled out completely and the carp in it died. He smoked a pipe in the haystack he did, the son-of-a-whore, and all the hay it went up in smoke...”

“I see,” interrupted Geralt. “So, he does bother you.”

“Nay.” Dhun shook his head. “He doesnae bother us. He be simply up to mischief, that's what he be.”

Dandelion turned to the window, muffling his laughter.

The Witcher kept silent.

“Oh, what be there to talk about,” said Nettly who had been silent until then. “Ye be a Witcher, nae? So do ye something about this deovel. It be work ye be looking for in Upper Posada. I heard so myself. So ye have work. We'll pay ye what needs be. But take note: we don't want ye killing the deovel. No way.”

The Witcher raised his head and smiled nastily. “Interesting,” he said. “Unusual, I’d say.”

“What?” Dhun frowned.

“An unusual condition. Why all this mercy?”

“He should nae be killed.” Dhun frowned even more. “Because in this Valley...”

“He should nae and that be it,” interrupted Nettly. “Only catch him, sir, or drive him off yon o'er the seventh mountain. And ye will nae be hard done by when ye be paid.”

The Witcher stayed silent, still smiling.

“Seal it, will ye, the deal?” asked Dhun.

“First, I’d like a look at him, this devil of yours.”

The freemen glanced at each other. “It be yer right,” said Nettly, then stood up. “And yer will. The deovel he do prowl the whole neighborhood at night but at day he dwells somewhere in the hemp. Or among the old willows on the marshland. Ye can take a look at him there. We won't hasten ye. Ye be wanting rest, then rest as long as ye will. Ye will nae go wanting in comfort and food as befits the custom of hospitality. Take care.”

“Geralt.” Dandelion jolted up from his stool and looked out into the yard at the freemen walking away from the cottage. “I can't understand anything anymore. A day hasn't gone by since our chat about imagined monsters and you suddenly get yourself hired hunting devils. And everybody—except ignorant freemen obviously—knows that devils are an invention; they're mythical creatures. What's this unexpected zeal of yours supposed to mean? Knowing you a little as I do, I take it you haven't abased yourself so as to get us bed, board and lodging, have you?”

“Indeed.” Geralt grimaced. “It does look as if you know me a little, singer.”

“In that case, I don't understand.”

“What is there to understand?”

“There's no such things as devils!” yelled the poet, shaking the cat from sleep once and for all. “No such thing! To the devil with it, devils don't exist!”

“True.” Geralt smiled. “But, Dandelion, I could never resist the temptation of having a look at something that doesn't exist.”

### Part III

“One thing is certain,” muttered the Witcher, sweeping his eyes over the tangled jungle of hemp spreading before them. “This devil is not stupid.”

“How did you deduce that?” Dandelion was curious. “From the fact that he's sitting in an impenetrable thicket? Any old hare has enough brains for that.”

“It's a question of the special qualities of hemp. A field of this size emits a strong aura against magic. Most spells will be useless here. And there, look, do you see those poles? Those are hops—their pollen has the same effect. It's not mere chance. The rascal senses the aura and knows he's safe here.”

Dandelion coughed and adjusted his breeches. “I’m curious.” He scratched his forehead beneath his hat. “How are you going to go about it, Geralt? I’ve never seen you work. I take it you know a thing or two about catching devils—I’m trying to recall some ballads. There was one about a devil and a woman. Rude, but amusing. The woman, you see...”

“Spare me, Dandelion.”

“As you wish. I only wanted to be helpful, that's all. And you shouldn't scorn ancient songs. There's wisdom in them, accumulated over generations. There's a ballad about a farmhand called Slow, who...”

“Stop wittering. We have to earn our board and lodging.”

“What do you want to do?”

“Rummage around a bit in the hemp.”

“That's original,” snorted the troubadour. “Though not too refined.”

“And you, how would you go about it?”

“Intelligently.” Dandelion sniffed. “Craftily. With a hounding, for example. I’d chase the devil out of the thicket, chase him on horseback, in the open field, and lasso him. What do you think of that?”

“Interesting. Who knows, maybe it could be done, if you took part—because at least two of us are needed for an enterprise like that. But we're not going hunting yet. I want to find out what this thing is, this devil. That's why I’m going to rummage about in the hemp.”

“Hey!” The bard had only just noticed. “You haven't brought your sword!”

“What for? I know some ballads about devils, too. Neither the woman nor Slow the farmhand used a sword.”

“Hmm…” Dandelion looked around. “Do we have to squeeze through the very middle of this thicket?”

“You don't have to. You can go back to the village and wait for me.”

“Oh, no,” protested the poet. “And miss a chance like this? I want to see a devil too, see if he's as terrible as they claim. I was asking if we have to force our way through the hemp when there's a path.”

“Quite right.” Geralt shaded his eyes with his hand. “There is a path. So, let's use it.”

“And what if it's the devil's path?”

“All the better. We won't have to walk too far.”

“Do you know, Geralt,” babbled the bard, following the Witcher along the narrow, uneven path among the hemp. “I always thought the devil was just a metaphor invented for cursing: ‘go to the devil’, ‘to the devil with it’, ‘may the devil.’ Lowlanders say: ‘The devils are bringing us guests,’ while dwarves have ‘Duvvel hoael’ when they get something wrong, and call poor-blooded livestock devvelsheyss. And in the Old Language, there's a saying, ‘A d'yaebl aep arse,’ which means...”

“I know what it means. You're babbling, Dandelion.”

Dandelion stopped talking, took off the hat decorated with a heron's feather, fanned himself with it and wiped his sweaty brow. The humid, stifling heat, intensified by the smell of grass and weeds in blossom, dominated the thicket. The path curved a little and, just beyond the bend, ended in a small clearing which had been stamped in the weeds.

“Look, Dandelion.”

In the very center of the clearing lay a large, flat stone, and on it stood several clay bowls. An almost burnt-out tallow candle was set among the bowls. Geralt saw some grains of corn and broad beans among the unrecognizable pips and seeds stuck in the flakes of melted fat.

“As I suspected,” he muttered. “They're bringing him offerings.”

“That's just it,” said the poet, indicating the candle. “And they burn a tallow candle for the devil. But they're feeding him seeds, I see, as if he were a finch. Plague, what a bloody pigsty. Everything here is all sticky with honey and birch tar. What…”

The bard's next words were drowned by a loud, sinister bleating. Something rustled and stamped in the hemp; then the strangest creature Geralt had ever seen emerged from the thicket. The creature was about half a rod tall with bulging eyes and a goat's horns and beard. The mouth, a soft, busy slit, also brought a chewing goat to mind. Its nether regions were covered with long, thick, dark-red hair right down to the cleft hooves. The devil had a long tail ending in a brush-like tassel which wagged energetically.

“Uk! Uk!” barked the monster, stamping his hooves. “What do you want here? Leave! Leave or I’ll ram you down. Uk! Uk!”

“Has anyone ever kicked your ass, little goat?” Dandelion couldn't stop himself.

“Uk! Uk! Beeeeee!” bleated the goathorn in agreement, or denial, or simply bleating for the sake of it.

“Shut up, Dandelion,” growled the Witcher. “Not a word.”

“Blebleblebeeeee!” The creature gurgled furiously, his lips parting wide to expose yellow horse-like teeth. “Uk! Uk! Bleubeeeeubleuuuuubleeeeeeee!”

“Most certainly” nodded Dandelion...”you can take the barrel-organ and bell when you go home...”

“Stop it, damn you,” hissed Geralt. “Keep your stupid jokes to yourself...”

“Jokes!” roared the goathorn loudly and leapt up. “Jokes? New jokers have come, have they? They've brought iron balls, have they? I’ll give you iron balls, you scoundrels, you. Uk! Uk! Uk! You want to joke, do you? Here are some jokes for you! Here are your balls!”

The creature sprang up and gave a sudden swipe with his hand. Dandelion howled and sat down hard on the path, clasping his forehead. The creature bleated and aimed again. Something whizzed past Geralt's ear.

“Here are your balls! Brrreee!”

An iron ball, an inch in diameter, thwacked the Witcher in the shoulder and the next hit Dandelion in the knee. The poet cursed foully and scrambled away, Geralt running after him as balls whizzed above his head.

“Uk! Uk!” screamed the goathorn, leaping up and down. “I’ll give you balls! You shitty jokers!”

Another ball whizzed through the air. Dandelion cursed even more foully as he grabbed the back of his head. Geralt threw himself to one side, among the hemp, but didn't avoid the ball that hit him in the shoulder. The goathorn's aim was true and he appeared to have an endless supply of balls. The Witcher, stumbling through the thicket, heard yet another triumphant bleat from the victorious goathorn, followed by the whistle of a flying ball, a curse and the patter of Dandelion’s feet scurrying away along the path.

And then silence fell.

### Part IV

“Well, well, Geralt.” Dandelion held a horseshoe he'd cooled in a bucket to his forehead. “That's not what I expected. A horned freak with a goatee like a shaggy billy goat, and he chased you away like some upstart. And I got it in the head. Look at that bump!”

“That's the sixth time you've shown it to me. And it's no more interesting now than it was the first time.”

“How charming. And I thought I’d be safe with you!”

“I didn't ask you to traipse after me in the hemp, and I did ask you to keep that foul tongue of yours quiet. You didn't listen, so now you can suffer. In silence, please, because they're just coming.”

Nettly and Dhun walked into the dayroom. Behind them hobbled a gray-haired old woman, twisted as a pretzel, led by a fair-haired and painfully thin teenage girl.

“Honorable Dhun, honorable Nettly,” the Witcher began without introduction. “I asked you, before I left, whether you yourselves had already tried to do something with that devil of yours. You told me you hadn't done anything. I’ve grounds to think otherwise. I await your explanation.”

The villagers murmured among themselves, after which Dhun coughed into his fist and took a step forward. “Ye be right, sir. Asking forgiveness. We lied—it be guilt devours us. We wanted to outwit the deovel ourselves, for him to go away...”

“By what means?”

“Here in this Valley,” said Dhun slowly, “there be monsters in the past. Flying dragons, earth myriapodans, were-brawls, ghosts, gigantous spiders and various vipers. And all the times we be searching in our great booke for a way to deal with all that vermin.”

“What great book?”

“Show the booke, old woman. Booke, I say. The great booke! I’ll be on the boil in a minute! Deaf as a doorknob, she be! Lille, tell the old woman to show the booke!”

The girl tore the huge book from the taloned fingers of the old woman and handed it to the Witcher.

“In this here great booke,” continued Dhun, “which be in our family clan for time immemorial, be ways to deal with every monster, spell and wonder in the world that has been, is, or will be.”

Geralt turned the heavy, thick, greasy, dust-encrusted volume in his hands. The girl was still standing in front of him, wringing her apron in her hands. She was older than he had initially thought—her delicate figure had deceived him, so different from the robust build of the other girls in the village.

He lay the book down on the table and turned its heavy wooden cover. “Take a look at this, Dandelion.”

“The first Runes,” the bard worked out, peering over his shoulder, the horseshoe still pressed to his forehead. “The writing used before the modern alphabet. Still based on elfin runes and dwarves’ ideograms. A funny sentence construction, but that's how they spoke then. Interesting etchings and illuminations. It's not often you get to see something like this, Geralt, and if you do, it's in libraries belonging to temples and not villages at the edge of the world. By all the gods, where did you get that from, dear peasants? Surely you're not going to try to convince me that you can read this? Woman? Can you read the First Runes? Can you read any runes?”

“Whaaaat?” The fair-haired girl moved closer to the woman and whispered something into her ear. “Read?” The crony revealed her toothless gums in a smile. “Me? No, sweetheart. ‘Tis a skill I’ve ne'er mastered.”

“Explain to me,” said Geralt coldly, turning to Dhun and Nettly, “how do you use the book if you can't read runes?”

“Always the oldest woman knows what stands written in the booke,” said Dhun gloomily. “And what she knows, she teaches some young one, when ‘tis time for her to turn to earth. Heed ye, yerselves, how ‘tis time for our old woman. So, our old woman has taken Lille in and she be teaching her. But for now, ‘tis the old woman knows best.”

“The old witch and the young witch,” muttered Dandelion.

“The old woman knows the whole book by heart?” Geralt asked with disbelief. “Is that right, Grandma?”

“Nae the whole, oh nae,” answered the woman, again through Lille, “only what stands written by the picture.”

“Ah.” Geralt opened the book at random. The picture on the torn page depicted a dappled pig with horns in the shape of a lyre. “Well then—what's written here?”

The old woman smacked her lips, took a careful look at the etching, then shut her eyes. “The horned aurochs or Taurus,” she recited, “erroneously called bison by ignoramuses. It hath horns and useth them to ram...”

“Enough. Very good, indeed.” The Witcher turned several sticky pages. “And here?”

“Cloud sprites and wind sprites be varied. Some rain pour, some wind roar, and others hurl their thunder. Harvests to protect from them, takest thou a knife of iron, new, of a mouse's droppings a half ounce, of a gray heron's fat...”

“Good, well done. Hmm…And here? What's this?”

The etching showed a disheveled monstrosity with enormous eyes and even larger teeth, riding a horse. In its right hand, the monstrous being wielded a substantial sword, in its left, a bag of money.

“A witchman,” mumbled the woman. “Called by some a Witcher. To summon him is most dangerous, albeit one must; for when against the monster and the vermin there be no aid, the witchman can contrive. But careful one must be...”

“Enough,” muttered Geralt. “Enough, Grandma. Thank you.”

“No, no,” protested Dandelion with a malicious smile. “How does it go on? What a greatly interesting book! Go on, Granny, go on.”

“Eeee…But careful one must be to touch not the witchman, for thus the mange can one acquire. And lasses do from him hide away, for lustful the witchman is above all measure...”

“Quite correct, spot on,” laughed the poet, and Lille, so it seemed to Geralt, smiled almost imperceptibly.

“ though the witchman greatly covetous and greedy for gold be,” mumbled the old woman, half-closing her eyes, “giveth ye not such a one more than: for a drowner, one silver penny or three halves; for a werecat, silver pennies two; for a plumard, silver pennies...”

“Those were the days,” muttered the Witcher. “Thank you, Grandma. And now show us where it speaks of the devil and what the book says about devils. This time ‘tis grateful I’d be to heareth more, for to learn the ways and meanes ye did use to deal with him most curious am I.”

“Careful, Geralt,” chuckled Dandelion. “You're starting to fall into their jargon. It's an infectious mannerism.”

The woman, controlling her shaking hands with difficulty, turned several pages. The Witcher and the poet leaned over the table. The etching did, in effect, show the ball-thrower: horned, hairy, tailed and smiling maliciously. “The deovel,” recited the woman. “Also called ‘willower’ or ‘sylvan.’ For livestock and domestic fowl, a tiresome and great pest is he. Be it your will to chase him from your hamlet, takest thou...”

“Well, well,” murmured Dandelion.

“ takest thou of nuts, one fistful,” continued the woman, running her finger along the parchment. “Next, takest thou of iron balls a second fistful. Of honey an utricle, of birch tar a second. Of gray soap a firkin; of soft cheese another. There where the deovel dwelleth, goest thou when ‘tis night. Commenceth then to eat the nuts. Anon, the deovel who hath great greed, will hasten and ask if they are tasty indeed. Givest to him then the balls of iron...”

“Damn you,” murmured Dandelion. “Pox take...”

“Quiet,” said Geralt. “Well, Grandma. Go on.”

“…having broken his teeth he will be attentive as thou eatest the honey. Of said honey will he himself desire. Givest him of birch tar, then yourself eateth soft cheese. Soon, hearest thou, will the deovel grumbleth and tumbleth, but makest of it as naught. Yet if the deovel desireth soft cheese, givest him soap. For soap the deovel withstandeth not...”

“You got to the soap?” interrupted Geralt with a stony expression, turning toward Dhun and Nettly.

“In no way,” groaned Nettly. “If only we had got to the balls. But he gave us what for when he bit a ball...”

“And who told you to give him so many?” Dandelion was enraged. “It stands written in the book, one fistful to take. Yet ye gaveth of balls a sackful! Ye furnished him with ammunition for two years, the fools ye be!”

“Careful.” The Witcher smiled. “You're starting to fall into their jargon. It's infectious.”

“Thank you.”

Geralt suddenly raised his head and looked into the eyes of the girl standing by the woman. Lille didn't lower her eyes. They were pale and wildly blue. “Why are you bringing the devil offerings in the form of grain?” he asked sharply. “After all, it's obvious that he's a typical herbivore.”

Lille didn't answer.

“I asked you a question, girl. Don't be frightened, you won't get the mange by talking to me.”

“Don't ask her anything, sir,” said Nettly, with obvious unease in his voice. “Lille…She…She be strange. She won't answer you; don't force her.”

Geralt kept looking into Lille's eyes, and Lille still met his gaze. He felt a shiver run down his back and creep along his shoulders. “Why didn't you attack the devil with stancheons and pitchforks.” He raised his voice. “Why didn't you set a trap for him? If you'd wanted to, his goat's head would already be spiked on a pole to frighten crows away. You warned me not to kill him. Why? You forbade it, didn't you, Lille?”

Dhun got up from the bench. His head almost touched the beams. “Leave, lass,” he growled. “Take the old woman and leave.”

“Who is she, honorable Dhun?” the Witcher demanded as the door closed behind Lille and the woman. “Who is that girl? Why does she enjoy more respect from you than that bloody book?”

“It be nae yer business.” Dhun looked at him, and there was no friendliness in his eyes. “Persecute wise women in your own town, burn stakes in yer own land. There has been none of it here, nor will there be.”

“You didn't understand me,” said the Witcher coldly.

“Because I did nae try,” growled Dhun.

“Noticed,” Geralt said through his teeth, making no effort to be cordial. “But be so gracious as to understand something, honorable Dhun. We have no agreement. I haven't committed myself to you in any way. You have no reason to believe that you've bought yourself a Witcher who, for a silver penny or three halves, will do what you can't do yourselves. Or don't want to do. Or aren't allowed to. No, honorable Dhun. You have not bought yourself a Witcher yet, and I don't think you'll succeed in doing so. Not with your reluctance to understand.”

Dhun remained silent, measuring Geralt with a gloomy stare. Nettly cleared his throat and wriggled on the bench, shuffling his rag sandals on the dirt floor, then suddenly straightened up. “Witcher, sir,” he said. “Do nae be enraged. We will tell ye, what and how. Dhun?” The elder of the village nodded and sat down.

“As we be riding here,” began Nettly, “ye did notice how everything here grows, the great harvests we have? There be nae many places ye see all grow like this, if there be any such. Seedlings and seeds be so important to us that ‘tis with them we pay our levies and we sell them and use them to barter...”

“What's that got to do with the devil?”

“The deovel was wont to make a nuisance of himself and play silly tricks, and then he be starting to steal a great deal of grain. At the beginning, we be bringing him a little to the stone in the hemp, thinking his fill he'd eat and leave us in peace. Naught of it. With a vengeance he went on stealing. And when we started to hide our supplies in shops and sheds, well locked and bolted, ‘tis furious he grew, sir, he roared, bleated. ‘Uk! Uk!’ he called, and when he goes ‘Uk! Uk!’ ye'd do best to run for yer life. He threatened to...”

“ screw,” Dandelion threw in with a ribald smile.

“That too,” agreed Nettly. “Oh, and he mentioned a fire. Talk long as we may, he could nae steal so ‘tis levies he demanded. He ordered grain and other goods be brought him by the sackful. Riled we were then and intending to beat his tailed ass. But...” The freeman cleared his throat and lowered his head.

“Ye need nae beat about the bush,” said Dhun suddenly. “We judged the Witcher wrong. Tell him everything, Nettly.”

“The old woman forbade us to beat the devil,” said Nettly quickly, “but we know ‘tis Lille, because the woman…The woman only says what Lille tell her to. And we…Ye know yerself, sir. We listen.”

“I’ve noticed.” Geralt twisted his lips in a smile. “The woman can only waggle her chin and mumble a text which she doesn't understand herself. And you stare at the girl, with gaping mouths, as if she were the statue of a goddess. You avoid her eyes but try to guess her wishes. And her wishes are your command. Who is this Lille of yours?”

“But ye have guessed that, sir. A prophetess. A Wise One. But say naught of this to anyone. We ask ye. If word were to get to the steward, or, gods forbid, to the viceroy...”

“Don't worry,” said Geralt seriously. “I know what that means, and I won't betray you.”

The strange women and girls, called prophetesses or Wise Ones, who could be found in villages, didn't enjoy the favor of those noblemen who collected levies and profited from farming. Farmers always consulted prophetesses on everything and believed them, blindly and boundlessly. Decisions based on their advice were often completely contrary to the politics of lords and overlords. Geralt had heard of incomprehensible decrees—the slaughter of entire pedigree herds, the cessation of sowing or harvesting, and even the migration of entire villages. Local lords therefore opposed the superstition, often brutally, and freemen very quickly learned to hide the Wise Ones. But they didn't stop listening to their advice. Because experience proved the Wise Ones were always right in the long run.

“Lille did not permit us to kill the deovel,” continued Nettly. “She told us to do what the booke says. As ye well know, it did nae work out. There has already been trouble with the steward. If we give less grain in levy than be normal, ‘tis bawl he will, shout and fulminate. Thus, we have nay even squeaked to him of the deovel, the reason being the steward be ruthless and knows cruelly little about jokes. And then ye happened along. We asked Lille if we could…hire ye...”

“And?”

“She said, through the woman, that she need first of all to look at ye.” “And she did.”

“That she did. And accepted ye she has, that we know. We can tell what Lille accepts and what she doesnae.”

“She never said a word to me.”

“She ne'er has spoken word to anyone—save the old woman. But if she had not accepted ye, she would nay have entered the room for all in the world...”

“Hmm…” Geralt reflected. “That's interesting. A prophetess who, instead of prophesying, doesn't say a word. How did she come to be among you?”

“We nae know, Witcher, sir,” muttered Dhun. “But as for the old woman, so the older folk remember, it be like this. The old woman afore her took a close-tongued girl under her wing too, one as which came from no one knows. And that girl she be our old woman. My grandfather would say the old woman be reborn that way. Like the moon she be reborn in the sky and ever new she be. Do nae laugh...”

“I’m not laughing.” Geralt shook his head. “I’ve seen too much to laugh at things like that. Nor do I intend to poke my nose into your affairs, honorable Dhun. My questions aim to establish the bond between Lille and the devil. You've probably realized yourselves that one exists. So, if you're anxious to be on good terms with your prophetess, then I can give you only one way to deal with the devil: you must get to like him.”

“Know ye, sir,” said Nettly, “it be nae only a matter of the deovel. Lille does nae let us harm anything. Any creature.”

“Of course,” Dandelion butted in, “country prophetesses grow from the same tree as druids. And a druid will go so far as to wish the gadfly sucking his blood to enjoy its meal.”

“Ye hits it on the head.” Nettly faintly smiled. “Ye hits the nail right on the head. ‘Twas the same with us and the wild boars that dug up our vegetable beds. Look out the window: beds as pretty as a picture. We have found a way, Lille doesnae even know. What the eyes do nay see, the heart will nae miss. Understand?”

“I understand,” muttered Geralt. “And how. But we can't move forward. Lille or no Lille, your devil is a sylvan. An exceptionally rare but intelligent creature. I won't kill him; my code doesn't allow it.”

“If he be intelligent,” said Dhun, “go speak reason to him.”

“Just so,” Nettly joined in. “If the deovel has brains, that will mean he steals grain according to reason. So ye, Witcher, find out what he wants. He does nae eat that grain, after all—not so much, at least. So, what does he want grain for? To spite us? What does he want? Find out and chase him off in some Witcher way. Will ye do that?”

“I’ll try,” decided Geralt. “But…”

“But what?”

“Your book, my friends, is out of date. Do you see what I’m getting at?”

“Well, forsooth,” grunted Dhun, “not really.”

“I’ll explain. Honorable Dhun, honorable Nettly, if you're counting on my help costing you a silver penny or three halves, then you are bloody well mistaken.”

### Part V

“Hey!”

A rustle, an angry Uk! Uk! and the snapping of stakes, reached them from the thicket.

“Hey!” repeated the Witcher, prudently remaining hidden. “Show yourself, willower.”

“Willower yourself.”

“So what is it? Devil?”

“Devil yourself.” The sylvan poked his head out from the hemp, baring his teeth. “What do you want?”

“To talk.”

“Are you making fun of me or what? Do you think I don't know who you are? The peasants hired you to throw me out of here, eh?”

“That's right,” admitted Geralt indifferently. “And that's precisely what I wanted to chat to you about. What if we were to come to an understanding?”

“That's where it hurts,” bleated the sylvan. “You'd like to get off lightly, wouldn't you? Without making an effort, eh? Pull the other one! Life, my good man, means competition. The best man wins. If you want to win with me, prove you're the best. Instead of coming to an understanding, we'll have competitions. The winner dictates the conditions. I propose a race from here to the old willow on the dyke.”

“I don't know where the dyke is, or the old willow.”

“I wouldn't suggest the race if you knew. I like competitions but I don't like losing.”

“I’ve noticed. No, we won't race each other. It's very hot today.”

“Pity. So maybe we'll pit ourselves against each other in a different way?” The sylvan bared his yellow teeth and picked up a large stone from the ground. “Do you know the game ‘Who shouts loudest?’ I shout first. Close your eyes.”

“I have a different proposition.”

“I’m all ears.”

“You leave here without any competitions, races or shouting. Of your own accord, without being forced.”

“You can shove such a proposition a d'yeabl aep arse.” The devil demonstrated his knowledge of the Old Language. “I won't leave here. I like it here.”

“But you've made too much of a nuisance of yourself here. Your pranks have gone too far.”

“Duvvelsheyss to you with my pranks.” The sylvan, as it turned out, also knew the dwarves’ tongue. “And your proposition is also worth as much as a duvvelsheyss. I’m not going anywhere unless you beat me at some game. Shall I give you a chance? We'll play at riddles if you don't like physical games. I’ll give you a riddle in a minute and if you guess it, you win and I leave. If you don't, I stay and you leave. Rack your brains because the riddle isn't easy.”

Before Geralt could protest, the sylvan bleated, stamped his hooves, whipped the ground with his tail and recited:

*It grows in soft clay, not far from the stream,  
Little pink leaves, pods small and full,  
It grows in soft clay, not far from the stream,  
On a long stalk, its flower is moist,  
But to a cat, please show it not,  
'Cos if you do, he'll eat the lot.*

“Well, what is it? Guess.”

“I haven't the faintest idea,” the Witcher said, not even trying to think it over. “Sweet pea, perhaps?”

“Wrong. You lose.”

“And what is the correct answer? What has…hmm…moist pods?”

“Cabbage.”

“Listen,” growled Geralt. “You're starting to get on my nerves.”

“I warned you,” chuckled the sylvan, “that the riddle wasn't easy. Tough. I won, I stay. And you leave. I wish you, sir, a cold farewell.”

“Just a moment.” The Witcher surreptitiously slipped a hand into his pocket. “And my riddle? I have the right to a revenge match, haven't I?”

“No!” protested the devil. “I might not guess it, after all. Do you take me for a fool?”

“No.” Geralt shook his head. “I take you for a spiteful, arrogant dope. We're going to play quite a new game shortly, one which you don't know.”

“Ha! After all! What game?”

“The game is called,” said the Witcher slowly, “don't do unto others what you would not have them do to you.’ You don't have to close your eyes.”

Geralt stooped in a lightning throw; the one-inch iron ball whizzed sharply through the air and thwacked the sylvan straight between the horns. The creature collapsed onto his back as if hit by a thunderbolt. Geralt dived between the poles and grabbed him by one shaggy leg. The sylvan bleated and kicked. The Witcher sheltered his head with his arm, but to little effect. The sylvan, despite his mean posture, kicked with the strength of an enraged mule. The Witcher tried and failed to catch a kicking hoof. The sylvan flapped, thrashed his hands on the ground and kicked him again in the forehead. The Witcher cursed, feeling the sylvan's leg slip from his fingers. Both, having parted, rolled in opposite directions, kicked the poles with a crash and tangled themselves up in the creeping hemp.

The sylvan was the first to jump up, and, lowering his horned head, charged. But Geralt was already on his feet and effortlessly dodged the attack, grabbed the creature by a horn, tugged hard, threw him to the ground and crushed him with his knees. The sylvan bleated and spat straight into the Witcher's eyes like a camel suffering from excess saliva. The Witcher instinctively stepped back without releasing the devil's horns. The sylvan, trying to toss his head, kicked with both hooves at once and—strangely—hit the mark with both. Geralt swore nastily but didn't release his grip. He pulled the sylvan up, pinned him to the creaking poles and kicked him in a shaggy knee with all his might; then he leaned over and spat right into his ear. The sylvan howled and snapped his blunt teeth.

“Don't do unto others…” panted the Witcher, “…what you would not have them do to you. Shall we play on?” The sylvan gurgled, howled and spat fiercely, but Geralt held him firmly by the horns and pressed his head down hard, making the spittle hit the sylvan's own hooves, which tore at the ground, sending up clouds of dust and weeds.

The next few minutes passed in an intense skirmish and exchange of insults and kicks. If Geralt was pleased about anything, it was only that nobody could see him—for it was a truly ridiculous sight.

The force of the next kick tore the combatants apart and threw them in opposite directions, into the hemp thicket. The sylvan got up before the Witcher and rushed to escape, limping heavily. Geralt, panting and wiping his brow, rushed in pursuit. They forced their way through the hemp and ran into the hops. The Witcher heard the pounding of a galloping horse, the sound he'd been waiting for.

“Here, Dandelion! Here!” he yelled. “In the hops!”

He saw the mount breast right in front of him and was knocked over. He bounced off the horse as though it were a rock and tumbled onto his back. The world darkened. He managed to roll to the side, behind the hop poles, to avoid the hooves. He sprung up nimbly, but another rider rode into him, knocking him down again. Then suddenly, someone threw themselves at him and pinned him to the ground.

Then there was a flash, and a piercing pain in the back of his head.

And darkness.

### Part VI

There was sand on his lips. When he tried to spit it out, he realized he was lying face down on the ground. And he was tied up. He raised his head, a little and heard voices.

He was lying on the forest floor, by a pine tree. Some twenty paces away stood unsaddled horses. They were obscured behind the feathery fronds of ferns, but one of those horses was, without a doubt, Dandelion's chestnut.

“Three sacks of corn,” he heard. “Good, Torque. Very good. You've done well.”

“That's not all,” said the bleating voice, which could only be the sylvan devil. “Look at this, Galarr. It looks like beans but it's completely white. And the size of it! And this, this is called oilseed. They make oil from it.”

Geralt squeezed his eyes shut, then opened them again. No, it wasn't a dream. The devil and Galarr, whoever he was, were using the Old Language, the language of elves. But the words corn, beans, and oilseed were in the common tongue.

“And this? What's this?” asked Galarr.

“Flaxseed. Flax, you know? You make shirts from flax. It's much cheaper than silk, and more hardwearing. It's quite a complicated process as far as I know but I’ll find out the ins and outs.”

“As long as it takes root, this flax of yours; as long as it doesn't go to waste like the turnip,” grumbled Galarr, in the same strange Volapuk [constructed language]. “Try to get some new turnip seedlings, Torque.”

“Have no fear,” bleated the sylvan. “There's no problem with that here. Everything grows like hell. I’ll get you some, don't worry.”

“And one more thing,” said Galarr. “Finally find out what that three-field system of theirs is all about.”

The Witcher carefully raised his head and tried to turn around.

“Geralt…” He heard a whisper. “Are you awake?”

“Dandelion…” he whispered back. “Where are we…? What's happening?”

Dandelion only grunted quietly. Geralt had had enough. He cursed, tensed himself and turned on to his side.

In the middle of the glade stood the sylvan devil with—as he now knew—the sweet name of Torque. He was busy loading sacks, bags and packs on to the horses. He was being helped by a slim, tall man who could only be Galarr. The latter, hearing the Witcher move, turned around. His hair was black with a distinct hint of dark blue. He had sharp features, big, bright eyes and pointed ears.

Galarr was an elf. An elf from the mountains. A pure-blooded Aen Seidhe, a representative of the Old People.

Galarr wasn't alone. Six more sat at the edge of the glade. One was busy emptying Dandelion's packs; another strummed the troubadour's lute. The remainder, gathered around an untied sack, were greedily devouring turnips and raw carrots.

“Vanadain, Toruviel,” said Galarr, indicating the prisoners with a nod of his head. “Vedrai! Enn'le!”

Torque jumped up and bleated. “No, Galarr! No! Filavandrel has forbidden it! Have you forgotten?”

“No, I haven't forgotten.” Galarr threw two tied sacks across the horse's back. “But we have to check if they haven't loosened the knots.”

“What do you want from us?” the troubadour moaned as one of the elves knocked him to the ground with his knee and checked the knots. “Why are you holding us prisoners? What do you want? I’m Dandelion, a poe...”

Geralt heard the sound of a blow. He turned around, twisted his head.

The elf standing over Dandelion had black eyes and raven hair, which fell luxuriantly over her shoulders, except for two thin plaits braided at her temples. She was wearing a short leather camisole over a loose shirt of green satin, and tight woolen leggings tucked into riding boots. Her hips were wrapped around with a colored shawl which reached halfway down her thighs.

“Que glosse?” [What are you looking at?] she asked, looking at the Witcher and playing with the hilt of the long dagger in her belt. “Que l'en pavienn, ell'ea?” [You're just an ape, yeah?]

“Nell'ea,” [wrong] he contested. “T’en pavienn, Aen Seidhe.” [you’re an ape, elf]

“Did you hear?” The elf turned to her companion, the tall Seidhe who, not bothering to check Geralt's knots, was strumming away at Dandelion's lute with an expression of indifference on his long face. “Did you hear, Vanadain? The ape-man can talk! He can even be impertinent!”

Seidhe shrugged, making the feathers decorating his jacket rustle. “All the more reason to gag him, Toruviel.”

The elf leaned over Geralt. She had long lashes, an unnaturally pale complexion and parched, cracked lips. She wore a necklace of carved golden birch pieces on a thong, wrapped around her neck several times. “Well, say something else, ape-man,” she hissed. “We'll see what your throat, so used to barking, is capable of.”

“What's this? Do you need an excuse to hit a bound man?” The Witcher turned over on his back with an effort and spat out the sand. “Hit me without any excuses. I’ve seen how you like it. Let off some steam.”

The elf straightened. “I’ve already let off some steam on you, while your hands were free,” she said. “I rode you down and swiped you on the head. And I’ll also finish you off when the time comes.”

He didn't answer.

“I’d much rather stab you from close up, looking you in the eyes,” continued the elf. “But you stink most hideously, human, so I’ll shoot you.”

“As you wish.” The Witcher shrugged, as far as the knots let him. “Do as you like, noble Aen Seidhe. You shouldn't miss a tied-up, motionless target.”

The elf stood over him, legs spread, and leaned down, flashing her teeth. “No, I shouldn't,” she hissed. “I hit whatever I want. But you can be sure you won't die from the first arrow. Or the second. I’ll try to make sure you can feel yourself dying.”

“Don't come so close.” He grimaced, pretending to be repulsed. “You stink most hideously, Aen Seidhe.”

The elf jumped back, rocked on her narrow hips and forcefully kicked him in the thigh. Geralt drew his legs in and curled up, knowing where she was aiming next. He succeeded, and got her boot in the hip, so hard his teeth rattled.

The tall elf standing next to her echoed each kick with a sharp chord on the lute.

“Leave him, Toruviel!” bleated the sylvan. “Have you gone mad? Galarr, tell her to stop!”

“Thaesse!” shrieked Toruviel and kicked the Witcher again. The tall Seidhe tore so violently at the strings that one snapped with a protracted whine.

“Enough of that! Enough, for gods’ sake!” Dandelion yelled fretfully, wriggling and tumbling in the ropes. “Why are you bullying him, you stupid whore? Leave us alone! And you leave my lute alone, all right?”

Toruviel turned to him with an angry grimace on her cracked lips. “Musician!” she growled. “A human, yet a musician! A lutenist!” Without a word, she pulled the instrument from the tall elf's hand, forcefully smashed the lute against the pine and threw the remains, tangled in the strings, on Dandelion's chest. “Play on a cow's horn, you savage, not a lute.”

The poet turned as white as death; his lips quivered. Geralt, feeling cold fury rising somewhere within him, drew Toruviel's eyes with his own.

“What are you staring at?” hissed the elf, leaning over. “Filthy ape-man! Do you want me to gouge out those insect eyes of yours?”

Her necklace hung down just above him. The Witcher tensed, lunged, and caught the necklace in his teeth, tugging powerfully, curling his legs in and turning on his side.

Toruviel lost her balance and fell on top of him.

Geralt wriggled in the ropes like a fish, crushed the elf beneath him, tossed his head back with such force that the vertebrae in his neck cracked and, with all his might, butted her in the face with his forehead. Toruviel howled and struggled.

They pulled him off her brutally and, tugging at his clothes and hair, lifted him. One of them struck him; he felt rings cut the skin over his cheekbone and the forest danced and swam in front of his eyes. He saw Toruviel lurch to her knees, blood pouring from her nose and mouth. The elf wrenched the dagger from its sheath but gave a sob, hunched over, grasped her face and dropped her head between her knees.

The tall elf in the jacket adorned with colorful feathers took the dagger from her hand and approached the Witcher. He smiled as he raised the blade. Geralt saw him through a red haze; blood from his forehead, which he'd cut against Toruviel's teeth, poured into his eye sockets.

“No!” bleated Torque, running up to the elf and hanging on to his arm. “Don't kill him! No!”

“Voe'rle, Vanadain,” a sonorous voice suddenly commanded. “Quess aen? Caelm, evellienn! Galarr!” [Stop! Vanadain? What elves? Everyone calm down. Galarr!]

Geralt turned his head as far as the fist clutching his hair permitted.

The horse which had just reached the glade was as white as snow, its mane long, soft and silky as a woman's hair. The hair of the rider sitting in the sumptuous saddle was identical in color, pulled back at the forehead by a bandana studded with sapphires.

Torque, bleating now and then, ran up to the horse, caught hold of the stirrup and showered the white-haired elf with a torrent of words. The Seidhe interrupted him with an authoritative gesture and jumped down from his saddle. He approached Toruviel, who was being supported by two elves, and carefully removed the bloodied handkerchief from her face. Toruviel gave a heartrending groan. The Seidhe shook his head and approached the Witcher. His burning black eyes, shining like stars in his pale face, had dark rings beneath them, as if he had not slept for several nights in a row.

“You stink even when bound,” he said quietly in unaccented common tongue. “Like a basilisk. I’ll draw my conclusions from that.”

“Toruviel started it,” bleated the devil. “She kicked him when he was tied up, as if she'd lost her mind...”

With a gesture, the elf ordered him to be quiet. At his command, the other Seidhe dragged the Witcher and Dandelion under the pine tree and fastened them to the trunk with belts. Then they all knelt by the prostrate Toruviel, sheltering her. After a moment Geralt heard her yell and fight in their arms.

“I didn't want this,” said the sylvan, still standing next to them. “I didn't, human. I didn't know they'd arrive just when we—When they stunned you and tied your companion up, I asked them to leave you there, in the hops. But...”

“They couldn't leave any witnesses,” muttered the Witcher.

“Surely, they won't kill us, will they?” groaned Dandelion. “Surely they won't…”

Torque said nothing, wiggling his soft nose.

“Bloody hell.” The poet groaned. “They're going to kill us? What's all this about, Geralt? What did we witness?”

“Our sylvan friend is on a special mission in the Valley of Flowers. Am I right, Torque? At the elves’ request he's stealing seeds, seedlings, knowledge about farming…What else, devil?”

“Whatever I can,” bleated Torque. “Everything they need. And show me something they don't need. They're starving in the mountains, especially in winter. And they know nothing about farming. And before they've learned to domesticate game or poultry, and to cultivate what they can in their plots of land…They haven't got the time, human.”

“I don't care a shit about their time. What have I done to them?” groaned Dandelion. “What wrong have I done them?”

“Think carefully,” said the white-haired elf, approaching without a sound, “and maybe you can answer the question yourself.”

“He's simply taking revenge for all the wrong that man has done the elves.” The Witcher smiled wryly. “It's all the same to him who he takes his revenge on. Don't be deluded by his noble bearing and elaborate speech, Dandelion. He's no different than the black-eyes who knocked us down. He has to unload his powerless hatred on somebody.”

The elf picked up Dandelion's shattered lute. For a moment, he looked at the ruined instrument in silence, and finally threw it into the bushes.

“If I wanted to give vent to hatred or a desire for revenge,” he said, playing with a pair of soft white leather gloves, “I’d storm the valley at night, burn down the village and kill the villagers. Childishly simple. They don't even put out a guard. They don't see or hear us when they come to the forest. Can there be anything simpler, anything easier, than a swift, silent arrow from behind a tree? But we're not hunting you. It is you, man with strange eyes, who is hunting our friend, the sylvan Torque.”

“Eeeeee, that's exaggerating,” bleated the devil. “What hunt? We were having a bit of fun...”

“It is you humans who hate anything that differs from you, be it only by the shape of its ears,” the elf went on calmly, paying no attention to the sylvan. “That's why you took our land from us, drove us from our homes, forced us into the savage mountains. You took our Dol Blathanna, the Valley of Flowers. I am Filavandrel aen Fidhail of Silver Towers, of the Feleaorn family from White Ships. Now, exiled and hounded to the edge of the world, I am Filavandrel of the Edge of the World.”

“The world is huge,” muttered the Witcher. “We can find room. There's enough space.”

“The world is huge,” repeated the elf. “That's true, human. But you have changed this world. At first, you used force to change it. You treated it as you treat anything that falls into your hands. Now it looks as if the world has started to fit in with you. It's given way to you. It's given in.”

Geralt didn't reply.

“Torque spoke the truth,” continued Filavandrel. “Yes, we are starving. Yes, we are threatened with annihilation. The sun shines differently, the air is different, water is not as it used to be. The things we used to eat, made use of, are dying, diminishing, deteriorating. We never cultivated the land. Unlike you humans, we never tore at it with hoes and ploughs. To you, the earth pays a bloody tribute. It bestowed gifts on us. You tear the earth's treasures from it by force. For us, the earth gave birth and blossomed because it loved us. Well, no love lasts forever. But we still want to survive.”

“Instead of stealing grain, you can buy it. As much as you need. You still have a great many things that humans consider valuable. You can trade.”

Filavandrel smiled contemptuously. “With you? Never.”

Geralt frowned, breaking up the dried blood on his cheek. “The devil with you, then, and your arrogance and contempt. By refusing to cohabit, you're condemning yourselves to annihilation. To cohabit, to come to an understanding, that's your only chance.”

Filavandrel leaned forward, his eyes blazing. “Cohabit on your terms?” he asked in a changed, yet still calm, voice. “Acknowledging your sovereignty? Losing our identity? Cohabit as what? Slaves? Pariahs? Cohabit with you from beyond the walls you've built to fence yourselves away in towns? Cohabit with your women and hang for it? Or look on at what half-blood children must live with? Why are you avoiding my eyes, strange human? How do you find cohabiting with neighbors from whom, after all, you do differ somewhat?”

“I manage.” The Witcher looked him straight in the eyes. “I manage because I have to. Because I’ve no other way out. Because I’ve overcome the vanity and pride of being different. I’ve understood that they are a pitiful defense against being different. Because I’ve understood that the sun shines differently when something changes, but I’m not the axis of those changes. The sun shines differently, but it will continue to shine, and jumping at it with a hoe isn't going to do anything. We've got to accept facts, elf. That's what we've got to learn.”

“That's what you want, isn't it?” With his wrist, Filavandrel wiped away the sweat above his white brows. “Is that what you want to impose on others? The conviction that your time has come, your human era and age, and that what you're doing to other races is as natural as the rising and the setting of the sun? That everybody must come to terms with it, to accept it? And you accuse me of vanity? And what are the views you're proclaiming? Why don't you humans finally realize that your domination of the world is as natural and repellant as lice multiplying in a sheepskin coat? You could propose we cohabit with lice and get the same reaction—and I’d listen to the lice as attentively if they, in return for our acknowledgment of their supremacy, were to agree to allow common use of the coat.”

“So, don't waste time discussing it with such an unpleasant insect, elf,” said the Witcher, barely able to control his voice. “I’m surprised you want to arouse a feeling of guilt and repentance in such a louse as me. You're pitiful, Filavandrel. You're embittered, hungry for revenge and conscious of your own powerlessness. Go on, thrust the sword into me. Revenge yourself on the whole human race. You'll see what relief that'll bring you. First kick me in the balls or the teeth, like Toruviel.”

Filavandrel turned his head. “Toruviel is sick,” he said.

“I know that disease and its symptoms.” Geralt spat over his shoulder. “The treatment I gave her ought to help.”

“This conversation is senseless.” Filavandrel stepped away. “I’m sorry we've got to kill you. Revenge has nothing to do with it; it's purely practical. Torque has to carry on with his task and no one can suspect who he's doing it for. We can't afford to go to war with you, and we won't be taken in by trade and exchange. We're not so naive that we don't know your merchants are just outposts of your way of life. We know what follows them. And what sort of cohabitation they bring.”

“Elf,” Dandelion, who had remained silent until now, said quietly, “I’ve got friends. People who'll pay ransom for us. In the form of provisions, if you like, or any form. Think about it. After all, those stolen seeds aren't going to save you...”

“Nothing will save them anymore,” Geralt interrupted him. “Don't grovel, Dandelion, don't beg him. It's pointless and pitiful.”

“For someone who has lived such a short time” Filavandrel forced a smile “you show an astounding disdain for death, human.”

“Your mother gives birth to you only once and only once do you die,” the Witcher said calmly. “An appropriate philosophy for a louse, don't you agree? And your longevity? I pity you, Filavandrel.”

The elf raised his eyebrows. “Why?”

“You're pathetic, with your little stolen sacks of seeds on pack horses, with your handful of grain, that tiny crumb thanks to which you plan to survive. And with that mission of yours which is supposed to turn your thoughts from imminent annihilation. Because you know this is the end. Nothing will sprout or yield crops on the plateau; nothing will save you now. But you live long, and you will live very long in arrogant isolation, fewer and fewer of you, growing weaker and weaker, more and more bitter. And you know what'll happen then, Filavandrel. You know that desperate young men with the eyes of hundred-year-old men and withered, barren and sick girls like Toruviel will lead those who can still hold a sword and bow in their hands, down into the valleys. You'll come down into the blossoming valleys to meet death, wanting to die honorably, in battle, and not in sickbeds of misery, where anemia, tuberculosis and scurvy will send you. Then, long-living Aen Seidhe, you'll remember me. You'll remember that I pitied you. And you'll understand that I was right.”

“Time will tell who was right,” said the elf quietly. “And herein lies the advantage of longevity. I’ve got a chance of finding out, if only because of that stolen handful of grain. You won't have a chance like that. You'll die shortly.”

“Spare him, at least.” Geralt indicated Dandelion with his head. “No, not out of lofty mercy. Out of common sense. Nobody's going to ask after me, but they are going to take revenge for him.”

“You judge my common sense poorly,” the elf said after some hesitation. “If he survives thanks to you, he'll undoubtedly feel obliged to avenge you.”

“You can be sure of that!” Dandelion burst out, pale as death. “You can be sure, you son of a bitch. Kill me too, because I promise otherwise, I’ll set the world against you. You'll see what lice from a fur coat can do! We'll finish you off even if we have to level those mountains of yours to the ground! You can be sure of that!”

“How stupid you are, Dandelion,” sighed the Witcher.

“Your mother gives birth to you only once and only once do you die,” said the poet haughtily, the effect somewhat spoiled by his teeth rattling like castanets.

“That settles it.” Filavandrel took his gloves from his belt and pulled them on. “It's time to end this.”

At his command, the elves positioned themselves opposite Geralt and Dandelion with bows. They did it quickly; they'd obviously been waiting for this a long time. One of them, the Witcher noticed, was still chewing a turnip. Toruviel, her mouth and nose bandaged with cloth and birch bark, stood next to the archers. Without a bow.

“Shall I bind your eyes?” asked Filavandrel.

“Go away.” The Witcher turned his head. “Go...”

“A d'yeable aep arse,” Dandelion finished for him, his teeth chattering.

“Oh, no!” the sylvan suddenly bleated, running up and sheltering the condemned men with his body. “Have you lost your mind? Filavandrel! This is not what we agreed! Not this! You were supposed to take them up to the mountains, hold them somewhere in some cave, until we'd finished...”

“Torque,” said the elf, “I can't. I can't risk it. Did you see what he did to Toruviel while tied up? I can't risk it.”

“I don't care what you can or can't! What do you imagine? You think I’ll let you murder them? Here, on my land? Right next to my hamlet? You accursed idiots! Get out of here with your bows or I’ll ram you down. Uk! Uk!”

“Torque.” Filavandrel rested his hands on his belt. “This is necessary.”

“Duvvelsheyss, not necessary!”

“Move aside, Torque.”

The sylvan shook his ears, bleated even louder, stared and bent his elbow in an abusive gesture popular among dwarves. “You're not going to murder anybody here! Get on your horses and out into the mountains, beyond the passes! Otherwise you'll have to kill me too!”

“Be reasonable,” said the white-haired elf slowly. “If we let them live, people are going to learn what you're doing. They'll catch you and torture you. You know what they're like, after all.”

“I do,” bleated the sylvan still sheltering Geralt and Dandelion. “It turns out I know them better than I know you! And, verily, I don't know who to side with. I regret allying myself with you, Filavandrel!”

“You wanted to,” said the elf coldly, giving a signal to the archers. “You wanted to, Torque. L’sparellean! Evellienn!” [*something, maybe prepare?* everyone]

The elves drew arrows from their quivers. “Go away, Torque,” said Geralt, gritting his teeth. “It's senseless. Get aside.” The sylvan, without budging from the spot, showed him the dwarves’ gesture.

“I can hear…music…” Dandelion suddenly sobbed.

“It happens,” said the Witcher, looking at the arrowheads. “Don't worry. There's no shame in fear.”

Filavandrel's face changed, screwed up in a strange grimace. The white-haired Seidhe suddenly turned round and gave a shout to the archers. They lowered their weapons.

Lille entered the glade.

She was no longer a skinny peasant girl in a sackcloth dress. Through the grasses covering the glade walked—no, not walked—floated a queen, radiant, golden-haired, fiery-eyed, ravishing. The Queen of the Fields, decorated with garlands of flowers, ears of corn, bunches of herbs.

At her left-hand side, a young stag pattered on stiff legs, at her right rustled an enormous hedgehog.

“Dana Meadbh,” said Filavandrel with veneration. And then bowed and knelt.

The remaining elves also knelt; slowly, reluctantly, they fell to their knees one after the other and bowed their heads low in veneration. Toruviel was the last to kneel.

“Hael, Dana Meadbh,” repeated Filavandrel.

Lille didn't answer. She stopped several paces short of the elf and swept her blue eyes over Dandelion and Geralt. Torque, while bowing, started cutting through the knots. None of the Seidhe moved.

Lille stood in front of Filavandrel. She didn't say anything, didn't make the slightest sound, but the Witcher saw the changes on the elf's face, sensed the aura surrounding them and was in no doubt they were communicating. The devil suddenly pulled at his sleeve.

“Your friend,” he bleated quietly, “has decided to faint. Right on time. What shall we do?”

“Slap him across the face a couple of times.”

“With pleasure.”

Filavandrel got up from his knees. At his command, the elves fell to saddling the horses as quick as lightning.

“Come with us, Dana Meadbh,” said the white-haired elf. “We need you. Don't abandon us, Eternal One. Don't deprive us of your love. We'll die without it.”

Lille slowly shook her head and indicated east, the direction of the mountains. The elf bowed, crumpling the ornate reins of his white-maned mount in his hands.

Dandelion walked up, pale and dumbfounded, supported by the sylvan. Lille looked at him and smiled. She looked into the Witcher's eyes. She looked long. She didn't say a word. Words weren't necessary.

Most of the elves were already in their saddles when Filavandrel and Toruviel approached. Geralt looked into the elf's black eyes, visible above the bandages.

“Toruviel…” Filavandrel said. And didn't finish.

The elf nodded. From her saddlebow, she took a lute, a marvelous instrument of light, tastefully inlaid wood with a slender, engraved neck. Without a word, she handed the lute to Dandelion. The poet accepted the instrument and smiled. Also, without a word, but his eyes said a great deal.

“Farewell, strange human,” Filavandrel said quietly to Geralt. “You're right. Words aren't necessary. They won't change anything.”

Geralt remained silent.

“After some consideration,” added the Seidhe, “I’ve come to the conclusion that you were right. When you pitied us. So goodbye. Goodbye until we meet again, on the day when we descend into the valleys to die honorably. We'll look out for you then, Toruviel and I. Don't let us down.”

For a long time, they looked at each other in silence. And then the Witcher answered briefly and simply:

“I’ll try.”

### Part VII

“By the gods, Geralt.” Dandelion stopped playing, hugged the lute and touched it with his cheek. “This wood sings on its own! These strings are alive! What wonderful tonality! Bloody hell, a couple of kicks and a bit of fear is a pretty low price to pay for such a superb lute. I’d have let myself be kicked from dawn to dusk if I’d known what I was going to get. Geralt? Are you listening to me at all?”

“It's difficult not to hear you two.” Geralt raised his head from the book and glanced at the sylvan, who was still stubbornly squeaking on a peculiar set of pipes made from reeds of various lengths. “I hear you; the whole neighborhood hears you.”

“Duvvelsheyss, not neighborhood.” Torque put his pipes aside. “A desert, that's what it is. A wilderness. A shit-hole. Eh, I miss my hemp!”

“He misses his hemp,” laughed Dandelion, carefully turning the delicately engraved lute pegs. “You should have sat in the thicket quiet as a dormouse instead of scaring girls, destroying dykes and sullying the well. I think you're going to be more careful now and give up your tricks, eh, Torque?”

“I like tricks,” declared the sylvan, baring his teeth. “And I can't imagine life without them. But have it your way. I promise to be more careful on new territory. I’ll be more restrained.”

The night was cloudy and windy. The gale beat down the reeds and rustled in the branches of the bushes surrounding their camp. Dandelion threw some dry twigs into the fire. Torque wriggled around on his makeshift bed, swiping mosquitoes away with his tail. A fish leapt in the lake with a splash.

“I’ll describe our whole expedition to the edge of the world in a ballad,” declared Dandelion. “And I’ll describe you in it, too, Torque.”

“Don't think you'll get away with it,” growled the sylvan. “I’ll write a ballad too, then, and describe you, but in such a way as you won't be able to show your face in decent company for twelve years. So, watch out!... Geralt?”

“What?”

“Have you read anything interesting in that book which you so disgracefully wheedled out of those freemen?”

“I have.”

“So, read it to us, before the fire burns out.”

“Yes, yes” Dandelion strummed the melodious strings of Toruviel's lute “Read us something, Geralt.”

The Witcher leaned on his elbow, edging the volume closer to the fire.

“‘Glimpsed she may be,’” he began, “‘during the time of sumor, from the days of Mai and Juyn to the days of October, but most oft this haps on the Feste of the Scythe, which ancients would call Lammas. She revealeth herself as the Fairhaired Ladie, in flowers all, and all that liveth followeth her path and clingeth to her, as one, plant or beast. Hence her name is Lyfia. Ancients call her Danamebi and venerate her greatly. Even the Bearded, albeit in mountains not on fields they dwell, respect and call her Bloemenmagde.’”

“Danamebi,” muttered Dandelion. “Dana Meadbh, the Lady of the Fields.”

“‘Whence Lyfia treads the earth blossometh and bringeth forth, and abundantly doth each creature breed, such is her might. All nations to her offer sacrifice of harvest in vain hope their field not another's will by Lyfia visited be. Because it is also said that there cometh a day at end when Lyfia will come to settle among that tribe which above all others will rise, but these be mere womenfolk tales. Because, forsooth, the wise do say that Lyfia loveth but One land and that which groweth on it and liveth alike, with no difference, be it the smallest of common apple trees or the most wretched of insects, and all nations are no more to her than that thinnest of trees because, forsooth, they too will be gone and new, different tribes will follow. But Lyfia eternal is, was and ever shall be until the end of time.’”

“Until the end of time!” sang the troubadour and strummed his lute. Torque joined in with a high trill on his reed pipes. “Hail, Lady of the Fields! For the harvest, for the flowers in Dol Blathanna, but also for the hide of the undersigned, which you saved from being riddled with arrows. Do you know what? I’m going to tell you something.” He stopped playing, hugged the lute like a child and grew sad. “I don't think I’ll mention the elves and the difficulties they've got to struggle with, in the ballad. There'd be no shortage of scum wanting to go into the mountains…Why hasten the...” The troubadour grew silent.

“Go on, finish,” said Torque bitterly. “You wanted to say: hasten what can't be avoided. The inevitable.”

“Let's not talk about it,” interrupted Geralt. “Why talk about it? Words aren't necessary. Follow Lille's example.”

“She spoke to the elf telepathically,” muttered the bard. “I sensed it. I’m right, aren't I, Geralt? After all, you can sense communication like that. Did you understand what…what she was getting across to the elf?”

“Some of it.”

“What was she talking about?”

“Hope. That things renew themselves and won't stop doing so.”

“Is that all?”

“That was enough.”

“Hmm…Geralt? Lille lives in the village, among people Do you think that...

“that she'll stay with them? Here, in Dol Blathanna? Maybe. If…”

“If what?”

“If people prove worthy of it. If the edge of the world remains the edge of the world. If we respect the boundaries. But enough of this talk, boys. Time to sleep.”

“True. It's nearly midnight; the fire's burning out. I’ll sit up for a little while yet. I’ve always found it easiest to invent rhymes beside a dying fire. And I need a title for my ballad. A nice title.”

“Maybe The Edge of the World?”

“Banal,” snorted the poet. “Even if it really is the edge, it's got to be described differently. Metaphorically. I take it you know what a metaphor is, Geralt? Hmm…Let me think…‘Where…’ Bloody hell. ‘Where—’”

“Goodnight,” said the devil.

## The Voice of Reason

The Witcher unlaced his shirt and peeled the wet linen from his neck. It was very warm in the cave, hot, even, the air hung heavy and moist, the humidity condensing in droplets on the moss-covered boulders and basalt blocks of the walls.

Plants were everywhere. They grew out of beds hewn into the bedrock and filled with peat, in enormous chests, troughs and flowerpots. They climbed up rocks, up wooden trellises and stakes. Geralt examined them with interest, recognizing some rare specimens—those which made up the ingredients of a Witcher's medicines and elixirs, magical philters and a sorcerer's decoctions, and others, even rarer, whose qualities he could only guess at. Some he didn't know at all or hadn't even heard of. He saw stretches of star-leafed melilote, compact balls of puffheads pouring out of huge flowerpots, shoots of arenaria strewn with berries as red as blood. He recognized the meaty, thickly veined leaves of fastaim, the crimson-golden ovals of measure-me-nots and the dark arrows of sawcuts. He noticed pinnated pondblood moss huddled against stone blocks, the glistening tubers of raven's eye and the tiger-striped petals of the mouse-tail orchid.

In the shady part of the grotto bulged caps of the se-want mushroom, gray as stones in a field. Not far from them grew reachcluster, an antidote to every known toxin and venom. The modest yellow-gray brushes peering from chests deeply sunken into the ground revealed scarix, a root with powerful and universal medicinal qualities.

The center of the cave was taken up by aqueous plants. Geralt saw vats full of hornwort and turtle duckweed, and tanks covered in a compact skin of liverwort, fodder for the parasitic giant oyster. Glass reservoirs full of gnarled rhizomes of the hallucinogenic bitip, slender, dark-green cryptocorines and clusters of nematodes. Muddy, silted troughs were breeding grounds for innumerable phycomycetes, algae, molds and swamp lichen.

Nenneke, rolling up the sleeves of her priestess's robe, took a pair of scissors and a little bone rake from her basket and got to work. Geralt sat on a bench between shafts of light falling through huge crystal blocks in the cave's vault.

The priestess muttered and hummed under her breath, deftly plunging her hands into the thicket of leaves and shoots, snipping with her scissors and filling the basket with bunches of weeds. She adjusted the stakes and frames supporting the plants and, now and again, turned the soil with her small rake. Sometimes, muttering angrily, she pulled out dried or rotted stalks, threw them into the humus containers as food for mushrooms and other squamous and snake-like twisted plants which the Witcher didn't recognize. He wasn't even sure they were plants at all—it seemed to him the glistening rhizomes moved a little, stretching their hair-like offshoots toward the priestess's hands.

It was warm. Very warm.

“Geralt?”

“Yes?” He fought off an overwhelming sleepiness. Nenneke, playing with her scissors, was looking at him from behind the huge pinnated leaves of sand-spurry flybush.

“Don't leave yet. Stay. A few more days.”

“No, Nenneke. It's time for me to be on my way.”

“Why the hurry? You don't have to worry about Hereward. And let that vagabond Dandelion go and break his neck on his own. Stay, Geralt.”

“No, Nenneke.”

The priestess snipped with scissors. “Are you in such haste to leave the temple because you're afraid that she'll find you here?”

“Yes,” he admitted reluctantly. “You've guessed.”

“It wasn't exactly difficult,” she muttered. “But don't worry. Yennefer's already been here. Two months ago. She won't be back in a hurry, because we quarreled. No, not because of you. She didn't ask about you.”

“She didn't ask?”

“That's where it hurts,” the priestess laughed. “You're egocentric, like all men. There's nothing worse than a lack of interest, is there? Than indifference? No, but don't lose heart. I know Yennefer only too well. She didn't ask anything, but she did look around attentively, looking for signs of you. And she's mighty furious at you, that I did feel.”

“What did you quarrel about?”

“Nothing that would interest you.”

“I know anyway.”

“I don't think so,” said Nenneke calmly, adjusting the stakes. “You know her very superficially. As, incidentally, she knows you. It's quite typical of the relationship which binds you, or did bind you. Both parties aren't capable of anything other than a strongly emotional evaluation of the consequences, while ignoring the causes.”

“She came looking for a cure,” he remarked coldly. “That's what you quarreled about, admit it.”

“I won't admit anything.”

The Witcher got up and stood in full light under one of the crystal sheets in the grotto's vault.

“Come here a minute, Nenneke. Take a look at this.” He unknotted a secret pocket in his belt, dug out a tiny bundle, a miniature purse made of goat-leather, and poured the contents into his palm.

“Two diamonds, a ruby, three pretty nephrites, and an interesting agate.” Nenneke was knowledgeable about everything. “How much did they cost you?”

“Two and a half thousand Temeria orens. Payment for the Vizima striga.”

“For a torn neck.” The priestess grimaced. “Oh, well, it's a question of price. But you did well to turn cash into these trinkets. The oren is weak and the cost of stones in Vizima isn't high; it's too near to the dwarves’ mines in Mahakam. If you sell those in Novigrad, you'll get at least five hundred Novigrad crowns, and the crown, at present, stands at six and a half orens and is going up.”

“I’d like you to take them.”

“For safekeeping?”

“No. Keep the nephrites for the temple as, shall we say, my offering to the goddess Melitele. And the remaining stones…are for her. For Yennefer. Give them to her when she comes to visit you again, which will no doubt be soon.”

Nenneke looked him straight in the eyes. “I wouldn't do this if I were you. You'll make her even more furious, if that's possible, believe me. Leave everything as it is, because you're no longer in a position to mend anything or make anything better. Running away from her, you behaved…well, let's say, in a manner not particularly worthy of a mature man. By trying to wipe away your guilt with precious stones, you'll behave like a very, very over-mature man. I really don't know what sort of man I can stand less.”

“She was too possessive,” he muttered, turning away his face. “I couldn't stand it. She treated me like...”

“Stop it,” she said sharply. “Don't cry on my shoulder. I’m not your mother, and I won't be your confidante either. I don't give a shit how she treated you and I care even less how you treated her. And I don't intend to be a go-between or give these stupid jewels to her. If you want to be a fool, do it without using me as an intermediary.”

“You misunderstand. I’m not thinking of appeasing or bribing her. But I do owe her something, and the treatment she wants to undergo is apparently very costly. I want to help her, that's all.”

“You're more of an idiot than I thought.” Nenneke picked up the basket from the ground. “A costly treatment? Help? Geralt, these jewels of yours are, to her, knickknacks not worth spitting on. Do you know how much Yennefer can earn for getting rid of an unwanted pregnancy for a great lady?”

“I do happen to know. And that she earns even more for curing infertility. It's a shame she can't help herself in that respect. That's why she's seeking help from others—like you.”

“No one can help her; it's impossible. She's a sorceress. Like most female magicians, her ovaries are atrophied and it's irreversible. She'll never be able to have children.”

“Not all sorceresses are handicapped in this respect. I know something about that, and you do, too.”

Nenneke closed her eyes. “Yes, I do.”

“Something can't be a rule if there are exceptions to it. And please don't give me any banal untruths about exceptions proving the rule. Tell me something about exceptions as such.”

“Only one thing,” she said coldly, “can be said about exceptions. They exist. Nothing more. But Yennefer…Well, unfortunately, she isn't an exception. At least not as regards the handicap we're talking about. In other respects, it's hard to find a greater exception than her.”

“Sorcerers” Geralt wasn't put off by Nenneke's coldness, or her allusion “have raised the dead. I know of proven cases. And it seems to me that raising the dead is harder than reversing the atrophy of any organs.”

“You're mistaken. Because I don't know of one single, proven, fully successful case of reversing atrophy or regenerating endocrine glands. Geralt, that's enough. This is beginning to sound like a consultation. You don't know anything about these things. I do. And if I tell you that Yennefer has paid for certain gifts by losing others, then that's how it is.”

“If it's so clear, then I don't understand why she keeps on trying to—”

“You understand very little,” interrupted the priestess. “Bloody little. Stop worrying about Yennefer's complaints and think about your own. Your body was also subjected to changes which are irreversible. She surprises you, but what about you? It ought to be clear to you too, that you're never going to be human, but you still keep trying to be one. Making human mistakes. Mistakes a Witcher shouldn't be making.”

He leaned against the wall of the cave and wiped the sweat from his brow.

“You're not answering,” stated Nenneke, smiling faintly. “I’m not surprised. It's not easy to speak with the voice of reason. You're sick, Geralt. You're not fully fit. You react to elixirs badly. You've got a rapid pulse rate, the dilation of your eyes is slow, your reactions are delayed. You can't get the simplest Signs right. And you want to hit the trail? You must be treated. You need therapy. And before that, a trance.”

“Is that why you sent Iola to me? As part of the therapy? To make the trance easier?”

“You're a fool!”

“But not to such an extent.”

Nenneke turned away and slipped her hands among the meaty stalks of creepers which the Witcher didn't recognize. “Well, have it your way,” she said easily. “Yes, I sent her to you. As part of the therapy. And let me tell you, it worked. Your reactions were much better the following day. You were calmer. And Iola needed some therapy, too. Don't be angry.”

“I’m not angry because of the therapy, or because of Iola.”

“But at the voice of reason you're hearing?”

He didn't answer.

“A trance is necessary,” repeated Nenneke, glancing around at her cave garden. “Iola's ready. She's made both physical and psychic contact with you. If you want to leave, let's do it tonight.”

“No. I don't want to. Look, Nenneke, Iola might start to prophesy during the trance. To predict, read the future.”

“That's just it.”

“Exactly. And I don't want to know the future. How could I do what I’m doing if I knew it? Besides, I know it anyway.”

“Are you sure?”

He didn't answer.

“Oh, well, all right,” she sighed. “Let's go. Oh, and, Geralt? I don't mean to pry but tell me…How did you meet? You and Yennefer? How did it all start?”

The Witcher smiled. “It started with me and Dandelion not having anything for breakfast and deciding to catch some fish.”

“Am I to understand that instead of fish you caught Yennefer?”

“I’ll tell you what happened. But maybe after supper. I’m hungry.”

“Let's go, then. I’ve got everything I need.”

The Witcher made a move toward the exit and once more looked around the cave hothouse. “Nenneke?”

“Aha?”

“Half of the plants you've got here don't grow anywhere else anymore. Am I right?”

“Yes. More than half.”

“How come?”

“If I said it was through the goddess Melitele's grace, I daresay that wouldn't be enough for you, would it?”

“I daresay it wouldn't.”

“That's what I thought.” Nenneke smiled. “You see, Geralt, this bright sun of ours is still shining, but not quite the way it used to. Read the great books if you like. But if you don't want to waste time on it, maybe you'll be happy with the explanation that the crystal roof acts like a filter. It eliminates the lethal rays which are increasingly found in sunlight. That's why plants which you can't see growing wild anywhere in the world grow here.”

“I understand.” The Witcher nodded. “And us, Nenneke? What about us? The sun shines on us, too. Shouldn't we shelter under a roof like that?”

“In principle, yes,” sighed the priestess. “But…”

“But what?”

“It's too late.”

## The Last Wish

The catfish stuck its barbelled head above the surface, tugged with force, splashed, stirred the water and flashed its white belly.

“Careful, Dandelion!” shouted the Witcher, digging his heels into the wet sand. “Hold him, damn it!”

“I am holding him…” groaned the poet. “Heavens, what a monster! It's a leviathan, not a fish! There'll be some good eating on that, dear gods!”

“Loosen it. Loosen it or the line will snap!”

The catfish clung to the bed and threw itself against the current toward the bend in the river. The line hissed as Dandelion's and Geralt's gloves smoldered.

“Pull, Geralt, pull! Don't loosen it or it'll get tangled up in the roots!”

“The line will snap!”

“No, it won't. Pull!”

They hunched up and pulled. The line cut the water with a hiss, vibrated and scattered droplets which glistened like mercury in the rising sun. The catfish suddenly surfaced, set the water seething just below the surface, and the tension of the line eased. They quickly started to gather up the slack.

“We'll smoke it,” panted Dandelion. “We'll take it to the village and get it smoked. And we'll use the head for soup!”

“Careful!”

Feeling the shallows under its belly, the catfish threw half of its twelve-foot-long body out of the water, tossed its head, whacked its flat tail and took a sharp dive into the depths. Their gloves smoldered anew.

“Pull, pull! To the bank, the son of a bitch!”

“The line is creaking! Loosen it, Dandelion!”

“It'll hold, don't worry! We'll cook the head…for soup…”

The catfish, dragged near to the bank again, surged and strained furiously against them as if to let them know he wasn't that easy to get into the pot. The spray flew six feet into the air.

“We'll sell the skin…” Dandelion, red with effort, pulled the line with both hands. “And the barbels…We'll use the barbels to make...”

Nobody ever found out what the poet was going to make from the catfish's barbels. The line snapped with a crack and both fishermen, losing their balance, fell onto the wet sand.

“Bloody hell!” Dandelion yelled so loud that the echo resounded though the osiers. “So much grub escaped! I hope you die, you son-of-a-catfish.”

“I told you.” Geralt shook his wet trousers. “I told you not to use force when you pull. You screwed up, my friend. You make as good a fisherman as a goat's arse makes a trumpet.”

“That's not true.” The troubadour was outraged. “It's my doing that the monster took the bait in the first place.”

“Oh really? You didn't lift a finger to help me set the line. You played the lute and hollered so the whole neighborhood could hear you, nothing more.”

“You're wrong.” Dandelion bared his teeth. “When you fell asleep, you see, I took the grubs off the hook and attached a dead crow, which I’d found in the bushes. I wanted to see your face in the morning when you pulled the crow out. And the catfish took the crow. Your grubs would have caught shit-all.”

“They would have, they would have.” The Witcher spat into the water, winding the line on to a little wooden rake. “But it snapped because you tugged like an idiot. Wind up the rest of the lines instead of gabbling. The sun's already up; it's time to go. I’m going to pack up.”

“Geralt!”

“What?”

“There's something on the other line, too…No, dammit, it only got caught. Hell, it's holding like a stone. I can't do it! Ah, that's it…Ha, ha, look what I’m bringing in. It must be the wreck of a barge from King Dezmod's time! What great stuff! Look, Geralt!”

Dandelion was clearly exaggerating; the clump of rotted ropes, net and algae pulled out of the water was impressive but it was far from being the size of a barge dating from the days of the legendary king. The bard scattered the jumble over the bank and began to dig around in it with the tip of his shoe. The algae was alive with leeches, scuds and little crabs.

“Ha! Look what I’ve found!”

Geralt approached, curious. The find was a chipped stoneware jar, something like a two-handled amphora, tangled up in netting, black with rotten algae, colonies of caddis-larvae and snails, dripping with stinking slime.

“Ha!” Dandelion exclaimed again, proudly. “Do you know what this is?”

“It's an old pot.”

“You're wrong,” declared the troubadour, scraping away shells and hardened, shiny clay. “This is a charmed jar. There's a djinn inside who'll fulfill my three wishes.”

The Witcher snorted.

“You can laugh.” Dandelion finished his scraping, bent over and rinsed the amphora. “But there's a seal on the spigot and a wizard's mark on the seal.”

“What mark? Let's see.”

“Oh, sure.” The poet hid the jar behind his back. “And what more do you want? I’m the one who found it and I need all the wishes.”

“Don't touch that seal! Leave it alone!”

“Let go, I tell you! It's mine!”

“Dandelion, be careful!”

“Sure!”

“Don't touch it! Oh, bloody hell!”

The jar fell to the sand during their scuffle, and luminous red smoke burst forth.

The Witcher jumped back and rushed toward the camp for his sword. Dandelion, folding his arms across his chest, didn't move.

The smoke pulsated and collected in an irregular sphere level with Dandelion's eyes. The sphere formed a six-foot-wide distorted head with no nose, enormous eyes and a sort of beak.

“Djinn!” said Dandelion, stamping his foot. “I freed thee and as of this day, I am thy lord. My wishes...”

The head snapped its beak, which wasn't really a beak but something in the shape of drooping, deformed and ever-changing lips.

“Run!” yelled the Witcher. “Run, Dandelion!”

“My wishes,” continued the poet, “are as follows. Firstly, may Valdo Marx, the troubadour of Cidaris, die of apoplexy as soon as possible. Secondly, there's a count's daughter in Caelf called Virginia who refuses all advances. May she succumb to mine. Thirdly...”

No one ever found out Dandelion's third wish.

Two monstrous paws emerged from the horrible head and grabbed the bard by the throat. Dandelion screeched.

Geralt reached the head in three leaps, swiped his silver sword and slashed it through the middle. The air howled, the head exhaled smoke and rapidly doubled in diameter. The monstrous jaw, now also much larger, flew open, snapped and whistled; the paws pulled the struggling Dandelion around and crushed him to the ground.

The Witcher crossed his fingers in the Sign of Aard and threw as much energy as he could muster at the head. The energy materialized in a blinding beam, sliced through the glow surrounding the head and hit its mark. The boom was so loud that it stabbed Geralt's ears, and the air sucked in by the implosion made the willows rustle. The roar of the monster was deafening as it grew even larger, but it released the poet, soared up, circled and, waving its paws, flew away over the water.

The Witcher rushed to pull Dandelion...who was lying motionless...away. At that moment, his fingers touched a round object buried in the sand.

It was a brass seal decorated with the sign of a broken cross and a nine-pointed star.

The head, suspended above the river, had become the size of a haystack, while the open, roaring jaws looked like the gates of an average-sized barn. Stretching out its paws, the monster attacked.

Geralt, not having the least idea of what to do, squeezed the seal in his fist and, extending his hand toward the assailant, screamed out the words of an exorcism a priestess had once taught him. He had never used those words until now because, in principle, he didn't believe in superstitions.

The effect surpassed his expectations.

The seal hissed and grew hot, burning his hand. The gigantic head froze in the air, suspended, motionless above the river. It hung like that for a moment then, at last, it began to howl, roar, and dispersed into a pulsating bundle of smoke, into a huge, whirling cloud. The cloud whined shrilly and whisked upstream with incredible speed, leaving a trail of churned-up water on the surface. In a matter of seconds, it had disappeared into the distance; only a dwindling howl lingered across the water.

The Witcher rushed to the poet, cowering on the sand.

“Dandelion? Are you dead? Dandelion, damn it! What's the matter with you?”

The poet jerked his head, shook his hands and opened his mouth to scream. Geralt grimaced and narrowed his eyes...Dandelion had a trained...loud...tenor voice and, when frightened, could reach extraordinary registers. But what emerged from the bard's throat was a barely audible, hoarse croak.

“Dandelion! What's the matter with you? Answer me!”

“Hhhh…eeee…kheeeee…theeee whhhhorrrrrrre…”

“Are you in pain? What's the matter? Dandelion!”

“Hhhh…Whhhooo…”

“Don't say anything. If everything's all right, nod.”

Dandelion grimaced and, with great difficulty, nodded and then immediately turned on his side, curled up and...choking and coughing...vomited blood.

Geralt cursed.

### Part II

“By all the gods!” The guard stepped back and lowered the lantern. “What's the matter with him?”

“Let us through, my good man,” said the Witcher quietly, supporting Dandelion, who was huddled up in the saddle. “We're in great haste, as you see.”

“I do.” The guard swallowed, looking at the poet's pale face and chin covered in black, dried blood. “Wounded? It looks terrible, sir.”

“I’m in haste,” repeated Geralt. “We've been traveling since dawn. Let us through, please.”

“We can't,” said the other guard. “You're only allowed through between sunrise and sunset. None may pass at night. That's the order. There's no way through for anyone unless they've got a letter of safe-conduct from the king or the mayor. Or they're nobility with a coat of arms.”

Dandelion croaked, huddled up even more, resting his forehead on the horse's mane, shuddered, shook and retched dryly. Another stream of blood trickled down the branched, dried pattern on his mount's neck.

“My good men,” Geralt said as calmly as he could, “you can see for yourselves how badly he fares. I have to find someone who can treat him. Let us through. Please.”

“Don't ask.” The guard leaned on his halberd. “Orders are orders. I’ll go to the pillory if I let you through. They'll chase me from service, and then how will I feed my children? No, sir, I can't. Take your friend down from the horse and put him in the room in the barbican. We'll dress him and he'll last out until dawn, if that's his fate. It's not long now.”

“A dressing's not enough.” The Witcher ground his teeth. “We need a healer, a priest, a gifted doctor...”

“You wouldn't be waking up anyone like that at night anyway,” said the second guard. “The most we can do is see that you don't have to camp out under the gate until dawn. It's warm in there and there's somewhere to put your friend; he'll fare better there than in the saddle. Come on, let us help you lower him from the horse.”

It was warm, stuffy and cozy in the room within the barbican. A fire crackled merrily in the hearth, and behind it a cricket chirped fiercely.

Three men sat at the heavy square table laid with jugs and plates.

“Forgive us for disturbing you, squires…” said the guard, holding Dandelion up. “I trust you won't mind…This one here is a knight, hmm…And the other one is wounded, so I thought...”

“You thought well.” One of the men turned his slender, sharp, expressive face toward them and got up. “Here lay him down on the pallet.”

The man was an elf, like the other one sitting at the table. Both, judging by their clothes, which were a typical mixture of human and elven fashion, were elves who had settled and integrated. The third man, who looked the eldest, was human, a knight, judging by the way he was dressed and by his salt-and-pepper hair, cut to fit beneath a helmet.

“I’m Chireadan,” the taller of the elves, with an expressive face, introduced himself. As was usual with representatives of the Old People, it was difficult to guess his age; he could have been twenty or one hundred and twenty. “This is my cousin Errdil. And this nobleman is the knight Vratimir.”

“A nobleman,” muttered Geralt, but a closer look at the coat of arms embroidered on his tunic shattered his hopes: a shield divided per cross and bearing golden lilies was cut diagonally by a silver bar. Vratimir was not only illegitimate but came from a mixed, human-nonhuman union. As a result, although he was entitled to use a coat of arms, he couldn't consider himself a true nobleman, and the privilege of crossing the city gate after dusk most certainly wasn't extended to him.

“Unfortunately” the Witcher's scrutiny did not escape the elf's attention “we, too, have to remain here until dawn. The law knows no exceptions, at least not for the likes of us. We invite you to join our company, sir knight.”

“Geralt, of Rivia” the Witcher introduced himself. “A Witcher, not a knight.”

“What's the matter with him?” Chireadan indicated Dandelion, whom the guards had laid on a pallet in the meantime. “It looks like poisoning. If it is poisoning, then I can help. I’ve got some good medicine with me.”

Geralt sat down, then quickly gave a guarded account of events at the river. The elves looked at each other, and the knight spat through his teeth and frowned.

“Extraordinary,” Chireadan remarked. “What could it have been?”

“A djinn in a bottle,” muttered Vratimir. “Like a fairy tale...”

“Not quite.” Geralt indicated Dandelion, curled up on the pallet. “I don't know of any fairy tale that ends like this.”

“That poor fellow's injuries,” said Chireadan, “are evidently of a magical nature. I fear that my medicine will not be of much use. But I can at least lessen his suffering. Have you already given him a remedy, Geralt?”

“A painkilling elixir.”

“Come and help me. You can hold his head up.”

Dandelion greedily drank the medicine, diluted with wine, choked on his last sip, wheezed and covered the leather pillow with spittle.

“I know him,” Errdil said. “He's Dandelion, the troubadour and poet. I saw him singing at the court of King Ethain in Cidaris once.”

“A troubadour,” repeated Chireadan, looking at Geralt. “That's bad. Very bad. The muscles of his neck and throat are attacked. Changes in his vocal cords are starting to take place. The spell's action has to be halted as soon as possible otherwise…This might be irreversible.”

“That means…Does that mean he won't be able to talk?”

“Talk, yes. Maybe. Not sing.”

Geralt sat down at the table without saying a word and rested his forehead on his clenched fists.

“A wizard,” said Vratimir. “A magical remedy or a curative spell is needed. You have to take him to some other town, Witcher.”

“What?” Geralt raised his head. “And here, in Rinde? Isn't there a wizard here?”

“Magicians are hard to come by in the whole of Redania,” said the knight. “Isn't that true? Ever since King Heribert placed an exorbitant tax on spells, magicians have boycotted the capital and those towns which are rigorous in executing the king's edicts. And the councilors of Rinde are famous for their zeal in this respect. Chireadan, Errdil, am I right?”

“You are,” confirmed Errdil. “But…Chireadan, may I?”

“You have to,” said Chireadan, looking at the Witcher. “There's no point in making a secret of it; everyone knows anyway. There's a sorceress staying in the town right now, Geralt.”

“Incognito, no doubt?”

“Not very.” The elf smiled. “The sorceress in question is something of an individualist. She's ignoring both the boycott imposed on Rinde by the Council of Wizards, and the disposition of the local councilors, and is doing rather splendidly out of it: the boycott means there's tremendous demand for magical services here and, of course, the sorceress isn't paying any levies.”

“And the town council puts up with it?”

“The sorceress is staying with a merchant, a trade broker from Novigrad, who is also the honorary ambassador. Nobody can touch her there. She has asylum.”

“It's more like house arrest than asylum,” corrected Errdil. “She's just about imprisoned there. But she has no shortage of clients. Rich clients. She ostentatiously makes light of the councilors, holds balls and extravagant parties...”

“While the councilors are furious, turn whoever they can against her and tarnish her reputation as best they can,” Chireadan cut in. “They spread foul rumors about her and hope, no doubt, that the Novigrad hierarchy will forbid the merchant to grant her asylum.”

“I don't like meddling in things like that,” muttered Geralt, “but I’ve got no choice. What's the merchant-ambassador's name?”

“Beau Berrant.”

The Witcher thought that Chireadan grimaced as he pronounced the name.

“Oh well, it really is your only hope. Or rather, the only hope for that poor fellow moaning on the bed. But whether the sorceress will want to help you…I don't know.”

“Be careful when you go there,” said Errdil. “The mayor's spies are watching the house. You know what to do if they stop you. Money opens all doors.”

“I’ll go as soon as they open the gates. What's the sorceress called?” Geralt thought he detected a slight flush on Chireadan's expressive face. But it could have been the glow from the fire in the hearth.

“Yennefer of Vergerberg.”

### Part III

“My lord's asleep,” repeated the doorman, looking down at Geralt. He was taller by a head and nearly twice as broad in the shoulders. “Are you deaf, you vagabond? The lord's asleep, I said.”

“Then let him sleep,” agreed the Witcher. “I’ve not got business with your lord but with the lady who is staying here.”

“Business, you say.” The doorman, as it turned out, was surprisingly witty for someone of such stature and appearance. “Then go, you loiterer, to the whorehouse to satisfy your need. Scram.”

Geralt unfastened the purse on his belt and, holding it by the straps, weighed it in his palm.

“You won't bribe me,” the Cerberus said proudly.

“I don't intend to.”

The porter was too huge to have the reflexes which would let him dodge or shield himself from a quick blow given by an ordinary man. He didn't even have time to blink before the Witcher's blow landed. The heavy purse struck him in the temple with a metallic crash. He collapsed against the door, grabbing the frame with both hands. Geralt tore him away from it with a kick in the knee, shoved him with his shoulder and fetched him another blow with the purse. The doorman's eyes grew hazy and diverged in a comical squint, and his legs folded under him like two penknives. The Witcher, seeing the strapping fellow moving, although almost unconscious, walloped him with force for the third time, right on the crown of his head.

“Money,” he muttered, “opens all doors.”

It was dark in the vestibule. A loud snoring came from the door on the left. The Witcher peeped in carefully. A fat woman, her nightdress hitched up above her hips, was asleep on a tumbled pallet, snoring and snorting through her nose. It wasn't the most beautiful sight. Geralt dragged the porter into the little room and closed the door.

On the right was another door, half-opened, and behind it: stone steps led down. The Witcher was about to pass them when an indistinct curse, a clatter and the dry crash of a vessel cracking reached him from below.

The room was a big kitchen, full of utensils, smelling of herbs and resinous wood. On the stone floor, among fragments of a clay jug, knelt a completely naked man with his head hanging low.

“Apple juice, bloody hell,” he mumbled, shaking his head like a sheep which had rammed a wall by a mistake. “Apple…juice. Where…Where're the servants?”

“I beg your pardon?” the Witcher asked politely.

The man raised his head and swallowed. His eyes were vague and very bloodshot.

“She wants juice from apples,” he stated, then got up with evident difficulty, sat down on a chest covered with a sheepskin coat, and leaned against the stove. “I have to…take it upstairs because...”

“Do I have the pleasure of speaking to the merchant Beau Berrant?”

“Quieter.” The man grimaced painfully. “Don't yell. Listen, in that barrel there…Juice. Apple. Pour it into something…and help me get upstairs, all right?”

Geralt shrugged, then nodded sympathetically. He generally avoided overdoing the alcohol but the state in which the merchant found himself was not entirely unknown to him. He found a jug and a tin mug among the crockery and drew some juice from the barrel. He heard snoring and turned. Beau Berrant was fast asleep, his head hanging on his chest.

For a moment, the Witcher considered pouring juice over him to wake him up, but he changed his mind. He left the kitchen, carrying the jug. The corridor ended in a heavy inlaid door. He entered carefully, opening it just enough to slip inside. It was dark, so he dilated his pupils. And wrinkled his nose.

A heavy smell of sour wine, candles and overripe fruit hung in the air. And something else, that brought to mind a mixture of the scents of lilac and gooseberries.

He looked around. The table in the middle of the chamber bore a battlefield of jugs, carafes, goblets, silver plates, dishes and ivory-handled cutlery. A creased tablecloth, which had been pushed aside, was soaked in wine, covered in purple stains and stiff with wax which had trickled down the candlesticks. Orange peel glowed like flowers among plum and peach stones, pear cores and grape stalks. A goblet had fallen over and smashed. The other was in one piece, half full, with a turkey bone sticking out of it. Next to the goblet stood a black, high-heeled slipper. It was made of basilisk skin. There wasn't a more expensive raw material which could be used in the making of shoes.

The other slipper lay under a chair on top of a carelessly discarded black dress with white frills and an embroidered flowery pattern.

For a moment Geralt stood undecided, struggling with embarrassment and the desire to turn on his heel and leave. But that would have meant his tussle with the Cerberus below had been unnecessary. And the Witcher didn't like doing anything unnecessarily. He noticed winding stairs in the corner of the chamber.

On the steps, he found four withered white roses and a napkin stained with wine and crimson lipstick. The scent of lilac and gooseberries grew stronger. The stairs led to a bedroom, the floor of which was covered in an enormous, shaggy animal skin. A white shirt with lace cuffs, and umpteen white roses, lay on the skin. And a black stocking.

The other stocking hung from one of the four engraved posts which supported the domed canopy over the bed. The engravings on the posts depicted nymphs and fawns in various positions. Some of the positions were interesting. Others funny. Many repeated themselves.

Geralt cleared his throat loudly, looking at the abundant black locks visible from under the eiderdown. The eiderdown moved and moaned. Geralt cleared his throat even louder.

“Beau?” the abundance of black locks asked indistinctly. “Have you brought the juice?”

“Yes.”

A pale triangular face, violet eyes and narrow, slightly contorted lips appeared beneath the black tresses. “Ooooh…” The lips became even more contorted. “Ooooh…I’m dying of thirst…”

“Here you are.”

The woman sat up, scrambling out of the bedclothes. She had pretty shoulders, a shapely neck and, around it, a black velvet choker with a star-shaped jewel sparkling with diamonds. Apart from the choker, she had nothing on.

“Thank you.” She took the mug from his hand, drank greedily, then raised her arms and touched her temples. The eiderdown slipped down even further. Geralt averted his eyes...politely, but unwillingly.

“Who are you?” asked the black-haired woman, narrowing her eyes and covering herself with the eiderdown. “What are you doing here? And where, dammit, is Berrant?”

“Which question shall I answer first?”

He immediately regretted his sarcasm. The woman raised her hand and a golden streak shot out from her fingers. Geralt reacted instinctively, crossing both hands in the Sign of Heliotrope, and caught the spell just in front of his face, but the discharge was so strong that it threw him back against the wall. He sank to the floor.

“No need!” he shouted, seeing the woman raise her hand again. “Lady Yennefer! I come in peace, with no evil intentions!”

A stamping came from the stairs and servants loomed in the bedroom doorway. “Lady Yennefer!”

“Leave,” the sorceress ordered calmly. “I don't need you. You're paid to keep an eye on the house. But since this individual has, nevertheless, managed to get in, I’ll take care of him myself. Pass that on to Berrant. And prepare a bath for me.”

The Witcher got up with difficulty. Yennefer observed him in silence, narrowing her eyes.

“You parried my spell,” she finally said. “You're not a sorcerer; that's obvious. But you reacted exceptionally fast. Tell me who you are, stranger who has come in peace. And I advise you to speak quickly.”

“I’m Geralt of Rivia. A Witcher.”

Yennefer leaned out of the bed, grasping a faun...engraved on the pole...by a piece of anatomy well adapted to being grasped. Without taking her eyes off Geralt, she picked a coat with a fur collar up off the floor and wrapped herself up in it tightly before getting up. She poured herself another mug of juice without hurrying, drank it in one go, coughed and came closer. Geralt discreetly rubbed his lower back which, a moment ago, had collided painfully with the wall.

“Geralt of Rivia,” repeated the sorceress, looking at him from behind black lashes. “How did you get in here? And for what reason? You didn't hurt Berrant, I hope?”

“No. I didn't. Lady Yennefer, I need your help.”

“A Witcher,” she muttered, coming up even closer and wrapping the coat around her more tightly. “Not only is it the first one I’ve seen up close but it's none other than the famous White Wolf. I’ve heard about you.”

“I can imagine.”

“I don't know what you can imagine.” She yawned, then came even closer. “May I?” She touched his cheek and looked him in the eyes. He clenched his jaw. “Do your pupils automatically adapt to light or can you narrow and dilate them according to your will?”

“Yennefer,” he said calmly, “I rode nonstop all day from Rinde. I waited all night for the gates to open. I gave your doorman, who didn't want to let me in, a blow to the head. I disturbed your sleep and peace, discourteously and importunately. All because my friend needs help which only you can give him. Give it to him, please, and then, if you like, we can talk about mutations and aberrations.”

She took a step back and contorted her lips unpleasantly. “What sort of help do you mean?”

“The regeneration of organs injured through magic. The throat, larynx and vocal cords. An injury caused by a scarlet mist. Or something very much like it.”

“Very much like it,” she repeated. “To put it in a nutshell, it wasn't a scarlet mist which has injured your friend. So, what was it? Speak out. Being torn from my sleep at dawn, I have neither the strength nor the desire to probe your brain.”

“Hmm…It's best I start from the beginning.”

“Oh, no,” she interrupted him. “If it's all that complicated, then wait. An aftertaste in my mouth, disheveled hair, sticky eyes and other morning inconveniences strongly affect my perceptive faculties. Go downstairs to the bath-chamber in the cellar. I’ll be there in a minute and then you'll tell me everything.”

“Yennefer, I don't want to be persistent, but time is pressing. My friend...”

“Geralt,” she interrupted sharply, “I climbed out of bed for you and I didn't intend to do that before the chime of midday. I’m prepared to do without breakfast. Do you know why? Because you brought me the apple juice. You were in a hurry, your head was troubled with your friend's suffering, you forced your way in here, and yet you thought of a thirsty woman. You won me over, so my help is not out of the question. But I won't do anything without hot water and soap. Go. Please.”

“Very well.”

“Geralt.”

“Yes.” He stopped on the threshold.

“Make use of the opportunity to have a bath yourself. I can not only guess the age and breed of your horse, but also its color, by the smell.”

### Part IV

She entered the bath-chamber just as Geralt, sitting naked on a tiny stool, was pouring water over himself from a bucket. He cleared his throat and modestly turned his back to her.

“Don't be embarrassed,” she said, throwing an armful of clothing on the hook. “I don't faint at the sight of a naked man. Triss Merigold, a friend, says if you've seen one, you've seen them all.”

He got up, wrapping a towel round his hips.

“Beautiful scar.” She smiled, looking at his chest. “What was it? Did you fall under the blade in a sawmill?”

He didn't answer. The sorceress continued to observe him, tilting her head coquettishly.

“The first Witcher I can look at from close up, and completely naked at that. Aha!” She leaned over, listening. “I can hear your heartbeat. It's very slow. Can you control how much adrenalin you secrete? Oh, forgive me my professional curiosity. Apparently, you're touchy about the qualities of your own body. You're wont to describe these qualities using words which I greatly dislike, lapsing into pompous sarcasm with it, something I dislike even more.”

He didn't answer.

“Well, enough of that. My bath is getting cold.” Yennefer moved as if she wanted to discard her coat, then hesitated. “I’ll take my bath while you talk, to save time. But I don't want to embarrass you and, besides, we hardly know each other. So then, taking decency into account...”

“I’ll turn around,” he proposed hesitantly.

“No. I have to see the eyes of the person I’m talking to. I’ve got a better idea.”

He heard an incantation being recited, felt his medallion quiver and saw the black coat softly slip to the floor. Then he heard the water splashing.

“Now I can't see your eyes, Yennefer,” he said. “And that's a pity.”

The invisible sorceress snorted and splashed in the tub. “Go on.”

Geralt finished struggling with his trousers, pulling them on under his towel, and sat on the bench. Buckling up his boots, he related the adventure by the river, cutting out most of the skirmish with the catfish. Yennefer didn't seem the type to be interested in fishing.

When he got to the part where the cloud-creature escaped from the jar, the huge soapy sponge froze.

“Well, well,” he heard, “that's interesting. A djinn in a bottle.”

“No djinn,” he contested. “It was some variant of scarlet mist. Some new, unknown type...”

“The new and unknown type deserves to be called something,” said the invisible Yennefer. “The name djinn is no worse than any other. Continue, please.”

He obeyed. The soap in the tub foamed relentlessly as he continued his tale, and the water overflowed. Something caught his eye. Looking more carefully he discerned outlines and shapes revealed by the soap covering the invisible Yennefer. They fascinated him to the extent that he was struck dumb.

“Go on!” a voice coming from nothingness, from above the outlines which so absorbed him, urged. “What happened next?”

“That's all,” he said. “I chased him away, that djinn, as you call him...”

“How?” The ladle rose and poured water. The soap vanished, as did the shapes.

Geralt sighed. “With an incantation,” he said. “An exorcism.”

“Which one?” The ladle poured water once more.

The Witcher started to observe the ladle's action more diligently because the water, albeit briefly, also revealed this and that. He repeated the incantation, substituting the vowel “e” with an intake of breath, according to the safety rule. He thought he'd impress the sorceress by knowing the rule, so he was surprised when he heard laughter coming from the tub.

“What's so funny?”

“That exorcism of yours…” The towel flew off its peg and suddenly began to wipe the rest of the outlines. “Triss is going to kill herself laughing when I tell her. Who taught you that, Witcher? That incantation?”

“A priestess from Huldra's sanctuary. It's a secret language of the temple...”

“Secret to some.” The towel slapped against the brim of the tub, water sprayed on to the floor and wet footprints marked the sorceress's steps. “That wasn't an incantation, Geralt. Nor would I advise you to repeat those words in other temples.”

“What was it, if not an incantation?” he asked, watching two black stockings outline shapely legs, one after the other.

“A witty saying.” Frilly knickers clung to nothing in an unusually interesting manner. “If rather indecent.”

A white shirt with an enormous flower-shaped ruffle fluttered upward and outlined Yennefer's body. She didn't, the Witcher noticed, bother with the whalebone nonsense usually worn by women. She didn't have to.

“What saying?” he asked.

“Never mind.”

The cork sprang from a rectangular crystal bottle standing on the stool. The bath-chamber started to smell of lilac and gooseberries. The cork traced several circles and jumped back into place. The sorceress fastened the cuffs of her shirt, pulled on a dress and materialized.

“Fasten me up.” She turned her back to him while combing her hair with a tortoiseshell comb. He noticed that the comb had a long, sharp prong which could, if need be, easily take the place of a dagger. He took a deliberately long time fastening her dress, one hook at a time, enjoying the scent of her hair, which fell halfway down her back in a black cascade.

“Going back to the bottle creature,” said Yennefer, putting diamond earrings in her ears, “it's obvious that it wasn't your funny incantation that drove him away. The hypothesis that he discharged his fury on your friend and left seems closer to the truth.”

“Probably,” Geralt agreed, gloomily. “I don't think he flew off to Cidaris to do away with Valdo Marx.”

“Who's Valdo Marx?”

“A troubadour who considers my companion, also a poet and musician, a talentless wastrel who panders to the taste of the masses.”

The sorceress turned around with a strange glimmer in her eyes. “Could it be that your friend managed to express a wish?”

“Two. Both stupid. Why do you ask? This fulfilling of wishes by genies is nonsense, after all, djinns, spirits of the lamp...”

“Clearly nonsense,” repeated Yennefer with a smile. “Of course. It's an invention, a fairy tale devoid of any sense, like all the legends in which good spirits and fortune tellers fulfill wishes. Stories like that are made up by poor simpletons, who can't even dream of fulfilling their wishes and desires themselves. I’m pleased you're not one of them, Geralt of Rivia. It makes you closer in spirit to me. If I want something, I don't dream of it...I act. And I always get what I want.”

“I don't doubt it. Are you ready?”

“I am.” The sorceress finished fastening the straps of her slippers and stood up. Even in high heels, she wasn't impressively tall. She shook her hair which, he found, had retained its picturesque, disheveled and curling disarray despite the furious combing.

“I’ve got a question, Geralt. The seal which closed the bottle…Has your friend still got it?”

The Witcher reflected. He had the seal, not Dandelion. But experience had taught him that sorcerers shouldn't be told too much. “Hmm…I think so.” He deceived her as to the reason for his delay in replying. “Yes, he probably does. Why? Is the seal important?”

“That's a strange question,” she said sharply, “for a Witcher and a specialist in supernatural monstrosities. Someone who ought to know that such a seal is important enough not to touch. And not to let their friend touch.”

He clenched his jaw. The blow was well aimed.

“Oh, well.” Yennefer changed her tone to a much gentler one. “No one's infallible and no Witcher's infallible, as we see. Everyone can make a mistake. Well, we can get it on our way. Where's your comrade?”

“Here, in Rinde. At Errdil's. The elf's.”

She looked at him carefully.

“At Errdil's?” she repeated, contorting her lips in a smile. “I know where that is. And I gather his cousin Chireadan is there too?”

“That's right. But what...?”

“Nothing,” she interrupted, raised her arms and closed her eyes.

The medallion around the Witcher's neck pulsed, tugged at the chain. On the damp bath-chamber wall shone the luminous outline of a door which framed a swirling phosphorescent milky nothingness. The Witcher cursed. He didn't like magical portals or traveling by them.

“Do we have to…” He cleared his throat. “It's not far...”

“I can't walk the streets of this town,” she cut him short. “They're not too crazy about me here. They might insult me and throw stones...or do something worse. Several people are effectively ruining my reputation here, thinking they can get away with it. Don't worry, my portals are safe.”

Geralt had once watched as only half a traveler using a safe portal flew through. The other half was never found. He knew of several cases where people had entered a portal and never been seen again.

The sorceress adjusted her hair again and pinned a pearl-embossed purse to her belt. The purse looked too small to hold anything other than a handful of coppers and a lipstick, but Geralt knew it was no ordinary purse.

“Hold me. Tighter. I’m not made of china. On our way!”

The medallion vibrated, something flashed and Geralt suddenly found himself in black nothingness, in penetrating cold. He couldn't see, hear or feel anything. Cold was all that his senses could register. He wanted to curse, but didn't have time.

### Part V

“It's an hour since she went in.” Chireadan turned over the hourglass standing on the table. “I’m starting to get worried. Was Dandelion's throat really so bad? Don't you think we ought to go and have a look?”

“She made it quite clear that she didn't want us to.” Geralt finished his mug of herb tea, grimacing dreadfully. He valued and liked the settled elves for their intelligence, calm reserve and sense of humor, but he couldn't understand or share their taste in food or drink. “I don't intend to disturb her, Chireadan. Magic requires time. It can take all day and night, as long as Dandelion gets better.”

“Oh well, you're right.”

A sound of hammering came from the room next door. Errdil, as it turned out, lived in a deserted inn which he had bought intending to renovate and then open with his wife, a quiet, taciturn elf. Vratimir, who had taken to their company after a night spent with the elves in the guardroom, volunteered to help with the repairs. He got down to renovating the wood paneling, working alongside the married couple, as soon as the confusion created by the Witcher and Yennefer leaping through the wall in the flash of a portal had subsided.

“I didn't think you'd find it so easy, if I’m to be honest,” Chireadan went on. “Yennefer isn't the most spontaneous of people when it comes to help. Others’ troubles don't particularly bother her, and don't disturb her sleep. In a word, I’ve never heard of her helping anyone if there wasn't something in it for her. I wonder what's in it for her to help you and Dandelion.”

“Aren't you exaggerating?” The Witcher smiled. “I didn't have such a bad impression of her. She likes to demonstrate her superiority, it's true, but compared with other wizards, with that whole arrogant bunch, she's walking charm and kindliness personified.”

Chireadan also smiled. “It's almost as though you thought a scorpion were prettier than a spider,” he said, “because it's got such a lovely tail. Be careful, Geralt. You're not the first to have judged her like that without knowing she's turned her charm and beauty into weapons. Weapons she uses skillfully and without scruple. Which, of course, doesn't change the fact that she's a fascinating and good-looking woman. You wouldn't disagree, would you?”

Geralt glanced keenly at the elf. For a second time, he thought he saw traces of a blush on his face. It surprised him no less than Chireadan's words. Pure-blooded elves were not known to admire human women, even the very beautiful ones, and Yennefer, although attractive in her own way, couldn't pass as a great beauty.

Each to their own taste but, in actual fact, not many would describe sorceresses as good-looking. Indeed, all of them came from social circles where the only fate for daughters would be marriage. Who would have thought of condemning their daughter to years of tedious studies and the tortures of somatic mutations if she could be given away in marriage and advantageously allied? Who wished to have a sorceress in their family? Despite the respect enjoyed by magicians, a sorceress's family did not benefit from her in the least because by the time the girl had completed her education, nothing tied her to her family anymore...only brotherhood counted, to the exclusion of all else. So only daughters with no chance of finding a husband become sorceresses.

Unlike priestesses and druidesses, who only unwillingly took ugly or crippled girls, sorcerers took anyone who showed evidence of a predisposition. If the child passed the first years of training, magic entered into the equation...straightening and evening out legs, repairing bones which had badly knitted, patching harelips, removing scars, birthmarks and pox scars. The young sorceress would become attractive because the prestige of her profession demanded it. The result was pseudo-pretty women with the angry and cold eyes of ugly girls. Girls who couldn't forget their ugliness had been covered by the mask of magic only for the prestige of their profession.

No, Geralt couldn't understand Chireadan. His eyes, the eyes of a Witcher, registered too many details.

“No, Chireadan,” he answered. “I wouldn't disagree. Thank you for the warning. But this only concerns Dandelion. He suffered at my side, in my presence. I didn't manage to save him, and I couldn't help him. I’d sit on a scorpion with my bare backside if I knew it would help him.”

“That's precisely what you've got to beware of most.” The elf smiled enigmatically. “Because Yennefer knows it and she likes to make the most of such knowledge. Don't trust her, Geralt. She's dangerous.”

He didn't answer.

Upstairs, the door squeaked. Yennefer stood at the stairs, leaning on the gallery balustrade.

“Witcher, could you come here?”

“Of course.”

The sorceress leaned her back against the door of one of the few rooms with furniture, where they had put the suffering troubadour. The Witcher approached, watchful and silent. He saw her left shoulder, slightly higher than her right. Her nose, slightly too long. Her lips, a touch too narrow. Her chin, receding a little too much. Her brows a little too irregular. Her eyes… He saw too many details. Quite unnecessarily.

“How's Dandelion?”

“Do you doubt my capabilities?”

He continued watching. She had the figure of a twenty-year-old, although he preferred not to guess at her real age. She moved with natural, unaffected grace. No, there was no way of guessing what she had been like before, what had been improved. He stopped thinking about it; there wasn't any sense.

“Your talented friend will be well,” she said. “He'll recover his vocal talents.”

“You have my gratitude, Yennefer.”

She smiled. “You'll have an opportunity to prove it.”

“Can I look in on him?”

She remained silent for a moment, watching him with a strange smile and drumming her fingers on the doorframe. “Of course. Go in.”

The medallion on the Witcher's neck started to quiver, sharply and rhythmically.

A glass sphere the size of a small watermelon, aflame with a milky light, lay in the center of the floor. The sphere marked the heart of a precisely traced nine-pointed star whose arms reached the corners and walls of the small chamber. A red pentagram was inscribed within the star. The tips of the pentagram were marked by black candles standing in weirdly shaped holders. Black candles had also been lit at the head of the bed where Dandelion, covered with sheepskins, rested. The poet was breathing peacefully; he didn't wheeze or rasp anymore, and the rictus of pain had disappeared from his face, to be replaced by an idiotic smile of happiness.

“He's asleep,” said Yennefer. “And dreaming.”

Geralt examined the patterns traced on the floor. The magic hidden within them was palpable, but he knew it was a dormant magic. It suggested the purr of a sleeping lion, without suggesting how the roar might sound.

“What is this, Yennefer?”

“A trap.”

“For what?”

“For you, for the time being.” The sorceress turned the key in the lock, then turned it over in her hand. The key disappeared.

“And thus, I’m trapped,” he said coldly. “What now? Are you going to assault my virtue?”

“Don't flatter yourself.” Yennefer sat on the edge of the bed. Dandelion, still smiling like a moron, groaned quietly. It was, without a doubt, a groan of bliss.

“What's this all about, Yennefer? If it's a game, I don't know the rules.”

“I told you,” she began, “that I always get what I want. As it happens, I desire something that Dandelion has. I’ll get it from him, and we can part ways. Don't worry, he won't come to any harm...”

“The things you've set on the floor,” he interrupted, “are used to summon demons. Someone always comes to harm where demons are summoned. I won't allow it.”

“not a hair of his head will be harmed,” continued the sorceress, without paying any attention to his words. “His voice will be even more beautiful, and he'll be very pleased, even happy. We'll all be happy. And we'll part with no ill feelings or resentment.”

“Oh, Virginia,” moaned Dandelion without opening his eyes. “Your breasts are so beautiful, more delicate than a swan's down…Virginia…”

“Has he lost his mind? Is he raving?”

“He's dreaming.” Yennefer smiled. “His dream wish is being satisfied in his sleep. I probed his mind to the very depths. There wasn't much there. A few obscenities, several dreams and masses of poetry. But be that as it may. The seal which plugged the bottle with the djinn, Geralt, I know he doesn't have it. You do. Please give it to me.”

“What do you need the seal for?”

“How should I answer your question?” The sorceress smiled coquettishly. “Let's try this: it's none of your damned business, Witcher. Does that satisfy you?”

“No.” His smile was equally nasty. “It doesn't. But don't reproach yourself for it, Yennefer. I’m not easily satisfied. Only those who are above average have managed so far.”

“Pity. So, you'll remain unsatisfied. It's your loss. The seal, please. Don't pull that face; it doesn't suit either your good looks or your complexion. In case you hadn't noticed, let me tell you that you are now beginning to repay the gratitude you owe me. The seal is the first installment for the price to be paid for the singer's voice.”

“I see you've divided the price into several installments,” he said coldly. “Fine. I might have expected that. But let it be a fair trade, Yennefer. I bought your help. And I’ll pay.”

She contorted her lips in a smile, but her violet eyes remained wide open and cold. “You shouldn't have any doubts as to that, Witcher.”

“Me,” he repeated. “Not Dandelion. I’m taking him to a safe place. When I’ve done that, I’ll come back and pay your second installment, and all the others. Because as to the first…”

He reached into a secret pocket of his belt and pulled out the brass seal with the sign of a star and broken cross. “Here, take it. Not as an installment. Accept it from a Witcher as proof of his gratitude for having treated him more kindly, albeit in a calculated manner, than the majority of your brethren would have done. Accept it as evidence of goodwill, which ought to convince you that, having seen to my friend's safety, I’ll return to repay you. I didn't see the scorpion amidst the flowers, Yennefer. I’m prepared to pay for my inattention.”

“A pretty speech.” The sorceress folded her arms. “Touching and pompous. Pity it's in vain. I need Dandelion, so he's staying here.”

“He's already been close to the creature you intend to draw here.” Geralt indicated the patterns on the floor. “When you've finished your handiwork and brought the djinn here, Dandelion is most certainly going to suffer despite all your promises, maybe even more than before. Because it's the creature from the bottle that you want, isn't it? Do you intend to master it, force it to serve you? You don't have to answer. I know it's none of my damned business. Do what you want, draw ten demons in if you like. But without Dandelion. If you put him at risk, this will no longer be an honest trade, Yennefer, and you don't have the right to demand payment for that. I won't allow...” He broke off.

“I wondered when you'd feel it,” giggled the sorceress.

Geralt tensed his muscles and, clenching his jaw until it hurt, strained his entire will. It didn't help. He was paralyzed, like a stone statue, like a post which had been dug into the ground. He couldn't even wiggle a toe.

“I knew you could deflect a spell thrown straight at you,” said Yennefer. “I also knew that before you tried anything, you'd try to impress me with your eloquence. You were talking while the spell hanging over you was working and slowly breaking you. Now you can only talk. But you don't have to impress me anymore. I know you're eloquent. Any further efforts in that direction will only spoil the effect.”

“Chireadan...” he said with an effort, still fighting the magical paralysis. “Chireadan will realize that you're up to something. He'll soon work it out, suspect something any minute now, because he doesn't trust you, Yennefer. He hasn't trusted you from the start...”

The sorceress swept her hand in a broad gesture. The walls of the chamber became blurred and took on a uniform dull gray appearance and color. The door disappeared, the windows disappeared, even the dusty curtains and pictures on the wall, splattered with flies, vanished.

“What if Chireadan does figure it out?” She grimaced maliciously. “Is he going to run for help? Nobody will get through my barrier. But Chireadan's not going to run anywhere. He won't do anything against me. Anything. He's under my spell. No, it's not a question of black sorcery. I didn't do anything in that way. It's a simple question of body chemistry. He's fallen in love with me, the blockhead. Didn't you know? Can you imagine, he even intended to challenge Beau to a duel. A jealous elf. That rarely happens. Geralt, it's not for nothing that I chose this house.”

“Beau Berrant, Chireadan, Errdil, Dandelion. You really are heading for your goal as straight as you can. But me, Yennefer, you're not going to use me.”

“Oh I am, I am.” The sorceress got up from the bed and approached him, carefully avoiding the signs and symbols marked out on the floor. “After all, I did say that you owe me something for curing the poet. It's a matter of a trifle, a small favor. After what I’ve done, what I intend to do here in a moment, I’m leaving Rinde and I’ve still got unpaid accounts in this town. I’ve promised several people here something, and I always keep my promises. Since I won't have time to do so myself, you'll keep those promises for me.”

He wrestled with all his might. In vain.

“Don't struggle, my little Witcher.” She smiled spitefully. “It's pointless. You've got a strong will and quite a bit of resistance to magic, but you can't contend with me and my spell. And don't act out a farce for me; don't try to charm me with your hard and insolent masculinity. You are the only one to think you're insolent and hard. You'd do anything for me in order to save your friend, even without spells at that. You'd pay any price. You'd lick my boots. And maybe something else, too, if I unexpectedly wished to amuse myself.”

He remained silent. Yennefer was standing in front of him, smiling and fiddling with the obsidian star sparkling with diamonds pinned to her velvet ribbon.

“I already knew what you were like,” she continued, “after exchanging a few words with you in Beau's bedroom. And I knew what form of payment I’d demand from you. My accounts in Rinde could be settled by anyone, including Chireadan. But you're the one who's going to do it because you have to pay me. For your insolence, for the cold way you look at me, for the eyes which fish for every detail, for your stony face and sarcastic tone of voice. For thinking that you could stand face-to-face with Yennefer of Vergerberg and believe her to be full of self-admiration and arrogance, a calculating witch, while staring at her soapy tits. Pay up, Geralt of Rivia!”

She grabbed his hair with both hands and kissed him violently on the lips, sinking her teeth into them like a vampire. The medallion on his neck quivered and it felt to Geralt as if the chain was shrinking and strangling him. Something blazed in his head while a terrible humming filled his ears. He stopped seeing the sorceress's violet eyes and fell into darkness.

He was kneeling. Yennefer was talking to him in a gentle, soft voice.

“You remember?”

“Yes, my lady.” It was his own voice.”

“So go and carry out my instructions.”

“At your command, my lady.”

“You may kiss my hand.”

“Thank you, my lady.”

He felt himself approach her on his knees. Ten thousand bees buzzed in his head. Her hand smelt of lilac and gooseberries. Lilac and gooseberries…Lilac and gooseberries…A flash. Darkness.

A balustrade, stairs. Chireadan's face.

“Geralt! What's the matter with you? Geralt, where are you going?”

“I have to…” His own voice. “I have to go...”

“Oh, gods! Look at his eyes!”

Vratimir's face, contorted with horror. Errdil's face. And Chireadan's voice.

“No! Errdil! Don't touch him! Don't try to stop him! Out of his way...get out of his way!”

The scent of lilac and gooseberries. Lilac and gooseberries…

A door. The explosion of sunlight. It's hot. Humid. The scent of lilac and gooseberries. There's going to be a storm, he thought.

And that was his last thought.

### Part VI

Darkness. The scent…

Scent? No, smell. Stench of urine, rotten straw and wet rags. The stink of a smoldering torch stuck into an iron grip set in a wall of uneven stone blocks. A shadow thrown by the light of the torch, a shadow on the dirt floor...the shadow of a grille.

The Witcher cursed.

“At last.” He felt someone lift him up, rest his back against the damp wall. “I was beginning to worry; you didn't regain consciousness for so long.”

“Chireadan? Where...dammit, my head's splitting...where are we?”

“Where do you think?”

Geralt wiped his face and looked around. Three rogues were sitting by the opposite wall. He couldn't see them clearly; they were sitting as far from the torch light as possible, in near complete darkness. Something which looked like a heap of rags crouched under the grille which separated them from the lit corridor. It was, in fact, a thin old man with a nose like a stork's beak. The length of his matted stringy hair and the state of his clothes showed that he hadn't arrived yesterday.

“They've thrown us in the dungeon,” he said gloomily.

“I’m glad you've regained your ability to draw logical conclusions,” said the elf.

“Bloody hell…And Dandelion? How long have we been here? How much time has gone by since...?”

“I don't know. I was unconscious, just like you, when I was thrown in here.” Chireadan raked up the straw to sit more comfortably. “Is it important?”

“And how, dammit! Yennefer...And Dandelion...Dandelion's there, with her, and she's planning...Hey, you! How long have we been in here?”

The other prisoners whispered among themselves. None replied.

“Have you gone deaf?” Geralt spat, still unable to get rid of the metallic taste in his mouth. “I’m asking you, what time of day is it? Or night? Surely you know what time they feed you?”

They muttered again, cleared their throats. “Sirs,” said one of them at last. “Leave us in peace and don't talk to us. We be decent thieves, not some politicals. We didn't try to attack the authorities. We was only stealing.”

“That be it,” said another. “You've your corner, we've ours. And let each look after his own.”

Chireadan snorted. The Witcher spat.

“That's the way it goes,” mumbled the hairy old man with a long nose. “Everyone in the clink guards his own corner and holds with his own.”

“And you, old man,” asked the elf sneeringly, “are you with them or with us? Which camp do you count yourself in?”

“None,” he answered proudly, “because I’m innocent.”

Geralt spat again. “Chireadan?” he asked, rubbing his temple. “This attempt on the authorities…Is it true?”

“Absolutely. You don't remember?”

“I walked out into the street…People were looking at me…Then…Then there was a shop...”

“A pawnbroker's.” The elf lowered his voice. “You went into the pawnbroker's. As soon as you walked in, you punched the owner in the teeth. Hard. Very hard.”

The Witcher ground his teeth and cursed.

“The pawnbroker fell,” Chireadan continued quietly. “And you kicked him several times in delicate places. The assistant ran to help his master and you threw him out of the window, into the street.”

“I fear,” muttered Geralt, “that wasn't the end of it?”

“Your fears are well founded. You left the pawnbroker's and marched down the center of the street, jostling passersby and shouting some nonsense about a lady's honor. There was quite a crowd following you, Errdil, Vratimir and I among them. Then you stopped in front of Laurelnose the apothecary's house, went in, and were back in the street a moment later, dragging Laurelnose by the leg. And you made something of a speech to the crowd.”

“What sort of a speech?”

“To put it simply, you stated that a self-respecting man shouldn't ever call a professional harlot a whore because it's base and repugnant, while using the word whore to describe a woman one has never knocked off or paid any money for doing so, is childish and punishable. The punishment, you announced, would be dealt there and then, and it would be fitting for a spoilt child. You thrust the apothecary's head between his knees, pulled down his pants and thrashed his ass with a belt.”

“Go on, Chireadan. Go on. Don't spare me.”

“You beat Laurelnose on the backside and the apothecary howled and sobbed, called to gods and men alike for help, begged for mercy...he even promised to be better in the future, but you clearly didn't believe him. Then several armed bandits, who in Rinde go by the name of guards, came running up.”

“And” Geralt nodded “that's when I made a hit at the authorities?”

“Not at all. You made a hit at them much earlier. Both the pawnbroker and Laurelnose are on the town council. Both had called for Yennefer to be thrown out of town. Not only did they vote for it at the council, but they bad-mouthed her in taverns and spread vulgar gossip.”

“I guessed that. Carry on. You stopped when the guards appeared. They threw me in here?”

“They wanted to. Oh, Geralt, what a sight it was. What you did to them, it's hard to describe. They had swords, whips, clubs, hatchets, and you only had an ash cane with a pommel, which you'd snatched from some dandy. And when they were all lying on the ground, you walked on. Most of us knew where you were going.”

“I’d be happy to know too.”

“You were going to the temple. Because the priest Krepp, who's also a member of the council, dedicated a lot of time to Yennefer in his sermons. You promised him a lesson in respect for the fair sex. When you spoke of him, you omitted his title and threw in other descriptions, to the delight of the children trailing after you.”

“Aha,” muttered Geralt. “So, blasphemy came into it, too. What else? Desecration of the temple?”

“No. You didn't manage to get in there. An entire unit of municipal guards, armed...it seemed to me...with absolutely everything they could lay their hands on in the armory apart from a catapult, was waiting in front of the temple. It looked as if they were going to slaughter you, but you didn't reach them. You suddenly grasped your head with both hands and fainted.”

“You don't have to finish. So, Chireadan, how were you imprisoned?”

“Several guards ran to attack you when you fell. I got into a dispute with them. I got a blow over the head with a mace and came to here, in this hole. No doubt they'll accuse me of taking part in an anti-human conspiracy.”

“Since we're talking about accusations” the Witcher ground his teeth again “what's in store for us, do you think?”

“If Neville, the mayor, gets back from the capital on time,” muttered Chireadan, “who knows…he's a friend. But if he doesn't, then sentence will be passed by the councilors, including Laurelnose and the pawnbroker, of course. And that means...”

The elf made a brief gesture across his neck. Despite the darkness, the gesture left little doubt as to Chireadan's meaning. The Witcher didn't reply. The thieves mumbled to each other and the tiny old man, locked up for his innocence, seemed to be asleep.

“Great,” said Geralt finally, and cursed vilely. “Not only will I hang, but I’ll do so with the knowledge that I’m the cause of your death, Chireadan. And Dandelion's, too, no doubt. No, don't interrupt. I know its Yennefer's prank, but I’m the guilty one. It's my foolishness. She deceived me, took the piss out of me, as the dwarves say.”

“Hmm…” muttered the elf. “Nothing to add, nothing to take away. I warned you against her. Dammit, I warned you, and I turned out to be just as big an... pardon the word... idiot. You're worried that I’m here because of you, but it's quite the opposite. You're locked up because of me. I could have stopped you in the street, overpowered you, not allowed... But I didn't. Because I was afraid that when the spell, she'd cast on you had dispelled, you'd go back and… harm her. Forgive me.”

“I forgive you, because you've no idea how strong that spell was. My dear elf, I can break an ordinary spell within a few minutes, and I don't faint while doing it. You wouldn't have managed to break Yennefer's spell and you would have had difficulty overpowering me. Remember the guards.”

“I wasn't thinking about you. I repeat: I was thinking about her.”

“Chireadan?”

“Yes?”

“Do you…Do you...”

“I don't like grand words,” interrupted the elf, smiling sadly. “I’m greatly, shall we say, fascinated by her. No doubt you're surprised that anyone could be fascinated by her?”

Geralt closed his eyes to recall an image which, without using grand words, fascinated him inexplicably. “No, Chireadan,” he said. “I’m not surprised.”

Heavy steps sounded in the corridor, and a clang of metal. The dungeon was filled with the shadows of four guards. A key grated. The innocent old man leapt away from the bars like a lynx and hid among the criminals.

“So soon?” the elf, surprised, half-whispered. “I thought it would take longer to build the scaffold…”

One of the guards, a tall, strapping fellow, bald as a knee, his mug covered with bristles like a boar, pointed at the Witcher. “That one,” he said briefly.

Two others grabbed Geralt, hauled him up and pressed him against the wall. The thieves squeezed into their corner; the long-nosed granddad buried himself in the straw. Chireadan wanted to jump up, but he fell to the dirt floor, retreating from the short sword pointed at his chest.

The bald guard stood in front of the Witcher, pulled his sleeves up and rubbed his fist. “Councilor Laurelnose,” he said, “told me to ask if you're enjoying our little dungeon. Perhaps there's something you need? Perhaps the chill is getting to you? Eh?”

Geralt did not answer. Nor could he kick the bald man, as the guards who restrained him were standing on his feet in their heavy boots.

The bald man took a short swing and punched the Witcher in the stomach. It didn't help to tense his muscles in defense. Geralt, catching his breath with an effort, looked at the buckle of his own belt for a while; then the guards hauled him up again.

“Is there nothing you need?” the guard continued, stinking of onions and rotting teeth. “The councilor will be pleased that you have no complaints.” Another blow, in the same place. The Witcher choked and would have puked, but he had nothing to throw up.

The bald guard turned sideways. He was changing hands.

Wham! Geralt looked at the buckle of his belt again. Although it seemed strange, there was no hole above it through which the wall could be seen.

“Well?” The guard backed away a little, no doubt planning to take a wider swing. “Don't you have any wishes? Mr. Laurelnose asked whether you have any. But why aren't you saying anything? Tongue-tied? I’ll get it straight for you!”

Wham!

Geralt didn't faint this time either. And he had to faint because he cared for his internal organs. In order to faint, he had to force the guard to...

The guard spat, bared his teeth and rubbed his fist again.

“Well? No wishes at all?”

“Just one…” moaned the Witcher, raising his head with difficulty. “That you burst, you son-of-a-whore.”

The bald guard ground his teeth, stepped back and took a swing...this time, according to Geralt's plan, aiming for his head. But the blow never came. The guard suddenly gobbled like a turkey, grew red, grabbed his stomach with both hands, howled, roared with pain…

And burst.

### Part VII

“And what am I to do with you?”

A blindingly bright ribbon of lightning cut the darkened sky outside the window, followed by a sharp, drawn-out crash of thunder. The downpour was getting harder as the storm cloud passed over Rinde.

Geralt and Chireadan, seated on a bench under a huge tapestry depicting the Prophet Lebiodus pasturing his sheep, remained silent, modestly hanging their heads. Mayor Neville was pacing the chamber, snorting and panting with anger.

“You bloody, shitty sorcerers!” he yelled suddenly, standing still. “Are you persecuting my town, or what? Aren't there any other towns in the world?”

The elf and Witcher remained silent.

“To do something like...” the mayor choked. “To turn the warder…Like a tomato! To pulp! To red pulp! It's inhuman!”

“Inhuman and godless,” repeated the priest, also present. “So inhuman that even a fool could guess who's behind it. Yes, mayor. We both know Chireadan and the man here, who calls himself a Witcher, wouldn't have enough Force to do this. It is all the work of Yennefer, that witch cursed by the gods!” There was a clap of thunder outside, as if confirming the priest's words. “It's her and no one else,” continued Krepp. “There's no question about it. Who, if not Yennefer, would want revenge upon Laurelnose?”

“Hehehe,” chuckled the mayor suddenly. “That's the thing I’m least angry about. Laurelnose has been scheming against me; he's been after my office. And now the people aren't going to respect him. When they remember how he got it in the ass...”

“That's all it needs, Mr. Neville, you to applaud the crime.” Krepp frowned. “Let me remind you that had I not thrown an exorcism at the Witcher, he would have raised his hand to strike me and the temple's majesty...”

“And that's because you spoke vilely about her in your sermons, Krepp. Even Berrant complained about you. But what's true is true. Do you hear that, you scoundrels?” The mayor turned to Geralt and Chireadan again. “Nothing justifies what you've done! I don't intend to tolerate such things here! That's enough, now get on with it, tell me everything, tell me what you have for your defense, because if you don't, I swear by all the relics that I’ll lead you such a dance as you won't forget to your dying day! Tell me everything, right now, as you would in a confessional!”

Chireadan sighed deeply and looked meaningfully and pleadingly at the Witcher.

Geralt also sighed, then cleared his throat. And he recounted everything. Well, almost everything.

“So that's it,” said the priest after a moment's silence. “A fine kettle of fish. A genie released from captivity. And an enchantress who has her sights on the genie. Not a bad arrangement. This could end badly, very badly.”

“What's a genie?” asked Neville. “And what does this Yennefer want?”

“Enchanters,” explained Krepp, “draw their power from the forces of nature, or to put it more accurately, from the so-called Four Elements or Principles, commonly called the natural forces. Air, Water, Fire and Earth. Each of these elements has its own Dimension which is called a Plane in the jargon used by enchanters. There's a Water Plane, Fire Plane and so on. These Dimensions, which are beyond our reach, are inhabited by what are called genies...”

“That's what they're called in legends,” interrupted the Witcher. “Because as far as I know...”

“Don't interrupt,” Krepp cut him short. “The fact that you don't know much was evident in your tale, Witcher. So be quiet and listen to what those wiser than you have to say. Going back to the genies, there are four sorts, just as there are four Planes. Djinns are air creatures; marides are associated with the principle of water; afreet are Fire genies and d'ao, the genies of Earth...”

“You've run away with yourself, Krepp,” Neville butted in. “This isn't a temple school; don't lecture us. Briefly, what does Yennefer want with this genie?”

“A genie like this, mayor, is a living reservoir of magical energy. A sorcerer who has a genie at their beck and call can direct that energy in the form of spells. They don't have to draw the Force from Nature; the genie does it for them. The power of such an enchanter is enormous, close to omnipotence...”

“Somehow I’ve never heard of a wizard who can do everything,” contradicted Neville. “On the contrary, the power of most of them is clearly exaggerated. They can't do this, they can't...”

“The enchanter Stammelford,” interrupted the priest, once more taking on the tone and poise of an academic lecturer, “once moved a mountain because it obstructed the view from his tower. Nobody has managed to do the like, before or since. Because Stammelford, so they say, had the services of a d'ao, an Earth genie. There are records of deeds accomplished by other magicians on a similar scale. Enormous waves and catastrophic rains are certainly the work of marides. Fiery columns, fires and explosions the work of afreets...”

“Whirlwinds, hurricanes, flights above the earth,” muttered Geralt, “Geoffrey Monck.”

Exactly. I see you do know something after all.” Krepp glanced at him more kindly. “Word has it old Monck had a way of forcing a djinn to serve him. There were rumors that he had more than one. He was said to keep them in bottles and make use of them when need arose. Three wishes from each genie, then it's free and escapes into its own dimension.”

“The one at the river didn't fulfill anything,” said Geralt emphatically. “He immediately threw himself at Dandelion's throat.”

“Genies” Krepp turned up his nose “are spiteful and deceitful beings. They don't like being packed into bottles and ordered to move mountains. They do everything they possibly can to make it impossible for you to express your wishes and then they fulfill them in a way which is hard to control and foresee, sometimes literally, so you have to be careful what you say. To subjugate a genie, you need a will of iron, nerves of steel, a strong Force and considerable abilities. From what you say, it looks like your abilities, Witcher, were too modest.”

“Too modest to subjugate the cad,” agreed Geralt. “But I did chase him away; he bolted so fast the air howled. And that's also something. Yennefer, it's true, ridiculed my exorcism...”

“What was the exorcism? Repeat it.”

Geralt repeated it, word for word.

“What?!” The priest first turned pale, then red and finally blue. “How dare you! Are you making fun of me?”

“Forgive me,” stuttered Geralt. “To be honest, I don't know…what the words mean.”

“So, don't repeat what you don't know! I’ve no idea where you could have heard such filth!”

“Enough of that.” The mayor waved it all aside. “We're wasting time. Right. We now know what the sorceress wants the genie for. But you said, Krepp, that it's bad. What's bad? Let her catch him and go to hell, what do I care? I think...”

No one ever found out what Neville was thinking, even if it wasn't a boast. A luminous rectangle appeared on the wall next to the tapestry of Prophet Lebiodus, something flashed, and Dandelion landed in the middle of the town hall.

“Innocent!” yelled the poet in a clear, melodious tenor, sitting on the floor and looking around, his eyes vague. “Innocent! The Witcher is innocent! I wish you to believe it!”

“Dandelion!” Geralt shouted, holding Krepp back, who was clearly getting ready to perform an exorcism or a curse. “Where have you…here…Dandelion!”

“Geralt!” The bard jumped up.

“Dandelion!”

“Who's this?” Neville growled. “Dammit, if you don't put an end to your spells, there's no guarantee what I’ll do. I’ve said that spells are forbidden in Rinde! First you have to put in a written application, then pay a tax and stamp duty…Eh? Isn't it that singer, the witch's hostage?”

“Dandelion,” repeated Geralt, holding the poet by the shoulders. “How did you get here?”

“I don't know,” admitted the bard with a foolish, worried expression. “To be honest, I’m rather unaware of what happened to me. I don't remember much, and may the plague take me if I know what of that is real and what's a nightmare. But I do remember quite a pretty, black-haired female with fiery eyes...”

“What are you telling me about black-haired women for?” Neville interrupted angrily. “Get to the point, squire, to the point. You yelled that the Witcher is innocent. How am I to understand that? That Laurelnose thrashed his own ass with his hands? Because if the Witcher's innocent, it couldn't have been otherwise. Unless it was a mass hallucination.”

“I don't know anything about any ass or hallucinations,” said Dandelion proudly. “Or anything about laurel noses: I repeat, that the last thing I remember was an elegant woman dressed in tastefully coordinated black and white. She threw me into a shiny hole, a magic portal for sure. But first she gave me a clear and precise errand. As soon as I’d arrived, I was immediately to say, I quote: ‘My wish is for you to believe the Witcher is not guilty for what occurred. That, and no other, is my wish.’ Word for word. Indeed, I tried to ask what all this was, what it was all about, and why. The black-haired woman didn't let me get a word in edgeways. She scolded me most inelegantly, grasped me by the neck and threw me into the portal. That's all. And now…” Dandelion pulled himself up, brushed his doublet, adjusted his collar and fancy...if dirty...ruffles. “…perhaps, gentlemen, you'd like to tell me the name of the best tavern in town and where it can be found.”

“There are no bad taverns in my town,” said Neville slowly. “But before you see them for yourself, you'll inspect the best dungeon in this town very thoroughly. You and your companions. Let me remind you that you're still not free, you scoundrels! Look at them! One tells incredible stories while the other leaps out of the wall and shouts about innocence. I wish, he yells, you to believe me. He has the audacity to wish...”

“My gods!” The priest suddenly grasped his bald crown. “Now I understand! The wish! The last wish!”

“What's happened to you, Krepp?” The mayor frowned. “Are you ill?”

“The last wish!” repeated the priest. “She made the bard express the last, the third wish. And Yennefer set a magical trap and, no doubt, captured the genie before he managed to escape into his own dimension! Mr. Neville, we must...”

It thundered outside. So strongly that the walls shook.

“Dammit,” muttered the mayor, going up to the window. “That was close. As long as it doesn't hit a house. All I need now is a fire...Oh gods! Just look! Just look at this! Krepp! What is it?”

All of them, to a man, rushed to the window.

“Mother of mine!” yelled Dandelion, grabbing his throat. “It's him! It's that son of a bitch who strangled me!”

“The djinn!” shouted Krepp. “The Air genie!”

“Above Errdil's tavern!” shouted Chireadan, “above his roof!”

“She's caught him!” The priest leaned out so far he almost fell. “Can you see the magical light? The sorceress has caught the genie!”

Geralt watched in silence. Once, years ago, when a little snot-faced brat following his studies in Kaer Morhen, the Witchers’ Settlement, he and a friend, Eskel, had captured a huge forest bumblebee and tied it to a jug with a thread. They were in fits of laughter watching the antics of the tied bumblebee, until Vesemir, their tutor, caught them at it and tanned their hides with a leather strap.

The djinn, circling above the roof of Errdil's tavern, behaved exactly like that bumblebee. He flew up and fell, he sprang up and dived, he buzzed furiously in a circle. Because the djinn, exactly like the bumblebee in Kaer Morhen, was tied down. Twisted threads of blindingly bright light of various colors were tightly wrapped around him and ended at the roof. But the djinn had more options than the bumblebee, which couldn't knock down surrounding roofs, rip thatches to shreds, destroy chimneys, and shatter towers and garrets. The djinn could. And did.

“It's destroying the town,” wailed Neville. “That monster's destroying my town!”

“Hehehe,” laughed the priest. “She's found her match, it seems! It's an exceptionally strong djinn! I really don't know who's caught whom, the witch him or he the witch! Ha, it'll end with the djinn grinding her to dust. Very good! Justice will be done!”

“I shit on justice!” yelled the mayor, not caring if there were any voters under the window. “Look what's happening there, Krepp! Panic, ruin! You didn't tell me that, you bald idiot! You played the wise guy, gabbled on, but not a word about what's most important! Why didn't you tell me that that demon…Witcher! Do something! Do you hear, innocent sorcerer? Do something about that demon! I forgive you all your offences, but...”

“There's nothing can be done here, Mr. Neville,” snorted Krepp. “You didn't listen to what I was saying, that's all. You never listen to me. This, I repeat, is an exceptionally strong djinn. If it wasn't for that, the sorceress would have hold of him already. Her spell is soon going to weaken, and then the djinn is going to crush her and escape. And we'll have some peace.”

“And in the meantime, the town will go to ruins?”

“We've got to wait,” repeated the priest, “but not idly. Give out the orders, mayor. Tell the people to evacuate the surrounding houses and get ready to extinguish fires. What's happening there now is nothing compared to the hell that's going to break loose when the genie has finished with the witch.”

Geralt raised his head, caught Chireadan's eye and looked away.

“Mr. Krepp,” he suddenly decided, “I need your help. It's about the portal through which Dandelion appeared here. The portal still links the town hall to...”

“There's not even a trace of the portal anymore,” the priest said Coldly, pointing to the wall. “Can't you see?”

“A portal leaves a trace, even when invisible. A spell can stabilize such a trace. I’ll follow it.”

“You must be mad. Even if a passage like that doesn't tear you to pieces, what do you expect to gain by it? Do you want to find yourself in the middle of a cyclone?”

“I asked if you can cast a spell which could stabilize the trace.”

“Spell?” The priest proudly raised his head. “I’m not a godless sorcerer! I don't cast spells! My power comes from faith and prayer!”

“Can you or can't you?”

“I can.”

“Then get on with it, because time's pressing on.”

“Geralt,” said Dandelion, “you've gone stark raving mad! Keep away from that bloody strangler!”

“Silence, please,” said Krepp, “and gravity. I’m praying.”

“To hell with your prayers!” Neville hollered. “I’m off to gather the people. We've got to do something and not stand here gabbling! Gods, what a day! What a bloody day!”

The Witcher felt Chireadan touch his shoulder. He turned. The elf looked him in the eyes, then lowered his own.

“You're going there because you have to, aren't you?”

Geralt hesitated. He thought he smelled the scent of lilac and gooseberries.

“I think so,” he said reluctantly. “I do have to. I’m sorry, Chireadan...”

“Don't apologize. I know what you feel.”

“I doubt it. Because I don't know myself.”

The elf smiled. The smile had little to do with joy. “That's just it, Geralt. Precisely it.”

Krepp pulled himself upright and took a deep breath. “Ready,” he said, pointing with pride at the barely visible outline on the wall. “But the portal is unsteady and won't stay there for long. And there's no way to be sure it won't break. Before you step through, sir, examine your conscience. I can give you a blessing, but in order to forgive you your sins...”

“…there's no time,” Geralt finished the sentence for him. “I know, Mr. Krepp. There's never enough time for it. Leave the chamber, all of you. If the portal explodes, it'll burst your eardrums.”

“I’ll stay,” said Krepp, when the door had closed behind Dandelion and the elf. He waved his hands in the air, creating a pulsating aura around himself. “I’ll spread some protection, just in case. And if the portal does burst…I’ll try and pull you out, Witcher. What are eardrums to me? They grow back.”

Geralt looked at him more kindly.

The priest smiled. “You're a brave man,” he said. “You want to save her, don't you? But bravery isn't going to be of much use to you. Djinns are vengeful beings. The sorceress is lost. And if you go there, you'll be lost, too. Examine your conscience.”

“I have.” Geralt stood in front of the faintly glowing portal. “Mr. Krepp, sir?”

“Yes.”

“That exorcism which made you so angry…What do the words mean?”

“Indeed, what a moment for quips and jokes...”

“Please, Mr. Krepp, sir.”

“Oh, well,” said the priest, hiding behind the mayor's heavy oak table. “It's your last wish, so I’ll tell you. It means…Hmm…Hmm…essentially…get out of here and go fuck yourself!”

Geralt entered the nothingness, where cold stifled the laughter which was shaking him.

### Part VIII

The portal, roaring and whirling like a hurricane, spat him out with a force that bruised his lungs. The Witcher collapsed on the floor, panting and catching his breath with difficulty. The floor shook. At first, he thought he was trembling after his journey through the splitting hell of the portal, but he rapidly realized his mistake. The whole house was vibrating, trembling and creaking. He looked around. He was not in the small room where he had last seen Yennefer and Dandelion but in the large communal hall of Errdil's renovated tavern.

He saw her. She was kneeling between tables, bent over the magical sphere. The sphere was aflame with a strong, milky light, so bright, enough to shine red through her fingers. The light from the sphere illuminated a scene, flickering and swaying, but clear. Geralt saw the small room with a star and pentagram traced on the floor, blazing with white heat. He saw many-colored, creaking, fiery lines shooting from the pentagram and disappearing up over the roof toward the furious roar of the captured djinn.

Yennefer saw him, jumped up and raised her hand.

“No!” he shouted, “don't do this! I want to help you!”

“Help?” She snorted. “You?”

“Me.”

“In spite of what I did to you?”

“In spite of it.”

“Interesting. But not important. I don't need your help. Get out of here.”

“No.”

“Get out of here!” she yelled, grimacing ominously. “It's getting dangerous! The whole thing's getting out of control; do you understand? I can't master him. I don't get it, but the scoundrel isn't weakening at all! I caught him once he'd fulfilled the troubadour's third wish and I should have him in the sphere by now. But he's not getting any weaker! Dammit, it looks as if he's getting stronger! But I’m still going to get the better of him. I’ll break...”

“You won't break him, Yennefer. He'll kill you.”

“It's not so easy to kill me...” She broke off. The whole roof of the tavern suddenly flared up. The vision projected by the sphere dissolved in the brightness. A huge fiery rectangle appeared on the ceiling. The sorceress cursed as she lifted her hands, and sparks gushed from her fingers.

“Run, Geralt!”

“What's happening, Yennefer?”

“He's located me…” She groaned, flushing red with effort. “He wants to get at me. He's creating his own portal to get in. He can't break loose, but he'll get in by the portal. I can't...I can't stop him!”

“Yennefer...”

“Don't distract me! I’ve got to concentrate…Geralt, you've got to get out of here. I’ll open my portal, a way for you to escape. Be careful; it'll be a random portal. I haven't got time or strength for any other…I don't know where you'll end up…but you'll be safe…Get ready...”

A huge portal on the ceiling suddenly flared blindingly, expanded and grew deformed. Out of the nothingness appeared the shapeless mouth already known to the Witcher, snapping its drooping lips and howling loudly enough to pierce his ears. Yennefer jumped, waved her arms and shouted an incantation. A net of light shot from her palm and fell on the djinn. It gave a roar and sprouted long paws which shot toward the sorceress's throat like attacking cobras. Yennefer didn't back away.

Geralt threw himself toward her, pushed her aside and sheltered her. The djinn, tangled in the magical light, sprang from the portal like a cork from a bottle and threw himself at them, opening his jaws. The Witcher clenched his teeth and hit him with the Sign without any apparent effect. But the genie didn't attack. He hung in the air just below the ceiling, swelled to an impressive size, goggled at Geralt with his pale eyes and roared. There was something in that roar, something like a command, an order. He didn't understand what it was.

“This way!” shouted Yennefer, indicating the portal which she had conjured up on the wall by the stairs. In comparison to the one created by the genie; the sorceress's portal looked feeble, extremely inferior. “This way, Geralt! Run for it!”

“Only with you!”

Yennefer, sweeping the air with her hands, was shouting incantations and the many-colored fetters showered sparks and creaked. The djinn whirled like the bumblebee, pulling the bonds tight, then loosening them. Slowly but surely, he was drawing closer to the sorceress. Yennefer did not back away.

The Witcher leapt to her, deftly tripped her up, grabbed her by the waist with one hand and dug the other into her hair at the nape. Yennefer cursed nastily and thumped him in the neck with her elbow. He didn't let go of her. The penetrating smell of ozone, created by the curses, didn't kill the smell of lilac and gooseberries. Geralt stilled the sorceress's kicking legs and jumped, raising her straight up to the opalescent flickering nothingness of the lesser portal.

The portal which led into the unknown.

They flew out in a tight embrace, fell onto a marble floor and slid across it, knocking over an enormous candlestick and a table from which crystal goblets, platters of fruit and a huge bowl of crushed ice, seaweed and oysters showered down with a crash. Screams and squeals came from around the room.

They were lying in the very center of a ballroom, bright with candelabra. Richly clad gentlemen and ladies, sparkling with jewels, had stopped dancing and were watching them in stunned silence. The musicians in the gallery finished their piece in a cacophony which grated on the ears.

“You moron!” Yennefer yelled, trying to scratch out his eyes. “You bloody idiot! You stopped me! I nearly had him!”

“You had shit-all!” he shouted back, furious. “I saved your life, you stupid witch!”

She hissed like a furious cat; her palms showered sparks.

Geralt, turning his face away, caught her by both wrists and they rolled among the oysters, seaweed and crushed ice.

“Do you have an invitation?” A portly man with the golden chain of a chamberlain on his chest was looking at them with a haughty expression.

“Screw yourself!” screamed Yennefer, still trying to scratch Geralt's eyes out.

“It's a scandal,” the chamberlain said emphatically. “Verily, you're exaggerating with this teleportation. I’m going to complain to the Council of Wizards. I’ll demand...”

No one ever heard what the chamberlain would demand. Yennefer wrenched herself free, slapped the Witcher in the ear with her open palm, kicked him forcefully in the shin and jumped into the fading portal in the wall.

Geralt threw himself after her, catching her hair and belt with a practiced move.

Yennefer, also having gained practice, landed him a blow with her elbow.

The sudden move split her dress at the armpit, revealing a shapely breast. An oyster flew from her torn dress.

They both fell into the nothingness of the portal. Geralt could still hear the chamberlain's voice.

“Music! Play on! Nothing has happened. Please take no notice of that pitiful incident!”

The Witcher was convinced that with every successive journey through the portal, the risk of misfortune was multiplying, and he wasn't mistaken. They hit the target, Errdil's tavern, but they materialized just under the ceiling. They fell, shattering the stair balustrade and, with a deafening crash, landed on the table. The table had the right not to withstand the blow, and it didn't.

Yennefer found herself under the table. He was sure she had lost consciousness. He was mistaken.

She punched him in the eye and fired a volley of insults straight at him which would do credit to a dwarven undertaker...and they were renowned for their foul language. The curses were accompanied by furious, chaotic blows dealt blindly, randomly.

Geralt grabbed her by the hands and, to avoid being hit by her forehead, thrust his face into the sorceress's cleavage which smelled of lilac, gooseberries and oysters.

“Let me go!” she screamed, kicking like a pony. “You idiot! Let go! The tethers are going to break any moment now. I’ve got to strengthen them, or the djinn will escape!”

He didn't answer, although he wanted to. He grasped her even more tightly, trying to pin her down to the floor. Yennefer swore horribly, struggled, and with all her strength, kicked him in the crotch with her knee. Before he could catch his breath, she broke free and screamed an incantation. He felt a terrible force drag him from the ground and hurl him across the hall until, with a violence that near-stunned him, he slammed against a carved two-doored chest of drawers and shattered it completely.

### Part IX

“What's happening there?!” Dandelion, clinging to the wall, strained his neck, trying to see through the downpour. “Tell me what's happening there, dammit!”

“They're fighting!” yelled an urchin, springing away from the tavern window as if he'd burned himself. His tattered friends also escaped, slapping the mud with their bare heels. “The sorcerer and the witch are fighting!”

“Fighting?” Neville was surprised. “They're fighting, and that shitty demon is ruining my town! Look, he's knocked another chimney down. And damaged the brick-kiln! Hey, you get over there, quick! Gods, we're lucky it's raining or there'd be a fire like nobody's business!”

“This won't last much longer,” Krepp said gloomily. “The magical light is weakening; the bonds will break at any moment. Mr. Neville! Order the people to move back! All hell's going to break loose over there at any minute! There'll be only splinters left of that house! Mr. Errdil, what are you laughing at? It's your house. What makes you so amused?”

“I had that wreck insured for a massive sum!”

“Does the policy cover magical and supernatural events?”

“Of course.”

“That's wise, Mr. Elf. Very wise. Congratulations. Hey, you people, get to some shelter! Don't get any closer, if you value your lives!”

A deafening crash came from within Errdil's house, and lightning flashed. The small crowd retreated, hiding behind the pillars.

“Why did Geralt go there?” groaned Dandelion. “What the hell for? Why did he insist on saving that witch? Why, dammit? Chireadan, do you understand?”

The elf smiled sadly. “Yes, I do, Dandelion,” he said. “I do.”

### Part X

Geralt leapt away from another blazing orange shaft which shot from the sorceress's fingers. She was clearly tired, the shafts were weak and slow, and he avoided them with no great difficulty.

“Yennefer!” he shouted. “Calm down! Will you listen?! You won't be able...”

He didn't finish. Thin red bolts of lightning spurted from the sorceress's hands, reaching him in many places and wrapping him up thoroughly. His clothes hissed and started to smolder.

“I won't be able to?” she said through her teeth, standing over him. “You'll soon see what I’m capable of. It will suffice for you to lie there for a while and not get in my way.”

“Get this off me!” he roared, struggling in the blazing spider's web. “I’m burning, dammit!”

“Lie there and don't move,” she advised, panting heavily. “It only burns when you move…I can't spare you any more time, Witcher. We had a romp, but enough's enough. I’ve got to take care of the djinn; he's ready to run away...”

“Run away?” Geralt screamed. “It's you who should run away! That djinn…Yennefer, listen to me carefully. I’ve got to tell you the truth.”

### Part XI

The djinn gave a tug at the tethers, traced a circle, tightened the lines holding it, and swept the little tower off Beau Berrant's house.

“What a roar he's got!” Dandelion frowned, instinctively clasping his throat. “What a terrible roar! It looks as if he's bloody furious!”

“That's because he is,” said Krepp.

Chireadan glanced at him. “What?”

“He's furious,” repeated Krepp. “And I’m not surprised. I’d be furious too if I had to fulfill, to the letter, the first wish accidentally expressed by the Witcher...”

“How's that?” shouted Dandelion. “Geralt? Wish?”

“He's the one who held the seal which imprisoned the djinn. The djinn's fulfilling his wishes. That's why the witch can't master it. But the Witcher mustn't tell her, even if he's caught on to it by now. He shouldn't tell her.”

“Dammit,” muttered Chireadan. “I’m beginning to understand. The warder in the dungeon burst…”

“That was the Witcher's second wish. He's still got one left. The last one. But gods help us, he shouldn't reveal that to Yennefer!”

### Part XII

She stood motionless, leaning over him, paying no attention to the djinn struggling at its bonds above the tavern roof. The building shook, lime and splinters poured from the ceiling, furniture crept along the floor, shuddering spasmodically.

“So that's how it is,” she hissed. “Congratulations. You deceived me. Not Dandelion, but you. That's why the djinn's fighting so hard! But I haven't lost yet, Geralt. You underestimate me, and you underestimate my power. I’ve still got the djinn and you in my hand. You've still got one last wish, haven't you? So, make it. You'll free the djinn and then I’ll bottle it.”

“You haven't got enough strength left, Yennefer.”

“You underestimate my strength. The wish, Geralt!”

“No, Yennefer. I can't…The djinn might fulfill it, but it won't spare you. It'll kill you when it's free. It'll take its revenge on you…You won't manage to catch it and you won't manage to defend yourself against it. You're weakened; you can barely stand. You'll die, Yennefer.”

“That's my risk!” she shouted, enraged. “What's it to you what happens to me? Think rather what the djinn can give you! You've still got one wish! You can ask what you like! Make use of it! Use it, Witcher! You can have anything! Anything!”

### Part XIII

“Are they both going to die?” wailed Dandelion. “How come? Krepp, why? After all, the Witcher...Why, by all perfidious and unexpected plagues, isn't he escaping? Why? What's keeping him? Why doesn't he leave that bloody witch to her fate and run away? It's senseless!”

“Absolutely senseless,” repeated Chireadan bitterly. “Absolutely.”

“It's suicide. And plain idiocy!”

“It's his job, after all,” interrupted Neville. “The Witcher's saving my town. May the gods be my witness...if he defeats the witch and chases the demon away, I’ll reward him handsomely…”

Dandelion snatched the hat decorated with a heron's feather from his head, spat into it, threw it in the mud and trampled on it, spitting out words in various languages as he did.

“But he's…” he groaned suddenly, “still got one wish in reserve! He could save both her and himself! Mr. Krepp!”

“It's not that simple,” the priest pondered. “But if…If he expressed the right wish…If he somehow tied his fate to the fate…No, I don't think it would occur to him. And it's probably better that it doesn't.”

### Part XIV

“The wish, Geralt! Hurry up! What do you desire? Immortality? Riches? Fame? Power? Might? Privileges? Hurry, we haven't any time!” He was silent. “Humanity,” she said suddenly, smiling nastily. “I’ve guessed, haven't I? That's what you want; that's what you dream of! Of release, of the freedom to be who you want, not who you have to be. The djinn will fulfill that wish, Geralt. Just say it.”

He stayed silent.

She stood over him in the flickering radiance of the wizard's sphere, in the glow of magic, amidst the flashes of rays restraining the djinn, streaming hair and eyes blazing violet, erect, slender, dark, terrible…

And beautiful.

Suddenly, she leaned over and looked him in the eyes. He caught the scent of lilac and gooseberries.

“You're not saying anything,” she hissed. “So, what is it you desire, Witcher? What is your most hidden dream? Is it that you don't know, or you can't decide? Look for it within yourself, look deeply and carefully because, I swear by the Force, you won't get another chance like this!”

But he suddenly knew the truth. He knew it. He knew what she used to be. What she remembered, what she couldn't forget, what she lived with. Who she really was before she had become a sorceress.

Her cold, penetrating, angry and wise eyes were those of a hunchback.

He was horrified. No, not of the truth. He was horrified that she would read his thoughts, find out what he had guessed. That she would never forgive him for it. He deadened that thought within himself, killed it, threw it from his memory forever, without trace, feeling, as he did so, enormous relief. Feeling that...

The ceiling cracked open. The djinn, entangled in the net of the now fading rays, tumbled right on top of them, roaring, and in that roar were triumph and murder lust. Yennefer leapt to meet him. Light beamed from her hands. Very feeble light.

The djinn opened his mouth and stretched his paws toward her.

The Witcher suddenly understood what it was he wanted.

And he made his wish.

### Part XV

The house exploded. Bricks, beams and planks flew up in a cloud of smoke and sparks. The djinn spurted from the dust-storm, as huge as a barn. Roaring and choking with triumphant laughter, the Air genie, free now, not tied to anyone's will, traced three circles above the town, tore the spire from the town hall, soared into the sky and vanished.

“It's escaped! It's escaped!” called Krepp. “The Witcher's had his way! The genie has flown away! It won't be a threat to anyone anymore!”

“Ah,” said Errdil with genuine rapture, “what a wonderful ruin!”

“Dammit, dammit!” hollered Dandelion, huddled behind the wall. “It's shattered the entire house! Nobody could survive that! Nobody, I tell you!”

“The Witcher, Geralt of Rivia, has sacrificed himself for the town,” mayor Neville said ceremoniously. “We won't forget him. We'll revere him. We'll think of a statue…”

Dandelion shook a piece of wicker matting bound with clay from his shoulder, brushed his jerkin free of lumps of rain-dampened plaster, looked at the mayor and, in a few well-chosen words, expressed his opinion about sacrifice, reverence, memory and all the statues in the world.

### Part XVI

Geralt looked around. Water was slowly dripping from the hole in the ceiling. There were heaps of rubble and stacks of timber all around. By a strange coincidence, the place where they lay was completely clear. Not one plank or one brick had fallen on them. It was as if they were being protected by an invisible shield.

Yennefer, slightly flushed, knelt by him, resting her hands on her knees.

“Witcher.” She cleared her throat. “Are you dead?”

“No.” Geralt wiped the dust from his face and hissed.

Slowly, Yennefer touched his wrist and delicately ran her fingers along his palm. “I burnt you...”

“It's nothing. A few blisters...”

“I’m sorry. You know, the djinn's escaped. For good.”

“Do you regret it?”

“Not much.”

“Good. Help me up, please.”

“Wait,” she whispered. “That wish of yours…I heard what you wished for. I was astounded, simply astounded. I’d have expected anything but to…What made you do it, Geralt? Why…Why me?”

“Don't you know?”

She leaned over him, touched him. He felt her hair, smelling of lilac and gooseberries, brush his face and he suddenly knew that he'd never forget that scent, that soft touch, knew that he'd never be able to compare it to any other scent or touch. Yennefer kissed him and he understood that he'd never desire any lips other than hers, so soft and moist, sweet with lipstick. He knew that, from that moment, only she would exist, her neck, shoulders and breasts freed from her black dress, her delicate, cool skin, which couldn't be compared to any other he had ever touched. He gazed into her violet eyes, the most beautiful eyes in the world, eyes which he feared would become… everything. He knew.

“Your wish,” she whispered, her lips very near his ear. “I don't know whether such a wish can ever be fulfilled. I don't know whether there's such a Force in Nature that could fulfill such a wish. But if there is, then you've condemned yourself. Condemned yourself to me.”

He interrupted her with a kiss, an embrace, a touch, caresses and then with everything, his whole being, his every thought, his only thought, everything, everything, everything. They broke the silence with sighs and the rustle of clothing strewn on the floor. They broke the silence very gently, lazily, and they were considerate and very thorough. They were caring and tender and, although neither quite knew what caring and tenderness were, they succeeded because they very much wanted to. And they were in no hurry whatsoever. The whole world had ceased to exist for a brief moment, but to them, it seemed like a whole eternity.

And then the world started to exist again; but it existed very differently.

“Geralt?”

“Mmm?”

“What now?”

“I don't know.”

“Nor do I. Because, you see, I…I don't know whether it was worth condemning yourself to me. I don't know how...Wait, what are you doing…? I wanted to tell you...”

“Yennefer…Yen.”

“Yen,” she repeated, giving in to him completely. “Nobody's ever called me that. Say it again.”

“Yen.”

“Geralt.”

## Part XVII

It had stopped raining. A rainbow appeared over Rinde and cut the sky with a broken, colored arc. It looked as if it grew straight from the tavern's ruined roof.

“By all the gods,” muttered Dandelion, “what silence…They're dead, I tell you. Either they've killed each other or my djinn finished them off.”

“We should go and see,” said Vratimir, wiping his brow with his crumpled hat. “They might be wounded. Should I call a doctor?”

“An undertaker, more like it,” said Krepp. “I know that witch, and that Witcher's got the devil in his eyes too. There's no two ways about it; we've got to start digging two pits in the cemetery. I’d advise sticking an aspen stake into that Yennefer before burying her.”

“What silence,” repeated Dandelion. “Beams were flying all over the place a moment ago and now it's as quiet as a grave.”

They approached the tavern ruins very cautiously and slowly.

“Let the carpenter get the coffins ready,” said Krepp. “Tell the carpenter...”

“Quiet,” interrupted Errdil. “I heard something. What was it, Chireadan?”

The elf brushed the hair off his pointed ear and tilted his head.

“I’m not sure…Let's get closer.”

“Yennefer's alive,” said Dandelion suddenly, straining his musical ear. “I heard her moan. There, she moaned again!”

“Uhuh,” confirmed Errdil. “I heard it, too. She moaned. She must really be suffering. Chireadan, where are you going? Careful!”

The elf backed away from the shattered window through which he had carefully peeped.

“Let's get out of here,” he said quietly. “Let's not disturb them.”

“They're both alive? Chireadan? What are they doing?”

“Let's get out of here,” repeated the elf. “Let's leave them alone for a bit. Let them stay there, Yennefer, Geralt and his last wish. Let's wait in a tavern; they'll join us before long. Both of them.”

“What are they doing?” Dandelion was curious. “Tell me, dammit!”

The elf smiled. Very, very sadly. “I don't like grand words,” he said. “And it's impossible to give it a name without using grand words.

## The voice of reason

Falwick, in full armor, without a helmet and with the crimson coat of the Order flung over his shoulder, stood in the glade. Next to him, with his arms across his chest, was a stocky, bearded dwarf in an overcoat lined with fox fur over, a chain-mail shirt of iron rings. Tailles, wearing no armor but a short, quilted doublet, paced slowly, brandishing his unsheathed sword from time to time.

The Witcher looked about, restraining his horse. All around glinted the cuirasses and flat helmets of soldiers armed with lances. “Bloody hell,” muttered Geralt. “I might have expected this.”

Dandelion turned his horse and quietly cursed at the sight of the lances cutting off their retreat. “What's this about, Geralt?”

“Nothing. Keep your mouth shut and don't butt in. I’ll try to lie my way out of it somehow.”

“What's it about, I ask you? More trouble?”

“Shut up.”

“It was a stupid idea after all, to ride into town,” groaned the troubadour, glancing toward the nearby towers of the temple visible above the forest. “We should have stayed at Nenneke's and not stirred beyond the walls…”

“Shut up. It'll all become clear; you'll see.”

“Doesn't look like it.”

Dandelion was right. It didn't. Tailles, brandishing his naked sword, continued pacing without looking in their direction. The soldiers, leaning on their spears, were watching gloomily and indifferently, with the expression of professionals for whom killing does not provoke much interest.

They dismounted. Falwick and the dwarf slowly approached.

“You've insulted Tailles, a man of good birth, Witcher,” said the count without preamble or the customary courtesies. “And Tailles, as you no doubt remember, threw down the gauntlet. It was not fit to press you within the grounds of the temple, so we waited until you emerged from behind the priestess's skirt. Tailles is waiting. You must fight.”

“Must?”

“Must.”

“But do you not think, Falwick” Geralt smiled disapprovingly “that Tailles, a man of good birth, does me too much honor? I never attained the honor of being knighted, and it's best not to mention the circumstances of my birth. I fear I’m not sufficiently worthy of… How does one say it, Dandelion?”

“Unfit to give satisfaction and joust in the lists,” recited the poet, pouting. “The code of chivalry proclaims...”

“The Chapter of the Order is governed by its own code,” interrupted Falwick. “If it were you who challenged a Knight of the Order, he could either refuse or grant you satisfaction, according to his will. But this is the reverse: it is the knight who challenges you and by this he raises you to his own level...but, of course, only for the time it takes to avenge the insult. You can't refuse. The refusal of accepting the dignity would render you unworthy.”

“How logical,” said Dandelion with an apelike expression. “I see you've studied the philosophers, sir Knight.”

“Don't butt in.” Geralt raised his head and looked into Falwick's eyes. “Go on, sir. I’d like to know where this is leading. What would happen if I turned out to be…unworthy?”

“What would happen?” Falwick gave a malicious smile. “I’d order you hung from a branch, you rat-catcher.”

“Hold on,” the dwarf said hoarsely. “Take it easy, sir. And no invective, all right?”

“Don't you teach me manners, Cranmer,” hissed the knight. “And remember, the prince has given you orders which you're to execute to the letter.”

“It's you who shouldn't be teaching me, Count.” The dwarf rested his hand on the double-headed axe thrust into his belt. “I know how to carry out orders, and I can do without your advice. Allow me, Geralt sir. I’m Dennis Cranmer, captain of Prince Hereward's guards.”

The Witcher bowed stiffly, looking into the dwarf's eyes, light gray and steel-like beneath the bushy flaxen eyebrows.

“Stand your ground with Tailles, sir,” Dennis Cranmer continued calmly. “It'll be better that way. It's not a fight to the death, only until one of you is rendered helpless. So, fight in the field and let him render you helpless.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Sir Tailles is the prince's favorite,” said Falwick, smiling spitefully. “If you touch him with your saber during the fight, you mutant, you will be punished. Captain Cranmer will arrest you and take you to face his Highness. To be punished. Those are his orders.”

The dwarf didn't even glance at the knight; his cold, steel eyes did not leave Geralt.

The Witcher smiled faintly but quite nastily. “If I understand correctly,” he said, “I’m to fight the duel because, if I refuse, I’ll be hanged. If I fight, I’m to allow my opponent to injure me because if I wound him, I’ll be put to the rack. What charming alternatives. Maybe I should save you the bother? I’ll thump my head against the pine tree and render myself helpless. Will that grant you satisfaction?”

“Don't sneer,” hissed Falwick. “Don't make your situation any worse. You've insulted the Order, you vagabond, and you have to be punished for it; do you understand? And young Tailles needs the fame of defeating a Witcher, so the Chapter wants to give it to him. Otherwise you'd be hanging already. You allow yourself to be defeated and you save your miserable life. We don't care about your corpse; we want Tailles to nick your skin. And your mutant skin heals quickly. So, go ahead. Decide. You've got no choice.”

“That's what you think, is it, sir?” Geralt smiled even more nastily and looked around at the soldiers appraisingly. “But I think I do.”

“Yes, that's true,” admitted Dennis Cranmer. “You do. But then there'll be bloodshed, great bloodshed. Like at Blaviken. Is that what you want? Do you want to burden your conscience with blood and death? Because the alternative you're thinking of, Geralt, is blood and death.”

“Your argument is charming, Captain, fascinating even,” mocked Dandelion. “You're trying to bait a man ambushed in the forest with humanitarianism, calling on his nobler feelings. You're asking him, as I understand, to deign not to spill the blood of the brigands who attacked him. He's to take pity on the thugs because the thugs are poor, have got wives, children and, who knows, maybe even mothers. But don't you think, Captain Cranmer, that your worrying is premature? Because I look at your lancers and see that their knees are shaking at the very thought of fighting with Geralt of Rivia, the Witcher who dealt with a striga alone, with his bare hands. There won't be any bloodshed here; nobody will be harmed here...aside from those who might break their legs running away.”

“I,” said the dwarf calmly and pugnaciously, “have nothing to reproach my knees with. I’ve never run away from anyone and I’m not about to change my ways. I’m not married, don't know anything about any children and I’d prefer not to bring my mother, a woman with whom I’m not very well acquainted, into this. But I will carry out the orders I’ve been given. To the letter, as always. Without calling on any feelings, I ask Geralt of Rivia to make a decision. I will accept whatever he decides and will behave accordingly.”

They looked each other in the eyes, the dwarf and the Witcher.

“Very well,” Geralt said finally. “Let's deal with it. It's a pity to waste the day.”

“You agree, then.” Falwick raised his head and his eyes glistened. “You'll fight a duel with the highborn Tailles of Dorndal?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Prepare yourself.”

“I’m ready.” Geralt pulled on his gauntlets. “Let's not waste time. There'll be hell if Nenneke finds out about this. So let's sort it out quickly. Dandelion: keep calm. It's got nothing to do with you. Am I right, Cranmer, sir?”

“Absolutely,” the dwarf stated firmly and looked at Falwick. “Absolutely, sir. Whatever happens, it only concerns you.”

The Witcher took the sword from his back.

“No,” said Falwick, drawing his. “You're not going to fight with that razor of yours. Take my sword.”

Geralt shrugged. He took the count's blade and swiped it to try it out.

“Heavy,” he said coldly. “We could just as easily use spades.”

“Tailles has the same. Equal chances.”

“You're very funny, Falwick.”

The soldiers surrounded the glade, forming a loose circle. Tailles and the Witcher stood facing each other.

“Tallies? What do you say to an apology?”

The young knight screwed up his lips, folded his left arm behind his back and froze in a fencing position.

“No?” Geralt smiled. “You don't want to listen to the voice of reason? Pity.”

Tailles squatted down, leapt and attacked without warning. The Witcher didn't even try to parry and avoided the flat point with a swift half-turn. The knight swiped broadly. The blade cut through the air once more. Geralt dodged beneath it in an agile pirouette, jumped softly aside and, with a short, light feint, threw Tailles off his rhythm. Tailles cursed, cut broadly from the right, lost his balance for a moment and tried to regain it while, instinctively, clumsily, holding his sword high to defend himself. The Witcher struck with the speed and force of a lightning bolt, extending his arm to its full length and slashing straight ahead. The heavy sword thundered against Tailles’ blade, deflecting it so hard it hit the knight in the face. Tailles howled, fell to his knees and touched the grass with his forehead.

Falwick ran up to him.

Geralt dug his sword into the ground and turned around.

“Hey, guards!” yelled Falwick, getting up. “Take him!”

“Stand still! To your places!” growled Dennis Cranmer, touching his axe. The soldiers froze. “No, Count,” the dwarf said slowly. “I always execute orders to the letter. The Witcher did not touch Tailles. The kid hit himself with his own iron. His hard luck.”

“His face is destroyed! He's disfigured for life!”

“Skin heals.” Dennis Cranmer fixed his steel eyes on the Witcher and bared his teeth. “And the scar? For a knight, a scar is a commendable reminder, a reason for fame and glory, which the Chapter so desired for him. A knight without a scar is a prick, not a knight. Ask him, Count, and you'll see that he's pleased.”

Tailles was writhing on the ground, spitting blood, whimpering and wailing; he didn't look pleased in the least.

“Cranmer!” roared Falwick, tearing his sword from the ground, “you'll be sorry for this, I swear!”

The dwarf turned around, slowly pulled the axe from his belt, coughed and spat into his palm. “Oh, Count, sir,” he rasped. “Don't perjure yourself. I can't stand perjurers and Prince Hereward has given me the right to punish them. I’ll turn a deaf ear to your stupid words. But don't repeat them, if you please.”

“Witcher.” Falwick, puffing with rage, turned to Geralt. “Get yourself out of Ellander. Immediately. Without a moment's delay!”

“I rarely agree with him,” muttered Dennis, approaching the Witcher and returning his sword, “but in this case he's right. I’d ride out pretty quick.”

“We'll do as you advise.” Geralt slung the belt across his back. “But before that, I have words for the count. Falwick!”

The Knight of the White Rose blinked nervously and wiped his palms on his coat.

“Let's just go back to your Chapter's code for a minute,” continued the Witcher, trying not to smile. “One thing really interests me. If I, let us say, felt disgusted and insulted by your attitude in this whole affair, if I challenged you to the sword right now, what would you do? Would you consider me sufficiently worthy to cross blades with? Or would you refuse, even though you knew that by doing so I would take you to be unworthy even to be spat on, punched in the face and kicked in the ass under the eyes of the foot soldiers? Count Falwick, be so gracious as to satisfy my curiosity.”

Falwick grew pale, took a step back, looked around. The soldiers avoided his eyes. Dennis Cranmer grimaced, stuck his tongue out and sent a jet of saliva a fair distance.

“Even though you're not saying anything,” continued Geralt, “I can hear the voice of reason in your silence, Falwick, sir. You've satisfied my curiosity; now I’ll satisfy yours. If the Order bothers Mother Nenneke or the priestesses in any way, or unduly intrudes upon Captain Cranmer, then may you know, Count, that I’ll find you and, not caring about any code, will bleed you like a pig.”

The knight grew even paler.

“Don't forget my promise, Count. Come on, Dandelion. It's time for us to leave. Take care, Dennis.”

“Good luck, Geralt.” The dwarf gave a broad smile. “Take care. I’m very pleased to have met you, and hope we'll meet again.”

“The feeling's mutual, Dennis.”

They rode away with ostensible slowness, not looking back. They began to canter only once they were hidden by the forest.

“Geralt,” the poet said suddenly, “surely we won't head straight south? We'll have to make a detour to avoid Ellander and Hereward's lands, won't we? Or do you intend to continue with this show?”

“No, Dandelion, I don't. We'll go through the forests and then join the Traders’ Trail. Remember, not a word in Nenneke's presence about this quarrel. Not a word.”

“We are riding out without any delay, I hope?”

“Immediately.”

[LATER]

Geralt leaned over, checked the repaired hoop of his stirrup and fitted the stirrup leather, still stiff, smelling of new skins and hard to buckle. He adjusted the saddle-girth, the travel bags, the horse blanket rolled up behind the saddle and the silver sword strapped to it. Nenneke was motionless next to him, her arms folded.

Dandelion approached, leading his bay gelding.

“Thank you for the hospitality, Venerable One,” he said seriously. “And don't be angry with me anymore. I know that, deep down, you like me.”

“Indeed,” agreed Nenneke without smiling. “I do, you dolt, although I don't know why myself. Take care.”

“So long, Nenneke.”

“So long, Geralt. Look after yourself.”

The Witcher's smile was surly. “I prefer to look after others. It turns out better in the long run.”

From the temple, from between columns entwined with ivy, Iola emerged in the company of two younger pupils. She was carrying the Witcher's small chest. She avoided his eyes awkwardly and her troubled smile combined with the blush on her freckled, chubby face made a charming picture. The pupils accompanying her didn't hide their meaningful glances and barely stopped themselves from giggling.

“For Great Melitele's sake,” sighed Nenneke, “an entire parting procession. Take the chest, Geralt. I’ve replenished your elixirs. You've got everything that was in short supply. And that medicine, you know the one. Take it regularly for two weeks. Don't forget. It's important.”

“I won't. Thanks, Iola.”

The girl lowered her head and handed him the chest. She so wanted to say something. She had no idea what ought to be said, what words ought to be used. She didn't know what she'd say, even if she could. She didn't know. And yet she so much wanted to.

Their hands touched.

Blood. Blood. Blood. Bones like broken white sticks. Tendons like whitish cords exploding from beneath cracking skin cut by enormous paws bristling with thorns, and sharp teeth. The hideous sound of torn flesh, and shouting...shameless and horrifying in its shamelessness. The shamelessness of the end. Of death. Blood and shouting. Shouting. Blood. Shouting...

“Iola!” Nenneke, with extraordinary speed considering her girth, rushed to the girl lying on the ground, shaken by convulsions, and held her down by her shoulders and hair. One of the pupils stood as if paralyzed, the other, more clearheaded, knelt on Iola's legs. Iola arched her back, opened her mouth in a soundless, mute cry.

“Iola!” Nenneke shouted. “Iola! Speak! Speak, child! Speak!”

The girl stiffened even more, clenched her jaws, and a thin trickle of blood ran down her cheek. Nenneke, growing red with the effort, shouted something which the Witcher didn't understand, but his medallion tugged at his neck so hard that he was forced to bend under the pressure of its invisible weight.

Iola stilled. Dandelion, pale as a sheet, sighed deeply.

Nenneke raised herself to her knees and stood with an effort. “Take her away,” she said to the pupils. There were more of them now; they'd gathered, grave and silent. “Take her,” repeated the priestess, “carefully. And don't leave her alone. I’ll be there in a minute.”

She turned to Geralt. The Witcher was standing motionless, fiddling with the reins in his sweaty hands.

“Geralt…Iola...”

“Don't say anything, Nenneke.”

“I saw it, too…for a moment. Geralt, don't go.”

“I’ve got to.”

“Did you see…did you see that?”

“Yes. And not for the first time.”

“And?”

“There's no point in looking over your shoulder.”

“Don't go, please.”

“I’ve got to. See to Iola. So long, Nenneke.”

The priestess slowly shook her head, sniffed and, in an abrupt move, wiped a tear away with her wrist.

“Farewell,” she whispered, not looking him in the eye.

# The Sword of Destiny

## The Limits of the Possible

“He's not coming back out, I tell you!” stated a pimply-faced man, shaking his head with finality. “It's been an hour and a quarter since he went in. He's done for.”

The townsfolk, huddled together amid the ruins and rubble, watched the gaping black hole of the entrance to the tunnel in silence. A fat man dressed in a yellow smock shifted slightly from one foot to the other, cleared his throat and pulled his wrinkled cap from his head.

“We have to wait a bit longer,” he said as he wiped the sweat from his sparse eyebrows.

“Why wait?” snorted pimply, “There in the caves lurks a basilisk, or have you forgotten, Alderman? Anyone goes down there, that's the end of them. Have you forgotten how many have died down there already? What are we waiting for?”

“This was the agreement, wasn't it?” murmured the fat man uncertainly.

“An agreement you made with a living man, Alderman” said the pimply-faced man's companion, a giant of a man in a leather butcher's apron. “He is now dead, as surely as the sun shines in the sky. It was plain from the beginning that he was headed towards death, like all the others before him. He didn't even take a mirror with him, only a sword - and everybody knows you need a mirror in order to kill a basilisk.”

“At least we've saved some coin,” added pimples “there's no one to pay for taking care of the basilisk. You might as well go home. As far as the sorcerer's horse and baggage... well it would be a shame if they went to waste.”

“Yes,” said the butcher, “It's a fine old mare and the saddlebags are full. Let's take a look.”

“What are you doing?”

“Shut up, Alderman. Don't get in the way unless you want a punch in the face,” threatened the pimpled man.

“A fine old mare,” repeated the butcher.

“Leave the horse alone, my darling.”

The butcher slowly turned around towards the stranger who had suddenly appeared from behind a collapsed wall, just at the back of the audience gathered around the tunnel entrance. The stranger had thick curly brown hair and wore a dark brown tunic under a puffy cotton coat and tall riding boots. He had no weapons.

“Step away from the horse,” he repeated with a menacing smile. “What have we here? A horse and saddlebags belonging to another and yet you eye them greedily and paw through them. Is that honorable?”

Pimply slowly slipped a hand inside his overcoat and glanced at the butcher. The butcher gave a nod and signaled toward the crowd, out of which stepped two strong, close cropped, youths. Both carried heavy clubs, like those used to stun animals in the slaughterhouse.

“Who are you?” demanded the pimply-faced man, whose hand remained hidden inside his overcoat, “to tell us what is and isn't honorable?”

“That's none of your business, my dear.”

“You carry no weapons.”

“That's true,” the stranger's smile grew even more poisonous, “I don't carry weapons.”

“That's no good,” pimply drew a long knife out from inside his coat, “Too bad for you you're not armed.”

The butcher also drew a blade; a long hunting knife. The other two men approached, brandishing their clubs.

“I don't carry weapons,” responded the stranger, not budging, “but I'm always armed.”

From behind the ruins, two young women stepped out lightly and confidently. The crowd quickly parted, retreated then thinned out.

The girls smiled, flashing their teeth, and blinked. They had blue stripes tattooed from the corners of their eyes to the tips of their ears. Lynx pelt clad their strong muscles from thigh to hip and their bare arms curved above their mail gauntlets. From behind the mail-clad shoulder of each rose the hilt of a sabre.

Pimply got down on one knee and slowly, very slowly, placed his knife on the ground.

From the hole in ruins came a rumble of stones, grinding, and then from the darkness there emerged two hands clutching the jagged edge of the wall. Following the hands, a white head appeared, the hair powdered with brick dust, a pale face and then, finally, shoulders, above which stood the hilt of a sword. A murmur escaped the crowd.

The alabaster-haired man straightened and pulled a strange shape from the hole; a small, odd looking body covered in dust and blood. Holding the beast by its long lizard-like tail, the man tossed it to the feet of the alderman without a word. The alderman jumped backwards and tripped on a fragment of wall, his eyes glued to a curved bird-like beak, webbed crescent-shaped wings and claws like sickles on its scaly feet. Its slashed throat, once carmine, was now a dirty red-brown. Its sunken eyes were glassy.

“Here's the basilisk,” said the white-haired man as he brushed the dust from his trousers, “As agreed, that'll be 200 lintars, good ones, not too worn. I will check them, I'm warning you.”

With shaking hands, the alderman produced a large purse. The white-haired man looked around at the townsfolk, his gaze resting on the pimply-faced man, his discarded knife at his feet. He also noticed the man in the brown tunic and the young women in the lynx pelts.

“It's always the same,” he said as he took the purse from the alderman's nervous hands, “I risk my neck for a few measly coins and you, meanwhile, try to rob me. You people never change, damn you to hell!”

“We haven't touched your bags,” the butcher muttered, backing away. The men armed with the clubs had long since hidden themselves in the crowd. “Your things have not been disturbed, sir”

“I'm glad to hear it,” the white-haired man smiled. At the sight of his smile, which bloomed on his pale face like an open wound, the crowd began to disperse. “And that is why, brother, you have nothing to worry about. Go in peace. But go quickly.”

Pimply, backing away, was about to run. The spots stood out on his pallid face making him look even more hideous.

“Hey! Wait a minute!” called the man in the brown tunic, “You've forgotten about something.”

“What's that... sir?”

“You pulled a knife on me.”

The tallest of the young women, who stood waiting with her long legs apart, turned on her hip. Her sabre, drawn faster than the eye could see, cut through the air. The head of the pimply-faced man flew upwards, tracing an arc before disappearing into the gaping hole. His body rolled stiff and heavy, like a freshly felled tree, amongst the broken rubble. The crowd cried out in unison. The second girl, her hand on the hilt of her sabre, turned agilely, covering her back. It was unnecessary - the crowd rushed and stumbled through the ruins towards the town as fast as their legs could carry them. At the head of the crowd, leaping impressively, was the alderman - slightly ahead of the butcher.

“A beautiful strike,” commented the white-haired man coldly as he shielded his eyes from the sun with a black-gloved hand. “A beautiful strike from a Zerricanian sabre. I humbly bow before the skill and beauty of free warrior women. I am Geralt of Rivia.”

“And I...” the unknown man indicated to a faded coat of arms emblazoned on his brown tunic representing three black birds aligned on a field of gold, “I am Borch, also called Three Jackdaws. And these are my bodyguards Tea and Vea. At least that's what I call them because their true names are a tongue twister. They are both, as you so finely guessed, Zerricanian.”

“Thanks to them, or so it would seem, I still have my horse and belongings. My thanks to you, warriors, and to you, noble lord.”

“Three Jackdaws. And I'm no gentleman. Is there anything keeping you in this region, Geralt of Rivia?”

“Nothing at all.”

“Perfect. In that case, I have a proposition. Not far from here, at the crossroads on the road to the river-port, is an inn called The Pensive Dragon. The food is unequalled throughout this whole region. I'm on my way there now with the intention of dining and spending the night. It would be an honor if you would accompany me.”

“Borch,” replied Geralt, white head turning away from his horse, looking into the bright eyes of the stranger, “I'd like you to know so that there be no misunderstanding between us. I'm a Witcher.”

“I thought as much. And you said that as if you were saying, 'I'm a leper.'“

“There are some,” Geralt replied calmly, “that would prefer the company of a leper to that of a Witcher.”

“And there are others,” replied Three Jackdaws with a smile, “who would prefer the company of sheep to that of young ladies. In the end, all I can do is pity them. I stand by my proposal.”

Geralt took off a glove and shook the stranger's outstretched hand. “I accept. It's a pleasure to meet you.”

“Let's be off then, I'm starving.”

### Part II

The innkeeper wiped the uneven surface of the table with a cloth, bowed and smiled. He was missing two front teeth.

“Yes...” Three Jackdaws stared for a moment at the blackened ceiling and watched the spiders walking playfully across it. “First... some beer. On second thoughts, a keg of beer. And with the beer... what do you recommend, my dear?”

“Cheese?” the innkeeper suggested uncertainly.

“No,” frowned Borch, “Cheese should be for afters. With the beer we'd like something sour and spicy.”

“At your service,” the innkeeper smiled even wider. His two front teeth were not the only ones that he lacked. “How about eels marinated in garlic and vinegar, or green pickles...”

“Perfect. For two please. And after that, some soup. Like the one I ate last time with the mussels, small fish and other crap floating in it.”

“Seafood soup?”

“Yes. Next, roast lamb with eggs and onions. Then about sixty crayfish. Throw some fennel into the pan, as much as you can muster. Then ewe's cheese and a salad. After that... we'll see.”

“At your service. Is that for everyone? All four of you?”

The tallest of the Zerricanians shook her head and patted her belly significantly, accentuating the way her linen shirt clung to her body.

“I forgot,” Three Jackdaws winked at Geralt, “The girls are watching their figures. Innkeeper! Lamb only for us two. Bring the beer and eels immediately, leave the rest for a while so that the other dishes don't get cold. We didn't come here to stuff our faces, just to spend time in pleasant conversation.”

“I understand completely, sir,” replied the innkeeper, bowing once more.

“Understanding - this is an important quality in your line of work. Give me your hand, my beauty,” gold coin jingled, and the innkeeper smiled as widely as possible.

“This is not an advance,” specified Three Jackdaws, “it's a little extra. Now get back to your kitchen, my good fellow.”

It was hot in the alcove. Geralt loosened his belt, removed his doublet then rolled up the sleeves of his shirt. “I see you're not troubled by lack of silver,” he said, “Do you live by the privileges of knighthood?”

“Partly,” Three Jackdaws smiled in answer and didn't elaborate.

They made short work of the eels and quarter of the beer barrel. Although the Zerricanians were obviously enjoying the evening, they did not drink much of the beer. They spoke together quietly until Vea suddenly burst into throaty laughter.

“Do the girls speak the common language?” asked Geralt as he watched them out of the corner of his eye.

“Badly. And they're not exactly chatterboxes, which is nice. How's your soup, Geralt?”

“Hmm.”

“Drink up.”

“Hmm.”

“Geralt...” Three Jackdaws gestured with his spoon and belched discretely, “Returning for one moment to the conversation we had whilst on the road: it's my understanding, Witcher, that you wander from one end of the world to the other, killing any monsters you meet along the way - for pay. That is your job, isn't it?”

“More or less.”

“What if somebody personally appeals to you to go somewhere specific? Say to carry out a special order. What do you do then?”

“That depends on who's asking me and what they have in mind.”

“And the wages?”

“That too,” the Witcher shrugged, “Everything becomes more expensive if you want to live well' as one of my magician friends likes to say.”

“Quite a selective approach, and I would say very practical. Yet there is a certain principal underlying it, Geralt. The conflict between the forces of Order and those of Chaos, as one of my wizard friends likes to say. I imagine that you always take missions that involve protecting humans from the Evil that is all around us. Undoubtedly this places you on the good side of the fence.”

“The forces of Order, the forces of Chaos... what grand words, Borch. You want at all costs for me to place myself on one side of the fence in a conflict that all regard as eternal, a conflict that's been going on since before we were born and will continue long after we're gone. On which side should the blacksmith place himself in this business? Or the innkeeper who hurries to bring us roast lamb? What, according to you, defines the boundary between Chaos and Order?”

“It's very simple,” Three Jackdaws looked the Witcher right in the eye, “Chaos represents a threat. It is on the side of violence and aggression. Order, on the other hand, opposes it. That is why it must be protected and needs someone to defend it. But let us drink and make a start on this lamb.”

“Good idea.”

Still concerned for their figures, the Zerricanians had taken a break from eating to devote themselves to drinking at an accelerated pace. Vea leaned on the shoulder of her companion, and murmured something in her ear, her braids brushing the tabletop. Tea, the shorter of the two, burst into laughter, her tattooed eyelids blinking merrily.

“Well,” continued Borch, gnawing on a bone. “Let us continue our conversation, if you'll permit. I see that prefer not to take sides in the conflict between the forces. You just want to do your job.”

“Yes.”

“But you cannot escape the conflict between Order and Chaos. Despite your comparison, you're not a blacksmith. I saw how you work; you enter an underground tunnel and come out of it with a small, mangled basilisk. There is a difference, my pretty, between shoeing horses and killing basilisks. You've already indicated that you'll journey to the other side of the world to slay a certain monster if the pay is worth it. Let's say a fierce dragon destroys...”

“Bad example,” interrupted Geralt. “You see, the boundary becomes blurred already. I don't kill dragons, despite the fact they no doubt represent Chaos.”

“Why is that?” Three Jackdaws licked his fingers, “But that's outrageous! Surely of all the monsters, the dragon is the most dangerous, vicious and cruel. Most terrible of all the reptiles. It attacks humans, spits fire and it even steals virgins! Haven't you heard enough stories about that? Is it possible that you, Witcher, do not have a few dragon slayings in your list of accomplishments?”

“I do not hunt dragons,” Geralt replied dryly, “Giant centipedes, yes. Dracolizards, dermopterans but not real dragons, greens, blacks or reds. Make no mistake about it.”

“You astonish me,” replied Three Jackdaws, “But nevertheless, I get the message. Enough talking about dragons for now. I see something red on the horizon; undoubtedly our crayfish. Drink up!”

They noisily broke the shells with their teeth and sucked out the white flesh. Salty water, stinging painfully, ran down to their wrists. Borch served up some more beer, scraping the bottom of the small cask with the ladle, while the Zerricanians amused themselves by watching the goings on around them. They laughed unpleasantly at a soothsayer on the next table over and the Witcher was convinced that they were looking for a fight. Three Jackdaws also noticed it and waved a crayfish at them threateningly. The girls giggled, Tea blowing him a kiss and giving him an ostentatious wink. Her tattoos made the gesture slightly macabre.

“They truly are wildcats,” murmured Three Jackdaws to Geralt. “They must be watched all the time otherwise, in less than two seconds flat and without warning, the ground is likely to be strewn with entrails. However, they are worth all the money in the world. Did you know that they can...?”

“I know,” replied Geralt, nodding. “It is difficult to find a better escort. Zerricanians are born warriors, trained in combat from a very early age.”

“I wasn't talking about that.” Borch spat a crayfish pincer onto the table. “I was thinking about their performance in bed.”

Geralt watched the young girls out of the corner of his eye. Both smiled and Vea seized a shellfish, as quick as a flash. She cracked the carapace with her teeth and blinked as she regarded the Witcher. Her lips glistened with the salty water. Three Jackdaws belched loudly.

“So, Geralt,” he continued, “you don't hunt dragons, green or otherwise. I'll bear it in mind. Why categorize them by these three colors, may I ask?”

“Four colors, to be precise.”

“You only mentioned three.”

“You seem to have a great interest in dragons, Borch. Is there a particular reason?”

“I'm just curious.”

“These colors are the customary categorization, although not a precise one. Green dragons are most widespread though in fact they are rather gray, like dracolizards. To tell you the truth the reds are more red brown, the color of brick. The large dark brown dragons are usually called black dragons. Rarest of all are the white dragons. I've never seen one. They live in the far North, apparently.”

“Interesting. Do you know what other types of dragons I've heard of?”

“I know,” replied Geralt, swallowing a mouthful of beer. “I've also heard of them: the gold. But they don't exist.”

“But how can you be sure? Just because you've never seen one? You've never seen a white one either.”

“That's not the point. Across the seas, in Ofir and Zangwebar, there are white horses with black stripes. I've never seen those either, but I know that they exist. The golden dragon is a myth, a legend, like the phoenix. Phoenixes and golden dragons do not exist.”

Vea, leaning on her elbows, looked at him curiously.

“You certainly know what you're talking about - you're a Witcher,” said Borch drawing some more beer from the small keg. “However, I think any myth, any legend, can contain a grain of truth that sometimes can't be ignored.”

“That is so,” confirmed Geralt, “but that is the territory of dreams, hopes and desires: it's about the belief that there is no limit to what is possible, just because there is sometimes a wild chance that it might be true.”

“Chance, exactly. It may be there once was a golden dragon; the product of a single, unique mutation.”

“If that's the case, that dragon would've suffered the fate of all mutants,” the Witcher bowed his head. “It couldn't survive, because it's too different.”

“Now you oppose natural law, Geralt. My wizard friend was in the habit of saying that each and every being can prevail in nature in one manner or another. The end of one existence always announces the beginning of another. There is no limit, at least when it comes to nature.”

“Your wizard friend was a huge optimist. There is one element he didn't take into consideration; errors made by nature or those that play with it. The golden dragon and all the other mutants of its species, even if they have existed, could not survive. A natural limit inherent in them has prevented it.”

“What's that?”

“Mutants...” the muscles in Geralt's jaw tensed, “Mutants are sterile, Borch. Only legends permit what nature condemns. Only myths can ignore the limits of what's possible.”

Three Jackdaws remained silent. Geralt saw that the girls' faces had suddenly become serious. Vea quickly leaned towards him, embracing him with her hard, muscular arms. He felt her lips on his cheek, wet with beer.

“They like you,” said Three Jackdaws slowly, “The devil take it, they like you!”

“What's so strange about that?” replied the Witcher, smiling sadly.

“Nothing. But a toast is necessary. Landlord! Another keg!”

“Not that much. A tankard at most.”

“Make that two tankards!” shouted Three Jackdaws. “Tea, I must leave for a moment.”

The Zerricanian picked up her sabre from the bench as she rose before inspecting the room with a tired glance. The Witcher noticed several pairs of eyes sparkle with greed at the sight of Borch's overstuffed coin-purse, but nobody dared to follow him as he staggered in the direction of the courtyard. Tea shrugged before following her employer.

“What's your real name?” asked Geralt of the girl who remained sitting at the table.

Vea smiled revealing a line of white teeth, much of her shirt was unbuttoned as far as the last possible limit of decency allowed. Geralt did not doubt for an instant that her demeanor was designed to test the resistance of the other patrons in the room.

“Alveaenerle.”

“That's beautiful.” The Witcher was sure that the Zerricanian now gazed at him doe-eyed, seductively. He was not mistaken.

“Vea?”

“Hmm...”

“Why do you ride with Borch? Warriors love of freedom. Can you tell me?”

“Hmm...”

“Hmm, what?”

“He is...” the Zerricanian wrinkled her brow while she tried to find the right words, “He is the most... the most beautiful.”

The Witcher shook his head. The criteria used by women to assess the desirability of men had always been an enigma to him.

Three Jackdaws burst into the alcove re-buttoning his trousers and gave a loud command to the landlord. Tea, two steps behind him, feigned boredom as she looked around the tavern, the merchants and the mariners present avoiding her eyes. Vea sucked at a crayfish while casting the Witcher knowing glances.

“I'll have another order of eel for everyone, braised this time,” Three Jackdaws sat down heavily, his still open belt jangled. “I'm tired of crayfish and I'm still hungry. I have reserved you a room, Geralt. You have no reason to be wandering this night. Let's have some more fun. To your health, girls!”

“Vessekheal [cheers],” Vea replied, holding up her glass. Tea blinked and stretched. Her lovely breasts, contrary to Geralt's expectations, did not burst out of her shirt.

“Let's have some fun!” Three Jackdaws leaned across the table, and slapped Tea on the behind, “Let's party, Witcher, Hey! Innkeeper! Over here!” The innkeeper quickly approached them, wiping his hands on his apron. “Do you have a large tub? Like one for washing linen in: solid and roomy.”

“How big, sir?”

“For four people.”

“For... four,” repeated the innkeeper smiling widely.

“Four,” confirmed Three Jackdaws, pulling his full coin-purse out of his pocket.

“We'll find one for you,” promised the innkeeper as he moistened his lips.

“Perfect,” replied Borch, all smiles. “Order one and bring it up into my room and see that it's filled with hot water. Get to it, my dear chap, and don't forget beer and at least three tankards.” The Zerricanians laughed and winked at the Witcher.

“Which do you prefer?” asked Three Jackdaws. “Huh, Geralt?”

The Witcher scratched his head.

“I know it's a difficult choice,” continued Three Jackdaws with a knowing air. “I also have trouble sometimes. Well, we will decide when we're in the tub. Hey, girls! Help me up the stairs.”

### Part III

There was a barricade on the bridge. A long and solid beam positioned on trestles barred access to the other bank of the river. Halberdiers in buttoned leather jackets and mail were gathered there, standing guard on both sides. Aloft, a crimson pennant bearing a silver griffin flapped in the wind.

“What the devil?” exclaimed Three Jackdaws as they approached the barricade. “We can't pass?”

“Do you have a pass?” asked the nearest halberdier, without removing from his mouth the straw he was chewing to stave off hunger or quite simply to kill time.

“What pass? What's going on? An epidemic of cattle plague? War? In whose name do you block the road?”

“On the order of King Niedamir, Lord of Caingorn.” the guard moved the straw to the other corner of his mouth and indicated to the pennant. “Without safe conduct, you cannot pass.”

“How stupid,” interrupted Geralt in a tired voice. “We are not, however, in Caingorn but in the county of Barefield. It's just as well that Barefield and not Caingorn collects the toll on the bridges of the Braa. What's it got to do with Niedamir?”

“Don't ask me,” replied the guard, spitting out his straw. “I'm only here to check the passes, if you want, you can ask our commanding officer.”

“Where is he?”

“Over there, making the most of the sun behind the toll collector's booth,” replied the guard, looking not at Geralt but at the naked thighs of the Zerricanians which lay nonchalantly across their saddles.

A guard was sitting on a pile of dry straw behind the hut of the toll collector. He was drawing in the sand, with the end of his halberd, a picture of a woman; a rather detailed view from an unusual perspective. Next to him there was a thin man, half dozing, delicately strumming chords on a lute. An eccentric plum colored hat decorated with a silver buckle and a long egret feather drooped over his eyes. Geralt recognized the hat and the feather so famous in Buina and Laruga and known in all the manors, castles, guesthouses, inns and brothels. Especially in the brothels.

“Dandelion!”

“Witcher Geralt!” merry blue eyes appeared from under the hat. “What a surprise! Is it really you? You wouldn't happen to have a pass, by chance?”

“What's all this business about passes? What's going on here, Dandelion? I'm travelling with the knight Borch of the Three Jackdaws and his escort and we want to cross the river.”

“I'm also stuck here.” Dandelion rose and lifted his hat before bowing to the Zerricanians with a courtly flourish. “They won't let me pass either, me, Dandelion, the most celebrated of minstrels and poets for a thousand miles around. It was the lieutenant who refused; and he's also an artist, as you can see.”

“I can't let anyone cross without a pass,” stated the lieutenant with a disconsolate air before adding the finishing touches to his sand picture with the tip of his weapon.

“We'll take a detour along the bank. It will take longer to get to Hengfors, but we don't have much choice.” said the Witcher.

“To Hengfors?” the bard looked surprised, “You mean you're not here to see Niedamir? You're not hunting the dragon?”

“What dragon?” asked Three Jackdaws, looking intrigued.

“You don't know? You really don't know? In that case, I shall tell you all about it, my lords. As I am obliged to wait here in the hope that somebody with a pass accepts my company, we have lots of time. Sit down.”

“Wait,” interrupted Three Jackdaws, “It's nearly midday and I'm thirsty, plague on it! We can't discuss such matters with dry throats. Tea and Vea, hurry back to town and buy a keg.”

“I like the way you think, lord...”

“Borch, also called Three Jackdaws.”

“Dandelion, nicknamed The Unrivalled... by certain young ladies.”

“Get on with it, Dandelion,” interrupted the Witcher, impatient. “We haven't got all day.”

The bard seized the neck of his lute and violently strummed some chords. “What would you prefer? In verse or in prose?”

“Normally.”

“As you like.” Dandelion did not lay down his lute. “Listen well, noble sirs, the events took place one week ago, not far from a free city named Barefield. Ah yes, in the small hours of the morning, dawn tinting red the veil of mist in the meadows...”

“It was supposed to be normally,” the Witcher pointed out.

“That is normally, isn't it? Okay, okay, I understand. Briefly, without metaphors. Near the town of Barefield, a dragon alit.”

“Oh really?” exclaimed the Witcher, “That seems incredible - nobody has seen a dragon in these parts for years. Isn't it just a dracolizard? Some of them can be quite big...”

“Don't insult me, Witcher, I know what it is. I've seen it. By chance I just came to Barefield for the market and I saw it with my own eyes. My ballad was already prepared, but you didn't want...”

“Carry on. Is it big?”

“It's as long as three horses, no taller than a horse, but much fatter. Gray as sand.”

“Green, then.”

“Yes. It swooped down without warning on a herd of sheep. The shepherds ran away and it killed a dozen animals and ate four of them before taking flight.”

“It flew away...” Geralt nodded his head. “That's it?”

“No, it returned the next morning, nearer to the city this time. It dove down onto a group of women who were washing their linen at the edge of the Braa. And did they run, my friend! I have never laughed so much in my life. Then the dragon executed two turns above Barefield before attacking some ewes in a nearby pasture. What a lot of panic and confusion it started! The day before, well, nobody had believed the shepherds... the alderman then started to mobilize a militia and the guilds, but before he had time to organize them, the people had taken matters into their own hands and sorted it out themselves.”

“How?”

“With a very popular method. The master shoe-maker, a certain Kozojed, conceived of a means to finish off the reptile. They killed a sheep then stuffed it full of hellebore, belladonna, hemlock, sulphur and shoemaker's pitch. To be on the safe side, the local pharmacist added two quarts of boil remedy and had the priest of the Temple of Kreve bless the offering. Then they staked the stuffed sheep in the middle of the herd. To tell you the truth, nobody believed that the dragon would be attracted by one stinking piece of shit surrounded by a thousand others. But reality exceeded our expectations. Forsaking the sheep that were alive and bleating, the reptile swallowed the bait along with the stake.”

“What then? Tell me more, Dandelion.”

“What else can I do? I'm not going to stop now. Listen to the rest: barely enough time had passed for a skillful man to untie the corset of a lady when the dragon started roaring and emitting smoke from both front and behind. Next it did a somersault, tried to fly away and then fell motionless. Two volunteers approached it to check if it still breathed. They were the local grave-digger and the village idiot, conceived by the lumberjack's daughter, a deranged girl who had been knocked up by a company of pikemen passing through Barefield during the rebellion of the Voivod Tracasse.”

“What lies you speak, Dandelion.”

“I do not lie; I do nothing but color gray reality. There's a difference.”

“Not really. Carry on, we're wasting time.”

“As I was saying, a grave-digger and a courageous simpleton went as scouts. We then raised for them a nice burial mound, small but pleasing to the eye.”

“Ah, good,” said Borch. “That means that the dragon still lived.”

“And how,” replied Dandelion merrily. “It lived, but it was too weak to eat the gravedigger and the idiot; it only sucked their blood. It then flew off... to the great anxiety of all, even though it found it difficult to take off. The dragon crashed with a roar every cubit and a half then took off again. Sometimes it crawled, dragging its hind legs behind it. The more courageous followed it at a distance without losing sight of it. And you know what?”

“Speak, Dandelion.”

“The dragon plunged into a ravine up in Big Kestrel Mountain, not far from the source of the Braa. It remains hidden in the caves.”

“Now it all becomes clear,” announced Geralt. “The dragon lived in these caves in state of lethargy for centuries; I've heard of similar cases. Its treasure must also be there. I know now why soldiers are blocking the bridge. Somebody wants to lay their hands on the treasure and that somebody is called Niedamir of Caingorn.”

“Exactly,” confirmed the troubadour. “The whole city of Barefield boils for this reason, because the people consider that the dragon's treasure belongs to them. But they fear to oppose to Niedamir. The king is a young featherbrain who has not yet started to shave, but he knew how to show that it was dangerous to take him on. Niedamir wants this dragon more than anything. That's why his reaction was so prompt.”

“He wants the treasure, you mean.”

“I'm convinced that the dragon interests him more than the treasure. Because, you see, the principality of Malleore has aroused the appetite of Niedamir for a long time. After the strange death of the prince, there remained a princess of marriageable age. The powers of Malleore did not see Niedamir and the other suitors in a good light because they knew that any new power would want to keep a tight rein on them; a situation that a gullible, young princess would not know how to deal with. They therefore dug out a dusty old prophecy that assured that the crown and the hand of the girl would belong to the one who conquers a dragon. They believed that this would keep the peace, knowing that no one had seen dragons in the region in such a long time. Niedamir didn't care about the legend. He tried every possible means to take Malleore by force but when the news of the appearance of the dragon of Barefield reached his ears, he understood that he could consequently conquer the noblemen of Malleore with their own weapon. If he returns to Malleore triumphantly brandishing the head of the dragon, they will welcome him as a monarch sent by the Gods, and the powers that be will not dare say a word. Don't be surprised that he seeks this dragon like a cat stalks a mouse. All the more so as this dragon crawls along with difficulty. For Niedamir it's a pure godsend, a smile of destiny, damn it.”

“And it cuts out the competition.”

“Well, I guess so. It also cools the enthusiasm of the inhabitants of Barefield. He must have given a pass to all the horsemen in the vicinity who might be able to strike down the dragon, because Niedamir is not keen to enter the caves himself, sword in hand, to fight the dragon. In a flash he had the most celebrated dragon slayers gathered around him. You probably know most of them, Geralt.”

“It's possible. Who? “

“Eyck of Denesle, for starters.”

“Son of a...” The Witcher whistled softly, “The god-fearing and virtuous Eyck: the dauntless knight, beyond reproach, himself.”

“You know him then, Geralt?” Borch asked. “Is he really such a specialist in dragons?”

“Not just dragons; Eyck knows how to deal with all monsters. He's even struck down manticores and griffins. He's also defeated a few dragons, or so I've heard. He's good, but the lunatic ruins business by refusing to take payment. Who else, Dandelion?”

“The Crinfrid Reavers.”

“The dragon doesn't stand a chance, even if it recovers its health. Those three are a famous band of experienced hunters. They don't fight within the rules, but their efficiency is without question. They exterminated all the dracolizards and giant centipedes of Redania, killing three red and one black dragon along the way, and that really is something. Is that everyone?”

“No. Six dwarfs also joined them: five bearded men commanded by Yarpen Zigrin.”

“I don't know him.”

“You've undoubtedly heard about the dragon Ocvista of Mount Quartz.”

“I've heard of it. I've even seen stones that came from his treasure; sapphires in incredible shades and diamonds as big as cherries.”

“Know that it was Yarpen Zigrin and his dwarfs that slew Ocvista. I also composed a ballad about this adventure, but it was quite boring and you lost nothing by not hearing it.”

“Is that everybody?”

“Yes. Not counting you. You insisted that you knew nothing about the dragon. Who knows, maybe it's true. Anyway, you now know. Now what?”

“Now nothing. I'm not interested in the dragon.”

“Ah! Very sneaky, Geralt. In any case, you don't have a pass.”

“I repeat: the dragon doesn't interest me. What about you, Dandelion? What brought you to these lands?”

“The usual.” The troubadour shrugged. “I have to be near events and stimulating situations. People will talk about this battle with the dragon for a long time. I could, of course, compose a ballad from the tales they'll tell, but it will be better if it's sung by somebody who saw the battle with their own eyes.”

“Battle?” asked Three Jackdaws. “It's more of an act reminiscent of an autopsy or the butchery of a pig. The more I listen to you, the more you astound me. A bunch of warriors stumbling over each other to finish off a half-dead dragon that's been poisoned by some yokel, I don't know whether to laugh or puke.”

“You're mistaken about the half-dead part,” replied Geralt, “If the dragon didn't die straight after it swallowed the poison, it means that it will have recovered. It's of no great importance; the Crinfrid Reavers will kill it all the same, but the battle, if you must know, will not be quick.”

“Your money is on the Reavers then, Geralt?”

“Definitely.”

“I wouldn't be so sure about that,” the artistic guard who had kept silent until then interrupted. “The dragon is a magical living being that can only be killed by spells. If somebody helps the sorceress who crossed the bridge yesterday... “

“Who?” Geralt's head tilted to look at him.

“A sorceress,” repeated the guard. “As I said.”

“What was her name?”

“She gave it, but I've forgotten. She had a pass. Young, attractive in her own way, but those eyes... you know the type, lords... they send a shiver down your spine when they look at you.”

“Do you know who it might be, Dandelion?”

“No,” replied the bard, grimacing. “Young, attractive and those eyes... it's not much to go on. They all answer this description. None of these girls who I know - and I know a lot - seem to look more than twenty-five, thirty years, but many of them remember the days when Novigrad was still a forest of conifers. But don't women make elixirs of mandrake? That can also make their eyes shine. It's definitely a woman, that's for sure.”

“Was she a redhead?” the Witcher asked.

“No, sir,” answered the lieutenant. “She had black hair.”

“What was the color of her horse? Chestnut with a white star?”

“No, it was as dark as her hair. I'm telling you, lords, it is she who will exterminate the dragon. Dragons are magician's business. Human strength can do nothing against these monsters.”

“I'm curious to know what the shoemaker Kozojed thinks about it,” said Dandelion, laughing. “If he had had something stronger to hand than hellebore and belladonna, the dragon's skin would be drying on a fence, my ballad would already be finished, and I would not be drying out in the sun today...”

“Why didn't Niedamir take you with him?” Geralt asked, giving the poet a dirty look. “You stayed in Barefield when he left. Doesn't the king like the company of artists? Why are you here drying out instead of playing for the king?”

“It's because of a young widow,” answered Dandelion with a despondent air. “Damn it! I romped about with her and when I awoke the following day Niedamir and the troops had already crossed the river. They even took this Kozojed and the scouts of the militia of Barefield but had forgotten about me. I tried unsuccessfully to explain it to the lieutenant, but he...”

“If you had a pass, there wouldn't have been a problem,” explained the halberdier dispassionately, leaning against the wall of the toll collector's booth. “No pass, no debate. An order is an order...”

“Ah!” Three Jackdaws interrupted him. “The girls are back with the beer.”

“And not alone,” added Dandelion getting up. “Look at that horse. It looks like a dragon.”

The Zerricanians emerged at a gallop from the birch wood flanked by a horseman riding a large nervous stallion, dressed for war.

The Witcher also rose.

The rider wore a purple velvet tunic and a short jacket adorned with sable fur. He looked at them arrogantly from his saddle. Geralt knew this type of look and didn't much care for it.

“Hello, gentlemen. I am Dorregaray,” the horseman introduced himself as he dismounted slowly and with dignity. “Master Dorregaray. Magician.”

“Master Geralt. Witcher.”

“Master Dandelion. Poet.”

“Borch, otherwise Three Jackdaws. The girls opening the barrel are with me. I believe you already know them, Lord Dorregaray.”

“Indeed,” replied the magician without smiling. “The beautiful Zerricanian warriors and I have already exchanged greetings.”

“Oh well! To your health!” Dandelion distributed the leather goblets brought by Vea. “Drink with us, sir magician. Lord Borch, can the lieutenant also join us?”

“Sure. Join us, good warrior.”

“I think” said the magician having taken a small sip in a distinguished fashion, “that you're waiting at the bridge for the same reason that I do.”

“If you're thinking of the dragon, Lord Dorregaray,” replied Dandelion, “that is it exactly. I want to be present at the battle and to compose a ballad. Unfortunately, the lieutenant here, a man some might say is lacking in manners, refused me passage. He demands a pass.”

“I beg your pardon.” the halberdier clucked his tongue and drank his beer. “I can let nobody through without permission. I have no choice in the matter. It seems that all of Barefield prepared wagons to hunt the dragon in the mountain, but I must comply with orders... “

“Your orders, soldier,” Dorregaray interrupted, frowning, “concern the unpleasant rabble, the prostitutes likely to spread immorality and riot, thieves, scoundrels and that type. But not me.”

“I let nobody through without permission, “ retorted the lieutenant pointedly. “I swear...”

“Don't swear,” Three Jackdaws interrupted him, rather coldly. “Tea, pour another one for the valiant warrior! Let us sit down, my lords. To drink standing up, quickly and without appreciating the merchandise, is not fitting for the nobility.”

They sat down on logs scattered around the keg. The halberdier, newly promoted to noble, became crimson with contentment.

“Drink, brave captain,” pressed Three Jackdaws.

“I am only a lieutenant, not a captain,” he answered, going red with renewed vigor.

“But you will become a captain, it's obvious.” Borch grinned. “Boys as clever as you get promoted in a jiffy.”

Dorregaray turned to Geralt having refused an additional glassful:

“In town they're still talking about your basilisk, noble Witcher, and you are already taking an interest in the dragon,” he said in a low voice. “I'm curious to know if you intend to slay this endangered species for pleasure or for pay.”

“Such curiosity is unusual,” replied Geralt, “when it comes from somebody who flocks double quick to the execution of a dragon to rip out his teeth. Aren't they precious for the making of your medicines and magical elixirs? Is it true, noble magician, that those ripped from still living dragons are the best?”

“Are you sure that's why I'm here?”

“Yes, I'm sure about that. But somebody has beaten you to it, Dorregaray. One of your female colleagues crossed the bridge armed with the pass that you lack. A sorceress with black hair, if it interests you.”

“On a black horse?”

“Yes, apparently.”

“Yennefer,” said Dorregaray with a worried air.

The Witcher shuddered, unnoticed by anyone.

A silence set in, that the future captain disrupted with a belch: “Nobody... without a pass.”

“Would 200 lintars be enough for you?” Geralt offered, retrieving the purse acquired from the fat alderman from his pocket.”

“Geralt,” said Three Jackdaws, smiling in an enigmatic way. “Really...”

“Please accept my apologies, Borch. I'm sorry I can't accompany you to Hengfors. Another time perhaps, if we meet again.”

“Nothing is compelling me to go to Hengfors,” Three Jackdaws replied carefully. “Nothing at all, Geralt.”

“Please put the purse away, sir,” threatened the future captain. “It's corruption, pure and simple. Even for 300, I won't let you cross.”

“And for 500?” Borch took out his purse. “Put away your silver, Geralt. I take responsibility for payment of the toll. It's starting to amuse me. 500, soldier. 100 per head, considering my girls as a single and beautiful unit. What do you say?”

“Goodness me,” the future captain was anxious as he hid Borch's purse inside his tunic. “What shall I tell the king?”

“You should say to him,” suggested Dorregaray as he stood up and withdrew an ivory wand from his belt, “that you were scared senseless you when you saw the show.”

“What show, sir?”

The magician drew a form with his wand and shouted out a spell. A pine growing next to the river exploded; wild flames consumed it from base to top in an instant.

“To the horses!” Dandelion jumped up nimbly and slung his lute onto his back. “To the horses, gentlemen! And ladies!”

“Raise the barrier,” the wealthy lieutenant with a promising career as a captain shouted to the halberdiers.

On the bridge, behind the barrier, Vea pulled on the reins. Her horse danced, the beat of its hooves resounding on the planks of the bridge. The girl, braids flitting in the wind, gave a piercing cry.

“Right, Vea!” Three Jackdaws replied. “Let's get to it Zerricanian! Like the wind in an uproar! “

### Part IV

“So,” declared the oldest of the Reavers. Boholt, imposing and powerful like the trunk of a thousand-year-old oak. “Apparently Niedamir did not scatter you to the four winds, noble lords. Though I could have sworn he would have done so. Well in the end, it's not down to us, the commoners, to discuss royal decisions. Come and share the fire. Make a place, lads. Just between us, Witcher, tell me the subject of your conversation with the king.”

“We spoke of nothing,” Geralt replied, leaning comfortably against his saddle positioned near the fire. “He didn't even come out of his tent to meet us. He only sent one of his footmen, what's his name?”

“Gyllenstiern,” Yarpen Zigrin told him, a stocky and bearded dwarf whose huge neck, tarry and covered with dust, shone in the light of fire. “A bombastic clown. An overfed pig. When we arrived, he put on lofty airs, driveled on and on, 'remember well, dwarves,' he said, 'who commands here and to whom you owe obedience. It is King Niedamir who commands, and his word is law,' and so on. I just listened, all the while wanting to send the boys in to throw him down and trample him into the ground. But I had self-control, you know. They only would have said that dwarves are dangerous, aggressive sons of bitches and that it's impossible for... for... as it's said, for the devil... to coexist or something like that. And there would have been another race riot in a small city. So, I just listened politely, nodding my head.”

“It seems from what you say that Sir Gyllenstiern doesn't know how to do anything else,” Geralt continued, “because he dressed us down in exactly the same way. Of course, we also deferred to his opinion.”

“In my opinion,” another Reaver intervened as he deposited a large blanket onto a heap of firewood. “It's a pity that Niedamir didn't send you away. Everyone is hot on the heels of this dragon, it's incredible. The place is teeming. It's not an expedition anymore, it's a funeral procession. I don't like to fight in a crowd.”

“Calm down, Nischuka,” Boholt cut in. “It's better for us to travel with one another. Haven't you ever hunted a dragon? There's always a whole crowd nearby, a veritable fair, a brothel on wheels. But when the reptile shows itself, you well know who stays put. Us. Nobody else.”

Boholt remained silent for a moment. He drank a good mouthful from a demijohn covered with wicker and sniffed loudly. He then cleared his throat: “All the better,” he continued, “as it so often happens that feasting and butchery begin just after the death of the dragon and before you know it heads are rolling like pears in an orchard. When the treasure is found, the hunters launch themselves at one another's throats. Geralt? Huh? Am I right? Witcher, I'm telling you.”

“I know of such cases,” confirmed Geralt in a dry tone.

“You know, so you say. Perhaps from hearsay, because I have never heard of a Witcher hunting a dragon. Your presence here is all the stranger.”

“That's true,” interjected Kennet, nicknamed Ripper, the youngest of the Reavers. “It is strange. And we...”

“Wait, Ripper, I'm the one doing the talking,” Boholt interrupted him. “Besides, I don't intend to dwell on the subject. The Witcher already knows what I'm getting at. I know it and he also knows it. Our paths have never crossed before and never will again. Imagine, my lads, for example, that I want to disturb the Witcher while he's doing his job or that I try to steal his dues from him. Would he not immediately strike me with his sword, and rightfully so? Am I right?”

Nobody confirmed or denied it. Boholt did not seem to be waiting especially for a reply.

“Yep,” he went on, “It's better to travel with one another, I say. The Witcher could prove to be useful. The area is wild and uninhabited. If a chimera, ilyocoris or striga happens upon us, we'll have problems. But if Geralt remains with us, we'll avoid these problems because it's his specialty. But the dragon is not his specialty. Right?”

Again, nobody confirmed or denied it.

“And Lord Three Jackdaws,” Boholt continued, handing the demijohn to the leader of the dwarves, “is a companion of Geralt. This guarantee is enough for me. Whose presence bothers you then, Nischuka and Ripper? Surely not Dandelion!”

“Dandelion,” Yarpen Zigrin intervened, handing the demijohn to the bard, “is always found where something of interest is happening. Everybody knows that he neither helps nor hurts and that he never slows down operations. He's like a tick on a dog's tail. Don't you think so, boys?”

The 'boys', robust dwarfs, burst out laughing, making their beards tremble. Dandelion slid his hat back onto his neck and drank from the demijohn.

“Damn! This is strong,” he groaned, gasping. “It'll make me lose my voice. What's it distilled from? Scorpions?”

“One thing I don't like, Geralt,” said Ripper, taking the bottle out of the minstrel's hands. “Is that this magician is with you. There are already far too many.”

“That's true,” confirmed Yarpen. “Ripper is right. This Dorregaray is about as useful to us as a saddle on a pig. We already have our own sorceress, the noble Yennefer. Ugh!”

“Yes!” Boholt chimed in, scratching his bullish neck which he had just freed from a leather gorget, bristling with studs. “There are too many magicians hereabouts, my dear fellows, in the heat of the royal tent they conspire, these wily foxes: Niedamir, the sorceress, the magician and Gyllenstiern. Yennefer is the worst of all. Do you know what they conspire about? How to rip us off, that's for sure!”

“And they stuff themselves with venison!” added Ripper with a despondent air. “And us, what do we eat? Marmots! The marmot, what is it, I ask you? A rat, nothing more than a rat. What do we eat? Rat!”

“That's nothing,” Nischuka replied, “Soon we'll dine on dragon's tail. There's nothing like it when it's been braised over coals.”

“Yennefer,” continued Boholt, “is a totally despicable, vicious woman, a shrew. Nothing like your girls, Lord Borch, who certainly know how to behave and keep quiet. Look, they stayed near the horses to whet their swords. When I passed by them, I greeted them amiably. They smiled at me in return. I like them. They are not like Yennefer who schemes and connives. I'm telling you: we must watch out, because our contract could just be hot air.”

“What kind of contract, Boholt?”

“Yarpen, can the Witcher be put in the picture?”

“I don't see a problem with that,” answered the dwarf.

“There's no booze left,” Ripper interrupted them, turning the empty demijohn upside down.

“Get some more then. You're the youngest. The contract, Geralt, was our idea, because we aren't mercenaries or some other unscrupulous kind. Niedamir can't just send us into the dragon's clutches and then give us a pittance of gold pieces. The truth is that we don't need to slay the dragon for Niedamir. On the contrary, he needs us. In this situation, who has the most significant role and who should get the most silver are obvious questions. We therefore proposed a fair deal: those who will personally take part in the battle against the dragon will take half the treasure. Niedamir will take a quarter by virtue of birth and title. The others, if they contributed in any way to the enterprise, will equally share the last quarter. What do you think of it?”

“What did Niedamir think of it?”

“He answered neither yes nor no. It would be in his best interest to cooperate, that greenhorn, because I'm telling you: alone, he will never slay the dragon. Niedamir remains dependent on professionals, that's to say on us, the Reavers, as well as on Yarpen and his boys. It's us, and nobody else, that will come within a sword's length of the dragon. If any others help, including magicians, they will be able to share a quarter of the treasure.”

“Besides the magicians, who do you count amongst these others?” Dandelion asked with interest.

“Certainly not musicians and authors of trashy verse,” Yarpen laughed. “We include those who toil with the axe, not with the lute.”

“Ah good!” Three Jackdaws interjected, looking up at the starry sky. “And what did the shoemaker Kozojed and his band toil with?”

Yarpen Zigrin spat into the fire, muttering something in the language of the dwarves.

“The Barefield militia knows these shitty mountains and will be our guide,” explained Boholt in a low voice. “It's fair to include them in distribution. As far as the shoemaker's concerned, that's a bit different. When a dragon arrives in a region, it's no good that the people think they can force-feed it poison with impunity then carry on screwing girls in the fields instead of calling professionals. If such a practice carried on, we'd be reduced to begging, wouldn't we?”

“That's true,” replied Yarpen. “That's why I'm telling you: the shoemaker should be held responsible for that mess rather than be declared a legend.”

“He's got it coming,” punctuated Nischuka firmly. “I'll do it.”

“And Dandelion,” continued the dwarf, “can write a comedic ballad about it, so that his shame and ignominy can live on forever in song.”

“You forgot an important element,” said Geralt. “There is one who can confuse matters by refusing any payment or contract. I'm talking about Eyck of Denesle. Did you talk to him?”

“For what purpose?” Boholt murmured under his breath while stirring the fire with a branch. “Regarding Eyck, there's nothing to discuss, Geralt. He doesn't know what he's doing.”

“We encountered him,” Three Jackdaws said. “On the path leading to your camp. Kneeling on the stones, dressed in his complete armor, he was gazing at the sky.”

“He always does that,” explained Ripper. “He meditates or prays. He says it's his divine mission to protect humans from evil.”

“Back home, in Crinfrid,” muttered Boholt, “They lock madmen such as him up in the in the back of a cowshed, tie them to a chain and when they give them a piece of coal, they draw marvelous pictures on the walls. But let's cease wasting time by endlessly discussing our fellows: let's talk business.”

A young petite woman, with black hair covered with a gold mesh and dressed in a wool coat, silently entered the circle of light.

“What stinks so?” Yarpen Zigrin asked, pretending not to notice her. “Is it sulphur?”

“No.” Boholt sniffed ostentatiously looking away “It's musk or some kind of incense.”

“No, it's probably...” the dwarf grimaced: “Ah! It's the noble Lady Yennefer. Welcome, welcome!”

The sorceress' gaze slowly took in the gathered individuals. Her shining eyes stopped for one instant on the Witcher. Geralt smiled slightly.

“May I sit?”

“But of course, benefactor,” replied Boholt, hiccupping. “Take a seat, there near the saddle. Move over, Kennet my friend, and give your seat to the sorceress.”

“My Lords, I hear that you're talking business.” Yennefer sat down, stretching out in front of her shapely legs sheathed in black stockings. “Without me?”

“We wouldn't dare bother such an important person,” replied Yarpen Zigrin.

Yennefer blinked, turning to the dwarf:

“You, Yarpen, you would better off being silent. Since the first day we met you've treated me like a bad smell. Now please continue and don't mind me. It doesn't bother me in the least.”

“What are you saying, fair lady?” Yarpen smiled showing a row of uneven teeth. “Leeches devour me if I do not treat you better than a bad smell. I sometimes pollute the air, but I would never dare to do so in your presence.”

The bearded 'boys' burst out laughing. They were immediately silent at the sight of a grey light which had formed around the sorceress.

“Another word out of you and you'll be polluted air, Yarpen,” Yennefer shot back at him in a metallic voice. “And a black stain on the grass.”

“Very well” Boholt broke the silence which had just descended with a cough. “Be silent, Zigrin. Let us hear what Lady Yennefer wants to tell us. She regrets that our business discussion is taking place without her. I deduce from this that she has a proposal to make to us. Let's listen, my dear fellows, to what this proposal consists of. However, let's hope that she doesn't offer to slay the dragon alone with her spells.”

“Why not?” Yennefer reacted, raising her head. “Do you think it impossible, Boholt?”

“It is perhaps possible. But for us not very lucrative, because you would then demand half of the dragon's treasure.”

“At the very least,” the sorceress replied coldly.

“You see that's not a good solution. We, madam, are only poor warriors. If we don't get paid, hunger threatens. We've only been eating sorrel and white goose...”

“After a festival, sometimes marmot,” added Yarpen Zigrin in a sad voice.

“... We drink only water.” Boholt drank a good draught from the demijohn and snorted. “For us, Lady Yennefer, there's no other solution. We get paid or it's death outside in the icy cold winter. Because the inns are so expensive.”

“Beer too,” added Nischuka.

“And the whores,” continued Ripper, dreamily.

“That's why we're going to try to slay the dragon without your spells and without your help.”

“Are you sure about that? Remember that there are limits as to how to go about it, Boholt.”

“There are perhaps. I've never encountered them for my part. No, madam. I repeat: we shall kill the dragon ourselves, without your spells.”

“What's more” added Yarpen Zigrin, “spells, too, are subject to certain limits.”

“Did you figure this out by yourself?” Yennefer asked slowly. “Perhaps somebody else has told you? Does the presence of a Witcher at this so noble gathering explain your egotism?”

“No,” replied Boholt looking at Geralt who pretended to be dozing, lazily stretched out on a blanket, his head resting on his saddle. “The Witcher has got nothing to do with this. Listen, dear Lady Yennefer. We offered a proposal to the king and he has not honored us with the answer. We'll wait patiently till morning. If the king accepts, we'll continue on our way together. Otherwise, we shall leave.”

“Us too,” murmured the dwarf.

“No possible negotiation,” Boholt went on. “Take it or leave it. Please repeat these words to Niedamir, dear Yennefer. And I'll also add that the deal could be favorable to you, to you and also to Dorregaray, if you agree with the king. We don't care about the dragon's carcass. We want only the tail. All rest will be yours. You have only to help yourself. We shall claim neither the teeth nor the brain: nothing of interest to magicians.”

“Of course,” added Yarpen Zigrin, sneering, “you can also have the carrion. Nobody's going to steal that from you, except perhaps the vultures.”

Yennefer got up, drawing her coat around her shoulders.

“Niedamir will not wait until the morning,” she announced firmly. “He accepts your conditions forthwith. Despite my advice, as you suspected, and that of Dorregaray.”

“Niedamir,” stated Boholt slowly, “has proved himself of sound judgment for such a young king. Because for me, Lady Yennefer, the wise show an ability to remain deaf to the advice of stupid or hypocritical people.”

Yarpen Zigrin sniggered. The sorceress put her hands on her hips and retorted: “You'll be singing another tune tomorrow when the dragon falls upon you, skewers you to the ground and breaks your legs. You'll kiss my ass and beg me to help you. As usual. I know you well, as I know all those of your kind. I know you so you well, it makes me sick.” She turned and walked away into the darkness, without saying goodbye.

“In my time,” said Yarpen Zigrin, “magicians remained locked up in their towers. They read learned books and mixed potions in their cauldrons with a spatula without sticking their noses into the affairs of warriors. They minded their own business without flaunting their asses at all the boys.”

“And a very pretty ass it is too, to be frank,” added Dandelion, tuning his lute. “Eh, Geralt? Geralt? Where's the Witcher gone?”

“What's it to us?” Boholt grumbled, feeding the fire with some more wood. “He left. Perhaps to satisfy the usual needs, my dear lords. That's his business.”

“Of course,” replied the bard, playing a chord on his lute. “What would you say to a song?”

“Sing, damn it,” Yarpen Zigrin grumbled, spitting, “but don't expect that I'll give you a shilling for your bleating, Dandelion. This is not the royal court, my lad.”

“That's for sure,” replied the troubadour, shaking his head.

### Part V

“Yennefer.”

She feigned astonishment as she turned around. The Witcher knew that she had heard his footsteps from afar. She deposited a wooden bowl on the ground and lifted her head, pushing back a lock of hair which fell across her forehead. Her curly tresses, now freed from the gold mesh, cascaded onto her shoulders.

“Geralt.”

As usual, she wore only two colors - white and black. Her hair and long black eyelashes invited a guess as to the color of her eyes, which they hid. A black dress, a small black jerkin with a white fur collar. A white shirt of fine linen. Around her neck, on a black velvet ribbon adorned with small diamonds, was a star of obsidian.

“You haven't changed, Yennefer.”

“Neither have you.” Her lips tightened in a line. “And in both cases, nothing more normal than that. Or, if you prefer, nothing more abnormal. But talking about the effects of time on our appearance, even if it is a very good means to start conversation, is slightly absurd, don't you think?”

“That's true.” He raised his head, looking to the side of Niedamir's tent at the fires of the royal archers, who were hidden by the dark silhouettes of the wagons. At a fire located farther away, they heard the tuneful voice of Dandelion singing Stars Above the Road, one of his most successful romantic ballads.

“Indeed,” said the sorceress, “pleasantries over, what do you have to say? I'm listening.”

“You see, Yennefer...”

“I see,” she interrupted him wildly, “but I don't understand. What's the reason for your presence here Geralt? Certainly not the dragon. From that point of view, I imagine nothing has changed.”

“No. Nothing changed there.”

“Then why did you join us?”

“If I tell you that it's because of you, would you believe me?”

She looked at him in silence. Her bright eyes expressed something unpleasant. “I believe you,” she said finally. “Why not? Men like to see their former lovers again to reminisce about the good old times. They take pleasure in imagining that their bygone love affairs assure them a perpetual right of possession on their ex-partners. It's good for their self-esteem. You're no exception, apparently.”

“Apparently” he replied, smiling. “You're right, Yennefer. The sight of you has boosted my self-esteem. In other words, I'm happy to see again you.”

“Is that all? Oh well, let's say that I'm also happy to see you again. And now we're both contented, I wish you good night. I'm going to bed. Before that, I intend to have a bath and so need to undress. I kindly ask you to go away to grant me a minimum of privacy.”

“Yen.” He reached out to her.

“Don't call me that!” she hissed furiously, drawing back. Blue and red sparks flew from her fingers which the sorceress aimed at him. “And if you touch me, I'll burn out your eyes, you bastard.”

The Witcher backed off. The sorceress, somewhat composed, pushed back her hair which had fallen across her forehead. She stood before him, resting her hands on her hips.

“What were you thinking, Geralt? That we would talk casually and cheerfully? That we would remember the old times? That after this conversation we would go to lie down in a wagon and make love on the furs... just like that, just to refresh our memories? Is that it?”

Geralt, not sure whether the sorceress knew how to read thoughts or just successfully guessed them, remained silent and smiled crookedly.

“These past four years did their job, Geralt. I overcame the pain at last. It's only for this reason that I did not spit in your face as soon as I saw you. But don't let my courtesy deceive you.”

“Yennefer...”

“Silence! I gave more to you than I have to any other man, you piece of shit. I didn't know myself why I had chosen you. And you... Oh no, my dear. I'm neither a whore nor an elf met at random on a forest path that you can run out on the following morning without waking, leaving a bunch of violets on the table. A girl you can turn into a laughingstock. Watch out! If you say even one word, you could end up regretting it.”

Geralt did not say a word as he sensed Yennefer's seething anger. The sorceress once again pushed the insubordinate curls from her forehead. She looked him closely in the eye.

“We met. Too bad,” she continued in a low voice. “We're not going to put on a show for the others. Let's preserve our dignity. Let's pretend to be good friends. But don't be mistaken, Geralt: between us there is nothing more than that. Nothing more, do you understand? And rejoice because it means that I've abandoned some plans I've been cooking up for you. But it doesn't mean that I forgive you. I shall never forgive you, Witcher. Never.”

She turned wildly, grabbing her bowl so violently that she splashed herself with water, and disappeared behind a wagon. Geralt shooed away a mosquito which flitted around his ear making an irritating noise. He slowly took the path back to the fire where sparse applause expressed approval for Dandelion's singing.

He looked at the dark-blue sky gaping above the black, jagged crest of the mountains. He wanted to laugh. He didn't know why.

### Part VI

“Watch out there! Pay attention!” shouted Boholt, turning around in the driver's seat towards the rest of the column behind him. “You're too near the rocks! Look out!”

The wagons moved onward behind each other, bouncing along on the stones. The drivers swore and cracked their whips; anxious, they leaned over to check that the wheels remained a respectable distance from the ravine and always in contact with the narrow, uneven path. Down in the bottom of the chasm, the River Braa bubbled with white foam between the rocks.

Geralt kept his horse very close to the stony wall covered in patches of brown moss and white blooms of lichen. He allowed the Reavers' wagon to pass. At the head of column, Ripper led the train along with the scouts of Barefield.

“Good!” he called “Make some effort! The way becomes broader.”

King Niedamir and Gyllenstiern caught up with Geralt on their chargers. Several archers on horseback flanked them. Behind them, all the royal wagons followed, making a deafening noise. Far behind them followed that of the dwarves, driven by Yarpen Zigrin, swearing incessantly. Niedamir, a thin and freckled lad in a white sheepskin coat, passed the Witcher, shooting him an arrogant, but clearly bored look. Gyllenstiern straightened up, stopping his mount.

“If you please, Sir Witcher,” he shot with an air of superiority.

“I'm listening.” Geralt spurred on his mare and rode alongside the chancellor behind the wagons. He was surprised that with such a fat gut, Gyllenstiern preferred riding a horse rather than in the comfort of a wagon.

Gyllenstiern pulled lightly on his reins adorned with golden studs and pushed a turquoise coat off his shoulders. “Yesterday, you said that dragons did not interest you. In what, therefore, are you interested, Sir Witcher? Why do you travel this road with us?”

“It's a free country, Lord Chancellor.”

“At the present time, Lord Geralt, everybody in this convoy must know his place and his role in accordance with the will of King Niedamir. Do you understand?”

“What are you getting at, Lord Gyllenstiern?”

“I'm already there. Lately I have heard that it is difficult to come to an agreement with you Witchers. It seems that when somebody asks a Witcher to kill a monster, he prefers to meditate on the legitimacy of this act rather than to just take up his sword and kill it. He wishes to consider the boundaries of what is acceptable by wondering whether the killing, in this particular case, does not contradict with his ethical code and if the monster is indeed a monster - as though it were not obvious at first glance. I think that your financial security hinders you: in my time, Witchers did not stink of money. The only stench was from the bandages with which they covered their feet. There was never the slightest hint of procrastination: they killed whatever they had been ordered to kill, that's it. It didn't matter whether it was a werewolf, a dragon or a tax collector. Only the effectiveness of the job. What do you think, Geralt?”

“Do you want to entrust me with a mission, Gyllenstiern?” replied the Witcher roughly. “I await your proposal. We shall decide then. But if that's not case, there's no point in waffling on like this, is there?”

“A mission?” the chancellor sighed. “No, I don't have one for you. Today we hunt the dragon and apparently it exceeds your abilities, Witcher. I fancy that the Reavers will fulfil this task. I simply wanted to keep you informed. Pay close attention: King Niedamir and I will not tolerate this type of fanciful dichotomy consisting of separating monsters into good and bad. We don't want to hear, and even less to see, how Witchers apply this principle. Do not meddle in royal business, Lord, and cease conspiring with Dorregaray.”

“I'm not in the habit of collaborating with magicians. How did you come to such a hypothesis?”

“The fancies of Dorregaray,” replied Gyllenstiern, “exceed even those of the Witchers. He goes beyond your dualistic dichotomy by considering that all monsters are good!”

“He exaggerates a bit.”

“There's no doubt about that. But he defends his views with amazing tenacity. Frankly I wouldn't be surprised if he's up to something. It's odd that he's joined this strange company

“I don't really like Dorregaray; the feeling's mutual.”

“Don't interrupt me! I must say your presence here seems strange to me: a Witcher with more scruples than there are fleas nesting in the coat of a fox; a magician who never stops spouting druidic incongruities regarding the balance of nature; a silent knight, Borch Three-Jackdaws and his escort from Zerricania - where, as everybody knows, they make sacrifices before effigies of dragons. And they all suddenly join our hunt. It's strange, don't you find?”

“If you say so, yes.”

“Know then,” the chancellor went on, “that as is so often the case, the most difficult problems always result in the simplest resolution. Do not force me to use to it, Witcher.”

“I don't understand.”

“You understand. You understand only too well. Thank you for this conversation, Geralt.”

The Witcher halted his mount. Gyllenstiern sped up his pace to join the king behind the wagons. Eyck of Denesle, dressed in a jerkin stitched with pale leather still carrying the impression of a breast-plate, passed by at walking pace leading a sleepy horse loaded with armor and carrying a silver shield and a powerful lance. Geralt waved to him, but the knight errant looked away, pursing his lips, before spurring his horse onwards.

“He doesn't like you very much,” said Dorregaray, joining Geralt. “Don't you think?”

“Apparently.”

“He's a rival isn't he? You both lead a similar activity. The difference being that the knight Eyck is an idealist and you a professional. The difference of no importance to the beings whom you slaughter.”

“Don't compare me to Eyck, Dorregaray. Who knows which of us two would come off worse as a result of your comparison.”

“As you wish. To tell the truth, to me you are just as loathsome as he is.”

“Thank you.”

“Don't mention it.” The magician patted the neck of his horse, frightened by the shouting of Yarpen and his dwarves. “As far as I'm concerned, Witcher, to make murder a vocation is disgusting, base and stupid. Our world hangs in the balance. The destruction, the murder of any living being in this world threatens this balance. The absence of equilibrium leads to extinction, and thus the end of the world as we know it.”

“Druid theory,” declared Geralt. “I know of it. An old hierophant introduced me to it before, in Rivia. Two days after our conversation, rat-men tore him to shreds. It wasn't evident that any kind imbalance had occurred as a result.”

Dorregaray looked at Geralt indifferently.

“The world, I repeat, remains in balance. A natural balance. Every species has its enemies, each is a natural enemy for the others. This fact also applies to human beings. The complete destruction of the natural enemies of man - to which you contribute, Geralt, as we can see -threatens our degenerate race.”

“You know, magician,” replied the Witcher, losing his temper, “Perhaps you should visit a mother whose son has been devoured by a basilisk and explain to her that she should be delighted with her misfortune, because it will enable the salvation of the degenerate human race. Wait and see how she answers you.”

“Good argument, Witcher,” interrupted Yennefer, who had joined them on her big black horse. “Dorregaray, be careful about what you say.”

“I'm not in the habit of keeping my opinions to myself.”

Yennefer slipped between the two. The Witcher noticed that she had replaced her golden mesh with a white neckerchief rolled into a headband.

“Consider suppressing them, Dorregaray,” she replied. “At least in front of Niedamir and the Reavers, who suspect you of wanting to sabotage the hunt. They will continue treating you as an inoffensive maniac as long as you restrict yourself to words. But if you try to do something, they will break your neck before you have time to take a breath.”

The magician smiled contemptuously.

“Besides,” continued Yennefer, “by uttering such views, you undermine the foundations of our profession and our duty.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“You can apply your theories to grand creation and vermin, Dorregaray, but not to dragons. Dragons remain the worst natural enemy of man. It's not a matter of the degeneration of humanity, but its survival. In the end, mankind must get rid of his enemies and anything else that threatens it.”

“Dragons are not the enemies of man,” interrupted Geralt.

The sorceress looked at him and smiled, only with her lips.

“On this issue,” she replied, “leave the discussion to us humans. You, Witcher, are not made to judge. You are only there to carry out certain tasks.”

“As a servile and programmed golem?”

“Your words, not mine,” she retorted coldly, “even if I consider them, it could be said, rather appropriate.”

“Yennefer,” said Dorregaray. “For a woman of your age and education to talk such nonsense is shocking. Why would dragons appear among the main enemies of man? Why not other living beings with a hundred times more victims than dragons? Why not hirikkhis, giant centipedes, manticores, amphisbaena or griffons? Why not wolves?”

“Let me tell you. The superiority of man over other breeds and species, the fight for his rightful place in nature, his vital place, will only succeed when man has put an end to his aggressive, nomadic search for food, where he moves about in accordance with the changing of the seasons. Otherwise, it will be impossible for him to multiply quickly enough. Humanity is a child without any real independence. A woman can only give birth safely sheltered by the walls of a city or a fortified town. Fertility, Dorregaray, is what's needed for development, survival and domination. Then we come to dragons: only a dragon can threaten a city or fortified town, no other monster. If dragons are not exterminated, humans will scatter to ensure their security instead of uniting against it. If a dragon breathes fire on a densely populated quarter, it's a catastrophe - a terrible massacre with hundreds of victims. That's why every last dragon must be wiped out.”

Dorregaray looked at her with a strange smile on his lips.

“You know, Yennefer, I'd prefer not be alive when the time comes that your idea of man's domination will come true and the time when the same will take up their rightful place in nature. Fortunately, it will never arrive. You will consume each other, you will poison yourselves, you will succumb to fever and typhus, because it will be filth and lice, not dragons, that will threaten your splendid cities where the women give birth every year, but where only one newborn baby out of ten will succeed in living more than ten days. Yes, Yennefer, of course: breeding, breeding and more breeding. Take care, my dear, go and make some babies, as it's a more natural function with which to occupy yourself rather than wasting time spouting nonsense. Goodbye.”

The magician spurred on his horse and left at a gallop to join the head of the column.

Seeing Yennefer's pale and tense face, Geralt instantly felt sorry for the magician. He grasped situation perfectly: Yennefer was sterile, as were most sorceresses, but unlike the others, she suffered as a result and became wild with rage when reminded of it. Dorregaray undoubtedly knew this weakness. He was, however, unaware that Yennefer had a cold-blooded thirst for vengeance.

“He's going to make trouble,” she hissed. “Oh, yes! Watch out, Geralt. If it comes to that, don't hope that I'll defend you if you don't exhibit some common sense.”

“Don't worry,” he replied, smiling. “We Witchers and servile golems always act reasonably. The limitations within which we can act are clearly and distinctly fixed.”

“Look at you!” Yennefer's face turned even paler. “You're as upset as a girl who's just had her lack of virtue exposed. You're a Witcher, you can't change that. Your duty...”

“Stop going on about my duty, Yen. This argument is starting to make me sick.”

“Don't speak to me like that, I'm warning you. Your nausea as well as your restricted range of actions are of no interest to me.”

“You'll witness some of them, however, if you don't cease bating me with grand ethics and talk of the struggle for the good of humanity. Or talk about dragons, dreadful enemies of the human tribe. I know better.”

“Oh yes?” The sorceress blinked. “What do you know about it, Witcher?”

“I know this.” Geralt ignored the violent warning of the medallion hanging around his neck. “If dragons didn't protect treasure, not even lame dogs would be interested in their fate. Magicians even less so. It's interesting to note that, in every hunt for a dragon, there is the presence of magicians who are strongly linked to the guild of jewelers. Yourself, for example. Later, while the market is saturated with stones, the ones from the dragon's hoard disappear as if by magic and their price remains constantly inflated. Therefore, don't talk to me about duty and battles for survival of the species. I know you too well and for too long.”

“Too long,” she repeated with a hostile air, grimacing. “Unfortunately. But don't think that you know me well, you son of a bitch. Damn it, what a fool I was... Go to hell! I can't look at you anymore.” She cried out, launching her dark horse into a flat-out gallop towards the head of the convoy. The Witcher stopped his mount to let through the wagon of dwarves who shouted, swore and played on bone flutes. Among them, sprawled out on some bags of oats, Dandelion strummed his lute.

“Hey!” cried Yarpen Zigrin from the driver's seat, pointing at Yennefer. “What's that black thing on the path? I'm curious, whatever can it be? It resembles a mare!”

“Undoubtedly!” replied Dandelion, shouting and pushing back his plum colored hat. “It's a mare riding a gelding! Incredible!”

The beards of Yarpen's boys shook with a chorus of laughter. Yennefer pretended not to hear them.

Geralt stopped his horse to let Niedamir's archers through. Behind them, a little way off, Borch rode slowly and right behind him, bringing up the rear guard, the Zerricanians. Geralt waited for them. He positioned his mare next to Borch's horse. They rode on in silence.

“Witcher,” Three Jackdaws said suddenly. “I'd like to ask you a question.”

“Ask away.”

“Why don't you turn back?”

The Witcher looked at him in silence for a while. “You really want to know?”

“Yes,” replied Three Jackdaws, turning to him.

“I walk in the column because I'm only a servile golem, only a strand of oakum carried by the wind on the highway. Where should I go? Tell me. For what purpose? In this company there are plenty of people to talk to. Some don't even cut short their conversations when I approach them. Those that don't like me tell me to my face, rather than talking behind my back. I accompany them for the same reason that I went with you in the bargemen's inn. Because it's all the same to me. I'm not expected to be anywhere in particular. There's nothing for me at the end of the road.”

Three Jackdaws cleared his throat.

“At the end of every path, there is a goal, a purpose. Everybody has one. Even you, despite your difference.”

“It is now my turn to ask you a question.”

“Go for it.”

“Do you see a goal at the end of your path?”

“I see one.”

“Lucky.”

“It's not a question of luck, Geralt. It's all a matter of what you believe and to what you devote yourself. Nobody can know this better than... What Witcher?”

“Nobody stops talking about their ambitions today,” murmured Geralt. “The ambition of Niedamir consists of conquering Malleore. That of Eyck of Denesle to protect the humans from dragons. Dorregaray feels called to accomplish a diametrically opposite purpose. Yennefer cannot fulfil her ambition owing to the changes to which her body has been subjected, and it upsets her. By the devil, only the Reavers and the dwarves seem not to need ambition. They simply want to make a packet. Perhaps that's why they appeal to me.”

“No, Geralt of Rivia, it is not they who appeal to you. I'm neither blind nor deaf. You didn't take out your purse to the soft music of their name. It seems to me that...”

“It's in vain,” the Witcher said without anger.

“I'm sorry.”

“No need to apologize.”

They stopped their mounts to avoid a collision with the archers of Caingorn who had stopped at the head of the column.

“What's happened?” Geralt stood up in his stirrups. “Why have we stopped?”

“I don't know,” replied Borch, looking around.

Vea uttered something, looking strangely worried.

“I'm going to the front,” declared the Witcher. “I'll find out.”

“Wait.”

“Why?”

Three Jackdaws remained silent, staring at the ground.

“Why?” repeated Geralt.

“On second thought, go,” Borch said finally. “I think perhaps it will be better to.”

“Why will it be better?”

“Go.”

The bridge linking up both edges of precipice seemed solid. It had been constructed with imposing logs of pine resting on a square pillar against which the current broke with crash in long rivulets of foam.

“Hey, Ripper!” shouted Boholt, approaching the wagon. “Why have you stopped?”

“I'm not sure about this bridge.”

“Why are we going this way?” Gyllenstiern asked, going up to them. “I'm not keen on crossing this bridge with the wagons. Hey! Shoemaker! Why go this way? The track goes on farther westward!”

The heroic poisoner of Barefield went up to him and took off his sheepskin hat. He cut a comical air in his frockcoat covered with an old-fashioned breast-plate dating from at least the time of King Sambuk.

“This way is shorter, noble lord,” he replied not to the chancellor but directly to Niedamir, whose face still expressed deathly boredom.

How's that?” demanded Gyllenstiern, his face contorted.

Niedamir did not deign to look at the shoemaker.

“Well,” explained Kozojed, indicating the three jagged summits dominating the area. “Over there are Chiava, Big Kestrel and Steed's Tooth. The track leads towards the ruins of an ancient fortified town, winds around Chiava to the north, and carries on beyond the source of the river. By taking the bridge, we can shorten the way. We can follow the ravine up to a body of water located between the mountains. If we find no trace of the dragon there, we can head eastward to examine the adjacent gulches. Even farther eastward, there are flat mountain pastures, then a path leading directly to Caingorn, towards your domains, lord.”

“How did this knowledge of mountains come to you, Kozojed?” Boholt asked. “While plaining down clogs?”

“No, lord. I was a shepherd in my youth.”

“The bridge will hold?” Boholt got up from his seat and looked down at the foaming river. “The chasm is forty fathoms deep.”

“It will hold, my lord.”

“How do you explain the presence of such a bridge in this wild land?”

“The trolls,” explained Kozojed, “constructed this bridge in ancient times to set up a toll. Whoever wanted to cross had to pay a hefty sum. But there were rarely any takers, so the trolls packed up and left. The bridge remained.”

“I repeat,” Gyllenstiern interrupted angrily, “that we've wagons filled with equipment and food just in case we get stuck in the wilderness. Isn't it better to stay on the track?”

“We can follow the track,” replied the shoemaker, shrugging, “but the road will be longer. The king had expressed his eagerness to battle the dragon. He beamed with impatience.”

“Burned with impatience,” corrected the chancellor.

“Burned then.” the shoemaker acquiesced. “All the same, the road will be shorter if we take the bridge.”

“Well, let's go, Kozojed!” decided Boholt. “Forward march, you and your troops. Where I'm from we have a habit of sending the most valiant first.”

“No more than one wagon at a time!” Gyllenstiern ordered.

“Agreed!” Boholt whipped his horses: the wagon clattered onto the logs of the bridge. “Look behind us, Ripper! Watch out that our wheels go straight.”

Geralt stopped his horse, his way barred by the archers of Niedamir, their crimson and yellow jerkins huddled together on a stone gable.

The Witcher's mare snorted.

Then the earth shook. The jagged edge of the rocky walls suddenly blurred against the background of the sky and the wall itself issued a dull, palpable roar.

“Look out!” shouted Boholt, who had already crossed to the other side of the bridge. “Look out!”

The first stones, still small, began rustling and hitting the slope as it shook with spasms. Geralt saw a black fissure forming across the path behind him. It broke and collapsed into space with a deafening crash.

“To the horses!” shouted Gyllenstiern. “My lords! We have to cross quickly!”

Niedamir, his head leaning on the mane of his mount, rushed onto the bridge followed by Gyllenstiern and some of the archers. Behind them, the royal wagon bearing a standard marked with a griffin crashed with a dull thud onto the faltering beams.

“It's a landslide! Get off the path!” shouted Yarpen Zigrin in the back as he whipped the hindquarters of his horses.

The dwarves' wagon crashed into some of the archers as it overtook Niedamir's second wagon.

“Move! Witcher! Get out of the way!”

Eyck of Denesle, sitting stiff and straight, overtook the dwarves' wagon at a gallop. If it wasn't for his deathly pale face and jaw clenched in grimace, one might think that the knight errant didn't notice the rocks and stones tumbling down onto the track. A wild cry went up from a group of archers who remained behind. Horses neighed.

Geralt tugged on the reins, his horse rearing. Just in front of him, the earth trembled under the impact of the rocks that hurtled down the slope.

Rumbling over the stones, the dwarves' wagon jolted just before it reached the bridge and overturned with a crack. One of its axles broke and a wheel bounced off the balustrade before falling into the turbulence.

The Witcher's mare, struck by shards of sharp rock, chewed at the bit. Geralt tried to jump from his mount, but his boot remained stuck in the stirrup. He fell. The mare neighed and rushed onto the bridge as it wobbled over the gap. The dwarves ran across shouting and swearing.

“Faster, Geralt!” Dandelion shouted over his shoulder as he ran behind the dwarves.

“Jump, Witcher!” shouted Dorregaray, jostling around in the saddle and struggling to control his now wild horse.

Behind them, a whole section of path collapsed. A cloud of dust went up, created by the landslide and the crashing of Niedamir's wagons as they broke to pieces. The Witcher managed to hang on to the straps of the magician's saddlebags. He heard a scream.

Yennefer fell with her horse, then rolled aside. She threw herself to the ground and protected her head with her hands, trying to remain out of reach of the hooves that kicked out blindly. The Witcher let go to rush toward her, avoiding a rain of stones and jumping over the fissures which formed under his feet. Clutching an injured shoulder, Yennefer rose to her knees. Her eyes were wide and there was a cut above her eyebrow. Blood trickled down to her earlobe.

“Get up, Yen!”

“Geralt, look out!”

An enormous block of rock, which had broken loose from the wall with a grating noise, came down directly behind them with a thud. Geralt dropped to shield the sorceress with his body. The block exploded and broke into thousands of fragments as fine as wasp stings.

“Hurry!” cried Dorregaray. From his horse, he waved his wand, reducing to dust the other rocks that had come loose from the wall. “To the bridge, Witcher!”

Yennefer made a sign with her hand, stretching out her fingers. Nobody understood what she shouted. Stones evaporated like raindrops on white-hot iron upon the bluish arch which had just formed above their heads.

“To the bridge, Geralt!” cried the sorceress. “Follow me!”

They ran behind Dorregaray and some unhorsed archers. The bridge swayed and cracked, beams bending, throwing them from one balustrade to the next.

“Quickly!”

The bridge collapsed all at once with a deafening racket. The half that they had just crossed tore itself apart and fell with a crash into the void, taking with it the dwarves' wagon which smashed onto a row of rocks. They heard the dreadful neighing of the panicked horses. The party that remained on the bridge continued holding on, but Geralt realized that they ran on an increasingly steep slope. Yennefer, breathing heavily, cursed.

“We're falling, Yen! Hold on!”

The rest of the bridge creaked, split apart and swung down like a drawbridge. Yennefer and Geralt slid, their fingers clutching at the cracks between the logs. Realizing that she was gradually losing her grip, the sorceress gave a shriek. Holding on with one hand, Geralt drew his dagger with the other and drove it into a crack before hanging on to it with both hands. The joints of his elbows started to strain as Yennefer held on tightly to his sword belt and scabbard that he wore across his back. The bridge gave way and tilted more and more towards the vertical.

“Yen,” groaned the Witcher. “Do something... damn it. Cast a spell!”

“How?” she replied in a low, hot-tempered growl. “I'm holding on with both hands!”

“Free one of your hands.”

“I can't...”

“Hey!” shouted Dandelion from higher up. “Can you hang on? Hey!”

Geralt didn't consider it helpful to reply.

“Throw a rope!” demanded Dandelion. “Quickly, god damn it!”

The Reavers, the dwarves and Gyllenstiern appeared beside Dandelion. Geralt heard the muffled voice of Boholt: “Wait a minute. She'll fall soon. We'll pull the Witcher up afterwards.”

Yennefer hissed like a snake as she clung to Geralt's back. The bandolier bit into the Witcher's torso painfully.

“Yen? Can you get a hold? Can you use your feet?”

“Yes,” she groaned. “In theory.”

Geralt looked down at the river boiling between the sharp stones against which rolled a few logs from the bridge, the body of a horse and a corpse dressed in the vivid colors of Caingorn. Amongst the rocks, in the emerald, transparent depths, he saw a body of huge trout moving against the flow.

“Can you hold on, Yen?”

“Somewhat... yes...”

“Pull yourself up. You must get a handhold.”

“No... I can't...”

“Throw a rope!” shouted Dandelion. “Have you all gone mad? They're both going to fall!”

“Wouldn't that be for the best?” murmured Gyllenstiern quietly.

The bridge trembled and tilted even more. Geralt began to lose all feeling in his fingers as he gripped the handle of his dagger.

“Yen...”

“Shut up... and stop fidgeting...”

“Yen?”

“Don't call me that...”

“Can you hold on?”

“No,” she replied coldly.

She no longer struggled, she just hung on his back; dead, inert weight.

“Yen?”

“Shut up.”

“Yen. Forgive me.”

“No. Never.”

Something slid along the beams, very quickly, like a snake.

Radiating a cold and pale light, wriggling and writhing as though it were alive, gracefully groping about with its mobile end, the rope found Geralt's neck, wormed its way under his armpits then formed a loose knot. Below Geralt, the sorceress moaned and caught her breath. The Witcher was sure that she was going to burst into tears. He was mistaken.

“Look out!” Dandelion shouted above. “We'll hoist you up! Nischuka! Kennet! Pull! Heave-ho!”

The rope jerked and tightened around them painfully, making it hard to breathe. Yennefer signed heavily. They were pulled up quickly, scraping against the wooden beams.

Above, Yennefer got to her feet first.

### Part VII

“Out of the whole fleet,” announced Gyllenstiern, “we saved only a baggage wagon, Majesty, not including that of the Reavers. Of the escort, only seven archers have survived. On the other side of precipice, the path has completely disappeared. As far as we can see, to the curve of the cliff, nothing but a pile of rocks and a smooth wall remain. It's not known if all the individuals present on the bridge at the time of its collapse still live.”

Niedamir did not answer. Standing to attention in front of him, Eyck of Denesle fixed him with a fevered gaze.

“We are incurring the Wrath of the Gods,” said the knight, raising his arms. “We have sinned, King Niedamir. It was to be a crusade; a crusade against evil. Because the dragon is evil, yes, every dragon is evil incarnate. Evil is nothing to me: I'll crush it under my foot... destroy it... yes, just as is commanded by the Gods and Holy Scripture.”

“Is he delirious?” said Boholt, becoming sullen.

“I don't know,” replied Geralt, readjusting his mare's harness. “I didn't understand a thing he said.”

“Hush,” demanded Dandelion “I'm trying to memorize his words. They might be able to serve me for my rhymes.”

“The Holy Book says,” Eyck continued, all in a rage, “that a serpent shall appear from the chasm, a dreadful dragon with seven heads and ten horns. On its hindquarters shall sit a woman dressed in purple and scarlet, a golden chalice in her hands, and on her forehead shall be inscribed the mark of her profound and complete debasement!”

“I knew it!” interrupted Dandelion merrily. “It's Cilia, the wife of Alderman Sommerhalder!”

“Keep quiet, sir poet,” Gyllenstiern commanded. “And you, Knight of Denesle, speak further, by the grace of the Gods.”

“In order to fight evil,” continued Eyck with grandiloquence, “it is necessary for oneself to have a pure heart and conscience with head held high! But whom do we see here? Dwarves, pagans who are born in blackness and revere dark powers! Blasphemous magicians, assuming divine right, power and privilege! A Witcher, odious mutant, accursed and unnatural creation. Are you therefore surprised that punishment smites us? Let us cease pushing the limits of divine grace! I urge you, O King, that you purge these vermin from our ranks before...”

“Not even a single word about me,” Dandelion interrupted him, complaining. “No word about poets. And yet I tried my best!”

Geralt smiled at Yarpen Zigrin who stroked the sharp edge of the axe that hung on his belt with a slow and steady movement. Amused, the dwarf grinned. Yennefer turned her back on the scene ostentatiously, showing greater concern for her dress which had torn up to the hip than for the words of Eyck.

“We perhaps went a little too far,” Dorregaray granted, “but for noble reasons, Lord Eyck, without a doubt. I consider, however, your comments regarding magicians, dwarves and Witchers unseemly, even if we're used to these types of opinions, they are neither polite nor worthy of a knight, Lord Eyck. And I will also add: all the less comprehensible as it was you, and no one else, who a short while ago ran up and threw the magical elven rope which saved the Witcher and the sorceress from certain death. From what you're now saying, I don't understand why you didn't pray for them to fall instead.”

“Bloody hell,” murmured Geralt to Dandelion. “It's him who brought the rope? Eyck? Not Dorregaray?”

“No,” muttered the bard. “It was definitely Eyck.”

Geralt shook his head in disbelief. Yennefer cursed under her breath and straightened up.

“Knight Eyck,” she said to him with a smile that all, except Geralt, believed kind and benevolent. “Can you explain why? I am vermin, but you saved my life?”

“You are a lady, dear Yennefer.” The knight bowed stiffly. “Your charming and sincere face makes me think that one day you will break free of your accursed magic.”

Boholt snorted.

“I thank you, sir knight,” Yennefer replied coldly. “The Witcher Geralt also thanks you. Thank him Geralt.”

“The devil take me first,” replied the Witcher with absolute sincerity. “Why should I thank him? I'm only a detestable mutant whose vile face brooks no improvement. The Knight Eyck pulled me from the void by accident, only because I was stubbornly held by a lady. If I'd been alone, Eyck wouldn't even have lifted his little finger. Am I mistaken, knight?”

“You are mistaken, Lord Geralt,” replied the knight errant serenely. “I never refuse assistance to those that need it. Even a Witcher.”

“Thank him, Geralt. And beg his forgiveness,” the sorceress told him firmly. “Otherwise, you confirm all that Eyck says about you. You don't know how to live with others because you're different. Your presence in this expedition is a mistake. An absurd purpose brings you here. It would be more reasonable for us to leave. I think that you understand this yourself. If not, it's high time that you did understand it.”

“What purpose are you talking about, madam?” Gyllenstiern intervened.

The sorceress looked at him without answering. Dandelion and Yarpen Zigrin smiled at each other significantly, but so as not to be seen be the sorceress.

The Witcher fixed his gaze on Yennefer's eyes. They were cold.

“Please excuse me, Knight of Denesle, my sincere thank you,” he announced, bowing his head. “I also thank all persons present for our hasty rescue. Hanging from the bridge, I heard how all and sundry rushed to our assistance. I beg you all for forgiveness. Except for the noble Yennefer, whom I thank without asking anything in return. Goodbye. This vermin is leaving the company, because this vermin has had enough of you. Take care, Dandelion.”

“Hey, Geralt,” said Boholt. “Stop acting like a spoiled little girl throwing a tantrum. There's no need to make a mountain out of a molehill. Damn it...”

“Mylooords!”

From out of the gorge ran Kozojed and some of the Barefield militiamen who had been sent out to scout the narrows of the ravine.

“What's happening? What's wrong with him?” asked Nischuka, raising his head.

“My lords... my... dear lords,” the shoemaker finally managed, out of breath.

“Stop wheezing, friend,” said Gyllenstiern, jamming his thumbs into his gold belt.

“The dragon! Over there, the dragon!”

“Where?”

“On the other side of the ravine... on the flats... lord... It...”

“To the horses!” commanded Gyllenstiern.

“Nischuka!” shouted Boholt, “To the wagon! Ripper, to your horse and follow me!”

“Get to it, boys!” yelled Yarpen Zigrin. “Get to it, damn it!”

“Hey! Wait!” Dandelion had slung his lute over his shoulder. “Geralt, take me on your horse!”

“Jump on!”

The ravine ended with a scattering of pale rocks spread increasingly further apart, creating an irregular circle. Behind them, the ground sloped slightly before becoming uneven and grassy pasture, enclosed all around by limestone cliffs studded with thousands of holes. Three narrow canyons, ancient beds of dried up mountain streams, overlooked the pasture.

Boholt arrived first and, galloping up to the rocky barrier, stopped his horse suddenly and stood up in his stirrups.

“By the plague,” he said. “By the yellow plague. This... this... it cannot be!”

“What?” asked Dorregaray, going up to him.

Next to him, Yennefer jumped off the Reavers' wagon, pressed her chest up against a large boulder and looked in turn. She stood back, rubbing her eyes.

“What? What is it?” shouted Dandelion, trying to see over Geralt's shoulder. “What is it Boholt?”

“The dragon... It's gold.”

Not more than one hundred paces from the narrowing of the ravine from which they had just emerged, atop a small hillock on the gently sloping path leading to the main northern canyon, sat a creature. Resting its narrow head on a rounded chest, it stretched its long and slender neck in a perfect arch, its tail wound around its outstretched paws.

There was in this creature an ineffable grace, something feline that clearly contradicted its reptilian provenance, for it was, without a doubt, reptilian. The scales it bore gave the appearance of being finely painted on. Furiously brilliant light shone in the dragon's bright yellow eyes. The creature was most certainly gold: from the tips of its claws planted in the earth up to the end of its long tail that moved slowly amongst the thistles proliferating upon the height. The creature opened its big, amber, bat-like wings and remained still, looking at them with its huge golden eyes and demanding that they admire it.

“A golden dragon,” murmured Dorregaray. “It's impossible... a living legend!”

“For crying out loud, golden dragons don't exist,” asserted Nischuka, spitting. “I know what I'm talking about.”

“What, therefore, do you see upon the height?” asked Dandelion.

“It's trickery.”

“An illusion.”

“It is not an illusion,” said Yennefer.

“It is a golden dragon,” added Gyllenstiern. “Most certainly a golden dragon.”

“Golden dragons exist only in legends!”

“Stop,” Boholt intervened with finality. “There's no need to make a fuss. Any fool can see that we're dealing with a golden dragon. What's the difference, my dear lords? Gold, speckled, chartreuse or checked? It's not big. We can deal with it in less than two. Ripper, Nischuka, take the canvas off the wagon, grab the equipment. Gold, not gold; it matters not.”

“There is a difference, Boholt,” said Ripper. “And an important one. It's not the dragon we're hunting. It's not the one who was poisoned near Barefield and who waits for us in his cavern, sleeping peacefully on precious metals and stones. This one is only resting on its ass in the meadow. What's the point of dealing with him?”

“This dragon is gold, Kennet,” shouted Yarpen Zigrin. “Have you seen its like before? Don't you understand? We'll get a lot more for its skin that what we could pull in for some pitiful treasure.”

“And without damaging the market for precious stones,” added Yennefer with an ugly smile. “Yarpen is right. The contract remains in effect. There is still something to share, don't you think?”

“Hey! Boholt?” shouted Nischuka from the wagon, noisily grabbing pieces of equipment. What do we use to protect the horses? Does a gold lizard spit out fire, acid or steam?”

“The devil only knows, my dear lords,” replied Boholt, concerned. “Hey! Magicians! Do the legends of golden dragons explain how to slay them?”

“How should we kill it? In the usual way,” replied Kozojed suddenly, raising his voice. “There's no time to waste. Give me an animal. We shall stuff it with poison then feed it to the lizard. That'll do it.”

Dorregaray gave the shoemaker a filthy look. Boholt spat, Dandelion looked away grimacing with disgust. Yarpen Zigrin smiled unpleasantly, hands on hips.

“What are you waiting for?” Kozojed asked. “It is high time we got down to work. We must establish what the decoy will be composed of so that the reptile passes away immediately; we need something horribly noxious, toxic or rotten.”

“Ah!” said the dwarf, still smiling. “What is toxic, filthy and evil-smelling all at once? You mean you don't know, Kozojed? It seems that it's you, you little shit.”

“What?”

“Get out of my sight, boot-buggerer, so I don't have to look at you anymore.”

“Lord Dorregaray,” said Boholt, going up to the magician, “Make yourself useful. Do you remember any legends or tales on the subject? What do you know about golden dragons? “

The magician smiled, standing up again in a dignified fashion.

“What do I know about golden dragons, you ask? Not much, but enough.”

“Speak.”

“Listen carefully, very carefully: right here in front of us sits a golden dragon. A living legend, perhaps the last and only creature of its type to have survived your murderous folly. Legends should not be killed. I will not allow you to touch this dragon. It that understood? You can put away your equipment and pack up your saddlebags and go home.”

Geralt was sure that a fight was going to erupt. He was wrong.

Gyllenstiern broke the silence:

“Honorable magician, be careful what you say and to whom you say it. King Niedamir can order you, Dorregaray, to pack up your saddlebags and go to hell; note that to suggest the same of him is improper. Is that clear?”

“No,” the magician replied proudly. “It isn't, because I am and remain Master Dorregaray. I will not obey the orders of an insignificant king governing a kingdom only visible from the top of a hill and in command an abject, filthy, stinking fortress. Did you know, my Lord Gyllenstiern, that with one wave of my hand I can transform you into cowpat, and your vulgar king into something much worse? Is that clear?”

Gyllenstiern had no time to reply. Boholt approached Dorregaray: he grabbed him by the arm and turned him around. Nischuka and Ripper, silent and grim-faced, stood right behind Boholt.

“Listen well, sir magician,” said the huge Reaver quietly. “Listen to me before you wave your hand: I could take the time to tell you, your grace, what I think of your protestations and legends, not to mention your stupid chattering. But I don't feel like it. Content yourself with following answer:”

Boholt cleared his throat, sank a finger into his nostril and snorted onto the magician's shoes.

Dorregaray turned pale, but did not move. He had noticed, as had all the others, the morning star that Nischuka held loosely in his hand. He knew, as did all the others, that the necessary time to cast a spell was undoubtedly longer than that which Nischuka needed to shatter his head into a thousand pieces.

“Okay,” said Boholt. “Now kindly step aside, your grace. And if the desire to open your mouth returns, I recommend that you stop up your trap at once with a tuft of grass. Because if I hear your babblings once more, I promise you that you'll regret it.” Boholt turned his back on him, rubbing his hands. “Nischuka, Ripper, get to work or the reptile is going to end up eluding us.”

“It doesn't seem intent on escape,” said Dandelion looking around. “Look at it”.

The golden dragon sat on the hillock, yawned, moved its head and wings and struck the earth with its tail.

“King Niedamir and ye knights!” a voice like the sounding of a brass clarion suddenly roared. “I am the dragon Villentretenmerth! I see that the landslide that I created, and was rather proud of, did not deter you. So here you are. As you know, there are only three exits to this valley. To the East towards Barefield and to the West towards Caingorn. You can leave by these two roads, but you will not pass by the ravine located to the north, because I, Villentretenmerth, forbid it. If anybody does not intend to respect my order, I honorably challenge him, in the form of a knight's duel using only conventional weapons; that is, without magic or bursts of flame. Battle will continue until the surrender of one of the parties. I await your answer through your herald, in accordance with protocol!”

All were dumbfounded.

“It talks!” Boholt murmured, barely able to catch his breath. “Incredible!”

“And very intelligently, at that,” added Yarpen Zigrin. “Does anybody know what a confessional weapon is?”

“Common place, without magic,” answered Yennefer, frowning. “Something else surprises me, however. They cannot articulate properly with a forked tongue. This rascal uses telepathy. Watch out because it works in both directions. It knows how to read your thoughts.”

“Is it completely mad or what?” declared Kennet alias Ripper, annoyed. “A duel of honor? With a stupid reptile? It's so small! Let's go at it all together! As a group!”

“No.”

They looked amongst themselves.

Eyck of Denesle, already on his horse, fully equipped, his lance at his stirrup, cut a more impressive figure than when he moved on foot. Fevered eyes shone beneath the raised visor of his helmet. His face was pallid.

“No, Lord Kennet,” repeated the knight, “over my dead body. I will not allow insult to the honor of knights in my presence. He who dares to violate the code of honor of duelling...” Eyck spoke more and more intensely; his impassioned voice broke and trembled with excitement. “Who dares to make fun of honor, makes fun of me. His blood or mine will run on this wasted earth. The animal demands a duel? So be it! Let the herald sound my name! Let the Judgment of the Gods decide our fate! The might of fangs and claws for the dragon, his infernal fury, and for me...”

“What a moron,” murmured Yarpen Zigrin.

“For me, law, faith and the tears of the virgins that this lizard...”

“Shut up, Eyck, you're giving us the urge to vomit!” Boholt reprimanded. “Get on with it. Get yourself over to that meadow instead of babbling on!”

“Hey, Boholt! Wait!” the leader of the dwarves intervened, stroking his beard. “You forget the contract? If Eyck strikes down the lizard, he will acquire half...”

“Eyck will acquire nothing at all,” replied Boholt, grinning. “I know it. If Dandelion dedicates a song to him, that will be more than enough for him.”

“Silence!” Gyllenstiern ordered. “So, shall it be. Faith and honor will rally against the dragon in the form of the knight errant, Eyck of Denesle, fighting in the colors of Caingorn as lance and sword of the King Niedamir. Such is the will of the king!”

“You see?” ground out Yarpen Zigrin under his breath. “The lance and the sword of Niedamir. The idiot King of Caingorn has definitely got us. What do we do now?”

“Nothing.” Boholt spat. “You are not going to pick a fight with Eyck, alright? Certainly, he talks crap, but since he's already rashly mounted his horse, it's better to let him go. Let him go, damn it, and let him settle his score with this dragon. Afterwards, we shall see.”

“Who holds the office of herald?” Dandelion asked. “The dragon wanted a herald. Perhaps me?”

“No. It's not a question of singing some ditty, Dandelion,” replied Boholt, frowning. “Yarpen Zigrin has a booming voice; let him be the herald.”

“Agreed, what does it matter?” replied Yarpen. “Give me the standard with the coat of arms so that we can do this properly.”

“Watch out, lord dwarf, make sure you're polite and respectful.” scolded Gyllenstiern.

“Don't tell me what to do.” The dwarf thrust out his chest proudly. “I had already conducted my first official engagement while you were still learning how to talk.”

The dragon remained sat on the hillock, waving its tail cheerfully while it waited patiently. The dwarf heaved himself onto the highest rock. He cleared his throat and bellowed:

“Hey! You there!” he shouted, putting his hands on his hips. “Scaly shithead! Are you ready to hear what the herald has to say? That's me, in case you were wondering! The knight errant Eyck of Denesle will be the first to take you on, all above board! He will drive his lance into your belly in accordance with sacred custom: which may be unfortunate for you, but it will be joy for the poor virgins and King Niedamir! Battle will have to respect the code of honor and law. You will be forbidden to belch fire. You will only be allowed to make mincemeat out of each other in the conventional way. Battle will go on as long as the opposing party has not given up the ghost or snuffed it... and we wish that for you more than anything! Did you get all that, dragon?”

The dragon yawned, shook its wings and swiftly slid down the hillock onto the flat ground.

“I heard you, virtuous herald,” it replied. “The valorous Eyck of Denesle deigns to come to me on meadow. I am ready! “

“What mugs!” Boholt spat, casting a gloomy look towards the knight Eyck as he trotted out to the barrier of rocks. “It's a bloody farce...”

“Shut it, Boholt,” shouted Dandelion, rubbing his hands. “Look, Eyck is going to charge! Bloody hell, what a fine ballad I'm going to compose!”

“Hurrah! Three cheers for Eyck!” one of the archers of Niedamir exclaimed.

“I,” Kozojed interjected sadly “would have made him gulp down some sulphur, just to be on the safe side.”

On the battleground, Eyck returned salute to the dragon by raising his lance. He slammed down the visor of his helmet before driving his spurs into the sides of his mount.

“Well, well,” the dwarf responded. “He might be a fool, but he really knows what he's doing. Look at him!”

Leaning forward, straining in the saddle, Eyck lowered his lance when he was at a gallop. In spite of Geralt's assumption, the dragon did not leap back. Neither did it try to elude its adversary by going around him but launched itself flat out towards the knight who attacked it.

“Kill it! Kill it, Eyck!” shouted Yarpen.

Eyck did not throw himself blindly into a frontal attack. Despite going full tilt, he skillfully changed direction at the last minute, shifting his lance over his horse's head. Flying alongside the dragon, he struck with all his might, standing up in his stirrups. Everybody started to shout in unison, except Geralt who refused to participate in the chorus.

The dragon evaded the thrust with an elegant circular movement, agile and full of grace. With a whip-like motion, it pivoted and, in a combination of feline exuberance and nonchalance,

disemboweled the horse with its paw. The horse reared high and let out a grunt. The knight, badly shaken, did not drop his lance, however. As the horse collapsed to the ground, the dragon swept Eyck from his saddle with one strike of its mighty paw. He was shot into the air, the plate of his armor grating against itself. Everybody heard the crash and clatter of his fall onto the ground.

The dragon crushed the horse with its foot, sat down and plunged in with its toothy maw. The horse bellowed with terror before dying in a last spasm.

All heard the deep voice of the dragon Villentretenmerth in the silence that had fallen.

“The valorous Eyck of Denesle may be withdrawn from the ground. He is unfit to continue battle. Next, please.”

“Oh Shit!” said Yarpen Zigrin in the quiet.

### Part VIII

“Both legs,” said Yennefer, drying her hands on a linen cloth. “And undoubtedly part of his backbone. His armor is split in the back as though it's been rammed. His legs were shredded by his own lance. He's not ready to get back up on a horse any time soon, supposing that he gets backup at all.”

“Occupational hazard,” murmured Geralt.

The sorceress frowned.

“Is that all you have to say?”

“What else do you want to hear, Yennefer?”

“This dragon is incredibly quick, too quick to be struck down by a human.”

“I understand. No, Yen. Not me.”

“Is it because of your principles?” the sorceress smiled maliciously. “Or perhaps it's just plain, ordinary fear. It would be the only human emotion you're capable of feeling.”

“Both,” replied the Witcher dispassionately. “What difference does it make?”

“Exactly.” Yennefer approached him. “None at all. Principles can be overridden; fear can be conquered. Kill this dragon, Geralt. Do it for me.”

“For you?”

“For me. I want this dragon. All of it. I want it for myself.”

“Use your spells and kill it yourself.”

“No. You kill it. With my spells, I shall immobilize the Reavers and the others so that they don't interrupt you.”

“There will be deaths, Yennefer.”

“Since when does that bother you? You'll be in charge of the dragon. I'll take care of the others.”

“Yennefer,” the Witcher replied coldly. “I'm having trouble understanding. Why do you need this dragon? Does the yellow color of its scales please you that much? Poverty threatens you not at all; your means are numerous, you are famous. So, what is it? Just don't say anything about duty, I beg you.”

Yennefer remained silent. Then, frowning, she kicked a pebble lying in the grass.

“There's somebody who can help me. Apparently, it... you know what I'm talking about... Apparently it's reversible. There is a chance. I can still have... Do you understand?”

“I understand.”

“It is a complicated and costly operation. But in exchange for a golden dragon... Geralt?”

The Witcher remained silent.

“When we were hanging from the bridge,” she continued, “you asked me for something. I grant it to you, in spite of everything.”

The Witcher smiled sadly. He touched the star of obsidian which hung on Yennefer's neck with his index finger.

“It's too late, Yen. We're no longer hanging from the bridge. I don't care anymore. In spite of everything.”

He expected the worst: a cascade of flames, flashes of lightning, blows raining down on his face, insults and curses. There was nothing. He saw, with astonishment, only the subtle trembling of her lips. Yennefer turned around slowly. Geralt regretted his words. He regretted the emotion from which they had originated. The last possible limit, like the strings of a lute, had been broken. He glanced at Dandelion and saw that the troubadour quickly turned away to avoid his gaze.

“Questions of honor and chivalry don't seem to apply any more, my dear Lord,” announced Boholt, already equipped with the armour of Niedamir, as he sat motionless on a stone with an expression of worry on his face. “The honor of the knights is lying over there, moaning quietly. It was a very bad idea, Sire Gyllenstiern, to send Eyck into battle as the knight and vassal of your king. I wouldn't dare to point a finger at the culprit, but I definitely know to whom Eyck owes a pair of broken pins. It is true, however, that we've killed two birds with one stone: we've got rid of a madman who wanted to relive the knights' legends by single-handedly defeating a dragon and a smart aleck who intended to get rich quick thanks to first. Do you know who I'm talking about, Gyllenstiern? Yes? Good. Now, it's our turn. This dragon belongs to us. It is to us, the Reavers, that it falls to kill the dragon. But for our own benefit.”

“And our contract, Boholt?” the chancellor shot back. “What about our contract?”

“I don't give a shit.”

“This is outrageous! It's contempt of court!” Gyllenstiern stamped his foot. “King Niedamir...”

“What about the king?” replied an irate Boholt, leaning on a colossal longsword. “Perhaps the king personally wants to pit his strength against the dragon? Or maybe you, his faithful chancellor? You would need to shield your big fat belly with armor before going into battle! Why not? You're welcome to try. We'll wait, your grace. You had your chance, Gyllenstiern, when Eyck tried to run the dragon through with his lance. You would have taken everything for yourself, and we would have received nothing - not a single scale from its back. Now, it's too late. Open your eyes. Nobody else is likely to fight in the colors of Caingorn. You won't find another fool such as Eyck.”

“That's not true!” The shoemaker Kozojed threw himself to the king's feet, who always seemed to be staring at an invisible point on the horizon. “Lord King! Wait just a little while until our Barefield chaps put in an appearance. It'll be well worth the wait. Damn that lot's stuck up arrogance. Look to the brave men who you can rely on, not to these blowhards!”

“Shut up!” Boholt calmly ordered, brushing a trace of rust from his breast-plate. “Shut your mouth, peasant, otherwise I'll shut it for you by making you choke on your teeth.”

Kozojed, seeing the approaching Kennet and Nischuka, retreated quickly and blended in with the group of the scouts from Barefield.

“Sire,” asked Gyllenstiern. “Sire, what do you order?”

The bored expression immediately disappeared from Niedamir's face. The young monarch scowled, wrinkled his freckled nose and got up.

“What do I order?” he said slowly. “Finally, you ask me, Gyllenstiern, instead of deciding for me and in my own name. I'm delighted. Let's keep it like that, Gyllenstiern. From now on, I want you silent and obedient. This, therefore, is the first of my orders. Gather all the people. Order them to place Eyck of Denesle on a wagon. We return to Caingorn.”

“Lord...”

“Not a word, Gyllenstiern. Lady Yennefer, noble lords, I take my leave of you. I wasted a fair amount of time carrying out this expedition, but the benefits which I take away from it are incommensurable. I learnt a lot. Thanks to you and your words, Lady Yennefer, Lord Dorregaray, Lord Boholt. And thanks to your silence, Lord Geralt.”

“Sire,” said Gyllenstiern, “why? The dragon is right there, at your mercy. Sire, what happened to your ambition?”

“My ambition,” repeated Niedamir, lost in his thoughts. “I don't have it anymore. And if I stay here, I risk losing it forever.”

“And Malleore? And the hand of the princess?” The chancellor had not given up; he continued, wringing his hands. “And the throne, Sire? The people consider that...”

“Screw the people of Malleore, to use the expression of Mr Boholt,” replied Niedamir. “The throne of Malleore belongs to me in any case: three hundred cavalry make my reign law in Caingorn and I have one thousand five hundred infantrymen against their measly thousand

shields. They will have to acknowledge my legitimacy. As long as I hang, slay and cleave my way through the roads of Malleore, they will have to acknowledge my legitimacy. As for their princess, that fatted calf, I shall reject her hand. I need only her belly to make me heirs. Afterwards, I shall get rid of her. With the old-fashioned method of Master Kozojed. We've spoken enough, Gyllenstiern. It's time to carry out my orders.”

“Indeed,” murmured Dandelion to Geralt. “He did learn a lot.”

“Yes, a lot,” confirmed the Witcher, looking at the hillock where the golden dragon, lowering its triangular head, licked something that sat in the grass beside it with its scarlet, forked tongue. “But I wouldn't like to be one of his subjects, Dandelion.”

“What's going to happen now, do you think?”

The Witcher gazed at a tiny green-grey creature that leaned against the golden dragon's paw, flapping its bat-like wings.

“And you, Dandelion, what do you have to say about it?”

“What does it matter what I think? I'm a poet, Geralt. Has my opinion the slightest importance?”

“Certainly.”

“In that case, I'll tell you, Geralt. When I see a reptile, a snake for instance, or a lizard, it disgusts me and scares me, they're horrible... While this dragon...”

“Yes?”

“It's... it's beautiful, Geralt.”

“Thank you, Dandelion.”

“What for?”

Geralt turned around and, with a slow movement, tightened the buckle on the bandolier across his chest by two holes. He raised his right hand to check that the hilt of his sword was well positioned. The poet looked at him wide-eyed.

“Geralt, you're going to...”

“Yes,” replied the Witcher, calmly. “There is a limit as to what is possible. I've had enough of all this. What are you going to do, Dandelion? Will you stay or will you follow Niedamir's troops?”

The troubadour bent to carefully put his lute down against a stone, then straightened up.

“I'll stay. What are you talking about? Limits of the possible? I reserve the right to use this expression as the title of my ballad.”

“It might be your last ballad.”

“Geralt.”

“Yes?”

“Don't kill it... if you can.”

“A sword is a sword, Dandelion. When it's drawn...”

“Try.”

“I shall try.”

Dorregaray sneered, turning towards Yennefer and the Reavers he pointed to the royal standard as it moved away.

“There,” he said, “goes King Niedamir. He no longer gives orders by the mouth of Gyllenstiern as he has finally gained some common sense. It's a good thing that you're with us, Dandelion. I propose that you begin composing your ballad.”

“About what?”

The magician produced his wand from inside his sable coat.

“How Master Dorregaray, wizard by trade, succeeded in driving away a bunch of brigands eager to exterminate the last living golden dragon. Don't move Boholt! Yarpen, take your hand away from your axe! Yennefer, don't even think about moving a finger! Go, you wretched curs, I suggest that you follow the king like a pack of hounds traipsing after their master. Take your horses and your wagons. I warn you: the slightest wrong movement, and there will remain of the perpetrator only a smell of burning and an empty space on the sand. I'm not joking.”

“Dorregaray,” Yennefer hissed.

“Dear magician,” said Boholt in a reasonable voice. “Either we come to an agreement...”

“Be silent, Boholt. I repeat: do not touch this dragon. Take your business elsewhere and good riddance.”

Yennefer's hand suddenly shot forward and the ground around Dorregaray exploded in a flash of azure fire, whirling about in cloud of gravel and ripped up clods. The magician staggered, surrounded by flames. Nischuka took advantage of this to leap up and punch him in the face. Dorregaray fell to the ground, his wand firing off a flash of red lightning that struck harmlessly amongst the rocks. Ripper, suddenly appearing at his side, kicked the unfortunate magician. He had already pivoted to repeat this gesture when the Witcher fell between them. He pushed Ripper back, drawing his sword and striking horizontally at the space between his pauldron and cuirass. Boholt blocked the blow with his longsword. Dandelion tried to trip up Nischuka, but to no avail: Nischuka took hold of the bard's rainbow tunic and punched him between eyes. Yarpen Zigrin, springing up behind Dandelion, buckled his legs by hitting him in the back of his knees with the handle of his axe.

Geralt dodged Boholt's sword with a pirouette and struck Ripper at close quarters as he tried to evade him, tearing his iron armband from his arm. Ripper retreated backwards with a jump, tripped over and fell to the ground. Boholt grunted, wielding his sword like a scythe. Geralt jumped over the hissing blade and rammed Boholt's cuirass with the hilt of his sword, pulled back then aimed for Boholt's cheek. Boholt, seeing that he could not parry blow, threw himself backwards and fell onto his back. In one leap, the Witcher had already joined him... At this instant, Geralt felt the earth give way and his feet falter. The horizon became vertical. Trying in vain to draw the Sign of Protection with his hand, he fell heavily onto his side, letting his sword slip free from his paralyzed hand. He heard his pulse knocking in his ears and a continuous hiss.

“Bind them while the spell still lasts,” shouted Yennefer, from further away upon the height. “All three!”

Dorregaray and Geralt, stunned and powerless, allowed themselves to be bound and tied to the wagon wordlessly and without resistance. Dandelion cursed and put up a fight and as a result was trussed up after first having received a few blows.

“What's the point in taking these sons of bitches prisoner?” Kozojed interrupted, approaching the group. “It's better to kill these traitors right away and be done with it.”

“You're a son of the same bitch,” Yarpen Zigrin replied. “Though saying that's an insult to dogs. Get lost, parasite!”

“Such recklessness!” shouted Kozojed. “We shall certainly see if you'll be as arrogant when my men arrive from Barefield. In their opinion, you...”

Yarpen, with an uncommon agility for his stature, effortlessly pivoted and struck him in the head with the handle of his axe. Nischuka, coming alongside, finished the job with a kick which sent Kozojed to graze on the grass some distance away.

“You'll regret this!” shouted the shoemaker, on all fours. “All of you...”

“Get him, lads!” roared Yarpen Zigrin. “That filthy-faced son of a whore cobbler! Come on, Nischuka!”

Kozojed didn't hang about. He jumped up and took off at a run towards the eastern canyon.

The Reavers of Barefield chased after him. The dwarves threw stones at him, laughing.

“Already the air's got a lot fresher,” laughed Yarpen. “Okay, Boholt, let's go and get the dragon!”

“Wait a minute.” Yennefer raised her arm. “The only thing you're going to be hitting is the road...You can go back that way: now be off with you. Every single one of you.”

“What?” Boholt flinched, his eyes flashed malevolently. “What are you talking about, dear lady sorceress?”

“Get out! Be gone! Go and find the shoemaker,” repeated Yennefer. “Every last one of you. I'm going to take on the dragon myself. With non-conventional weapons. Thank me before leaving. Without me, you would have had a taste of the Witcher's sword. Go quickly, Boholt, before I get annoyed. I'm warning you: I know a spell which could transform you into geldings. I have only to wave my hand.”

“Good grief,” exclaimed Boholt. “My patience has reached its limit. I won't be made to look a fool. Ripper remove the wagon's tongue. It seems to me that I also need a non-conventional weapon. Somebody's going to suffer, my dear lords. I'm not pointing a finger. I shall simply say that it's a certain despicable sorceress.”

“Try it, Boholt. It would make my day.”

“Yennefer,” asked the dwarf, reproachfully, “Why?”

“Perhaps it's because I don't like to share, Yarpen.”

“Oh well,” the dwarf smiled, “you're only human. So human that it's even worthy of a dwarf. It's nice to find one's own qualities in a sorceress. I don't like to share either, Yennefer.”

He bent over in a movement as short and quick as a flash of lightning. A metal ball, produced from who knows where, flew and struck Yennefer's forehead violently. Before the sorceress came to, Ripper and Nischuka immobilized her arms and Yarpen has bound her ankles with a rope. The sorceress howled with anger. One of Yarpen's boys, holding her from behind, threw a bridle over her head and pulled it tight, stifling her shouts by shoving the straps into her open mouth.

“What now, Yennefer?” shot Boholt, walking towards her. “How are you going to transform me into a gelding without being able to move your hands?”

He tore the neck of her tunic then ripped her shirt open. Trapped in the bridles, Yennefer hurled abuse at him in the form of stifled shouting.

“We have no time at present,” said Boholt, groping her while ignoring the sniggering of the dwarves, “but wait just a little while, sorceress. When we've taken care of the dragon, we'll be able to have some fun. Tie her firmly to the wheel, lads. Both hands tied, so that she can't move a finger. And none of you boys dare to interfere with her, damn it. He who stands strongest against the dragon will have first place in the queue.”

“Boholt,” said Geralt quietly and ominously. “Watch out. I will hunt you to the ends of the earth.”

“You surprise me,” replied the Reaver, also quietly. “If I were you, I'd keep my mouth shut because, knowing your abilities, I'm likely take your threat seriously. You leave me no choice. I can't let you live, Witcher. But we'll deal with you later. Nischuka, Ripper, to the horses.”

“That's just your luck,” Dandelion wailed. “Damn it, it's me who got you into this mess.”

Dorregaray lowered his head and watched thick drops of his blood run slowly from his nose onto his belly.

“Stop staring at me this instant!” the sorceress shouted at Geralt. She writhed like a snake in her bonds in a vain attempt to conceal her naked charms. Geralt obediently diverted his eyes. Dandelion didn't.

“According to what I see,” mocked the bard, “you must have used a whole barrel of mandrake elixir, Yennefer. Your skin resembles that of a sixteen-year-old girl. It's giving me goosebumps.”

“Shut up, you son of a whore!” the sorceress replied.

Dandelion didn't relent, “How old are you really? Two hundred years? Rather a hundred and fifty, say. And you act like...”

Yennefer stretched her neck to spit at him. It missed its target...

“Yen,” muttered the Witcher sadly, wiping his saliva spattered ear with his shoulder.

“Make him stop ogling me!”

“I have no intention of doing so,” declared Dandelion, continuing to admire the pleasant view of the half-naked sorceress. “It's because of her that we're prisoners. They'll cut our throats. At the very least, they're going to rape her. At her age...”

“Shut up, Dandelion,” ordered the Witcher.

“Not on your life. I have a burning desire to compose a ballad about a pair of tits. Please don't interrupt me.”

“Dandelion,” Dorregaray spat out some blood, “be serious.”

“I'm very serious, damn it.”

Boholt, helped up by a dwarf, clambered onto his saddle with difficulty due to the heavy leather armor he was decked out in. Nischuka and Ripper were already waiting on their mounts, huge longswords at their sides.

“Good,” muttered Boholt. “Now to the dragon.”

“No,” a deep voice answered, the sonority of which was reminiscent of a brass horn. “It is I who will come to you!”

A long bright gold muzzle appeared behind the circle of rocks, followed by an elongated neck protected by a row of spines then long-clawed paws. Menacing reptilian eyes with vertical pupils observed the scene from on high.

“I couldn't wait on the battleground any longer,” explained the dragon Villentretenmerth, looking around at them. “I therefore took the liberty of coming to join you. I see that the adversaries eager to fight me are growing fewer and fewer.”

Boholt grabbed his reins between his teeth and his sword in his two fists.

“Thatsh gahd,” he mumbled indistinctly, biting on the reins. “Ah hahp dat yer're reddy fer combat, monshter!”

“I am ready,” replied the dragon, bowing its back into an arch and wafting its tail in the air as a sign of provocation.

Boholt checked what was going on around him. Nischuka and Ripper surrounded the animal slowly, with deliberate calmness, on either side. Yarpen Zigrin and the boys waited behind them, armed with axes.

“Aaargh!” bellowed Boholt, spurring his horse on wildly and brandishing his sword.

The dragon pivoted, rising and letting itself fall back to the earth; like a scorpion with its tail above its haunches, it struck downward, mowing down not Boholt, but Nischuka who attacked laterally. Nischuka fell with a crash, his horse neighing and screaming. Boholt, approaching at a gallop, attacked with a mighty blow from his sword, the broad blade of which the dragon skillfully avoided. The momentum of the gallop took Boholt on past the dragon. It twisted and, standing on its hind legs, hit Ripper with its claws, disemboweling the horse and goring its rider's thigh with a single swipe. Boholt, leaning in the saddle, managed to gain control of his mount and, still gripping the reins between his teeth, charged again.

Whipping the air with its tail, the dragon swept aside all of the dwarves as they came running up to it. Then it launched itself at Boholt, vigorously crushing Ripper in its passage as he tried to get up again. Boholt, turning his head, tried an evasive maneuver but the dragon was much quicker and more agile. Shrewdly intercepting Boholt from the left, cutting off his route, it hit him with its clawed foot. The horse reared and fell onto its side. Boholt flew from the saddle, losing both sword and helmet, and fell backwards before bashing his head on a boulder.

“Run, boys! Into the mountains!” yelled Yarpen Zigrin with a shout which drowned out the howling Nischuka, still crushed by his horse.

Beards blowing in the wind, the dwarves ran towards the rocks at an amazing speed for their short legs. The dragon did not pursue them. He sat quietly and looked around. Nischuka thrashed and yelled under the weight of his horse. Boholt was lying motionless. Ripper limped back to the shelter of the rocks, walking sideways like a crab.

“It's incredible,” murmured Dorregaray. “Incredible...”

“Hey!” Dandelion pulled so hard on his bonds; the wagon shook. “What's that? There! Look!”

They saw a big cloud of dust on the side of the eastern ravine, soon followed by a tumult of shouting, rattle and clatter. The dragon raised its head to look.

Three big wagons carrying armed men came out onto the plain. They scattered to encircle the dragon.

“Bloody hell! It's the militia and guilds of Barefield!” cried Dandelion. “They succeeded in bypassing the river Braa! Yes, it's them! Look, there's Kozojed at the head!”

The dragon lowered its head to gently push the small, greyish, chirping creature towards the wagon. It then struck the ground with its tail, roaring loudly, before launching itself like a speeding arrow to meet the inhabitants of Barefield.

“What's that small thing moving in the grass over there, Geralt?” Yennefer asked.

“It's what the dragon protected,” replied the Witcher. “It was just recently hatched in a cavern in the northern ravine. It's the offspring of the female dragon poisoned by Kozojed.”

The baby reptile, stumbling and hugging the ground with its rounded belly, came up to the wagon with a halting step. It chirped, stood on its hind legs and unfurled its wings. It suddenly went to snuggle up against the sorceress. Yennefer sighed deeply, looking puzzled.

“He likes you,” murmured Geralt.

“He may be young, but he's no idiot,” added Dandelion, fidgeting enthusiastically despite his bonds. “Look where he lays his little head. I'd like to be in his place, damn it. Hey! Little one! You should run away. This is Yennefer, the bane of dragons! And Witchers! At least of one Witcher in particular...”

“Shut up, Dandelion,” shouted Dorregaray. “Look at what's happening on the ground over there! They're going to catch it! Plague upon on all of them!”

The wagons of the inhabitants of Barefield, rumbling like chariots, rushed at the attacking dragon.

“Hack it to pieces,” shouted Kozojed hanging on the driver's shoulders. “Hack it to pieces until it's dead, my friends! Don't hold back!”

In a single leap, the dragon evaded the first wagon, but found itself trapped between the two following, from whence a big double fisherman's net, tied with ropes, was thrown over him. The entangled dragon fell, struggling, then curled into a ball before lashing out its legs. The net ripped sharply, torn to pieces. The first wagon, which had now managed to turn around, threw another net, immobilizing it completely. The other two wagons made a u-turn and charged the dragon once again, rattling and bouncing over the potholes in the ground.

“You are caught in the net, carp!” yelled Kozojed. “We're not going to delay gutting you!”

The dragon roared, fire billowing out into the sky with clouds of smoke. The Barefield militiamen jumped down from their wagons and rushed towards it. The dragon roared once again, a desperate, resounding call.

An answer came up from the northern canyon in the form of a piercing war cry.

At a full-on gallop, their blonde braids flitting in the wind and blades flashing, there suddenly appeared from the ravine...

“The Zerricanians!” cried the Witcher, struggling to free himself from his bonds.

“Oh, shit!” exclaimed Dandelion. “Geralt, do you know what this means?”

The Zerricanians cut through the mass of militiamen like a hot knife in through butter, leaving in their wake heaps of slashed bodies. They dismounted from their horses before running flat out towards the imprisoned dragon. A militiaman tried to intervene. His head rolled from his shoulders. Another one tried to stab Vea with a pitchfork, but the Zerricanian, holding her sword with both hands, disemboweled him from his perineum up to his sternum. The others took to their heels.

“To the wagons,” shouted Kozojed. “To the wagons, my friends! We shall crush them with the wagons.”

“Geralt!” Yennefer shouted suddenly. Stretching her trussed up legs, she managed to move them under the wagon, very close to the Witcher's hands which were tied behind his back. “The Sign of Igni! Burn my bonds! Can you feel the rope? Burn it, damn it!”

“Without looking?” Geralt protested. “I'll burn you, Yen!”

“Form the sign! I can take it!”

Geralt obeyed. He felt a tingling in his fingers, forming the Sign of Igni just above the sorceress' ankles. Yennefer turned her head to bite the neck of her tunic, stifling a moan. The young dragon nestled his wings against her, chirping.

“Yen!”

“Burn the rope!” she wailed.

The bonds finally gave way as the foul smell of charred meat became intolerable. Dorregaray issued a strange sound before fainting, sagging in his bonds against the wheel of the wagon.

The sorceress, face twisted with pain, sat back and extended a freed leg. She cried out in a voice full of rage and suffering. The medallion Geralt wore at his neck trembled as though it were alive. Yennefer shifted her hips and gestured with her leg towards the wagons of the Barefield militia and called out a spell. The air vibrated and filled with the smell of ozone.

“Oh! By the Gods!” Dandelion moaned with awe. “What a ballad it will be, Yennefer!”

The spell cast by her pretty leg did not quite succeed. The first wagon and everyone inside it took on a shade of buttercup yellow which the warriors Barefield, blinded by the heat of battle, did not even notice. The spell was more effective on the second wagon: all its crew were instantly transformed into huge pimply frogs which fled, croaking comically, in all directions. The wagon, deprived of a driver, turned over and smashed onto the ground. Dragging the torn off tongue behind them, the horses disappeared into the distance, neighing hysterically.

Yennefer bit her lip, raising her leg once more. The buttercup yellow wagon, accompanied by a rousing music coming from somewhere above, was reduced to a cloud of smoke of the same color; all the crew, dazed, crashed to the grass, forming a picturesque heap.

The wheels of the third wagon became square: the horses reared up, the wagon collapsed in on itself and the Barefield militiamen were ejected. Out of pure spite, Yennefer moved her leg again, and with an additional charm, transformed all of them at random into turtles, geese, millipedes, pink flamingos or suckling pigs. The Zerricanians expertly and methodically dispatched the others.

The dragon, finally tearing the net to pieces, jumped up, flapping its wings. It roared and flew like an arrow in pursuit of Kozojed, who had succeeded in escaping the massacre. The shoemaker ran like a gazelle, but the dragon was faster. Geralt, seeing its open maw and flashing teeth as sharp as daggers, turned away. He heard a bloodcurdling scream then a terrible crunch. Dandelion stifled a cry. Yennefer, pale as a sheet, doubled over and turned around to vomit under the wagon.

The silence which followed was broken only by the croaking, squawking and shrieking of the survivors of the Barefield militia.

Vea stood over Yennefer, legs wide apart, wearing a nasty smile. The Zerricanian drew her sword. Yennefer, pale, raised her leg.

“No,” interrupted Borch. Three Jackdaws sat on a stone. He held in his arms the young dragon, calm and happy.

“We will not kill Lady Yennefer,” the dragon Villentretenmerth continued. “There's no point now. Besides, we are now grateful to Lady Yennefer for her invaluable help. Release them, Vea.”

“Did you know, Geralt?” Dandelion murmured, rubbing his numb hands. “Did you know? There's an ancient ballad about a golden dragon. Golden dragons can...”

“can take all forms,” completed the Witcher, “even human form. I've also heard about it, but I didn't believe it.”

“Mr. Yarpen Zigrin!” the dragon called out to the dwarf hanging on the vertical cliff wall, about two hundred cubits above the ground. “What are you looking for up there? Marmots? They are not to your taste, if I remember rightly. Get down, I beg you, and busy yourself with the Reavers. They need assistance. Killing is over for today. It's better for everybody.”

Dandelion tried to wake the still unconscious Dorregaray, casting anxious glances at the Zerricanians who continued to survey the battlefield attentively. Geralt salved and dressed Yennefer's burnt ankles. The sorceress hissed in pain and muttered curses under her breath.

Having finished with this task, Geralt got up. “Stay here,” he said, “I need to talk to the dragon.”

Yennefer, wincing, rose. “I'll go with you, Geralt.” She took him by the hand. “Can I? Please, Geralt.”

“With me, Yen? I thought that...”

“Don't think.”

She clung to his shoulder.

“Yen?”

“Everything is okay now, Geralt.”

He looked into her eyes, which were now as warm as they once were in the past. He bent and kissed her on the lips. They were hot, soft and yearning. As they once were in the past. They approached the dragon. Yennefer, supported by Geralt, made a very low courtesy as if she were before a king, holding the hemline of her dress with the tips of her fingers.

“Three Jack-... Villentretenmerth...,” stated the Witcher.

“My name means literally in your language ' three black birds ',” explained Borch. The young dragon clutched Three Jackdaws' forearm with its claws and stretched out his neck to receive a caress. “Order and Chaos,” said Villentretenmerth, smiling. “Remember, Geralt? Chaos represents aggression, while order represents the means to protect itself from it. Shouldn't we go to the ends of the earth to stand against aggression and evil, Geralt? Especially when, as you said, the wage is attractive. As it was in this case. It was the treasure of the female dragon Myrgatabrakke, poisoned near Barefield. It was she who called me so that I could help her to neutralize the evil that threatened her. Myrgatabrakke flew off shortly after Eyck de Denesle had been removed from the field of battle. She had time to escape during your debates and quarrels, leaving me her treasure, in other words, my wage.”

The young dragon chirped and flapped its wings. “Therefore, you...”

“Yes,” interrupted the dragon. “It's necessary in this day and age. The creatures that you commonly call monsters have felt, for some time, more and more threatened by humans. They don't know how to defend themselves and they need a protector... a Witcher.”

“And the goal at the end of the path?”

“Here it is.” Villentretenmerth raised his forearm; frightened, the young dragon started to chirp. “Here is my goal, my purpose. Thanks to him, I shall prove, Geralt of Rivia, that there is no limit as to what's possible. You too, one day, will discover such a purpose, Witcher. Even those who are different deserve to live. Goodbye, Geralt. Goodbye, Yennefer.”

The sorceress curtsied once again, steadying herself firmly on Geralt's shoulder. Villentretenmerth stood up and looked at her, his face very serious.

“Excuse my boldness and my frankness, Yennefer. It's written on your faces; I don't even need to read your thoughts. You were made for each other, you and the Witcher. But nothing will come of it. Nothing. I'm sorry.”

“I know.” Yennefer turned a little pale. “I know, Villentretenmerth. But I too would like to believe that there is no limit as to what's possible or at least that this limit is very distant.”

Vea went up to Geralt. She whispered to him, touching his shoulder. The dragon laughed.

“Geralt, Vea wants you to know that she will never forget the tub at the Pensive Dragon. She hopes that she will see you again.”

“What?” Yennefer asked, blinking anxiously.

“Nothing,” the Witcher replied quickly. “Villentretenmerth...”

“I'm listening, Geralt of Rivia.”

“You can take all forms. Whatever you wish?”

“Yes.”

“Why transform into a human? Why Borch, with the coat of arms of three black birds?”

The dragon gave him a broad smile. “It's hard for me to say, Geralt, in what circumstances our respective forefathers had their first meeting, but I know that for dragons nothing is more loathsome than man. Man awakens in dragons an instinctive and irrational hatred. I am an exception. To me... you are quite likeable. Goodbye.”

It was not a gradual transformation, like the hazy disappearance of an illusion. It took place in the blink of an eye. In place of where there was, a moment earlier, a curly-haired knight in a tunic adorned with three black birds there now appeared a golden dragon, stretching his long slender neck gracefully. Bowing his head, the dragon unfurled wings that shone brilliant gold in the rays of the sun. Yennefer sighed loudly.

Vea, already in the saddle next to Tea, waved goodbye.

“Vea,” said the Witcher, “you were right.”

“Hmm?”

“He is definitely the most beautiful.”

## A Shard of Ice

The dead sheep, swollen and bloated, its four rigid legs raised towards the sky, gave a convulsion. Geralt, sitting on his haunches against the wall, drew his sword slowly, taking care that the blade did not make a sound as it left the sheath. Ten paces away from him, the pile of refuse suddenly swelled and heaved. The Witcher had just enough time to leap up and avoid the wave of refuse that had been set in motion and now poured forth violently.

A tentacle with a blunt, tapering end suddenly emerged from the refuse and shot forward to meet him with incredible speed. The Witcher jumped onto the remnants of a broken cabinet that lay on top of a pile of rotting vegetables; he regained his balance and struck the tentacle with his sword, quickly and cleanly, severing the suckers with the staggering blow. He immediately leapt backwards, but slipped on the boards, landing thigh-deep in the rotting mass.

The mountain of trash exploded like a geyser, expelling a dense and foul-smelling sludge of kitchen waste, rotting rags and whitish strands of sauerkraut; from beneath there appeared a huge and bulbous body, shapeless like a grotesque potato, lashing the air with its three tentacles and its mutilated stump.

Geralt, still stuck in the sludge, twisted his hips, smoothly severed another tentacle with a broad stroke. The remaining two tentacles, as thick as boughs, fell heavily onto him, driving him deeper into the refuse. The monster's body barreled towards him, ploughing through the refuse. Geralt saw the hideous bulb split open, revealing a gaping maw full of enormous, jagged teeth.

He let the tentacles grab him around the waist and was pulled out of the mess with a squelching noise. He was drawn towards the beast as it advanced through the refuse, reeling itself nearer; its serrated jaws gnashed wildly and furiously. When he got close to the strange mouth, the Witcher struck at the beast, wielding his sword with both hands, the blade sliding slowly and casually into its flesh. It emitted a choking, sickly sweet stench. The monster started to hiss and tremble; it released its prey, tentacles waving in the air convulsively. Once again mired in the filth, Geralt struck again, body twisting, so that the blade crunched and ground hideously against the monster's snarled teeth. The creature gurgled and collapsed, but then suddenly surged upwards, hissing and splashing the Witcher with stinking slime. Desperately wading through the sludge, Geralt dragged himself forward, pushing the refuse aside with his torso before launching himself outwards. He then struck with all his might, blade cleaving downwards between the monster's two faintly phosphorescent eyes, slicing its body from top to bottom. The monster groaned with pain; it shuddered, spilling forth a pile of waste like a punctured bladder and emitting warm waves of palpable stench. The tentacles twitched and trembled amongst the decay.

The Witcher scrambled out of the thick sludge, finding himself standing on a swaying but solid footing. He felt something sticky and repulsive that had seeped into his boot creep further up his calf. To the well, he thought, so I can clean this filth off as quickly as possible. Wash myself clean. The monster's tentacles slapped loudly and wetly on the refuse once more, then fell still.

A shooting star flashed across the sky, for one second enlivening the black firmament studded with unmoving bright points. The Witcher didn't make a wish.

He breathed heavily, harshly, feeling the effects of the elixirs he had drunk before the battle subsiding. Adjacent to the city walls, the huge heap of refuse and debris sloping steeply down toward the glittering ribbon of the river now looked exotic and picturesque in the light of the stars. The Witcher spat.

The monster was dead. It had now become part of the pile in which it had lived.

A second shooting star passed.

“Trash,” the Witcher uttered with difficulty, “Nothing but muck, filth and shit.”

### Part II

“You stink, Geralt,” Yennefer frowned, not turning from the mirror before which she removed the make-up from her eyelids and lashes. “Take a bath.”

“There's no water,” he said, peering into the tub.

“We'll sort something out.” The sorceress stood up and opened wide the window. “Would you prefer seawater or fresh water?”

“Sea, for a change.”

Yennefer quickly threw open her arms, then cast a spell by performing a swift, intricate gesture with her fingers. A strong wind blew through the open window, cool and damp. The shutters rattled as an irregular green sphere burst, whistling, into the room, disturbing the dust. The tub foamed with water, heaving restlessly, beating against the edges and splashing out onto the floor. The sorceress returned to her original task.

“Did it go well?” she asked. “What was it?”

“A zeugl, as I thought.” Geralt pulled off his boots, threw off his clothes and plunged a foot into the tub. “Damn, Yen, it's cold. Can't you heat it up?”

“No.” The sorceress said. Bringing her face nearer to the mirror, she placed a few drops of something in her eye with a pipette. “That type of spell is terribly exhausting and makes me feel sick. Anyway, after the elixirs, the cold water will do you good.”

Geralt did not argue. Arguing with Yennefer was pointless.

“Did the zeugl cause you difficulty?” The sorceress plunged the pipette into the bottle and moistened her other eye, grimacing comically.

“Not especially.”

They heard a loud noise on the other side of the opened window, the sharp crack of breaking wood and a slurred falsetto voice, brazenly reciting the chorus of a popular bawdy song.

“A zeugl.” The sorceress grabbed a second bottle from amongst the imposing battery of containers that stood on the table and drew out the cork. The smell of lilac and gooseberries filled room. “You see, even in the city it's easy for a Witcher to find work. You don't have to roam the wilds. Istredd maintains that after the extinction of a forest or marsh creature, another one always replaces it; a new mutation adapted to the artificial environment created by humans.”

As usual, Geralt frowned when Yennefer mentioned Istredd. The Witcher was starting to get fed up with her going on about the genius of Istredd. Even when Istredd was right.

“Istredd is right,” continued Yennefer massaging her cheeks and eyelids with the potion that smelt of lilac and gooseberries. “You've seen it yourself: pseudo-rats in sewers and cellars, zeugls in the refuse, platocorises in filthy ditches and drains, giant molluscs rampant in the mill ponds. It's almost symbiotic, don't you think?”

And ghouls in the graveyards devouring the dead a day after the funeral, he thought, rinsing the soap from his body. Utterly symbiotic.

“Yes...” The sorceress pushed back the bottles and jars. “Even in city, there's work for a Witcher. I think you'll eventually settle down permanently in some market town, Geralt.”

The devil take me first! he thought, but kept it to himself. To contradict Yennefer would have inevitably led to a quarrel and quarrelling with Yennefer could be dangerous.

“Have you finished, Geralt?”

“Yes.”

“Get out of the tub.”

Without getting up, Yennefer casually waved her hand and cast a spell. The water from the tub, along with that which spilled onto the floor and dripped from Geralt came together in a translucent sphere, then flew, whistling, out of the window. There was a loud splash.

“A plague upon you, you son of a whore!” came an angry shout from below.” Don’t you know where to chuck out your piss? May you be eaten alive by lice! Until you are dead!”

The sorceress closed the window.

“Damn, Yen,” the Witcher chuckled. “Couldn't you throw the water away somewhere else?”

“I could have,” she muttered, “but I didn't feel like it.”

She took a lantern from the table and approached the Witcher. Her white nightgown, clinging to every slight movement of her body, cut an incredibly enchanting vision. More so than if she were naked, he thought.

“I want to examine you,” she said. “The zeugl could have wounded you.”

“It didn't wound me. I would've felt it.”

“After the elixirs? Don't make me laugh. You wouldn't have felt a fracture unless the bone was poking out and catching on things. And the zeugl could have given you anything including tetanus and blood poisoning. You have to be checked. Turn around.”

He felt the warmth of the lantern on his body, and the occasional caress of her hair.

“You seem to be alright,” she said. “Lie down before the potions knock you down. Those potions are terribly dangerous. They'll eventually kill you.”

“I have to take them before a fight.”

Yennefer did not respond. She sat before the mirror once again, combing her long, black, shiny curls. She always combed her hair before going to bed. Geralt thought it strange, but he loved to watch her do it. He suspected that Yennefer knew this.

He suddenly felt very cold, the elixirs making him shiver violently. His neck grew stiff and the effects finally settled in the pit of his stomach in swirling eddies of nausea. He swore under his breath and collapsed on the bed, his gaze still on Yennefer.

A movement in the corner of the room caught his eye and he looked closer. Nailed crookedly to the wall were some deer antlers, covered in cobwebs, atop which perched a small black bird.

Turning its head sideways, the bird fixed the Witcher with a yellow, unmoving stare.

“What's that, Yen? Where did it come from?”

“What?” Yennefer turned around. “Oh, that! It's a kestrel.”

“A kestrel? Kestrels are speckled russet. That one's black.”

“It's a magical kestrel. I made it myself.”

“Why?”

“I need it for something,” she replied coldly.

Geralt didn't ask any more questions, knowing that Yennefer would not answer them. “Are you going to see Istredd tomorrow?”

The sorceress pushed back the bottles on the table, placed her comb in a small casket and closed the leaves of the triptych mirror.

“Yes, I'm going in the morning. Why?”

“Nothing.”

She lay next to him without putting out the lantern. She was unable to sleep in the dark, so she never put out the light. Whether the lamp was a night light or candle, it always had to burn to the last. Always. Another eccentricity. Yennefer had an incredible amount of eccentricities.

“Yen?”

“Yes?”

“When are we going back on the road?”

“Stop going on about it.” Yennefer pulled on the eiderdown roughly. “We've been here three days and you've already asked this question about thirty times. I told you: I have business here in the city.”

“With Istredd?”

“Yes.”

He sighed and embraced her without concealing his intentions.

“Hey!” she whispered. “You took the elixirs...”

“So what?”

“Nothing.” she giggled like a teenager.

She nestled against him then wriggled around so that she could remove her nightgown more easily. Delighting in her nakedness, as usual Geralt felt a shiver go down his spine and a tingling in his fingers as they met Yennefer's bare skin. His lips lightly touched her breasts, rounded and delicate with nipples so pale they were only apparent by their prominence. His hands got lost in the tangle of her hair, sweet with the fragrance of lilac and gooseberries. Yennefer gave herself up to his caresses, purring like a cat, wrapping her legs around his hips.

The Witcher soon realized that he had, as usual, overestimated his resistance to the elixirs and had forgotten their negative effects on the body. Maybe it's not the elixirs, he thought. Maybe it's down to battle fatigue and the ever-present risk of death. It's a fatigue that's so routine, I often forget about it. My body, even though it's enhanced, can't fight that routine. It reacts in the usual way, but the only trouble is that it happens when you don't want it to. Damn it... As usual, Yennefer didn't allow herself to lose heart over such a trifle. He felt her touch and heard her soft murmur in his ear. As usual, he thought of the countless number of times she'd needed to use this very practical spell. And then he thought of it no more.

As usual, it was extraordinary.

He gazed at her mouth, the corners quivering in an involuntary smile. He knew this smile well; more a smile of triumph than happiness. He never asked her about it. He knew that she wouldn't have answered him.

The black kestrel, perched on the deer's antlers, flapped its wings and snapped its crooked beak. Yennefer turned her head and sighed with great sadness.

“Yen?”

“Nothing, Geralt.” She kissed him. “It's Nothing.”

The lantern shone with a flickering light. In the wall, a mouse scratched, and a beetle rustled quietly and rhythmically in the chest of drawers.

“Yen?”

“Hmm?”

“Let's get away from here. I have a bad feeling about this place. This city has a malignant effect on me.”

The sorceress turned on her side and caressed his cheek, pushing away strands of hair. Her fingers slid lower, touching the calloused scar that ran across his neck.

“Do you know what the name of this city means? Aedd Gynvael?”

“No. Is it the language of the elves?”

“Yes. It means 'Shard of Ice'.”

“That's strange, it doesn't suit this disgusting hell-hole.”

“Amongst the elves,” she whispered thoughtfully, “there is the legend of the Queen of Winter, travelling across the country through a blizzard on a sleigh drawn by white horses. She sows hard, sharp, tiny shards of ice as she goes and woe betide he should one of these shards pierce his eye or his heart. That someone is lost forever. Nothing will be able to cheer him, all that is not the pure white of snow will become for him ugly, hateful, disgusting. He will not know peace and, forsaking all, will follow the Queen in pursuit of his dream and his love. Of course, he will never find it and will die of sorrow. Apparently in this city, in ancient times, such a thing happened. It's a beautiful legend, isn't it?”

“The elves know how to dress everything up with pretty words,” mumbled Geralt sleepily, tracing her shoulder with his lips. “It's not a legend, Yen. It's a beautiful way to describe the terrible phenomenon called the Wild Hunt, a curse apparent in certain lands. An irrational collective insanity drives people to follow the ghostly procession racing across the sky. I've seen it. Indeed, it's not uncommon in winter. I've been offered a lot of money to end the curse, but I didn't take it. Nothing can stand against the Wild Hunt...”

“Witcher,” Yennefer murmured, kissing his cheek, “you possess not one ounce of romanticism. I... I love the legends of the elves; they're so beautiful. It's a pity that humans don't have such legends. Maybe one day they'll create some? But what will their legends be like? All around, everywhere you look, is dullness and uncertainty. Even something born of beauty soon leads to boredom and banality, commonplace, the human ritual, the tedious rhythm of life. Oh, Geralt, it's not easy being a sorceress, but in comparison with ordinary human existence... Geralt?”

She laid her head on his chest, feeling his slow, rhythmic breathing.

“Sleep,” she whispered, “Sleep, Witcher.”

### Part III

The city had a malignant effect on him.

From the moment he awoke, everything put him in a bad mood and roused his anger. Everything. He was annoyed that much of the morning had been wasted because he had overslept and annoyed at the absence of Yennefer who had left before he woke up.

She must have hurried, because her accoutrements, which were usually neatly put away in the caskets, had been left scattered across the table like dice thrown by a fortune-teller during a divination: brushes of fine hair - the largest to powder her face, the smaller to apply lipstick, the smaller still for the paint that Yennefer used on her eyelashes; pencils and sticks for her eyelids and eyebrows; tweezers and silver spoons; jars and bottles made of porcelain and milky-white glass containing, as he knew, potions and ointments made of commonplace ingredients such as soot, goose grease and carrot juice and dangerous ingredients such as the mysterious mandrake, antimony, belladonna, cannabis, dragon's blood and the concentrated venom of giant scorpions. And finally, the air was filled with the scent of lilac and gooseberries - the perfume she always wore.

Her presence was felt in these objects. In this scent. But she was not there.

He went downstairs, feeling a growing anxiety and rising anger. At everything. Angry at the cold and congealed scrambled eggs which the innkeeper, distracted from feeling up the girl who worked in the kitchen, served him. Particularly annoyed that the girl was barely twelve years old and tears stood in her eyes.

The warm spring weather and the joyful noise of street life did nothing to alleviate Geralt's mood. There was still nothing he liked about Aedd Gynvael, which was an unpleasant parody of all the small cities he had ever known - infinitely noisier, more humid, dirtier and more annoying.

He still caught the faint odor of refuse in his clothes and hair. He decided to go to the baths.

There, he was irritated by the expression of the bath attendant, who stared at the Witcher's medallion and his sword as it lay on the edge of the tub. Geralt was angered at the fact that the bath attendant had not offered him the services of a young woman. He had no intention of making use of such a girl, but the fact that they offered such a service to everybody except him enraged him.

When he left, despite the clean scent of the soap on his body, the Witcher's mood had not improved and Aedd Gynvael seemed no better. Still there was nothing that pleased him. He didn't like the piles of manure littering the streets. He didn't like the beggars crouched around the temple walls. He didn't like the slapdash inscription painted on the walls: ELVES: SEGREGATION NOW!

He was denied entrance to the castle, being told to seek out the alderman of the Guild of Merchants. This upset him. It also upset him when a senior guildsman, an elf, told him to look for the alderman in the marketplace with a look of contempt and superiority, which was strange for someone about to be forced into a ghetto.

The marketplace swarmed with people, stalls, wagons, horses, cattle and flies. Upon a dais, a pilloried convict was pelted with mud and dung by a mob of people. Showing admirable composure, the convict mocked his tormentors with a string of obscenities, barely raising his voice.

For Geralt, having seen such set ups before, the reason for the alderman's presence in the throng became clear. The travelling traders inflated their prices to cover the bribes they had to pay, and the bribes had to trace back to somebody. The alderman, aware of the custom, attended to it in person so the other merchants didn't have to bother.

He officiated under a dirty blue canopy, held up by poles. There was a table beneath it besieged by angry customers. Alderman Herbolth sat behind the table, his contempt and disdain for all and sundry showing clearly on his pallid face.

“Hey! Where are you going?”

Geralt slowly turned around. He immediately suppressed his anger and frustration, becoming a sliver of cold, hard ice. He couldn't allow himself to express any emotion. The man who approached him had hair as yellow as an oriole and brows of the same color above pale and empty eyes. Slim hands with long fingers rested on his belt of large brass plates which bore a sword, a mace and two daggers.

“Yeah,” said the man. “I know you. You're the Witcher, right? Here to see Herbolth?”

Geralt nodded, keeping his eyes on the man's hands. He knew it was dangerous to lose sight of a man's hands.

“I've heard of you, monster slayer” said the blonde man as he paid careful attention to Geralt's hands. “Although I don't believe we've ever met, you've probably heard of me. My name is Ivo Mirce. But everyone calls me The Cicada.”

The Witcher nodded to confirm that he had heard of him. He also knew that there was a price on head of The Cicada in Vizima, Caelf and Vattweir. If they had asked his opinion, he would have told them it was too little. But they hadn't, so he didn't.

“Okay,” said The Cicada. “I know that the alderman's waiting for you. You can pass. But your sword, my friend, will have to stay here. I'm paid to keep an eye on proceedings. Nobody can approach Herbolth armed. Got it?”

Geralt shrugged indifferently and unbuckled his belt, wrapping it around his scabbard and handing it to The Cicada. The Cicada gave a slight smile.

“Goodness me,” he said. “Such manners, not a word of protest. I knew the rumors about you were exaggerated. I wish you'd asked me for my sword, just so you could see my response.”

“Hey, Cicada!” the alderman suddenly cried, rising, “Leave him be! Come over here Lord Geralt, welcome, welcome. Away, gentlemen, merchants, leave us alone for a moment. Your interests give way to issues of greater importance to the city. Submit your requests to my secretary!”

The outpouring of false welcome didn't fool Geralt. He knew that it served only as an opportunity for bargaining. The merchant wanted some time to consider whether the bribes were high enough.

“I'll bet that The Cicada was trying to provoke you.” Herbolth casually raised his hand in reply to the Witcher's equally hurried bow. “Don't worry about it. The Cicada only draws his sword when ordered. True, he doesn't much like that, but as long as I'm in charge, he'll have to obey, or he'll be sent on his way. Don't worry about it.”

“Why the hell do you need someone like The Cicada, alderman? Surely it's not that dangerous here?”

“It's not dangerous because of the presence of The Cicada.” Herbolth smiled. “His fame travels far and he's on my side. You know, Aedd Gynvael and all the other cities in the Toine Valley belongs to the Governors of Rakverelin. Recently, these governors are changing all the time. It's not clear why, because nothing else changes and every other one is half or quarter elf; cursed breed. They're responsible for all the problems around here.”

Geralt didn't add that the current situation could also be down to those actually driving the wagon, because the joke, although well known, wasn't funny to everyone.

“Every new governor,” continued Herbolth, warming up, “starts by getting rid of all the chief magistrates and aldermen and replacing them with friends and relatives. But after what The Cicada did to the envoy of one of the governors, nobody has dared to replace me and I'm the longest serving alderman from the oldest regime, so old, even I don't recall which. But here we are, chatting away and polishing peanuts, as my first wife used to say, may she rest in peace. Let's get to the point. What kind of creature crept into our dump?”

“Azeugl.”

“I've never heard of such a creature. I suppose it's dead?”

“Yes, it's dead.”

“And how much is it going to cost the municipal fund? Seventy?”

“One hundred.”

“Well, well, Sir Witcher! I think you've been at the henbane! One hundred marks for killing a foul worm living in a shit heap?

“Worm or not, alderman, it devoured eight people, as you told me yourself.”

“People? Good one! The monster, as I told you, ate old Hylaste, who had famously never been sober, an old woman from the suburbs and some of Sulirad the Rafter's children. We didn't even know how many straight away, because even Sulirad doesn't know how many children he has. He makes them at such a rate, he doesn't have time to count them. Some people! Eighty.”

“If I hadn't killed the zeugl, it would have eventually eaten somebody more important. The apothecary, say. Where would you buy your chancre ointment? One hundred.”

“One hundred marks is a lot of money. I don't know if I'd give you that much for a nine-headed hydra. Eighty five.”

“A hundred, Lord Herbolth. It may not have been a nine-headed hydra, but nobody here, including the famous Cicada, was able to handle the zeugl.”

“Because nobody here wanted to go wading through trash and manure. My final offer: ninety.”

“One hundred.”

“Ninety-five, by all the demons and devils!”

“Agreed.”

“Well.” Herbolth smiled broadly. “That's settled. Do you always barter so wonderfully, Witcher?”

“No.” Geralt did not smile. “It's quite rare. I just wanted to impress you, alderman.”

“That you did, and may the plague take you,” laughed Herbolth. “Hey, Peregrine! Come here! Bring me the ledger and a purse and count out ninety marks for me.”

“We agreed on ninety-five.”

“What about tax?”

The Witcher cursed softly. The alderman signed the receipt with a flourish, then scratched his ear with the end of the quill. “I hope that the dump is safe now. Eh, Witcher?

“It should be. There was only one zeugl. Although it's possible that it reproduced. Zeugls are hermaphrodites, like snails.”

“Now what are you saying?” Herbolth looked at him with narrowed eyes. “Reproduction takes two: a male and a female. Is it possible for zeugls to multiply like fleas or mice in a rotten straw mattress? Every idiot knows there are no male and female mice; they are all identical and just hatch by themselves from the rotten straw.”

“And snails hatch from damp leaves,” added the secretary, Peregrine, still busy placing the coins in piles.

“Indeed, everybody knows,” Geralt agreed, smiling reassuringly. “That there are no male or female snails. There are only snails and leaves. And anyone who says otherwise is wrong.”

“Enough,” the alderman cut in, eyeing him suspiciously. “No more about bugs. I want to know if there's still something dangerous in the dump, and please have the courtesy reply plainly and succinctly.”

“In a month or so, you'll have to search the dump again, preferably with dogs. Young zeugls are not very dangerous.”

“Can't you do that, Witcher? We can discuss prices.”

“No.” Geralt took the money from Peregrine. “I have no intention of staying in your lovely town for a week, never mind a month.”

“It's interesting that you should say that.” Herbolth smiled wryly, looking him in the eye. “Very interesting, in fact. Because I think you're going to stay here longer.”

“You think wrongly, alderman.”

“Really? You came here with that dark-haired sorceress, I've forgotten her name... Guinevere, I think. You stayed with her at The Sturgeon. They say in the same room.”

“What of it?”

“Whenever she visits Aedd Gynvael, she does not leave too quickly. And she's been here many times before.” Peregrine smiled significantly; a wide, toothless grin. Herbolth still met Geralt's eyes, unsmiling. Geralt smiled as threateningly as he could.

“Anyway, what do I know?” The alderman looked away and dug a heel into the ground. “And I don't give a shit. But just so you know, the wizard Istredd is a very important person. He is irreplaceable in this town, priceless, I might say. He is respected by all, locals and outsiders too. We don't stick our noses into his business, magical or otherwise.”

“Perhaps rightly so,” agreed the Witcher. “Where does he live, if I may ask?”

“Don't you know? It's right here. Do you see that house? The tall, white one between the warehouse and the armory, standing up like a candle stuck in an ass. But you won't find him there now. Istredd recently unearthed something next to the south wall and is currently digging around there like a mole. So many people were milling around the excavation site, that I went to take a look. I politely asked him: Why, sir, are you digging in the ground like a small child?' and everybody started to laugh, 'What's hidden there, in the ground?' He looked at me as if I were a beggar and said: 'History.' What history is that, then?' I asked, and he replied: 'The history of mankind. Answers to questions. The answer to what was and what shall be.' There was only a pile of shit here before the town was built,' said I, 'fallow land, shrubs and werewolves. And what will be depends on who is next governor appointed by the administration of Rakverelin - another mangy half-elf, I fear. The earth holds no answers, only worms.' Do you think he listened? He's still there, still digging. If you want to see him, go to the south wall.”

“Oh, Lord Alderman,” Peregrine snorted. “He's at home now. He doesn't care about the excavations now that...”

Herbolth looked at him menacingly. Peregrine turned away and coughed, shifting from one foot to the other. The Witcher continued to smile forcedly, crossing his arms over his chest.

“Yes, ahem, ahem.” The alderman cleared his throat. “Who knows, maybe Istredd has returned home now. What's it to me, anyway?”

“Take care of yourself, alderman,” said Geralt, not bothering with the pretense of a bow. “I wish you a good day.”

He returned to The Cicada, who met him with a clinking of weaponry. Without a word, the Witcher reached for his sword which The Cicada held in the crook of his elbow. The Cicada stood back.

“In a hurry, Witcher?”

“Yes, I'm in a hurry.”

“I took a look at your sword.”

Geralt threw him a look that could never have been considered warm. “That's something to boast about,” nodded the Witcher. “Few have seen it. Even fewer are able to talk about it.”

“Ho, ho!” The Cicada grinned. “That sounded so much like a threat, I've got goosebumps. I've always been curious, Witcher, why people are so afraid of you. Now I think I know why.”

“I'm in a hurry, Cicada. Give me my sword, if you please.”

“Smoke in the eyes, Witcher, nothing but smoke in the eyes. You confound people like a beekeeper smokes out bees with your stone-like faces, your bravado and your reputation -likely contrived by yourselves. The bees stupidly flee the smoke rather than stinging you in the ass, which would swell up just like any others. They say that you don't feel like humans do. Nonsense. If any one of you got a good jab, you'd feel it.”

“Finished?”

“Yes,” said The Cicada as he gave the Witcher his sword. “Do you know what intrigues me, Witcher?”

“Yes. Bees.”

“No. I wonder, if you came walking down an alley, armed with your sword, from one direction and me from the other, which of us would reach the end of the street? It's something, in my opinion, worthy of a bet.”

“Why are you pestering me, Cicada? Are you looking for a fight? Is that what you want?”

“Not especially. I'm just curious to see if there's any truth to what people say. That you Witchers are so good in battle because you have no heart, no soul, no mercy and no conscience. Is that all? Because they say exactly the same things about me. And not without reason. So, I'm terribly curious to know which of us two that entered that alley would come out alive. Huh? Is it worth a bet? What do you think?”

“I told you that I'm in a hurry. I won't waste time splitting hairs. I'm not a gambling man, but if it ever occurs to you to get in my way while I'm walking down an alley, I strongly recommend that you think again.”

“Smoke.” The Cicada smiled, “Smoke in the eyes and nothing more. See you later, Witcher; who knows, maybe in an alley somewhere?”

“Who knows?”

### Part IV

“Here we can talk freely. Sit down, Geralt.”

The most striking thing about the studio was the impressive number of books that occupied the vast interior. Thick tomes filled the libraries that lined the walls, bowing the shelves and piled up on cupboards and chests. The Witcher assessed that they must have cost a fortune. There was certainly no lack of other common elements of decor: a stuffed crocodile, a dried porcupine fish hanging from the ceiling, a dusty skeleton, an imposing collection of bottles filled with alcohol that contained every beast imaginable: centipedes, spiders, snakes, toads and countless human and non-human samples, mostly internal organs. There was even a homunculus, or something that resembled a homunculus; it could just as easily have been a preserved fetus.

Geralt wasn't particularly impressed with the collection. He had lived at Yennefer's house in Vengerberg for six months and she possessed an even more interesting collection, including a phallus of unprecedented proportions, apparently from a mountain troll. She also had a magnificent stuffed unicorn, upon whose back she liked to make love. Geralt was of the opinion that the only place even less suited for lovemaking would be the back of a live unicorn. In contrast to the Witcher, who considered a bed a luxury and valued all possible applications such a wonderful piece of furniture offered, Yennefer was wildly inventive. Geralt recalled pleasant moments spent with the sorceress on the slope of a roof, in the hollow of a dead tree, on the balcony, and those of others, the railing of a bridge, a canoe, rocking unsteadily on a rushing stream and lastly while levitating thirty fathoms above the ground. But worst of all was the unicorn. One happy day, however, the thing collapsed beneath them. It ripped open and broke into pieces, causing the pair to burst into wild laughter.

“What amuses you so, Witcher?” Istredd asked, sitting behind a long table upon which rested a large number of rotting skulls, bones and rusty iron pots.

“Every time I see stuff like this,” the Witcher sat opposite, indicating to the bottles and jars, “I wonder to myself whether it's possible to practice magic without the use of such monstrosities, considering the sight of them turns the stomach.”

“It's a matter of taste,” said the sorcerer, “And tradition. What's repugnant to some, doesn't affect others in the same way. And you, Geralt, what disgusts you? I'm curious to know what is considered repugnant by someone who, so I've heard, is able to wade neck deep through filth and garbage if the price is right. Please don't take this question as an insult or provocation. I'm genuinely curious to know what can provoke a feeling of disgust in a Witcher.”

“Didn't I happen to hear that you keep a jar containing the menstrual blood of a maiden, Istredd? It disgusts me to picture you, a professional magician, bottle in hand, on your knees, trying to collect this precious liquid - drop by drop - from the source, so to speak.”

“Good one.” Istredd smiled. “I speak, of course, of your incisive wit, because you're not right about the contents of the vial.”

“But sometimes you need to use blood, right? Certain spells, or so I've heard, you can't even begin without the blood of a virgin; all the better if she was killed by a bolt of lightning on a cloudless night. I'm just curious, what makes it better than that of an old prostitute who fell off a wall while drunk?”

“Nothing,” agreed the magician, a friendly smile on his lips. “But if it gets out that the blood of a pig works just as well, considering how much easier it is to get, the riffraff would start experimenting with sorcery. But if the rabble has to collect the blood of the maiden that interests you so much, or dragon's tears, tarantula venom, broth made with the severed hands of a newborn or a corpse exhumed at midnight, most of them will think twice about such an enterprise.”

They were silent for a moment. Istredd, giving the impression of being deeply absorbed in his thoughts, tapped his fingernails on a cracked skull, browned and missing the lower jaw, which lay before him. His finger traced the jagged edge of the hole that started at the temporal bone. Geralt looked at him discretely. He wondered how old the sorcerer was. He knew that the most talented magicians were able to stop the aging process permanently at their desired age. Men, by reason of reputation and prestige, preferred an age of advanced maturity, suggesting wisdom and experience. Women, such as Yennefer, cared less about prestige and more about attractiveness. Istredd was in the prime of life and did not seem to be more than forty. He had straight, slightly greying hair that fell to his shoulders and many small wrinkles on his forehead, around his mouth and at the corners of his eyes. Geralt did not know if the depth and wisdom in those gentle grey eyes was natural or caused by a spell. After a while, he concluded that he didn't give a damn.

“Istredd,” he interrupted the awkward silence. “I came here because I wanted to see Yennefer. Although she's not here, you invited me in. To talk. About what? How the riffraff are trying to break your monopoly on the use of magic? I know that you count me as part of this rabble. It's nothing new to me. For a moment, I had the impression that you were going to be different from your colleagues who have often struck up a conversation with me for the sole purpose of expressing how much they don't like me.”

“I will not apologize for my, as you say, colleagues,” said the magician calmly, “I understand them, because, like them, I had to work hard to master the magical arts. When I was just a boy and all my peers were running through the fields with bows and arrows, fishing or playing leapfrog, I pored over manuscripts. The bitter cold from the stony floors of the tower froze my bones and joints. That was in the summer; in the winter it cracked my tooth enamel as well. The dust from the old books and scrolls made my cough until tears came to my eyes, and my teacher, old Roedskilde, never missed an opportunity to take his whip to my back, apparently when I was not making enough progress in my studies. I didn't get to fight, or chase girls or drink beer during the years when such diversions are best appreciated.”

“Poor thing,” replied the Witcher with a frown. “Indeed, it brings tears even to my eyes.”

“Why the sarcasm? I'm trying to explain to you why magicians don't like shamen, enchanters, healers, witches and Witchers. Call it want you want, even simple jealousy, but here lies the reason for antipathy. It bothers us when we see magic, an art we were taught to regard as a gift to the adept, a privilege of the elite and the most sacred mystery of all, fall into the hands of the inferior and the lay practitioner. Even if the magic in question is incompetent, wretched and ridiculous. That is why my colleagues don't like you. I don't like you, either.”

Geralt was sick and tired of this conversation, so much so that a growing feeling of unease crawled like a snail across the back of his neck and down his spine. He looked straight into Istredd's eyes and gripped the edge of the table with the tips of his fingers. “This is about Yennefer, isn't it?”

The sorcerer raised his head, still lightly tapping his fingers on the skull lying on the table. “Bravo for your insight,” he said, holding the Witcher's gaze. “Please accept my congratulations. Yes, this is about Yennefer.”

Geralt fell silent. Once, long ago, many, many years ago, while still a young Witcher, he was waiting to ambush a manticore. He felt the manticore approaching. He could not see it or hear it, but that feeling; he could never forget that feeling. And now he felt exactly the same.

“Your insight,” said the wizard, “saves a lot of time that otherwise would have been spent beating around the bush. So now the matter is out in the open.”

Geralt did not respond.

“My deep friendship with Yennefer,” continued Istredd, “started quite some time ago, Witcher. It has long been a friendship without obligations, based on long or short, but more or less regular, periods spent with one another. This type of casual relationship is often practiced amongst our profession. It's just that it's suddenly not enough for me. I decided to propose that she remain with me permanently.”

“And what was her reply?”

“She'd think about it. So, I gave her time to think. I know it's not an easy decision for her.”

“Why are you telling me this, Istredd? What's your reasoning, other than a commendable but rare sense of nobility amongst those of your profession? What's the point of this honesty?”

“Practicality,” sighed the magician, “because, as you well know, it is you who prevents Yennefer from making a decision. So, I'm asking you to leave voluntarily. Disappear from her life and stop getting in our way. In short, go to hell. It would be best if you leave quietly and without saying goodbye, which, as she has informed me, is what you usually do.”

“Truly,” Geralt forced a smile, “Your honesty amazes me more and more. I expected many things, but not this. Didn't it occur to you that it might be better that, instead of asking, you could have hit me with a ball of lightning and reduced me to a pile of carbon. Then there would be nothing standing in your way, just a sooty smudge on the wall. That method would have been easier and safer. Because, as you know, a request can be denied but not a ball of lightning.”

“I didn't take into account the possibility that you might refuse.”

“Why? Isn't this strange request nothing more than a warning in advance of a ball of lightning or some other spell? Maybe you're going to back up your request with more persuasive arguments? A sum that's likely to sate the appetite of a greedy Witcher? How much is it worth, to clear me from the path that leads to your happiness?”

The sorcerer stopped tapping the skull, placing the palm of his hand on top of it and squeezing. Geralt watched his knuckles go white. “It wasn't my intention to insult you with such an offer,” he said. “Far from it. But... if... Geralt, I'm a magician, and not a bad one. I don't want to brag about my powers, but many of your wishes, if you want to make them, I should be able to fulfil. Some of them with ease.”

He made a casual gesture with his hand, as if shooing a mosquito. The air above the table suddenly swarmed with fabulously colored apollo butterflies.

“My wish, Istredd,” growled the Witcher, waving the insects away from his face, “Is that you stop getting between Yennefer and I. I'm not interested in any offer you have to make. You should have made your proposal to Yennefer while she was with you. Formerly. Because that was in the past. Now it's the present and she is with me. Am I supposed to leave just to make your life easier? I refuse. Not only will I not help you, I will do everything in my modest power to hinder you. As you can see, I'm no less honest than you.”

“You have no right to refuse. None at all.”

“What do you take me for, Istredd?”

The magician looked him straight in the eyes, leaning across the table. “For a fleeting affair. A momentary infatuation, at best, a whim, one adventure among the hundreds Yenna has had, because Yenna loves to play with emotions: she is impulsive and unpredictable in her caprices. Now, having exchanged a few words with you, I've rejected the possibility that she's just using you as a plaything. But believe me, this is so often the case.”

“You have not understood my question.”

“You're wrong. I understood. But I have deliberately referred only to Yenna's emotions. Because you're a Witcher and can experience no emotion whatsoever. You don't want to grant my request because you feel that she needs you, you think... Geralt, you're with her just because she wants it and you'll be with her for as long as she wants. And what you feel is just a reflection of her emotions, the interest she shows in you. By all the demons in hell, Geralt, you're not a child, you know what you are. You're a mutant. Don't get me wrong, I don't say this to denigrate or insult you. I'm just stating a fact. You're a mutant, and a main feature of your mutation is that you're completely insensible to emotion. That's the way you're created so that you can do your job. Do you understand? You cannot feel anything. All that you regard as emotion is nothing more than cellular memory, somatic, if you know what that word means.”

“Suppose that I do.”

“All the better. Listen then. I'm asking you something that I could only ask of a Witcher, not a human. I can be honest with a Witcher, but I could not afford such truthfulness with a human. Geralt, I want to give Yenna understanding and stability, affection and happiness. Can you, hand on heart, say the same? No, you cannot. For you, these words are meaningless. You chase after Yenna, happy as a child for the occasional kindness shown to you. Like a feral cat, used to having stones pitched at it, pleased that you have finally found someone who is not afraid to pet him. Do you know what I mean? Oh, I know you understand, you're not stupid, that's clear. You see for yourself why you have no right to reject my kind offer.”

“I have as much right to refuse,” drawled Geralt, “as you do to ask, therefore our rights cancel each other out and we're back to our starting point, the point being this: Yen, apparently not bothered by my mutations and their consequences, is now with me. You made her a proposal, as is your right. She said that she'll think about it? That's her right. You have the impression that I'm making it difficult for her to decide? Why she hesitates? That I'm the cause of this hesitation? That's also my right. If she hesitates, then it's presumably not without reason. Maybe it's something I give to her, even if it's something there is no word for in the vocabulary of Witchers.”

“Listen...”

“No. You listen to me. She was once with you, you say? Who knows, perhaps it's not I, but you who is the fleeting infatuation, the caprice, the impulsive fling that's so typical of her. Istredd, I can't even rule out whether or not she only perceives you as a plaything. That, Sir Wizard, cannot be excluded solely on the basis of this conversation. It seems to me that, in this case, the plaything is the one who speaks with more grandiloquence.”

Istredd did not even flinch. Geralt admired his composure. However, the prolonged silence seemed to indicate that the blow had hit the target.

“You're playing with words,” said the magician, at last. “You revel in them. You use words to replace the normal human feelings you don't possess. Your words do not express feelings, only sounds, like those produced when you knock upon a skull. Because you are as empty as this skull. You have no right to...”

“Enough,” Geralt interrupted sharply, perhaps too sharply. “Stop denying that I have rights, I'm sick of it, do you hear? I said that our rights are equal. No, damn it, mine are greater.”

“Really?” The magician paled slightly, to Geralt's great pleasure. “Why is that?”

The Witcher thought for a moment and decided to finish it. “Because,” he burst out, “Last night she made love with me and not you.”

Istredd picked up the skull, stroking it. His hand, to Geralt's annoyance, was not even shaking. “According to you, that affords you some rights?”

“Only one. The right to draw conclusions.”

“A ha,” the magician said slowly, “Fine. Well. She made love with me this morning. You have the right to draw your own conclusions. I know I already did.”

The silence lasted a long time. Geralt desperately sought an answer. He couldn't find one. “Enough chatter,” he said finally, rising, angry with himself because it sounded abrupt and stupid. “I'm going.”

“Then go to hell,” said Istredd, just as abruptly, without looking up.

### Part V

When she entered, he was lying on the bed fully clothed with his hands behind his head, staring at the ceiling. He looked at her.

Yennefer slowly closed the door behind her. She was beautiful.

So beautiful, he thought. Everything about her is beautiful. And dangerous. The colors she wears; the contrast of black and white. Beauty and terror. Her natural, raven curls. Her high cheekbones, accentuated by the crease that forms when she smiles - if she deigns to smile -her lips, wonderfully small and pale beneath her lipstick. Her eyebrows, wonderfully irregular when she washes away the kohl at the end of the day. Her nose, wonderfully long. Her small hands, wonderfully nervous, restless and adept. Her figure, fine and slim, emphasized by the tightness of her belt. Her slender legs, as they move beneath her black skirt. Beautiful.

Without a word she sat down at the table and rested her chin on her hands.

“Well, come on, let's get started,” she said, “This lengthy, dramatic silence is too banal for me. Let's get on with it. Get off the bed and stop gazing at the ceiling looking all offended. The situation is already quite silly and there's no reason to make it even sillier. Get up, I say.”

He got up willingly and, without hesitation, sat down astride the chair opposite her. She didn't look away from him, as might be expected.

“As I said, let's fix this and fix it quickly. To avoid making the situation even more uncomfortable, I will quickly answer a few questions without you having to ask them. Yes, it's true that in choosing to ride with you to Aedd Gynvael, I knew that I was going to see Istredd and knew that, having met up with him, I would sleep with him. I didn't realize that it would become public knowledge and that you would end up bragging to each other about it. I now know how you feel, and for that I'm sorry. But no, I do not feel guilty.”

He was silent.

Yennefer shook her head, her black, shimmering curls cascaded onto her shoulders. “Geralt, say something.”

“He...” Geralt cleared his throat. “He calls you Yenna.”

“Yes,” she looked away. “And I call him Val. That's his name. Istredd is a nickname. I have known him for years, Geralt. He is very dear to me. Don't look at me like that. You are also very dear to me. And therein lies the whole problem.”

“Are you thinking about accepting his proposal?”

“Just so you know, I'm thinking about it. As I told you, we've known each other for years. Since... many years. We share interests, goals and ambitions. We understand each other without words. He can support me, and who knows, there may come a day when I need support. And above all... he... he loves me. I think.”

“I won't stand in your way, Yen.”

Her head jerked up and her violet eyes shone with pale fire.

“In my way? Don't you understand anything, you idiot? If you were in my way, just a hindrance, I could be rid of you in the blink of an eye; teleport you to the end of Cape Bremervoor or create a tornado to transport to the country of Hanna. With a little effort, I could turn you into a piece of quartz and put you in my garden, in the flowerbed with the peonies. I could brain-wash you so that you'd forget who I am and what my name is. This would be the ideal solution, because then I could simply say: 'It was fun, bye.' I could walk away quietly, just like you did when you ran away from my house in Vengerberg.”

“Don't shout, Yen, there's no need to be so aggressive. And don't bring up Vengerberg again, we agreed not to talk about it anymore. I'm not angry with you, Yen, and I'm not blaming you. I know that you can't be held to common mores. And it hurts... it kills me, the thought that I'll lose... this cellular memory. Atavistic remnants of feeling in a mutant devoid of emotion...”

“I can't stand it when you talk like that!” she burst out. “I hate it when you use that word. Never use it in my presence again. Never!”

“Does it change facts? In the end, I'm still a mutant.”

“It's not a fact. Do not say that word in my presence.”

The black kestrel, standing on the deer's horns, flapped its wings and scratched with its claws. Geralt looked at the bird, at its yellow, unmoving eyes. Yennefer again rested her chin on her hands.

“Yen.”

“I'm listening, Geralt.”

“You promised to answer my questions. Questions that I don't even need to ask. There is one very important one. One that I've never asked. The one I'm afraid to ask. Answer it.”

“I cannot, Geralt,” she said, firmly.

“I don't believe you, Yen. I know you too well.”

“You can never truly know a sorceress.”

“Answer my question, Yen.”

“The answer is: I don't know. But what kind of answer is that?”

Silence. The murmur of the hubbub from the street died down.

The fiery glow of the setting sun pierced the slits of the shutters and cast slanting rays of light across the room.

“Aedd Gynvael,” muttered the Witcher. “A shard of ice... I felt it. I knew this city... was my enemy. Malignant.”

“Aedd Gynvael,” she repeated slowly. “The sleigh of the elven queen. Why, Geralt?”

“I'm following you, Yen, because the reins of my sleigh became entangled with the runners of yours. And the blizzard rages around me. And the frost. And the cold.”

“The warmth in you would melt the shard of ice with which I struck you,” she murmured. “So, the spell would vanish and you would see me as I really am.”

“Lash your white horses, Yen, and make them fly north to where the thaw never comes. So that the ice will never melt. I want to us to soon be together in your castle of ice.”

“The castle doesn't exist.” Yennefer's lips trembled and twisted. “It is a symbol. And we drive ourselves towards an unobtainable dream. Because I, the Queen of the Elves, I long for warmth. That is my secret. So, every year I take my sleigh out to the city, into the swirling snow, and every year someone, struck by my spell, tangles the reins of his sleigh with the runners of mine. Every year. Every year, someone new. Never ending. Because while the warmth I desire destroys the spell, it also destroys the magic and the charm. My chosen one, once star-struck by ice, suddenly becomes an ordinary nobody. And I, icy spell thawing before their eyes, become no better than the others... mere mortals.”

“And from that pristine whiteness, spring emerges,” he said “And Aedd Gynvael appears, an ugly city with a beautiful name. Aedd Gynvael and its pile of trash, a huge stinking heap of garbage that I have to enter because I'm paid to do so, because I was created to deal with the filth that fills others with fear and disgust. I have been deprived of the ability to feel, so I was not able to feel the horror of that disgusting squalor, so I would not retreat nor flee before it, full of dread. Yes, I have been deprived of emotion. But not completely. Whoever did it, botched the job.”

He fell silent. The black kestrel rustled its feathers, opening and closing its wings.

“Geralt.”

“I'm listening.”

“Now you will answer my question. The question that I've never asked. That which I was afraid to ask... I'm also not going to ask it today, but please answer it. Because... because I really wish to hear your reply. It's the one thing, the one word you have never said. Say it, Geralt. Please.”

“I cannot.”

“Why is that?”

“Don't you know?” He smiled sadly. “My answer would be just a word. A word that doesn't express feelings, a word that doesn't express emotions, because I am devoid of them. A word that would only be a sound, like the sound a cold and empty skull makes when it's struck.”

She looked at him in silence. Her eyes, wide open, took on a deep violet color.

“No, Geralt,” she said. “That's not true. Or only partly true. You are not deprived of feelings. Now I see. Now I know that...”

She fell silent.

“Stop, Yen. You've already decided. Do not lie. I know you. I see it in your eyes.”

She looked away. He knew.

“Yen,” he whispered.

“Give me your hand,” she said.

She took his hand in hers; he immediately felt a tingling and the throbbing of blood in the veins of his forearm. Yennefer whispered a spell in a calm, measured voice, but he saw drops of sweat appear on her pale forehead from the effort and her pupils dilate with the pain.

Releasing his arm, she stretched out her hands and raised them in a gesture of gentle caress -stroking an invisible shape, slowly, up and down. Between her fingers, the air began to grow more dense and opaque, curling and wavering like smoke.

He was gazing in awe. The magic of creation, seen as the pinnacle of magician's achievements, had always fascinated him, much more than illusion and magical transformation. Yes, Istredd was right, he thought, in comparison with such magic, my Signs look ridiculous.

Between Yennefer's hands that trembled with the effort, slowly materialized the form of a coal-black bird. The sorceress' fingers gently caressed the slightly ruffled feathers, flat head and curved beak. Yet another movement, hypnotic, fluid and delicate, and the black kestrel, lowering its head, croaked loudly. Its twin, still sitting motionlessly in the corner, responded with a squawk.

“Two kestrels,” Geralt said quietly. “Two black kestrels created via magic. I guess you need both.”

“You guess correctly,” she said with difficulty. “I need both. I was wrong to think that one would suffice. I was very wrong, Geralt... which irritates me being the proud Queen of Winter, convinced of her own omnipotence. There are some things... you cannot obtain, even through magic. And some gifts you can't accept unless you are able to give something in return... something equally valuable. Otherwise, such a gift will slip through your fingers, like a shard of ice melting in a closed fist. There will remain only regret, a sense of loss and guilt...”

“Yen...”

“I am a sorceress, Geralt. The power I possess over matter is a gift. A gift I reciprocate. I paid for it... with everything I had. There's nothing left.”

She fell silent. The sorceress wiped her brow with a trembling hand.

“I was wrong,” she repeated. “But I'll fix my mistake. Emotions and feelings...” she touched the black kestrel's head. The bird ruffled its feathers, opening its mute curved beak. “Emotions, whims and lies, fascinations and games. Feelings and the lack thereof... gifts that should not be accepted... lies and truth. What is right? To deny a lie? Or to state a fact? And if the fact is a lie, then what is truth? Who is so full of feelings that it tears them apart and who is a cold and empty shell of a skull? Who? What is right, Geralt? What is the truth?”

“I don't know, Yen. You tell me.”

“No,” she said and lowered her eyes. It was the first time. He had never seen her do this before. Never.

“No,” she repeated. “I cannot, Geralt. I cannot tell you. It will be this bird, born from the touch of your hand, that will tell you. Bird, what is the truth?”

“The truth,” declared the kestrel, “is a shard of ice.”

### Part VI

Although it seemed to him that he wandered the alleys aimlessly and with no destination in mind, he suddenly found himself near the south wall, at the excavation, amongst a network of trenches that wound chaotically and exposed parts of the ancient foundations, intersecting at the ruins of a stone wall.

Istredd was there. With rolled up shirt sleeves and tall boots, he shouted something to the servants who were using hoes to dig the wall of a trench striped with layers of different colors of earth, clay and charcoal. On some planks arranged to the side lay blackened bones, broken pieces of pots and other objects; unrecognizable, corroded and covered with rust.

The magician noticed him immediately. After he gave some muttered command to those digging, he jumped out of the trench and walked towards Geralt, wiping his hands on his trousers.

“What do you want?” he asked abruptly.

The Witcher, standing motionless before him, did not reply. The men, pretending to work, watched them closely, whispering amongst themselves. “Hatred shines in your eyes,” Istredd frowned. “What do you want, I ask you? Have you made a decision? Where is Yenna? I hope...”

“Don't hold out too much hope, Istredd.”

“Oh,” said the magician. “What's this I hear in your voice? Do I understand you correctly?”

“What is it that you understand?”

Istredd placed his hands on his hips and glared defiantly at the Witcher.

“Let's not deceive each other,” he said. “You hate me, and I hate you too. You insulted me with what you said about Yennefer... you know what. I insulted you in a similar way. You offend me and I offend you. Let's settle this like men. I see no other solution. That's why you came here, right?”

“Yes,” Geralt said, rubbing his forehead. “You're right, Istredd. That's why I'm here. Without a doubt.”

“Perfect. It cannot go on. Only today I learned that, for a few years, Yennefer has been back and forth between us like a rag ball. First, she's with me, then she's with you. She'll run away from me to look for you and vice versa. The others that came in between don't count. Only the two of us matter. This can't go on. Out of the two of us, there must be only one.”

“Yes,” Geralt said, without removing his hand from his forehead. “Yes... you're right.”

“In our arrogance,” continued the magician, “we thought that Yenna wouldn't hesitate to choose the better of us. As for who was the better, neither of us had any doubt. We came to the point where, like a pair of urchins, we bragged about the regard she has shown us and, like inexperienced boys, we even divulged the nature of that regard and what it meant. I imagine that, like myself, you've been thinking about it and have realized just how wrong we were. Yenna doesn't want to choose between us, even if we were to accept that choice. Well, we'll have to decide for her. I'm not going to share Yenna with anyone, and the fact that you've come here says the same about you. We know this all too well. As long as there are two of us, neither of us can be sure of her feelings. There must be only one. You understand, right?”

“True.” the Witcher said, barely moving his tense lips. “The truth is a shard of ice...”

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“What's wrong with you? Are you sick or drunk? Or maybe full of Witcher's herbs?”

“I'm fine. Something... I have something in my eye. Istredd, there must be only one. Yes, that's why I've come here. Without a doubt.”

“I knew it,” said the magician. “I knew that you'd come. Anyway, I'll be honest with you. You anticipated my intentions.”

“A ball of lightning?” the Witcher smiled wanly.

Istredd frowned.

“Maybe,” he said. “Maybe a ball of lightning. But certainly not in the back. Honorably, face to face. You are a Witcher, it evens things out. Well, let's decide where and when.”

Geralt thought about it. And decided. “The square...” he indicated with his hand. “I passed through it...”

“I know. There's a well there, called the Green Key.”

“So, near to the well. Yes. At the well... tomorrow, two hours after sunrise.”

“Okay. I'll be punctual.”

They stood motionless for a moment, not looking at each other. Finally, the magician muttered something under his breath. He kicked at a block of clay then crushed it with a blow from his heel.

“Geralt?”

“What?”

“Don't you feel stupid?”

“I feel stupid,” the Witcher admitted reluctantly.

“I'm relieved,” muttered Istredd, “because I feel like the ultimate idiot. I never imagined that one day I'd have a fight to the death with a Witcher over a woman.”

“I know how you feel Istredd.”

“Well...” the magician forced a smile. “The fact that this has occurred, that I have decided to do something so completely contrary to my nature, is testament to the fact that... it is necessary.”

“I know, Istredd.”

“Of course, you also know, whichever of us survives will have to immediately flee to the ends of the earth to hide from Yenna?”

“I know.”

“And of course, you are aware of the fact that, after her rage has cooled off, you will be able to return to her?”

“Of course.”

“Well, that's settled,” the magician gestured as though he was about the turn away, but after a moment's hesitation he extended his hand. “Until tomorrow, Geralt.”

“Until tomorrow,” the Witcher shook his proffered hand. “Until tomorrow, Istredd.”

### Part VII

“Hey, Witcher!”

Geralt lifted his head from surface of the table, upon which, while lost in his thoughts, he'd drawn fancy curlicues in the beer that had spilled.

“It wasn't easy to find you.” Alderman Herbolth sat down and pushed aside the jugs and tankards. “At the inn they said you had gone to the stables, but at the stables I found only your horse and packs. And now you're here... It's probably the foulest tavern in town. Only the worst rabble comes here. What are you doing here?”

“Drinking.”

“I see. I wanted to talk with you. Are you sober?”

“As an infant.”

“Glad to hear it.”

“What do you want, Herbolth? I am, as you can see, busy.” Geralt smiled at the girl who placed another jug on the table.

“Rumor has it,” frowned the alderman, “that you and the magician have decided to kill each other.”

“That's our business. His and mine. Mind your own business.”

“No, it's not just your business.” Herbolth disagreed. “We need Istredd, we can't afford another magician.”

“Then go to the temple and pray for his victory.”

“Do not mock,” barked the alderman. “And don't get clever with me, vagabond. By the gods, if I didn't know that the magician will never forgive me, I'd throw you in the hole, into the very bottom of the dungeons, or have you dragged out of the city walls by horses, or even order The Cicada to gut you like a pig. But unfortunately, Istredd is very enthusiastic about matters of honor and he'd never forgive me. I know that he wouldn't.”

“That's fantastic.” The Witcher downed another pint and spat out under the table a blade of straw that had fallen into his tankard. “I'm getting off lightly. Is that all?”

“No,” said Herbolth, drawing from inside his coat a purse stuffed with silver. “Here's a hundred marks, Witcher, take them and get out of Aedd Gynvael. Get out of here, preferably immediately, in any case before sunrise. I told you that we can't afford another magician and I will not allow him to risk his life in a duel with someone like you, for a reason as stupid as...”

He stopped short, even though the Witcher hadn't moved.

“Take your foul face away from this table, Herbolth.” Geralt said. “And stick your one hundred marks up your ass. Go now, because your face is making me sick and if I have to look at it for much longer, I'm going to puke on you - from your hat to your boots.”

The alderman put away the purse and laid both hands on the table.

“No, I won't,” he said. “I wanted to do the right thing, but if it's not to be, it's not to be. Fight, flay, burn, hack each other to pieces for this whore who will spread her legs for anyone who wants her. I think that Istredd will be able to finish you off, you cutthroat for hire, and that only your boots will remain, but if not, I'll get you, even before his corpse cools, and break every bone in your body under torture. Not a single part of your body will be left intact, you...”

He didn't have enough time to remove his hands from the table; the Witcher's movement was too fast as his hand flew out from under the table, blurred before the alderman's eyes; a dagger struck between his fingers with a dull thud.

“Maybe.” the Witcher hissed, gripping the hilt of the dagger, staring into Herbolth's face, from which the blood had drained. “Maybe Istredd will kill me. But if not... I'm getting out of here and you, you little shit, don't try to stop me unless you want the filthy streets of this city to fill with blood. Get out of here.”

“Mr. Alderman! What's going on here? Hey, you...”

“Easy, Cicada,” Herbolth said, slowly moving his hands across the table, as far away from the blade of the dagger as possible. “Nothing's going on. Nothing.”

The Cicada re-sheathed his half-drawn sword. Geralt didn't look at him. He didn't look at the alderman as he exited the tavern, under the protection of The Cicada who shielded him from staggering bargemen and coach drivers. He gazed at the little man with a rat-like race and black, piercing eyes sitting a few tables away.

I'm on edge, he thought, alarmed, my hands are shaking. My hands are actually shaking. This is impossible, what's happening to me... Does this mean that...

Yes, he thought, looking at the rat-faced man. I think so.

It's so cold...

He stood up.

He looked at the little man and smiled. Then he parted the flaps of his coat, and withdrew two gold coins from a pouch, tossing them onto the table. They clinked, one spinning and striking the blade of the dagger still stuck in the polished wood.

### Part VIII

The blow fell unexpectedly, the club whistling softly through the dark, so fast that the Witcher very nearly didn't have enough time to protect his head as he instinctively raised his arm to block the blow, deflecting it with a nimble twist of his body. He jumped back, dropped to one knee, rolled forwards and got to his feet. He felt a movement of air as the club fell again, evading the blow with a graceful pirouette, spinning between the two dark silhouettes that closed in on him in the darkness, reaching over his right shoulder for his sword.

He had no sword.

Nothing can take away my reflexes, he thought as he lightly leapt back, Routine? Cellular memory? I'm a mutant and I react like a mutant, he thought, again falling to one knee to dodge another blow, reaching towards his boot for his dagger. He had no dagger.

He gave a wry smile and was promptly struck on the head with the club. He saw stars as the pain shot right down to his fingertips. He fell to the ground, limp and still smiling.

Someone fell upon him, pressing him into the ground. Somebody else tore his pouch from his belt. His eye caught the flash of a blade and someone knelt on his chest, tearing the neck of his shirt and pulling out his medallion. They immediately let it fall from their fingers.

“By Beelzebub,” Geralt heard a gasp, “It's a Witcher...”

The other cursed, wheezing.

“He doesn't have a sword... By the gods... It's cursed... Stay away from it, Radgast! Don't touch it!”

The moon momentarily shone through the thinning cloud. Geralt glimpsed an emaciated face above him; male, rat-like, with shining black eyes. He heard footsteps disappearing down the alley that reeked of cats and burnt cooking oil.

The man with the rat face slowly withdrew his knee from Geralt's chest.

“Next time...” Geralt heard the clear whisper, “Next time, when you want to kill yourself, Witcher, don't try to get others to do it for you. Just hang yourself by your reins in the stables.”

### Part IX

It had rained during the night.

Geralt left the stables, rubbing his eyes and brushing the blades of straw from his hair. The rising sun shone on the wet roofs and glittered like gold in the puddles. The Witcher had an unpleasant taste in his mouth and the bump on his head throbbed with a dull ache.

At the gate to the stables sat a black cat, fastidiously washing its paw.

“Here, kitty, kitty, kitty,” called the Witcher.

The cat froze and glared at him angrily, folding back its ears and hissing, teeth bared.

“I know,” nodded Geralt, “I don't like you either. I'm just joking.”

He unhurriedly loosened the buckles and laces of his jacket, smoothing out the creases in his clothes and checking that nothing would hamper his freedom of movement. He sheathed his sword behind his back and straightened the hilt above his right shoulder, then he tied a leather bandana across his forehead, pushing his hair behind his ears. He pulled on long gauntlets, bristling with short silver studs.

Once again, he looked at the sun, pupils narrowed into vertical slits, and thought to himself, What a beautiful day. A beautiful day for a fight. He sighed and spat, then walked slowly through the streets, lined with walls that emitted the sharp, piercing smell of wet plaster and lime.

“Hey, freak!”

He looked around. The Cicada, accompanied by three suspicious-looking, armed individuals sat on a pile of logs arranged along the ditch. He got up, stretched, and went to stand in the middle of the street, carefully avoiding the puddles.

“Where are you going?” he asked, placing his narrow hands on his weapons belt.

“None of your business.”

“Just to make things clear, I don't give a damn about the alderman, the magician or this whole shitty town,” The Cicada said, slowly emphasizing each word. “It's you I'm interested in, Witcher. You're not going to reach the end of this street. Do you hear? I want to see how good you are in a fight. It's keeping me up at night. Halt, I say.”

“Get out of my way.”

“Stop!” shouted The Cicada, putting his hand on the hilt of his sword. “Didn't you understand what I said? We're going to fight! I challenged you! Soon we will see who's the best!”

Geralt shrugged his shoulders, not slowing his pace.

“I challenge you to a fight! You hear me, weirdo?” shouted The Cicada, again blocking his path. “What are you waiting for? Get out your iron! What's this, are you scared? Or maybe you're only bothered by those, like Istredd, who've screwed your sorceress?”

Geralt carried on walking, forcing The Cicada to awkwardly step backwards. The armed men accompanying The Cicada got up from the pile of logs and started to follow them, maintaining a certain distance. Geralt heard the mud squelching under their feet.

“I challenge you!” repeated The Cicada, reddening then going pallid in turn. “Do you hear, damned Witcher? What more do you need? That I spit in your face?”

“So, spit.”

The Cicada stopped and took a deep breath, preparing to spit. He was staring into the Witcher's eyes instead of paying attention to his hands. This was a mistake. Geralt, still not slowing down, swiftly punched him in the mouth with his studded fist. He struck without pausing, only using the momentum of his stride to follow through. The Cicada's lips cracked and burst like crushed cherries. The Witcher hauled back and hit him again in the same place, this time stopping briefly, feeling his anger dissipate with the force and vigor the blow carried. The Cicada, spinning on one foot in the mud, the other in the air, vomited blood and fell backwards into a puddle. The Witcher, hearing the chink of a blade being drawn behind him, stopped and turned fluidly, one hand on the hilt of his sword.

“Come on, then,” he said, his voice trembling with rage, “Try me.”

The one who drew his sword looked into Geralt's eyes. One second. And then he looked away. The rest began to withdraw; slowly at first, then with greater urgency. Gauging the situation, the man with the sword also fell back, his lips moving silently. The man furthest back turned and ran, splashing through the mud. The others froze in place, not attempting to advance.

The Cicada rolled over in the mud and sat up, propping himself up on his elbows, babbling incoherently, spitting out something white with a large amount of red. Walking past him,

Geralt casually kicked him in the face, breaking his cheekbone, the man floundered again in the puddles.

He walked on, not looking back.

Istredd was already at the well, standing there, leaning against the wooden shaft next to the moss encrusted winch. On his belt hung a sword. A beautiful, light sword with a swept hilt, the tip of the scabbard brushing against the cuff of his shiny riding boot. On the magician's shoulder sat a black bird.

A kestrel.

'And here you are, Witcher.” Istredd, equipped with a falconer's glove, gently and carefully placed the bird on the roof of the well.

“Here I am, Istredd.”

“I didn't think you were coming. I thought you'd left.”

“As you can see, I'm still here.”

The magician threw his head back and laughed long and loudly.

“She wanted to save us...” he said. “Both of us. But that's beside the point, Geralt. Draw your blade. There can be only one of us.”

“You're going to fight with a sword?”

“Does that surprise you? You also fight with a sword. Let's go.”

“Why Istredd? Why a sword and not magic?”

The magician paled; his mouth twitched nervously.

“En garde, I say!” he shouted. “No time for questions, that moment has gone! Now is the time for action!”

“I want to know,” Geralt said slowly. “I want to know why you choose the sword. I want to know where you got that black kestrel. I have a right to know. A right to know the truth, Istredd.”

“The truth?” the magician replied bitterly. “Well, maybe you do. Yes, you do. We have equal rights. The kestrel, you ask? It arrived at dawn, wet from the rain. It brought a note; so short that I know it by heart: 'Goodbye, Val. Forgive me. I cannot accept your gift, as I have nothing to give you in return that will adequately express my gratitude. That's the truth, Val. The truth is a shard of ice.' Well, Geralt? Are you happy now? Are your rights satisfied?”

The Witcher slowly nodded.

“Well,” replied Istredd. “Now I'm going to exercise my rights, because I cannot accept the news this letter brings me. I can't be without her... I'd rather... En garde, damn it!”

He twisted and drew his sword with a quick, graceful movement, exhibiting great skill. The kestrel squawked.

The Witcher remained motionless, hands at his sides.

“What are you waiting for?” barked the magician.

Geralt slowly raised his head, looked at him for a moment, then turned on his heel.

“No, Istredd,” he said quietly. “Goodbye.”

“What do you mean, damn it?”

Geralt stopped. “Istredd,” he said over his shoulder, “Don't drag anyone else into this. If you want to do it, just hang yourself by your reins in the stables.”

“Geralt!” shouted the magician, his voice cracked suddenly with a note of hopelessness that grated on the ears, “I won't give up! I'll follow her to Vengerberg. I'll go to the ends of the earth to find her! I won't ever give up on her! Know this!”

“Farewell, Istredd.”

He stepped into the street without looking back. He walked, paying no attention to the people who hurried out of his way, quickly slamming doors and shutters. He paid no heed to anyone or anything.

He thought about the letter which was waiting for him at the inn.

He accelerated his pace. He knew that at the besides, a black kestrel awaited, wet from the rain, holding a note in its curved beak. He wanted to read it as soon as possible.

Even though he already knew its contents.

## The Eternal Fire

“Scum! Worthless singer! Crook!”

Geralt, his curiosity piqued, led his mare to the corner of the alley. Before he had the time to locate the origin of the screams, he heard a crash of glass join the chorus of cries. A jar of cherry jam, he thought. That is the sound of a jar of cherry jam thrown by someone from a great height or with great force. He perfectly remembered Yennefer, during their time together, throwing in anger the jars like it that she received from her customers. Yennefer was ignorant of all the secrets of making jams: her magic in this area was still desperately incomplete.

A fairly large group of onlookers had amassed around the corner of the alley, at the foot of a narrow pink-painted house. A young woman with blonde hair was standing in her nightgown on a flowered balcony suspended just below the overhanging edge of the rooftop. Soft and rounded shoulders appeared beneath the frills of her bodice. She seized a flowerpot with the intention of throwing it.

The thin man, wearing an olive-colored hat adorned with a feather, barely had time to leap back, like a goat, to avoid the impact of the pot that exploded on the ground just in front of him and scattered into a thousand pieces.

“I beg you, Vespula!” he cried. “Don't believe them! I am faithful to you! May I die on the spot if it isn't true!”

“Scoundrel! Demon spawn! Vagabond!” the plump blonde yelled back before retreating into the depths of the house to search, no doubt, for new ammunition.

“Hey, Dandelion!” called the Witcher, leading his uncooperative mount onto the battlefield. “How are you? What's going on?”

“Everything's fine,” replied the troubadour, flashing his teeth in a smile. “The usual. Hello, Geralt. What are you doing here? By the plague, look out!”

A pewter cup whistled through the air and rebounded with a crash on the paving stones. Dandelion recovered it from the ground to examine its condition and then tossed it into the gutter.

“Don't forget to take your clothes,” shouted the blonde, the ruffles of her nightgown dancing on her buxom chest. “Get out of my sight! Don't set foot here again, you good-for-nothing musician!”

“That's not mine,” Dandelion said in surprise, retrieving the multicolored pants from the ground. “I have, in all my life, never worn a pair of pants like these.”

“Go away! I don't want to see you anymore! You... You... You want to know what you're worth in bed? Nothing! Nothing, you hear? You hear, everyone?”

Another flowerpot burst forth: the dried stalk of the plant hummed through the air. Dandelion had just enough time to dive. A copper pot of at least two and a half gallons followed the same course, whirling. The crowd of bystanders, standing out of the path of the projectiles, burst into laughter. Most of these clowns applauded, outrageously encouraging the young woman to continue.

“Does she have a crossbow in the house?” the Witcher asked uneasily.

“It's possible,” replied the poet, craning his neck toward the balcony. “What bric-a-brac she has in there! Did you see these pants?”

“It would be prudent not to stay here. You can come back when she calms down.”

“By all the devils,” Dandelion grimaced, “I do not return to a house where I've had slander and copper pots thrown in my face. Our brief liaison is finished. Wait a little longer for her to throw me... Oh, by the gods! No! Vespula! Not my lute!”

The troubadour lunged, holding out his arms, tripped and fell, grabbing the instrument at the last moment just above the ground. The lute uttered a groaned song.

“Phew!” he murmured, rising. “I have it. All is well, Geralt, we can go. I left with her, it's true, a coat with a marten-fur collar, but never mind, that will be the price I pay. Because I know she'll never throw the coat.”

“Liar! Blackguard!” the blonde bawled before spitting pointedly from the balcony. “Vagabond! Damned crook!”

“Why is she so upset? Have you done something stupid, Dandelion?”

“The usual,” the troubadour replied with a shrug. “She requires that I be monogamous, but she herself doesn't hesitate to display another man's pants to the whole world. You heard her name-calling? By the gods, I personally have bedded better women, but I refrain from shouting as much in the middle of the street. Let's go.”

“Where do you suggest we go?”

“Where do you think? Certainly not the Temple of the Eternal Fire. Let's go to The Pike's Grotto. I need to settle my nerves.”

Without protest, the Witcher led his mount behind Dandelion, who was already walking with a purposeful stride through the narrow alley. The troubadour tuned his instrument and plucked a few strings before playing a deep and vibrant chord:

“Autumn's scents have pervaded the air; the wind stole the word from our lips. That's the way it must be, please don't shed those diamonds that run down your cheeks.”

Dandelion broke off. He waved happily to two girls who passed next to them, carrying baskets of vegetables. The girls giggled.

“What brings you to Novigrad, Geralt?”

“Supplies: a harness, equipment, and this new jacket.” The Witcher stroked the fresh, brand new leather of his jacket. “What do you think, Dandelion?”

“You are certainly no fashion plate,” the bard said, grimacing and stroking the chicken feathers on the puffed sleeve of his own bright blue doublet with the notched collar. “I'm happy to see you in Novigrad, the capital, the center and the cultural heart of the world. An enlightened man can breathe deeply here!”

“Then let's breathe on the next street over,” suggested Geralt, seeing a barefooted man squatting, his eyes wide, in the act of defecating in an adjacent alley.

“Your incessant sarcasm grows tiresome,” Dandelion said, grimacing again. “In Novigrad, Geralt, there are houses made of brick, paved city streets, a seaport, warehouses, four watermills, slaughterhouses, sawmills, a large manufactory of pointed-toe shoes, and all desirable guilds and artisans, a mint, eight banks and nineteen pawnbrokers, a breathtaking castle and guard tower, and then every sort of diversion: a scaffold, a gibbet equipped with a trapdoor, thirty-five inns, a theater, a zoo, a bazaar and twelve brothels... I don't remember how many temples. Lots, in any case. And all these women, Geralt, proper ones, combed and perfumed... The satins, the velour, the silks, the bustles, the ribbons. Oh, Geralt! The verse writes itself!”

“Your home all surrounded by snow, glassy frost covers rivers and lakes. That's the way it must be, please don't show this yearning and grief on your face.”

“A new ballad?”

“Yes. It's entitled Winter, but it isn't finished yet. I haven't come up with an ending because of Vespula: I'm shattered, and the verse isn't coming to me. By the way, I forgot, how is it going with Yennefer?”

“So-so.”

“I understand.”

“No, you don't understand a thing. Well then, where is this inn? Is it far from here?”

“Just around the corner. There it is, we've arrived. You see the sign?”

“I see it.”

“I greet you warmly!” Dandelion called, smiling broadly at the young woman sweeping the stairs. “My word, has everyone ever told you, dear girl, how lovely you are?”

The girl blushed, tightening her grip on her broom. Geralt thought for a moment that she wanted to strike Dandelion. He was mistaken. The girl gave him a smile, batting her eyelashes. Dandelion, as he usually did, ignored her reaction.

“I salute you and wish you good health! Good day!” Dandelion boomed, entering the inn and striking a resonant chord on his lute, whose strings jumped under the repeated movement of his thumb. “Master Dandelion, the most celebrated poet in the land, pays a visit to your unworthy establishment, innkeeper! He was struck by the desire for a beer! Do you appreciate the magnitude of the honor that I grant you, old miser?”

“I do,” the innkeeper replied despondently, emerging from behind the counter. “I am delighted to see you again, master singer. I rejoice to see that you have kept your word. You had indeed promised to return this morning to pay your debts from last night. And I thought it was only hot air, as usual. I am ashamed of my mistake.”

“Don't torment yourself without reason, my good man,” the troubadour replied cheerfully, “because I don't have any money. We'll discuss it later.”

“No,” the innkeeper responded coldly. “We will discuss it now. Your credit is dead, master poet. You will not extort from me twice in a row.”

Dandelion hung his lute on a hook stuck in the wall and then sat at a table. He removed his hat and meticulously examined the egret plume. “Do you have any money, Geralt?” he asked, with a trace of hope in his voice.

“I don't. I spent everything I had on my jacket.”

“That's not good, that's not good,” Dandelion sighed. “By the plague, there isn't a soul to treat us. Innkeeper, why is your establishment so empty today?”

“It's too early for the regular customers. The workers repairing the temple have already left and gone on to the site, taking the foreman with them.”

“No-one else?”

“No-one else, apart from his magnificence, the merchant Biberveldt, who takes his breakfast in the alcove.”

“Dainty is here,” Dandelion said, pleased. “You should have said so earlier. Come with me to the alcove, Geralt. You know Dainty Biberveldt, the halfling?”

“No.”

“That's all right. You'll get to know him. Oh, oh!” called the troubadour, making his way to the side of the room. “I can already pick up the smell and the fragrance of onion soup, so sweet in my nostrils. Yoo-hoo! It's us! Surprise!”

At the base of the alcove's central post, which was decorated with garlands of garlic and bundles of dried herbs, there sat a chubby and curly-haired halfling dressed in a pistachio-green jacket. His right hand held a wooden spoon, the left an earthenware bowl. Seeing Dandelion and Geralt, the halfling froze and opened his mouth wide. His round hazel eyes dilated with terror.

“Hi, Dainty,” Dandelion said cheerfully, waving his hat.

The halfling remained motionless, without closing his mouth. Geralt noticed that his hand shook slightly and caused a long morsel of cooked onion hanging from his spoon to swing like a pendulum.

“H-h... Hello to you, Dandelion,” he managed to say, stammering and swallowing.

“You have the hiccups? Want me to scare you? Listen: your wife was seen arriving at the toll gate! She'll arrive any second! Gardenia Biberveldt in the flesh! Haha!”

“You sure can be stupid, Dandelion,” the halfling said reproachfully.

Dandelion broke into laughter again, accompanied by two chords played on his lute. “If only you could see your face, brother: so foolish. Besides, you look at us as if we had horns and tails. It's the Witcher who scares you... eh? Perhaps you think that hunting season on halflings has just opened! Perhaps...”

“Stop,” Geralt interrupted in annoyance, approaching the table. “Pardon us, friend. Dandelion has just been through a personal tragedy that he has not yet digested. He tries to use jokes to hide his sadness, dejection, and shame.”

“Don't tell me.” The halfling finally swallowed the contents of his spoon. “Let me guess: Vespula finally threw you out? Is that it, Dandelion?”

“I do not discuss delicate subjects with individuals who are drinking and stuffing themselves while their friends are forced to stand,” replied the troubadour, who sat down without waiting to be invited.

The halfling swallowed a spoonful of soup and began to lick up the drips of cheese.

“Sure,” he conceded reluctantly. “Join me, then. Have a seat. They're serving onion soup today... Will you have some?”

“In principle, I never eat so early in the morning,” Dandelion replied insolently. “But so be it: I'll eat, but certainly not with a dry throat... Hey! Innkeeper! Some beer, if you please! Quickly!”

A girl with her hair pulled back in a long braid that reached her thighs brought some goblets and bowls of soup. Having noticed her mouth surrounded by downy hairs, Geralt considered that she could have nice lips if only she remembered to close them.

“Dryad of the forest!” Dandelion cut in, seizing her hand and kissing the palm. “Sylph! Vision! Divine entity with pale blue eyes like a lake. Beautiful as the break of day. The form of your open lips, so exciting...”

“Give him some beer, quickly,” groaned Dainty. “He'll get into trouble.”

“Nothing of the kind, nothing of the kind,” the bard assured him. “Isn't that right, Geralt? It's difficult to find someone quieter than the two of us. I, master merchant, am a poet and musician: music softens the mood. The Witcher here only poses a threat to monsters. I present to you: Geralt of Rivia, the terror of striga, werewolves and others of their breed. You have certainly heard of him, Dainty!”

“I have...” The halfling darted a suspicious eye over the Witcher. “Well, what brings you to Novigrad, master Geralt? Have horrible monsters been poking their muzzles around here? Has someone hired your... er, ah... services?”

“No,” the Witcher said, smiling. “I am here only to enjoy myself.”

“Oh!” Dainty responded nervously, his hairy feet fidgeting where they were hanging a foot above the ground. “That's good...”

“What's good about it?” asked Dandelion, swallowing a spoonful of soup and taking a draught of his beer. “Perhaps you intend to support us, Biberveldt? Pay for our entertainment, you mean? This couldn't have come at a better time. We intend to start by getting a little drunk here in the Pike's Grotto, then hop over to Passionflower, it's an excellent and extravagant brothel where we can hire a half-elf or maybe even a pure one. We still need a patron.”

“A what?”

“Someone to pay for it.”

“That's what I thought,” mumbled Dainty. “Sorry, but I have a business appointment. I don't have, moreover, the funds for such entertainment. Besides, the Passionflower doesn't tolerate non-humans.”

“What are we, then? Barn owls? Ah, I understand! Halflings aren't allowed inside. That's true, you're right, Dainty. This is Novigrad, the capital of the world.”

“Yes...” said the halfling, continuing to watch the Witcher, his lips pinched. “I'll be going now... I have an appointment...”

The door to the alcove opened then with a bang: the room was entered by none other than... Dainty Biberveldt!

“By the gods!” Dandelion exclaimed.

The halfling standing in the doorway in no way differed from the one who was seated at the table, apart from the fact that he was clean, and the new arrival was dirty, his clothing disheveled and wrinkled.

“I have you, you son of a bitch,” shouted the bedraggled halfling. “Blasted thief!”

His immaculate twin rose abruptly, overturning his stool and scattering the cutlery. Geralt reacted immediately: having seized his sheathed sword from the bench, he struck Biberveldt's neck with the shoulder strap. The halfling dropped and then rolled along the ground before crawling between Dandelion's legs with the intention of reaching the doorway on all fours. His limbs elongated into something like a spider's legs. At the sight, the disheveled Dainty Biberveldt swore, shouted, and leapt back in a movement that threw him against the wooden partition with a bang. Geralt freed his sword from its sheath. He cleared a path by kicking a chair aside and then launched himself after the immaculate Dainty Biberveldt. The latter, no longer having anything in common with the real Dainty Biberveldt except the color of his vest, cleared the threshold of the room like a grasshopper and burst into the common room, barging into the girl with parted lips. Seeing his long legs and his indistinct shape, the girl opened her mouth wide and gave an ear-shattering scream. Making the most of the time gained from the collision with the girl, Geralt caught up to the creature in the middle of the room and tripped it with a deft kick to the knee.

“Don't try to move, little brother,” he warned, gritting his teeth and pressing the point of his sword to the neck of the shocking apparition. “Don't try to move.”

“What's going on here?” cried the innkeeper, rushing over wielding the handle of a shovel. “What is that? Guards! Obstruante, run and alert the guard!”

“No!” the creature screamed, flattening itself against the ground and growing more and more deformed. “Have mercy, no!”

“This is not a matter for the guard,” agreed the disheveled hobbit, exiting the alcove. “Hold the girl, Dandelion!”

Despite the swiftness of his reaction, the troubadour managed to take hold of Obstruante, who was screaming, and choose his grip with great care. The girl fell at his feet, squealing.

“Easy there, innkeeper,” Dainty Biberveldt shot, breathing heavily. “This is a personal matter. We won't trouble the guard. I'll pay for any damage...”

“There's no damage,” the master of the house said simply, looking around.

“There will be soon,” the pot-bellied halfling continued, “because I'm going to beat the shit out of him... and how! I'm going to do him in. I'll make it so painful for so long that he'll never be able to forget me: we'll break everything in here.”

Flattened against the ground like a puddle, the long-legged caricature of Dainty Biberveldt sniffled miserably.

“Out of the question,” the innkeeper said coldly, blinking and hefting the handle of his shovel. “Fight in the street or in the yard, master halfling. Not here. Otherwise I'll call the guard. You can count on it. But it's... but it's a monster, that one!”

“Master innkeeper,” Geralt intervened evenly, without reducing the pressure of the point of his sword on the creature's neck, “stay calm. No-one will break anything in your place. There will be no damage. The situation is under control. I am a Witcher. As you see, the monster is neutralized. But as it is indeed a personal matter, I suggest that we clear it up calmly in the alcove. Let go of the girl, Dandelion, and come here. I have a silver chain in my bag. Take it out and tightly bind the limbs of our gracious stranger: at the elbows, behind his back. Don't move, little brother.”

The creature keened softly.

“Well, Geralt,” Dandelion said. “It's tied. Go into the alcove. And you, innkeeper, what are you standing there for? I ordered beer. And when I order beer, you must continue serving it until I ask for water.”

Geralt shoved the bound creature into the alcove and had it sit at the base of the post. Dainty Biberveldt sat too, eyeing it malevolently.

“Look at it: a horror,” said the halfling. “It looks like a mass of fermenting dough. Look at his nose, Dandelion. It looks like it'll fall off. Son of a bitch. His ears are like my mother-in-law's before she was buried. Brrr!”

“Wait, wait,” Dandelion groaned. “You, you're Biberveldt? Uh, yes, obviously. But the thing sitting against the post was also you a few moments ago. If I am not mistaken. Geralt! All eyes now turn to you, Witcher. What's going on here, by all the devils? What is that?”

“It's a mimic.”

“Mimic, yourself,” the creature responded in a guttural voice, wrinkling its nose. “I'm not a mimic, but a doppler. My name is Tellico Lunngrevink Letorte, also known as Penstock. My friends call me Dudu.”

“I'll give you 'Dudu,' you damned son of a whore!” Dainty shouted, shaking his fist. “Where are my horses, thief?”

“Gentlemen,” the innkeeper prompted, entering with a jug and an armful of mugs. “You promised to stay quiet.”

“Oh, beer!” mumbled the halfling. “I have such a thirst, by pestilence. And I'm famished!”

“I, too, would gladly drink something,” said Tellico Lunngrevink Letorte.

No-one paid attention to his request.

“What is that thing?” asked the innkeeper, looking at the creature who, at the sight of the beer being served, dragged a long tongue between his drooping lips. “What is that, sirs?”

“A mimic,” repeated the Witcher, ignoring the monster's grimace. “It goes by a number of names: shifter, double, imitator, pavrat, or even doppler, as he calls himself.”

“A shifter!” exclaimed the innkeeper. “Here, in Novigrad? In my establishment? Quickly, the guard must be alerted without delay! And the priests! My word...”

“Easy, easy,” Dainty Biberveldt growled, eating Dandelion's soup, which had miraculously not spilled from its bowl. “We'll have plenty of time to turn it over to the authorities. But later. This scoundrel has stolen from me. This is not a matter to entrust to the authorities before I have recovered my due. I know you well, you inhabitants of Novigrad and your judges: I won't recover a dime, and even that would take luck...”

“Have mercy,” the doppler moaned desperately. “Don't turn me over to the humans! Don't you know what they do to the ones like me?”

“Of course, we know,” interrupted the innkeeper, nodding his head. “The priests exorcise captured dopplers: they tie them securely to a wooden stake and trap them in a ball of clay and slag before baking them until the clay hardens and becomes a brick. At least that's what we did once, when monsters were more common.”

“A barbaric custom, typical of humans,” Dainty said with a grimace, pushing the empty bowl away. “But it might be the proper punishment for the banditry and theft. Come on and talk, scoundrel, where are my horses? Answer quickly, or I will rip off your nose with my feet and shove it up your ass! I ask you, where are my horses!”

“I... I sold them,” said Tellico Lunngrevink Letorte.

The drooping lips contracted suddenly, taking the shape of a miniature head of cauliflower.

“He sold them? Did you hear that?” the halfling frothed. “He sold my horses!”

“Of course,” Dandelion commented. “He had plenty of time. I've seen him here for three days... That means that... By pestilence, Dainty, this means that...”

“It's obvious what that means!” the merchant cried, stamping his hairy feet. “He robbed me on the way, a day's journey from the city, and came here pretending to be me, you understand? And he sold my horses! I'll kill him! I'll snuff him out with my own hands!”

“Tell us what happened, master Biberveldt.”

“Geralt of Rivia, I presume? Witcher?”

Geralt acknowledged this with a nod.

“What luck,” the halfling went on. “I'm Dainty Biberveldt of the Persicaires prairie, farmer, rancher and merchant. Call me Dainty, Geralt.”

“Tell us what happened, Dainty.”

“Well, it was like this: we, my servants and myself, were taking the horses by way of the Devil's Crossing to sell. A day's walk from the city, we set up camp. We fell asleep after drinking a keg of brandy. I awake in the night, my bladder fit to burst. So I get out of the cart and while I'm up, check on the horses in the meadow. A damned fog enveloped me. I noticed someone coming toward me. ‘Who goes there?’ I asked. The other doesn't say anything. I went closer, and... I see myself, like a mirror. I think that I shouldn't have had so much to drink, damn that brandy. Then this one... because it was him, he hits me in the face! I saw stars and passed out. I woke up in the morning with a blood-covered lump the size of a cucumber on my head. Not a soul to be found. Not a trace of our camp. I wandered for a whole day to find the path. Then I continued my walk, subsisting on little roots and raw mushrooms. He, meanwhile, that revolting Dudulico, whatever his name is, went to Novigrad wearing my appearance to get rid of my horses! I'm going to... As for my servants, the blind fools, I'll give them a hundred blows with a cane on their bare asses for not recognizing their own master and for getting conned like this! Cretins, dunderheads, piss-drunk louts...”

“Don't blame them, Dainty,” Geralt interrupted. “They never had a chance to see through it: a mime makes a copy so perfect that it's impossible to distinguish from the original, in this case the victim. You've never heard of mimics?”

“I've heard of them, sure, but I thought they were imaginary.”

“They are by no means imaginary. A doppler only needs to know or examine the victim to adapt his own shape immediately and perfectly to the structure of the original. I would point out that this is no illusion, but an extremely fine metamorphosis that imitates even the smallest details. How do mimics manage this? That, we don't know. Sorcerers presume that we are dealing with a process similar to that of lycanthropy, but I think that this is an entirely different mechanism, or something like lycanthropy but with an underlying force a thousand times greater. A werewolf can only take two or perhaps three forms at most, while the mimic can transform infinitely so long as what he copies corresponds more or less to his body mass.”

“Body mass?”

“Yes. He can't transform into a colossus. Nor a mouse.”

“I see. And what's the chain you tied him with for?”

“The silver is lethal to a werewolf, but only neutralizes, as you can see, a mimic. He sits quietly without changing form thanks to the power of this chain.”

The doppler pursed his drooping lips, giving the Witcher a sullen look. His troubled eyes had lost the hazel color of the halfling's irises and turned yellow.

“Watch yourself, you son of a bitch,” Dainty growled. “When I think it even came down to the Grotto where I myself usually stay. And it persuaded them, the imbeciles, that it was really me!”

Dandelion nodded.

“Dainty,” said the troubadour, “it was really you. I've been coming here for three days. It was your appearance and your wording. He thought like you. When the bill came, he was as miserly as you. Maybe even more so.”

“On the latter point I don't care in the least,” said the halfling, “because in that case maybe I can recover some part of my money. I don't dare touch that thing. Get my purse back from him, Dandelion, and see what it contains. There should be a lot of money if the horse thief sold my animals.”

“How many horses did you have, Dainty?”

“Twelve.”

“Based on the current price on the world market,” the musician continued, inspecting the contents of the purse, “and on the influence that you really hold, then I see enough for perhaps one horse here, and that, old and strung out. In Novigrad, this would be enough to acquire two goats, possibly three.”

The merchant was silent. He looked as though he would burst into tears. Tellico Lunngrevink Letorte flattened his nose as low as possible and his lips lower still, making a feeble gurgle.

“In other words,” the halfling sighed at last, “it's a creature whose existence I had dismissed as a fairy-tale that has robbed and ruined me. That's what I call bad luck.”

“I won't argue with that,” the Witcher remarked, casting a glance at the doppler that was curling in on itself more and more. “I was also convinced that mimics belonged to a bygone era. Apparently, there were once many of them in the forests and on the surrounding plateaus. But their ability to take other forms alarmed the first settlers, who began to hunt them efficiently. Almost all of them were exterminated.”

“And it's a good thing,” the innkeeper interrupted, spitting: “I swear on the Eternal Fire that I'd prefer dragons or devils, because a dragon is a dragon and a devil a devil. You know what you're dealing with. Werewolves, their metamorphoses and their variations, are all simply horrifying. It is a demonic process, a fraud, the act of a traitor. Humans have everything to lose from such trickery! I tell you: alert the guard and put the monster to the flame!”

“Geralt,” Dandelion said, intrigued by the subject, “I'd be happy to hear the voice of a specialist. These mimics really are menacing and aggressive?”

“They generally use their ability to copy,” the Witcher replied, “for defense rather than attack. I have never heard of...”

“By the plague,” Dainty interrupted, bringing his fist down on the table. “If knocking someone out and robbing them isn't aggressive, then I don't know what is. The matter is simple: I was attacked and robbed of not only the fruits of honest labor, but also of my own self. I demand compensation! I will not accept...”

“We must alert the guard,” repeated the innkeeper. “And also, the priests! And burn the monster, the non-human!”

“Stop, innkeeper!” the halfling cut in, looking up. “You begin to annoy us with your guards. I note that this non-human has only caused harm to myself. Not to you, until shown otherwise. And, incidentally, you will notice that I am also a non-human.”

“Come now, master Biberveldt...” the innkeeper replied, with an embarrassed smile. “What a difference there is between him and you! Your kind are like humans, of course, while this one is nothing but a monster. I'm surprised, by the way, master Witcher, that you stay seated like this without reacting. What is your purpose, one might ask? Isn't it true that you kill monsters?”

“Monsters, indeed,” Geralt responded coldly, “but not members of intelligent races.”

“Here, master,” said the innkeeper “you exaggerate somewhat.”

“That's right, Geralt,” Dandelion interrupted, “you're pushing it, calling this an 'intelligent race.' Just look at it.”

Tellico Lunngrevink Letort indeed did not give the impression of belonging to a sentient race. Fixing the Witcher with his troubled yellow eyes, he more closely resembled a puppet made of mud and flour. The sniffles produced by his nose, lying flat on the table, did not make a convincing case for such membership.

“Enough of this meaningless blather!” Dainty Biberveldt cried suddenly. “There is nothing to discuss! All that matters are my horses and my losses! You heard me, you blasted yellow fungus! To whom did you sell my horses? What have you done with the money? Speak now, because I'll kick you and hit you and tear you apart!”

Opening the door, Obstruante stuck her head into the alcove.

“Some guests just arrived at the inn, father,” she murmured. “Apprentice builders and some others. I'm serving them, but stop shouting like this, because they're starting to ask what's going on in here.”

“By the Eternal Fire!” the innkeeper swore, looking at the collapsed doppler. “If someone comes in and sees it... we're finished. If we don't alert the guard, well... Master Witcher! If this is really a shifter, tell this thing to take a more respectable and discreet form. For the moment, at least.”

“Well said,” Dainty agreed. “Turn him into something else, Geralt.”

“Into whom?” the doppler asked then, gurgling. “I can only take the form of someone I can see. Which one of you wants to lend me his appearance?”

“Not me,” the innkeeper said quickly.

“Nor me,” Dandelion said indignantly. “It wouldn't be good camouflage. The whole world knows me: the sight of two Dandelions seated at the same table would cause a greater sensation than the sight of this naked monster.”

“With me, it would be the same,” Geralt added, smiling. “That leaves you, Dainty. You're in luck. No offense: you know that humans have difficulty differentiating between halflings.”

The merchant didn't hesitate for long. “Fine,” he said. “So be it. Remove the chain, Witcher. Come on, turn yourself into me, 'intelligent race.'“

Freed from the chain, the doppler stretched his pasty limbs, stroked his nose and then studied the halfling. The stretched skin of his face became firmer and took on color. The nose diminished, producing a muffled gurgle. On his bald scalp, curly hair appeared. Dainty widened his eyes. The innkeeper, awed, mutely opened his mouth. Dandelion gasped without interrupting his incessant moan.

The final touch was the change to the color of his eyes. Dainty Biberveldt the Second gave a rumbling gurgle. He seized the mug belonging to Dainty Biberveldt the First from across the table and brought it greedily to his lips.

“It's impossible, it's impossible,” Dandelion repeated in a low voice. “See here: the copy is perfect, it's impossible to differentiate. Everything is there! This time, even the mosquito bites and the stains on the trousers... Truly, the trousers! Geralt, even the sorcerers don't succeed at that! Feel it, that's real wool, not an illusion! Incredible! How does he do it?”

“Nobody knows,” the Witcher rumbled. “He himself doesn't know. I said that he possesses an ability to completely transform his own matter, but this ability is organic and instinctive...”

“But the trousers... What are the trousers made of? And the vest?”

“It's just his own transformed skin. I don't think that he'd readily agree to take them off. Besides, the skin would immediately lose its woolen properties...”

“Pity,” Dainty said, his eyes glinting. “I was just wondering if it was possible for it to transform the matter of that bucket into gold.”

Obviously very happy to be the center of attention, the doppler who had become a faithful copy of the halfling took his ease with a broad smile. He adopted a seated position identical to that of Dainty, his hairy feet kicking in the same way.

“You know the subject of dopplers well, Geralt,” he said before tipping back his mug, smacking his tongue and burping. “Very well, even.”

“By the gods, that's exactly the voice and the mannerisms of Biberveldt,” said Dandelion. “Does anyone have a red taffeta ribbon? We must mark it, damn it, because it could all go wrong.”

“How is that, Dandelion?” demanded Dainty Biberveldt the First. “There is no way you can confuse me with him! From the first...”

“... glance, there are differences,” continued Dainty Biberveldt the Second, stifling a burp. “To confuse us, you would really have to be a horse's ass.”

“What did I just say?” Dandelion murmured with admiration. “He thinks and talks like Biberveldt. It is impossible to differentiate...”

“That's a stretch!” The halfling made a face. “A big stretch.”

“No,” Geralt objected, “it's no stretch. Whether you believe it or not, Dainty, that creature is indeed yourself at the moment. Through means unknown, the doppler also precisely copies the psyche of its victims.”

“The psy... what?”

“The characteristics of the mind: character, feeling, thoughts. The soul. This contradicts the claims of the majority of sorcerers and all priests: the soul is also the body.”

“You blaspheme...” the innkeeper broke in, breathing unevenly.

“What rubbish,” Dainty Biberveldt added forcefully. “Don't joke around, Witcher. The properties of the mind, well then: copying someone's nose or trousers is one thing, but the intelligence, that's bullshit. I'll prove it right here. If your flea-bitten doppler copied my business acumen, he would not have sold my horses in Novigrad where the market is weak, but would have gone to Devil's Crossing, to the horse market, where the prices are decided at auction. There, you do not lose...”

“Of course, you lose!” The doppler aped the halfling's pique, imitating his characteristic grumble. “First, the auction prices at Devil's Crossing have been falling, because the merchants decide amongst themselves how much to bid. And a commission must be paid to the organizers.”

“You will not teach me commerce, imbecile,” Biberveldt raged. “At Devil's Crossing, I would have gotten 90 or even 100 apiece. And you, how much did you get from the rogues in Novigrad?”

“130,” replied the doppler.

“You lie, damned porridge-brain!”

“I'm not lying. I took the horses directly to the port, master Dainty, where I found a fur trader from overseas. Furriers don't use oxen to draw their caravans, because the animals are too slow. The furs are light, but valuable. They must therefore travel faster. In Novigrad, there is no market for horses: thus, there are no horses either. I was the only one to make an offer. I could therefore name my own price. It's as simple...”

“Don't lecture me, I told you!” Dainty shouted, growing crimson. “Well then, you made some money. But where has it gone now?”

“I invested it,” Tellico replied proudly, smoothing a stubborn lock of hair just as Dainty often did. “Money, master Dainty, must always circulate for business to carry on.”

“Watch yourself or I'll break your face! What did you use the money from the horses for? Speak!”

“I said: I bought merchandise.”

“What merchandise, you damned lunatic?”

“I bought co... cochineal pigment,” the doppler stammered, then recited rapidly: “five hundred bushels of cochineal pigment, sixty-two fifths of mimosa bark, fifty-five barrels of rose essence, twenty-three barrels of fish oil, six hundred earthenware bowls and eight hundred pounds of beeswax. Note that the fish oil was a very good price because it was slightly rancid. Ah! I almost forgot: one hundred cubits of cotton cord.”

A very long silence fell.

“Rancid fish oil,” Dainty said at last, articulating very slowly and placing emphasis on each word. “Cotton cord, rose essence. I must be dreaming. It's a nightmare. Anything can be bought in Novigrad: the most precious and the most useful items... and this cretin spends my money to acquire this shit. With my appearance! My standing and my reputation as a merchant are ruined. No, it's all too much for me. I can't take it. Give me your sword, Geralt, so I can finally be rid of him.”

The door to the alcove opened with a creak.

“Merchant Biberveldt!” called the individual who had just entered. He was so thin that the purple toga he wore seemed to be draped on a coat-hanger; on his head sat a velvet hat shaped something like an overturned chamberpot. “Is the merchant Biberveldt here?”

“Yes,” the two halflings replied in unison.

In the instant that followed, one of the two Dainty Biberveldts threw the contents of his mug into the Witcher's face, deftly kicked the stool out from under Dandelion and crawled swiftly under the table in the direction of the door, knocking over the individual in the funny hat in the process.

“Fire! Help!” he yelled, falling backward into the common room. “Murder! Call the fire brigade!”

Having wiped the foam from his face, Geralt set off in pursuit of the fugitive, but the other Dainty Biberveldt, who had also rushed to the door, got tangled in his legs after slipping on the sawdust. They fell together in the doorway. Dandelion swore horribly, trying to extricate himself from under the table.

“Stop, thief!” howled the lanky individual, still on the ground and entangled in the folds of his toga. “Thief! Bandits!”

Geralt trampled the halfling. Finally, in the inn's common room, he saw the doppler barrel into the customers and run into the street. The Witcher tried to use his momentum to cross this elastic barrier but was halted by the customers who blocked the way. He managed to knock down one of them, black with mud and stinking of beer, but the others, locking their strong shoulders, did not budge an inch. Geralt thrashed, enraged. He heard the sharp crack of thread and leather giving way. Under his arm, he could feel a sudden lack of resistance. The Witcher stopped struggling and swore.

“We caught him!” shouted the workers. “We caught the thief! What do we do, chief?”

“Into the quicklime!” the foreman bellowed, lifting his head from the table and trying to orient himself with bleary eyes.

“Guards!” bawled the one dressed in purple, extricating himself from the alcove. “Contempt of court! Guards! You'll end up on the gallows, thief!”

“We have him!” cried the workers. “We have him, sir.”

“It's not him,” the man in the toga howled in response. “Catch the scoundrel! Chase him!”

“Who?”

“Biberveldt, the hobbit! Catch him, catch him! Lock him up in a dungeon!”

“Just a minute...” Dainty interrupted, stepping out of the alcove. “What are you doing, master Schwann? Don't wipe your mouth with my name. Call off the alarm. It's not necessary.”

Schwann grew quiet, watching the halfling warily. Dandelion appeared in the doorway of the alcove, wearing his hat askew and checking the state of his lute. The workers released Geralt at last after having exchanged some words in low voices. Despite his anger, the Witcher constrained himself to spitting profusely on the floor.

“Merchant Biberveldt!” Schwann yelped, blinking his myopic eyes. “What is the meaning of this? Attacking a municipal functionary could cost you dearly... Who was that, the hobbit who disappeared?”

“A cousin,” Dainty replied promptly. “A distant cousin...”

“Yes, yes...” Dandelion confirmed quickly, feeling that he was in his element at last. “A distant cousin of Biberveldt called Toupet-Biberveldt, the black sheep of the family. As a child, he fell down a well. Happily, the well was dry, but unfortunately, the bucket fell on his head. He's usually harmless. Only the sight of the color purple drives him into a rage. But there is nothing to worry about, because the sight of red hair on a lady's pubis has the power to calm him. That's why he fled to Passionflower, I tell you, master Schwann...”

“Enough, Dandelion,” the Witcher interrupted abruptly. “Shut up, damn it.”

Schwann draped himself in his toga, brushed off the sawdust that clung to it and stuck out his chest, adopting an expression of appropriate severity.

“Yes...” he said. “Look after your loved ones more carefully, merchant Biberveldt, because you should know that you are responsible for their actions. If I file a complaint... But I do not have the time. Biberveldt, the errand that brings me here: in the name of the municipal authorities, I order you to pay the taxes that you owe.”

“What?”

“The taxes,” the functionary repeated, pinching his lips together in the manner of his superiors. “What's gotten into you? Has your cousin made you lose your head? When one makes a profit, one must pay his taxes or expect to find himself thrown into the deepest dungeon.”

“Me?” Dainty bawled. “Me, profit? But I have nothing but losses, for fuck's sake! Me...”

“Careful, Biberveldt,” the Witcher murmured.

Dandelion dealt a furtive kick to his hairy ankle. The halfling coughed.

“Of course,” he said, trying to plaster a smile across his chubby face. “Of course, master Schwann. If one does business, one must pay taxes. Good business generates big taxes. And the reverse, I imagine.”

“It is not for me to judge the quality of your transactions, master merchant.” The official sat at the table and made a wry face; from the folds of his toga, he produced an abacus and a scroll that he unrolled on the table, smoothing it with his sleeve. “My role is to count and collect. Yes... Let's draw up the bill... That will be... hum... Take off two, carry the one... Yes... 1,553 crowns and 20 coppers.”

A hoarse sound burst from Dainty's throat. The workers murmured in amazement. Dandelion sighed.

“Well, goodbye, friends,” the halfling said at last. “If anyone asks, tell them I'm rotting in the dungeon.”

### Part II

“Until noon tomorrow,” Dainty whimpered. “Schwann, that son of a bitch, exaggerates. The repulsive old man could have given me an extension. More than 1,500 crowns! Where will I find that kind of money by tomorrow? I am a finished halfling, ruined, doomed to end my life in prison! Let's not sit here, by the plague. I tell you this: that scoundrel the doppler must be caught. We must catch him!”

The three of them were seated on the edge of the marble basin of a dry fountain, situated in the center of a small square surrounded by the homes of bourgeoisie with great wealth but extremely questionable taste. The water in the basin was green and horribly filthy, teeming with small fish that swam amid the refuse. Mouths gaping, they tried to gulp air from the surface, laboriously opening and closing their gills. Dandelion and the halfling were chewing on beignets that the troubadour had stolen from a street vendor.

“If I were you,” said the bard, “I would give up the pursuit and start looking for someone who could loan me the money. What will catching the doppler accomplish? You think that Schwann will accept it as the financial equivalent?”

“You're an idiot, Dandelion. By finding the doppler, I'll get my money back.”

“What money? Everything your purse contained was used to pay for the damage and grease Schwann's palm. There was no more.”

“Dandelion,” the halfling said, grimacing. “You might know something about poetry, but as for business, forgive me for saying so, you have an empty skull. You heard the amount of tax that Schwann calculated? Taxes, they are paid on the basis of what? Eh? Of what?”

“Of everything,” replied the poet. “Myself, I am taxed for singing. And the fact that I sing to satisfy an internal need makes little difference.”

“You really are an idiot, as I said. In business, taxes are paid on profit. On profit, Dandelion! You understand? That scoundrel the doppler stole my identity and organized a particularly lucrative scam! He made a profit! And me, I must pay the tax and the debts surely racked up by this vagabond! If I don't pay, I'll end up behind bars; they'll publicly clap me in irons and send me to the mines. By the plague!”

“Ah!” Dandelion said cheerfully. “Then you have no other choice, Dainty. You must leave the city on the sly. You know what? I have an idea. We'll hide you under a sheepskin and when you walk through the gate, you'll only have to repeat: 'Baa, baa, I am a sheep.' No-one will recognize you.”

“Dandelion,” the halfling replied hotly. “Shut up or I will put you through hell. Geralt?”

“Yes, Dainty.”

“Will you help me catch the doppler?”

“Listen,” responded the Witcher, trying vainly to repair the torn sleeve of his jacket. “We are in Novigrad, a city of thirty thousand inhabitants: humans, dwarves, half-elves, halflings and gnomes, and perhaps twice as many people passing through. How can you find anyone in that mob?”

Dainty swallowed his beignet and then licked his fingers. “And magic, Geralt? What about your Witcher spells, which are the subject of so many stories?”

“The doppler is only magically detectable when he takes his own appearance. Unfortunately, he doesn't walk down the street in that form. And even then, magic wouldn't be any help, because the area is saturated with weak magical signals. Half the houses have magical locks; three quarters of the people wear an amulet for some purpose or another: to protect against thieves, lice, indigestion... The number is infinite.”

Dandelion ran his fingers over the body of the lute, plucking the strings. “With spring the warm smell of rain returns,” he sang. “No, that won't do. With spring comes the smell of the sun... Damn it, no! Definitely not. But then not everything...”

“Stop squawking,” the halfling snapped. “You're getting on my nerves.”

Dandelion threw the rest of his beignet to the fish and and spat into the basin. “Look,” he said, “golden carp. They say these fish grant wishes.”

“Those are red,” Dainty remarked.

“What's the difference? By the plague, there are three of us, and they grant three wishes. One per person. What do you think, Dainty? Wouldn't you like a fish to pay your taxes?”

“Of course. I would also like for a meteor to fall from the sky and bash in the doppler's head. And then...”

“Stop, stop. We have wishes to make, too. Me, I'd like the fish to whisper the end of my ballad to me. And you, Geralt?”

“Leave me be, Dandelion.”

“Don't spoil the mood, Witcher. Simply say what you'd like.”

The Witcher stood. “I'd like,” he murmured, “for the fact that we are being followed to turn out to be a misunderstanding.”

Four people dressed in black and wearing leather caps were emerging from an alley and heading straight for the fountain. Dainty swore quietly, seeing them approach.

Four others appeared behind them, from the same alley. These didn't approach. Arranged in a line, they were content to block the exit. They held curious hoops resembling coiled lengths of rope. The Witcher examined the area. He rolled his shoulders to adjust the position of the sword on his back. Dandelion gave a moan.

A man of short stature, dressed in a white doublet and a short gray coat, appeared behind the men dressed in black. The gold chain he wore around his neck flashed, in time with his footsteps, with the golden hue of the sun.

“Chapelle,” Dandelion groaned. “It's Chapelle...”

The men dressed in black were slowly moving behind them in the direction of the fountain. The Witcher moved to draw his sword. “No, Geralt,” Dandelion murmured, pressing close to him. “By the gods, don't draw your weapon. This is the temple guard. If we resist, we'll never get out of Novigrad alive. Don't touch your sword.”

The man in the white doublet approached them with a purposeful stride. The men dressed in black dispersed behind him to surround the basin and fully occupy the terrain. Geralt watched attentively, hunching slightly. The strange circles the men held in their hands were not whips, as he had first thought. They were lamiae.

The man in the white doublet approached.

“Geralt,” the bard murmured, “by all the gods, stay calm...”

“I will not allow them to touch me,” he growled. “I will not let a single person touch me. Whatsoever. Be careful, Dandelion... When I begin, run for your life. I'll stop them... for a while...”

Dandelion didn't answer. Having set his lute on his shoulder, he bowed deeply before the man in the white doublet, which was richly embroidered with gold and silver thread in a mosaic of tiny patterns.

“Venerable Chapelle...”

The man called Chapelle stopped and looked them over. Geralt had noticed that his horribly chilly eyes reflected the color of metal. His abnormally sweaty brow had a sickly pallor; blotches of crimson stood out on his cheeks.

“Master Dainty Biberveldt, merchant,” he announced. “The talented Master Dandelion. And Geralt of Rivia, representing the ever-noble brotherhood of Witchers. Is this a reunion between old friends? In our home, in Novigrad?”

No-one answered.

“To compound the misfortune,” Chapelle continued, “I must divulge that someone has already reported you.”

Dandelion paled slightly. The halfling's teeth chattered. Not to be distracted from his surveillance of the individuals in black wearing leather hats who surrounded the basin, the Witcher ignored Chapelle. In most of the countries Geralt knew, manufacture and possession of a barbed lamia, also called a Whip of Mayhe, was strictly prohibited. Novigrad was no exception. Geralt had seen men struck in the face by a lamia. It was impossible afterward to forget the sight.

“The proprietor of the inn The Pike's Grotto” Chapelle continued, “had the impudence to reproach your lordships for associating with a demon, a monster known generally as a shifter or mimic.”

No-one responded. Chapelle crossed his arms over his chest and stared at them coldly.

“I felt compelled to warn you that this denunciation had been made. I also inform you that the innkeeper in question has been imprisoned in a dungeon. We suspect him of inventing the story under the influence of beer or liquor. The things these people will invent. To begin with, shifters don't exist. They're an invention of credulous yokels.”

No-one made any comment.

“Furthermore, no shifter could approach a Witcher,” Chapelle continued, smiling, “without being killed on the spot. Isn't that right?”

Chapelle didn’t wait for a response and continued, “The accusation of the innkeeper would be in these circumstances absolutely absurd if a certain detail did not nevertheless leave some doubt.”

Chapelle shook his head in the imposing silence. The Witcher heard the slow exhalation of the air that Dainty had previously sucked deep into his lungs.

“Yes, a certain detail is very important,” Chapelle repeated. “We are indeed dealing with an act of heresy and sacrilegious blasphemy. It is obvious that no shifter, I say none, and no monster for that matter, would be able to approach the walls of Novigrad by reason of the presence of its nineteen Temples of Eternal Fire, whose sacred virtue protects the city. Anyone who claims to have seen a shifter in The Pike's Grotto, situated a stone's throw from the main altar of Eternal Fire, is a sacrilegious heretic who must repudiate his words. If it happens that he refuses to repudiate them, I will be obliged to assist in the form of forces and means that remain, believe me, at my disposal in my jails. You see, there is no need to worry.”

The expressions on the faces of Dandelion and the halfling proved beyond doubt that they were of a different opinion.

“There is absolutely no need to worry,” Chapelle repeated. “Your lordships may leave Novigrad without interference. I will not keep you, but I would insist that your lordships do not spread the imaginary allegations of the innkeeper and do not comment loudly on these events. We, humble servants of the Church, must consider stories questioning the power of the Eternal Fire to be heresy, with all the attending consequences. The religious convictions of your lordships, which I respect for what they are, do not enter into this. Simply be aware and do what you will. I am tolerant so long as one respects the Eternal Fire and does not blaspheme against it. He who dares to blaspheme, I will condemn to burn, that is all. In Novigrad, all are equal before the law. The law is the same for all: anyone who blasphemes against the Eternal Fire perishes in the flames and sees his assets confiscated. But enough talk about all that. I say again: you can go through the gates of Novigrad unimpeded. It would be best...”

Chapelle smiled slightly, giving the impression of a malicious grimace: he puffed out his cheeks, looking around the small square. Witnessing the scene, the few passersby quickened their step and quickly looked away. “... best,” Chapelle finally said, “best to leave immediately, without delay. It is obvious that, in the case of my lord the merchant Biberveldt, the absence of delay signifies 'without delay after meeting his fiscal obligations.' I thank you, my lords, for the time that you have kindly granted me.”

Turning discreetly to the others, Dainty silently mouthed a word. The Witcher had no doubt that the unspoken word could only be 'bastard.' Dandelion bowed his head, smiling stupidly.

“Master Witcher,” Chapelle said suddenly. “With your permission, I would have a private word with you.”

Geralt approached. Chapelle reached his hand out slightly. If he touches my elbow, I hit him, thought the Witcher. I hit him no matter the consequences.

Chapelle didn't touch Geralt's elbow.

“Master Witcher,” he said in a low voice, turning his back to the others, “I know that certain cities, in contrast to Novigrad, are deprived of the divine protection of the Eternal Fire. Suppose then that a creature like a shifter operated in one of these cities. Tell me, out of curiosity, how much you would charge to capture such a creature alive.”

“I do not offer my services in populated cities,” the Witcher replied, shrugging. “A third party could suffer.”

“You are concerned, then, with the fortunes of others?”

“Well yes, because I am in general responsible for their fate. This cannot be without consequences.”

“I understand, but should the degree of deference to third parties not be inversely proportional to the expected remuneration?”

“No, it should not.”

“I don't care for your tone, Witcher. But no matter, I understand what you suggest by that tone. You suggest that you do not intend to undertake the... what I could ask you to do, regardless of the amount of your payment. And what about the type of payment?”

“I don't understand.”

“But yes, of course you do.”

“No, truly.”

“What I say is purely theoretical,” Chapelle continued quietly, calmly, without anger or menace in his voice. “Would it be possible if the recompense for your service was the guarantee that your friends and yourself would leave this... theoretical city alive? What do you think?”

“This question,” the Witcher replied, smiling unpleasantly, “is not one that it is possible to answer theoretically. The situation you describe, venerable Chapelle, must be realized in practice. I am absolutely not in a hurry, but if need be... If there is no other way... I am ready to put that scenario to the test.”

“Ah! Perhaps you're right,” Chapelle responded dispassionately. “We theorize too much and I see that, in terms of practice, you do not intend to cooperate. Perhaps it is better that way. I nurture the hope, in any case, that this will not be a source of conflict between us.”

“I too,” Geralt said, “nurture that hope.”

“That hope continues to burn within us, Geralt of Rivia. Do you know the Eternal Fire? A flame that never dies? The symbol of our fortitude? Our path through the darkness? The Eternal Fire, Geralt, is hope. For all, without exception. Because if something is given in part... to you, to me, to others... that thing is simply called hope. Remember this. It was a pleasure to meet you, Witcher.”

Geralt bowed stiffly and kept silent. Chapelle looked at him for a moment, then turned his back and crossed the square without a glance at his escort. The men armed with lamiae followed behind in an orderly formation.

“Oh, my mother,” Dandelion whimpered timidly, watching them leave. “We were lucky. As long as it's over, as long as they're finished with us for now.”

“Calm yourself,” said the Witcher, “and stop whining. Nothing happened, as you can see.”

“Do you know who that was, Geralt?”

“No.”

“That was Chapelle, the officer of security. Novigrad's secret service is dependent on the Church. Chapelle isn't a priest, but the highest official of the hierarchy, the most powerful and dangerous man in the city. Everyone, even the Council and the guilds, quake in their boots before him: he's a scoundrel of the first order, Geralt, drunk on power like a spider on blood. People whisper about his exploits: disappearances that leave no trace, false accusations, torture, masked assassins, terror, blackmail, ordinary theft, duress, scams and plots. By the gods, you have… have the makings of a beautiful story, Biberveldt.”

“Leave me alone, Dandelion,” Dainty said. “You have nothing to fear: no-one harms a hair on the head of a troubadour. For reasons that escape me, you are still untouchable.”

“An untouchable poet,” Dandelion groaned, still pale, “may also fall under the wheels of a runaway cart, be poisoned by eating fish or accidentally drown in a ditch. Such scenarios are Chapelle's specialty. He agreed to talk with us, that's already an extraordinary fact. One thing is certain: he would never have done so without a good reason. He's up to something. You'll see: he'll fall upon us at the first opportunity, clap us in irons and torture us with impunity. Nothing is more normal here!”

“There is a lot of truth in what he says,” the halfling said to Geralt. “We must be wary of the scoundrel who owns this land. They say he's sick, that his blood is spoiled. Everyone is waiting for him to kick the bucket.”

“Shut up, Biberveldt,” Dandelion hissed timidly, looking around them. “Someone could hear. See how everyone's watching. Break camp, I tell you. I advise you to reflect seriously on what Chapelle suggested regarding the doppler. I, for example, have never seen a doppler in my life. If necessary, I am prepared to swear on the Eternal Fire.”

“Look!” the halfling said suddenly. “Someone's coming now!”

“Run!” Dandelion cried.

“Calm down, calm down,” Dainty said, smiling broadly and smoothing his stubborn hair. “I know him. It's Muscadin, a local merchant, treasurer of the guild. We've done business together. Look at his face! As if he'd shit his pants. Hey, Muscadin, are you looking for?”

“I swear on the Eternal Fire,” Muscadin said slowly, breathless, dragging off his fox-cap and wiping his forehead with his sleeve. “I was sure they would drag you to the tower. It's a miracle. I'm amazed...”

The halfling maliciously cut Muscadin's words short: “It is kind of you to be amazed... Even kinder of you to explain why.”

“Don't play the fool, Biberveldt,” Muscadin responded anxiously. “Everyone is talking about it. The hierarchy has seen it. Chapelle too. The whole town knows what a deal you got on the cochineal, and with what intelligence and cunning you profited from the events in Poviss.”

“What are you talking about, Muscadin?”

“By the gods, Dainty, would you stop this gloating like the bird of proverb who thinks his nest the best? Did you not buy the cochineal at half price, for 5.20 a bushel? You did. Taking advantage of low demand, you paid with a promissory note. You didn't pay a single cent in cash for the transaction. And what happened? Within the day, you turned over the merchandise for a price four times higher than what you originally paid. Will you have the gall to claim that this was nothing but coincidence or luck, and that in buying the cochineal, you knew nothing of the upheavals taking place in Poviss?”

“What? What are you saying?”

“There has been turmoil in Poviss!” Muscadin shouted. “A... there... what's the word: a “rellavotion.” King Rhyd was deposed. The Thyssenides clan governs now! Rhyd's court, nobility, and army wore blue. The local weavers only bought indigo. But the Thyssenides wear scarlet. The price of indigo fell, and cochineal rose! Then we learned that it was you, Biberveldt, who had on hand the only store of cochineal available. Ha!”

Dainty kept quiet, frowning.

“Biberveldt the cunning, that's the least we can call you,” Muscadin continued. “And without a word to anyone, even your friends... If you had told me, we would all be able to profit. We could even have found a common agency. But you preferred to go it alone. That's your choice. In any case, no longer count on me. By the Eternal Fire, the halflings are nothing but egotistical scoundrels and dogs. Vimme Vivaldi has never endorsed a promissory note for me, and for you? Without hesitation. Rotten, every one of you damned 'non-humans,' accursed halflings and dwarves! Plague take you!” Muscadin spat and turned on his heel.

Lost in thought, Dainty scratched his head. His cowlick rose. “Something begins to grow clearer, my lads,” he said finally. “I know what we should do. Let's go to the bank. If anyone can get us through all this, it's my good banker, Vimme Vivaldi.”

### Part III

“I imagined banks differently,” Dandelion murmured, examining the room. “Where do they keep the money, Geralt?”

“Devil only knows,” the Witcher responded in a low voice, trying to hide the torn sleeve of his jacket. “Maybe in the basement?”

“No, I looked: there's no basement here.”

“Must be in the attic.”

“Please come into my office, gentlemen,” announced Vimme Vivaldi.

Seated at large tables, young men and dwarves of indeterminate age were busy aligning rows of numbers and letters on sheets of parchment. All, without exception, bowed their heads and stuck out their tongues slightly. The Witcher thought that the task must be terribly tedious. It seemed nonetheless to absorb the workers. In one corner, an old man who looked like a beggar was seated on a stool, sharpening pencils. His pace remained slow.

The banker cautiously closed the door to his office. He smoothed his long beard, which was well-maintained despite ink stains here and there, then adjusted the jacket that was buttoned with difficulty over his belly.

“You know, master Dandelion,” he said, sitting behind an enormous mahogany table that groaned under the weight of heaped scrolls, “I imagined you very differently. I've heard and know your songs: of Queen Vanda, drowned in the Cula river, because no-one would have her. And the kingfisher who dove to the bottom of a latrine...”

“I am not the author,” Dandelion responded, red with anger. “I've never written anything of the sort!”

“Oh. Excuse me.”

“If we could perhaps move on to serious matters,” Dainty interrupted. “Time is wasting while you discuss unnecessary subjects. I have serious problems, Vimme.”

“I was afraid of that,” the dwarf responded, shaking his head. “Remember that I warned you, Biberveldt. I told you three days ago not to invest money in that rancid fish oil. What difference does it make that the price was low? The nominal price is not important. What is important is the resale profit. The same for the rose essence and the wax, and the damned cotton cord. What possessed you, Dainty, to buy such shit? In cash, no less, instead of paying reasonably with a letter of credit or exchange! I told you, the cost of storage in Novigrad is expensive. In a span of two weeks it will exceed three times the value of the goods. And you...”

“Yes,” the halfling moaned quietly. “Tell me, Vivaldi. I what?”

“You, you assured me that there was no risk, that you'd sell it all within twenty-four hours. Today you come back to see me with your tail between your legs to admit you're having trouble. You haven't sold any of it, have you? And the storage price went up, eh? Ah, that's no good, it's no good! Do I need to get you out of this now, Dainty? If at least you had insured your merchandise, I would gladly send one of my scribes to discreetly burn your warehouse. No, my friend, the only thing we can do is take things philosophically and say, 'it all went to shit.' That's commerce: win one day, lose the next. In the long run, what's the importance of the money spent to buy fish oil, string, and rose essence? Not much. Let's speak instead of more serious matters. Tell me if I should sell the mimosa bark, because the offers are beginning to stabilize at five and five sixths.”

“Huh?”

“Are you deaf?” the banker asked, frowning. “The latest offer is equivalent to five and five sixths. I hope that you came back to get rid of it, because you will not get seven, Dainty.”

“Came back?”

Vivaldi smoothed his beard to dislodge the breadcrumbs that were clinging to it.

“You came in an hour ago,” he replied calmly, “with the order to hold until seven. To sell at seven times the initial purchase price, this would be 2 crowns and 45 coppers per pound. It's too expensive, Dainty, even in such a favorable market. The tanners have already agreed amongst themselves to freeze the price. I'd bet my head that...”

“The merchant Sulimir offers 2.15 crowns!” shouted a strident voice.

“Six and a sixth,” Vivaldi calculated swiftly. “What shall we do, Dainty?”

“Sell!” the halfling cried. “Six times the purchase price and you still hesitate, by the plague?”

A second creature, wearing a yellow hat and covered in an overcoat that resembled an old sack, arrived in turn in the office.

“The merchant Biberveldt recommends not to sell before seven!” he yelled, before wiping his nose with his sleeve and immediately departing.

“Ah, ah!” the dwarf said eventually, after a long delay. “A Biberveldt orders me to sell, but another Biberveldt, on the contrary, asks me to wait. Interesting. What shall we do, Dainty? Will you settle the matter before a third Biberveldt orders us aboard a galley to be transported to the land of dog-headed men, eh?”

“What is that?” asked Dandelion, indicating the thing dressed in a green hat that was standing motionless in the doorway. “What is it, by the plague?”

“A young gnome,” Geralt replied.

“It must be,” Vivaldi confirmed drily. “It's not an old troll. What it is: is of no importance. Come, Dainty, I'm listening.”

“Vimme,” the halfling said, “I implore you: don't ask questions. Something terrible has happened. Know and acknowledge that I, Dainty Biberveldt, honest merchant of the Persicaires prairie, don't have the slightest idea what is going on here. Tell me every detail: everything that's happened over the past three days. I beg you, Vimme.”

“Interesting,” said the dwarf. “I understand that what with the commissions I collect, I must respect the wishes of my clients. Listen, then. You appeared in my bank three days ago, completely out of breath. You made a deposit of 1,000 crowns and requested a promissory note of 2,520 payable to the bearer. I gave my endorsement.”

“Without collateral?”

“Without, because I like you, Dainty.”

“Tell the rest, Vimme.”

“The next morning, you rushed in and insisted, making a ruckus and stamping your feet, that I open a line of credit in the Vizima branch of my bank for the substantial amount of 3,500 crowns. The beneficiary was to be, if I recall correctly, a certain Ther Lukokian, known as Big-Nose. I opened this credit.”

“Without collateral,” the halfling repeated, hope rising in his voice.

“My fondness for you, Biberveldt,” the banker sighed, “ends at 3,000 crowns. I required a written statement stipulating that in the case of insolvency, the mill will belong to me.”

“What mill?”

“The mill of your father-in-law, Arno Hardbotomm of the Persicaires prairie.”

“I'm never going home,” Dainty said mournfully, adding decisively: “I'll take out a loan to buy a ship and become a pirate.”

Vimme Vivaldi scratched his ear, watching him suspiciously.

“Hey!” he said. “You recovered the letter and tore it up a while ago. You're solvent. Nothing surprising about that, with such earnings...”

“Earnings?”

“Indeed, I forgot,” grumbled the dwarf, “that I'm expected to be surprised by nothing. You came out far ahead with the cochineal, Biberveldt, because you see, the upheaval that took place in Poviss...”

“I know that already,” the halfling interrupted. “Indigo fell and cochineal rose. And I got some money. Is that right, Vimme?”

“That's the truth. You have an account with me for 6,346 crowns and 80 coppers. Net, after subtracting my commission and the amount of tax.”

“You paid the tax for me?”

“Shouldn't I have?” Vivaldi asked, surprised. “When you came in an hour ago, you settled up neatly. One of my clerks already brought the sum to the town hall. About 1,500, because the sale of the horses is of course included.”

The office door burst open with a bang to admit something wearing an extremely dirty hat.

“2.30 crowns!” he shouted. “The merchant Hazelquist!”

“Don't sell!” Dainty cried. “Wait for a better price! Both of you, go back to the market at once!”

The two gnomes greedily seized the copper coins tossed to them by the dwarf and disappeared.

“Yes... Where was I, then?” Vivaldi wondered for a moment, toying with the abnormally large amethyst crystal that served as his paperweight. “Ah yes... I was up to the cochineal bought with my promissory note. The letter of credit that I mentioned earlier, you used to buy a large quantity of mimosa bark. You bought a lot, but at a good price: 35 coppers a pound from Zangwebar's broker, that Big-Nose or Snout. The galley docked at the port yesterday. That's where it all started.”

“I can imagine,” Dainty groaned.

“What is mimosa bark good for?” Dandelion couldn't help but ask.

“Nothing,” the halfling groaned sadly. “Unfortunately.”

“Mimosa bark, master poet,” the dwarf explained, “is a tanning substance used in the manufacture of leather.”

“Someone was stupid enough,” Dainty interrupted, “to buy mimosa bark from overseas when one can acquire it for next to nothing from Temerian oak.”

“That's just where the vampire is buried,” said Vivaldi, “because the Temerian druids threatened to set a plague of rats and locusts over the land if the destruction of oak trees is not stopped immediately. The dryads support the druids. It must be said that the Temerian king has always had a certain weakness for dryads. In short: a complete embargo on Temerian oak came into effect yesterday. The price of mimosa is climbing. You had the benefit of good information, Dainty.”

Outside the office door there came the sound of footsteps. The thing wearing a green hat burst breathlessly into the office: “The venerable merchant Sulimir...” the gnome managed to say, “orders me to repeat that the merchant Biberveldt, the halfling, is nothing but a savage hairy-eared swine, a speculator and a swindler, and that he, Sulimir, wishes for Biberveldt to contract scabies. He offers 2.45 crowns. This is his final offer.”

“Sell,” the halfling concluded. “Go, little one, run and confirm. Calculate, Vimme.”

Vivaldi grabbed a stack of parchment and produced a dwarven abacus, a veritable marvel. Unlike those used by humans, the dwarven abacus was shaped like a latticed pyramid. Vivaldi's was crafted from golden filaments upon which small uniform prisms cut from rubies, emeralds, onyx and black agate moved. The dwarf deftly manipulated the jewels at the top, bottom, and sides with his stout fingers.

“This will be... hum... hum... Less cost and my commission... Minus tax... Yes... 15,622 crowns and 25 coppers. Not bad.”

“If I've calculated correctly,” Dainty Biberveldt said slowly, “that will make a net total of... I should have...”

“Precisely 21,969 crowns and 5 coppers. Not bad.”

“Not bad?” Dandelion yelped. “Not bad? With that kind of sum, you could by a whole village or a small castle! Never in my life have I seen that kind of money!”

“Nor have I,” said the halfling. “But let's not get carried away, Dandelion. No-one here has seen that money and we may never even see the color of it.”

“How is that, Biberveldt?” the dwarf said, scowling. “Where do you get such sorry thoughts? Sulimir will pay in cash or with a letter of exchange. Sulimir's money is good. What's wrong, then? You're worried about the losses from the purchase of your stinking fish oil and wax? With such profits, you can easily cover those losses...”

“It's not that.”

“Then what?”

Dainty bowed his curly head and cleared his throat.

“Vimme,” he said, staring at the ground. “Chapelle is sniffing around.”

The banker clucked his tongue.

“It's not right,” he said, “but it's not surprising. You see, Biberveldt, the commercial information that you used for your transactions also has political implications. No-one suspected that these things would happen in Poviss and Temeria. Not even Chapelle, and Chapelle likes to be the first to know. Now, you can imagine that he's racking his brains to discover how you had access to this information. I think that he must already know. As do I.”

“Interesting.”

Vivaldi glanced at Dandelion and Geralt, wrinkling his nose.

“Interesting? What is interesting are your associates, Dainty,” he said. “A troubadour, a Witcher and a merchant. My congratulations. Master Dandelion travels everywhere: he frequents royal courts and no doubt knows how to keep his ears open. The Witcher? A bodyguard? A scarecrow to keep away the debtors?”

“Your conclusions are too hasty, master Vivaldi,” Geralt replied coldly. “We are not associates.”

“And I,” Dandelion continued, flushing, “do not eavesdrop. I'm a poet, not a spy!”

“One hears things,” the dwarf said, grinning. “Many things, master Dandelion.”

“Lies!” the troubadour shouted. “It's not true!”

“All right, all right, I believe you. Only, I don't know if Chapelle will believe you. But who knows, perhaps we are making a lot of noise over nothing. I will tell you, Biberveldt, that Chapelle has changed a great deal since his attack of apoplexy. Perhaps the fear of death crept into his heart and forced him to ask questions? This is not the same Chapelle. He has become friendly, sympathetic, calm and... even honest, in a way.”

“What are you telling me?” said the halfling. “Chapelle... honest? Friendly? It's not possible.”

“I'm telling you the truth,” Vivaldi retorted. “What's more, the Church actually faces another problem in the Eternal Fire.”

“How is that?”

“The Eternal Fire must burn everywhere, as they say. Altars devoted to it must be erected throughout the land. Many altars. Don't ask for details, Dainty: I am not a follower of human beliefs. But I know that all the priests, including Chapelle, are concerned only with altars and fire. Grand preparations are in motion. Taxes will increase, for sure.”

“My word,” said Dainty. “Small consolation, but...”

The office door opened again to reveal the thing in a green hat and rabbit fur garment that the Witcher already knew.

“The merchant Biberveldt,” he reported, “requests the purchase of bowls. The price is secondary.”

“Perfect,” the halfling said with a smile, which more resembled the distorted face of an enraged wildcat. “Then buy lots of bowls. The will of master Biberveldt must be obeyed. What else should we buy? Cabbage? Juniper oil? Iron stoves?”

“And,” the merchant produced something from his fur coat, “the merchant Biberveldt requests 30 crowns in cash to pay for a jug of wine, a meal and beer to drink. Three scoundrels have stolen his purse at The Pike's Grotto.”

“Ah! Three scoundrels,” Dainty repeated, emphasizing each word. “My word, this city is teeming with scoundrels. And where is the venerable merchant Biberveldt right now, if I may ask?”

“Where could he be? At the west bazaar, of course,” the thing replied with a sniff.

“Vimme,” Dainty said in a dire tone. “Don't ask any questions. Find me a very heavy and solid cane from somewhere. I'm going to the west bazaar, but I can't go without that cane. There are too many scoundrels and thieves over there.”

“A cane, you say? That can be arranged. But something continues to nag at me, Dainty. I will not ask any questions. I will not ask, but I will only guess, and you will confirm or deny my suppositions, all right?”

“Guess away.”

“That rancid fish oil, the rose essence, the wax and the bowls, the damned cotton cord, it's nothing but a ploy to divert the competition's attention from the cochineal pigment and the mimosa and confuse the market, isn't it, Dainty?”

The office door opened to admit something without a hat.

“Oxyria reports: everything is ready!” it pealed loudly. “He asks if we can pour!”

“Pour!” bawled the halfling. “Pour immediately!”

“By old Rhundurin's beard,” exclaimed Vimme Vivaldi, after the gnome had closed the door. “I don't understand! What's going on here? Pour what? Pour it into what?”

“I have no idea,” Dainty admitted, “but business must go on.”

### Part IV

Sneaking with difficulty through the crowd, Geralt headed directly toward a stall laden with copper dishes, pots and pans reflecting the red light of the sun at the end of the day. Behind the stall stood a dwarf with a red beard, dressed in an olive-green hood and heavy sealskin boots. On the dwarf’s face there was a certain surliness: he gave the impression that he could at any moment spit on the customer busy browsing the merchandise. The customer drowned the dwarf in a flood of incoherent words, waving her bust and shaking her golden curls.

The customer was none other than Vespula, whom Geralt already knew from his role in the bombardment. Without waiting to be recognized, the Witcher melted back into the crowd.

The west bazaar hummed with energy: crossing such a crowd resembled nothing so much as a stroll through hawthorn bushes. The sleeves and pant legs were continuously, at any given moment, being tugged: by children who had been lost by their mothers when they went into tents to drag out husbands too tempted by alcohol and refreshment; spies from the guard tower; traveling salesmen offering caps of invisibility, aphrodisiacs, and erotic scenes carved in cedar wood. Geralt soon stopped smiling to swear and elbow his way through.

He heard the sound of a lute, followed by a rippling laugh in a familiar timbre. These sounds were coming from a stall as colorful as a storybook, adorned with the sign “Miracles, amulets and fishing bait.”

“Has anyone ever told you that you're extremely pretty?” Dandelion called, perched on the counter and cheerfully swinging his dangling legs. “No? But that's impossible! But this is a city of the blind! Come, good people! Who wants to hear a love song? Whosoever wants to be moved and spiritually enriched has only to toss a coin into my hat. What is that you threw me, asshole? Those copper coins, you can keep for the beggars. Don't insult an artist with copper! I may eventually forgive you, but art never will!”

“Dandelion,” Geralt said, approaching. “I thought we separated to find the doppler, but I find you organizing a concert. You're not ashamed to sing in the market like an old beggar?”

“Ashamed?” the bard echoed, shocked. “What's important is that one sings, not where one sings. Besides, I'm hungry. The stall's proprietor promised me lunch. As for the doppler, look for it yourself. Me, I'm not made for pursuit, for fighting and settling scores. I'm a poet.”

“You'd be better off not drawing attention to yourself, poet, because your girlfriend is in the area. You could be in trouble.”

“My girlfriend?” Dandelion groaned nervously. “Which one? I have several.”

Brandishing a copper pan, Vespula forged a path through the crowd with the velocity of a charging aurochs. Dandelion tumbled from the stall to make his escape, hopping nimbly over the baskets of carrots. Vespula turned to the Witcher, her nostrils flaring with fury. Geralt flattened himself against the rigid wall of the storefront behind him.

“Geralt!” Dainty Biberveldt cried from the churning crowd, blundering into Vespula. “Quickly, quickly! I saw it! Over there, he ran away!”

“I'll find you; you degenerate!” shouted Vespula, regaining her balance. “I will settle the score with the whole herd of swine! What a group you are! A crook, a tattered vagabond and a hairy-footed midget! You won't soon forget me!”

“Over here, Geralt!” Dainty hollered, bowling over a group of students engaged in a shell game in his path. “There, he slipped between the carts! Block the way to the left! Hurry!”

They hastened in pursuit, surrounded by the curses of the customers and merchants they jostled. Geralt miraculously managed to evade a kid who got tangled in his legs. He bounded over him but hurtled into two barrels of herring. The fishmonger, furious, flung at his back the live eel whose qualities he had been praising to his customers.

They spotted the doppler, who was trying to hide in a sheep pen.

“The other side!” Dainty shouted. “Get the other side, Geralt!”

The doppler, still visible in his green vest, dashed along the side of the fence like an arrow. It was obvious that he had not transformed so that he could continue to take advantage of the halfling's agility, which no-one could match. Except, of course, another halfling. Or a Witcher.

Geralt saw the doppler suddenly change direction, raising a cloud of dust, and slip through a hole in the fence erected around the large tent, home to slaughterhouses and butchers. Dainty spotted it too. He hopped the fence and found himself trapped in the middle of a herd of bleating sheep. He lost time. Geralt veered and threw himself on the doppler's trail between the boards of the fence. He heard then the crackle of a tearing garment. Under his second arm, the jacket became very loose.

The Witcher stopped dead to swear and spit. And swear again.

Dainty ran after the doppler toward the tent. Cries, the sound of blows, profanity and a frightful din could be heard within.

The Witcher swore a third time with particular vulgarity. He gritted his teeth, raising his right hand and aiming the Aard sign directly toward the tent. It swelled like a sail in a tempest. From within came an inhuman howling, the sound of hooves and bellowing oxen. The tent collapsed.

The doppler managed to crawl out from under the canvas to flee to the side of a smaller tent, most likely serving as the cold room. Geralt turned his hand instinctively toward the fugitive and touched the Sign to his back. The doppler collapsed to the ground as if struck by lightning, but recovered immediately, reaching the side of the tent in a few bounds and disappearing, with the Witcher always on his heels.

Under the tent, it reeked of meat. The darkness was oppressive.

Tellico Lunngrevink Letort was standing there, motionless and out of breath, clinging to a pig carcass suspended from a pole. The tent had no other exit; the canvas was solidly and tightly secured to the ground.

“It's a pleasure to see you again, mimic,” Geralt said coldly.

The doppler's breath was loud and heavy.

“Leave me alone,” he managed at last. “Why are you chasing me, Witcher?”

“Tellico,” Geralt replied, “you ask some stupid questions. To come into possession of Biberveldt's horses and appearance, you knocked him out and left him flat broke. You continue to profit from his personality, and you're surprised by the trouble it brings you? Devil only knows what you're planning, but I intend to oppose it one way or another. I don't want to kill you or hand you over to the authorities. You must leave this city. I will be particularly vigilant.”

“And if I refuse?”

“Then I'm the one who'll leave, with a wheelbarrow and a sack.”

The doppler swelled suddenly, then thinned just as suddenly and began to grow. His curly chestnut hair blanched and lengthened to reach his shoulders. The halfling's green vest shone like oil and became a black leather. Silver studs appeared on the shoulders and the sleeves. His chubby and ruddy face tapered and grew pale.

Above his right shoulder appeared the hilt of a sword.

“Don't come any closer,” called the second Witcher, snorting and smiling. “Don't come any closer, Geralt. I won't allow you to touch me.”

What a horrible smile, thought Geralt, wanting to seize his sword. I really have a dreadful mouth. My eyes blink appallingly. Is that really the spitting image of me? By the plague.

At the same moment, the doppler's hand and the Witcher's touched the hilts of their respective weapons. The two swords were drawn from their sheaths. Both Witchers simultaneously executed two small, quick steps: the first forward, the second to the side. Both swung their swords with a hiss like a propeller.

They froze in that position.

“You can't defeat me,” growled the doppler, “because I've become you, Geralt.”

“You're mistaken, Tellico,” the Witcher replied in a low voice. “Throw down your sword and take Biberveldt's form again. Otherwise, you'll regret it. I promise you.”

“I'm you,” the doppler repeated. “You will never have the advantage over me. You can't defeat me, because I'm you!”

“You have no idea what it means to be me, mimic.”

Tellico lowered the arm that was holding his sword. “I am you,” he repeated.

“No,” the Witcher replied. “You know why? Because you're a nice little doppler. A doppler who could have killed Biberveldt and buried his body in the weeds, ensuring that he would never be unmasked, not even by the halfling's wife, the famous Gardenia Biberveldt. But you didn't kill him, Tellico, because that's not in your nature. You are indeed nothing but a nice little doppler whose friends nicknamed him Dudu. Whatever appearance you borrow, you always remain the same. You only know how to copy what is good in us, because the parts that are bad, you don't understand. That is what you are, doppler.”

Tellico backed up until his back was flattened against the canvas side of the tent.

“That's why you're going to turn back into Biberveldt and offer your paws for me to bind. You're not capable of resisting me, because there is part of me that you weren't able to copy. You know that very well, Dudu. For a moment you had access to my thoughts.”

“You're right, Geralt,” he said indistinctly, because his lips were changing shape. “I had access to your thoughts. For a short time, it's true, but it was enough. Do you know what I'll do now?”

The Witcher's leather jacket took on a bluebonnet luster. The doppler smiled, adjusted his olive-colored hat adorned with an egret's plume and hung his lute on his shoulder. The lute that, just a moment before, had been a sword.

“I'll tell you what I'll do now, Witcher,” he said, laughing Dandelion's loud and rippling laugh. “I'll be on my way and lose myself in the crowd, where I'll discreetly transform into someone else, even a beggar. I'd rather be a beggar in Novigrad than a doppler in the barren wilderness. Novigrad owes me a debt, Geralt. The construction of this city destroyed the environment where we could live in our natural surroundings. We were exterminated, hunted like mad dogs. I am one of the few who survived. Once, when wolves attacked me, I transformed into a wolf and ran with the pack for weeks. In this way I survived. I do the same thing today, because I do not want to wander in the woods and spend the winter under tree stumps; I no longer want to feel constant hunger; I no longer want to serve without respite as an archery target. Here, in Novigrad, it's warm, there's food, one can work for a living and people very rarely hunt each other with bows. Novigrad offers me a pack of wolves. I join it to survive, you understand?”

Geralt acknowledged this with a nod of his head.

“You've reached an accord with the dwarves, the halflings, the gnomes and elves; even,” he continued, his lips stretching into Dandelion's insolent smile, “a modest degree of integration. What makes me worse than them? Why am I refused the right? What must I do to live in this city? Transform myself into a doe-eyed elf, with long legs and silken hair? Huh? How is an elf better than me? At the sight of an elf, you stare at her legs, but me, when you look at me, you want to vomit? You order me to clear off, you want to banish me, but I'll survive. I know how. In the wolf pack, I ran, howled and bit my confederates for a female's favors. As an inhabitant of Novigrad, I'll trade, weave wicker baskets, beg or steal. As part of your society, I'll do the ordinary things that people do in your society. Who knows, perhaps I'll be able to get married?”

The Witcher remained silent.

“As I said,” Tellico continued calmly, “I'm going. And you, Geralt, you won't even try to stop me. You won't lift even a single finger, because I pierced your thoughts for an instant, Geralt - including those whose existence you refuse to admit, those that you hide from yourself. To stop me, you would have to kill me, but the idea of cutting me down in cold blood fills you with horror. Am I wrong?”

The Witcher still did not answer.

Tellico adjusted the strap of his lute again and started toward the exit after turning his back on Geralt. He walked with a resolute gait, but the Witcher noticed that his neck stiffened, and his shoulders hunched, waiting for the hiss of the blade. Geralt sheathed his sword. The doppler stopped midway and turned to look at him.

“Goodbye, Geralt,” he said. “Thank you.”

“Goodbye, Dudu,” the Witcher replied. “Good luck.”

The doppler turned in the direction of the crowded bazaar with the same confident, lighthearted and swinging gait as Dandelion. Just like the troubadour, he raised his right hand and waved energetically, smiling broadly at the nearby girls. Geralt followed slowly in his steps. Slowly.

Tellico grasped his lute, walking and, having slowed his pace, played two chords, a prelude to strumming out a melody already known to Geralt. Turning, he sang lightly, like Dandelion:

*When the spring comes along with the rain*

*the sun will warm us both.*

*That's the way it must be, for we burn*

*with fire eternal like hope.*

“Repeat that for Dandelion if you can remember it,” he called. “This ballad should be titled The Eternal Fire. Goodbye, Witcher!”

“Hey!” he heard suddenly. “Lousy crook!”

Startled, Tellico turned. Vespula appeared from behind a stall, her bust rising and falling violently, and gave him an ominous look.

“Ogling girls, you traitor?” she hissed, moving with increasing agitation. “Serenading them, scoundrel?”

Tellico doffed his cap and bowed, giving her a broad smile, just as Dandelion would.

“Vespula, my dear,” he said attentively, “how happy I am to see you. Forgive me, my sweet. I'm in your debt...”

“You are... you are...” she interrupted loudly. “And as you're in my debt, it's time to pay! Here!”

The enormous copper pan flashed in the sun before striking the doppler's head, making a deep resonant sound. With a stupid grin frozen on his face, Tellico stiffened and fell, folding his arms. His form suddenly began to change, to melt and lose all true similarity. Witnessing the scene, the Witcher grabbed a large rug from a stall and hurried toward him. Having unrolled the rug on the ground, he slipped the doppler onto it with two little kicks and conscientiously wrapped him in the carpet.

Sitting on the bundle, Geralt wiped his brow with his sleeve. Vespula looked at him menacingly, shaking the pan in her fist. A crowd amassed around the two of them.

“He's ill,” said the Witcher, forcing a smile. “It's for his own good. Don't crowd, good people. The poor man needs air.”

“Didn't you hear?” Chapelle asked with quiet authority, making his way into the throng. “I suggest you return to your activities! These assemblies are forbidden under penalty of law!”

The crowd dispersed around him to reveal Dandelion, who had been attracted, with no particular urgency, by the notes of the lute. At the sight of him, Vespula gave a terrible cry before throwing down her pan and fleeing the square at a run.

“What happened to her?” asked Dandelion. “Did she see a devil?”

Geralt got up from the rolled rug, which was beginning to wriggle slightly. Chapelle approached it slowly. He was alone. His personal guard was never visible.

“In your place, master Chapelle, I would not go any farther,” Geralt said in a low voice.

“Oh yes?” Chapelle looked at him coolly, his lips thinning.

“If I were you, master Chapelle, I would pretend to have seen nothing.”

“Yes, clearly,” Chapelle replied, “but you are not me.”

Dainty Biberveldt, breathless and sweaty, emerged from behind the tent. He stopped short at the sight of Chapelle and began to whistle, his hands behind his back, pretending to admire the roof of the warehouse.

Chapelle came close to Geralt. The Witcher remained motionless without blinking or flinching. Their eyes met for a moment, then Chapelle leaned over the bundle:

“Dudu,” he said, addressing Dandelion's cordovan shoes where they protruded from the rolled and misshapen carpet. “Copy Biberveldt, quickly.”

“How?” Dainty cried, looking away from the warehouse. “What?”

“Silence,” Chapelle insisted. “So, Dudu, how are you?”

“That's...” replied a stifled groan from inside the rug. “That's... That's...”

The cordovan shoes protruding from the carpet lost their consistency, dematerializing to transform into the barefoot and hairy feet of the halfling.

“Get out of there, Dudu,” said Chapelle. “And you, Dainty, keep quiet. To these people, all halflings look alike, don't they?”

Dainty grumbled indistinctly. Geralt stared at Chapelle, blinking suspiciously. The official straightened up and turned: the last curious onlookers on the periphery decamped on the spot in a clamor of footsteps that faded into the distance.

Dainty Biberveldt the Second extricated himself and emerged from the carpet, sneezing. He sat down, wiping his nose and eyes. Dandelion leaned against a chest that was resting on its side and strummed his lute with an intrigued expression on his face.

“Who is it? Who do you think, Dainty?” Chapelle asked gently. “It's a strong resemblance, don't you think?”

“It's my cousin,” Dainty said in a whisper, and smiled widely. “A very close relation: Dudu Biberveldt from the Persicaires prairie, a genius of commerce. I've just decided to...”

“Yes, Dainty?”

“I've decided to make him my representative in Novigrad. What do you think, cousin?”

“Thank you very much, cousin,” responded the very close relation, the hero of the Biberveldt clan, the genius of commerce, with a wide smile.

Chapelle smiled too.

“Your dream of living in the big city has come true,” Geralt murmured. “What are you looking for in the city, Dudu... and you, Chapelle?”

“If you had lived in the headlands,” Chapelle replied, “eating roots, soaking wet and shivering in the cold, then you would know... We too want something from life, Geralt. We are no worse than you.”

“That's a fact,” Geralt commented, nodding. “You're not. You may even be better. What happened to the real Chapelle?”

“He kicked the bucket,” Chapelle the Second said under his breath. “It was two months ago: apoplexy. May the earth above his resting place weigh lightly on him and may the Eternal Fire illuminate his path. I was nearby when it happened... No-one noticed... Geralt? You won't...”

“What didn't they notice?” asked the Witcher, his face impassive.

“I thank you,” Chapelle whispered.

“Are there many of you?”

“Is it important?”

“No,” conceded the Witcher. “It's not.”

A form wearing a green hat and dressed in rabbit fur emerged from behind the carts and stalls.

“Lord Biberveldt...” the gnome stammered breathlessly, looking from one halfling to the other with amazement.

“I think, little one,” Dainty said, “that you're looking for my cousin, Dudu Biberveldt. Speak, speak, here he is.”

“Oxyria reports that the stock has been completely sold,” explained the gnome, who smiled broadly, displaying his sharp teeth. “At 4 crowns apiece.”

“I think I know what's happening,” said Dainty. “Too bad Vivaldi isn't with us: he could have calculated our profit in the wink of an eye.”

“If you'll allow me, cousin,” interrupted Tellico Lunngrevink Letorte, also known as Penstock, Dudu to his friends and, to all the city of Novigrad, member of the numerous Biberveldt clan. “Allow me to make the calculation. I have an infallible memory for figures. Among other things.”

“Please,” Dainty said, bowing. “Please do, dear cousin.”

“The expenses,” the doppler reflected, furrowing his brow, “weren't high: 18 for the rose essence, 8.50 for the fish oil, hum... in all, including the string: 45 crowns. The transaction is 600 pieces at 4 crowns, so 2,400. And no commission in the absence of an intermediary...”

“I ask you not to forget the tax,” Chapelle the Second prompted. “Remember that a representative of the municipal authorities and of the church stands before you and plans to fulfill his duties conscientiously.”

“Not subject to a tax,” Dudu Biberveldt fired back, “because it is a sale with religious purposes.”

“Huh?”

“Mixed in suitable proportions, fish oil, wax and rose essence, colored with a little cochineal,” the doppler explained, “poured into earthenware bowls around a piece of cotton cord will, when the wick is lit, burn with a beautiful red flame that will burn for a long time without an unpleasant odor: the Eternal Fire. The priests need candles for their altars to the Eternal Fire. Now we have what they need.”

“By the plague,” Chapelle groaned. “Indeed... We needed candles... Dudu, you really are a genius.”

“I get it from my mother,” Tellico replied modestly.

“A mother you closely resemble,” Dainty confirmed. “Look at those eyes shining with intelligence. Just like my dear aunt, Begonia Biberveldt.”

“Geralt,” Dandelion moaned. “In three days, he earned more money than I have in all my life!”

“In your place,” the Witcher said seriously, “I would give up singing for commerce. Ask him, perhaps he'll take you on as an apprentice.”

“Witcher...” Tellico grasped his sleeve. “Tell me how I can... can thank you.”

“22 crowns.”

“What?”

“For a new jacket. Look at what's left of this one.”

“You know what?” Dandelion shouted abruptly. “We're all going to a brothel. To Passionflower! The Biberveldts' treat!”

“They'll admit halflings?” Dainty asked, worried.

“Just let them try to keep you out.” Chapelle made a menacing face. “Let them try and I'll accuse the entire brothel of heresy.”

“Well,” Dandelion said. “All is well. And you, Geralt, are you coming with us?”

The Witcher chuckled. “You know, Dandelion,” he said, “I'd actually be happy to.”

## A Little Dedication

The young siren emerged from the water up to her waist, violently splashing the surface with her hands. Geralt considered her breasts beautiful -perfect, even. Only their color spoiled the sight: the nipples were pale green and the surrounding areola paler yet. Skillfully riding the waves that she raised, the young mermaid stretched charmingly, shaking out her wet celadon-green hair, and began to sing melodiously.

“What?” The duke leaned over the railing of the ship. “What did she say?”

“She refused,” said Geralt. “She says she doesn't want to.”

“You've explained that I love her, that I can't imagine living without her, that I want to marry her, be only with her, and no-one else?”

“I told her that.”

“And..?”

“And nothing.”

“Tell her again.”

The Witcher touched his lips with his fingers and gave a vibrant trill. Picking up the words and the melody, he began to scrupulously pass on the duke's confessions of love.

Drifting on her back, the young siren interrupted him: “Stop translating, stop working so hard,” she sang. “I understood that. When he professes his love for me, it is always the same stupid simpering. Has he said anything concrete?”

“Not really.”

“That's a shame.”

The siren struck the water and immersed herself with an abrupt movement of her tail. The sea foamed where it was churned by the mullet-like fin.

“What? What did she say?” asked the duke.

“That it's a shame.”

“What's a shame? What does that mean: 'a shame'?”

“It sounds to me like a refusal.”

“Nobody refuses me anything!” shouted the duke, in defiance of the obvious facts.

“Lord,” muttered the captain of the ship as he approached the two of them, “our nets are ready. All we have to do is throw them to capture...”

“I wouldn't advise that,” Geralt interrupted in a measured tone. “She isn't alone. Under the water there are many others, and the depths could hide a kraken.”

The captain trembled and grew pale, fixating on the last. “A kra... a kraken?”

“A kraken,” confirmed the Witcher. “I don't advise that you mess about with your nets. One scream from her would reduce us to drifting planks and drown us like common kittens. And you, Agloval, must decide: do you want a wife or a fish to keep in a bowl?”

“I love her,” Agloval answered resolutely. “I want to marry her. But for that, she must have legs, and not a scaly tail. Everything is prepared: I traded two pounds of beautiful pearls for a magic elixir that is fully guaranteed to cause her to grow legs. She will suffer only a little for three days, no more. Call her, Witcher, tell her one more time.”

“I've already explained it to her twice. She replied that she categorically refuses, but that she knows of a sea witch whose spells can turn your legs into a magnificent tail. And do so painlessly.”

“Has she lost her mind? Me, I'm expected to grow a fish tail? Not on your life! Tell her, Geralt!”

The Witcher leaned heavily over the railing. In his shadow, the sea looked as lush and green as aspic. The siren emerged in a fountain of water before he even had time to call her. She froze for a moment, balanced on her tail, then turned on her back to plunge into a wave in a movement that displayed all her charms. Geralt swallowed.

“Hey, you!” she sang. “Will it take much longer? My skin is cracking under the sun! White-haired one, ask him if he agrees.”

“He doesn't agree,” replied the Witcher, taking up the melody. “Sh'eenaz, you must understand that he can't possibly grow a tail and live under the water. You are free to breathe the air, but he absolutely cannot breathe water!”

“I knew it!” she squealed. “I knew it! The excuses, the stupid and naive excuses: not the slightest bit of dedication! Who likes to make sacrifices? Me, I sacrifice myself for him: every day, I crawl on rocks that scrape the scales off my back and fray my fin. All for him! And now he refuses to renounce his two horrible canes? Love is not only taking; it is also devotion and dedication! Tell that to him!”

“Sh'eenaz,” called Geralt. “Don't you understand? He can't live in the water!”

“I do not accept the claims of an imbecile! I... I love him too, and I want to raise fry with him, but how can I do that if he refuses to become a fish like me? Where, then, am I supposed to leave my spawn, huh? In his hat?”

“What does she say?” cried the duke. “Geralt! I didn't bring you here so that you could have a private chat with her...”

“She refuses to change her mind. She is angry.”

“Throw the nets!” bawled Agloval. “I will keep her trapped in a pool for a month and...”

“Then what?” the captain interrupted rudely. “There could be a kraken under the ship! Have you ever seen a kraken, sir? Jump into the water if you want and catch her with your hands! I'm not getting involved in this. This sea is my livelihood.”

“Your livelihood? I am your livelihood, you scoundrel! Throw the nets or I'll have you drawn and quartered!”

“Now see here! On this ship, I am in command. Not you!”

“Shut up, both of you.” Geralt was hoarse with anger. “She's trying to tell us something. It is a difficult dialect that requires concentration!”

“I've had enough!” Sh'eenaz shouted in song. “I'm hungry. So, white-haired one, he will decide now! Tell him only that I will no longer suffer the humiliation of waiting for him while he keeps flopping around like a four-legged starfish. Tell him that I have girlfriends who can give me better satisfaction than the trifling sort he offers me on the rocks! As for me, I think he is playing at a game intended for younger fish. I am a siren, normal and sound...”

“Sh'eenaz...”

“Don't interrupt me! I haven't finished yet! I'm healthy, normal, and mature enough to spawn. If he really wants me, then he must have a tail, a fin, and everything else like a normal triton. Otherwise, I won't have anything to do with him!”

Geralt translated quickly. His efforts to avoid vulgarity were not very successful, because the duke blushed and swore horribly.

“Shameless slut!” he yelled. “Frigid whore! Go find yourself a herring!”

“What did he say?” Sh'eenaz asked, swimming close.

“He won't grow a tail!”

“Tell him... tell him to go dry out!”

“What did she say?”

“She wants you,” explained the Witcher, “to drown yourself.”

### Part II

“What a pity,” sighed Dandelion. “I would have liked to come with you to the sea, but what can I do? I have such terrible seasickness! You know I've never spoken with a mermaid in my life? Damn it, it's too bad.”

“I know you,” said Geralt as he buckled his straps. “That won't stop you from writing your ballad.”

“Of course. I already have the first verse. In my ballad, the mermaid sacrifices herself for the duke: she transforms her fish tail into magnificent little legs but pays for her dedication with the loss of her voice. The duke betrays her and rejects her. She dies of grief and transforms into sea-foam when the rays of the sun...”

“Who's going to believe that nonsense?”

“It doesn't matter,” Dandelion grumbled. “I don't write my ballads to be believable, I write them to be moving. Why am I talking to you about this? You don't know anything. Tell me instead, how much did Agloval pay you?”

“He didn't give me anything. He argued that I hadn't fulfilled my part of the mission, that he expected something else from me... That he rewards effects, not good intentions.”

Dandelion nodded and took off his hat, looking at the Witcher. He pursed his lips in disappointment. “Does that mean we still don't have any money?”

“It looks like it.”

Dandelion's grimace grew even more pathetic. “It's all my fault,” he moaned. “Everything is my fault. Geralt, are you angry with me?”

No, the Witcher was not angry with Dandelion. Far from it.

Still, there was no doubt that they owed their misadventures to Dandelion. It was the bard who had insisted on going to the party at Four Maples. Attending parties, he explained, satisfied a deep and natural human need. From time to time, claimed the musician, a man must meet his fellow man in a place where one can laugh and sing, eat kebabs and dumplings, drink beer, listen to music, dance and fondle girls whose curves glisten with sweat. If everyone decided to satisfy those needs any old way, he argued, without concerted organization, boundless chaos would ensue. That's why festivals and parties were invented. And when festivals and parties were organized, it was only appropriate to attend.

Geralt wasn't stubborn enough to refuse, even if, on the list of his own deep and natural needs, attending parties was somewhere near the bottom. He agreed to accompany Dandelion, as he was relying on the contacts from such meetings to obtain information on available work: for a long time, no-one had called on him and his purse was beginning to grow dangerously light.

Nor did the Witcher blame Dandelion for provoking the guards. Geralt, in this case, was not himself blameless: he could have intervened and stopped the combative impulses of the troubadour, but he did not, preferring not to stand with the primitive forest guards known as the Foresters. That organization of volunteers had a nasty reputation for their mission of hunting “non-humans.” Geralt yawned while listening to their boasting about elves, dryads or evil fairies pierced with arrows, slaughtered or hanged from trees. Dandelion, in contrast, emboldened by his association with the Witcher, made his feelings known. At first the Foresters did not react badly to his banter, his jokes and his unpopular suggestions, which provoked gales of laughter from the farmers observing the scene. However, when Dandelion sang an outrageous verse that he had invented for the occasion, ending with the words “you're as thick as two short planks, so you must be a Forester,” the situation degenerated into a pitched battle. The shed that served as the tavern went up in smoke. A squad under the command of Budibog the Bald, in whose domain Four-Maples was included, was forced to intervene. He ruled that the Foresters, Dandelion, and Geralt shared responsibility for the damages and the crimes, including the recent seduction of an under-aged redhead who was found after the event, in the bushes behind the field, smiling foolishly with a flushed complexion and her tunic torn down to her waist. Luckily, Budibog the Bald knew Dandelion. The sentence was commuted to a fine which nonetheless depleted all their funds. They also had to flee Four-Maples on horseback as soon as possible to avoid the vengeance of the Foresters, who had been exiled from the village and desired revenge. In the surrounding woods, forty individuals were engaged in the hunt. Geralt had no desire to become a target for the Foresters' arrows, whose harpoon-shaped tips caused horrific wounds.

Their original plan was displaced by a detour through the villages along the forest edge, where Geralt hoped to find some work. They took the road from the sea toward Bremervoord. Unfortunately, Geralt found no work except for his involvement in the affair of Duke Agloval and the mermaid Sh'eenaz, whose chances of succeeding were a priori very slim. Geralt's gold ring and the Alexandrite brooch from one of Dandelion's numerous dalliances had been sold to buy food. Despite their present difficulties, the Witcher nevertheless felt no resentment toward Dandelion.

“No, Dandelion,” he said. “I'm not angry with you.”

Dandelion didn't believe a word of it. This explained the silence of the troubadour, who was rarely quiet. He patted the neck of his horse after searching afresh through the saddlebags. Geralt knew he would find nothing of value. The smell food that the breeze brought from a nearby farm became unbearable.

“Master!” someone shouted suddenly. “Oy, Master!”

“Yes?” Geralt responded, turning.

From a two-wheeled cart drawn by two asses and parked to one side, there descended a man with an imposing paunch, dressed in felt shoes and a heavy fur-trimmed wolf-skin coat.

“Uh... Well...” the stout man said, embarrassed, as he approached. “I was not addressing you, sir, I only meant... Master Dandelion...”

“That's me,” the poet proudly confirmed, adjusting his feather-plumed hat. “What can I do for you, good man?”

“With utmost respect, Master,” said the heavyset man, “my name is Teleri Drouhard, spice merchant by trade, dean of the local guild. It's that my son Gaspard is engaged to Dalia, the daughter of Mestvin, captain of the royal navy.”

“Ah,” said Dandelion, flawlessly maintaining a serious expression. “Extend my congratulations and best wishes to the lucky couple. And what can I help you with? Is it the right of first night? That, I never refuse.”

“Huh? No... not that... In fact, the banquet and the wedding will be tonight. It's that my wife wanted to invite you to Bremervoord, Master Dandelion, and forced my hand... That's women for you. Listen, she said to me, 'Teleri, we should show the world that we are not governed by ignorance, but culture and art, you know, that when we host a banquet it's refined, not just an excuse for binge drinking until you throw up.' I told that stupid woman: so we already called a bard, isn't that enough? She answers that a bard isn't enough, that, oh la la, Master Dandelion, now there's a celebrity to make the neighbors die of jealousy. Master? Would you do us the honor? I symbolically present you with 25 good talars... in support of the arts...”

“Do my ears deceive me?” Dandelion demanded, after this last part. “Me, I'm expected to play second fiddle? You want me to be the side act for some other musician? Me? I have never yet fallen so low, venerable sir, as to be reduced to mere accompaniment for someone else.”

Drouhard flushed. “Excuse me, Master,” he stammered. “It wasn't me, but my wife... I hold you in the highest honor...”

“Dandelion,” whispered Geralt under his breath, “stop taking on airs. We need the coin.”

“Don't tell me what to do,” insisted the poet. “Me, putting on airs? Me? You're one to talk, the one who refuses interesting jobs every other day! You won't kill the hirikkhis because it's an endangered species; not the scorpion flies either because they're not dangerous; not to mention the noctambelles because they are charming sorceresses; and the dragons, because that's against your code of ethics. I too, you may imagine, am someone with self-respect! I too have my own personal code!”

“Dandelion, I'm begging you, do it for me. A little dedication, lad, that's all I ask. I promise that I won't be so choosy next time. Come on, Dandelion...”

The troubadour scratched the peach-fuzz on his chin and stared at the ground. Drouhard came closer shouting: “Master... Grant us this honor. It's just that my wife would never forgive me for coming back without you. And so... I'll raise the price to 30.”

“35!” Dandelion bid firmly.

Geralt smiled and sniffed hopefully at the smell of food coming from the farm.

“All right, Master, all right,” Teleri Drouhard said quickly, so quickly it was obvious that he could easily follow the auction until 40. “And... my house, if you like, to refresh and relax you, Master, is yours. And you, sir... To whom do I owe the honor?”

“Geralt of Rivia.”

“You too, sir, you're invited... to eat, drink...”

“Of course, with pleasure,” interrupted Dandelion. “Show us the way, good sir Drouhard. Between the two of us, the other bard - who is it?”

“The honorable lady Essi Daven.”

### Part III

Geralt rubbed his belt buckle and the silver studs of his jacket with his sleeve once more, combed his hair and tied it back with a cord and polished his shoes, rubbing the sides of his boots together.

“Dandelion?”

“Yes?”

The bard stroked the egret plume attached to his hat, smoothed and straightened his jacket. Both had spent half a day washing their clothes to make them presentable.

“What is it, Geralt?”

“Try to behave yourself so that they run us off after the party, and not before.”

“Very funny.” Dandelion was indignant. “I advise you to mind your manners. Shall we go in?”

“Let's go. Do you hear that? Someone's singing. It's a woman.”

“You just noticed? That's Essi Daven, known as Little-Eye. You never met a woman bard? Ah yes! I forgot that you avoid places where art flourishes. Little-Eye is a poet and a gifted singer, but not without some ill-mannered faults, if I can trust my ears, not without them in the least. What she's singing now is actually none other than my own ballad. Just wait, she'll hear my performance and we'll see that little eye squint in envy.”

“Dandelion, for pity's sake. They'll throw us out.”

“Don't interfere. This is a professional matter. Let's go in.”

“Dandelion?”

“Yes?”

“Why Little-Eye'?”

“You'll see.”

The wedding took place in a huge warehouse, emptied of its usual barrels of herrings and fish oil. The smell had almost been lifted by the hanging bunches of mistletoe and heather decorated with ribbons. Here and there, as was the custom, garlands of garlic were hung, to scare off supposed vampires. The tables and benches that flanked the walls were covered with white cloths. In one corner, a great bonfire and a spit had been installed. Although it was crowded, there was no uproar. Over five hundred people of different nations and trades, along with the spotty-faced groom and the bride he was devouring with his gaze, listened in silent contemplation to the charming ballad of a young woman, wearing a modest blue dress and sitting on a stage, singing melodiously, accompanied by a lute that rested on her knee. The girl couldn't have been older than eighteen. She was extremely thin. Her hair, long and full, was dark gold. She finished her song as they entered. She received the thunderous applause that was lavished upon her with a nod of her head that shook her hair.

“I bid you welcome, Master, welcome.” Drouhard, dressed in his finest clothes, seized them and led them to the center of the warehouse. “And welcome to you, Sir Gerard... It is a great honor... Yes... Allow me... Venerable ladies and gentlemen! Here is our honorable host, who does us the honor of honoring us... Master Dandelion, the famous singer and writer of verse... and poet! who honors us with this very great honor... Honors us so...”

The cries of joy and applause drowned out Drouhard's stammered speech before he could choke. Dandelion, proud as a peacock, adopted a manner equal to the occasion and bowed deeply before gesturing with his hand to the young girls sitting in a row, like chickens on their perch, and were monitored, from the second row, by a squad of old matrons. The girls didn't flinch, giving the impression that they had been affixed to the bench with carpenter's glue or something equally effective. Without exception, they held their hands flat on their knees and kept their mouths open.

“Well then!” Drouhard called, “come, drink beer, my friends! And eat! Over here, over here! By the grace of...”

The girl dressed in blue fought her way through the crowd that rushed, like a wave against the reefs, toward the tables laden with food.

“Hi, Dandelion,” she said.

Especially since he began traveling with Dandelion, Geralt considered expressions such as “eyes like the stars,” which the bard used to indiscriminately compliment the girls, to be banal and trite. In the case of Essi Daven, even someone as deaf to poetry as Geralt must concede that the expression was nonetheless fitting. In a cute and friendly little face distinguished by nothing in particular, there burned and shone a dark blue eye, beautiful, huge, hypnotic. The second eye of Essi Daven was mostly covered by a golden circlet that fell across her cheek, which she habitually adjusted by shaking her head or puffing at it: thus the second eye of Small-Eye was unveiled, revealing a perfect similarity with the first.

“Hi, Little-Eye,” Dandelion replied with a grin. “You sang a beautiful ballad earlier. You have significantly improved your repertoire. I've always said that when one can't write one's own verse, one must borrow it from others. Is that common practice for you?”

“Not really,” Essi Daven replied, tit for tat, with a smile that revealed small white teeth. “It's been known to happen. Not as often as I would like, but I usually don't have the option: the lyrics are poorly written and the melodies, while certainly enjoyable and unpretentious in their simplicity - if not downright simplistic - don't measure up to my listeners' expectations. You've written something new, Dandelion? I hadn't heard.”

“Not surprisingly,” the bard replied with a sigh. “I sing my ballads in places where only the most gifted and famous artists are invited: just the kind of place where I never see you.”

Essi flushed crimson and blew on her circlet. “It is a fact,” she said, “that I am not in the habit of frequenting brothels. I find their atmosphere depressing. It saddens me that you must perform in such places, but so it goes. When you have no talent, you don't have the luxury of choosing your audience.”

This time, it was Dandelion who blushed hotly. Little-Eye smiled happily and immediately fell upon his neck, kissing him noisily on the cheek. The Witcher was surprised, but only a little. A colleague of Dandelion could hardly be expected to be less unpredictable than Dandelion himself.

“Dandelion, you dear old fool!” Essi said, continuing the hug. “I'm so glad to see you in good health, physical and mental.”

“Hey, Doll.” Dandelion lifted the tiny girl and whirled her around until the ruffles of her dress twirled. “You were wonderful, by the gods. I haven't heard such lovely wickedness in a long time. Your quarrels are even better than your singing. And you are beautiful too!”

“How many times have I told you,” Essi said, puffing on her circlet and then looking to Geralt, “not to call me 'Doll,' Dandelion? Besides, it's about time that you introduced your companion, who I see is not a colleague of ours.”

“Thank the gods for that,” cried the bard, laughing. “He has neither voice nor ear for poetry, Doll - at best, he knows how to combine booze and syphilis. This is a representative of the Witcher trade: Geralt of Rivia. Come here, Geralt, and kiss Little-Eye's hand.”

The Witcher approached without knowing how to react. The kissing of hands was generally practiced on the rings of duchesses, before whom it was necessary to kneel. In regard to women of less exalted rank, here in the South the gesture was considered a mark of eroticism and remained reserved only for established couples.

Little-Eye, however, dispelled Geralt's doubts by energetically extending a hand with the fingers pointed down. The Witcher took her hand clumsily and kissed it. The cheeks of Essi, who had kept one eye fixed on him, colored.

“Geralt of Rivia!” she said. “You don't keep company with just anyone, Dandelion.”

“It's my honor,” murmured the Witcher, aware that he sounded no more eloquent than Drouhard. “Madam...”

“To hell with all that,” growled Dandelion. “Stop making Little-Eye uncomfortable with your titles and your stuttering. Her name is Essi and Essi, his name is Geralt. Introductions are over. Time to get serious, Doll.”

“If you call me 'Doll' again, I'll smack your ear. What are these serious matters we need to discuss?”

“We need to decide the order of our program. I propose that we take turns performing our ballads. This will have the best effect. Of course, everyone will sing his own ballads.”

“Maybe.”

“How much is Drouhard paying you?”

“That's none of your business. Who's going to start?”

“Me.”

“Agreed. Hey! Look who's decided to honor us with his presence! That's Duke Agloval. He just came in, look.”

“Hey, hey! The quality of the audience rises,” Dandelion said joyfully. “But there is no room for complacency either: Agloval is a miser. Geralt can attest to that. The duke loathes giving up his coin. He hires people, it's true, but as for settling the accounts afterward...”

“I heard about that.” Essi pushed back her circlet and looked at Geralt. “It was being discussed at the port and on the docks. This is about the famous Sh'eenaz, is it not?”

Agloval answered the deep reverence of the honor guard at the door with a curt nod and walked directly toward Drouhard, whom he drew into a corner, which prevented him from drawing the attention of the guests at the center of the room. Geralt watched them out of the corner of his eye. The conversation took place in low tones, but the two speakers seemed extremely agitated. Drouhard could not stop wiping his forehead with his sleeve, turning his head, and scratching his neck. At his questions the duke, his expression stiff and dour, responded by shrugging his shoulders.

“The duke,” Essi said in a low voice, pressing against Geralt, “seems preoccupied. Could it still be a matter of the heart? This morning's misunderstanding with the famous little mermaid? What do you think, Witcher?”

“Could be.” Geralt, strangely surprised and irritated by the question, afforded the poet a furtive glance. “Everyone has his own problems. Not all of us can get by singing at fairs.”

Little-Eye paled slightly. She puffed at her circlet, eyeing him with an air of challenge. “By saying that, did you hope to hurt me or simply offend me?”

“Neither. I only intended to stave off the other questions about the problems of Agloval and his mermaid that I don't feel able to answer.”

“I understand.” The pretty eye of Essi Daven narrowed slightly. “I will not present you with any more such dilemmas. I will not ask the questions I would like to ask and that I was considering, to be honest, to be an invitation to a friendly conversation. Thus, there will be no discussion between us. Have no fear; it will not become the subject of a song at a fair. The pleasure was all mine.”

She turned her back quickly to move to a respectable distance toward the tables. Dandelion shifted his stance and muttered: “You can't say that you were friendly to her, Geralt.”

“I admit, it's stupid,” responded the Witcher. “I hurt her for no reason. Maybe I'd better go and offer her an apology...”

“Stop,” said the bard, adding solemnly, “It's difficult to correct the first impression. Come, let's pour the beer instead.”

They didn't have time to drink their beer because Drouhard, extracting himself from conversation with a group of citizens, accosted them: “Lord Gerard,” he said, “excuse me. His Lordship the Duke wants to speak with you.”

“I'm coming.”

Dandelion took the Witcher's sleeve. “Geralt, don't forget.”

“What?”

“You made a promise to accept whatever missions you are proposed without sulking. I have your word. How did you put it? A little dedication?”

“I know, Dandelion. But how do you know that Agloval...”

“I have a nose for it, remember, Geralt.”

“Sure, Dandelion.”

He went with Drouhard to a corner of the room, far from the guests. Agloval was sitting on a low stool. At his side was a swarthy man in colorful clothing and a short black beard. Geralt had not noticed him earlier.

“We meet again, Witcher,” the duke began, “despite my oath this morning never to see you again. But I have no other Witcher at hand. You will have to do. Meet Zelest, my steward in charge of pearl diving.”

“This morning,” the swarthy man intoned quietly, “I wanted to extend our fishing area. A boat went adrift farther west, behind the cape, in the direction of the Dragon's Teeth.”

“The Dragon's Teeth,” put in Agloval, “are two grand volcanic reefs that emerge from the tip of the cape. They are visible from the shore.”

“Yes,” Zelest confirmed. “In general, we don't sail there because there are many whirlpools and rocks. Diving is dangerous. But on the shore, there are fewer and fewer pearls. Therefore, a boat was sent there with a seven-man crew: two sailors and five divers. That night, when they did not return, we grew worried, even though the sea was as flat as oil. I sent two fast skiffs which found the boat adrift. Not a soul was aboard. Vanished without a trace. It's impossible to know what happened. But there was a fight. Massacre. Signs...”

The Witcher blinked. “What signs?”

“Deck covered with blood.”

Drouhard whistled and glanced anxiously around. Zelest lowered his voice:

“It is just as I say,” he repeated, clenching his teeth. “Boat covered in blood. Butchery. Something has murdered people. One might say a sea monster. Yes, undoubtedly a sea monster.”

“No pirates?” Geralt asked quietly. “No competing pearl divers? You have ruled out the possibility that they were boarded and attacked with ordinary knives?”

“We have ruled it out,” replied the duke. “There are neither pirates nor competition in the area. Piracy does not end with the disappearance of all crew members without exception. No, Geralt, Zelest is right. It's the work of a sea monster, nothing else. Listen, no-one dares go out to sea, even in the corners that are well-marked and familiar. People are paralyzed by fear. The port is at a standstill. Even the ships and galleys do not leave the dock. You see, Witcher?”

“I understand,” said Geralt with a nod of his head. “Who will show me the place?”

“Ah!” Agloval rested his hand on the table and drummed his fingers. “I like that. Finally, a reaction from the Witcher. Let's not quibble over the details. You see, Drouhard: a good Witcher is a hungry Witcher. Isn't that so, Geralt? Without your musician friend, you would still go to sleep tonight without a bite to eat! This is good news for you, isn't it?”

Drouhard bowed his head. Zelest looked blankly at him.

“Who will show me the place?” Geralt repeated, staring coldly at Agloval.

“Zelest,” said the duke, his smile fading. “When will you get to work?”

“Tomorrow morning. Be on the pier, sir Zelest.”

“Yes, master Witcher.”

“Great.” The duke rubbed his hands with a new and mocking smile. “Geralt, I hope the adventure with this monster ends better than the one with Sh'eenaz. I'm counting on it. Ah, one more thing. I forbid you to discuss this matter. I don't want to cause panic over anything more important than what I already have on my back. Is that understood, Drouhard? I will have your tongue ripped out if it appears that you have loose lips.”

“I understand, Duke.”

“Good.” Agloval rose. “I'll go before I spoil your fun and feed the rumor. Farewell, Drouhard, I want you to give all my best wishes to the couple.”

“Thank you, Duke.”

Essi Daven, sitting on a stool and surrounded by a dense ring of listeners, was singing a melodious and nostalgic ballad about the misfortunes of a woman betrayed. Leaning against a pole, Dandelion mumbled something under his breath, counting the time and the syllables on his fingers.

“So,” he asked, “you've found some work?”

“Yes.” The Witcher did not go into details, about which the bard cared little.

“I told you. I have a flair for money. Good, very good. I earn a little coin and so do you. We're going to treat ourselves. Then we'll go to Cidaris for the harvest festival. But excuse me a moment: I've spotted something interesting on the bench.”

Geralt followed the poet's gaze, but apart from the dozen girls with their lips parted, he noticed nothing of interest. Dandelion straightened his jacket, tipped his hat at a jaunty angle and went, fully immersed in his role, toward the bench. Dodging the attending matrons with a sidelong maneuver, he began his ritual with a charming smile.

Essi Daven ended her ballad. The audience gave her its applause, a small purse, and a large bouquet of chrysanthemums, admittedly a little faded.

The Witcher strolled into the crowd of guests in search of an opportunity to find a place at the table of food. With dismay, he saw the rapid disappearance of pickled herring, stuffed cabbage, boiled codfish heads, mutton chops, slices of salami, slices of smoked salmon and ham; the problem was that there were no places free.

The young girls and the matrons surrounded Dandelion with some excitement and asked him to sing a song. He replied with an insincere smile and gave a refusal out of false modesty.

Having conquered his politeness, Geralt finally managed to seat himself at the table: an elderly man, smelling strongly of vinegar, helpfully and forcefully cleared a space by almost toppling the bench along with all his neighbors. Geralt did not wait to start eating. In the blink of an eye he emptied the only dish he could reach. The man who reeked of vinegar slid him another. To thank him, Geralt was forced to listen patiently to a long tirade on youth and modern times. The man equated social liberties with flatulence. Geralt had trouble keeping a straight face.

Essi stood against the wall, alone amid the branches of mistletoe, in the process of tuning her lute. The Witcher saw a young man dressed in a brocade doublet bend close to her and say something with a faint smile. Essi looked at him and pursed her pretty lips, responding with a few quick words. The young man stiffened and turned sharply on his heel. His ears, red as rubies, glowed for a long time in the semi-darkness of the room.

“... horror, shame and humiliation,” continued the man who smelled of vinegar. “An enormous flatulence, sir.”

“I'm sure you're right,” Geralt replied without conviction, wiping his plate with a piece of bread.

“Venerable lords and excellencies, we humbly ask for silence,” cried Drouhard at the center of the room. “The famous Master Dandelion will sing for us, despite his fatigue and mild illness, the famous ballad of Queen Marienn and the black crow! He performs at the personal request of Miss Veverka, our beloved miller's daughter whom, I quote Master Dandelion, he cannot refuse!”

Miss Veverka, one of the less pretty girls on the bench, was transformed in the twinkling of an eye. A tumult of applause covered the recurring flatulence of the man who smelled of vinegar. Dandelion waited for complete silence before entering into a dramatic introduction and began to sing without taking his eyes from Miss Veverka.

The young girl grew more attractive from couplet to couplet. A little flirtation is more effective than all the creams and magic essences that Yennefer sells in her boutique in Vengerberg, thought Geralt.

He noticed Essi sneak behind the semicircle of Dandelion's listeners and discreetly vanish out to the terrace. Driven by a strange impulse, he politely left the table and followed after her.

Leaning against the railing, Essi leaned on her elbows, her head held between her slender arms. Her gaze was lost in the waves of the sea that were highlighted by the light of the moon and the lamps of the port. The wood creaked under Geralt's feet. Essi straightened.

“Forgive me, I didn't mean to disturb you,” he said stiffly, watching her lips take on the same pinched expression that the poet had turned on the young man in brocade.

“You're not bothering me,” she replied with a smile and pushed back her circlet. “I'm not looking for solitude here, only the fresh air. Does the smoke and stale air bother you as well?”

“Somewhat, but what bothers me more is the knowledge that I hurt you. I have come to ask for your forgiveness, Essi, and for another chance to have a friendly conversation with you.”

“I'm the one who should ask forgiveness,” she said, resting her hands on the railing. “I reacted too rashly. It happens all the time: I can't control myself. Forgive me and allow me another chance to speak with you.”

He walked over and leaned next to her. He felt a warmth emanating from her person, and a faint smell of verbena. Geralt was fond of that scent, even if it was not the equal of lilac and gooseberry.

“What does the sea make you think of, Geralt?” she asked suddenly.

“Of worry,” he responded spontaneously.

“Interesting. You seem so calm and composed to me.”

“I didn't say that I felt worried. You asked me what I associate with the sea.”

“Associations are a reflection of the soul. I should know: I'm a poet.”

“And what is the sea for you?” Geralt asked quickly, to avoid any rambling about any supposed uneasiness he felt.

“A perpetual movement,” she replied after reflection. “Change. And an enigma, a mystery, something that I cannot understand, that I could describe a thousand ways in a thousand poems without ever reaching the core or the essence. Yes, that's probably it.”

“What you're feeling is also worry,” he said, the scent of verbena growing stronger and stronger. “Yet you seem so calm and composed...”

She turned, causing her circlet to slip and placing her beautiful eyes on him. “I am neither calm nor composed.”

It happened suddenly, without warning. The gesture that he made, which should have been a brief touch to her shoulders, became an ardent grip on her waist. Geralt approached quickly, but without violence, until the unexpected contact with the girl's body made his blood boil. Essi froze suddenly, stiffened and arched her back, and seized the Witcher's hands as if to pull or drag them from her waist.

“Why... what's the point?”

The circlet fell, and from behind it appeared the wide-open eyes of Little-Eye.

The Witcher brought his face close to hers. They kissed on the lips. For the moment, Essi didn't release the hands that Geralt put on her waist; she continued to arch her back to avoid the contact of their bodies. They spun around each other in this position as if in a dance. Essi kissed Geralt with passion and expertise. At length.

Then the girl deftly and effortlessly broke free from the grip of the Witcher. Leaning back against the railing, she put her head in her hands once more. Geralt suddenly felt terribly foolish. The feeling stopped him from approaching her and kissing her hunched shoulders.

“Why?” she asked coldly without turning. “Why did you do that?”

She looked at him out of the corner of her eye. The Witcher knew he had taken the wrong path and found himself standing on a thin layer of grass and moss ready to collapse under the force of any insincerity, lies, deceit, or bravado.

“Why?” she repeated.

Geralt did not answer.

“Looking for a woman for the night?”

He did not answer. Essi turned and touched his shoulder.

“Let's go back inside,” she said without apparent emotion, but this untroubled tone did not deceive the Witcher, who felt a strong tension. “Don't make that face: nothing happened. I'm not looking for a man for the night. Don't feel guilty, all right?”

“Essi...”

“Let's go, Geralt. The audience is calling for Dandelion's third encore. It's my turn, now. I'll sing...”

Essi pushed back her circlet with a puff of breath. She looked at him strangely.

“I'll sing for you.”

### Part IV

“Aha!” The Witcher feigned astonishment. “You're already home? I thought that you wouldn't come back tonight.”

Dandelion secured the hasp of the door, hung up his lute and feather-plumed hat on a nail, then took off his jacket, dusted it, and left it on some bags lying in a corner of the small room. Aside from those bags, a mattress and an enormous bale of hay, the room contained no furniture: even the candle dripped a pool of wax on the floor. Drouhard admired Dandelion, but obviously not to the point of offering him a real bedroom or alcove.

“Why did you think I wouldn't be back tonight?” Dandelion asked, removing his shoes.

The Witcher got up on his elbows, making the straw creak. “I thought that you would be delivering a serenade outside the window of Miss Veverka, the girl you've been feasting your eyes on all evening like a dog fixated on his bitch.”

“Hey, hey!” the bard replied, laughing. “You can be so stupid and primitive! Don't you understand? I never had any fondness for Veverka. I simply wanted to make Miss Akeretta jealous before I make my move tomorrow. Move over a little.”

Dandelion collapsed on the mattress and tugged the thick rug that covered Geralt toward himself. Feeling a strange anger rising within him, the Witcher turned his head toward the window through which, despite the presence of numerous cobwebs, he could see the stars.

“What's the matter with you?” asked the poet. “Does it bother you that I chase after girls? Since when? Would you have me take an oath of purity like a druid? Or maybe...”

“Quit posturing. I'm tired. Haven't you noticed that we have a mattress and roof over our heads for the first time in two weeks? The idea that you won't be roughly shaken awake tomorrow doesn't make you crazy with joy?”

“For me,” mused Dandelion, “a mattress without a young woman isn't a mattress at all. It is incomplete happiness... and what good is incomplete happiness?”

Geralt groaned softly. Enjoying the sound of his own voice, Dandelion continued his late-night chatter:

“Incomplete happiness, it's... like an interrupted kiss... Why are you grinding your teeth, may I ask?”

“You are terribly boring, Dandelion: you have no subjects of conversation except for beds, girls, asses, breasts, incomplete happiness and kisses interrupted by the dogs set upon you by the parents of giddy brides. Apparently, you can't stop yourself Only the frivolity, or the debauchery, enables you to compose ballads, write poems and sing. It is, you see, the dark side of your talent.”

The Witcher had spoken with emotion.

Dandelion had no trouble reading his sentiments: “Aha!” the bard replied serenely. “This must be because of Essi Daven, our Little-Eye. She cast her pretty little eye over the Witcher and started sowing disorder. He went off violently in front of the princess. And instead of blaming himself, he reproaches me for I don't know what hidden agenda.”

“You talk a lot of shit, Dandelion.”

“No, my friend. Essi made a big impression on you. Don't deny it. I don't see anything wrong with it but be careful not to put a foot wrong. She is not as you imagine her. If her talent has many dark sides, they aren't the ones you think.”

“I see,” the Witcher said. “You know her very well.”

“Quite well. But not in the way you think, no.”

“It's amazing to hear you admit it.”

“You really are stupid.” The bard stretched, placing his hands at his neck. “I've known Little-Eye almost since she was a child. For me... she's like a little sister. I repeat: don't make any stupid moves with her. You would do a lot of damage, because she's fallen for your charms, too. Admit that you want her.”

“Even if I did, I don't usually talk about these things, unlike you,” Geralt said impassively. “I don't compose songs on the subject. Thank you for what you told me about her. It actually saved me from making a stupid mistake. Now drop it. As far as I'm concerned the matter is closed.”

Dandelion lay in silence for a moment. Geralt nonetheless knew his companion well:

“I know,” the poet said finally. “I understand everything.”

“You don't understand anything, Dandelion.”

“Do you know what your problem is? You appear to be something that you're not. You flaunt your otherness, what you consider to be your abnormality. You impose this upon yourself, never understanding that for most ordinary people, you yourself are one of the most normal people who ever lived. What difference does it make that your reflexes are faster, that your pupils become vertical slits in the sun, that you can see in the dark like a cat and that you can cast whatever spells you know? What do I care? I once knew an innkeeper who could fart for ten minutes without interruption and in this way managed to interpret the melody of the psalm Welcome, welcome the morning star. Aside from what one might call his talent, he was a perfectly normal innkeeper with a wife, children, and a paralytic grandmother.”

“Can you explain what this has do with Essi Daven?”

“Of course. You wrongly assumed that Little-Eye was interested in you for dubious, even perverse reasons, that she looked at you with the fascination reserved for a unicorn, a two-headed calf or a salamander in a bestiary. You provoked her animosity at the first opportunity in the form of an unkind and unjustified reprimand; you returned a blow that she didn't deal. I saw it with my own eyes! I didn't witness the events that followed, but I noticed that you left the room and her cheeks were red when you returned. Yes, Geralt. I'll inform you of a mistake you made. You wanted to get revenge for the, in your opinion, prurient interest that she displayed. You then decided to take advantage of her fondness for you.”

“I say again: you're talking crap.”

“You tried,” the bard continued without budging from the mattress, “to get her into bed by showing her what it's like to go to bed with a monster, a mutant, a Witcher. Fortunately, Essi showed herself to be smarter than you are and tremendously sympathetic to your stupidity, whose causes she understands. I infer this from the fact that you did not return from the terrace with a black eye.”

“Have you finished?”

“I'm finished.”

“Fine, good night.”

“I know why you fidget and grind your teeth.”

“Of course, you know everything.”

“I know that you've been tortured to the point where you aren't capable of understanding a normal woman. But you're under Yennefer's thumb: the devil knows what you see in her.”

“Drop it, Dandelion.”

“Really, you wouldn't prefer a normal girl like Essi? But what can those sorceresses have that Essi doesn't? Age? Perhaps Little-Eye is early in her youth, but she is at least as old as she looks. Do you know what Yennefer told me one day after some drinks? Hah... She told me she did it with a man for the first time in the year that the plow was invented from two plowshares!”

“You're lying. Yennefer likes you as much as a malevolent pestilence. She would never have admitted anything like that to you.”

“You're right. I lied. I admit it.”

“You don't have to: I know you well.”

“It seems to you that you know me. Never forget that human nature can be complex.”

“Dandelion,” sighed the Witcher, falling halfway asleep already, “you're nothing but a cynic, a disgusting womanizer and a liar. Nothing about that, believe me, is truly complex. Good night.”

“Good night, Geralt.”

### Part V

“You get up early, Essi.”

The poet smiled, holding her windblown hair. She advanced slowly along the pier, avoiding the holes formed by the rotten boards.

“I couldn't resist the urge to watch the Witcher at work. Will you still consider me a filthy busybody? Well yes, I'll admit it: I am actually a little curious. How is your work going?”

“What work?”

“Oh, Geralt!” she said. “You underestimate my curiosity and my aptitude for collecting and interpreting information. I already know all about the fishermen's accident; I know the details of your last contract with Agloval. I also know that you're looking for a helmsman willing to take you to the shore of the Dragon's Teeth. Have you found one?”

He studied her for a moment before he decided to speak:

“No. I haven't found a one.”

“They are afraid?”

“Yes.”

“How then will you perform your reconnaissance without crossing the sea? If you can't navigate, how will you tickle the ribs of the monster responsible for the death of the fishermen?”

Geralt took the hand of the girl and led her away from the pier. They walked on the rocky beach, between the boats perched on the shore, along the rows of nets suspended from posts and through curtains of dried and gutted fish blown by the wind. Geralt found to his surprise that the girl's company was neither unpleasant nor burdensome. He also hoped that a peaceful and pleasant conversation would erase the memory of the kiss on the terrace. Essi's presence on the pier meant, moreover, that she didn't want him. He was happy.

“Tickle the monster's ribs,” he muttered, repeating the girl's words. “If I knew how... My knowledge in matters of marine teratology remains very limited.”

“Interesting. According to what I know, there are a lot more monsters in the sea than on the land, in terms of both individuals and species. It seems to me then that it's good hunting grounds for a Witcher.”

“That's not so.”

“Why?”

“The spread of humans to the ocean,” he replied, clearing his throat and turning his head, “is too recent. Witchers were especially necessary on land at the time of the first settlement. We are not adapted for combat with sea creatures, even though the most aggressive creatures abound underwater, it's true. The capabilities of Witchers aren't enough against these sea monsters. These creatures are either too large or too well-protected behind their shells or finally too much at ease in their element. Or all three at once.”

“What do you think about the monster that killed the fishermen? Do you have any suspicions?”

“It could be a kraken.”

“No, a kraken would have destroyed the boat that was recovered intact and covered in blood.” Little-Eye grew pale and swallowed. “Don't think that's idle speculation. I was raised next to the sea... I saw more than one creature.”

“A giant squid could throw people over the side...”

“Then there would be no blood. Geralt, it's neither squid nor orca nor turtle-dragon, because our monster neither destroyed nor overturned the boat. Maybe you're making a mistake in looking for the culprit in the sea.”

The Witcher considered this.

“I begin to admire you, Essi,” he said. The poet blushed. “You're right. This could be an attack from the sky: an ornithodragon, a griffon, a wyvern, a dermoptera or a diploures giant. Maybe even a...”

“Excuse me,” Essi interrupted. “Look who's coming.”

Agloval only skirted the shore. His clothes were drenched. His anger seemed to intensify when he saw them.

Essi bowed discreetly, while Geralt inclined his head and tapped his chest with his fist. Agloval spat.

“I waited on the rocks for three hours, almost since the sun rose,” he growled. “She hasn't shown. Three hours to wait like an idiot on wave-swept rocks.”

“I see... I'm sorry,” muttered the Witcher.

“Sorry?” the duke exploded. “Sorry? But everything is your fault. You're the one who bungled the job. You're the one who ruined everything.”

“What did I ruin? I only acted as the translator...”

“To hell with all this!” he interrupted nervously, putting himself in profile. It was a very royal profile, meriting inclusion on a well-beaten currency. “I would be better off if I hadn't resorted to your services. This may sound strange, but when we had no translator, we understood one another better, Sh'eenaz and me, if you know what I mean. Now... you know what they say in town? It's whispered that the fishermen died because I lost my temper with the siren. That it was revenge.”

“Absurd,” the Witcher commented icily.

“How do I know it's absurd?” the duke burst out. “What do I know, except for what you told me? Do I know what she is capable of? What monsters can hear her there, in the depths? Prove to me, please, that it's absurd. Bring me the head of the monster that slaughtered the fishermen. Get to work instead of flirting on the beach...”

“To work?” Geralt exploded. “But how? Should I cross the sea riding on a barrel? Your Zelest threatened the sailors with the worst tortures and the gallows... There's nothing I can do: no-one wants to take me. Zelest himself is not exactly eager. How...”

“What's that to me: how?” Agloval yelled, cutting him off. “It's your business! Weren't the Witchers created so that normal people do not have to wonder how to get rid of monsters? I hired your services and I demand that you obey me. Otherwise, go to hell before I drive you with a stick to the very borders of my domain!”

“Calm yourself, my lord Duke,” said Little-Eye in a low voice despite her nervous pallor and the trembling of her hands. “And stop threatening Geralt, please. Dandelion and I are honored to count among our friends the king Ethain Cidaris, one of our fans, an enthusiastic amateur artist. The king Ethain is an enlightened sovereign who considers our ballads not only from the perspective of music and rhyme, but also as a chronicle of humanity. Would you, my lord duke, like to appear in this chronicle? I can help you.”

Agloval looked at her for a moment with a cold and indifferent expression.

“The fishermen who died had wives and children,” he finally said in a voice that was much more measured and calm. “The others will return to the sea when hunger tightens their bellies. The pearl divers, oyster- and lobstermen, fishermen, all of them. They will return to the sea sooner or later, but will they come back safe and sound? What do you think, Geralt? And you, Miss Daven? Your ballad will undoubtedly be interesting: idling on the beach, the Witcher watches the children crying over blood-covered boats.”

Essi paled even more. She pushed back her circlet, blew on the band as she prepared to retort, but the Witcher took her hand before she could open her mouth.

“Enough,” he said. “In this outpouring of words, only one thing is really important: you hired my services, Agloval, and I accepted the mission. I will fulfill it if it is feasible.”

“I look forward to it,” the duke responded in a whisper. “Goodbye. My regards, Miss Daven.”

Essi did not bow, only nodded. Hunched over the stones, with his clothing drenched, Agloval left in the direction of the port. Geralt realized then that he still held the poet's hand and that she was not trying to get free. He let go. Regaining her normal colors, Essi turned her face to him.

“It doesn't take much for you to agree to take risks,” she said. “A few words on the subject of women and children were enough. And yet we still talk about the insensitivity of Witchers, Geralt. Agloval doesn't care about children, women, or the elderly. All that matters to him is that fishing and pearl-diving resumes, because every day off is synonymous with a loss of profit for him. He only has to use starving children as bait for you to agree to risk your life...”

“Essi,” he interrupted. “I'm a Witcher. Risking my life is my job. Children have nothing to do with it.”

“Stop pretending.”

“Why should I?”

“If you were really the cold professional you pretend to be, you would have tried to bargain. You didn't even mention money. But enough on that subject. What now?”

“Let's keep walking.”

“Gladly. Geralt?”

“Yes...”

“I told you that I was raised by the sea. I can steer a boat...”

“Forget it.”

“Why?”

“Forget it,” he repeated firmly.

“You could tell me more politely.”

“I could, but you would think... ah, devil only knows why. I'm nothing but an insensitive Witcher. I risk my life, no-one else's.”

Essi clenched her teeth and gave her head a shake. The wind ruffled the wind once more. Her face was covered for a moment by a tangle of golden locks.

“I only wanted to help.”

“I know. Thank you.”

“Geralt?”

“Yes...”

“What if there's some truth to the rumors concerning Agloval? You know that sirens aren't always friendly. There have been cases...”

“I can't believe that...”

“Sea witches,” continued Little-Eye, deep in concentration. “Naiads, tritons, sea nymphs. Who knows what they're capable of? Sh'eenaz had a motive.”

“I don't believe it,” he interrupted neatly.

“You don't believe it, or you don't want to believe it?”

Geralt didn't respond.

“And you try to pass yourself off as a cold professional?” she asked with a strange smile. “As someone whose purpose is driven by the sword? If you want, I'll tell you who you really are.”

“I know who I really am.”

“You are sensitive,” she said softly, “worried to the very depths of your soul. Your stony face and your glacial voice don't fool me. Your sensitivity puts you in fear of raising your sword against an opponent who has a moral advantage over you...”

“No, Essi,” he said slowly. “Don't look to me for the subject of a moving ballad: that of the internally conflicted Witcher. I might like that to be the case, but it isn't. My code and my training resolve every moral dilemma. In that, I am well prepared.”

“Don't say such things!” Essi burst out. “I don't understand why you try to...”

“Essi,” he interrupted again, “I don't want you to imagine things about me. I'm not a knight errant.”

“You aren't a cold and ruthless killer either.”

“No,” he answered calmly. “I'm not, contrary to what some people think. It is not my sensitivity and the quality of my character that make me more than that, but the pride, the egotism, and the arrogance of a professional convinced of his valor. Of someone instilled with the belief that the code and cold routine are superior to emotion and prevent him from committing errors, from getting lost in the Manichean maze of Good and Evil, Order and Chaos. No, Essi, the sensitivity is on your part. It's characteristic of your profession, isn't it? You think that the siren appears sympathetic, but you worry that with her pride wounded, she could attack the pearl divers in a desperate act of revenge. At first, you look for justification, extenuating circumstances... You tremble at the idea of a Witcher hired by the duke to assassinate a beautiful siren, only because you have succumbed to your emotions. The Witcher is deprived of such contradictions, Essi, and of emotions. If it turns out that the siren is to blame, the Witcher will not kill her, because his code forbids it. The code resolves all my dilemmas.”

Little-Eye lifted her head suddenly and looked at him.

“All your dilemmas?” she asked in a whisper.

She knows about Yennefer, he thought. She knows everything. Dandelion, damned loudmouth...

They looked at one another.

What is hidden in your azure-blue eyes, Essi? Curiosity? Fascination with the 'other?' What are the other sides of your talent, Little-Eye?

“Excuse me,” she said. “The question was stupid and naive. It suggested that I believe what you say. Let's go back. The wind cuts me to the marrow of my bones. Looks like the sea is rising.”

“I see. You know, Essi, it's interesting...”

“What's interesting?”

“I could have sworn that the rocks where Agloval met the siren were larger and closer to the shore. I don't see them anymore.”

“The tide is rising,” Essi said. “The water will reach the cliff soon.”

“It will rise up the cliff?”

“Yes. The water rises and falls here by more than ten cubits, because the inlet and the estuary are influenced by tidal echoes. That's what the sailors call the phenomenon.”

Geralt looked toward the cape and the Dragon's Teeth battered by the foaming waves.

“Essi,” he asked, “when does the tide start to recede?”

“Why?”

“Because... That's it, I understand. Yes, you're right. The tide goes out along the line of an underwater plateau.”

“The line of what?”

“A sort of plateau formed by the sea floor that emerges like a peak...”

“And the Dragon's Teeth..”

“... are located exactly on the ridge line.”

“And will be accessible by wading...”

“How much time will I have?”

“I don't know.” Little-Eye's face wrinkled. “You could ask the people here, but I don't think it's the best idea. Look: there are rocks between the shore and the Teeth. The whole bay is riddled with gaps and fjords. At low tide, they form ravines and basins filled with water. I don't know if...”

A splashing sound reached them from the side of the rocks that were barely still visible, and then came a loud modulated cry.

“White-haired one!” called the siren, floating gracefully on the crest of the waves and elegantly lashing the water with her tail.

“Sh'eenaz,” replied Geralt, lifting his hand in greeting.

The mermaid swam up to the rocks. She held herself upright in the deep-sea foam, drawing her hair back with both hands and presenting in this position all the charms of her chest. Geralt cast an eye toward Essi whose face was slightly flushed. The girl had an expression of regret and embarrassment and looked down at her own charms, forming a ridge under her dress.

“Where is my beloved?” sang Sh'eenaz, coming closer. “He should be here.”

“He came, waited for three hours and then left.”

“Left?” the siren trilled in surprise. “He didn't wait for me? He could not endure three lousy little hours of waiting? That's what I thought: not an ounce of self-sacrifice! What a monster! And you, what are you doing here, white-haired one? You came to take a walk with your lover? You make a lovely couple. Too bad your legs spoil the sight.”

“This isn't my lover. We hardly know each other.”

“Is that so?” Sh'eena said, surprised. “That's a pity. You really do make a beautiful couple. Who is she?”

“My name is Essi Daven, I am a poet,” sang Little-Eye, modulating her voice in a melodious and expressive air next to which Geralt's inflections sounded like a croak. “I am pleased to meet you, Sh'eenaz.”

The young siren struck her hands flat on the water, laughing loudly.

“How beautiful!” she cried. “You know our language! Really, you humans amaze me. We are not so different after all.”

The Witcher was no less surprised than the siren, though he could have guessed that the girl, more educated than he, would know the Old Tongue, the language of elves that sirens, sea witches, and naiads used in their melodies. He also noticed that the complexity of the melodies that were so difficult for him presented Little-Eye with no major difficulty.

“Sh'eenaz,” he said. “Some things do separate us, even if blood flows through us both! Who... Who killed the pearl divers near the two stones? Tell me!”

The siren dived, disturbing the water before reappearing at the surface. Her pretty face suddenly contorted into a terrible grimace:

“Don't tempt fate!” she cried in a shrill voice. “Don't go near the Steps! Not you! Don't enter into conflict with them! Not you!”

“What? Why not us?”

“Not you!” repeated the siren, falling back against the waves.

Water rose up from the splash. They saw her tail once more, her narrow fin spread to strike against the surface of the waves. The siren disappeared into the depths.

Little-Eye smoothed her wind-blown hair. She remained motionless, lost in thought.

“I didn't know,” said Geralt, clearing his throat, “that you knew the Old Tongue so well, Essi.”

“You couldn't know,” she replied with bitterness in her voice. “You hardly know me, isn't that right?”

### Part VI

“Geralt...” Dandelion said, looking around and sniffing the air like a hunting dog. “What is that stench, do you smell it?”

“No, not really...” said the Witcher, sniffing. “I've been to smellier places. It's only the smell of the sea.”

The bard turned his head to spit between the rocks. The water foamed and churned in the gaps between the stones, revealing sandy ravines washed by the waves.

“Looks like everything is perfectly dry, Geralt. But where did all that water go? How does the tide bloody work? Have you ever asked yourself that?”

“No. I've had other things on my mind.”

Dandelion trembled slightly:

“I think the lowest depths of the bloody ocean hide an enormous monster, a revolting scaly beast, a huge toad with horns on its repulsive face. From time to time, he swallows the water along with everything that lives in it: fish, seals, turtles, everything. After he swallows it all, he makes water: that's the tide. What do you think?”

“I think you're a complete idiot. Yennefer explained to me once that the tides are linked to the moon.”

“What nonsense! What do the sea and the moon have to do with each other? Only dogs howl at death under the moon. She was mocking you, Geralt, the little liar. I know it wouldn't be the first time, after all.”

The Witcher did not comment on Dandelion's words. He watched the rocky ravines, gleaming with moisture after the sea's retreat. The water continued to rise and fall, but it seemed that they would be able to pass.

“Well, time to get to work,” he said, rising and adjusting the sword carried on his shoulder. “We can't wait around for high tide. Dandelion, you still insist on going with me?”

“Yes. Subjects for ballads don't lie around like pinecones under a Christmas tree. Besides, it's Doll's birthday tomorrow.”

“I don't see the connection.”

“Pity. We, the normal people, are in the habit of giving gifts at birthdays. Since we don't have the money to buy something, I'll find something at the bottom of the sea.”

“A herring? A cuttlefish?”

“You can be such an idiot. I'll find amber, a seahorse, or perhaps a pretty shell. It's the symbol that's important: a sign of thoughtfulness and affection. I like Little-Eye and I want to make her happy. Don't you understand that? That's what I thought. Come on. You first, because a monster could strike at any instant.”

“Fine.” The Witcher descended the stone wall covered with slimy algae. “I go in front to protect you from harm. That will be my sign of thoughtfulness and affection. Just remember: if I shout, run for your life and don't get in the way of my sword. We're not here to look for seahorses, but to size up a killer monster.”

They descended to the bottom of the ravine, at times paddling through the water in the cracks and pools filled with sand and seaweed. To improve the situation, it began to rain: Geralt and Dandelion were soon soaked from head to toe. The troubadour was constantly stopping to search the sand and seaweed with a stick.

“Oh, look, Geralt, a fish. Completely red, by the devil. And here, a little eel. And that? What's this? It looks like a translucent louse. And this... Oh my! Geralt!”

The Witcher turned abruptly, his hand moving to the hilt of his sword.

It was a human skull, white, polished by sand, embedded in a crack filled with sand. Dandelion trembled at the sight of an annelid wriggling in the eye socket and gave an unpleasant cry. The Witcher shrugged and led the way to the stone platform unveiled by the waves. Ahead, the two Dragon's Teeth were as imposing as mountains. He watched cautiously. The ground was littered with sea cucumbers, shells and seaweed. In the puddles and potholes large jellyfish waved and echinoderms undulated. Small crabs as colorful as hummingbirds flew by, waving their legs.

In the distance Geralt saw a corpse, lying among the stones. The ribcage of the drowned man, infected by crabs inside and out, moved strangely from the algae. The corpse could not have been there for more than a day, but the crabs had already shredded it so that any closer visual inspection would produce nothing conclusive. The Witcher, without a word, veered to avoid the corpse. Dandelion didn't notice.

“It stinks of decay,” he said, joining Geralt. Dandelion spat, wringing his drenched hat. “And it's pouring rain. It's cold. I'll catch cold and lose my voice, damn it...”

“Stop complaining. If you want to go back, all you have to do is follow our footsteps.”

Behind the base of the Dragon's Teeth lay a limestone plateau ending in a pit that opened onto the tranquil waves of the sea: the tide's edge.

Dandelion looked around them.

“Ah, Witcher! Your monster has enough sense to retire to sea with the tide. You must have thought he would wait belly-up for you to come along and gut him.”

“Shut up.”

The Witcher approached the edge of the plateau and knelt carefully while holding the tapered shells that covered the rock. He saw nothing. The water was dark and its surface disturbed and opaque from the drizzle.

Dandelion entered one of the recesses in the stone, pushing the most insistent crabs with his foot; he looked around and ran his fingers over the walls, dripping with water and covered with loose algae and rugged colonies of shellfish and mussels.

“Hey, Geralt!”

“What?”

“Look at these shells. They're pearl mussels, aren't they?”

“No.”

“Would you know?”

“No.”

“Then wait until you know more before forming an opinion. They are pearl mussels, I'm sure. I'll gather some pearls. At least our expedition will bring us some profits, not just a vicious cold. Right, Geralt?”

“Gather away. The monster attacks pearl divers. Collectors fall in the same category.”

“You want me to act as bait?”

“Go on, gather away. Take the larger shells. If they don't contain any pearls, we can always use them for soup.”

“And what then? I only want the pearls... The shells can go to hell... Plague take it! How the hell do you open these? Don't you have a knife, Geralt?”

“You don't even have a knife with you?”

“I'm a poet, not a cut-throat. Oh, nevermind, I'll put them in my bag; we'll get the pearls out later. Hey, you! Get out of my way!”

The crab caught by Dandelion's kick flew over Geralt's head and plunged into a wave.

Intrigued by the black mass of water, the Witcher slowly followed the edge of the plateau. He heard Dandelion pounding the stone to detach the mussels.

“Dandelion! Come here, look!”

Broken, the plateau ended abruptly at a right angle and fell into the sea. Beneath the surface of the water, one could distinctly see large blocks of marble, sides covered with algae, molluscs, and sea anemones waving in their aquatic element like flowers in the wind.

“What is it? It looks like a staircase.”

“It is a staircase,” Dandelion whispered, impressed. “Yes. It's a staircase that leads to an underwater city... Just like the legendary Ys that was submerged by the waves. Have you heard the legend of the city of the abyss: Ys-on-the-Water? I'll write a beautiful ballad that will make my rivals green with envy. I must see all of this... Look, there's a sort of mosaic... Something is engraved or molded. Writing? Move over.”

“Dandelion! Careful of the depths! You'll slip...”

“Of course, I won't! In any case, I'm already soaked. Look, it's shallow... On the first step, the water is barely waist deep. And it's as wide as a ballroom. Oh, damn!”

Geralt jumped instantly into the water to grab Dandelion by the neck.

“I slipped on this shit,” Dandelion explained breathlessly, holding between his hands a slender and flat molded shell that was cobalt blue and covered in algae. “They're all over the stairs. The color is beautiful, don't you think? Hey, put it in your bag: mine is already full.”

“Get out of here now!” the Witcher roared furiously. “Get back on the plateau, Dandelion. This isn't a game.”

“Quiet. Did you hear something? What was that?”

Geralt had heard. The sound came from below, from the depths of the water. It had been dull and deep, but short, fleeting, barely perceptible, like the sound of a bell.

“A bell, by the Beard...” murmured Dandelion, moving up to the plateau. “I was right, Geralt, it's the bell of Ys under the water, the bell of the city of ghosts whose sound is muffled by the elemental water. It reminds us of damnation...”

“Shut it, okay?”

The sound came again, closer.

“... reminds us,” the bard continued, squeezing the tails of his coat, “of our terrible fate. That bell sounds like a warning...”

The Witcher stopped paying attention to Dandelion's voice to focus his sixth sense. He felt something, or rather the presence of something.

“It's a warning...” Dandelion stuck his tongue out slightly, a sign of artistic concentration. “A warning that... um... we do not forget... um... um... That's it, I have it!”

The heart of the bell is deaf,  
it is the song of death that you hear  
*O death, easier to face than to forget...*

The water exploded next to the Witcher. Dandelion screamed. From the foam arose a bulging-eyed monster about to strike Geralt with a sharp and toothed instrument, resembling a scythe. Geralt had seized his sword as soon as the water began to swell. Whirling, he cut the loose, scaled neck of the monster. The Witcher turned just in time to see another creature rise out of the water under a strange helmet and wearing something resembling a copper breastplate covered in verdigris. With a broad stroke of his sword, Geralt struck the point of the short pike wielded against him and, using his momentum, struck the toothed jaws of the ichthyosaur and leapt back toward the edge of the platform with a splash.

“Run for it, Dandelion!”

“Give me your hand!”

“Run, damn it!”

The next creature appeared in the waves with a hiss, a bloody sword grasped in a rough green paw. The muscles of the Witcher's back gave a twitch away from the edge of the shell-studded plateau and allowed him to take position. The fish-eyed creature, however, remained motionless. The same size as Geralt, the water came up to its waist, but an imposing crest bristled on its head and the gills were wide open, giving the impression that it was larger. The grimace drawn across its toothed face resembled nothing so much as a cruel smile.

Paying no attention to the two corpses that floated in the red water, the creature brandished its sword, holding the guardless hilt in both hands. Bristling its beautiful crest and its gills, it skillfully twirled its blade through the air. Gerald heard the hiss and the hum of the weapon.

The creature took a step forward, forming a wave that crashed against the Witcher. Geralt's sword whirled and hissed in response, and stepped forward, in turn, raising the challenge.

The long nimble fingers of the fish-eyed creature shifted on the hilt of the sword. The creature lowered shoulders that were protected by copper and scales, and immersed itself up to its chest, concealing its weapon below the water. The Witcher gripped his sword with both hands - the right under the guard and the left near the pommel - and raised it slightly to the side, above his right shoulder. He locked eyes with the monster, but the opalescent fisheyes only offered a teardrop-shaped iris, polished and cold like metal, expressing and betraying nothing. Not even the intention of an attack.

From the depths at the bottom of the staircase came the sound of the abyssal bells, more distinctly and increasingly close.

The fish-eyed monster surged forward and brandished its sword above the water. It attacked to the side and down, much more rapidly than expected. Geralt was lucky: he had predicted that the blow would come from the right. He parried with a downward movement, twisting his body and turning the sword so that the flat of the blade blocked the sword of his adversary. At that moment, everything depended on the speed with which each of them could move from a static block to an offensive stance with a shift of the fingers on the hilt of his sword. Each of the fighters, ready to deal the decisive blow, had their weight on the right foot. Geralt knew that they were equally fast.

But the fish-eyed creature had a longer reach.

The Witcher dealt a sideways blow to the haunch and, executing a sharp turn to parry his opponent's blade, easily avoided the wild and desperate swing that the monster returned out of desperation. Without making a sound, it opened its fish-mouth before disappearing beneath the red-brown haze that was suspended in the water.

“Give me your hand, quick!” Dandelion yelled. “More are swimming toward us! I see them!”

Seizing the bard's right hand, the Witcher came out of the water and climbed onto the stone plateau. Behind him, a huge wave appeared.

The first sign of the tide.

They quickly fled before the rising water. Geralt turned and saw several other underwater creatures emerge from the sea and join in pursuit, leaping agilely on their strong legs. Without a word, he quickened his pace.

Having difficulty with the water that reached his knees, Dandelion was panting. Suddenly he stumbled and fell. Holding himself up on his trembling hands, the troubadour floundered in the kelp. Seizing his belt, the Witcher pulled him out of the foaming water.

“Run!” he cried. “I'll stop them!”

“Geralt!”

“Run, Dandelion! The water will close the gap and we won't be able to get away! Run for your life!”

Dandelion groaned before starting to run again. The Witcher followed him, hoping that the monsters would give up the pursuit. Against all of them, he didn't have a chance.

The creatures caught up at the edge of the fault, because the water strongly favored swimming while the Witcher, clinging to the slippery rocks, progressed with more and more difficulty through the churning water. Geralt stopped in the basin where Dandelion had found the skull.

He stopped and turned, trying to recover his composure.

The point of his sword pierced the first in the temple and ripped through the second, which was wielding a sort of hatchet. The third fled.

The Witcher tried then to hurry up the ravine, but the swirl of an explosive wave filled the chasm with a crash, tearing at the rocks and pulling him down in its undertow. Colliding with one of the sea creatures, Geralt kicked at it. Something grabbed him by the legs and dragged him toward the depths. His shoulder struck against the rock; the Witcher opened his eyes just in time to see the dark outline of his attackers and two quick flashes. He parried the first with his sword and instinctively blocked the second with his left hand. Geralt felt a shock and pain, then the aggressive irritation of salt. He kicked off from the bottom with his feet. Swimming to the surface, he drew the Sign with his fingers. The muffled explosion pierced his eardrums. If I get through this alive, he thought, striking the water with his hands and feet, if I make it through this, I'll go see Yen Vengerberg, try to do something else... If I get out alive...

He thought he heard the sound of a trumpet or a horn.

The wave that exploded anew into the shaft threw him face-down onto a large rock. Geralt distinctly heard the horn now, and the screams of Dandelion, reaching him from all directions at once. Snorting saltwater from his nose, he looked around himself, pushing the wet hair from his face.

The Witcher found himself at the point where they began their excursion. Flat on his stomach on the pebbles. All around, the surf was producing white foam.

Behind him, in the ravine that had in the meantime expanded into a bay, a gray dolphin danced on the waves. The young siren was riding on its back, her celadon hair windblown. Her breasts were magnificent.

“White-haired one!” she sang, signaling with a hand that held a long spiral shell. “Are you alive?”

“I'm alive,” the Witcher said, astonished.

The foam around him was becoming pink. The salt on his rigid left shoulder stung intensely. The sleeves of his jacket had been shredded. Blood was flowing. I got out, he thought. I made it again. But no, I will never find her.

He saw Dandelion approaching at a run over the wet rocks.

“I've stopped them,” sang the siren before blowing again into her conch shell. “But not for long! Run and don't come back, white-haired one! The sea... It's not for you!”

“I know,” he shouted back. “I know. Thank you, Sh'eenaz!”

### Part VII

“Dandelion,” asked Little-Eye, using her teeth to tear the end of the bandage while she pressed the knot against the Witcher's wrist. “Can you explain where all those shells packed under the stair came from? Drouhard's wife is doing the housework and she doesn't know what to think.”

“Shells?” Dandelion sounded surprised. “What shells? I have no idea. Perhaps ducks dropped them on their migration home?”

Geralt hid his smile in the shadows. He remembered swearing his silence to Dandelion, who spent the whole afternoon opening the shells and digging out the slimy meat. He injured his finger and tore his shirt without finding a single pearl. No surprise there, since there was no chance that they were pearl mussels. The idea of making soup was immediately rejected after opening the first mussel, the appearance of which was so repulsive and the smell so strong that they had tears in their eyes.

Little-Eye finished Geralt's bandage and sat on the side of the tub. He thanked the girl, inspecting his skillfully bandaged hands. The wound was deep and long enough to reach his elbow; the Witcher suffered with each movement. The wound had been temporarily dressed by the sea, but before they could return home, it had started to bleed again. Just before the girl's arrival, Geralt had applied to his forearm an elixir to promote blood clotting and numb the pain. Essi found him in the process of trying, with Dandelion's help, to stitch the wound with fishing line. Essi cursed at them and took over dressing the wounds. Meanwhile, Dandelion recounted the story of the battle, repeating several times that he reserved the exclusive rights to the ballad of the events. Essi, of course, inundated the Witcher with questions that he could not answer. She reacted very badly to what she considered an effort to hide something. She became sullen and stopped asking questions.

“Agloval already knows everything,” she said. “You were seen going home, and Drouhard's wife went to tell everyone that she had seen blood on the stairs. Everyone rushed to the rocks in hopes of seeing corpses washed ashore by the waves. They're still looking, but I understand that they've found nothing.”

“And they will find nothing,” the Witcher said. “I'll pay a visit to Agloval tomorrow. Ask him, if you can, to stop people from going near the Dragon's Teeth until further notice. But take care not to say a word about this staircase and Dandelion's fantasies about the city of Ys. The treasure-hunters would flock to it in droves and we would have many more corpses on our hands...”

“I'm not a gossip.” Essi pouted, forcefully pushing the circlet back on her forehead. “If I ask you something, it's not so that I can run and disclose everything like a washerwoman.”

“I'm sorry.”

“I have to go out,” Dandelion informed them. “I have an appointment with Akeretta. Geralt, I'm taking your jacket, because mine is still dirty and wet.”

“Everything is wet here,” Little-Eye remarked mockingly, giving the pile of clothes on the ground a vengeful kick with her boot. “How could you? We need to hang the clothesline, dry it properly... You're terrible.”

“It will dry out well enough on its own.”

Dandelion extracted the Witcher's wet jacket and admired the silver studs riveted to the sleeves.

“Stop talking nonsense! And that, what is that? Oh no! The bag is still filled with mud and seaweed! And what is that? Ugh!”

Geralt and Dandelion looked silently at the cobalt blue shell that Essi held in both hands. They had forgotten its existence. The mold that coated it stank horribly.

“It's a gift,” said the troubadour, backing toward the door. “Tomorrow, it's your birthday, isn't it, Doll? Well, it's your present.”

“It?”

“It's beautiful, eh?” Dandelion sniffed before adding quickly: “On behalf of Geralt. He's the one who chose it. Oh... It's getting late. Farewell...”

Little-Eye was silent for a moment after Dandelion left. The Witcher looked at the foul-smelling shell, blushing with shame at the troubadour's attitude and his own.

“You remembered my birthday?” Essi asked, formulating each world carefully and holding the shell as far from herself as possible. “Really?”

“Give me that,” he replied sharply. Geralt got up from his mattress, protecting his bandaged hand. “I beg your pardon for that idiot...”

“But no,” she protested, seizing the small knife that was hanging from her belt. “It's a very beautiful shell that I want to keep as a souvenir. I just need to clean it and get rid of... whatever it contains. I'll throw it out the window for the cats.”

Something struck the floor, bouncing. Geralt widened his eyes and saw the thing in front of Essi. It was a pearl. A perfectly opalescent and polished azure-blue pearl, big as a swollen pea.

“By the gods...” Little-Eye saw it in turn. “Geralt... a pearl!”

“A pearl,” he repeated, laughing. “You will still get a present, Essi. I'm glad.”

“Geralt, I can't accept it. This pearl is worth at least...”

“It's yours,” he interrupted. “Even if he is an idiot, Dandelion really thought about your birthday. He kept saying that he wanted to please you. And so, fate has had its way.”

“And you, Geralt?”

“Me?”

“Do you also want to please me? This pearl is so beautiful... It must be very valuable... You don't regret it?”

“I'm glad that you're pleased. And if I regret anything... it's that there is only one. And...”

“Yes?”

“And that I haven't known you as long as Dandelion. I didn't know the date of your birthday. I wish I could give you gifts and make you happy... and call you Doll.”

She threw herself violently on his neck. Geralt had anticipated the movement, turning his head for a cool kiss on the cheek. He hugged her gently but with some reservation. He felt the girl's body stiffen and slowly withdraw, but no farther than the length of the arms she was always resting on her shoulders. He knew what she wanted, but he did not meet her expectations: he was not attracted to her.

Essi released him then and turned toward the dirty window, which was ajar.

“Of course,” she said abruptly. “You hardly know me. I forgot...”

“Essi,” he replied after a moment of silence. “I...”

“I hardly know you either,” she exploded, interrupting him. “So what? I love you. I can't do anything about that. Not a thing.”

“Essi!”

“Yes, I love you, Geralt. It doesn't matter to me what you think. I loved you from the moment I saw you in the wedding hall.”

The poet bowed her head in silence.

She stood right before him; Geralt was sorry that she was not the fish-eyed creature hiding its sword under the water; with it, at least, he had a fighting chance.

“You have nothing to say,” she said. “Nothing, not a word.”

I'm tired, he thought, and terribly weak. I need to sit down; my vision is foggy; I've lost some blood; and I haven't eaten anything... I need to sit down. Damn bedroom... May it burn to the ground in a thunderstorm. No furniture; if there were at least two stupid chairs and a table we could share and converse easily and hold hands in safety. I am condemned to sit on a mattress and ask her to do the same. Nothing is more dangerous than a mattress stuffed with straw into which one sinks and has his movements too restricted to dodge...

“Sit next to me, Essi.”

The girl joined him on the mattress, hesitantly and with some delay, far from him. Too far.

“When I heard,” she murmured, breaking the silence, “that Dandelion dragged you back covered in blood, I left the house like a madwoman; I was in shock, I ran blindly. And then... you know what I thought? That it was magic; that you had secretly cast a spell; that you had charmed me with unfair means; your sign, your wolfs-head medallion, your evil eye. That's what I thought, but I didn't stop running, because I knew then that I accepted... that I surrendered to the influence of your power. But the reality proved to be even worse. You didn't cast anything of the sort, Geralt; you didn't use any spell to seduce me. Why? Why haven't you bewitched me?”

The Witcher was silent.

“If it was nothing but magic,” she continued, “the situation would be simple and easy to resolve. I would submit, happily, to your power. But then... then I... I don't know what is happening to me...”

By the devil, he thought, if, when she is with me, Yennefer feels exactly what I'm feeling now, I sympathize with her plight. I'll never be surprised by her reactions; I'll never hate them... never.

I expected of Yennefer - as is expected of me now - that the impossible be achieved: something even more impossible than the liaison between Agloval and Sh 'eenaz. Yennefer had the deep conviction that a little dedication was not enough; and that our situation called for a sacrifice over and over again, without any guarantee that it would be enough. No, I will no longer blame Yennefer for being unable and unwilling to give me a little bit of attention. I know now that the smallest trace is as heavy as gold.

“Geralt,” moaned Little-Eye, laying her head on his shoulder. “I am so ashamed of my powerlessness: a sort of supernatural fever, preventing me from breathing freely...”

Geralt continued to hold his silence.

“I always thought that it was a sublime and wonderful state of mind; dignified even in disappointment. But love is only vegetative, Geralt, horribly and banally vegetative. It's the state of someone who succumbs to illness, who takes poison. Because, like the one who is poisoned, the lover is desperate to get any antidote. At all. Even humiliation.”

“Essi, I beg you.”

“I feel humiliated by the object of my desires, and shamefully condemned to suffer in silence. I am ashamed to have embarrassed you, but I could not do otherwise. Helpless before the fate that afflicts me, it is as if I am sick; completely subject to an external grace. Diseases have always horrified me; they cause feebleness, confusion and loneliness. The disease is that we may go into remission.”

Geralt did not open his mouth.

“I should,” she moaned again, “be grateful that you don't try to take advantage of the situation. But this is not the case. I am ashamed of that too. I hate your silence and your eyes dilated with fear. I hate you... for your silence, your sincerity, your... Her too, I hate her, the sorceress; I would gladly settle things with her using my knife... I hate her. Order me to leave, Geralt, because I can't bring myself to do that on my own, and yet that is what I want: to leave, go to the town, go to the hostel. I want revenge on you for the shame I feel, my humiliation... I'll take the first opportunity...”

Damn, he thought, hearing her voice sink like a ball of rags tumbling down a staircase. She will start to cry, for sure. Then what, plague take it, what will I do?

Essi's hunched shoulders trembled like a leaf. The girl turned her head to weep without sobbing in a strangely silent and peaceful way.

I feel nothing at all, he thought with terror. Not the slightest emotion. If I hold her in my arms now, it will be a premeditated gesture, calculated, without spontaneity. I'm going to embrace her, not because I have any desire to, but because I feel that it's necessary. I don't feel any emotion.

When he embraced her shoulders, she stopped crying and dried her tears, shaking her head sharply. She turned so that he would not see her face and then her head fell heavily onto Geralt's chest.

A little dedication, he thought, it would only take a little... It would calm her down: an embrace, a kiss, a hug... She wants nothing more... And even if it is not enough, what's the difference? A little dedication and attention: she is beautiful and worthy of that much... If she wants more... It will calm her down. Making love gently, peacefully, in silence. But me... It's all the same to me, because Essi smells of verbena, not of lilac and gooseberry; she doesn't have cold and electrifying skin; Essi's hair is not a black tornado of shiny curls; Essi's eyes are beautiful, sweet, hot and blue, but they are not deep purple, cold and dispassionate. Essi will fall asleep afterward, will turn her face and part her lips; Essi will not smile in triumph. Because Essi...

Essi is not Yennefer.

That's why I can't grant her even a little dedication.

“Please, Essi, don't cry.”

“Yes...” She moved away from him very slowly. “Yes... I understand. It can't be helped.”

They sat in silence, seated beside one another on the bench of hay. Night was falling.

“Geralt,” she said suddenly, in a voice that trembled. “Perhaps... as with this shell, this strange gift... we could find a pearl in our relationship? Later? After a while?”

“I see this pearl,” he finally said with effort, “set in silver, a flower of finely-chiseled silver petals. I see it hanging around your neck on a chain, worn as I wear this medallion. It will be your talisman, Essi. A talisman that will protect you from every kind of evil.”

“My talisman,” she repeated, lowering her head. “A pearl trapped in silver just as I will never be free, myself. My jewel, my substitute. Can a talisman like that bring good luck?”

“Yes, Essi. Be sure of it.”

“Can I keep sitting with you?”

“You can.”

Sunset was approaching. Darkness was falling little by little. They stayed together, positioned next to each other on a mattress filled with straw in an attic room, devoid of furniture, with only an unlit candle stuck in a cold puddle of wax.

They sat in silence for a long time. Then Dandelion returned. They heard his footsteps, the strains of his lute and his humming. In the room, Dandelion noticed their presence without saying a word. Essi didn't say anything either. She stood and walked out without looking at them.

Dandelion made no comment, but the Witcher saw in his eyes the words he didn't say.

### Part VIII

“An intelligent race,” repeated Agloval, lost in thought, his elbows resting on the arms of his chair and his chin on his fists. “An underwater civilization. Ichtyoide creatures living at the bottom of the sea. A staircase leading into the depths. Geralt, do you take me for the most naive of dukes?”

Little-Eye, standing next to Dandelion, snorted angrily. Dandelion shook his head nervously. Geralt was a statue.

“It's all the same to me whether you believe me or not. My duty is to warn you. The boats sailing in the area and the people who approach the Dragon's Teeth at low tide are in mortal danger. If you want to verify my statements; if you want to take that risk: it's your business. I'm only giving you fair warning.”

“Ah!” Zelest intervened suddenly. The steward was sitting behind Agloval in a windowed alcove. “If these are monsters like elves or goblins, then they're not dangerous. My fear is of the greater monster: sorcery. From what the Witcher said, they are like ghosts of the watery depths. We can overcome ghosts. A story recently reached my ears about a magician who killed the ghosts of Lake Mokva in the blink of an eye. He threw a barrel of magic potion into the water: the ghosts were done for. Not a trace left.”

“That's right,” interrupted Drouhard, who until then had remained silent. “It didn't leave a trace... But the bream, pike, crayfish and mussels suffered the same fate; just like the weeds at the bottom; even the nearby alders dried up.”

“Marvelous,” Agloval commented drily. “Thank you for that brilliant idea, Zelest. Do you have any others?”

“That's right... That's right...” the steward continued, growing a deep red. “The magician overdid it a bit, he went a little too far. But I will succeed without a magician, Duke. The Witcher said that it's possible to fight and kill the monsters. Then it's a war, my lord. Like the old days. Nothing new for us! Dwarves lived in the mountains. Where are they now? Elvish savages and malevolent fairies can still be found in the forests, but they too will be done for soon. We must defend our land as our ancestors did...”

“And only my grandchildren will see the color of pearls once more?” interrupted the duke with a grimace. “We don't have time, Zelest.”

“It will be easy. I say: for each boat of fishermen, two boats of archers. The monsters will see reason, learn fear. Isn't that right, master Witcher?”

Geralt looked at him coldly without responding.

Agloval exposed his most noble profile, turning his head and biting his lips, then turned his gaze on the Witcher, blinking and frowning.

“You have not completed your mission, Geralt...” he said. “You have once again wasted the opportunity to do well. It is true that you have shown some good will, I don't deny that. But I am not paying you for good will; it's the result I pay for. It is the effectiveness that interests me, Witcher, and your effectiveness is in fact, pardon the term, pathetic.”

“Well said, my dear duke!” Dandelion cut in mockingly. “It's just a pity that you weren't with us at the Dragon's Teeth. We, the Witcher and myself, would have granted you the opportunity to meet one of the creatures surging from the sea with sword in hand. Then you would understand what the situation is and stop dithering about the payment you owe...”

“Like a fish-merchant,” said Little-Eye.

“I'm not in the habit of dithering, bargaining or arguing,” Agloval replied calmly. “I said that I will not give you a cent, Geralt. Our contract was in effect: remove the threat, eliminate the danger, make pearl diving safe. And what do you do? You tell me a romantic story about an intelligent race living at the bottom of the sea. You advise me to stay as far as possible from the place where my resources are gathered. What have you really done? You will have killed... how many, by the way?”

“Their number is not important,” Geralt responded, paling slightly. “For you at least, Agloval.”

“Precisely, and there is not even any evidence. If at least you had brought me the right hand of one of these fish-frogs, perhaps I would have given you the usual compensation for my ranger when he brings me a few pairs of wolf ears.”

“Well,” the Witcher said coldly, “there is nothing left for me to do but bid you farewell.”

“You are mistaken,” said the duke. “I propose a full-time job with an honest salary: captain of the armored guard that will now protect the fishermen. This is not a position for life; you can leave once this intelligent race knows to stay away from my people. What do you think?”

“Thank you, but I'm not interested,” the Witcher replied with a grimace. “Such work doesn't suit me. I believe that waging war against another race is idiotic. It may perhaps be an ideal activity for a bored and idle duke, but not for me.”

“Oh, but that's grand!” Agloval cried with a laugh. “That's just sublime! You reject my offer of a job fit for a king! You renounce, with the air of a rich man after a feast, a very handsome sum of money. Geralt, have you eaten anything today? No? And tomorrow? And the day after? Your options are dwindling, Witcher. It is difficult to make a living under ordinary circumstances, let alone with an arm in a sling...”

“How dare you!” Little-Eye yelled. “How dare you speak to him in that tone, Agloval? The arm he carries in a sling was injured during a mission that you yourself ordered! How can you behave in such a petty way?”

“Stop,” interrupted Geralt. “Stop, Essi. There's no point.”

“Wrong,” she replied with anger. “There is a point. Someone must finally tell the truth to the duke who owes his title to the fact that no-one wanted, aside from him, to reign over this tiny rock in the sea, and who thinks he is in any position to humiliate others.”

Agloval clenched his teeth, reddening, but remained silent.

“Yes, Agloval,” continued Essi, “you take pleasure in belittling your fellows; you love to look down on someone like the Witcher who was ready to die for your money. But you should know that the Witcher doesn't care about your scorn and your insults; that they don't make any impression on him at all; that he does not even take them into consideration. The Witcher doesn't even feel what your servants and subjects, Zelest and Drouhard, must feel: a deep and gnawing shame. The Witcher doesn't feel what we, Dandelion and myself, feel in your sight: disgust. Do you know, Agloval, why that is? I'll tell you: because the Witcher knows that he's better than you, that he is worth a thousand of you. That is what gives him his strength.”

Essi stopped. She looked down quickly so that Geralt would not have time to notice the tears beading at the corner of her beautiful eye. The girl brought her hand to the flower of silver petals at her neck, in the center of which was set an azure-blue pearl. The latticed petals of the mysterious flower had been carved by a master jeweler worthy of the title. The Witcher was pleased with the quality of the craftsman hired by Drouhard, who had paid for everything without requiring reimbursement.

“Therefore, my lord duke,” Little-Eye said, lifting her head, “do not insult the Witcher by offering a position as a mercenary in the army that you want to raise against the ocean. Do not embarrass yourself by presenting a proposition that can only provoke laughter. Have you figured it out yet? You can hire the services of a Witcher for a particular mission, to protect people from harm or threat; but you cannot buy a Witcher and use him for your own purposes. Because a Witcher, even injured and hungry, will always be better than you. That is why he spurns your miserable job. Do you understand?”

“No, Miss Daven,” Agloval replied coldly. “I don't understand. On the contrary, I understand less and less. The first thing that I don't understand is why I have not yet ordered that all three you be drawn and quartered, or certainly beaten and branded with a red-hot iron. You, Miss Daven, you try to convince us that you know everything, but then tell me why I should spare you?”

“But of course, right away,” the poet responded tit for tat. “It is because deep down, Agloval, in your heart, there is still a spark of dignity, a remaining trace of honor that the arrogance of the nouveau riche miscreant has not snuffed out. Deep down, Agloval: in the deepest place in your heart you are still capable of loving a mermaid.”

Agloval, white as a sheet, wiped his sweaty hands on the arms of his chair. Bravo thought the Witcher, bravo, Essi. You are brilliant. But he also felt tired, terribly tired.

“Get out,” Agloval ordered dully. “Be on your way. Go where you like. Leave me alone.”

“Farewell, duke,” said Essi. “Before I go, accept one more piece of advice, something that the Witcher should tell you, but I don't want him to forget. I will do so in his place.”

“I'm listening.”

“The ocean is vast, Agloval. No-one yet knows what the horizon hides, if it does hide something. The ocean is larger than the largest of the wild forests from which you drove the elves. It is more difficult to cross than any mountain or valley where you massacred the dwarves. At the bottom of the ocean lives a race outfitted with cuirasses, one that knows the secrets of forging metal. Be careful, Agloval. If the archers begin to accompany the fishermen, you will start a war against an enemy that you do not know. What you start could turn out to be a nest of hornets. I advise you, therefore, to give the sea to them, because the sea is not for you. You do not know, and you will never know where the steps lead that descend into the depths from the Dragon's Teeth.”

“You are mistaken, Miss Essi,” Agloval said quietly. “We know where the staircase leads. Even better: we will follow them, these Steps. We will discover what can be found on the other side of the ocean, if there is anything to be found. And we will take from this ocean all that we are able to take. If we are not capable, our children or our children's children will be. It is a matter of time. That is our undertaking, if we must fill the ocean with blood. Understand this, Essi, wise Essi, you who write in your ballads the chronicle of humanity. Life is not a ballad, poor girl, little poet with her charming eye blinded by the beauty of her own words. Life is a battle, as the Witchers, in their superiority over us, have learned. It is they who have led the way, who have carved the path and littered it with the corpses of those who have crossed the path of humanity. It is they who, with us, defend the world. We, Essi, we only continue this fight. It is we, not your ballads, who will create the chronicle of humanity. We have never needed Witchers more, because from now on nothing will stop us. Nothing.”

Essi paled and puffed on her circlet, violently shaking her head.

“Nothing at all, Agloval?”

“Nothing, Essi.”

The poet smiled. A sudden commotion filled the antechamber: the sound of footsteps and shouts. Paiges and guards burst into the room. They knelt and bowed, forming a hedge.

Sh'eenaz appeared in the doorway, wearing a sea-blue dress adorned with frills white as foam. A dizzying décolletage revealed the siren's charms, partially hidden and adorned by a collar of nephrite and lapis-lazuli worthy of admiration. Her celadon-green hair curled artfully and was retained by a tiara of coral and magnificent pearls.

“Sh'eenaz...” stammered Agloval, falling to his knees. “My... Sh'eenaz...”

The siren entered slowly with a stride that was light and graceful, as fluid as a wave. She stopped in front of the duke and, with a smile that displayed all her little white teeth, seized the dress in her small hands and lifted it high enough that everyone could see for himself the quality of work performed by the sea-witch. Geralt swallowed. The witch knew what nice legs were, obviously, and how to fashion them.

“Ah!” exclaimed Dandelion. “My ballad... That's exactly what I wrote in my ballad... For him, she traded her tail for legs, but she also lost her voice!”

“I haven't lost anything,” Sh'eenaz declared, singing these words in the common tongue. “For the moment. I feel brand new after that procedure.”

“You speak our language?”

“So what, is it forbidden? How are you, white-haired one? Oh, I see that your beloved is here also... Essi Daven, if I recall correctly. Do you know her a little better or still just barely?”

“Sh'eenaz...” Agloval stammered insistently, approaching her on his knees. “My love! My dear... my only... At last, you decided... At last, Sh'eenaz!”

With a distinguished gesture, the siren offered her hand to kiss.

“Ah yes, because I love you too, idiot. What kind of lover is incapable of a little dedication?”

### Part IX

Their departure from Bremervoord took place with a fresh morning mist veiling the intensity of the disc of the sun that appeared on the horizon. They had decided to leave as a trio, but without real discussion and without a common goal, wanting simply to stay together for a while longer.

They left the rocky cape, bidding farewell to the cliffs carved by the surf and jutting vertically from the beach, the strange limestone formations lapped by the wind and waves. Upon entering the green and floral valley of Dol Adalatte, the scent of the sea, the crash of surf and the savage cries of seagulls remained in their nostrils and their ears.

The talkative Dandelion kept jumping from subject to subject: the country of Bars and its idiotic custom of forcing young girls to remain virgins until marriage; the iron birds of the island of Inis Porhoet; the water of life and the water of death; the taste and the narcotic properties of the sapphire wine called cill; the royal quadruplets of Ebbing, dubbed with the quarrelsome names of Putzi, Gritzi, Mitzi, and Juan Pablo Vassermiller. He also criticized the new trends in music and poetry started by his competitors, poor specimens, he said, without a true artist among them.

Geralt kept his silence. Essi, too, was quiet or only responded with partial words. The Witcher felt and avoided the look she cast toward him.

They crossed the Adalatte river on a ferry whose rope they had to tow themselves as the ferryman, white as a sheet and lost in a state of inebriation approaching epilepsy, could not release the mooring post that he held in both hands and responded systematically to all questions put to him with an inexpressive “beuh.”

The country on the other side of the Adalatte pleased the Witcher. The villagers situated along the river were for the most part circled by fences, suggesting that there would be work for him.

Earlier that afternoon, enjoying a break - they left Dandelion watching the horses while they drank - Essi approached Geralt without warning.

“Geralt,” she said softly. “I... I can't stand it. It's more than I can bear.”

The Witcher tried to avoid her gaze, but she would not let him escape. Essi toyed with the azure pearl set in the silver flower that was suspended around her neck. Geralt regretted anew that she was not the fish-eyed monster hiding its sword beneath the water instead.

“Geralt... We must resolve this problem, mustn't we?”

She waited for his response: a word, just one, the slightest hint of a reaction. But the Witcher knew that he had nothing that he could dedicate to her and did not want to lie to her. In fact, he didn't dare tell the truth for fear of hurting her.

Dandelion, ever-reliable Dandelion with his habitual tact, at last salvaged the situation by appearing suddenly.

“Yes, that's right!” he yelled, plunging a stick into the water to scatter the rushes and enormous river-nettles. “You really have to make a decision, it's about time! I don't want to watch the act you're putting on any longer! What are you waiting for from him, Doll? Something impossible? And you, Geralt, what do you expect? That Little-Eye read your thoughts like... yes, like the other one? And that she contents herself with the situation you're comfortable with, where, without divulging your emotions, you are required to give neither explanation nor refusal? How long will it take you to hear? When do you plan to understand? In how many years? In the form of distant memories? Tomorrow, we part ways, by the devil! Oh, I've had enough of you two. Listen: I'll cut myself a hazel branch to fish with, and you, meanwhile, will have time for everything you have to say. Say it all! Try to come to a mutual understanding. It's not as difficult as you think. Then, by all the gods, do it. Do it with him, Doll. Do it with her, Geralt, and be good for her. And then, by the plague, either move on or...”

Dandelion turned violently on his heel, breaking a bulrush and swearing. He planned to fish until nightfall with a horsehair mounted to a hazel branch.

When he disappeared, Geralt and Essi remained motionless for a long moment, leaning against the trunk of a willow tree overlooking the stream. They were silent, hand in hand. Then the Witcher began to talk at length and in a low voice; Little-Eye listened with tears in her eyes.

Then they did it.

And all was in order.

### Part X

The next day, they organized a sort of farewell dinner. Essi and Geralt had bought a lamb in a village, already prepared. During the haggling, Dandelion made off with fresh garlic, onions, and carrots from the garden behind the house. They also stole a pot to prepare it in, nimbly slipping it through the farrier's hedge. The Witcher had to plug the holes by using the Igni sign.

The farewell dinner was held in a clearing deep in the forest. The fire crackled cheerfully. Geralt carefully turned the prepared animal, stirring the contents of the steaming pot with the stripped branch of a pine tree. Little-Eye, who knew nothing about cooking, was content to make the atmosphere agreeable by singing ribald verses with her lute.

It was a dinner party. In the morning, it was agreed that each would go his own way in search of what he already had. But unaware of that fact, ignorant of just how far the road would take them, they had decided to separate.

After eating their fill and drinking the beer that Drouhard had offered them, they talked and laughed together. Dandelion and Essi sparred in song. Geralt, lying on spruce branches with his hands behind his head, thought that he had never heard such beautiful voices and such beautiful ballads. He thought of Yennefer. He also thought of Essi. He had the feeling that...

At the end of the evening, Little-Eye sang with Dandelion the celebrated duet of Cynthia and Vertven, a marvelous love song beginning with the words: “These are not my first tears...” Geralt had the impression that even the trees leaned in to listen to the troubadours.

Then Little-Eye, who smelled of verbena, lay down next to him, pressed against his shoulder, lay her head on his chest, then sighed perhaps twice before falling into a peaceful sleep. The Witcher did not sleep until much later.

Dandelion, absorbed by the glow of the fire that was going out little by little, remained seated and played a few discreet chords on his lute.

He began with a few measures that he transformed into a quiet melody. The words were born with the music, captured by it like insects in translucent amber.

The ballad recounted the story of a certain Witcher and of a certain poet: the circumstances of their encounter at the seaside, amid the squalling of the gulls; their mutual love at first sight; the sincerity of their love; their indifference toward a death that could not destroy this love nor separate them.

Dandelion knew that few would believe the story told by the ballad, but he didn't care: one writes a ballad for the emotion it conveys.

Dandelion could have changed, some years later, the content of that ballad to reflect the truth. He did not. The true story was indeed moving. Who would hear, indeed, that the Witcher and the poet parted and never saw each other again? That four years later, Little-Eye died of smallpox in Vizima during an epidemic? That Dandelion carried her body in his arms far from the funeral pyres burning away in the city, alone and quiet, into the forest, and buried with her, according to her wishes, two objects: her lute and the azure pearl with which she was never parted.

No, Dandelion kept the first version of his ballad, but he never sang it again. Not ever, for anyone.

In the morning, a hungry and furious werewolf took advantage of the darkness of the night that had not yet dissipated and invaded the camp; but, recognizing the voice of Dandelion, he listened for a moment to the melody before disappearing into the forest.

## The Sword of Destiny

He discovered the first body around noon.

The sight of the dead rarely shook the Witcher. His gaze passed over most of them with perfect indifference. But not this time.

The boy was fifteen. He lay on his back, legs wide apart; something, on his lips, was frozen, like a grimace of terror. Geralt knew nonetheless that the child had died on the spot, that he had not suffered, that he probably didn't even see death coming. The arrow had pierced his eye and penetrated deep into the skull through the eye socket. The fletching consisted of tiger-pheasant feathers, painted yellow and jutting above the grass.

Geralt looked around himself quickly. He found what was looking for without difficulty: a second arrow, identical, stuck in the trunk of a pine tree, about six steps back. He understood what had happened. The child had not heeded the warning: frightened by the whistle and the impact of the arrow, he had taken off running in the wrong direction. The side that the arrow told him not to go, to turn around. The lightning hiss and the poison pen, the brief impact of the point that bit into the wood. “Human! Not another step!” That was the declaration of the whistle and the impact. “Human! Begone! Go quickly from Brokilone. You have conquered the entire world, human, you have left your mark everywhere, you peddle everything in the name of modernity, an era of change, what you call progress. But we want neither you nor your progress. We don't want any of your changes. We want nothing that you bring with you.” Whistle, impact. “Out of Brokilone!”

Human, out of Brokilone, thought the Witcher. Even if you are fifteen, crossing the forest, driven by fear, without knowing your way. Even if you are seventy, forced to gather firewood, because your infirmity has warranted that you be chased from the cottage and deprived of food. Even if you are six, drawn by the flowers that bloom in the sun-drenched clearing. Out of Brokilone! Whistling, impact.

In the past, he thought, before shooting to kill, they gave two warnings. Three, even.

In the past, he thought, continuing on his way. In the past.

Progress...

The forest did not seem to warrant such a sinister aura. It was, in fact, terribly wild and impenetrable, but this was nothing out of the ordinary in the depths of a forest where each shaft of light, each touch of sun that the leaves and branches of the large trees allowed to filter through, was immediately exploited by dozens of young birch, alder and hornbeam, by brambles, ferns and junipers, covering with their shoots a land of brittle wood, of dry branches and rotted trunks, remains of the oldest trees at the end of their battle and their life.

There was not the heavy, ominous silence ordinarily associated with the places where these things dominated. On the contrary, Brokilone was alive. Buzzing insects, lizards rustling underfoot, beetles shining in rainbow colors, thousands of spiders crawling on canvases where droplets sparkled, woodpeckers striving against the trunks, jays chattering.

Brokilone was alive.

But the Witcher could not allow himself to be complacent. He knew where he was and did not forget the boy with the pierced eye. Among the mosses and pine needles, he sometimes saw bleached bones stripped by carnivorous ants.

He continued on his way - cautiously, but swiftly. The tracks were fresh. He thought he could make the capture, stop, and return to the people that he served. He thought, despite everything, he was not too late.

He was wrong.

He would not have noticed the second body without the reflection of the sun on the sword that the dead man clutched in his hand. He was a grown man. The simplicity of his dark gray garments revealed a humble origin. Except for blood stains blooming from two arrows planted in his chest, his clothing was clean and new: he was not, a simple valet.

Geralt looked around him and found the third corpse, dressed in a leather jacket and a green tunic. The ground around the body was entirely trampled, the moss and the needles stamped down into the dirt. There could be no doubt: this man had suffered at length.

He heard a groan.

Quickly, he parted the juniper branches and saw the deep hole that they had concealed. In the hollow, a man of strong constitution was lying on the exposed roots of a pine. His hair was black, like his beard, contrasting with the terrible, even deathly pallor of his face. His light deerskin doublet was red with blood.

The Witcher vaulted into the hole. The wounded man opened his eyes.

“Geralt...” he moaned. “Oh gods... I must be dreaming...”

“Freixenet?” said the Witcher, surprised. “You're here?”

“I... ah...”

“Don't move.” Geralt knelt next to him. “Where are you hurt? I don't see the arrow...”

“It went clean through. I broke the tip, then I took it out... Listen, Geralt...”

“Shut up,” Geralt said, “because you're losing all your blood. You have a pierced lung. I need to get you out of here, damn it! What the devil were you doing in Brokilone? This is dryad territory, their sanctuary; no-one leaves alive. Don't you know that?”

“Later...” Freixenet moaned. He spat blood. “Later, I'll explain... Now, get me out of here... Ah! Damn it! Gently... ah...”

“I can't.” Geralt stood, looking around. “You're too heavy...”

“Leave me,” the wounded man muttered. “Leave me, it's a shame... But save her... By all the gods, save her...”

“Who?”

“The princess... ah... Find her, Geralt...”

“Keep quiet, by all the devils! I'll find something to pull you out of there.”

Freixenet coughed loudly and spat again; a dense stream of blood fell from his beard. The Witcher swore. He leapt out of the hole and examined his surroundings. Needing two young trees, he went to the edge of the clearing where he had noticed an alder.

Whistle, impact.

Geralt froze. The arrow shot into the trunk at head-height was fletched with a hawk feather. He looked in the direction indicated by the shaft; he knew where it was fired from. About fifty paces away there was another hole, a tree stump lifting its tangle of roots into the sky and still clinging to an enormous mass of sandy soil. Further on, there was a massive blackthorn and the darkness was striped by the light bands of the trunks of birch trees. He saw no-one. He knew he would see nothing.

He raised both hands in the air, very gently.

“Ceddmil! Va an Eithne medth e Duen Canelll Essed Gwynbleidd!”

[Not quite sure but this means “Greetings, I go to meant Eithne in Duen Canell. I am White Wolf”]

He heard the muffled rustling of a bowstring, then saw an arrow shot deliberately for him that he saw in time. He lifted his gaze, stopped in his tracks and tumbled to aside. Geralt froze. The arrow was planted almost vertically in the moss, two steps from him. Almost instantly, a second arrow joined the first at an identical angle. He feared that he would never see the flight of the third.

“Medth Eithne!” he repeated. “Essed Gwynbleidd!” [Meet Eithne, I am white wolf, maybe Medth means I am friends with? Or take me too? At this point in the story I don’t think he is attempting to meat Eithne, so I am thinking Medth means I’m friends with]

“Gldeddyvvort!” [Sword!]

A voice like a whisper of wind responded. A voice, not an arrow. He was alive. Gently, the Witcher loosened the buckle of his belt and removed his sword, holding it far from his body and then tossing it to the ground. The second dryad emerged without a sound from behind the trunk of a tree surrounded by junipers, less than ten paces from him. Although she was petite and slender, the trunk seemed thinner still. Geralt did not understand how he could have failed to notice her arrival. Her garment - a harlequin fabric combining several shades of green and brown, in leaves and scraps of bark, but not at all detracting from the grace of her body - had effectively camouflaged her. Her hair, tied back by a black scarf at her brow, was olive-colored, and stripes painted with walnut ink streaked her face.

More to the point, the dryad was drawing her bow and taking aim.

“Eithne!” he cried.

“Thdess aep!” [shut up]

He was silent, docile, unmoving, hands held away from his body. The dryad did not lower her weapon.

“Dunca!” she cried. “Braenn! Caemm vort!” [Dunca, Braenn, come here]

The one that had fired on him appeared from the blackthorn and crossed the tree stump, jumping deftly across the hole. Despite the mass of dried branches, he heard none crack beneath her feet. He felt behind him a slight rustle, like the sound of a leaf carried by the wind. He knew that the third dryad stood behind him.

One of them picked up Geralt's sword in a movement like lightning. She had hair the color of honey, tied back with a headband of rushes. A quiver filled with arrows hung on her back.

The one that was the farthest away, near the hole, was fast approaching. Her clothing was indistinguishable from that of her companions. She covered her dusky brick-colored hair in a braided crown of clover and heather. Her bow remained lowered, but an arrow was already nocked.

“Ten thesse in medth aep Eithne llev?” she asked, coming very close.

Her voice was extraordinarily melodic; her eyes were enormous and black.

“Ess' Gwynbleidd?”

“Ae... aesseld...” he stammered. But the words of the Brokiloneon dialect that sang from the mouths of the dryads could not escape from his mouth and were bruised by his lips. “Does one of you speak the common tongue? I don't know much...”

“An'vdill. Vort Hinge,” she cut in.

“I am Gwynbleidd, the White Wolf. Madame Eithne knows me. I have business with her. I have lived before in Brokilone. In Duen Canell.”

“Gywnbleidd.”

The one with brick-red hair blinked her eyes.

“Vatt'ghern?”

“Yes,” he confirmed. “The Witcher.”

The olive-haired one restrained her anger and lowered her bow. The one with brick-red hair watched Geralt with large eyes; her green-tinted face remained completely motionless, dead, as if she were a statue. That immobility did not allow him to judge the beauty of her features; the thought stumbled on her indifference, insensitivity, and even cruelty. Geralt silently reproached himself for his poor judgment in seeing false humanity in this dryad. He should have known that she was simply older than the two others. Despite their appearances, she was actually much, much older.

Silence hung over their indecision. Geralt heard Freixenet moaning, groaning, coughing. The one with brick-red hair had also heard, but her face remained impassive. The Witcher put his hands on his hips.

“There, in the hole,” he said calmly, “is an injured man. Without help, he will die.”

“Thdess aep!” [shut up]

The olive-haired one drew her bow, directing the tip of the arrow directly at Geralt's face.

“You want to let him die?” he continued, without raising his voice. “To choke gradually on his own blood, so simply? In that case, it would be better to finish him.”

“Shut up,” the dryad barked, using the common tongue.

Even so, she lowered her weapon and released the tension of the string. She turned to the second with an inquisitive look. The one with brick-red hair nodded, indicating the hole beneath the tree stump. The olive-haired one ran to it, quickly, without a sound.

“I want to see Madame Eifhne,” Geralt repeated. “I'm on a mission...”

Indicating the honey-haired one, the eldest said:

“She will lead you to Duen Canell. Go.”

“Frei... and the wounded man?”

The dryad looked at him, blinking her eyes. She continued to toy with the nocked arrow. “Nevermind that,” she replied. “Go. She will take you.”

“But...”

“Va'en vortl” she said curtly, her lips thinning.

Geralt shrugged his shoulders and turned to the honey-haired one. She seemed to him to be the youngest of the three, but he could be mistaken. He noticed the blue of her eyes.

“Let's go.”

“Very well,” the honey-haired one responded. After a moment of hesitation, she returned his sword. “Let's go.”

“What's your name?” he asked.

“Shut up.”

She made off quickly through the heart of the forest without giving him a glance. It was an effort for Geralt to follow her. The dryad was trying - deliberately, Geralt knew - to make the man she was guiding collapse finally into the brush, complaining, exhausted, unable to continue. Too young to know that he was a Witcher, she was unaware that she was not dealing with a human.

The girl - Geralt understood that she was not a born dryad - stopped suddenly and turned. He saw her breasts heaving beneath her dappled garment; she was trying with difficulty not to pant.

“Shall we slow down?” he suggested with a smile.

“Yea.” She gave him a grudging look. “Aeen essedth Sidh?” [are you an elf?]

“No, I'm not an elf. What's your name?”

“Braenn,” she replied, resuming the journey a little more steadily, without any intention of losing him.

They walked together then, one beside the other. Geralt caught the scent of her sweat: the ordinary perspiration of an ordinary girl. The sweat of dryads recalled the smell of crushed willow branches.

“And what were you called before?”

She fixed her eyes on his. Her lips drew back suddenly. He thought that she would get angry or order him to shut up. She did neither.

“I don't remember,” she responded, hesitating.

He thought she was lying.

She didn't appear to be more than sixteen years old and could not have lived in Brokilone for more than six or seven years: if she had been taken in earlier, even as a small child or a newborn, he would not be able to recognize her as a human. Blues eyes and fair hair could also occur among the dryads. Dryad children, conceived in celebrated encounters with elves or humans, only inherited the natural qualities of their mothers and could only be born as daughters. It was exceedingly rare, and in general only in later generations, that a child was born with the eyes or the hair of an anonymous male ancestor. Geralt was nevertheless sure that Braenn did not possess a drop of dryad blood. That was of no great importance. By birth or not, she was now well and truly one of them.

“And you?” She watched him with suspicion. “What is your name?”

“Gywnbleidd.”

She nodded. “Well then... Gwynbleidd.”

They moved more slowly than before, but always with a certain velocity. Braenn, it was obvious, knew Brokilone well. If he had been alone, the Witcher would not be able to maintain such a pace and remain on course. Braenn quickly reached the edge of the forest; she followed the winding and hidden paths, crossed ravines at an agile run across the fallen logs that served as bridges, waded bravely into the glossy expanses of marshes green with duckweed that the Witcher had never dared to cross on his own, losing many hours or even days to get around them.

Braenn's presence alone did not protect Geralt from the wilderness. There were places where the dryad slowed her pace, advancing very carefully, feeling the ground, taking the Witcher by the hand. He understood why: the pitfalls of Brokilone were legendary. There was talk of spiked pits, arrow traps, falling trees, the terrible “hedgehog”: a ball bristling with spines that was attached to a rope and fell unexpectedly, clearing all in its path. There were also places where Braenn stopped and whistled melodiously. Whistles then answered her from the brush. There were places, too, where she stopped, her hand resting on an arrow in her quiver, ushering Geralt into silence and waiting, tensely, for the source of sounds in distant thickets.

They had to make camp despite the efficiency of their pace. Braenn invariably chose a place at a height where gusts of hot air regulated the temperature. They slept on dried ferns, very close to one another: a dryad custom. In the middle of the night, Braenn snuggled tightly against him. Nothing more. He took her in his arms. Nothing more. She was a dryad. It was only for warmth.

They resumed their journey at dawn, when it was still nearly dark.

### Part II

They crossed a meadow dotted with lesser wooded slopes, following the meandering of the misty valleys and leaving behind them the large grassy clearings and devastated forests.

Braenn stopped once more. She inspected their surroundings. Her attitude might indicate that she had lost her way, but Geralt knew that was impossible. Taking advantage of the pause, he sat on a fallen trunk.

He heard then a scream. Short. Strident. Desperate.

Braenn immediately went down on one knee and retrieved two arrows from her quiver. Taking one between her teeth, she slotted the second and drew her bow, aiming judiciously through the bushes.

“Don't shoot!” Geralt cried.

He leapt over the tree trunk and crossed through the mountains of vegetation.

In a modest clearing at the foot of a rocky escarpment, a small figure dressed in a gray jacket was cornered. Five paces from him, something was approaching slowly and disturbing the grass. Something dark brown and measured in yards. At first, Geralt thought that it was a snake, but he noticed the yellow legs, moving, hooked, and the plated segments of its long thorax. He realized that this was not a snake. It was much more dangerous.

Pressed against the tree, the little one was continuously making plaintive little cries. The long quivering antenna of the giant centipede, sensing odors and heat, rose up from the grass.

“Don't move!” shouted the Witcher, stamping to divert the attention of the insectoid.

But the centipede did not react: its antennae were busy locating the scent of its next victim. The monster moved into action, curled itself in an 'S' and charged. Its bright yellow legs twinkled through the grass with the regularity of a galley's oars.

“Yghern!” Braenn cried. [giant centipede!]

In two bounds, Geralt reached the clearing. He broke into a run, drawing the sword from the sheath on his back. With a blow from his hip, taking advantage of his momentum, he pushed the petrified little one to one side and into a bramble bush. The insectoid began to quiver in the grass; it threw itself then at the Witcher, raising up its front segments and snapping fangs that were dripping with venom. Geralt danced, leaping over the plated body of the monster and, turning, tried to strike at a vulnerable gap in the carapace with his sword. The monster was nevertheless too fast; the sword skidded over the chitinous armor without biting in, as if a thick carpet of moss was cushioning the blow. Geralt tried to escape, but not swiftly. With colossal force, the insectoid wrapped its abdomen around the legs of the Witcher, who lost his balance. He tried to extract himself. Without success.

The centipede curved and tried to seize him with its forceps. In the process, it violently scraped the tree, coiling around it. At that moment, an arrow whistled over Geralt's head; it loudly pierced the animal's carapace, nailing it to the trunk of the tree. The centipede twisted, broke the arrow and escaped; but two other projectiles had already struck. The Witcher kicked away from the abdomen and rolled to one side.

On one knee, Braenn shot arrow after arrow with incredible speed, and without missing the insectoid. It broke the shafts; but each additional arrow pinned it to the tree. The flat animal mouth, glistening and dark brown, gnashed its jaws; it snapped its mandibles at the places where the arrows pierced it, thinking stupidly that it could hit its enemy that way and wound him.

Geralt jumped aside and put an end to the fight with a single blow, hurling his sword through the air. The tree served the purpose of a chopping block.

Braenn approached slowly, her bow always drawn; she gave a kick to the thorax of the animal that continued to squirm in the grass and wriggle its legs; she spat.

“Thanks,” the Witcher said, crushing the severed head of the centipede with his heel.

“For what?”

“You saved my life.”

The dryad looked at him. There was nothing in her expression, neither comprehension nor emotion. “Yghern,” she responded, tapping the still-squirming carcass with her foot. “He broke some of my arrows.”

“You saved my life and that of this little wood-nymph,” Geralt repeated. “But by the devil, where has she gone?”

Braenn carefully parted the thorn bushes, digging deeply with her arm through the spiny shoots.

“It's as I thought,” she exclaimed, extracting the small figure in a gray jacket from the brush. “Look at this, Gwynbleidd.”

It was not a dryad. Neither was it an elf, a sylph, a pixie, or a hobbit. It was the most human of little girls. Even within the territory of Brokilone: the place least conducive to such a being...

She had fair hair, mouse-gray, and large impetuous green eyes. She could not have been more than ten years old.

“Who are you?” he asked. “Where did you come from?”

She did not respond. Where have I seen her before? he thought. I have already seen her somewhere. Her or someone very like her. “Don't be afraid,” he told her, looking embarrassed.

“I'm not afraid,” she muttered under her breath. She was visibly cold.

“We must eclipse ourselves,” Braenn interrupted, inspecting their surroundings. “When one yghern appears, a second arrives, sometimes simultaneously. I don't have many more arrows.”

The little girl turned her gaze to the dryad, opened her mouth and rubbed it with the palm of her hand to wipe away the dust.

“But by the devil, who are you then?” Geralt repeated, staring at her. “What are you doing in... in this forest? How did you get here?”

The little girl bowed her head, sniffing.

“Are you deaf? Who are you? I'm asking you. What's your name?”

“Ciri,” she confessed in a sniff.

Geralt turned. Braenn, who was checking her bow, furtively met his glance.

“Listen, Braenn...”

“Sir?”

“Is it possible... Is it possible that she... that she has escaped you... that she has fled from Duen Canell?”

“Sir?”

“Don't play the fool with me,” he said, getting angry. “I know that you take young humans. Did you yourself arrive in Brokilone by falling from the sky? I ask you: is it possible that...”

“No,” the dryad cut in. “I have never seen her before.”

Gerald watched the little girl. Her tousled ash-gray hair, littered with pine needles and leaves, nevertheless seemed clean: no odor of smoke, manure or grease. Her hands, while certainly dirty, were small and delicate, without scars or blemishes. The clothing she was wearing, a gray jacket with a red hood, betrayed no origin, but her ankle-boots were crafted from calf leather. She was decidedly not a country girl. Freixenet! the Witcher remembered suddenly. This is the girl Freixenet was searching for! It was for her that he entered Brokilone.

“Where are you from, little brat? I'm asking you.”

“How dare you address me in that way?”

The little girl insolently raised her head and stomped her foot against the ground, but the soft moss cushioned the gesture.

“Ah!” exclaimed the Witcher, smiling. “There we are, Princess. In name only, because the outward appearance remains miserable. You come from Verden, don't you? You know there are people searching for you? Don't worry, I'll bring you home. Listen, Braenn...”

No sooner than he looked away, the little girl turned and ran.

“Bloede Turd!” yelled the dryad, grabbing her quiver. “Caemm 'ere!”

The little girl ran blindly, trampling the ground and stumbling over the dry branches.

“Stop!” Geralt cried. “Where are you, little pest?”

Braenn instantly drew her bow. The arrow whistled violently in a low arc; the point stuck loudly in a tree and ruffled the hair of the little girl, who recoiled and fell to the ground.

“You idiot!” the Witcher growled angrily, approaching the dryad. Braenn nimbly pulled a new arrow from her quiver. “You could have killed her!”

“This is Brokilone,” she replied arrogantly.

“And she is a child!”

“And so?”

He noticed without allowing a word to escape that the arrow was fletched with tiger-pheasant feathers, painted yellow. He turned his back on her and plunged quickly into the wood.

Huddled at the foot of a tree, the little girl had lifted her head to look at the arrow planted in the trunk. She heard Geralt's footsteps, rising, but the Witcher caught up to her with a rapid leap and grabbed hold of her hood. She turned her head to him, then stared fixedly at the Witcher's hand. Geralt let go.

“Why did you run?”

“It's none of your concern,” she replied, sniffling. “Leave me alone, you, you...”

“Filthy brat,” the Witcher growled angrily. “This, this is Brokilone. The centipede wasn't enough for you? You won't last until morning in this forest. Don't you understand?”

“Don't touch me!” she said defensively. “You lackey! I am a princess, as you said yourself!”

“You're nothing but a stupid little brat.”

“I am a princess!”

“Princesses don't wander all alone in the woods. Princesses don't sniffle.”

“I'll order that your head be chopped off! Hers too.”

The little girl wiped her nose and shot a hostile look at the dryad who was approaching. Braenn burst out laughing.

“Well, stop this crying,” the Witcher said curtly. “Why did you run, Princess? Where would you go? What are you afraid of?”

The little girl kept quiet, still sniffling.

“As you wish.” He murmured to the dryad: “We're going. If you want to be alone in the forest, that's your choice. But the next time a yghern attacks you, don't bother to scream, because it certainly is not befitting of a princess. Princesses know how to die without complaint, and how to blow their noses properly. Goodbye, Your Royal Highness.”

“Wa... Wait...”

“Yes?”

“I'll come with you.”

“It is an honor. Isn't that right, Braenn?”

“But you can't take me back to Kistrin! Promise?”

“Who is...” he began. “Ah, by the devil! Kistrin. Prince Kistrin? The son of Ervyll of Verden?”

The little girl took out a small handkerchief and blew her nose, turning her face away.

“No more games,” Braenn said gloomily. “We must return to the path.”

“One minute, one minute.” The Witcher stood and looked haughtily at the dryad. “Our plans have slightly changed, my sweet archer.”

“Pardon?”

“Madame Eithne will wait. I must accompany this little girl home. To Verden.”

“You will go no other way. Her either.”

The Witcher smiled horribly. “Be careful, Braenn,” he warned. “I'm not the kid from yesterday whose eye you pierced with an arrow in ambush. I know how to defend myself.”

“Bloede arss!” she growled, raising her bow. “You go to Duen Canell. Her also. Not to Verden!”

“No, no, not to Verden!” The little girl with ash-gray hair rushed to the dryad and clung to her slender thigh. “I am staying with you! Let him go, if he wants, all alone to Verden and that idiot Kistrin!”

Braenn did not even give her a glance: she preferred to keep her eyes on Geralt. She nevertheless allowed her bow to lower.

“Ess turd!” she spat at his feet. “Very well, go where your eyes take you! I'm curious to see if you survive. You will die before you leave Brokilone.”

She's right, Geralt thought. I don't have a chance of getting out. Without her, I can neither leave Brokilone nor reach Duen Canell. Too bad, we'll see then. I may be able to convince Eithne...

“Very well, Braenn,” he concluded apologetically. He smiled: “Don't be angry, my sweet. Yes, it will be as you wish. We will all go to Duen Canell to pay a visit to Madame Eithne.”

The dryad muttered something between her teeth and removed the arrow from her bowstring.

“Let's go,” she said. She adjusted the scarf in her hair. “We have lost too much time.”

“Oh!” the little girl wailed after a step.

“What is it?”

“I have something... in my leg.”

“Wait, Braenn! Come on, little girl, I'll carry you on my shoulders.”

From the heat of her body emanated a smell of wet feathers.

“What is your name, Princess? I forgot.”

“Ciri.”

“Where is your kingdom, if I may be permitted to ask?”

“I will not say,” she replied. “I will not say, that's all.”

“It wouldn't kill you. Stop squirming and don't sniffle in my ear. What explains your presence in Brokilone? You got lost? You took a wrong turn?”

“Actually, I never get lost.”

“Stop fidgeting. You ran away from Kistrin? Castle Nastrog? Before or after marriage?”

“How do you know?” she asked, sniffing with a preoccupied air.

“I am incredibly intelligent. Why exactly flee into Brokilone? There were no directions less dangerous?”

“It's my stupid horse.”

“You're lying, Princess. At your size, you could only ride a cat. And even then, it would have to be very sweet-tempered.”

“Marck was leading it. The squire of the knight Voymir. In the forest, the horse stumbled and broke a leg. Then we got lost.”

“You say that this never happens to you.”

“He got lost, not me. There was fog. We got lost.”

You're lost, thought Geralt. Poor little squire of knight Voymir: he had the misfortune to meet Braenn and her companions. The boy - who had probably never been with a woman — had made up his mind to help a little girl with green eyes after hearing tales of knights and the virgins they are required to marry. He had then helped her only to fall to the arrow of a motley dryad who herself has probably never been with a man, but already knew how to kill.

“I asked you: you fled before or after the marriage?”

“I ran away, that's all. What does it matter to you?” she said, frowning. “Grandmother told me I had to go to the castle and get to know this Kistrin. Only to get to know him. Then, his father, the big king...”

“Ervyll.”

“For him, right away, he only had marriage in mind. But me, I don't want this Kistrin. Grandmother told me...”

“He displeases you so much, the prince Kistrin?”

“I don't want him,” Ciri declared haughtily, sniffing loudly. “He's big, stupid, and ugly. He has bad breath. Before I left, I saw one of his portraits where he wasn't so big. I don't want a husband like him. I don't want to marry.”

“Ciri,” the Witcher replied hesitantly. “Kistrin is still a child, just like you. In a few years, he could become a nice, very attractive young man.”

“Then they can send me another portrait in a few years!” she snorted. “And to him too. He told me that I was a lot prettier than the portrait he received. He told me that he loved Alvina, a lady of the court, and that he wants to become a knight. You see? He doesn't want me, and I don't want him. What good is that marriage?”

“Ciri,” murmured the Witcher, “he is a prince, and you are a princess. Princes and princesses are made to unite. Such is the custom, that's how it is.”

“You talk like all the others. You think you can lie to me because I'm still small.”

“I'm not lying to you.”

“You're lying.”

Geralt fell silent. Ahead of them, Braenn, astonished by the silence, turned around before resuming the walk with a shrug.

“Where are we going?” Ciri asked sadly. “I want to know!”

Geralt kept quiet.

“Answer when I ask you a question!” she threatened, underscoring her order with a loud sniff. “Don't you know... who is on you?”

He did not react.

“I'll bite your ear!”

The Witcher had had enough. He took the girl down from his shoulders and set her on the ground.

“Listen, kid,” he said sternly, gripping the buckle of his belt. “I'll put you over my knee and give you a good thrashing. No-one will prevent me here: this is not the royal court and I am neither a courtier nor a servant. You will regret not staying at Nastrog. You'll understand very shortly that it is better to be a married princess than a brat lost in the forest. Married princesses have the right to be intolerable, it is a fact. Married princesses are never even spanked, except perhaps personally by the prince, her husband.”

Ciri frowned, sobbing and sniffing a few more times. Braenn, leaning against a tree, watched without blinking.

“So?” asked the Witcher, wrapping his belt around his wrist. “Are we going to behave decently and kindly? Or will I have to tan your royal hide? Well?”

The little girl sniffed again and then shook her head quickly.

“You will be sensible, Princess?”

“Yes,” she growled.

“It's nearly the brown hour,” said the dryad. “Let's continue on our journey, Gwynbleidd.”

The forest became sparser. They crossed young sandy woods, fields of heather, misty prairies where herds of deer grazed. The temperature fell.

“Venerable lord,” said Ciri, breaking a very long silence.

“My name is Geralt. What is it?”

“I'm terribly hungry.”

“We'll stop soon. It's almost nightfall.”

“I can't stand it,” she continued, sobbing. “I haven't eaten anything since...”

“Don't cry.” He reached into his wallet and took out a piece of fat bacon, a small slice of cheese and two apples. “Here.”

“What is that yellow thing?”

“Bacon fat.”

“That, I don't want,” she growled.

“It goes down well,” he said, swallowing the piece of animal fat. “Eat the cheese. And an apple. Just one.”

“Why just one?”

“Don't fidget. Eat both.”

“Geralt?”

“Hum?”

“Thank you.”

“It's nothing. Eat heartily.”

“No... not for this. For this too, but... You saved my life before, from the centipede... Brr... I almost died of fear...”

“There are many things that can kill you that way,” he confirmed seriously. There are many things that can kill you in even more horrible and tragic ways, he thought. “You can thank Braenn.”

“Who is she?”

“A dryad.”

“An evil fairy of the forest?”

“Yes.”

“They're the ones that we... They steal children! She abducted us? Except you're not small. Why does she speak so strangely?”

“She speaks as she speaks, it's not important. The important thing is how she shoots. Don't forget to thank her when we stop.”

“I will not forget,” she replied, sniffling.

“Don't squirm, princess, future wife of the prince of Verden.”

“I will never be the wife of some prince,” she grumbled.

“Well, well, you won't marry anyone. You will become a hamster and take refuge in a burrow.”

“That's not true! You don't know anything at all!”

“Don't scream in my ear. Don't forget about my belt.”

“I will not be the wife of any prince. I will be...”

“Yes? What?”

“It's a secret.”

“Ah! A secret. Great.” He lifted his head. “What's going on, Braenn?”

The dryad had stopped.

She shrugged, looking at the sky.

“I am breaking,” she replied sadly. “All because of what you picked up. Here we make camp: it's vespers.”

### Part III

“Ciri?”

“Hum?” The little girl sniffled, rustling the branches on which she rested.

“You're not cold?”

“No,” she sighed. “Today, it's good. Yesterday... Yesterday I was horribly frozen... Oh, by the gods!”

“Strange,” said Braenn, untying the laces of her long and supple boots. “While skinny, she has traveled a vast distance despite the sentinels, the swamps and the thickets. Strong, healthy, courageous. She will be useful to us, indeed... most useful.”

Geralt cast an eye quickly over the dryad and her eyes shining in the darkness. Braenn leaned her back against the tree and untied her scarf, freeing her hair with a brisk shake of her head.

“She was found in Brokilone,” she murmured, anticipating his comment. “She is ours, Gwynbleidd. We go to Duen Canell.”

“Madame Eithne will decide,” he replied bitterly.

But he knew that Braenn was right. Pity, he thought, watching the little girl squirm on her cushion of greenery. A girl so resolute. Where have I seen her before? No matter. It's a real pity. The world is so large and so beautiful. Until the end of her life, her world will be limited to Brokilone. That end might even be soon: until the day she sinks into the ferns, with a cry and the hiss of an arrow, fighting an absurd war for mastery of the forest on the side of those who are to blame for her loss. For those who... yes, sooner or later.

“Ciri?”

“Yes?”

“Where do your parents live?”

“I have no parents,” she said, sniffling. “They drowned in the sea when I was little.”

Yes, he thought, that would explain no small number of things. A child of a dead prince. Who knows, maybe the third daughter in a family with four boys already. Graced with a noble title that is in fact less important than that of a chamberlain or squire. A little thing with ashen hair and green eyes who meanders through the court and therefore must be disposed of as soon as possible by finding a husband. As soon as possible, before she becomes a little woman, a threat of scandal, of a misalliance or of the incest that the promiscuity of a communal bedroom in the castle can only favor...

The flight of the little girl did not surprise the Witcher. He had already met many young princesses, even of royal blood, taken in by traveling theater troupes and happy to have escaped from a king who, though decrepit, was always eager for descendants. He had encountered the sons of kings, preferring the uncertain life of a mercenary rather than marriage to a lame and syphilitic princess chosen by his father for an inheritance as questionable as it was miserable, but guaranteeing an alliance and the sustainability of the dynasty.

He lay down next to the girl and covered her with his cloak.

“Go to sleep,” he murmured. “Go to sleep, little orphan.”

“Oh, yes?” she muttered. “I am a princess, and not an orphan. I have a grandmother. She is queen, what do you think? When I tell her that you wanted to hit me with a belt, my grandmother will order your head chopped off, you'll see.”

“But that's monstrous, Ciri! Have mercy.”

“You'll see!”

“You are such a nice little girl. Chopping off heads, this is terribly wrong. You won't say anything, will you?”

“I'll tell her everything.”

“Ciri...”

“I'll tell everything, everything, everything. You're afraid, huh?”

“Yes, very. You know, Ciri, that when you cut off someone's head, he can die?”

“Are you mocking me?”

“How could I dare?”

“You will see for yourself, then! My grandmother does not joke. When she puts her foot down, the greatest warriors and knights kneel before her. I saw it myself. And if one of them disobeys, squeak, he's beheaded.”

“That's awful, Ciri.”

“How?”

“It's surely your head that they'll take off.”

“My head?”

“Of course. It's your grandmother, the queen, who arranged your marriage with Kistrin and sent you to Verden, to the castle of Nastrog. You have disobeyed. When you come back... Squeak! No more head.”

The little girl remained silent. She had even stopped fidgeting. He heard the click of her tongue while she bit her lower lip. She sniffled: “It's not true! Grandmother wouldn't let anyone cut off my head, because... she's my grandmother, isn't she? At most, I would get...”

“Oh, yes?” Geralt laughed. “Your grandmother doesn't joke around, isn't that right? You have already had beatings?”

Ciri fixed him with an expression full of anger.

“You know what?” he said. “We'll tell your grandmother that I have already beaten you. No-one can be punished twice for the same offense. What do you think?”

“That you're stupid.” Ciri rose up on her elbows, rustling the branches. “When grandmother learns that you've beaten me, she'll cut off your head, as simple as that!”

“Even though, as you say, there's so little in my head?”

The little girl didn't respond. She sniffed once more.

“Geralt...”

“What is it, Ciri?”

“Grandma knows that I'm obligated to come back. I don't have to be a princess or even the wife of that idiot Kistrin. I must come back, that's all.”

You are obligated, he thought. Unfortunately, this depends on neither you nor your grandmother. It will depend on the mood of old Eithne and on my ability to convince her.

“Grandmother knows,” continued Ciri. “Because I... Geralt, swear to me that you won't repeat this to anyone. It's a horrible secret. Terrible, I tell you. Swear.”

“I swear.”

“I'll tell you. My mama was a sorceress, you know. And my papa was cursed. That's what one of my nannies told me, and when grandmother learned, it was a terrible scene. Because I'm predestined, you know?”

“For what?”

“I don't know,” she responded, preoccupied. “But I'm predestined. That's what my nanny told me. And grandmother said that she will not allow it, that she'd rather all the cas... the castles fall in ruin. You understand? And my nanny said that nothing could counter predestination. Ah! And then my nanny started crying and grandmother started screaming. You see? I'm predestined. I'll never be married to that idiot Kistrin. Geralt?”

“Sleep,” Geralt said, his jaw dropping in a yawn. “Sleep, Ciri.”

“Won't you tell me a story?”

“What?”

“Tell me a story,” she grumbled. “Am I expected to go to sleep without hearing a story? It's impossible.”

“I don't know, damn it, I don't know any stories. Sleep.”

“Don't lie. You know. When you were small, no-one told you any stories? What are you laughing about?”

“Nothing. I was just reminded of something.”

“Ah! You see! Go on, tell it.”

“What?”

“A children's story.”

He smiled again and placed his hands beneath his neck, looking at the stars that twinkled between the branches just above their heads.

“Once there was... a cat,” he began. “An ordinary cat, with stripes, who was hunting mice. One day, the cat went alone on a long walk through a dark, terrible forest. He walked and walked and walked...”

“Don't think that I'll fall asleep before he arrives,” she murmured, pressing against him.

“Quiet, little pest. He walks and walks and meets a fox. A red fox.”

Braenn sighed, lying down on the other side of the Witcher. She hugged him too, gently.

“And then?” Ciri sniffed. “Tell the rest.”

“The fox looks at the cat. He asks: 'Who are you?' The cat replies: 'I am a cat.' The fox retorts: Ah! And you are not afraid, you cat, to walk alone in the forest? What if the king decides to go hunting? What will you do with the dogs and hunters on their horses? I tell you, cat, the hunt is a terrible thing for the likes of you and I. You have a fur coat; I have one too. The hunters are without pity for us, because they have fiancees and mistresses whose hands and necks shiver: they turn us into stoles and muffs for those whores.”

“What are those, muffs?” asked Ciri.

“Don't interrupt my story. The fox then continues: 'I, dear cat, know how to escape them. I have one thousand and two hundred eighty-six methods: I am cunning. And you, dear cat, how many tricks do you possess against the hunters?”

“Oh! What a pretty story,” Ciri enthused, snuggling even closer against the Witcher. “Tell me... How did the cat respond?”

“Yes,” Braenn murmured from the other side. “How did he respond?”

The Witcher turned his head. The dryad's eyes sparkled. Her tongue was slightly parting her lips. Evidently, he thought, young dryads are fond of stories. Just like young Witchers: they are rarely told fictional stories. Young dryads fall asleep to the rustling trees; young Witchers to the ache of their muscles. Our eyes shone, like Braenn's, when we listened to Vesemir's stories, there at Kaer Morhen. It was a long time ago... so long...

“And then?” Ciri prompted impatiently. “What happened next?”

“The cat replies: 'I, dear fox, do not have multiple ways, but only one: Hop! I climb up a tree. This should be sufficient, I believe?' The fox smiles: Well then! Dear cat, you're nothing but a fool. Turn tail and run from here, because you will perish if the hunters track you.'”

“Suddenly, without warning, with neither transition nor delay, the hunters emerge from the bushes: on top of the cat and the fox!”

“Oh!” Ciri whimpered.

The dryad shook violently.

“Quiet!”

“They throw themselves upon them then, shouting: 'Forward! Skin their hides! For the muffs, the muffs!' They unleash the dogs upon the cat and the fox. And the cat, hop! climbs up the tree as cats do. Right to the top. And the dogs, snap! seize the fox. Even before the red-furred one could make use of one of his cunning routes, he was transformed into a lady's stole. The cat meows from the top of the tree, defying the hunters. They cannot reach him, because the tree is too high. They wait at the bottom, swearing against the gods of the earth, but leave empty-handed. The cat then descends the tree and goes quietly home.”

“And then?”

“Nothing. The story is over.”

“And the moral? Stories always have a moral, don't they?”

“What?” Braenn asked, shaking harder against Geralt. “What is that, a moral?”

“Good stories always have a moral, bad ones don't,” confirmed Ciri, sure of herself.

“That one was good,” the dryad retorted. “Each received what he deserved. We must climb up to the top of the tree from the yghern, sickly little one, like the proud feline. Without hesitation: the top of the tree, at once, and wait with wisdom. Survive. Without resignation.”

Geralt chuckled.

“Weren't there any trees in the grounds of Castle Nastrog, Ciri? Instead of coming to Brokilone, you could have climbed to the top and waited for Kistrin to lose interest in the wedding.”

“Are you making fun of me?”

“Yes.”

“You know, I can't stand you.”

“That's awful, Ciri, you've touched me right in the heart.”

“I know,” she nodded, sniffing, and then pressed close against him.

“Sleep well, Ciri,” he murmured, breathing in the pleasant smell of feathers. “Sleep well. Good night, Braenn.”

“Dearme, Gwynbleidd.”

### Part IV

The next day, they reached the Trees. Braenn knelt and bowed. Geralt sensed that he should do the same. Ciri sighed in admiration.

The Trees, primarily oak, yew, and white walnut, were a dozen yards across. It was hardly possible to estimate the height of their peaks. The place where their powerful, sinuous roots transformed into a single trunk was located very high above their heads. They could move much faster: the colossi left plenty of space, and other vegetation, in their shadow, could not survive. Only a bed of rotten leaves remained.

They could move faster, but they walked slowly. In silence. Bowing their heads. They were, among the Trees, miniscule, insignificant, trivial. Negligible. Even Ciri kept quiet. She didn't say a word for nearly half an hour.

They left the perimeter of the Trees after an hour of walking, to again sink into the ravines and damp beech forests.

Ciri's cold was getting worse and worse. Geralt, who had no handkerchiefs, and who was tired of hearing the constant sniffling, taught her to blow her nose in her fingers. This pleased the little girl enormously. From her smile and her sparkling eyes, the Witcher knew that she was delighted by the idea of being able to show that trick to the court during a banquet or an audience with an overseas ambassador.

Braenn stopped suddenly and turned. “Gwynbleidd,” she said, pulling her green scarf down around her neck, “come. I need to cover your eyes. I must.”

“I know.”

“I will guide you. Give me your hand.”

“No,” Ciri protested, “I'll guide him. Okay, Braenn?”

“All right, sickly little one.”

“Geralt?”

“Yes?”

“What does that mean, Gwyn... bleidd?”

“White Wolf. That's what the dryads call me.”

“Careful, a root. Take care not to trip. They call you that because you have white hair?”

“Yes... oh! Damn!”

“I told you there was a root.”

They continued to walk. Slowly. The leaves on the ground were slippery. Geralt was feeling a warmth on his face. The sun's glow filtered through the cloth that covered his eyes.

He heard Ciri's voice:

“Oh! Geralt. How beautiful it is here... It's a shame you can't see it all. There are so many flowers. And birds. You hear them singing? Oh! There are so many! Such numbers. And then the squirrels... Careful, we're going to cross a stream on a path of stones. Don't fall into the water. What fish! There are so many. They swim in the water, you know! There are so many animals. Nowhere else are there so many...”

“Nowhere,” he muttered, “nowhere. We have arrived in Brokilone.”

“What?”

“Brokilone. The end of our journey.”

“I don't understand...”

“No-one understands. No-one wants to understand.”

“Take off your blindfold, Gwynbleidd. We've arrived.” A thick fog engulfed Braenn up to the knee. “Duen Canell, the place of the Oak. The heart of Brokilone.”

Geralt had already been here before. Twice. But he had never told anyone. No-one would have believed him. There was a sinkhole entirely covered by the tops of immense green trees, bathed in the fog and vapor emanating from the earth, the rocks, the hot springs. A sinkhole...

The medallion that he wore around his neck vibrated gently.

A sinkhole flooded with magic. Duen Canell. The heart of Brokilone. Braenn lifted her head and gave a shrug of her quiver.

“Come, give me your hand, sickly little one.”

At first, the sinkhole appeared dead and abandoned. But not for long. A strong and melodic whistle was heard. A slender dryad with dark hair descended gracefully, walking along a barely visible spiral of polypore fungus that embraced the trunk of a nearby tree. She was dressed like the others in a camouflaged garment.

“Cedd, Braenn.”

“Cedd, Sirssa. Va 'n vort medth Eithne d? “

“Neen, aefder,” replied the dark-haired one, casting a languid glance at the Witcher. “Ess' ae'n Sidh?”

Particularly attractive, even by human standards, she laughed, showing her shining white teeth. Geralt, aware that the dryad was looking him over from head to toe, lost his composure and felt foolish.

“Neen.” Braenn turned her head. “Ess'vatt'ghern, Gwynnbleidd, a vden medth Eithne va, a'ss.”

“Gwynbleidd?” The lovely dryad pursed her lips. “Bloede caerm! Aen'ne caen n 'wedd vort! T'essfoile!”

Braenn chuckled.

“What's going on?” asked the Witcher, annoyed.

“Nothing,” Braenn chuckled again. “Nothing. Come on.”

“Oh! Look!” Ciri marveled. “Look, Geralt, at all these houses, how funny they are!”

Duen Canell really began at the bottom of the sinkhole. The “funny houses,” whose forms resembled large balls of mistletoe, were hung from the branches and trunks of trees at various heights, just above the ground or higher, and even at the peaks. Geralt also saw some larger constructions on the ground: the huts made of woven branches and covered with leaves. He sensed the presence of life behind the openings of these constructions, but the dryads remained invisible. They would be far fewer in number than on his previous visit.

“Geralt,” Ciri murmured. “These houses are growing! They have leaves.”

“They are made of living trees,” explained the Witcher. “That's the way the dryads live, and that's how they construct their homes. A dryad never hurts a tree by cutting or sawing. They know nevertheless how to grow the branches to form shelters.”

“How cute. I'd love to have a house like this in our park.”

Braenn stopped in front of one of the largest constructions.

“Inside, Gwynbleidd, is where you will meet Madame Eithne. Vdfdill, sickly little one.”

“What?”

“It is a farewell, Ciri. She's saying goodbye.”

“Ah! Goodbye, Braenn.”

They entered. Inside the “house” sparkled with a kaleidoscope of sunbeams, filtered and screened by the frame.

“Geralt!”

“Freixenet!”

“But you live! By all the devils!” The wounded man beamed. Frexenet raised himself on his bed of fir. He saw Ciri clinging to the Witcher's thigh. His eyes shone in their sockets; he flushed crimson. “So, there you are, little pest! I came within a hair of losing my life because of you! Ah! You're lucky that I can't get up, because I would already have you firmly spanked!”

Ciri pouted. “That's the second one who wants to beat me,” she replied, comically wrinkling her nose. “I'm a young girl... Young girls don't get smacked! It's not allowed.”

“I will show you what's allowed,” Freixenet responded, coughing, “filthy little scab! Ervyll has lost his mind... Every message more terrified than the last, he says that your grandmother has set her army on him. Who would believe that you ran away yourself? Everyone knows who Ervyll is and what he likes. Everyone thinks that he... did something in a drunken state and ordered you drowned in a pond! We are on the brink of war with Nilfgaard. The treaty and the alliance with your grandmother were thrown to the devils! You see the extent of your misdeed?”

“Don't get worked up over this,” said the Witcher, “you could cause a hemorrhage. How did you manage to get here so fast?”

“If only I knew. I was unconscious the better part of the time. They pushed something disgusting down my throat. Forcefully, pinching my throat... What an affront, those bitches...”

“You survived thanks to what they forced down your throat. They carried you all the way here?”

“They put me on a sled. I asked for news of you, but they kept silent. I was sure you had fallen to an arrow. You were gone so quickly... and there you are safe and sound, and without so much as a limp; what's more, well done, you found Princess Cirilla. Devil take me, Geralt, you always pull through, like a cat landing on its feet.”

The Witcher smiled without responding. Freixenet turned his head to cough violently and spit out a pink substance.

“So,” he added, “from the fact that they haven't finished me off, I must be doing well. They know you, those diabolical huntresses. That's the second time you've saved me from danger.”

“Don't mention it, baron.”

Freixenet tried to sit up, groaning in pain, but had to give up.

“With my barony in the latrines,” he grumbled, “I was Baron of Hamm. I am currently something resembling a voivode for Ervyll of Verden. Or rather I was, because even if I get out of this forest alive, my only place in Verden will be on the scaffold. Cirilla, that little minx, escaped under the surveillance of my guards. You think I would have gone adventuring with two companions in Brokilone for fun? No, Geralt, I too have fled. I could only count on the clemency of Ervyll under the condition that I brought her back. And then we came across those accursed creatures... Without you, I would still be in the hole. You saved me again. It's destiny. It's clear as crystal.”

“You're exaggerating.”

Freixenet turned his head. “It's destiny,” he repeated. “It must have been written that we would meet again, Witcher. And that once again, you'd save my skin. I remember that we spoke in Hamm after you freed me from the spell of that bird.”

“It's chance,” Geralt retorted coldly, “chance, Freixenet.”

“What chance? Hell, without you, I would still be a cormorant today.”

“You were a cormorant,” Ciri cried in excitement, “a real cormorant, a bird?”

“Yes,” replied the baron, clenching his teeth. “A... a whore... a bitch... for revenge.”

“You clearly didn't give her a fur stole,” Ciri said, wrinkling her nose, “or a muff.”

“There was another reason,” Freixenet continued, blushing slightly, “but what difference does it make to you, you dirty brat?” Ciri, visibly annoyed, turned her head; Freixenet began to cough. “Yes... me... You delivered me from a spell at Hamm. Without you, Geralt, I would be spending the rest of my life as a cormorant. I would fly over the lake and deposit my droppings on the branches of the trees, dressed in the shirt woven by my little sister with pine nettles, in her pigheaded determination to improve things, to liberate me from the spell. Hell, when I'm reminded of that shirt, I want to hit someone. What an idiot...”

“Don't talk like that,” said the Witcher, laughing. “Her intentions were pure. She had been tricked, that's all. A number of nonsensical myths approach the question of disenchantment. You're lucky, Freixenet. She could have ordered that you be plunged into boiling milk. It has happened before. Dressing someone in a nettle shirt doesn't threaten their health, even if it doesn't help.”

“Hmm, perhaps so. Perhaps I expected too much of her. Elise has always been a fool, since she was a little girl: silly and pretty, perfect material for becoming the wife of a king.”

“What pretty material is that?” asked Ciri. “And why to become a wife?”

“I told you not to meddle in this, brat. Yes, Geralt, I was lucky that you appeared in Hamm and that the good brother of the king was inclined to spend the ducats to have you disenchant me.”

“You know, Freixenet,” responded the Witcher, laughing more and more, “that the story has spread far and wide?”

“The real version?”

“Not quite. First, you've been decked out with ten brothers.”

“Oh no!” The baron raised himself on his elbows, coughing. “Including Elise, then we would be twelve? What dark idiocy! My mother was certainly not a rabbit!”

“That's not all. It was thought that a cormorant was not sufficiently romantic.”

“Indeed it isn't! There is nothing romantic about it!” The baron made a face, massaging his chest, which was bandaged by twigs and strips of bark. “And what then do they say I was transformed into?”

“A swan. More precisely, swans plural, because there were eleven of you, remember?”

“And how, I ask you, is a swan more romantic than a cormorant?”

“I don't know.”

“Me neither. But I am betting in this story, Elise delivers me from this fate with a damned shirt of nettles.”

“You've got it. By the way, how's Elise?”

“The poor thing is consumptive. She won't last much longer.”

“That’s sad.”

“Yes,” Freixenet confirmed without emotion, looking away.

“To return to your enchantment...” Geralt leaned against the wall of braided, supple branches. “Do you still have any symptoms? Feathers growing on your body?”

“By the grace of the gods, no,” sighed the baron. “All is well. The only characteristic that remains from that time is a taste for fish. Nothing beats a good feast of fish. Sometimes I visit the fishermen in the morning on the harbor, and before they've caught even one more noble piece, I content myself first with the delectable taste of a handful of a dozen bleaks, still teeming in their holding tanks, some small loach straight, a dace or a chub... It's more pleasure than a real banquet.”

“He was a cormorant,” Ciri said slowly, looking at Geralt. “And you're the one who disenchanted him. You know how to cast spells?”

“That seems obvious,” retorted Freixenet. “All Witchers know how.”

“Wit... Witcher?”

“You don't know that he's a Witcher? The famous Geralt of Rivia! Indeed, how could a brat like you know that he's a Witcher? In our time, it's not like it was. There aren't many Witchers today. You almost never meet them anymore. Have you already seen one?”

Ciri slowly shook her head without looking away from Geralt.

“A Witcher, kid, is...” Freixenet paused and turned pale, seeing Braenn enter the hut. “No, I won't! I don't want anything stuffed down my throat, no way! Geralt, tell her...”

“Calm down.”

Braenn only gave Freixenet a furtive glance. She went directly to Ciri, who was crouched next to the Witcher. “Come,” she said. “Come, sickly little one.”

“Where are we going?” Ciri asked, grimacing. “I will not. I want to stay with Geralt.”

“Go ahead,” Geralt said, forcing a smile. “You'll have fun with Braenn and the young dryads. They'll show you Duen Canell...”

“She didn't blindfold me,” Ciri said very slowly. “On the way, she didn't blindfold me. You, yes. So that you can't come back. That means that...”

Geralt stared at Braenn. The dryad shrugged and took the little girl in her arms, holding her close.

“That means...” Ciri's voice broke. “That means I will never get out of here. Doesn't it?”

“No-one escapes their destiny.”

They all turned their heads in the direction of that voice: full, low, firm and decisive. A voice that demanded that one listen and tolerated no objection. Braenn bowed. Geralt knelt.

“Madame Eithne...”

The sovereign of Brokilone wore a thin green dress, light and flowing. She was, like most of the dryads, small and thin, but carried herself proudly. Her serious and hard face, her pursed lips, gave the impression that she was larger and more powerful. The color of her hair and her eyes resembled molten silver.

She entered the hut escorted by two younger dryads, armed with bows. She silently motioned to Braenn, who hastened to take Ciri by the hand and led her toward the exit, bowing her head. Ciri, pale, confused, followed with a stiff and inelegant gait. When she passed beside Eithne, the silver-haired dryad seized her chin and looked the little girl in the eyes for a long time. Geral saw Ciri shaking.

“Go,” Eithne said at last. “Go, my child. Don't be afraid of anything. Nothing can change your destiny. You are in Brokilone.”

Ciri trotted quietly behind Braenn. She turned at the door of the hut. The Witcher noticed that her lips trembled and that her eyes filled with tears, brilliant as glass. He nevertheless continued to kneel silently, always bowing his head in respect.

“Rise, Gwynbleidd, welcome.”

“Hail, Eithne, sovereign of Brokilone.”

“I am once again pleased to welcome you to my forest. Even though you come without my consent or even my knowledge. Entering Brokilone in this way is risky, White Wolf. Even for you.”

“I'm on a mission.”

“Ah!” The dryad smiled slightly. “This explains your temerity, to use the only appropriate term. Geralt, the immunity of delegates is only observed among humans. As for me, I do not accept it. I recognize, moreover, nothing that is human. Here, this is Brokilone.”

“Eithne...”

“Silence,” she cut in without raising her voice. “I gave the order to spare you. You will leave Brokilone alive. Not by virtue of your status as a messenger, but for other reasons.”

“You don't want, then, to know for whom I act as delegate?”

“To be honest, no. Here, we are in Brokilone. You come from the outside, a world that does not interest me at all. Why should I waste my time hearing delegates? What does it matter to me, the proposals or the ultimatums set by someone who I know thinks and feels differently from me? What does it matter to me what King Venzlav thinks?”

Geralt turned his head in astonishment. “How do you know that it's Venzlav who sent me?”

“It's all too evident,” replied the dryad, smiling. “Ekkehard is too foolish. Ervyll and Viraxas hate me too much. I see no other surrounding areas.”

“You know a lot about what is happening outside Brokilone, Eithne.”

“I know many things, White Wolf. It is the privilege of my age. Now, if you would, I would like to resolve a matter. The man who looks like a bear...” the dryad stopped smiling and looked at Freixenet, “is your friend?”

“We know each other. I once delivered him from a spell.”

“The problem is that I do not know what to do with him. I can't order his execution after allowing him to be cared for, even if he is a threat. He doesn't have the air of a fanatic, perhaps of a scalp-hunter. I know that Ervyll pays for every dryad scalp. I can't remember how much. The price increases along with everything else from inflation.”

“You are mistaken. He is not a scalp-hunter.”

“Why then did he enter Brokilone?”

“To look for the little girl for whom he was responsible. He risked his life to find her.”

“That's absurd,” she said coldly. “He took more than a risk. He went to certain death. He owes his life to having the constitution and strength of a horse. Regarding the child, she also owes her life to chance. My daughters did not fire, believing her to be a pixie or a leprechaun.”

Her gaze rested once more on Freixenet. Geralt noticed that her lips were losing their unpleasant harshness.

“Well then. Celebrate this day.”

Eithne approached the bed of branches. The two dryads who accompanied her did the same. Freixenet paled and curled up in the hope of disappearing.

She watched for a moment, blinking her eyes slightly.

“Do you have children?” she asked at last. “I am speaking to you, blockhead.”

“Pardon?”

“I spoke clearly.”

“I'm not...” Freixenet cleared his throat, coughing. “I'm not married.”

“Your family is not important. I want to know if your fat loins are able to kindle fires. By the Great Tree! Have you ever knocked up a woman?”

“Eh, well! Yes... yes, madame, but...”

Eithne gave a careless wave of her hand and then turned to Geralt.

“He will remain in Brokilone,” she said, “until he is completely healed and then for some time longer. Then... he will go wherever he pleases.”

“Thank you, Eithne.” The Witcher bowed. “And the little girl... What is your decision?”

“Why do you ask me that?” The dryad's silver eyes fixed coldly on him. “You know that well.”

“She isn't an ordinary child; she is not from a village. She is a princess.”

“This does not impress me. It makes no difference.”

“Listen...”

“Not another word, Gwynbleidd.”

Geralt paused, pursing his lips.

“What about my mission?”

“I am listening,” murmured the dryad. “Not out of curiosity. As a personal favor to you: you can testify to Venzlav that his request was made and collect the money that he certainly promised you for your visit to my kingdom. But not now. I am busy. Pay me a visit tonight in my Tree.”

### Part V

Freixenet rose onto his elbows after the dryad was gone. He groaned, coughed, and spat in his hand.“What does this mean, Geralt? Why am I supposed to stay? What does she want with these children? What story are we beginning, eh?”

“You will keep your head, Freixenet,” replied the Witcher in a tired voice. “You will become one of the privileged few who have left Brokilone alive. Lately, in any case. And then, you will become the father of a little dryad, perhaps several.”

“How? I must become... a breeding stallion?”

“You can call it what you like. Your choice is limited.”

“I understand,” groaned the baron, with a vulgar smile. “I've seen prisoners of war working in the mines or digging canals. Of the two evils, I prefer... I simply hope that I have the strength. There are quite a few here...”

“Stop that stupid smiling, thinking your dreams are coming true,” Geralt said, scowling. “Here there is no honor, no music, no wine, no fans, let alone hordes of amorous dryads. You will meet one, perhaps two. There will be no sentiment. They will treat the matter and even more so yourself very pragmatically.”

“They don't feel pleasure? At the least, I hope that it doesn't hurt them.”

“Stop acting like a child. In this respect, they are no different from ordinary women. At least physically.”

“What do you mean?”

“It is up to you whether the dryad enjoys herself or not. This does not change the fact that only the outcome will be important. Your person in this case is secondary. Expect no recognition. Ah! And never take the initiative, under any circumstances.”

“The initiative?”

“If you meet her in the morning,” the Witcher continued patiently, “bow down, and by all the devils, don't smile or wink. This is for dryads a gravely serious subject. If she's smiling or approaches you, you can then start the conversation. It is best to talk about trees. If you don't know about those, you can still talk about the weather. If, on the other hand, she pretends not to see you, keep your distance. And keep your distance from the other dryads. And your hands in your pockets. A dryad unprepared for this exchange wouldn't understand what you were doing. You risk a knife-slash for wanting to touch her: she would not understand the intent.”

“Have you already tasted the joys of dryad marriage?” joked Freixenet. “This has happened to you?”

The Witcher did not respond. He had before his eyes the beautiful and svelte dryad, the insolence of her smile. *Vatt'ghern, bloede caerme. A Witcher: a sorry fate. What do you have to report, Braenn? What can he give us? There is nothing to be gained from a Witcher...*

“Geralt?”

“What?”

“What will happen with Princess Ciri?”

“You can depend on it. She will soon become a dryad. In two or three years, she'll put an arrow through her own brother's eye if he tries to enter Brokilone.”

“Damn,” shouted Freixenet, blanching. “Ervyll will be furious. Geralt? It wouldn't be possible to...”

“No,” interrupted the Witcher. “Don't even try. You will not get out of Duen Canell alive.”

“That means the little one is lost.”

“For you, yes.”

### Part VI

The Tree of Eithne was, it went without saying, an oak, or rather three oaks that melded with each other as they grew, still green and betraying no symptoms of desiccation despite the three hundred years, at least, that Geralt attributed to them. The trunks were hollow. The cavity they formed was the size of a large room with high ceilings tapering into a cone. The interior, lit by a feeble lantern, had been transformed into a comfortable home where modesty prevailed over hardiness.

Eithne waited, kneeling on a woven carpet. Ciri, washed and cured of her cold, sat cross-legged before her, straight as a ramrod and motionless, her almond eyes wide open. The Witcher saw a beautiful face where no trace of dirt or evil grin appeared now.

The dryad was carefully and slowly combing the girl's long hair.

“Enter, Geralt, sit down.”

He sat formally, bending first on one knee.

“Are you rested?” she asked, without looking to the Witcher and continuing to comb Ciri's hair. “When do you think you will take the path back? What do you say to tomorrow morning?”

“As you wish, sovereign of Brokilone,” he responded coldly. “A single word from you is enough to be rid of my indecent presence in Duen Canell.”

“Geralt...” Eithne slowly turned her head. “Understand me well. I know you and respect you. I know that you have never harmed a dryad, naiad, sylph or nymph, rather the contrary: you often come to their defense, save their lives. But that changes nothing in this matter. Too many things separate us. Our worlds are different. I neither wish to nor am able to make exceptions. For anyone. I am not asking if you understand this, because I know that you do. I ask if you accept it.”

“What difference does it make?”

“None. But I want to know.”

“I accept it,” he confirmed. “What will happen to the girl? She doesn't belong in this world either.”

Ciri gave him a fierce look and then glanced up toward the dryad. Eithne smiled.

“Not for long,” she replied.

“Eithne, please, think again.”

“About what?”

“Give her to me. Let her leave with me to her own world.”

“No, White Wolf.” The dryad once again thrust the comb deep in Ciri's ashen hair. “I will not give her to you. You should understand better than anyone.”

“Me?”

“Yes, you. Brokilone is not closed to the world's news. Some of it concerns a certain Witcher who, in payment for his services, sometimes extorts a very curious oath: 'Give me what your house holds without your knowledge,' 'Give me what you possess without knowing it.' Isn't this familiar to you? In this way, you have tried for some time to change the course of destiny. In search of the young boys that destiny offers you for your succession, you try to avert death and oblivion. You struggle against nothingness. Why then do you greet this consequence with astonishment? I care only about the destiny of dryads. Is that not justice? For each dryad assassinated by the humans, I take a young girl.”

“In the taking, you stir up animosity and the desire for vengeance. You promote hatred.”

“Human hatred... Nothing new under the sun. No, Geralt. I will not give her back. Especially since she is healthy. It's somewhat rare today.”

“Somewhat rare?”

The dryad directed her large silver eyes to him: “They abandon sick girls to me: diphtheria, scarlet fever, croup, and even smallpox lately. They think that we have no immunity and that an epidemic will destroy us, or at least decimate our ranks. We disappoint them, Geralt. We have something more than immunity. Brokilone takes care of its children.”

Eithne fell silent. She leaned down and used her second hand to delicately untangle a stubborn knot.

“May I divulge the content of the message sent to you by the king Venzlav?”

“Isn't it a waste of time?” asked the dryad, raising her head. “Why trouble yourself? I know perfectly well what King Venzlav intends to offer me. There is no need for the gift of clairvoyance to know that. He wants me to grant him a part of Brokilone's territory from, let's say, up to the Vda river which he considers or would like to consider a natural border between Brugge and Verden. In exchange, I suppose that he will offer me an enclave: a little piece of wild forest. I suppose also that his word and his royal prerogative guarantees that this little bit of wild land, this modest patch of primeval forest, will be ours for ever and ever, and that no-one will dare attack the dryads, that they will be able to live there in peace. What, Geralt? Venzlav wants to end a war with Brokilone that has lasted for two centuries? And for this, the dryads should offer that for which they have perished for two hundred years? Offer Brokilone? So easily?”

Geralt kept silent. He had nothing to add. The dryad laughed.

“The proposition of the king is like this, Gwynbleidd? Or perhaps it is less hypocritical: 'Come down from your complacency, old bogey of the woods, savage beast, relic of the past, and hear what we, King Venzlav, desire: cedar, oak and white hickory, and then mahogany, golden birch, yew for bows and pine for planks. Brokilone runs alongside us, but we import our wood from behind the mountains. We want the iron and copper that's hidden in your basement. We want the gold veins of Craag An. We want to attack, sawing and digging, without hearing the hiss of your arrows. And most importantly: we want to finally become master of all the kingdom has to offer. We do not want a Brokilone and a forest through which we cannot march. Such an entity hurts our pride, irritates us and keeps us awake, as we are, we humans, the owners of the world. We can tolerate in this world some elves, dryads or naiads, provided these creatures stay discreet. Accept our will, Sovereign of Brokilone, or perish.'“

“Eithne, you have yourself agreed that Venzlav is neither so idiotic nor fanatical. You know without a doubt that he is a just king, venerating peace, saddened and worried when blood is shed...”

“If he keeps his distance from Brokilone, not a drop of blood will spill.”

“You know very well,” replied Geralt, lifting his head, “that the situation is somewhat different: humans have been killed at the Scorched Earth, at the Eighth League, in the hills of the Owl; and then too in Brugge, on the left bank of the Ruban. All these places are situated outside of Brokilone. The forest was cleared there a hundred years ago!”

“What meaning do a hundred years have for Brokilone? And a hundred winters?”

Geralt was silent.

The dryad gave him an indifferent glance, then caressed Ciri's ashen hair.

“Accept Venzlav's proposal, Eithne.”

The dryad gave him an indifferent glance.

“What will that give us, we the children of Brokilone?”

“The possibility of survival. No, Eithne, don't interrupt me. I know what you mean. I understand your pride in an independent Brokilone. But the world changes. An era is coming to an end. Whether you like it or not, the humans' mastery of the world is a fact. Only those who assimilate into their society survive. The others disappear. Eithne, there exist forests where dryads, water sprites and elves live peacefully in accord with the humans. We are so close to each other. Humans can become the fathers of your children. What does this war you are waging give you? The potential fathers of your children fall one by one to your arrows. What is the cost? How many dryads by blood are there in Brokilone? How many girls are abducted and educated? You even need a Freixenet. You have no choice. I only see her: a little human girl terrorized and stultified by drugs, paralyzed with fear...”

“I'm not afraid at all!” Ciri cried then, taking up for an instant her devilish expression. “And I'm not stultified! That's not true! Nothing can happen to me here. That's the truth! I'm not afraid! Grandmother said that dryads aren't evil, and my grandmother is the most intelligent woman in the world! My grandmother... my grandmother said that there must be forests like this...”

She stopped and bowed her head. Eithne burst into laughter:

“Child of Old Blood,” she said. “Yes, Geralt, the Children of Old Blood of which you speak continue to be born throughout the world. And you, you tell me about the end of an era... You ask me if we will survive...”

“The brat was to be married to Kistrin of Verden,” cut in Geralt. “It's a shame that union must now be impossible. Kistrin will one day succeed Ervyll: under the influence of a wife with such opinions, the expeditions against Brokilone would quickly end.”

“I don't want Kistrin!” the little girl protested softly. A light appeared in her green eyes. “What Kistrin is looking for is a pretty and stupid material. I am not a material that is available! I will not become a royal princess!”

“Silence, Child of Old Blood.” the dryad pressed Ciri to her breast. “Do not cry. You will never become a royal princess, of course...”

“Of course,” interrupted the Witcher. “And you and I, Eithne, know very well what Ciri will become. I see that this fate is already decided. Too bad. What response shall I report to King Venzlav, Sovereign of Brokilone?”

“None.”

“What do you mean, none?”

“None. He will understand. Once, long ago, before Venzlav was in the world, heralds were sent to the border of Brokilone. Horns and trumpets sounded; armor shone; standards and pennants flapped in the wind. They proclaimed, “Give back Brokilone! King Capradonte, sovereign of the Bald Mountain and the Flooded Prairie, requires that you abdicate Brokilone!” The response of Brokilone was always the same. When you leave my forest, Gwynbleidd, turn around and listen. In the whisper of leaves, you will hear the response of Brokilone. Send it to Venzlav and add that as sure as the oaks of Duen Canell, he will never hear any other. To the last tree, to the last dryad.”

Geralt remained silent.

“You say that an era is ending,” Eithne continued slowly. “You're wrong. There are things that will never end. You speak of survival? Well, I fight for my survival. Brokilone remains thanks to my fighting: the trees live longer than humans, but they must be protected from axes. You speak to me of kings and princes. Who are they? They are what I know as the skeletons of bleached bones that lie in the depths of the forest, in the necropolis of Craag An, in the marble tombs, on the heaps of yellow metal and shining stones. Meanwhile, Brokilone remains; the trees sing over the ruins of palaces; their roots crack the marble. Your Venzlav recalls those kings? Yourself, do you remember, Gwynbleidd? If not, how can you say that an era ends? What can you know of extermination or of eternity? What right do you have to speak of destiny? Do you have the least sense of destiny?”

“No,” he agreed. “I don't. But...”

“If you do not know,” she interrupted, “no 'but' can apply. You do not know. It's as simple as that.”

Eithne lapsed into silence and turned her head, touching her forehead.

“When you came here for the first time, all those years ago, you did not already know. And Morenn... my daughter... Geralt, Morenn is dead. She perished on the border of Ruban in defense of Brokilone. I could not recognize her, what she was reduced to. Her face had been trampled by the hooves of your horses. Destiny? Today, Witcher, you who were unable to give descendants to Morenn, you bring me a Child of Old Blood. A little girl who knows what destiny is. No, it is not likely that you will be able to accept and agree with such sensitive knowledge. Repeat for me, Ciri, repeat what you told me before White Wolf, the Witcher Geralt of Rivia, entered the room. Again, Child of Old Blood.”

“Your majes... Noble lady,” began Ciri in a broken voice. “Don't force me to stay here. I can't... I want... to go. I want to go with Geralt. I must... with him...”

“Why with him?”

“Because it is my destiny.”

Eithne turned. Her face was extremely pale. “What do you think, Geralt?”

The Witcher did not answer. Eithne snapped her fingers. Braenn burst into the interior of the oak like a phantom appearing from the night. She held in both her hands a silver chalice. The medallion Geralt wore around his neck began to shake rapidly.

“What do you think?” repeated the silver-haired dryad, rising. “She will not stay in Brokilone! She does not want to be a dryad! She will not replace Morenn for me! She wants to go, go, follow her destiny! Is that so, Child of Old Blood? Is that really what you want?”

Ciri affirmed this with a nod of her head. Her shoulders shook. The Witcher had had enough.

“Why do you badger this child, Eithne, since you have already decided to give her the Water of Brokilone? Her will then ceases to have any importance. Why would you behave like this? Why give me this spectacle?”

“I want to show you what destiny is. I want to prove that nothing ends. That everything is always just beginning.”

“No, Eithne,” he said, rising. “Sorry to spoil this performance, but I have no intention of continuing to be the privileged spectator. You have crossed the line, Sovereign of Brokilone, presenting in this manner the gulf that separates us. You, the elder races, you love to repeat that hatred is a stranger to you, that the sentiment remains a human specialty. That is not true. You also know hate; you know what hatred is. You only dress it up differently: with more wisdom, less violence. And so perhaps with more cruelty. I accept your hatred, Eithne, in the name of all human beings. I deserve it, even though I am sorry for Morenn.”

The dryad did not respond.

“Here then is the response from Brokilone that I am supposed to bring to Venzlav of Brugge, isn't it? Warning and defiance? Living proof of the hatred and power that slumber among these trees: a child will receive from the hands of another human child, whose mind and memory were also destroyed, a poison to erase her past. And this response must be conveyed to Venzlav by a Witcher who, moreover, knows and has grown fond of these children? A Witcher, responsible for the death of your daughter? Well, Eithne, so be it, in accordance with your will. Venzlav will hear your answer. My voice and my eyes are messengers for the king to decipher. But I do not have to watch the spectacle being prepared. I refuse.”

Eithne was still silent.

“Goodbye, Ciri.” Geralt knelt and pulled the little girl to him; Ciri's shoulders never stopped shaking. “Don't cry. You know that nothing bad can happen to you.”

Ciri sniffled. The Witcher rose.

“Goodbye, Braenn,” he said to the young dryad. “Go in peace and take care of yourself. May your life be as long as that of the trees of Brokilone. And one more thing...”

“Yes, Gwynbleidd?” Braenn had lifted her head: her eyes were moist.

“It is easy to kill with a bow, girl. It is easy to let go of the string and think: This isn't me, it's the arrow. My hands do not bear the blood of this boy, it's the arrow that killed him, not me. But the arrow does not dream at night. I wish for you not to dream either, little blue-eyed dryad. Farewell, Braenn.”

“Mona!” Braenn murmured indistinctly.

The cup that she held in her hands began to tremble. Its clear liquid covered them in rivulets.

“What?”

“Mona!” she cried. “My name is Mona! Madame Eithne, I...”

“Enough,” Eithne interrupted harshly. “That is enough, control yourself, Braenn.”

Geralt laughed.

“Here is your destiny, Dame of the Forest. I respect your resistance and your struggle, but I know that soon you will be alone: the last dryad in Brokilone will send young girls to their deaths remembering their real names. I wish you good luck even so, Eithne. Goodbye.”

“Geralt,” murmured Ciri, still standing motionless, her back bent. “Don't leave me alone...”

“White Wolf,” said Eithne, taking Ciri's bent back in her arms, “what must she ask of you? Have you decided to abandon her despite this? Are you afraid not to stay with her to the end? Why do you leave her at such a time, leave her alone? Where do you flee, Gwynbleidd? What do you flee?”

Ciri bowed her head even more but did not start to cry.

“Until the end,” agreed the Witcher. “Well, Ciri. You will not be alone. I will stay with you. Don't be afraid of anything.”

Eithne took the chalice from Braenn's trembling hands and lifted it. “Can you decipher the ancient runes, White Wolf?”

“Yes.”

“Read what is engraved. This is the chalice of Craag An. All the kings now forgotten have wet their lips from it.”

“Duettaedn aefcirrdn Cderme Gleddyv. Yn esseth. “

“Do you know what that means?”

“The sword of destiny has two edges... You are one of them.”

“Arise, Child of Old Blood.” The dryad's voice intimated an unconditional order, an implacable will: “Drink. It is the Water of Brokilone.”

Geralt bit his lip, searching the silver eyes of Eithne. His gaze avoided Ciri, who placed her mouth at the rim of the chalice. He had seen it already, before, an identical scene: the convulsions, the hiccups, a terrible cry, unheard, which was extinguished at last little by little. Then the void, the torpor and apathy in the eyes that opened slowly. He had seen it all.

Ciri drank the liquid. On Braenn's motionless face, a tear formed.

“That's enough.” Eithne took the cup from her and placed it on the ground. With both hands, she stroked the ashen hair that fell upon the shoulders of the little girl.

“Child of Old Blood,” she continued, “choose. Do you prefer to stay in Brokilone or follow the path of destiny?”

The Witcher's head turned incredulously. Ciri breathed more rapidly. Her cheeks took on color. But nothing more. Nothing.

“I want to follow the path of destiny,” said the little girl, looking the dryad straight in the eye.

“Let it be so, then,” replied Eithne, her voice cold and dry.

Braenn sighed heavily.

“I want to be alone,” concluded Eithne, turning her back on them. “I ask you to leave.”

Braenn took Ciri and touched Geralt's shoulder, but he rejected the young dryad's hand.

“Thank you, Eithne,” he said.

The dryad turned slowly. “Why are you thanking me?”

“For the providence,” he joked. “For your decision. Because it wasn't the Water of Brokilone, was it? Destiny wanted Ciri to return home and it's you, Eithne, who played the role of providence. I thank you.”

“You know almost nothing of providence,” she replied bitterly. “You know very little, Witcher. Very little really. You don't understand the larger picture. You thank me? You thank me for the role I played? For the bargain? For the artifice, deceit, deception? You thank me because the sword of destiny is, you think, made of wood plated with gold? So, pursue your logic to its conclusion: do not thank me, but expose me. Expose your arguments, prove to me your reasons, show me your true face. Show me how the human truth triumphs, the common sense by the grace of which, you believe, you control the world. Here is the Water of Brokilone, there remains a little. Will you allow yourself to try it, conqueror of the world?”

Geralt, troubled by her words, hesitated only a moment. The Water of Brokilone, even if authentic, would have no effect on him. The Witcher was in effect completely resistant to toxic tannins and hallucinogenic liquids. Had it been possible that it was the Water of Brokilone? Ciri had drunk it and nothing had happened. He took the chalice in both hands and fixed his eyes with the dryad's.

The ground gave way under his feet without warning, as if the world had fallen on his back. The mighty oak spun and shook. Feeling around with difficulty using his numbed hands, he managed to open his eyes, but it was as difficult as moving the marble slab of a tomb. Eithne's eyes, shining like mercury. And other eyes, emerald green. No, not as clear. Like spring grass. The medallion suspended around his neck rang and vibrated.

“Gwynbleidd,” he heard, “look carefully. No, closing your eyes will help with nothing. Look, look at your destiny.

“Do you remember?”

He saw a sudden explosion of light piercing a curtain of smoke; *large and massive candelabra dripping with wax; stone walls; steep stairs; a little girl with green eyes and ashen hair coming down the steps, wearing a tiara encrusted with artistically carved gems and dressed in a blue dress with a silver train that was supported by a page above, dressed in scarlet*.

“Do you remember?”

His own voice that said... that said: “I will return in six years...”

*An arbor, the heat, the smell of flowers, the heavy and monotonous hum of bees. Himself, kneeling, offering a rose to a woman whose ashen curls were scattered beneath a narrow golden band. On the fingers on the hand that took the rose, rings of emeralds and large green cabochons.*

“Return,” said the woman. “Return if you change your mind. Your destiny will be waiting for you.”

I never went back, he thought. I never went back to... Where?

*Ashen hair. Green eyes.*

Again, his own voice in the darkness, into the uncertainty where everything disappears. There are only fires, fires on the horizon. A whirlwind of sparks and purple smoke. Belleteyn! Night of May. Through the clouds of smoke, violet eyes, dark, burning in a pale and triangular face veiled beneath a tangle of black curls, watching.

Yennefer!

“It is too little.”

The thin lips appear to twist. A tear runs down her pale cheek. Very quickly, faster and faster, like a drop of paraffin along a candle.

“It's too little. There must be something more.”

“Yennefer!”

“Nothingness against nothingness,” announced the apparition, speaking with the voice of Eithne. “The nothingness and emptiness that exist in you, conqueror of the world, you who are not even capable of seducing the woman you love and who leaves and flees with destiny in the palm of his hand. The sword of destiny has two edges. You are one of them. But what is the other, White Wolf?”

“There is no destiny.” His own voice. “There is none. It does not exist. Only death is predestined for us.”

“That's right,''' responds the woman with ashen hair and a mysterious smile. “That's right, Geralt.'“

The woman is wearing silver armor, bloody, twisted, punctured by the blows of halberds. A trickle of blood runs from the corner of her lips that smile horribly and without reason. “You make a mockery of destiny,” she said. “You mock her, you toy with her. The sword of destiny has two edges. You are one of them. The other... is it death? But it is we who die. We die because of you. Death cannot catch you. It is content with us. It follows you step by step, White Wolf, and it is others who are dying. Because of you. Do you remember me? “

“Ca... Calanthe!”

“You can save him.” It's the voice of Eithne that pierces the smoke screen: “You can save him, Child of Old Blood. Before he disappears into the nothingness that he loves in the black forest that knows no borders.”

Eyes, green as spring grass. A touch. Voices crying out in an incomprehensible chorus. Faces.

He sees nothing more and then falls into the abyss, the void, darkness. The voice of Eithne is what he hears last:

“Let it be so.”

### Part VII

“Geralt, wake up! Wake up, please!”

The Witcher opened his eyes and saw the sun: a golden ducat outlined distinctly in the sky, perched above the crown of trees, beyond the curtain of morning mist. He was lying on wet, spongy moss. A root dug into his back.

Ciri knelt beside him, tugging on the edge of his jacket.

“Plague...” he bellowed. He looked around. “Where am I? Where do I find myself?”

“I don't know either,” she replied. “I woke up a moment ago, here, next to you, horribly frozen. I don't remember... You know, eh? It's magic!”

“No doubt you're right.” Geralt sat, dislodging the pine needles that had been stuffed into his collar. “No doubt you're right, Ciri. The Water of Brokilone, name to name... It seems that the dryads have amused themselves at our expense.”

He stood, lifted the sword that was lying nearby and buckled his belt around his waist. “Ciri?”

“Yes?”

“You too, you were amused at my expense.”

“Me?”

“You are the daughter of Pavetta, the granddaughter of Calanthe of Cintra. You knew from the beginning who I was...”

“No,” she responded, blushing. “Not at first. It's you who disenchanted my papa, isn't it?”

“Not really.” He shook his head. “It was your mother... with the help of your grandmother. I only helped them.”

“But Nanny said... She said that I was the subject of destiny. Because I was the surprise. The child-surprise, Geralt?”

“Ciri.” He looked into her eyes, nodding and smiling. “You can believe me: you are the biggest surprise I have ever met.”

“Ah!” The girl's face cleared. “Then it's true! I am the subject of destiny. Nanny predicted that a Witcher would come, that he would have white hair and that he would take me with him. Grandmother cried... How will it be? Where are you taking me, tell me?”

“Home, to Cintra.”

“Really? I thought that...”

“You will think on the road. Let's go, Ciri, we must leave Brokilone. This is not a safe place.”

“But I'm not afraid!”

“Me, I'm afraid.”

“Grandmother said that Witchers aren't afraid of anything.”

“Your grandmother was exaggerating. On our way, Ciri. I think I know where we...” He examined the sun. “Hmm... Let's take the chance... Let's go that way.”

“No.” Ciri wrinkled her nose and pointed in the opposite direction. “That way. There.”

“How do you know?”

“I know, that's all,” she responded, shrugging. She put him under her emerald gaze, astonished and helpless. “How... I don't know.”

Pavetta's daughter, he thought. The child... The Child of Old Blood? It's possible that she inherited this gift from her mother. “Ciri...” He unbuttoned his shirt and took out his medallion. “Touch it.”

“Oh!” She opened her mouth wide. “It's a terrible wolf. It has fangs...”

“Touch.”

“Oh!”

The Witcher smiled, feeling the violent vibration of the medallion and the waves traveling up the silver chain.

“It moved,” Ciri murmured. “It moved!”

“I know. Come on, Ciri. You'll guide us.”

“It's magic, isn't it?”

“Of course.”

As predicted, the little girl sensed the way forward. In what manner? This, he did not know. Quickly, more quickly than he would have thought, they came to a path that led them to the crossing of three roads. This was the border of Brokilone, at least as was recognized by humans. He remembered that only Eithne did not consider this the case.

Ciri bit her lip, wrinkled her nose and paused, seeing the sandy roads torn by hooves and wagon wheels. Oriented at last, Geralt could be free of the girl's uncertain suggestions. He took the road east toward Brugge. Ciri, always worried, looked at the road west.

“That way leads to Castle Nastrog,” he teased. “You miss Kistrin?”

The girl grumbled, catching up to Geralt. She turned again nonetheless, several times.

“What is it, Ciri?”

“I don't know,” she murmured. “This isn't the right path, Geralt.”

“Why? We're going to Brugge, home of King Venzlav who lives in a splendid castle where we will visit the baths and where we will sleep on feather beds...”

“It's not the right path,” she repeated. “No.”

“It's a fact: I've seen the best. Stop brooding, Ciri. Let's go quickly.”

They turned a corner surrounded by bushes. Ciri was right...

The soldiers encircled them suddenly, rapidly, on all sides. They wore conical helmets, coats of mail and dark gray tunics sporting the black and gold of Verden. They remained at a distance without drawing their weapons.

“Where do you come from, where are you going?” someone yelled to Geralt, a squat man with spidery legs in a wide stance, wearing a worn green uniform. His face was tanned and wrinkled like a prune. His bow and his white-fletched arrows rose above his head.

“We come from the Scorched Earth,” lied the Witcher, holding Ciri's hand fast. “I go home, to Brugge. What is this about?”

“Service of the King,” the tanned man replied more politely, having noticed the sword on Geralt's back. “We...”

“Bring him here, Jughans!” cried someone who was farther back on the road.

The soldiers parted.

“Don't look, Ciri,” Geralt breathed. “Turn around. Don't look.”

A fallen tree blocked the path, cluttering it with branches. The cut and broken base of the trunk, bristling with long shards of white wood, lay in the thicket bordering the path. In front of the tree stood a cart covered by a tarp. Riddled with arrows, entangled in the yoke and the reins, small long-haired horses were lying on the ground, showing their yellow teeth. One of them still lived. It snorted heavily, continuing to kick.

There were also dead bodies scattered on the bloodstained sand, clinging to the sides of the cart or tangled in the cartwheels.

Two soldiers, then a third, emerged slowly from the ranks of armed men gathered around the cart. There were about a dozen, motionless, holding their horses.

“What happened?” asked the Witcher. He tried, for Ciri's sake, to hide the scene of the massacre with his body.

A squinting soldier wearing a short mail coat and high boots watched attentively, scraping his unshaven chin with a rasping sound. On his left forearm he wore the worn and weathered cuff of an archer. “An attack,” he said simply. “Fairies of the woods killing merchants. We are in charge of the investigation.”

“Fairies would take out merchants?”

“You see for yourself,” said the squinting soldier, motioning with his arm, “they are riddled with arrows, veritable hedgehogs... On the highway! These creatures of the woods are becoming more and more zealous. Soon it will no longer be possible to enter the forest or even come near.”

“And you,” ventured the Witcher, blinking, “who are you?”

“The troops of Ervyll, the decurions of Nastrog. We served under the command of Baron Freixenet, but the Baron fell to Brokilone.”

Ciri opened her mouth, but Geralt signaled for her to be silent, shaking her hand.

“Blood for blood, I say!” growled the squint-eyed soldier's companion, a giant with a doublet trimmed in copper. “Blood for blood! This is not tolerable. First Freixenet and the Princess of Cintra, now these merchants. By all the gods, vengeance, vengeance I tell you! Otherwise, you will see tomorrow, and the day after, they will kill humans on the steps of their own homes!”

“Brick speaks well,” continued the squint-eyed soldier. “Doesn't he? And you, brother, I ask you: where are you from?”

“From Brugge,” lied the Witcher.

“And this little one, your daughter?”

Geralt shook Ciri's hand again. “My daughter.”

“From Brugge...” Brick frowned. “I tell you, brother, that it's your king, Venzlav, who emboldens the monsters. He is not the ally of our Ervyll or of Viraxas of Kerack. If we were fighting on three fronts, we could finally be rid of that breed...”

“How did the massacre happen?” Geralt asked slowly. “Does anyone know? Has a merchant survived?”

“There are no witnesses,” said the squint-eyed soldier. “But we know what happened. Junghans, the ranger, read the traces like a book. Tell him, Junghans...”

“Yeah,” said the tanned one. “It happened like this: the merchants were rolling down the highway. They stumbled on the downed tree. See, master, the pine felled in the middle of the road is freshly cut. In the brush, there are traces. You see? And when the merchants came down to move the tree, they were fired on from three different sides. From there, the bushes, where there are twisted birch. And there, there are traces. Arrows, see, it's the work of fairies: fletchings glued with resin, the feathers covered in sap...”

“I see,” the Witcher interrupted, looking at the deceased. “Some of them, it seems to me, survived the arrows and were slaughtered with knives.”

From behind the ranks of soldiers standing behind him there came another man, short and thin, dressed in a dashing doublet. He wore his black hair cut very short. His cheeks were shaven and gray. The Witcher only needed to look at his small, narrow hands gloved by black mittens, at his fishy eyes, his sword, the handles of stilettos emerging from his waistband and the hem of his left boot... Geralt had seen too many assassins not to recognize another one.

“You have a keen eye,” the swarthy man said, very slowly. “My word, you see many things.”

“This is the case,” said the squint-eyed soldier. “He will report what he saw to his king, Venzlav, since it seems that we must not touch the supposedly good and kind fairies. They can certainly be met during the month of May to be kissed. For that, they may be good. We will see if one of them falls into our hands alive.”

“Even half-alive,” grinned Brick. “Plague! Where is the druid? It's almost noon and there's no trace of him. It's time to hit the road.”

“What will you do?” Geralt asked, without letting go of Ciri's hand.

“How does it concern you?” the dark one growled.

“Why get worked up, Levecque?” interrupted the squint-eyed one, laughing horribly. “We are honest people. We have no secrets. Ervyll sent us a druid, a great sorcerer who can communicate with trees. He will accompany us to the forest to avenge Freixenet and try to save the princess. This is not a walk, brother, but an expedition, pun... pun...”

“Punitive,” sighed Levecque.

“Yeah. I had it on the tip of my tongue. Yes, be on your way, brother, because the situation will soon get heated here.”

“Yes,” Levecque said, looking at Ciri. “It's dangerous here, even more so with a little girl. The fairies love them. Huh, kid? Your mother's waiting for you at home?”

Ciri nodded, trembling.

“It would be a pity if she never saw you again,” the dark one continued, without looking away. “She would no doubt complain to Venzlav: by tolerating the dryads, King, you have condemned my daughter and my husband. Who knows if Venzlav wouldn't renew his alliance with Ervyll then?”

“Leave 'em, Mr Levecque,” growled Junghans. The creases on his face deepened. “Let 'em go.”

“Hello to you, kid.” Levecque reached out his hand and stroked Ciri's head. She shuddered and recoiled.

“What? You're afraid?”

“You have blood on your hand,” the Witcher said softly.

“Ah!” Levecque lifted his arm. “Indeed. It's the merchants' blood. I wanted to see if there were any survivors. The fairies, unfortunately, were thorough.”

“Fairies?” Ciri said in an unsteady voice, not reacting to the pressure from the Witcher's hand. “Oh! Sir knight, you are mistaken. It couldn't be dryads!”

“What are you mumbling about, kid?”

The swarthy man narrowed his pale eyes. Geralt glanced right and left, estimating the distances.

“They were not dryads, sir knight,” Ciri repeated. “It's obvious!”

“Huh?”

“This tree... This tree was cut! With an ax! Dryads never cut a tree, isn't that right?”

“That's right,” Levecque responded, looking at the squint-eyed soldier. “Oh! But you're a smart little girl. Too smart.”

The Witcher had spotted the assassin's black-gloved hand creeping like a spider to the handle of his stiletto. Although Levecque's eyes had not once left the little girl, Geralt knew that the first shot would be brought against him. He waited for Levecque to touch his weapon.

The squint-eyed soldier gasped.

Three movements. Three, only.

The silver-studded forearm struck the left side of the swarthy man's head. The Witcher found himself between Junghans and the squint-eyed soldier even before Levecque fell to the ground, and his sword, emerging from its sheath with a hiss, sang through the air and struck the temple of Brick, the giant in the copper-trimmed doublet.

“Save yourself, Ciri!”

The squint-eyed soldier, seizing his sword, jumped aside, but too late. The Witcher opened his torso diagonally from top to bottom and then, taking advantage of the energy of the blow, struck instantly, bottom to top, leaving his body branded by a bloody X.

“Guys!” Junghans yelled at the rest of the troops, which were petrified with astonishment. “To me!”

Ciri reached a twisted beech and climbed like a squirrel to reach the top branches, hiding in the foliage. The ranger fired an arrow in her direction without success. The others began to move. Arranged in a semicircle, they drew their bows and took arrows from their quivers. Geralt, kneeling, extended his fingers to form the Aard sign, not at the too-distant archers but at the sand of the path before them, which blinded them in the whirlwind.

Junghans pulled a second arrow from his quiver and bounded agilely.

“No!” Levecque yelled, getting up, armed with a sword in his left hand and a stiletto in his right. “Allow me, Junghans!”

The Witcher pivoted smoothly to face him.

“He's mine,” Levecque continued, shaking his head and wiping his face with his forearm. “Only mine!”

Geralt, leaning, spun in a half circle, but Levecque did not do the same: he attacked directly. They met, cornered.

He's not bad, thought the Witcher, neutralizing with difficulty the rapid movement of the waving blade of the murderer, and deflecting with a half-turn the blow of his stiletto. He did not volunteer a riposte, but leapt to the side, predicting that Levecque would try again and be imbalanced by his wide swing. But the killer was not a novice. He shrank back and circled with a feline agility. Then he jumped without warning, flashing his sword like a whirlwind. The Witcher refused direct confrontation, meeting him with a high and fast parry that forced the killer to recoil. Levecque curled up in preparation for a fourth. He hid one of his stilettos behind his back. The Witcher, again, did not attack, did not close the distance, preferring once again to circle around his adversary.

“Every good joke comes to an end,” Levecque growled between his teeth. “What do you say we wrap things up, wise guy. Wrap things up before we cut down your bastard in her tree. What do you think?”

Geralt had noticed that the murderer was watching his own shadow, waiting until it reached his opponent, meaning that he would be dazzled by the sun. The Witcher stopped turning for the killer's convenience.

His pupils diminished to become two horizontal slits, two tight lines.

To disguise the change, he squinted as if he had been blinded.

Levecque jumped, turned, maintaining his equilibrium with the arm wielding a stiletto and struck with a wrist movement that seemed impossible, bottom to top. Geralt shot forward, turned and parried the blow. With an equally impossible movement of his wrist and shoulder, he pushed the killer back with the strength of his parry, which ended in a stroke of his blade along the left cheek of his adversary. Levecque staggered, seizing his face. The Witcher turned about-face and, throwing all his weight on his left leg and in a short blow severed the carotid artery. Drenched in blood, Levecque curled up and fell to his knees before pitching headfirst into the sand.

Geralt slowly turned to face Junghans. The latter was aiming his bow, grinning terribly. The Witcher bent low, grasping his sword in both hands. The other soldiers were also holding their bows in a deathly silence.

“What are you waiting for?” bellowed the ranger. “Go! Go!”

Then he abruptly stumbled, staggered and jogged a few steps before collapsing, an arrow through his throat. The fletching was made of tiger pheasant feathers, dyed yellow with a concoction made of bark.

Arrows sang out from the black wall of the forest, in long and flat arcs. They seemed to glide slowly and peacefully on whistling feathers and not pick up speed and force until the moment of impact. They struck their targets without error, decimating the helpless mercenaries of Nastrog, falling like leaves onto the sandy road, mowed down like sunflowers under the blows of a stick.

The survivors hurried to the horses, jostling each other. The arrows did not stop whistling. They reached the soldiers as they ran or were already in the saddle. Only three of them managed to bring their horses to a full gallop, shouting and striking the flanks of their mounts. But they didn't go far.

The forest was closed, blocking the way. The sandy highway, sun-drenched, disappeared behind the wall of dense and impenetrable black trunks.

The mercenaries spurred their horses. Frightened and bewildered, they tried to turn around, but the arrows fell all the while. They tore through the mounted soldiers amid the sound of trampling, the neighing of horses and shouting.

Then there was silence.

The wall of the forest enclosing the highway shimmered, faded, flashed with all the colors of the rainbow and disappeared. The road was visible again. There appeared a horse with a gray coat was ridden by a powerful blond-bearded horseman, wearing a seal jacket belted by a strip of plaid wool.

The gray horse advanced restlessly, shaking its head and lifting its forelegs high. He snorted, avoiding the corpses and the smell of blood. The horseman, upright in the saddle, lifted his right hand: a light breeze rustled the branches of the trees.

“Ceddmil, Wedd Brokiloener” cried the horseman. “Fdill, And Woedwedd!”

“Fdill!” replied a voice from the forest, carried by the wind.

The green and brown silhouettes disappeared one after the other into the undergrowth of the forest. Only one remained, with hair the color of honey. She approached.

“Va fdill, Gwynbleidd,” she said, coming closer.

“Goodbye, Mona,” replied the Witcher. “I will not forget you.”

“Forget,” she replied harshly, adjusting the quiver on her back. “There is no Mona. Mona was a dream. I am Braenn. Braenn of Brokilone.” She gave one more wave of her hand and disappeared.

The Witcher turned. “Mousesack,” he said, looking at the rider on the gray horse.

“Geralt,” acknowledged the horseman, eying him with a cold stare. “An interesting encounter. But start with the most important things. Where is Ciri?”

“Here!!” cried the little girl, completely hidden in the foliage. “Can I come down?”

“Yes, you can,” responded the Witcher.

“But I don't know how!”

“In the same way you climbed up, but in reverse.”

“I'm afraid! I'm at the top of the tree!”

“Come down, I tell you. We have much to discuss, little lady.”

“But what?”

“Why, by the plague, did you climb up instead of running into the forest? I would have followed behind you; I wouldn't have had to... Ah! By cholera, come down!”

“I did like the cat in the story! Whatever I do, it's always wrong! Why? I wish I knew.”

“I, too,” said the druid, “would like to know. And your grandmother, Queen Calanthe would also like to know. Come down, little princess.”

Leaves and dry branches tumbled down from the tree. Then there came the sound of ripping fabric. Ciri finally appeared, sliding, her legs apart, along the trunk. In place of the hood of her cloak, she wore only picturesque tatters.

“Uncle Mousesack!”

“In the flesh.”

The druid took the little girl in his arms pressed her against him.

“Is it Grandmother who sent you, Uncle? She was put to a lot of trouble?”

“Not too much,” said Mousesack, smiling. “She is too busy to wet her strap. The way back to Cintra will take some time, Ciri. Take the opportunity to find an explanation for your adventures. The best, if you take my advice, would be to make it short and to the point. An explanation that it is possible to state very, very quickly. But I believe nonetheless that at the end, Princess, you will cry out very, very loud.”

Ciri grimaced with pain, sniffled, grumbled quietly. Her hands instinctively sought refuge at the part of her body that was most at risk.

“Let's go,” suggested Geralt, inspecting the area. “Let's go, Mousesack.”

### Part VIII

“No,” said the druid. “Calanthe has changed her plans: she no longer wants Ciri and Kistrin to marry. She has her reasons. In addition, it will not surprise you to hear that, since this unfortunate attack made on the merchants, King Ervyll has lost much of his credibility in my eyes, and you know that my judgment counts in the kingdom. No, we will not even stop in Nastrog. I will take the little one directly to Cintra. Come with us, Geralt.”

“What for?”

The Witcher glanced at Ciri, who shivered under a tree, protected by Mousesack's fur cloak.

“You know why. This child, Geralt, is your destiny. Your paths crossed for the third time, yes, the third time. In a certain sense, of course, especially when it comes to the first two times. I hope, Geralt, that you do not think that this is a simple coincidence.”

“What difference does it make what I call it?” replied the Witcher, forcing a smile. “Things escape the names we give them, Mousesack. Why take me to Cintra? I've already been there, I've already met her, as you said, by other paths. So what?”

“Geralt, you demanded then an oath that Calanthe, Pavetta, and her husband swore to. It has been upheld. Ciri is the child-surprise. Destiny requires...”

“That I take this child and make her into a Witcher? A little girl! Look at me, Mousesack. Can you imagine that I could have been a fresh and pretty little girl?”

“The devil with the Witchers' arts!” retorted the druid, carried away. “What does your heart say? What is the relationship? No, Geralt, I see that you do not understand and that I must use simple words. Listen, any cretin can exact an oath. You're one of them. That in itself is nothing extraordinary. It's the child who is extraordinary. As is the link that was created when the child was born. I must be even more clear? Not a problem, Geralt: since the birth of Ciri, your wishes and plans cease to be important, as does what you refuse and what you renounce. Yourself, by plague and cholera, you have ceased to count! Do you understand?”

“Don't shout. You're going to wake her up. Our surprise is sleeping. And when she wakes up... Mousesack, even extraordinary things, one can... One must sometimes renounce.”

The druid watched him insistently. “You know, however, that you can never have a child of your own.”

“I know.”

“And you renounce her?”

“I renounce her. Do I not have the right?”

“You have the right,” Mousesack responded. “And how. But it's risky. There is an old saying that the sword of destiny...”

“... has two edges,” finished Geralt. “I know.”

“Then do as you think is right.” The druid turned his head and spat. “And to think that I was ready to risk my neck for you...”

“You?”

“Yes. Unlike you, I believe in destiny. And I know that it is dangerous to toy with a double-edged sword. Don't play games, Geralt. Take the opportunity that has been given to you. Make the link with Ciri into a normal relationship between guardian and child. Otherwise... This link could manifest in other ways. More terrible. Negative and destructive. I want to protect you, you and the little one. If you wanted to take her, I would not be opposed. I would take the risk of explaining everything to Calanthe.”

“How do you know that Ciri would be willing to follow me? Have you had a premonition?”

“No,” Mousesack responded seriously. “I know because she fell asleep when you held her tight in your arms, and because she whispers your name in a dream and her hand seeks yours.”

“That's enough.” Geralt stood. “I should move on. Farewell, bearded one. All my respects to Calanthe. For Ciri's escapades, invent something.”

“Your escape is illusory, Geralt.”

“My escape from destiny?” The Witcher tightened the straps of a recovered horse.

“No,” the druid responded, watching the little girl: “from her.”

The Witcher nodded and then vaulted into the saddle. Mousesack remained seated, motionless, using a stick to stir the dying fire.

Geralt went slowly through the heather that reached his stirrups, in the main slope of the valley, toward the black forest.

“Geralt!”

He turned. Ciri stood at the top of the hill, the little figure with ashen hair looking defeated.

“Don't go!”

He waved his hand.

“Don't go!” she screamed with less strength. “Don't go!”

I must, he thought. I must, Ciri. Because... I'm leaving forever.

“Don't think that you'll get away so easily!” she cried. “Don't even think it! You can't run away! I am part of your destiny, you hear?”

There is no destiny, he thought. It doesn't exist. The only thing that is predestined for us all is death. The second side of the sword with two edges is death. The first is me. The second is the death that follows me step by step. I cannot, I have no right to expose you to it, Ciri.

“I am your destiny!”

He heard more cries from the top of the hill, but with less strength and more desperation.

With a kick, he urged his horse on and plunged into the damp forest, black and cold as the abyss, in the familiar shadow and benevolent unending darkness.

## Something More

When the hooves struck the planks of the bridge, Yurga didn't even raise his head. He stifled a scream, dropped the binding from the wheel that he was trying to reattach and crawled under the cart as quickly as possible. In tears, digging his back into the rough coat of mud and manure that covered the underside of the vehicle's floor, he was screaming intermittently and trembling with fear.

The horse slowly approached the cart. Yurga noticed how cautiously and delicately the hooves moved on the beams that were moldy and rotted through.

“Get out of there,” said the unseen rider.

Yurga hissed through his teeth, regathering his wits. The horse snorted and stamped a hoof.

“Easy, Roach,” said the rider. Yurga heard the man patting the neck of his horse. “Come out, friend. I won't do you any harm.”

The merchant did not believe the stranger's words. There was nevertheless something in the voice that was reassuring and intriguing, although the tone was not pleasant. Muttering prayers to several gods at once, Yurga at last stuck his head cautiously out from under the carriage.

The rider had hair as white as milk, held back by a leather headband, and a black wool coat that fell onto the rump of his chestnut mare. He did not look at Yurga. Leaning on his saddle, he looked at the wheel of the cart and the axle stuck in the split boards of the bridge. He suddenly lifted his head, touching the merchant with his gaze in the process of impassively observing the vegetation that pushed through the banks of the ravine.

Yurga extricated himself with difficulty, grumbling. He wiped his nose on the back of his hand, smearing his face with wood tar from the axle. The rider darted him a somber and attentive look, sharp and cutting as a harpoon. Yurga remained silent.

“The two of us will not be able to free it,” the stranger finally said, indicating the stuck wheel. “You're traveling alone?”

“There are three of us, lord,” Yurga stammered. “My servants have fled, the cowards...”

“Not surprising,” responded the rider, looking down at the bottom of the ravine beneath the bridge. “Not at all surprising. I think you should do the same. There is still time.”

Yurga's eyes did not follow the stranger's gaze to the skulls, ribs, and shins scattered among the stones, visible through the burdock and nettles growing on the dry riverbed. The merchant feared that those black eye sockets, beautiful smiling teeth, and all the broken bones would cause him to break down completely, and what remained of his courage would burst like a fish's swim bladder. Then he would flee along the road, stifling his screams, as the driver and the valet had just an hour earlier.

“But what are you waiting for?” asked the rider in a low voice, turning his horse. “Twilight? It will be too late. They will take you as soon as night falls. Perhaps even earlier. Go, mount your horse, come with me. Get out of here as fast as possible.”

“And the cart, sir?” Yurga yelled at the top of his lungs, surprising himself with the intensity of his shout, not knowing whether it was fear, despair, or anger that caused it. “The merchandise! A whole year of work! I'd rather die! I won't leave any of it behind!”

“It seems to me that you don't yet know where fate has led you, friend,” the stranger said quietly, gesturing with his hand toward the horrible cemetery stretching beneath the bridge. “You don't want to leave the cart here, you say? I tell you that when twilight falls, not even the treasures of King Dezmod will be able to save you. Stop thinking about your damn cart. The devil with your idea to take a shortcut across such a marvelous country. Do you know what massacres have taken place here since the end of the war?”

Yurga indicated his ignorance.

“You don't know,” replied the stranger, shaking his head, “but you see what lies below! It's difficult not to notice. They are exactly those who tried to take a shortcut. And you, you say you don't want to leave your cart behind. What does it contain, your famous cart? I'm curious to know.”

Yurga did not answer. While looking at the rider from below, he was torn between “oakum” and “old rags.”

The rider didn't appear particularly interested in his response. He calmed the chestnut mare who was tossing her head nervously.

“Lord...” the merchant stammered at last. “Help me. Save me. I would be grateful until the end of my days... Don't let me... I'll give you what you want, anything you desire... Save me, lord!”

The stranger turned his head abruptly, keeping both hands on the pommel of the saddle.

“What did you say?”

Yurga, mouth agape, was silent.

“You will give me what I want, repeat it.”

Yurga swallowed and closed his mouth. He regretted that he had not thought twice before speaking. His head spun with the most fantastic conjectures concerning the price that the strange traveler could exact. Everything. Even the privilege of a particular trade once a month with his young wife, Chrisididae, did not seem so terrible compared with the loss of his cart, and no doubt much less macabre than becoming a bleached skeleton at the bottom of the ravine. The merchant's atavism quickly bowed to the considerations of the situation. The rider didn't look like a tramp, a vagabond, or a marauder, as many as there were since the end of the war. Neither was he a prince, a counselor, or one of those little knights with a high opinion of themselves who liked to extract money from their neighbors. Yurga estimated his worth at close to twenty gold coins. His commercial nature nevertheless prevented him from offering a price.

He limited himself to speaking indiscriminately of “eternal gratitude.”

“I asked you,” the stranger repeated calmly, waiting for the silent merchant, “if you will give me what I want.”

He had to speak. Yurga swallowed hard, nodding his head. Against expectations, the stranger did not look triumphant; he did not even seem especially pleased with the success of his negotiation. He spat into the ravine, leaning on his horse.

“But what am I doing?” he said sadly. “Aren't I making a mistake? Either I try to get you out of here. I won't deny that this adventure could be fatal for one or both of us. If we succeed then you, in return...”

Yurga tensed, ready to cry.

“You give me,” the rider in the black coat said quickly, “the thing that you did not expect to find on returning home. Do you swear?”

Yurga nodded his head, stammering.

“Good,” grinned the stranger. “Now move over. It's best if you hide under the cart again. The sun is setting.”

He got down from his horse and took off his coat. The merchant noticed the sword that the stranger carried on a shoulder strap and the harness that crossed his chest. He had the feeling that he had heard talk before of people who carried their weapons in this way. The black leather jacket cut at the waist and the long gauntlets studded with silver could indicate that the stranger was from Novigrad or its area. The fashion for such garments was popular among the youth lately, but the stranger was no longer a young man.

The rider turned after unloading his horse; the medallion suspended on his chest by a silver chain began to shudder; he held in his arms a small iron mug and a long, tied bundle covered in skins.

“Still not under the cart?” he asked, approaching.

Yurga noticed the wolf with bared fangs depicted by the medallion. “Would you be... a Witcher, sir?”

The stranger shrugged his shoulders. “That's right. A Witcher. And now, hide under the other side of the cart. Don't come out and keep your mouth shut. I need to be alone for a moment.”

Yurga complied. He crouched near the wheel, hiding underneath the tarp. He preferred not to see what the stranger was doing on the other side of the cart and wanted to see the bones lying at the bottom of the ravine even less. He looked instead at his shoes and the star-shaped specks of green moss covering the rotten planks of the bridge.

A Witcher. The sun disappeared. He heard footsteps.

The stranger came out slowly, very slowly, from behind the cart and moved to the center of the bridge. Yurga saw his back. He noticed that his sword was not the same one he had before. It was a beautiful weapon: the hilt, the guard, and the iron embellishments on the scabbard shone like stars. Even at dusk, they glowed.

The golden and purple glow covering the forest faded.

“Sir...”

The stranger turned. Yurga managed to suppress a scream.

The stranger's face was white, white and porous as fresh cheese under his clothes. And his eyes... Oh gods... The terror screamed through Yurga. His eyes...

“Behind the cart, quickly,” the stranger ordered in a low voice.

It was not the same voice that he had heard earlier. The merchant suddenly felt the pressure of his overfull bladder.

The stranger turned and walked over the bridge. A Witcher.

The horse tethered to the ladder of the cart groaned and neighed, striking the planks with its hooves. A mosquito hummed over Yurga's ear. The merchant did not even move to swat it. A second mosquito arrived. Entire clouds of mosquitoes were concentrated in the brush on the opposite side of the ravine.

They were screaming.

Yurga saw, clenching his teeth painfully, that they were not mosquitoes.

In the increasingly dense twilight, small misshapen silhouettes, horrible, no taller than an ell, thin as skeletons, were overtaking the other side of the ravine. They moved onto the bridge with a bizarre gait like a heron's, lifting their swollen knees very high in abrupt movements. Bilious eyes bulged from flat and wrinkled faces. Their small frog-like mouths sported tiny pearly fangs. They approached, hissing.

The stranger, still as a statue in the center of the bridge, suddenly lifted his right hand with his fingers positioned strangely. The monstrous dwarves retreated, hissing, before quickly resuming their approach, faster and faster, raising their long, grasping, stick-thin limbs.

From the left came the sound of claws: a new monster appeared suddenly from under the bridge; the others pounced, in stupefying leaps. The stranger turned. The new sword flashed. The head of the creature that climbed from the bridge flew six feet into the air, trailing a garland of blood behind it. The white-haired man bounded into the group that remained. He struck, whirling his sword right and left. The monsters hurled themselves at him from all sides, screaming, flailing their limbs; the sword, bright and sharp as a razor, did not discourage them. Yurga huddled against the cart.

Something fell at his feet, covered in blood. It was a long bony leg with four claws, scaled like a hen's.

The merchant screamed.

He felt a stealthy presence next to him. He curled up as if to disappear under the carriage. The ghastly thing then fell upon his neck: the large clawed leg gripped him at his temple and his cheek. Yurga closed his eyes. He tore himself away from the monster, screaming and slashing at the body; he found himself in the middle of the bridge, surrounded by corpses lying on the planks. The battle raged. The merchant saw nothing except the raging tumult and confusion from which emerged, from time to time, an arc of silver light.

“Help!” he yelled, feeling the sharp fangs pierce his hood and engulf the back of his skull.

“Get your head down!”

He pressed his chin to his chest, searching with his gaze for the quick strike of the blade. The sword sang through the air, brushing his hood. Yurga heard a wet and terrible crack. A hot liquid spilled like a bucket across his shoulders. A dead weight around his neck forced both his knees to the ground.

The merchant saw three other monsters spring from under the bridge. Leaping like locusts, they seized the stranger's legs. One of them, its frog face split by a blow, staggered rigidly away before falling to the planks. The second, pierced by the tip of the sword, collapsed into spasms. The others surrounded the white-haired man like ants, driving him to the side of the bridge. The third monster was thrown, bleeding, screaming and convulsing, from the fray. The disordered horde rolled at the same moment over the edge of the bridge and into the ravine. Yurga fell to the ground, protecting his head with his hands.

Under the bridge, the merchant heard the triumphant clamor of the monsters give way to the hissing of the sword, screaming and moans of pain. Then there came from the darkness a clanging of stones followed by the crackle of crushed and smashed skeletons, and again the whistle of a sword and a final, desperate, blood-curdling croaking, prematurely interrupted.

It was then that the silence was punctuated here and there, among the trees deep in the woods, by the frightened cry of a bird. Then even the birds were silent.

Yurga swallowed hard and sat up slightly, lifting his head. The silence still reigned. Not even the leaves of the trees made a sound. The forest seemed to have become mute with terror. Frayed clouds darkened the sky.

“Hey!”

The merchant turned, instinctively protecting himself with his hands. The Witcher was standing before him, motionless, black, holding his shining sword at arm's length. Yurga noticed that he did not stand up straight, he leaned to one side.

“Lord, have you made it?”

The Witcher did not respond. He took a heavy and awkward step, touching his left hip, and reached out to hold on to the side of the cart. Yurga noticed black and shining blood dripping onto the planks.

“Lord, you're injured!”

The Witcher did not respond. He clung to the side of the cart, locking eyes with the merchant, and then slid slowly onto the bridge.

### Part II

“Easy, careful... Under the head... One of you support his head!”

“Here, here, on the cart!”

“By the gods, the lord... Master Yurga, he's bleeding through the dressing...”

“Stop jabbering! Come on, hurry up! Profit, the nerve! Cover him with furs, and you, Veil, don't you see that he's shaking?”

“Perhaps he could be given some vodka!”

“Wounded and unconscious? Are you mad, Veil? Pass me the bottle instead: I need a drink... Dogs, scoundrels, miserable cowards! Running away like that and leaving me alone!”

“Master Yurga! He said something!”

“What? What did he say?”

“I'm not sure... A name...”

“What name?”

“Yennefer...”

### Part III

“Where am I?”

“Don't get up, sir, don't move, or everything will reopen and tear. Those horrible creatures must have bitten the thigh down to the bone. You lost a lot of blood... Don't you recognize me? Yurga! The man you saved on the bridge; don't you remember?”

“Ah...”

“Are you thirsty?”

“By the devil, yes...”

“Drink, my lord, drink. You're consumed by fever.”

“Yurga... where are we?”

“We're on the road, in my cart. Don't say anything, my lord, don't move. We must cross the forests to reach the first human settlements and find a healer. Your dressing isn't enough. The blood won't stop flowing...”

“Yurga...”

“Yes, my lord?”

“In my chest... a flask... sealed with green wax. Break the seal and give it to me... in a goblet. No-one must touch the flask... if you value your life... Quick, Yurga... Damn, but this cart can shake... The flask, Yurga...”

“Here... drink.”

“Thank you... Pay close attention. I'm going to fall asleep. I will be thrashing and raving, and then still as a corpse. It's nothing, don't be afraid...”

“Sleep, lord, otherwise your wound will reopen, and you'll lose all your blood.”

He sank into the furs. His head reeled. He felt that the merchant had covered him with a coat and a blanket that smelled of horse sweat. The cart jolted. Each bump hit his thigh and hip painfully. He gritted his teeth. Above him, he saw millions of stars. So close that it seemed that it would be enough to reach above his head, just above the line of the trees, to touch them.

#### [Hallucination/Flashback Starts]

I’m not sure rather this is a hallucination or a flashback, I am inclined to believe it’s a flashback. Geralt taking some hallucinogenic drug that he thinks will help him dreams of his past. This hallucination is of the last time he ran into Yennifer after their breakup from “A Shard of Ice”. It takes place at the Belleteyn(mayday) festival, which from the description is a celebration of renewed life, but seems to be drinking and sex.

He chose to follow the path farthest from the light, from the glow of fires, to hide in the areas of swaying shadow. It wasn't easy: all around were burning pyres of pine, dotting the sky with the red light of torches, adding their banners of smoke to the darkness, crackling and flaring with light between the dancing silhouettes.

Geralt stopped to allow the passage of the procession - mad, screaming, savage - that approached him and blocked any escape. Someone seized his shoulder and tried to give him a small cup filled with foam. He refused politely, but firmly pushed away the staggering man who carried a barrel of watered beer around to the people. He did not drink.

Not tonight.

Not far away, on a stage built from the trunks of birch trees that overlooked the huge bonfire, the fair-haired King of May, wearing a crown of flowers and branches, kissed the Queen of May; he caressed her breasts through her thin, sweat-drenched tunic. The monarch, very drunk, staggered and could not keep his balance without holding onto the queen, holding a nice mug of beer in the fist at his back. The queen was not sober either. Encircled by a wreath of flowers that was falling over her eyes, she clung to the neck of the king and kicked up her legs. The crowd danced on the stage, singing, shouting, and waving branches twined with flowers and vines.

“Belleteyn!” a girl cried into Geralt's ear.

Tugging at his sleeve, she forced him to join the procession that surrounded him. She danced beside him: her robe and the flowers in her hair fluttered in the breeze. He allowed her to draw him into the dance. He whirled deftly, allowing the other couples to pass.

“Belleteyn! It's the night of May!”

Next to them, a scuffle broke out, the cries and nervous laughter of a girl struggling against a boy who carried her off into the dark, outside the circle of light. The procession, shouting, followed a path between the burning fires. Sometimes, someone stumbled, falling and breaking the chain of linked arms that then branched out into small groups.

The eyes of the girl, piercing through the leaves that adorned her brow, were watching Geralt. She approached and hugged herself forcefully against his shoulders. He gave a blunt refusal. Her fingers pressed the wetness of her body through the fine linen. She lifted her head, closing her eyes. Her teeth gleamed brilliantly below her slightly raised lip. The girl gave off the smell of sweat and sweet grass, of smoke and desire.

Why not, he thought, crumpling the back of her dress. His hands delighted in the humid and ethereal heat. The young woman was certainly not his type: too small, too tightly wrapped. He felt with his fingers where the too-tight dress divided her body into two sharp curves, just where he should not feel them. But why not, during a night like this... it doesn't matter.

Belleteyn... The fires on the horizon. The night of May.

Nearest to the stake, engulfing the bundles of dry resin that launched the flames, the yellow glow intensified, flooding the area with light. The girl met Geralt's eyes. He heard her inhale sharply. Her body suddenly tensed; her fingers curled abruptly against the Witcher's chest. Geralt released his companion. She hesitated at first, then moved her body away without immediately giving up the contact between her hips the Witcher's thigh. Avoiding his gaze, her head bowed, she withdrew her hands before taking a step back.

They were still for a moment. The return of the procession did not absorb them, did not shake them, did not hurry them. The girl awkwardly turned and ran, losing herself in the mass of other dancers. She cast a furtive glance back.

Belleteyn...

But what am I doing here?

A star shone, twinkling in the dark. Blinding. The amulet around the Witcher's neck began to tingle. Geralt instinctively dilated his pupils to pierce the darkness without difficulty.

The woman was not a peasant. The country girls were not wearing black velvet cloaks. The country girls were pushed or dragged by the men into the bushes, crying out, giggling, wriggling and trembling like freshly caught fish. None of them gave the impression that they were in control of the situation: this woman was taking a companion into the dark, a man with blond hair and his shirt half open.

The country girls never wore a velvet ribbon around their necks, or an obsidian star encrusted with diamonds.

“Yennefer.”

Her violet eyes burned in a pale, triangular face.

“Geralt...”

She released the hand of the blond angel whose torso gleamed with sweat like a copper plate. The boy hesitated, staggered, fell to his knees, turned his head, looked around, protested. Then he rose slowly, considering them with a look that was at once skeptical and embarrassed, and walked off toward the fires. The sorceress didn't even look at him. She stared intently at the Witcher. Her hand trembled on the edge of her cloak.

“It's good to see you again,” he said without emotion.

He felt then that the tension between them had fallen.

“Same,” she replied, smiling. It seemed that the smile contained something forced, but he wasn't sure. “This is a pleasant surprise, I agree. What are you doing here, Geralt? Oh! Pardon me, excuse my indiscretion. Of course, you are here for the same thing I am. This is the feast of Belleteyn. The difference being that you have caught me, one might say, in the act.”

“I've disturbed you.”

“I'll live,” she joked. “The night will go on. If I like, I can seduce another.”

“A pity that I don't know how,” he managed to say, feigning indifference. “A girl saw my eyes in the light and ran away.”

“In the morning,” she replied, smiling in an even more artificial way, “when they really go mad, they won't pay so much attention. You'll find another, you'll see...”

“Yen...”The rest of the sentence caught in his throat.

They looked at each other for a long time, a very long time. The red glow of the fire danced over their faces. Yennefer sighed suddenly, veiling her eyes under their lashes.

“Geralt, no. Don't start...”

“It's Belleteyn,” he interrupted, “did you forget?”

She approached slowly, put a hand on his shoulder and pressed gently against him, curling herself gently against his chest. He stroked the raven-black hair that fell in curls like snakes.

“Believe me,” she murmured, lifting her face, “I wouldn't hesitate for a moment if it were only a question of... but there's no sense in it. Everything would begin again and end as it did before. There's no sense in us...”

“Must everything make sense? It's Belleteyn.”

“Belleteyn?” She turned her face. “What difference does that make? Something drew us to these fires and these celebrating people. We intended to dance, to let loose, to get a little drunk and vigorously enjoy freedom from good manners here, in honor of the renewal of the cycle of nature. And what? We trip over each other after... how much time has passed? After... a year?”

“One year, two months and eighteen days.”

“I'm touched. Do you do that on purpose?”

“Yes, Yen...”

“Geralt,” she interrupted, leaning back suddenly and shaking her head, “let me be clear: it's impossible.”

He confirmed with a nod of his head that this was clear.

Yennefer pushed her cloak back from her shoulders. She wore a thin white blouse and a black skirt held by a belt of silver links.

“I don't want to start again,” she repeated. “And the idea of doing with you... what I intended to do with the handsome blond... under the same rules... that idea, Geralt, I find demeaning. Degrading for you and for me. Understand?”

He nodded again. She looked at him, through her lowered lashes.

“You aren't going?”

“No.”

She remained silent for a moment, then shrugged her shoulders impatiently. “You're offended?”

“No.”

“Come, let's sit down somewhere, away from the chaos. Talk a little. You see, I'm glad that we met. It's the truth. Let's sit a moment. Agreed?”

“All right, Yen.”

They left in the dark, away from the bonfire, toward the dark edge of the forest, careful to avoid the embracing couples. To find a quiet place, they had to walk for a while. They stopped on a dry hill flanked by a juniper bush as slender as a cypress.

The sorceress unclasped her brooch and spread her cloak over the ground after shaking it out. He sat next to her. He longed to take her shoulders, but it would only annoy her. Yennefer rebuttoned her wide-open blouse, with Geralt watching attentively. She sighed, holding herself against him. Geralt knew that Yennefer had to make a great effort to read thoughts, but that she instinctively sensed the intentions of others.

They were silent.

“Oh, by the plague!” she cried suddenly, breaking free of his embrace.

The sorceress lifted her arms and recited an incantation. Over their heads rose bubbles of red and green that burst high in the air and formed feathery red flowers. Laughter and cries of joy reached them from the fires.

“Belleteyn,” she said bitterly. “The night of May... The cycle repeats itself. They have fun, if they can...”

There were other sorcerers in the area. Three orange flashes rang out in the distance; on the other side, at the foot of the forest, a geyser of rainbow-colored meteors twirled into the sky and exploded. The dancers near the fire cried out in admiration. Feeling tense, Geralt caressed Yennefer's curls and inhaled the scent of lilac and gooseberry they gave off. If I want her too much, he thought, she will sense it; it might upset her. I'll ask her quietly if it's all right.

“It's nothing new to me,” she said. Something trembled nonetheless in her voice. “Nothing worth mentioning.”

“Don't do that to me, Yen. Don't read my mind. It bothers me.”

“Forgive me. It's instinctive. And you, Geralt, what's new?”

“Nothing, nothing worth mentioning.”

They remained silent.

“Belleteyn!” she cried suddenly. Geralt felt the shoulders pressed against his chest rise and fall. “They have fun. They celebrate the eternal cycle of nature. And us? What do we do? We, the relics, those condemned to death, to extermination and oblivion. Nature is reborn, the cycle repeats itself. But not us, Geralt. We can't perpetuate ourselves. We are denied that possibility. We have inherited the gift to do extraordinary things with nature, sometimes against it, but we have been deprived in return of what is most simple and natural. What does it matter that we live longer than humans? There is no spring after the winter; we are not reborn; our end carries us with it. But something draws us to the fires, even though our presence is a cruel joke, a sacrilege against this festival.”

She fell silent. He didn't like to see her fall into such darkness. He knew too well the reason for it. It's starting to gnaw at her again, he thought. There had been a time when it seemed that she had forgotten or accepted her fate. He moved his shoulders, rocking her like a child. She did not resist. Geralt wasn't surprised; he knew that she needed it.

“You know, Geralt,” she said, suddenly calm, “it's your silence that I've missed the most.”

He pressed his lips to her hair, her ears. I want you, Yen, he thought, I want you, you know that. You know it well, Yen.

“I know,” she murmured.

“Yen...”

“Only for now,” she replied, watching him with wide-open eyes. “Only on this night that will soon disappear. That will be our Belleteyn. We will part in the morning. I beg you, don't count on anything more. I can't... I couldn't. Forgive me. If I hurt you, kiss me and let me go.”

“If I kiss you, I'm not leaving.”

“That's what I thought.”

She bowed her head. Geralt kissed her parted lips. Cautiously: first the upper lip, then the lower. His hands tangled in her curls, touched her ears, the gems in the lobes, her neck. Returning his kiss, Yennefer drew herself to him; her nimble fingers had no trouble defeating the clasps of his jacket.

She slid back on the cloak arranged over the moss. Geralt kissed her breasts. He felt the nipples harden and rise under the fine fabric of her blouse. Yennefer was breathing raggedly.

“Yen...”

“Don't say anything, please.”

The touch of her bare skin, sweet and cold, electrified his palm and his fingers. Geralt's back shuddered under Yennefer's nails. Shouting, singing, whistling reached them all the while from the fires, in a distant whirlwind of sparks and purple smoke. Embraces, caresses. Him, her. Chills. And impatience. He touched the slender thighs closed around his hips that shook like a leaf.

Belleteyn!

Breaths and sighs began their ballet; lightning flashed before their eyes; the scent of lilac and gooseberry enveloped them. The King and the Queen of May, was it the expression of a sacrilegious joke? Of oblivion?

It's Belleteyn, the night of May!

A piercing groan from Yen or from Geralt; black curls covering their eyes and mouths; trembling fingers entwined in their tightly grasped hands. A cry; black lashes, damp; a groan.

Then silence. An eternity of silence.

Belleteyn... The fires on the horizon...

“Yen?”

“Oh... Geralt.”

“Yen, are you crying?”

“No!”

“Yen...”

“I had promised myself... I had...”

“Don't say anything. It doesn't matter. Aren't you cold?”

“Yes.”

“And now?”

“Warmer.”

The sky cleared at a dizzying speed. The black wall of the forest regained its contours: the jagged line of the ridge of trees emerged from the indistinct darkness. Behind her, the azure announcement of dawn poured over the horizon, extinguishing the stars. It got colder. Geralt held Yennefer tighter. He covered her with his coat.

“Geralt?”

“Hmm...”

“The day will break.”

“I know.”

“Have I hurt you?”

“A little.”

“Will it start all over?”

“Nothing ever stopped.”

“Please... I feel good with you...”

“Don't say anything. Everything's fine.”

The smell of smoke was rising from the heather. The smell of lilac and gooseberries.

“Geralt?”

“Yes?”

“Do you remember when we met the Great Mountain Kestrel? And the golden dragon? What was his name?”

“Three Kestrels. I remember.”

“He told us...”

“I remember, Yen.”

She kissed the back of his neck, pinning his head and tickling him with her hair.

“We were made for each other,” she murmured. “Perhaps even destined for each other. But none of this can happen. It's a shame. We will have to separate when the day breaks. It can't be otherwise. We must separate so as not to hurt each other: destined for each other, made for each other, but the one who created us should have thought of something more. Forgive me. I had to tell you.”

“I know.”

“Making love makes no sense.”

“You're mistaken.”

“Go back to Cintra, Geralt.”

“What?”

“Go to Cintra. Go, and this time don't give up. Don't repeat the mistake from last time...”

“How do you know?”

“I know everything about you. Have you forgotten? Go to Cintra, go as fast as possible. A dark time approaches. Very dark. You must get there in time...”

“Yen...”

“No, don't say anything, please.”

It was more and more fresh and more and more clear.

“Don't go now. Wait for the dawn.”

“We'll wait.”

### Part IV

“Don't get up, lord. Your dressing needs to be changed, because the wound is dirty, and your leg is horribly swollen. By the gods, it's awful... We need to find a healer as soon as possible...”

“To hell with healers!” groaned the Witcher. “Give me my chest, Yurga. Yes, this flask. Pour it directly on the wound. Oh! By the plague and cholera! It's nothing, add more... Oh! That's good. Dress it and cover me...”

“It's swollen, lord, the whole thigh... And you're stricken with fever...”

“To hell with the fever... Yurga?”

“Yes, lord?”

“I forgot to thank you...”

“I'm not the one who should be thanked, lord, but you. It's you who saved my life. You have been injured in defending me. And me? What have I done? I only tended to an injured and unconscious man. I carried him in my cart and kept him from perishing. It's an ordinary thing, master Witcher.”

“Not so ordinary as that, Yurga. I have been abandoned in similar situations, like a dog...”

The merchant was silent, bowing his head. “Yes... it happens. The world around us is horrible,” he murmured at last. “But that's not a reason for all of us to behave so execrably. Good is necessary. That's what my father taught me and that's what I will teach my sons.”

The Witcher fell silent. He watched the tree branches that hung over the road and disappeared with the movement of the cart. His thigh came back to life. The pain was gone.

“Where are we?”

“We have just forded the Trava river. We are actually in the woods of Groundcherry. It's no longer Temeria, but Sodden. You were sleeping when we crossed the border and when customs officers searched the cart. I must tell you that they were surprised to find you there. But the oldest one knew you and they allowed us to go through.”

“He knew me?”

“Yes, without a doubt. He called you Geralt. That's what he said: Geralt of Rivia. Isn't that your name?”

“So...”

“He promised to send someone ahead with word that a healer was needed. I gave him a little something so that he doesn't forget.”

“I thank you, Yurga.”

“No, lord. I already said: it's I who thank you. And that's not all. I am still in your debt. We agreed... What's happening, lord? Are you losing your strength?”

“Yurga, give me the flask with the green seal...”

“Lord, you're going to go back... You cried out so terribly in your sleep...”

“I need it, Yurga...”

“As you wish. Wait while I pour it into a goblet... By the gods, we need a healer, as soon as possible, because otherwise...”

#### [Hallucination/Flashback Starts]

The Witcher turned his head. He heard the cries of children playing in the ditch, drained, next to the castle gardens. There was a dozen of them. The kids made a devil of a racket, shouting to each other in their little falsettos, shrill and excited. They ran up and down the bottom of the ditch, resembling a school of small fish ceaselessly changing direction, but managing to stay together. As is always the case in these situations, a smaller one, out of breath, was trying to catch up with the gang of older ones, thin as scarecrows, who wrestled and shouted.

“There are a lot of them,” the Witcher remarked.

Mousesack gave him a forced smile, pulling on his beard and shrugging. “Yes, a lot.”

“And one of them... Which one of these boys is the famous surprise?”

“I can't, Geralt...”

“Calanthe?”

“Of course. You don't believe, I hope, that she would give you a child so easily? You know that, don't you? She is a woman of iron. I'll tell you something that I should not admit. In the hope that you understand... I'm also counting on you not to betray me to her.”

“Speak.”

“When the child was born six years ago, she called for me and ordered me to find you. To kill you.”

“You refused.”

“We refuse nothing to Calanthe,” Mousesack replied seriously, looking him right in the eye. “I was ready to set out before she called me back. She revoked the order without comment. Be careful when you talk to her.”

“I will be. Mousesack, tell me: what happened to Duny and Pavetta?”

“They were sailing to Skellige from Cintra when a storm surprised them. Nothing was recovered of the boat, not even some boards. Geralt... the fact that the child was not aboard with them is maddeningly strange. Incomprehensible. They had to take it with them on the ship, but they changed their minds at the last moment. No-one knows why. Pavetta was never apart from...”

“How did Calanthe handle this misfortune?”

“How do you think?”

“I see.”

Hurling expletives, the children climbed like a band of goblins to the top of the ditch and immediately disappeared. Geralt noticed a little girl, just as thin and noisy as the boys, but with a plait of fair hair, keeping her distance from the head of the small group. With a savage cry, the little band slipped down the steep slope of the ditch again. At least half of them, the girl included, fell on their backsides. The youngest, still unable to catch up to the others, somersaulted and fell to the bottom where he began to bawl hot tears and rub his scraped knee. The other boys stood by, railing at him and laughing before resuming their course. The little girl knelt next to the boy, took him in her arms and dried his eyes, wiping the dust and dirt from a face grimacing in pain.

“Come on, Geralt. The queen awaits.”

“So be it, Mousesack.”

Calanthe was sitting on a wooden bench with a backrest, which was suspended by chains from one of the main branches of an enormous linden tree. It seemed that she was napping, save for the small kick of her foot she gave from time to time to revive the swing. Three young women remained at her side. One was sitting on the grass near the swing. Her dress fanned over the grass and formed a white spot on the green, like a patch of snow. The other two were arguing further away, delicately picking strawberries.

“Madam,” said Mousesack, bowing.

The queen lifted her head. Geralt knelt.

“Witcher,” she responded dryly.

As before, the queen wore emeralds matching the green of her dress and her eyes. As before, a thin gold crown encircled her ash-gray hair. But her hands, which he remembered as thin and white, were not as thin as before. Calanthe had put on weight.

“Hail, Calanthe of Cintra.”

“I bid you welcome, Geralt of Rivia. Rise, I was waiting. Mousesack, please accompany the girls to the castle.”

“At your service, my queen.”

They were left alone.

“Six years,” Calanthe said without smiling. “You are terribly punctual, Witcher.”

He made no comment.

“At times, no, for years at a time, I deluded myself that you might forget. Or that for other reasons you might be prevented from coming. No, I didn't want anything unfortunate to happen to you, but I had to take into consideration the dangerous nature of your profession. It is said that death follows in your footsteps, Geralt of Rivia, but that you never look behind you. Then... when Pavetta... You know already?”

“I know,” Geralt said, inclining his head. “My sincere condolences...”

“No,” she interrupted, “it was all long ago. I no longer wear mourning clothes, as you see. I wore them for long enough. Pavetta and Duny... were destined for each other to the end. How can I deny the power of destiny?”

They fell silent. Calanthe, with a kick, revived the swing.

“And so, it is that the Witcher returned after the agreed-upon period,” she said slowly. A strange smile bloomed on her lips. “He returned, requiring that the oath be respected. What do you think, Geralt? It's probably in this manner that the storytellers will recount our meeting in a hundred years. With the difference that they will embellish the story, striking a chord and toying with the emotions. Yes, they know their work well. I can imagine it. Listen, if you would:

“And the cruel Witcher said at last: 'Respect your oath, Queen, or my curse will be upon you.' The queen, in tears, fell at the feet of the Witcher, crying, 'Mercy! Do not take that child from me! He is all I have!'“

“Calanthe...”

“Don't interrupt me, please,” she replied dryly. “Haven't you noticed that I am telling a story? Listen closer:

“The cruel and vicious Witcher stamped his foot and waved his arms, shouting: 'Beware, perjurer. You will not escape your punishment if you do not respect your oath.' The queen responded: 'So be it, Witcher. Let it be done according to destiny. Look over there: a dozen children are playing. Recognize the one destined for you. Take that one and leave me alone, with a broken heart.”

The Witcher was silent. Calanthe's smile grew more and more ugly.

“In this story, the queen, I imagine, offers three chances to the Witcher. But we do not live in the world of fairy tales, Geralt. We are indeed real, you, me, and our problem. And so is our destiny. This is not a story being told, it is a life at stake. Sickening, cruel, arduous, sparing neither error and prejudice, nor regret and misery, and sparing neither Witchers nor queens. That is why, Geralt of Rivia, you will be granted only one attempt.”

The Witcher had not yet flinched.

“One single attempt,” repeated Calanthe. “I said before: we are not characters in a story, this is real life where we must find our own moments of happiness, because, you know, we can hardly count on a happy ending. That is why, regardless of your choice, you will not leave empty-handed. You will take a child. Whichever you have chosen. A child that you will turn into a Witcher... provided that he passes the trial of Herbs, of course.”

Geralt lifted his head abruptly. The queen was still smiling. He knew that smile, ugly and vicious, contemptuous and concealing none of her artifice.

“I've surprised you,” she said. “I gave the matter some study. Since there was a chance that Pavetta's child might become a Witcher, I put myself to the trouble. However, my sources did not inform me of the proportion of children, out of ten, who can pass the trial of Herbs. Would you like to satisfy my curiosity in this area?”

“My queen,” Geralt began, clearing his throat. “Without a doubt you must have taken sufficient pains in your studies to know that my code and my Witcher's oath forbid me from uttering the word, let alone from discussing it.”

Calanthe violently stopped the movement of the swing, planting her heels in the ground.

“Three, at most four out of ten,” she explained, feigning concentration with a nod of her head. “A difficult selection, very difficult, I would say, and that at each stage. First, the choice, then that of the test. And finally, the changes. How many rogues ultimately receive the medallion and the silver sword? One in ten? One in twenty?”

The Witcher remained silent.

“I have given the matter a lot of thought,” Calanthe went on, abandoning her smile. “I concluded that the stage of the choice is incidental. What difference does it make, Geralt, that one child and not another dies or goes mad as a result of a massive dose of drugs? What difference does it make if the mind is destroyed or consumed by delusions, or the eyes explode instead of becoming the eyes of a cat? In light of the blood or the sickness preceding his death, what difference does it make whether one child or another was truly destined by providence or was perfectly inappropriate? Tell me.”

The Witcher folded his hands across his chest to control their trembling. “To what end?” he asked. “Do you expect an answer?”

“No, I don't expect that.” The queen smiled again. “As always, you remain infallible in your conclusions. Who knows whether I, in response to your answer, might graciously deign to devote a little of my attention to the sincerity and the truthfulness of your words? The words that you speak might - who knows? - lift with them the weight on your spirit. If not, oh well, let's get to work providing the material for the storytellers and go choose a child, Witcher.”

“Calanthe,” he responded, fixing his eyes on the queen. “What do the storytellers matter to us? If they don't get any material, then they will invent something. And even if they have access to some authentic source, you know perfectly well that they will distort it. As you yourself rightly remarked, this is not a fairy tale, but life, sickening and cruel, through which we are trying, by the plague and cholera, to live decently and to strictly limit the amount of harm we inflict on others. In one tale, the queen must actually beg the Witcher and he responds by stamping his foot. In life, the queen could simply say: 'Do not take this child, please.' And the Witcher answered: 'Since you insist, my queen, so be it.' He then resumed his journey at dusk. Such is life. The storyteller would not get a cent from his audience if he told such nonsense. At most, a kick in the rear. Because it's boring.”

Calanthe stopped smiling. He saw something else shining in her eyes.

“And so?” she growled.

“Let's end this game of hide and seek, Calanthe. You know what I think. I will leave just as I arrived. Choose a child? What do you take me for? You think that this is so important to me? That I came to Cintra, tormented by an obsession with taking your little child from you? No, Calanthe. I simply wanted to see the child, to look into the eyes of destiny... Myself, I don't know... Don't be afraid. I will not take it. You had only to ask...”

Calanthe jumped up violently from the swing. A green light burned in her eyes.

“Ask?” she growled, furious. “Of you? Me, afraid? Afraid of you, cursed sorcerer? You dare to turn your expression of contemptuous pity on me? You dare insult me with your condescension! You reproach me for my cowardice! You disobey my will! My kindness to you unleashes your insolence! Beware!”

The Witcher decided not to shrug his shoulders: it was more prudent to kneel and prostrate himself. He did.

“Well,” Calanthe growled, standing over him. Her arms were swinging, fists clenched around the spikes of her rings. “Finally. This is a more appropriate position. It is in this position that one answers to a queen when she requires a response. And if instead of a question, it's an order that I give you, you will bow down even lower and hasten without delay to obey it. Understood?”

“Yes, my queen.”

“Perfect. Get up.”

He stood up.

She looked at him, biting her lips. “My outburst of anger has not offended you? I ask regarding its form, not its content.”

“No.”

“Good. I will try not to explode again. As I told you, ten children play there in the ditch. Choose the one that seems to you the most suitable. Take him with you and by the gods make him a Witcher, because that is the will of destiny. And if not of destiny, know that it is my will.”

He looked her in the eye and bowed very low.

“My queen,” he said, “six years ago, I showed you that there exist things more powerful than the royal will. By the gods, if such things really exist, I will prove it once more. You will not force me to make a choice I do not want to make. Pardon the form, not the content.”

“The depths of my castle dungeon are riddled with cells. I warn you: one more moment, one more word, and you will rot.”

“None of the children playing in the ditch is suited to become a Witcher,” he said slowly. “The son of Pavetta is not among them.”

Calanthe blinked but did not waver. “Come,” she said finally, turning on her heel.

He followed her through the flowering bushes, the clumps and hedges. The queen entered a sunlit gazebo. Four rattan chairs surrounded a malachite table. On the streaked tabletop supported by four fierce griffons, there sat a pitcher and two small cups.

“Have a seat and pour.”

She drank, without pretension, heavily, like a man. He did the same but remained standing.

“Sit down,” she repeated. “I want to talk.”

“I'm listening.”

“How did you know that the son of Pavetta was not found among those children?”

“I don't know.” Geralt opted for sincerity. “I said it at random.”

“Ah? I might have guessed. And none of them is suited to become a Witcher, is that the truth? How can you tell? By magic?”

“Calanthe,” he answered in a soft voice, “I could neither confirm nor deny it. What you said earlier was the simple truth: every child is capable. The trials decide. Later.”

“By the gods of the sea, in the words of my late husband,” she declared, laughing, “it is all false! Including the law of surprise! The legends of children nobody expected and for whom the claimants return at the appointed time. I thought so! It's a game! A game of chance and fate! But all this is diabolically dangerous, Geralt.”

“I know.”

“A game that causes harm. Why, tell me, do you force the parents or guardians to make such difficult promises? Why take their children? There are so many, everywhere, there is no need to take them. The roads swarm with orphans and vagabonds. In any village, it is easy to buy an infant on the cheap. During the drought before the harvest, any serf will sell his children willingly. What does he care? A new one is already on the way. Why demand an oath of Duny, of Pavetta and myself? Why appear six years to the day after the birth of the child? And why, by cholera, don't you want it now? Why tell me that you won't take it?”

Geralt remained silent. Calanthe nodded her head.

“You don't answer,” she concluded, letting herself fall against the back of her chair. “Attempt to elucidate the reason behind your silence for me. Logic being the mother of all knowledge, what does she suggest in this matter? What do we have at our disposal? A Witcher on a quest for destiny hidden in a strange and unlikely surprise. The Witcher discovers that destiny and then abruptly renounces it, saying that he no longer wants the child-surprise. His face remains utterly impassive and his voice resonates with the coolness of glass and metal. The Witcher thinks that the queen, a woman after all, will allow herself to be tricked and in the end will cede to his masculinity. No, Geralt, don't wait for me to show weakness. I know why you renounce your choice of a child. You renounce it because you do not believe in destiny, because you are not certain. And when you're not sure... it's fear that takes over. Yes, Geralt, fear is your engine. Fear is your cargo. Dare to say otherwise.”

He slowly pushed the cup on the table so that the clink of silver on malachite would not betray the uncontrollable trembling of his arm.

“You don't deny it?”

“No.”

She bent to seize his hand with vigor. “You disappoint me,” she said, giggling prettily.

“This isn't voluntary,” he responded, laughing as well. “How did you guess, Calanthe?”

“I did not guess.” She did not release his hand. “I said it at random, that's all.”

They broke out in laughter.

They settled into silence in the greenery and the smell of the clusters of cherries, in the heat and the buzzing of bees.

“Geralt?”

“Yes, Calanthe?”

“You do not believe in destiny?”

“I don't know if I believe in anything. As for destiny... I think that it is not enough. There must be something more.”

“I must ask you a question on this point: what was your story? It is said that you were a child-surprise. Mousesack said...”

“No, Calanthe. Mousesack had something else in mind. Mousesack undoubtedly knows... but he resorts to legend when it suits him. I was never the thing that one does not expect to find on his return. It is wrong to say that I became a Witcher for that reason. I was an ordinary orphan, Calanthe, a kid that his mother, whom he does not remember, did not want. But I know who she is.”

The queen was all ears, but Geralt did not continue.

“Are all the stories about the law of surprise also legends?”

“All of them. How can one know whether something is chance or destiny?”

“But you, the Witchers, you keep looking.”

“We don't stop. But that makes no sense. Nothing makes sense.”

“You believe that a child of providence will safely pass the tests?”

“We believe that such a child would not need to pass the tests.”

“One more question, Geralt, quite personal. Do you mind?”

He nodded his acquiescence.

“It is known that there is no better way to pass on hereditary traits than in the natural way. If you seek a child possessed of such qualities and such strength, why not look for a woman who... I am being indelicate, no? But it seems to me that I've hit my mark.”

“As always,” he responded with a sad smile, “you remain infallible, Calanthe. You have hit upon it, to be sure. What you suggest is impossible for me.”

“Forgive me.” Her smile disappeared. “In the end, it's only human.”

“A Witcher isn't human.”

“Ah? And so, no Witcher...”

“None. The trial of Herbs, Calanthe, is horrible. And what is irreversibly done to young boys during the changes is even more so.”

“Stop lamenting your fate,” she grumbled. “This is not like you. It doesn't matter what you've been subjected to. The result in my eyes is quite evident. If I knew that Pavetta's child would become someone like you, I wouldn't hesitate an instant.”

“The risk is very large,” he said quickly. “It's just as you said: four in ten survive.”

“By the devil! Is there only danger in the event of these changes? Only the future Witchers take risks? Life is full of hazards, Geralt. Life, too, is governed by selection: accidents, diseases, wars. Opposing destiny is perhaps as dangerous as abandoning it. Geralt... I would voluntarily give you this child, but... I am also afraid.”

“I will not take it. It is too great a responsibility, one that I refuse to assume. I would not want for this child to speak about you the way... the way I...”

“You hate this woman, Geralt?”

“My mother? No, Calanthe. I doubt that she was given a choice... or perhaps she had no say? No, she had, you know, enough formulas and elixirs... Choice. There is a sacred and incontestable choice of every woman that must be respected. Emotions are of no importance here. She had the indisputable right to make such a choice. That's what she did. But I think about meeting her, the expression on her face then... it gives me a sort of perverse pleasure, if you understand what I mean.”

“I understand what you say perfectly,” she replied, smiling. “But the chances of this happening are slim. I can't judge your age, Witcher, but I suspect that you're much older than you appear. And so, this woman...”

“This woman,” he interrupted, “must now look much younger than I do.”

“A sorceress?”

“Yes.”

“Interesting. I thought that sorceresses could not...”

“She no doubt thought the same thing.”

“No doubt. But you're right... Let's not speak any more about the right of a woman to decide. This is not the subject at hand. Returning to our problem. You will not take a child? This is final?”

“Final.”

“What if... destiny was not a myth? If it truly exists, do you not fear that it will take revenge?”

“If destiny takes vengeance, it will be on me,” he replied calmly. “It is I who attack it. You have fulfilled your duty in this matter. If destiny proved not to be a legend, I would then find the child from those you showed me. The child of Pavetta is among them?”

“Yes.” Calanthe inclined her head slowly. “Would you like to look into the eyes of destiny?”

“No. I don't care. I withdraw and renounce my claim on the boy. How can I see the face of destiny when I don't believe in it? To unite two individuals, I think, destiny is not enough. It takes something more. Should I follow, groping along like a blind man, naive and uncomprehending? I have no respect for such destiny. My decision is irrevocable, Calanthe of Cintra.”

The queen rose, smiling. The Witcher could not divine what that smile concealed.

“So be it, Geralt of Rivia. Perhaps destiny willed that you withdraw and renounce your claim. I am, for my part, convinced. If you had chosen the right child, the destiny that you mock might have cruelly mocked you in return.”

He saw irony in those green eyes. She continued to wear an indecipherable smile. A rosebush grew next to the gazebo. Geralt plucked a flower, breaking its stem and then knelt, his head bowed, presenting the flower in his hands.

“I regret that I did not meet you sooner, white-haired one,” she said, accepting the offered rose. “Rise.”

He rose.

“If you change your mind,” she went on, sniffing the flower, “if you decide... Return to Cintra. I will wait for you. Your destiny will be waiting for you, as well. Perhaps not advitam aeternam, but for some time, no doubt.”

“Farewell, Calanthe.”

“Farewell, Witcher. Look after yourself. I... I sometimes feel... in a strange way... that I am seeing you for the last time.”

“Farewell, my queen.”

### Part V

Geralt awoke and discovered with astonishment that the stinging pain in his thigh had disappeared. It seemed that the swelling had also diminished. He wanted to check with his hands, but he could not lift them. Before he could understand that the weight of the fur blankets prevented him from moving, a horrible icy anxiety seized his stomach with talons like a hawk's. He extended and relaxed his fingers and repeated silently, no, no, I'm not... Paralyzed.

“You're awake.”

It was an observation, not a question, made in a voice that was clear and sweet. A woman. Young, certainly. He turned his head and mumbled something about trying to get up.

“Don't move. Not so roughly, anyway. Are you in pain?”

“Nnn...” The sticky lips tore. “Nnno. Only hurts... back.”

“A bedsore,” the gentle alto voice diagnosed, with open chilliness. “Leave it to me. Come, drink this. Easy, in slow sips.”

The taste and smell of juniper dominated the beverage. An old trick, he thought. Juniper or mint to mask the true composition. He recognized cousataire and perhaps some button-heart. Yes, the button-heart was doubtlessly to neutralize the toxins and purify the blood poisoned by gangrene or infection.

“Drink. Drain the cup dry. Slower, or you'll choke.” The medallion he wore around his neck began to vibrate slightly. Then the potion contained magic as well. With effort, he dilated his pupils. Lifting his head, he could now see clearly. A woman of feeble constitution, she wore men's clothing. The pallor of her thin face was luminous in the darkness.

“Where are we?”

“In the tar-makers' clearing.”

The smell of resin floated effectively through the air. Geralt heard voices coming from the side of the hearth. Someone threw on some dead wood. The flame rose, sizzling. He looked at her again, making use of the light. Her hair was held back by a band of snakeskin. Her hair...

He felt a suffocating pain in his throat and his chest, and forcefully clenched his fists.

Her hair was red like fire. Illuminated by the light of the hearth, it looked vermillion, like cinnabar.

“Are you in pain?” She read his emotions incompletely. “Wait...” He felt the shock of heat from the contact of her hand: the fire flowed down her back, and lower, toward her buttocks. “You're coming around,” she said. “Don't try to move on your own. You're very weak. Hey! Could someone help me?”

Geralt heard steps next to the hearth; he saw shadows, silhouettes. Someone bent down. It was Yurga.

“How are you feeling, lord? Better?”

“Help me turn him over,” the woman said. “Carefully, slowly... Ah yes... Good. Thank you.”

Lying on his stomach, he could no longer meet her gaze. He calmed and controlled the trembling of his hands. She could sense his feelings. Geralt heard the clinking of bottles in her bag and the tinkling of flasks and porcelain jars. He also heard her breathing and felt her warmth against his side. She knelt next to him.

“My injury,” he asked to break the unbearable silence, “was difficult?”

“Yes, indeed. A little.” A chill entered her voice. “It's often the case with bites. The worst type of injury. But you must be used to them, Witcher.”

She knows, she searches through my thoughts. Reads them? Probably not. And I know why... She's afraid.

“Yes, nothing new for you,” she repeated, knocking together her glass tools. “I saw that you had some scars... But I managed. I am, you see, a sorceress... and a healer. That's my specialty.”

Yes, I was right, he thought. He did not respond.

“Going back to your injury,” she continued calmly, “you must know that your pulse, four times slower than that of an ordinary man, saved your life. Otherwise, you would not have survived. I can say that without hesitation. I saw the bandage that you had on your leg. There was something resembling a dressing, but it was a poor imitation.”

Geralt remained silent.

“Later,” she continued, lifting his shirt up to his neck, “the wound became infected, which is normal with bites. The infection was finally controlled. Of course, your Witcher elixirs were a great help. Still, I don't understand why you still take hallucinogens. I heard your ravings, Geralt of Rivia.”

She reads, he thought, she really reads thoughts. Unless Yurga told her my name. Perhaps I said it during my dreams under the effects of “black gull. “Devil only knows... The knowledge of my name could mean nothing. Nothing. She doesn't know who I am. She is completely unaware of who I am.

He felt her apply to his back a cool and soothing ointment that gave off a strong smell of camphor. Her hands were small and very soft.

“Forgive my conventional methods,” she said. “I could reduce your bedsore with the help of magic, but I'm tired from tending to your injury: I'm not feeling very well. I bandaged your leg and healed it as much as necessary. You're no longer in danger. Don't get up for two days. Even veins repaired by magic can rupture and cause terrible bleeding. The scar will remain, of course. A new one for your collection.”

“Thank you...” He pressed his cheek against the furs to distort his voice and mask his natural tone: “Might I know to whom I owe my thanks?”

She will not tell me, he thought, or will prefer to lie.

“My name is Visenna.”

I know, he thought.

“I am glad,” he said slowly, keeping his cheek to the furs all the while, “I am pleased that our paths have crossed, Visenna.”

“By chance,” she replied coolly, replacing his shirt on his back and covering it with fur blankets. “The customs official informed me that someone had need of my art. When my presence is necessary, I go. It's a strange habit of mine. Listen: I gave the ointment to the merchant. Ask him to apply it morning and evening. Since he says that you saved his life, he can perform that service for you.”

“And me, Visenna? How can I thank you?”

“Don't talk about that. I never take money from Witchers. Call it solidarity, if you like, professional solidarity. And sympathy. In the cause of that sympathy I will tell you, listen to one more piece of advice, or if you prefer, the prescription of a healer: stop taking hallucinogens, Geralt. Hallucinogens aren't curative; they don't heal anything.”

“Thank you, Visenna, for your help and your advice. I am grateful to you... for everything.”

He moved his hand from under the furs and touched the healer's knee. It began to tremble. She took his hand and squeezed it slightly. Geralt carefully freed his fingers to grasp her forearm.

Of course, it was the smooth skin of a young girl. The sorceress trembled even more but did not withdraw her arm. He found the hand of the young woman and squeezed it firmly. His medallion, hanging around his neck, vibrated in agitation.

“Thank you, Visenna,” he repeated, controlling the tremor in his voice. “I'm glad that our paths have crossed.”

“It was chance...” she answered again, but this time without coldness in her voice.

“Perhaps it was destiny?” he suggested, surprised that her excitement and nervousness had disappeared without leaving a trace. “Do you believe in destiny, Visenna?”

“Yes,” she said, after some time. “I believe in it.”

“Do you believe that people bound by fate,” he continued, “necessarily meet one another?”

“I believe that too... What are you doing? Don't turn over.”

“I want to see your face... Visenna. I want to see your eyes. And you... you can look into mine.”

She made a movement as if she would fall to her knees, but she remained at his side. Geralt turned slowly, wincing in pain. The light was bright: someone had thrown more wood on the fire. The sorceress did not move. She turned her face in profile. The Witcher noticed then that her lips trembled. She squeezed his hand hard.

Geralt watched her carefully.

There was no resemblance. Her profile was completely different. A small nose. A narrow chin. The woman said nothing. She finally leaned over and met his eyes. Closely. All without a word.

“Do my improved eyes please you?” he asked calmly. “They're not very common... Do you know, Visenna, what is done to the eyes of Witchers to improve them? Do you know that this is not always successful?”

“Stop,” she said softly. “Stop it, Geralt.”

“Geralt...” He felt suddenly that something had broken in him. “It's Vesemir who called me that. Geralt of Rivia! I even learned to imitate the regional accent. Probably to fill an inner need to belong somewhere. Even if the sentiment is fictitious. Vesemir... gave me that name. He also revealed your identity to me. Not without reluctance.”

“Shut up, Geralt, shut up.”

“You tell me today that you believe in destiny. At the time, did you believe in it already? Yes, certainly. You already saw that destiny would ordain our meeting. Even so, it should be noted that you yourself contributed little toward its realization.”

The woman still said nothing.

“I always wanted... I asked myself what I would say when we met. I thought about the question I would ask you. I imagined being able to feel a perverse pleasure...”

A tear beaded distinctly on the healer's cheek. Geralt felt his throat tighten painfully. He was tired, sleepy, weak.

“In the light of day...” he murmured, “tomorrow, in the light of the sun, I will look into your eyes, Visenna... And I will ask my question. Or perhaps I won't ask, because it's too late. Was it destiny? Yes, Yen was right. It is not enough to be, yourself, subject to destiny. There must be something more... But I will look into your eyes tomorrow... In the light of the sun.”

“No,” she replied softly, in a voice of velvet that pierced through and summoned up the layers of memory that were missing, nonexistent, but nevertheless remained.

“If,” he protested. “If I want to...”

“No. Sleep now. When you wake up, you will stop wanting that. What good is it to lock eyes by the light of the sun? What will that change? We can't turn back time. We can't change anything. What sense is there in asking me that question, Geralt? The fact that I don't know of any response that will really give you a perverse pleasure? That will give us that mutual destruction? No, we will not look into each other's eyes. Hypnotize yourself, Geralt. Between us, know that it wasn't Vesemir who gave you that name. Even if this does not change anything and does not undo the past, I want you to know that. Farewell, take care of yourself. Don't try to find me...”

“Visenna...”

“No, Geralt. You're going to fall asleep. And me... I will have been a dream. Goodbye.”

“No, Visenna!”

“Sleep!” she intoned in a velvet voice that broke the Witcher's will and tore it like tissue.

“Sleep.”

Geralt fell asleep.

### Part VI

“Are we already in the territory of Outer Rivia, Yurga?”

“Since yesterday, my lord Geralt. We will reach the Yarouga river soon. On the other side, we will be in my home. Look, even the horses are walking more quickly and leaning their heads forward. They've picked up the smell of the barn and the house.”

“The house... You live within the castle's fortifications?”

“No, in the suburb.”

“Interesting.” The Witcher looked around. “There's practically no evidence of the war. It was said, however, that the country was horribly destroyed.”

“Well,” Yurga replied, “there is a shortage of everything but ruins... at least, that's not what's missing. Look carefully: almost every house, every courtyard, has a brand-new frame. Beyond the river, you see, there it's even worse, where the fire burned everything to the ground... War is war, but one must keep on living. We suffered the worst torments when the Black Ones crossed through our lands. It seemed that they wanted to turn everything into a desert. Many of those who fled then have never returned. In their place, newcomers have settled. Life must go on.”

“That's right,” murmured Geralt, “life must go on. Regardless of the past... one must keep on living...”

“Absolutely right. Here! Look at it this way. I sewed and patched your trousers. Now they are like new. Just like this land, my lord Geralt. The war tore and trampled it under iron horseshoes; bruised and bloodied it; but the land renews itself, becoming fertile once more: the bodies themselves work to enrich the soil, even if it is difficult to work the land because of the bones and the armor cluttering the fields. Earth will overcome iron.”

“You don't fear the return of the Nilfgaardians... the Black Ones? Now they know the path through the mountains...”

“Well of course, we live in fear. But what can we do? Sit down and cry? Tremble? One must keep on living. Come what may. Whatever fate has in store for us, we can't avoid it.”

“You believe, then, in destiny?”

“How could I not believe in it? After our meeting on the enchanted bridge where you saved my life! Oh, master Witcher, you'll see that my Chrysididae will be kissing your feet...”

“Stop with that. In truth, I am the one indebted to you. On the bridge... I was only doing my job, Yurga. I was practicing my profession, which consists of protecting humans for money, not for charity. Yurga, you know what people say about Witchers? That no-one knows which is worse... them, or the monsters that they destroy.”

“That's all wrong, lord, I don't understand why you talk like that. You think that I don't have my own eyes to see with? You are cut from the same cloth as that healer...”

“Visenna...”

“She didn't tell me her name. She came to us and offered her services without hesitation, knowing that we needed her. That evening, by the time I got down from my horse, she was already taking care of you. Oh, my lord, she took such good care of your leg. The air was filled with magic and we all fled, terrified, into the forest. And then the blood ran from her nose. Magic, apparently, is not easy. She bandaged you with such delicacy, like...”

“Like a mother?” Geralt asked through clenched teeth.

“Effectively. That's right. And when you were asleep...”

“Yes, Yurga?”

“White as a sheet, she was barely on her feet. But she came to ask us if any of the rest of us needed her help. The tar-maker, who had his hand crushed by a tree, benefited from her care. And she didn't take a cent. She even left the medicine. I know, Geralt, that there are many things said in the world about Witchers and sorceresses, but not here. We, the people of Upper Sodden, of Outer Rivia, we know the truth. We need sorceresses too much not to know who they really are. Their memories are not peddled by storytellers or gossips but etched in stone. You saw for yourself back in the woods. Besides, my lord, you certainly know better than I do. The whole world knows about the battle that was fought here less than a year ago. You must have heard about it.”

“I haven't been back here for over a year. I was in the North. But I heard talk... The second battle of Sodden...”

“Exactly. You will see the hill and the rock. Before, the hill had the ordinary name of 'Mount Coulemelle,' but now all the world knows it as the Sorcerers' mountain or the mountain of the fourteen. Because twenty-two sorcerers joined the battle and fourteen died. It was a terrible struggle, master Geralt. The ground rose up, the sky spat fiery rain. Lightning struck. Corpses littered the ground. But the sorcerers at last vanquished the Black Ones and snuffed out the power that animated them. Fourteen of them did not return. Fourteen of them gave their lives... What's wrong, my lord? What is it?”

“Nothing. Continue, Yurga.”

“The battle was terrible, oh! Without the sorcerers on the hill, we surely would not be able to talk like this today, you and I, on the tranquil road to my house, because it wouldn't exist anymore, and neither would I, and perhaps you wouldn't either... Yes, we are indebted to all those sorcerers. Fourteen of them died in our defense, we the people of Sodden and Outer Rivia. Of course, there were others who fought as well: warriors, nobles and peasants alike, anyone who could lay hands on a pitchfork or an ax, or even a stake... All acted with courage. Many of them died. But the sorcerers... Nothing is more natural for a warrior than to die on the field of battle, and then, that life is short anyway... But sorcerers can live as long as they like. Even so, they did not hesitate.”

“They did not hesitate,” repeated the Witcher, wiping his forehead. “They did not hesitate. And me, I was in the North...”

“What's wrong, my lord?”

“Nothing.”

“Yes... All of us, in the area, we leave flowers on that hill and through May, Belleteyn, the fire always burns. It will burn forever and ever. These fourteen sorcerers will live eternally in the memories of men. Living in memory, master Geralt, it's... it's something more!”

“You're right, Yurga.”

“Every child knows the names of the fourteen carved in stone at the top of the hill. You don't believe me? Listen: Axel known as Raby, Triss Merigold, Atlan Kerk, Vanielle of Brugga, Dagobert of Vole...”

“Stop, Yurga.”

“What's wrong, my lord? You're as pale as death.”

“Nothing.”

### Part VII

He climbed the hill very slowly, carefully, attentive to the work of tendons and muscles after their magical healing. Despite being completely healed, the wound still required his attention, and he took care not to put his full weight on the leg. It was hot. The smell of the grass intoxicated him and clouded his mind, but it was pleasant.

The obelisk had not been installed in the center of the plateau at the top of the hill, but further down, behind a row of sharp stones. If Geralt had come before sunset, the shadow cast on the standing stone by the row of stones would accurately represent the perimeter and indicate the direction in which each sorcerer's face was turned during the battle. He looked in each direction, over the endless rolling fields. If there were any bones left - he was certain -they were covered by the abundant grass. A hawk circled in the distance, hovering serenely, with wings outstretched: the only movement in a landscape petrified by the heat wave.

The base of the obelisk was large. To encircle it would require at least four or five people with arms outstretched. It was obvious that it would have been impossible to transport it so far without resorting to magic. The face of the standing stone that faced the row of stones had been meticulously polished.

On it had been engraved in runic characters the names of the fourteen deceased.

He approached it slowly. Yurga, indeed, was right. At the foot of the obelisk, common flowers, wildflowers, poppies, lupines, forget-me-nots, had been placed.

Triss Merigold, chestnut hair, cheerful, ready to burst into laughter for no reason at all, like a child. He liked her. It had been mutual.

Lawdbor of Murivel, with whom Geralt had avoided a fight in the city of Vizima, on a day when he had caught the Witcher in the act of manipulating dice with a discreet telekinesis.

Lytta Neyd, alias Coral. She had been dubbed with nickname because of the color of the cream she applied to her lips. She had once spoken ill of Geralt to the King Belohun, who then imprisoned him for a week in a dungeon. As soon as he was released, he went to find her to ask for her reasons and had found himself in bed with the beautiful woman, without knowing how, for another week.

Gorazd the Elder who had wanted to pay him 100 marks in exchange for the opportunity to examine his eyes and even 1,000 for the chance to dissect him, “not necessarily today,” he had clarified.

He waited three more years.

Geralt heard from behind him a quiet rustle. He turned.

She was barefoot, dressed in a simple linen dress. Long fair hair tumbled free over her shoulders. A daisy-chain crown adorned her brow.

“Greetings to you,” he said.

Without answering, she looked at him with eyes that were blue and cold.

Geralt noticed that she was not tanned. It was strange, because the skin of the country girls, scorched by the sun, was ordinarily dark by the end of the summer. Her face and what was visible of her shoulders was missing the golden tint.

“You've brought flowers?”

She smiled and lowered her eyelids. He felt a chill set in. She passed by him without a word and knelt at the foot of the monument, touching the stone with her hand.

“I don't bring flowers,” she said, lifting her head. “Those that have been brought here are for me.”

He watched her carefully. She knelt, her body hiding the last name engraved on the stone. The girl emitted a glow of light against the base of the dark rock.

“Who are you?” he asked slowly.

“You do not know?”

I know, he thought, looking at the icy blue of her eyes. Yes, I think that I know.

Geralt felt calm. He could not be otherwise. Not now.

“I have always been curious to see you, madam.”

“You don't have to give me such a title,” she replied coldly. “We have known each other for years, haven't we?”

“We know each other,” he agreed. “They say that you follow in my steps.”

“I go my own way. But you, you had never, until just now, looked behind you. You turned back today for the first time.”

Geralt remained silent. Tired, he had nothing to say.

“How... How will it happen?” he asked her at last, coldly and without emotion.

“I will take you by the hand,” she replied, looking him straight in the eye. “I will take you by the hand and lead you across the meadow, through a cold and wet fog.”

“And after? What is there beyond the fog?”

“Nothing,” she replied, smiling. “After that, there is nothing.”

“You have followed me step by step,” he said, “cutting down the ones in my path. Why? So that I would be alone, isn't that right? And finally begin to know fear? I'll tell you the truth. You have always frightened me. I didn't turn back for fear of seeing you behind me. I was always afraid. I have lived my life in fear, until today...”

“Until today?”

“Yes. We stand face to face, but I don't feel any anxiety. In taking everything from me, you have also stripped me of fear.”

“Why are your eyes, then, filled with terror, Geralt of Rivia? Your hands shake. You are pale. Why? Are you afraid to read the fourteenth name engraved on the obelisk? If you like, I can tell you the name.”

“No, you don't need to. I know whose name it is. The circle closes. The snake bites his own tail. So be it. You and your name. The flowers. For you and for me. The fourteenth name engraved at the base, the name that I gave my heart to by night and by the light of the sun, in frost, drought, and rain. No, I will not speak it now.”

“But yes, speak it.”

“Yennefer... Yennefer of Vengerberg.”

“But the flowers are for me.”

“End this,” he managed to say. “Take... take my hand.”

She stood and approached him. Geralt felt a chill, hard and penetrating.

“Not today,” she replied. “Another day, yes. But not today.”

“You've taken everything from me...”

“No,” she interrupted. “Me, I take nothing. I only take by the hand. So that no-one must be alone and lost in the fog... Goodbye, Geralt of Rivia. Some other day.”

The Witcher did not respond. She turned slowly and then disappeared into the fog that was drowning the summit of the hill where everything was disappearing: into that damp and white haze vanished the obelisk, the flowers placed at its base and the fourteen engraved names. Soon there was nothing left but the fog and the grass wet with brilliant droplets under his feet, a grass whose sweet, heavy aroma created a doleful atmosphere, a will to forget and collapse from fatigue...

“Master Geralt! What is it? Were you asleep? I warned you that you could still weaken yourself. Why did you climb to the summit?”

“I was asleep,” he groaned, wiping his face with his hand. “I was asleep, by the plague... It's nothing, Yurga, it's because of this heat...”

“Yes, you have a devil of a fever... We must continue on our way, my lord. Come, I'll help you down the slope.”

“I have nothing...”

“Nothing, nothing. I'm curious to know the reason for your staggering. By the plague, why did you climb the hill in this heat? You wanted to read all their names?”

“Nothing... Yurga... you really remember all of the names inscribed on the monument?”

“Of course.”

“I'll test your memory... The last. The fourteenth. What is it?”

“But you're a real skeptic. Don't you believe anything? You want to verify that I'm not lying? I told you that even children know the names. The last, you say? Yes, the last, it's Yol Grethen of Carreras. You know her, perhaps?”

“No,” he replied. “I don't know her.”

### Part VIII

“Master Geralt?”

“Yes, Yurga?”

The merchant bowed his head and was quiet, wrapping his finger with the thin strap with which he had repaired the Witcher's seat. He stood at last and nudged the back of the valet who was driving the cart.

“Let go of the reins, Profit. I'll drive. Sit on the seat next to me, master Geralt. And you, Profit, what are you still doing here? Come on, hop to it! We need to talk. No need for your ears here!”

Roach, ahead of them a little and biting the rope that secured her to the chariot, appeared to envy the little mare that Profit rode at a trot along the highway.

Yurga clicked his tongue, lightly striking the horse with the reins. “Well,” he drawled, “the situation is this, my lord. I promised you... then, on the bridge... I made a promise...”

“Forget it,” the Witcher interrupted promptly. “Forget it, Yurga.”

“I cannot forget it,” the merchant responded bluntly, “my word is not the wind. That which I don't expect to find at home when I return with you.”

“Leave me be. I don't want anything from you. We are settled.”

“No, lord. If I find such a thing at home, it will be the sign of destiny. And if one makes a mockery of Destiny, if one tells lies, she takes it very seriously.”

I know, thought the Witcher. I know.

“But... master Geralt...”

“What, Yurga?”

“I won't find anything at home that I don't expect to see. Not a thing, let alone what you want. Listen, master Witcher: Chrysididae, my wife, will give me no more children. Whatever may happen, there will not be a new child at home. You are mistaken.”

Geralt did not respond.

Yurga remained quiet also. Roach snorted again, tossing her head.

“But I have two sons,” Yurga said very quickly, looking at the road ahead of him. “Two healthy sons, strong and not stupid. I must send them into apprenticeships. One of them will, I think, learn the trade with me. But the other...”

Geralt continued to be silent.

Yurga turned his head and looked at him: “You were saying? You demanded an oath from me on the bridge. It was for you to find a child, nothing else, isn't that so? I have two sons: let one of them study the Witchers' arts. It's not a bad idea.”

“You are sure,” Geralt interrupted in a low voice, “that he isn't stupid?”

Yurga blinked. “Defending people, saving their lives, in your opinion, is it a good or a bad thing? Those fourteen, on the hill? You, on the bridge? What you yourself have accomplished, is it good or bad?”

“I don't know,” Geralt managed to respond. “I don't know, Yurga. Sometimes, I think that I know. But sometimes I have my doubts as well. Would you like for your son to have such doubts?”

“And why not?” the merchant replied seriously. “Why not have doubts? It's nothing but a human and good thing.”

“What?”

“Doubt. Only an evil man, master Geralt, is without it. And no-one escapes his destiny.”

The Witcher did not respond.

The main road ran along a high promontory and bent birches that mysteriously managed to keep hold of the steep slope. The trees had yellow leaves. Fall is returning, thought Geralt, it's a new autumn. Below, a river shimmered. Behind a freshly whitewashed fence, one could see the roofs of houses and the polished stilts of the wharf.

The winch squeaked.

The ferry was heading toward the edge, pushing a wave ahead of it. It split the waters with its blunt prow, pushing aside the grass and leaves that floated on the surface, trapped by a coating of dust. The ropes, pulled by the ferrymen, groaned. The crowd assembled on the banks was raising a commotion: women's cries, men's cursing, children's tears, bellowing, neighing, bleating. The deep monotone chant of fear.

“Stand back! Make way! Stand back, damn it!” shouted a knight, his head covered by a bloody rag.

His horse, immersed up to the abdomen, was annoyed, lifting its forelegs roughly and raising splashes. On the pier could be heard screams, cries: soldiers armed with shields pushed the crowd back, striking where they could with the butt of their spears.

“Stay away from the ferry!” cried the knight, swinging his sword. “The army has priority! Stay back, or heads will fly!”

Geralt pulled on the reins to stop his horse, which danced on the edge of the slope.

At the bottom of the valley marched heavily armed soldiers. The movement of their weapons and armor enveloped the wearers in a cloud of dust that reached the shield-bearers in their path.

“Geraaaalt!”

The Witcher looked down. A thin man with a cherry-colored jacket and a hat with an egret-feather plume jumped up and hailed him from a cart loaded with wooden cages that had been abandoned at the side of the road. In the cages, hens and geese were cackling constantly.

“Geraaaalt, it's me!”

“Dandelion! Come join me!”

“Stay away from the ferry,” the knight continued to scream from his bandaged head, on the pier. “The ferry is only for the army! If you want to get to the other side, you pack of dogs, take your hatchets and get to work in the forest! Make yourself a raft! The ferry is only for the army!”

“By all the gods, Geralt,” panted the poet, climbing the side of the valley. His cherry-colored jacket was covered with poultry feathers white as snow. “You see what's happening? Sodden just lost the battle: they retreated. Retreat? But what am I saying? It's more of a stampede... a full panic! We need to get out of here, Geralt, and cross to the other side of the Yaruga river...”

“What are you doing here, Dandelion? Where did you come from?”

“What am I doing here?” shouted the bard. “You ask me that? I am doing the same as the others. I was jolted all day yesterday on this cart! Some son of a bitch stole my horses during the night! Geralt, I beg you, get me out of here! Those Nilfgaardians could arrive at any moment! Anyone without the Yaruga river between himself and their army will be slaughtered. Slaughtered, you understand?”

“Don't panic, Dandelion.”

Below, they heard the neighing of horses forced aboard the ferry and the clamor of their hooves striking the boards; the screaming; the uproar of the crowd; the sound of splashing caused by a cart pushed into the water; the bellowing of cattle whose faces broke the surface of the water. Geralt saw the crates and bundles of hay carried by the current smash against the hull of the ferry and continue on their way. All was clamor and cursing; a cloud of dust rose from the valley; hoofbeats could be heard.

“Each in turn!” yelled the knight with the bandaged head, plunging with his horse into the crowd. “In order, you sons of bitches! One after the other!”

“Geralt,” moaned Dandelion, clinging to the stirrup, “you know what's happening? We'll never get aboard the ferry. The soldiers will outdo themselves and burn it afterward so it can't be used by Nilfgaardians. That's what they do in general, eh?”

“You're right,” agreed the Witcher. “That's the favored practice. I still don't understand why all these people are in such a panic! Is this the first war they've ever seen? Usually, the royal troops fight amongst themselves, then the kings come to an agreement, sign a treaty and take advantage of the occasion to kill each other. These events shouldn't concern all the people stampeding on the pier! What explains this outburst of violence?”

Dandelion looked directly at the Witcher's face without releasing the stirrup: “You clearly have very meager access to information, Geralt. Or you don't know how to interpret it. This is not an ordinary war of succession or a dispute over the ownership of a piece of land; we are not dealing with the quarrel of two noblemen to which peasants, occupied by their crops, remain passive witnesses.”

“What is it then? Enlighten me, because I don't know what's going on. Between you and me, it doesn't interest me much, but explain it anyway, please.”

“This war is unique,” the bard explained seriously. “The armies of Nilfgaard leave behind them nothing but desolation and corpses: entire fields of corpses. It's a war of total extermination. Nilfgaard against everything. The cruelty...”

“There is no war without cruelty,” the Witcher interrupted. “You're exaggerating, Dandelion. It's like burning the ferry: such is the practice... It is, I would say, a military tradition. Since the beginning of the world, armies have been killing, stealing, burning and attacking, unceasingly, and in that order. Since the beginning of the world, when a war breaks out, the farmers and their wives hide in the woods with the few possessions that they can carry and return home when the conflict is over...”

“Not this war, Geralt. After this war, no-one returns. There will be nothing to return to. Nilfgaard leaves behind it only rubble; its armies advance like lava from which no-one escapes. The roads are strewn, for miles, with gallows and pyres; the sky is cut with columns of smoke as long as the horizon. Since the beginning of the world, in fact, nothing of this sort has happened before. Since the world is our world... You must understand that the Nilfgaardians have descended from their mountains to destroy this world.”

“That's absurd. Who would benefit from destroying the world? Wars aren't fought for the sake of destruction. Wars are fought for two reasons: the first is power; the second is money.”

“Stop your philosophizing, Geralt! You can't change what's happening with philosophy! Why aren't you hearing me? Why do you refuse to understand? Believe me, Yaruga will not stop Nilfgaard's momentum. In winter, when the river freezes, they will push the front even farther. I tell you this: we must flee to the North. They may not reach that far. But in any case, our world will no longer be the same. Geralt, don't leave me alone here! Don't go without me! Don't leave me!”

“You've lost your mind, Dandelion.” The Witcher leaned over his saddle. “Fear must have made you take leave of your senses. How can you believe that I would leave you alone? Give me your hand. Get on my horse. You won't find anything of value on the ferry. Besides, they'll never let you on board. I'll take you up the river. We'll look for a boat or a raft.”

“The Nilfgaardians will catch us. They are already there. Have you noticed the knights? You can see that they come directly from the battlefield. Let's go downriver, toward the mouth of the Ina.”

“Stop panicking. We'll get through, don't worry. Downriver, there are crowds of fugitives. At each ford, like here, there will be problems with crossing by ferry. All the boats must have been requisitioned. We'll go upriver, against the current. Don't be afraid. I'll get you across, on a tree trunk if necessary.”

“You can hardly see the other bank!”

“Stop complaining. I told you I would get you across.”

“And you?”

“Get on my horse. We'll discuss it on the way. Hey, by the devil, you're not taking this huge bag! You want to break Roach's spine?”

“It's Roach? Roach was a bay, this one is chestnut.”

“All of my horses are named Roach. You know that very well. Stop giving me the run-around. What do you have in there? Gold?”

“Manuscripts! Poems! And my rations...”

“Throw it all in the river. You'll write new poems. As for food, I'll share mine with you.”

Dandelion made a mournful face but didn't hesitate. He threw his bag into the water and jumped onto the horse, sitting on the saddlebags and clinging to the Witcher's belt.

“On the way, on the way,” he repeated anxiously. “Don't lose any time, Geralt, go into the woods before...”

“Stop, Dandelion... You're making Roach nervous.”

“Don't mock me. If you knew what I...”

“Shut up, by the plague. We're taking the road. I'd like to get you across before nightfall.”

“Me? And you?”

“There's nothing calling me to the other side of the river.”

“Have you gone mad, Geralt? You've had enough of living? What are you doing?”

“It's nothing that concerns you. I'm going to Cintra.”

“To Cintra? But Cintra doesn't exist anymore!”

“What are you talking about?”

“Cintra doesn't exist anymore. It's only rubble and ruins. The Nilfgaardians...”

“Get down, Dandelion...”

“What?”

“Get down!”

The Witcher turned forcefully. At the sight of his face, the troubadour shot down from the horse like an arrow, stumbling. Geralt in turn dismounted calmly. Having passed the reins over the mare's head, the Witcher stood indecisively for a moment before running his gloved hand over his face. He sat on a stump opposite a bush of blood-red dogwood shoots.

“Come here, Dandelion,” he said. “Sit with me and tell me what happened to Cintra. Tell me everything.”

The poet sat: “The Nilfgaardians dealt the first blow,” he began after a moment of silence. “There were thousands. They met with the armies of Cintra in the Marnadal valley. The battle lasted all day: from dawn to dusk. Cintra's troops valiantly resisted before being decimated. The king died, and that's when the queen...”

“Calanthe.”

“Yes. Seeing that her army had succumbed to panic and scattered, she gathered around herself and her standard any who could still fight and formed a line of defense that reached the river, next to the city. All the soldiers who were still able followed.”

“And Calanthe?”

“With a handful of knights, she covered the troops' crossing and defended the rear. They say she fought like a man, plunging into the thick of the battle. She was impaled by pikes when she charged against the Nilfgaardian infantry. She was then evacuated to the city… What's in that flask, Geralt?”

“Vodka. Want some?”

“Well then, gladly.”

“Speak. Continue, Dandelion. Tell me everything.”

“The city wasn't properly defended. There was no headquarters. The defensive walls were empty. The rest of the knights and their families, the princes and the queen, barricaded themselves in the castle. The Nilfgaardians then took the castle after their sorcerers reduced the gate to cinders and burned down the walls. Only the tower, apparently protected by magic, resisted the spells of the Nilfgaardian sorcerers. Even so, the attackers penetrated inside four days later without making camp. The women had killed the children, the boys and girls, and fell upon their own swords or... What's is it, Geralt?”

“Continue, Dandelion.”

“Or... like Calanthe... head first, from the battlement, the very top... It's said that she asked to be... but no-one would agree. So she climbed up to the crenelations and... jumped head first. They say they did horrible things to the corpse afterward. I don't want... What is it?”

“Nothing, Dandelion... At Cintra, there was... a child: the little daughter of Calanthe, about ten or eleven years old. Her name was Ciri. Have you heard of her?”

“No, but a there was terrible massacre that left almost no-one alive in the city and the castle. None of the defenders of the keep escaped from death, as I told you. Most of the women and the children of the royal families were there.”

The Witcher remained silent.

“You knew Calanthe?” asked Dandelion.

“I knew her, indeed.”

“And the little girl you told me of? Ciri?”

“I knew her well.”

A wind blew across the river, rippling the surface of the water and shaking the branches of the bush. Some leaves flew by, swirling. It's fall, the Witcher thought. It's the new autumn.

Geralt stood.

“Do you believe in destiny, Dandelion?”

The bard lifted his head and looked at the Witcher with eyes wide with astonishment.

“Why do you ask me that?”

“Answer.”

“Well... yes, I believe.”

“But do you know that destiny alone is not enough? That there must be something more?”

“I don't understand.”

“You're not alone. But that's how it is. It takes something more. The problem is that I... I never knew what that was.”

“What is it, Geralt?”

“Nothing, Dandelion. Come on, in the saddle. Let's go. Hurry up. Who knows how long it will take to find a big enough boat. I'm still not abandoning Roach.”

“We're going to cross together, then?” asked the poet, invigorated.

“Yes. I have nothing more to look for on this side of the river.”

### Part IX

“Yurga!”

“Chrysididae!”

The young woman standing next to the gate ran, stumbling and crying out, hair flying, to Yurga who tossed the rains to his servant and leapt out of the cart toward his wife. He took her by the waist, energized, lifted her and whirled.

“I'm back, Chrysididae! I'm back!”

“Yurga!”

“I'm back! Throw the doors open wide! The master of the house has returned!”

Surprised in the middle of doing laundry, Chrysididae was wet and smelled of soapy water. Yurga set her back down without releasing her. She remained in his arms, trembling, pressed tight against him.

“Come with me to the house, Chrysididae.”

“By the gods, you returned... I couldn't sleep... Yurga... I couldn't even sleep...”

“I'm back. Hey, I'm back! I've even come back rich, Chrysididae! You see the cart? Hey, Profit! Crack the whip, go through the gate! You see the cart, Chrysididae? It carries a lot of things...”

“Yurga, what do I care about your cart? You've come back... in good health... whole...”

“I came back rich, I tell you. Come see...”

“Yurga? And him, who is he? The one dressed in black? By the gods, with a sword...”

The merchant turned. Dismounting, the Witcher pretended, with his back turned, to settle the cinches and adjust the saddle of his horse. He did not look up and he did not approach.

“I'll tell you later. Oh, Chrysididae, as long as... Tell me, where are the children? They're in good health?”

“They're in good health, Yurga, in good health. They went out to the fields to shoot crows. The neighbors will tell them to come home. They'll turn up right away, all three...”

“All three? What's... Chrysididae? You can...”

“No... but I must tell you something... you won't get angry?”

“Me? With you?”

“I adopted a little girl, Yurga. The druids took her in... You know, the ones who saved the lives of children after the war... They gathered them up in the forests, the lost and abandoned kids... barely alive... Yurga? Are you angry?”

Yurga slapped his hand to his forehead and turned around. The Witcher walked behind the cart, leading his horse. Avoiding their gaze, he kept turning his head.

“Yurga?”

“Oh, by the gods,” groaned the merchant. “By the gods, Chrysididae! Something that I didn't expect! At home!”

“Don't be angry, Yurga... You'll see that you'll grow to love her. She's a smart little girl, friendly, hardworking... a little strange, it's true. She refused to say where she was from and then started to cry. So, I don't ask her questions. Yurga, you know how much I've always wanted to have a little girl... What do you think?”

“Nothing,” he replied softly. “Nothing. It's destiny.” All along the way, he kept repeating the word feverishly: “Destiny, destiny... By the gods... we aren't capable of understanding what it is, Chrysididae. It's impossible to know the thoughts of something like that. And the dreams. We aren't capable...”

“Papa!!!”

“Nadbor! Sulik! How you've grown! Regular little bulls! Come to me...”

Yurga stopped dead when he saw the sickly little girl with her ashen hair walking slowly behind the boys. The little girl looked at him. The merchant noticed the large green eyes like spring grass and bright as two stars. He saw her suddenly pick up speed and run... He heard her cry out in a shrill and piercing voice:

“Geralt!”

The Witcher turned instantly and rushed to meet the young girl. The scene left Yurga speechless. He had never seen anyone move so fast.

They met in the middle of the yard: the little girl with ashen hair surrounded by a gray dress; the white-haired Witcher with his sword on his shoulder, dressed in black leather studded with silver; bounding lightly; the little girl trotting; the Witcher kneeling; the tiny hands of the little girl around his neck; the mouse-gray hair of the girl falling on the Witcher's shoulders. Chrysididae gave a muffled scream. Yurga drew her to him without saying a word and took her in his arms. His other arm hugged the two boys.

“Geralt!” the little girl repeated, hugging the Witcher's chest. “You've found me! I knew it! I always knew! I knew you'd find me!”

“Ciri,” the Witcher said.

Yurga didn't see Geralt's face, hidden by the little girl's ashen hair. He only saw black-gloved hands squeezing Ciri's back and shoulders.

“You've finally found me! Oh, Geralt! I waited all this time! It took so long... We'll stay together now, won't we? Now we'll be together, right? Say it, Geralt! Forever! Say it!”

“Forever, Ciri.”

“It's just like they predicted, Geralt! Like they predicted... I'm your destiny? Say it! I'm your destiny?”

Yurga saw astonishment in the eyes of the Witcher. He heard Chrysididae's discreet sobs and felt her shoulders trembling. He knew that he would not understand the answer, but he waited anyway. With good reason:

“You're more than that, Ciri. More than that.”

# Blood of Elves

*Verily I say unto you, the era of the sword and axe is nigh, the era of the wolf’s blizzard. The Time of the White Chill and the White Light is nigh, the Time of Madness and the Time of Contempt: Tedd Deireádh, the Time of End. The world will die amidst frost and be reborn with the new sun. It will be reborn of the Elder Blood, of Hen Ichaer, of the seed that has been sown. A seed which will not sprout but will burst into flame.*

*Ess’tuath esse! Thus, it shall be! Watch for the signs! What signs these shall be, I say unto you: first the earth will flow with the blood of Aen Seidhe, the Blood of Elves…*

Aen Ithlinnespeath,  
Ithlinne Aegli aep Aevenien’s prophecy

## CHAPTER ONE

The town was in flames.

The narrow streets leading to the moat and the first terrace belched smoke and embers, flames devouring the densely clustered thatched houses and licking at the castle walls. From the west, from the harbor gate, the screams and clamor of vicious battle and the dull blows of a battering ram smashing against the walls grew ever louder.

Their attackers had surrounded them unexpectedly, shattering the barricades which had been held by no more than a few soldiers, a handful of townsmen carrying halberds and some crossbowmen from the guild. Their horses, decked out in flowing black caparisons, flew over the barricades like specters, their riders’ bright, glistening blades sowing death amongst the fleeing defenders.

Ciri felt the knight who carried her before him on his saddle abruptly spur his horse. She heard his cry. “Hold on,” he shouted. “Hold on!”

Other knights wearing the colors of Cintra overtook them, sparring, even in full flight, with the Nilfgaardians. Ciri caught a glimpse of the skirmish from the corner of her eye – the crazed swirl of blue-gold and black cloaks amidst the clash of steel, the clatter of blades against shields, the neighing of horses—

Shouts. No, not shouts. Screams.

“Hold on!”

Fear. With every jolt, every jerk, every leap of the horse pain shot through her hands as she clutched at the reins. Her legs contracted painfully, unable to find support, her eyes watered from the smoke. The arm around her suffocated her, choking her, the force compressing her ribs. All around her screaming such as she had never before heard grew louder. What must one do to a man to make him scream so?

Fear. Overpowering, paralyzing, choking fear.

Again the clash of iron, the grunts and snorts of the horses. The houses whirled around her and suddenly she could see windows belching fire where a moment before there’d been nothing but a muddy little street strewn with corpses and cluttered with the abandoned possessions of the fleeing population. All at once the knight at her back was wracked by a strange wheezing cough. Blood spurted over the hands grasping the reins. More screams. Arrows whistled past.

A fall, a shock, painful bruising against armour. Hooves pounded past her, a horse’s belly and a frayed girth flashing by above her head, then another horse’s belly and a flowing black caparison. Grunts of exertion, like a lumberjack’s when chopping wood. But this isn’t wood; it’s iron against iron. A shout, muffled and dull, and something huge and black collapsed into the mud next to her with a splash, spurting blood. An armoured foot quivered, thrashed, goring the earth with an enormous spur.

A jerk. Some force plucked her up, pulled her onto another saddle. Hold on! Again the bone-shaking speed, the mad gallop. Arms and legs desperately searching for support. The horse rears. Hold on!… There is no support. There is no… There is no… There is blood. The horse falls. It’s impossible to jump aside, no way to break free, to escape the tight embrace of these chainmail-clad arms. There is no way to avoid the blood pouring onto her head and over her shoulders.

A jolt, the squelch of mud, a violent collision with the ground, horrifically still after the furious ride. The horse’s harrowing wheezes and squeals as it tries to regain its feet. The pounding of horseshoes, fetlocks and hooves flashing past. Black caparisons and cloaks. Shouting.

The street is on fire, a roaring red wall of flame. Silhouetted before it, a rider towers over the flaming roofs, enormous. His black-caparisoned horse prances, tosses its head, neighs.

The rider stares down at her. Ciri sees his eyes gleaming through the slit in his huge helmet, framed by a bird of prey’s wings. She sees the fire reflected in the broad blade of the sword held in his lowered hand.

The rider looks at her. Ciri is unable to move. The dead man’s motionless arms wrapped around her waist hold her down. She is locked in place by something heavy and wet with blood, something which is lying across her thigh, pinning her to the ground.

And she is frozen in fear: a terrible fear which turns her entrails inside out, which deafens Ciri to the screams of the wounded horse, the roar of the blaze, the cries of dying people and the pounding drums. The only thing which exists, which counts, which still has any meaning, is fear. Fear embodied in the figure of a black knight wearing a helmet decorated with feathers frozen against the wall of raging, red flames.

The rider spurs his horse, the wings on his helmet fluttering as the bird of prey takes to flight, launching itself to attack its helpless victim, paralysed with fear. The bird – or maybe the knight – screeches terrifyingly, cruelly, triumphantly. A black horse, black armour, a black flowing cloak, and behind this – flames. A sea of flames.

Fear.

The bird shrieks. The wings beat, feathers slap against her face. Fear!

Help! Why doesn’t anyone help me? Alone, weak, helpless – I can’t move, can’t force a sound from my constricted throat. Why does no one come to help me?

I’m terrified!

Eyes blaze through the slit in the huge winged helmet. The black cloak veils everything—

“Ciri!”

She woke, numb and drenched in sweat, with her scream – the scream which had woken her – still hanging in the air, still vibrating somewhere within her, beneath her breast-bone and burning against her parched throat. Her hands ached, clenched around the blanket; her back ached…

“Ciri. Calm down.”

The night was dark and windy, the crowns of the surrounding pine trees rustling steadily and melodiously, their limbs and trunks creaking in the wind. There was no malevolent fire, no screams, only this gentle lullaby. Beside her the campfire flickered with light and warmth, its reflected flames glowing from harness buckles, gleaming red in the leather-wrapped and iron-banded hilt of a sword leaning against a saddle on the ground. There was no other fire and no other iron. The hand against her cheek smelled of leather and ashes. Not of blood.

“Geralt—”

“It was just a dream. A bad dream.”

Ciri shuddered violently, curling her arms and legs up tight.

A dream. Just a dream.

The campfire had already died down; the birch logs were red and luminous, occasionally crackling, giving off tiny spurts of blue flame which illuminated the white hair and sharp profile of the man wrapping a blanket and sheepskin around her.

“Geralt, I—”

“I’m right here. Sleep, Ciri. You have to rest. We’ve still a long way ahead of us.”

I can hear music, she thought suddenly. Amidst the rustling of the trees… there’s music. Lute music. And voices. The Princess of Cintra… A child of destiny… A child of Elder Blood, the blood of elves. Geralt of Rivia, the White Wolf, and his destiny. No, no, that’s a legend. A poet’s invention. The princess is dead. She was killed in the town streets while trying to escape…

Hold on… !Hold…

“Geralt?”

“What, Ciri?”

“What did he do to me? What happened? What did he… do to me?”

“Who?”

“The knight… The black knight with feathers on his helmet… I can’t remember anything. He shouted… and looked at me. I can’t remember what happened. Only that I was frightened… I was so frightened…”

The man leaned over her, the flame of the campfire sparkling in his eyes. They were strange eyes. Very strange. Ciri had been frightened of them, she hadn’t liked meeting his gaze. But that had been a long time ago. A very long time ago.

“I can’t remember anything,” she whispered, searching for his hand, as tough and coarse as raw wood. “The black knight—”

“It was a dream. Sleep peacefully. It won’t come back.”

Ciri had heard such reassurances in the past. They had been repeated to her endlessly; many, many times she had been offered comforting words when her screams had woken her during the night. But this time it was different. Now she believed it. Because it was Geralt of Rivia, the White Wolf, the Witcher, who said it. The man who was her destiny. The one for whom she was destined. Geralt the Witcher, who had found her surrounded by war, death and despair, who had taken her with him and promised they would never part.

She fell asleep holding tight to his hand.

The bard finished the song. Tilting his head a little he repeated the ballad’s refrain on his lute, delicately, softly, a single tone higher than the apprentice accompanying him.

No one said a word. Nothing but the subsiding music and the whispering leaves and squeaking boughs of the enormous oak could be heard. Then, all of a sudden, a goat tethered to one of the carts which circled the ancient tree bleated lengthily. At that moment, as if given a signal, one of the men seated in the large semi-circular audience stood up. Throwing his cobalt blue cloak with gold braid trim back over his shoulder, he gave a stiff, dignified bow.

“Thank you, Master Dandilion,” he said, his voice resonant without being loud. “Allow me, Radcliffe of Oxenfurt, Master of the Arcana, to express what I am sure is the opinion of everyone here present and utter words of gratitude and appreciation for your fine art and skill.”

The wizard ran his gaze over those assembled – an audience of well over a hundred people – seated on the ground, on carts, or standing in a tight semi-circle facing the foot of the oak. They nodded and whispered amongst themselves. Several people began to applaud while others greeted the singer with upraised hands. Women, touched by the music, sniffed and wiped their eyes on whatever came to hand, which differed according to their standing, profession and wealth: peasant women used their forearms or the backs of their hands, merchants’ wives dabbed their eyes with linen handkerchiefs while elves and noblewomen used kerchiefs of the finest tight-woven cotton, and Baron Vilibert’s three daughters, who had, along with the rest of his retinue, halted their falcon hunt to attend the famous troubadour’s performance, blew their noses loudly and sonorously into elegant mould-green cashmere scarves.

“It would not be an exaggeration to say,” continued the wizard, “that you have moved us deeply, Master Dandilion. You have prompted us to reflection and thought; you have stirred our hearts. Allow me to express our gratitude, and our respect.”

The troubadour stood and took a bow, sweeping the heron feather pinned to his fashionable hat across his knees. His apprentice broke off his playing, grinned and bowed too, until Dandilion glared at him sternly and snapped something under his breath. The boy lowered his head and returned to softly strumming his lute strings.

The assembly stirred to life. The merchants travelling in the caravan whispered amongst themselves and then rolled a sizable cask of beer out to the foot of the oak tree. Wizard Radcliffe lost himself in quiet conversation with Baron Vilibert. Having blown their noses, the baron’s daughters gazed at Dandilion in adoration – which went entirely unnoticed by the bard, engrossed as he was in smiling, winking and flashing his teeth at a haughty, silent group of roving elves, and at one of them in particular: a dark-haired, large-eyed beauty sporting a tiny ermine cap. Dandilion had rivals for her attention – the elf, with her huge eyes and beautiful toque hat, had caught his audience’s interest as well, and a number of knights, students and goliards were paying court to her with their eyes. The elf clearly enjoyed the attention, picking at the lace cuffs of her chemise and fluttering her eyelashes, but the group of elves with her surrounded her on all sides, not bothering to hide their antipathy towards her admirers.

The glade beneath Bleobheris, the great oak, was a place of frequent rallies, a well-known travellers’ resting place and meeting ground for wanderers, and was famous for its tolerance and openness. The druids protecting the ancient tree called it the Seat of Friendship and willingly welcomed all comers. But even during an event as exceptional as the world-famous troubadour’s just-concluded performance the travellers kept to themselves, remaining in clearly delineated groups. Elves stayed with elves. Dwarfish craftsmen gathered with their kin, who were often hired to protect the merchant caravans and were armed to the teeth. Their groups tolerated at best the gnome miners and halfling farmers who camped beside them. All non-humans were uniformly distant towards humans. The humans repaid in kind, but were not seen to mix amongst themselves either. Nobility looked down on the merchants and travelling salesmen with open scorn, while soldiers and mercenaries distanced themselves from shepherds and their reeking sheepskins. The few wizards and their disciples kept themselves entirely apart from the others, and bestowed their arrogance on everyone in equal parts. A tight-knit, dark and silent group of peasants lurked in the background. Resembling a forest with their rakes, pitchforks and flails poking above their heads, they were ignored by all and sundry.

The exception, as ever, was the children. Freed from the constraints of silence which had been enforced during the bard’s performance, the children dashed into the woods with wild cries, and enthusiastically immersed themselves in a game whose rules were incomprehensible to all those who had bidden farewell to the happy years of childhood. Children of elves, dwarves, halflings, gnomes, half-elves, quarter-elves and toddlers of mysterious provenance neither knew nor recognised racial or social divisions. At least, not yet.

“Indeed!” shouted one of the knights present in the glade, who was as thin as a beanpole and wearing a red and black tunic emblazoned with three lions passant. “The wizard speaks the truth! The ballads were beautiful. Upon my word, honourable Dandilion, if you ever pass near Baldhorn, my lord’s castle, stop by without a moment’s hesitation. You will be welcomed like a prince– what am I saying? Welcomed like King Vizimir himself! I swear on my sword, I have heard many a minstrel, but none even came close to being your equal, master. Accept the respect and tributes those of us born to knighthood, and those of us appointed to the position, pay to your skills!”

Flawlessly sensing the opportune moment, the troubadour winked at his apprentice. The boy set his lute aside and picked up a little casket which served as a collection box for the audience’s more measurable expressions of appreciation. He hesitated, ran his eyes over the crowd, then replaced the little casket and grabbed a large bucket standing nearby. Master Dandilion bestowed an approving smile on the young man for his prudence.

“Master!” shouted a sizeable woman sitting on a cart, the sides of which were painted with a sign for “Vera Loewenhaupt and Sons,” and which was full of wickerwork. Her sons, nowhere to be seen, were no doubt busy wasting away their mother’s hard-earned fortune. “Master Dandilion, what is this? Are you going to leave us in suspense? That can’t be the end of your ballad? Sing to us of what happened next!”

“Songs and ballads” – the musician bowed – “never end, dear lady, because poetry is eternal and immortal, it knows no beginning, it knows no end—”

“But what happened next?” The tradeswoman didn’t give up, generously rattling coins into the bucket Dandilion’s apprentice held out to her. “At least tell us about it, even if you have no wish to sing of it. Your songs mention no names, but we know the witcher you sing of is no other than the famous Geralt of Rivia, and the enchantress for whom he burns with love is the equally famous Yennefer. And the Child Surprise, destined for the witcher and sworn to him from birth, is Cirilla, the unfortunate Princess of Cintra, the town destroyed by the Invaders. Am I right?”

Dandilion smiled, remaining enigmatic and aloof. “I sing of universal matters, my dear, generous lady,” he stated. “Of emotions which anyone can experience. Not about specific people.”

“Oh, come on!” yelled a voice from the crowd. “Everyone knows those songs are about Geralt the Witcher!”

“Yes, yes!” squealed Baron Vilibert’s daughters in chorus, drying their sodden scarves. “Sing on, Master Dandilion! What happened next? Did the witcher and Yennefer the Enchantress find each other in the end? And did they love each other? Were they happy? We want to know!”

“Enough!” roared the dwarf leader with a growl in his throat, shaking his mighty waist-length, red beard. “It’s crap – all these princesses, sorceresses, destiny, love and women’s fanciful tales. If you’ll pardon the expression, great poet, it’s all lies, just a poetic invention to make the story prettier and more touching. But of the deeds of war – the massacre and plunder of Cintra, the battles of Marnadal and Sodden – you did sing that mightily, Dandilion! There’s no regrets in parting with silver for such a song, a joy to a warrior’s heart! And I, Sheldon Skaggs, declare there’s not an ounce of lies in what you say – and I can tell the lies from the truth because I was there at Sodden. I stood against the Nilfgaard invaders with an axe in my hand…”

“I, Donimir of Troy,” shouted the thin knight with three lions passant blazoned across his tunic, “was at both battles of Sodden! But I did not see you there, sir dwarf!”

“No doubt because you were looking after the supply train!” Sheldon Skaggs retorted. “While I was in the front line where things got hot!”

“Mind your tongue, beardy!” said Donimir of Troy flushing, hitching up his sword belt. “And who you’re speaking to!”

“Have a care yourself!” The dwarf whacked his palm against the axe wedged in his belt, turned to his companions and grinned. “Did you see him there? Frigging knight! See his coat of arms? Ha! Three lions on a shield? Two shitting and the third snarling!”

“Peace, peace!” A grey-haired druid in a white cloak averted trouble with a sharp, authoritative voice. “This is not fitting, gentlemen! Not here, under Bleobheris’ crown, an oak older than all the disputes and quarrels of the world! And not in Poet Dandilion’s presence, from whose ballads we ought to learn of love, not contention.”

“Quite so!” a short, fat priest with a face glistening with sweat seconded the druid. “You look but have no eyes, you listen but have deaf ears. Because divine love is not in you, you are like empty barrels—”

“Speaking of barrels,” squeaked a long-nosed gnome from his cart, painted with a sign for “Iron hardware, manufacture and sale”, “roll another out, guildsmen! Poet Dandilion’s throat is surely dry – and ours too, from all these emotions!”

“—Verily, like empty barrels, I tell ye!” The priest, determined not to be put off, drowned out the ironware gnome. “You have understood nothing of Master Dandilion’s ballad, you have learned nothing! You did not see that these ballads speak of man’s fate, that we are no more than toys in the hands of the gods, our lands no more than their playground. The ballads about destiny portrayed the destinies of us all, and the legend of Geralt the Witcher and Princess Cirilla – although it is set against the true background of that war – is, after all, a mere metaphor, the creation of a poet’s imagination designed to help us—”

“You’re talking rubbish, holy man!” hollered Vera Loewenhaupt from the heights of her cart. “What legend? What imaginative creation? You may not know him, but I know Geralt of Rivia. I saw him with my own eyes in Wyzima, when he broke the spell on King Foltest’s daughter. And I met him again later on the Merchants’ Trail, where, at Gildia’s request, he slew a ferocious griffin which was preying on the caravans and thus saved the lives of many good people. No. This is no legend or fairy-tale. It is the truth, the sincere truth, which Master Dandilion sang for us.”

“I second that,” said a slender female warrior with her black hair smoothly brushed back and plaited into a thick braid. “I, Rayla of Lyria, also know Geralt the White Wolf, the famous slayer of monsters. And I’ve met the enchantress, Lady Yennefer, on several occasions – I used to visit Aedirn and her home town of Vengerberg. I don’t know anything about their being in love, though.”

“But it has to be true,” the attractive elf in the ermine toque suddenly said in a melodious voice. “Such a beautiful ballad of love could not but be true.”

“It could not!” Baron Vilibert’s daughters supported the elf and, as if on command, wiped their eyes on their scarves. “Not by any measure!”

“Honourable wizard!” Vera Loewenhaupt turned to Radcliffe. “Were they in love or not? Surely you know what truly happened to them, Yennefer and the witcher. Disclose the secret!”

“If the song says they were in love,” replied the wizard, “then that’s what happened, and their love will endure down the ages. Such is the power of poetry.”

“It is said,” interrupted Baron Vilibert all of a sudden, “that Yennefer of Vengerberg was killed on Sodden Hill. Several enchantresses were killed there—”

“That’s not true,” said Donimir of Troy. “Her name is not on the monument. I am from those parts and have often climbed Sodden Hill and read the names engraved on the monument. Three enchantresses died there: Triss Merigold, Lytta Neyd, known as Coral… hmm… and the name of the third has slipped my mind…”

The knight glanced at Wizard Radcliffe, who smiled wordlessly.

“And this witcher,” Sheldon Skaggs suddenly called out, “this Geralt who loved Yennefer, has also bitten the dust, apparently. I heard he was killed somewhere in Transriver. He slew and slew monsters until he met his match. That’s how it goes: he who fights with the sword dies by the sword. Everyone comes across someone who will better them eventually, and is made to taste cold hard iron.”

“I don’t believe it.” The slender warrior contorted her pale lips, spat vehemently on the ground and crossed her chainmail-clad arms with a crunch. “I don’t believe there is anyone to best Geralt of Rivia. I have seen this witcher handle a sword. His speed is simply inhuman—”

“Well said,” threw in Wizard Radcliffe. “Inhuman. Witchers are mutated, so their reactions—”

“I don’t understand you, magician.” The warrior twisted her lips even more nastily. “Your words are too learned. I know one thing: no swordsman I have ever seen can match Geralt of Rivia, the White Wolf. And so I will not accept that he was defeated in battle as the dwarf claims.”

“Every swordsman’s an arse when the enemy’s not sparse,” remarked Sheldon Skaggs sententiously. “As the elves say.”

“Elves,” stated a tall, fair-haired representative of the Elder Race coldly, from his place beside the elf with the beautiful toque, “are not in the habit of using such vulgar language.”

“No! No!” squealed Baron Vilibert’s daughters from behind their green scarves. “Geralt the Witcher can’t have been killed! The witcher found Ciri, the child destined for him, and then the Enchantress Yennefer, and all three lived happily ever after! Isn’t that true, Master Dandilion?”

“’Twas a ballad, my noble young ladies,” said the beer-parched gnome, manufacturer of ironwares, with a yawn. “Why look for truth in a ballad? Truth is one thing, poetry another. Let’s take this – what was her name? – Ciri? The famous Child Surprise. Master Dandilion trumped that up for sure. I’ve been to Cintra many a time and the king and queen lived in a childless home, with no daughter, no son—”

“Liar!” shouted a red-haired man in a sealskin jacket, a checked kerchief bound around his forehead. “Queen Calanthe, the Lioness of Cintra, had a daughter called Pavetta. She died, together with her husband, in a tempest which struck out at sea, and the depths swallowed them both.”

“So you see for yourselves I’m not making this up!” The ironware gnome called everyone to be his witnesses. “The Princess of Cintra was called Pavetta, not Ciri.”

“Cirilla, known as Ciri, was the daughter of this drowned Pavetta,” explained the red-haired man. “Calanthe’s granddaughter. She was not the princess herself, but the daughter of the Princess of Cintra. She was the Child Surprise destined for the witcher, the man to whom – even before she was born – the queen had sworn to hand her granddaughter over, just as Master Dandilion has sung. But the witcher could neither find her nor collect her. And here our poet has missed the truth.”

“Oh yes, he’s missed the truth indeed,” butted in a sinewy young man who, judging by his clothes, was a journeyman on his travels prior to crafting his masterpiece and passing his master’s exams. “The witcher’s destiny bypassed him: Cirilla was killed during the siege of Cintra. Before throwing herself from the tower, Queen Calanthe killed the princess’s daughter with her own hand, to prevent her from falling into the Nilfgaardians’ claws alive.”

“It wasn’t like that. Not like that at all!” objected the red-haired man. “The princess’s daughter was killed during the massacre while trying to escape from the town.”

“One way or another,” shouted Ironware, “the witcher didn’t find Cirilla! The poet lied!”

“But lied beautifully,” said the elf in the toque, snuggling up to the tall, fair-haired elf.

“It’s not a question of poetry but of facts!” shouted the journeyman. “I tell you, the princess’s daughter died by her grandmother’s hand. Anyone who’s been to Cintra can confirm that!”

“And I say she was killed in the streets trying to escape,” declared the red-haired man. “I know because although I’m not from Cintra I served in the Earl of Skellige’s troop supporting Cintra during the war. As everyone knows, Eist Tuirseach, the King of Cintra, comes from the Skellige Isles. He was the earl’s uncle. I fought in the earl’s troop at Marnadal and Cintra and later, after the defeat, at Sodden—”

“Yet another veteran,” Sheldon Skaggs snarled to the dwarves crowded around him. “All heroes and warriors. Hey, folks! Is there at least one of you out there who didn’t fight at Marnadal or Sodden?”

“That dig is out of place, Skaggs,” the tall elf reproached him, putting his arm around the beauty wearing the toque in a way intended to dispel any lingering doubts amongst her admirers. “Don’t imagine you were the only one to fight at Sodden. I took part in the battle as well.”

“On whose side, I wonder,” Baron Vilibert said to Radcliffe in a highly audible whisper which the elf ignored entirely.

“As everyone knows,” he continued, sparing neither the baron nor the wizard so much as a glance, “over a hundred thousand warriors stood on the field during the second battle of Sodden Hill, and of those at least thirty thousand were maimed or killed. Master Dandilion should be thanked for immortalising this famous, terrible battle in one of his ballads. In both the lyrics and melody of his work I heard not an exaltation but a warning. So I repeat: offer praise and everlasting renown to this poet for his ballad, which may, perhaps, prevent a tragedy as horrific as this cruel and unnecessary war from occurring in the future.”

“Indeed,” said Baron Vilibert, looking defiantly at the elf. “You have read some very interesting things into this ballad, honoured sir. An unnecessary war, you say? You’d like to avoid such a tragedy in the future, would you? Are we to understand that if the Nilfgaardians were to attack us again you would advise that we capitulate? Humbly accept the Nilfgaardian yoke?”

“Life is a priceless gift and should be protected,” the elf replied coldly. “Nothing justifies wide-scale slaughter and sacrifice of life, which is what the battles at Sodden were – both the battle lost and the battle won. Both of them cost the humans thousands of lives. And with them, you lost unimaginable potential—”

“Elven prattle!” snarled Sheldon Skaggs. “Dim-witted rubbish! It was the price that had to be paid to allow others to live decently, in peace, instead of being chained, blinded, whipped and forced to work in salt and sulphur mines. Those who died a heroic death, those who will now, thanks to Dandilion, live on forever in our memories, taught us to defend our own homes. Sing your ballads, Dandilion, sing them to everyone. Your lesson won’t go to waste, and it’ll come in handy, you’ll see! Because, mark my words, Nilfgaard will attack us again. If not today, then tomorrow! They’re licking their wounds now, recovering, but the day when we’ll see their black cloaks and feathered helmets again is growing ever nearer!”

“What do they want from us?” yelled Vera Loewenhaupt. “Why are they bent on persecuting us? Why don’t they leave us in peace, leave us to our lives and work? What do the Nilfgaardians want?”

“They want our blood!” howled Baron Vilibert.

“And our land!” someone cried from the crowd of peasants.

“And our women!” chimed in Sheldon Skaggs, with a ferocious glower.

Several people started to laugh – as quietly and furtively as they could. Even though the idea that anyone other than another dwarf would desire one of the exceptionally unattractive dwarf-women was highly amusing, it was not a safe subject for teasing or jests – especially not in the presence of the short, stocky, bearded individuals whose axes and short-swords had an ugly habit of leaping from their belts and into their hands at incredible speed. And the dwarves, for some unknown reason, were entirely convinced that the rest of the world was lecherously lying in wait for their wives and daughters, and were extremely touchy about it.

“This had to happen at some point,” the grey-haired druid declared suddenly. “This had to happen. We forgot that we are not the only ones in this world, that the whole of creation does not revolve around us. Like stupid, fat, lazy minnows in a slimy pond we chose not to accept the existence of pike. We allowed our world, like the pond, to become slimy, boggy and sluggish. Look around you – there is crime and sin everywhere, greed, the pursuit of profit, quarrels and disagreements are rife. Our traditions are disappearing, respect for our values is fading. Instead of living according to Nature we have begun to destroy it. And what have we got for it? The air is poisoned by the stink of smelting furnaces, the rivers and brooks are tainted by slaughter houses and tanneries, forests are being cut down without a thought… Ha – just look! – even on the living bark of sacred Bleobheris, there just above the poet’s head, there’s a foul phrase carved out with a knife – and it’s misspelled at that – by a stupid, illiterate vandal. Why are you surprised? It had to end badly—”

“Yes, yes!” the fat priest joined in. “Come to your senses, you sinners, while there is still time, because the anger and vengeance of the gods hangs over you! Remember Ithlin’s oracle, the prophetic words describing the punishment of the gods reserved for a tribe poisoned by crime! ‘The Time of Contempt will come, when the tree will lose its leaves, the bud will wither, the fruit will rot, the seed turn bitter and the river valleys will run with ice instead of water. The White Chill will come, and after it the White Light, and the world will perish beneath blizzards.’ Thus spoke Seeress Ithlin! And before this comes to pass there will be visible signs, plagues will ravish the earth – Remember! – the Nilfgaard are our punishment from the gods! They are the whip with which the Immortals will lash you sinners, so that you may—”

“Shut up, you sanctimonious old man!” roared Sheldon Skaggs, stamping his heavy boots. “Your superstitious rot makes me sick! My guts are churning—”

“Careful, Sheldon.” The tall elf cut him short with a smile. “Don’t mock another’s religion. It is not pleasant, polite or… safe.”

“I’m not mocking anything,” protested the dwarf. “I don’t doubt the existence of the gods, but it annoys me when someone drags them into earthly matters and tries to pull the wool over my eyes using the prophecies of some crazy elf. The Nilfgaardians are the instrument of the gods? Rubbish! Search back through your memories to the past, to the days of Dezmod, Radowid and Sambuk, to the days of Abrad, the Old Oak! You may not remember them, because your lives are so very short – you’re like Mayflies – but I remember, and I’ll tell you what it was like in these lands just after you climbed from your boats on the Yaruga Estuary and the Pontar Delta onto the beach. Three kingdoms sprang from the four ships which beached on those shores; the stronger groups absorbed the weaker and so grew, strengthening their positions. They invaded others’ territories, conquered them, and their kingdoms expanded, becoming ever larger and more powerful. And now the Nilfgaardians are doing the same, because theirs is a strong and united, disciplined and tightly knit country. And unless you close ranks in the same way, Nilfgaard will swallow you as a pike does a minnow – just as this wise druid said!”

“Let them just try!” Donimir of Troy puffed out his lion-emblazoned chest and shook his sword in its scabbard. “We beat them hollow on Sodden Hill, and we can do it again!”

“You’re very cocksure,” snarled Sheldon Skaggs. “You’ve evidently forgotten, sir knight, that before the battle of Sodden Hill, the Nilfgaard had advanced across your lands like an iron roller, strewing the land between Marnadal and Transriver with the corpses of many a gallant fellow like yourself. And it wasn’t loud-mouthed smart-arses like you who stopped the Nilfgaardians, but the united strengths of Temeria, Redania, Aedirn and Kaedwen. Concord and unity, that’s what stopped them!”

“Not just that,” remarked Radcliffe in a cold, resonant voice. “Not just that, Master Skaggs.”

The dwarf hawked loudly, blew his nose, shuffled his feet then bowed a little to the wizard.

“No one is denying the contribution of your fellowship,” he said. “Shame on he who does not acknowledge the heroism of the brotherhood of wizards on Sodden Hill. They stood their ground bravely, shed blood for the common cause, and contributed most eminently to our victory. Dandilion did not forget them in his ballad, and nor shall we. But note that these wizards stood united and loyal on the Hill, and accepted the leadership of Vilgefortz of Roggeveen just as we, the warriors of the Four Kingdoms, acknowledged the command of Vizimir of Redania. It’s just a pity this solidarity and concord only lasted for the duration of the war, because, with peace, here we are divided again. Vizimir and Foltest are choking each other with customs taxes and trading laws, Demawend of Aedirn is bickering with Henselt over the Northern Marches while the League of Hengfors and the Thyssenids of Kovir don’t give a toss. And I hear that looking for the old concord amongst the wizards is useless, too. We are not closely knit, we have no discipline and no unity. But Nilfgaard does!”

“Nilfgaard is ruled by Emperor Emhyr var Emreis, a tyrant and autocrat who enforces obedience with whip, noose and axe!” thundered Baron Vilibert. “What are you proposing, sir dwarf? How are we supposed to close ranks? With similar tyranny? And which king, which kingdom, in your opinion, should subordinate the others? In whose hands would you like to see the sceptre and knout?”

“What do I care?” replied Skaggs with a shrug. “That’s a human affair. Whoever you chose to be king wouldn’t be a dwarf anyway.”

“Or an elf, or even half-elf,” added the tall representative of the Elder Race, his arm still wrapped around the toque-wearing beauty. “You even consider quarter-elves inferior—”

“That’s where it stings,” laughed Vilibert. “You’re blowing the same horn as Nilfgaard because Nilfgaard is also shouting about equality, promising you a return to the old order as soon as we’ve been conquered and they’ve scythed us off these lands. That’s the sort of unity, the sort of equality you’re dreaming of, the sort you’re talking about and trumpeting! Nilfgaard pays you gold to do it! And it’s hardly surprising you love each other so much, the Nilfgaardians being an elven race—”

“Nonsense,” the elf said coldly. “You talk rubbish, sir knight. You’re clearly blinded by racism. The Nilfgaardians are human, just like you.”

“That’s an outright lie! They’re descended from the Black Seidhe and everyone knows it! Elven blood flows through their veins! The blood of elves!”

“And what flows through yours?” The elf smiled derisively. “We’ve been combining our blood for generations, for centuries, your race and mine, and doing so quite successfully – fortunately or unfortunately, I don’t know. You started persecuting mixed relationships less than a quarter of a century ago and, incidentally, not very successfully. So show me a human now who hasn’t a dash of Seidhe Ichaer, the blood of the Elder Race.”

Vilibert visibly turned red. Vera Loewenhaupt also flushed. Wizard Radcliffe bowed his head and coughed. And, most interestingly, the beautiful elf in the ermine toque blushed too.

“We are all children of Mother Earth.” The grey-haired druid’s voice resounded in the silence. “We are children of Mother Nature. And though we do not respect our mother, though we often worry her and cause her pain, though we break her heart, she loves us. Loves us all. Let us remember that, we who are assembled here in this Seat of Friendship. And let us not bicker over which of us was here first: Acorn was the first to be thrown up by the waves and from Acorn sprouted the Great Bleobheris, the oldest of oaks. Standing beneath its crown, amongst its primordial roots, let us not forget our own brotherly roots, the earth from which these roots grow. Let us remember the words of Poet Dandilion’s song—”

“Exactly!” exclaimed Vera Loewenhaupt. “And where is he?”

“He’s fled,” ascertained Sheldon Skaggs, gazing at the empty place under the oak. “Taken the money and fled without saying goodbye. Very elf-like!”

“Dwarf-like!” squealed Ironware.

“Human-like,” corrected the tall elf, and the beauty in the toque rested her head against his shoulder.

“Hey, minstrel,” said Mama Lantieri, striding into the room without knocking, the scents of hyacinths, sweat, beer and smoked bacon wafting before her. “You’ve got a guest. Enter, noble gentleman.”

Dandilion smoothed his hair and sat up in the enormous carved armchair. The two girls sitting on his lap quickly jumped up, covering their charms and pulling down their disordered clothes. The modesty of harlots, thought the poet, was not at all a bad title for a ballad. He got to his feet, fastened his belt and pulled on his doublet, all the while looking at the nobleman standing at the threshold.

“Indeed,” he remarked, “you know how to find me anywhere, though you rarely pick an opportune moment. You’re lucky I’d not yet decided which of these two beauties I prefer. And at your prices, Lantieri, I cannot afford them both.”

Mama Lantieri smiled in sympathy and clapped her hands. Both girls – a fair-skinned, freckled islander and a dark-haired half-elf – swiftly left the room. The man at the door removed his cloak and handed it to Mama along with a small but well-filled money-bag.

“Forgive me, master,” he said, approaching the table and making himself comfortable. “I know this is not a good time to disturb you. But you disappeared out from beneath the oak so quickly… I did not catch you on the High Road as I had intended and did not immediately come across your tracks in this little town. I’ll not take much of your time, believe me—”

“They always say that, and it’s always a lie,” the bard interrupted. “Leave us alone, Lantieri, and see to it that we’re not disturbed. I’m listening, sir.”

The man scrutinised him. He had dark, damp, almost tearful eyes, a pointed nose and ugly, narrow lips.

“I’ll come to the point without wasting your time,” he declared, waiting for the door to close behind Mama. “Your ballads interest me, master. To be more specific, certain characters of which you sang interest me. I am concerned with the true fate of your ballad’s heroes. If I am not mistaken, the true destinies of real people inspired the beautiful work I heard beneath the oak tree? I have in mind… Little Cirilla of Cintra. Queen Calanthe’s granddaughter.”

Dandilion gazed at the ceiling, drumming his fingers on the table.

“Honoured sir,” he said dryly, “you are interested in strange matters. You ask strange questions. Something tells me you are not the person I took you to be.”

“And who did you take me to be, if I may ask?”

“I’m not sure you may. It depends if you are about to convey greetings to me from any mutual friends. You should have done so initially, but somehow you have forgotten.”

“I did not forget at all.” The man reached into the breast pocket of his sepia-colored velvet tunic and pulled out a money-bag somewhat larger than the one he had handed the procuress but just as well-filled, which clinked as it touched the table. “We simply have no mutual friends, Dandilion. But might this purse not suffice to mitigate the lack?”

“And what do you intend to buy with this meagre purse?” The troubadour pouted. “Mama Lantieri’s entire brothel and all the land surrounding it?”

“Let us say that I intend to support the arts. And an artist. In order to chat with the artist about his work.”

“You love art so much, do you, dear sir? Is it so vital for you to talk to an artist that you press money on him before you’ve even introduced yourself and, in doing so, break the most elementary rules of courtesy?”

“At the beginning of our conversation��� – the stranger’s dark eyes narrowed imperceptibly – “my anonymity did not bother you.”

“And now it is starting to.”

“I am not ashamed of my name,” said the man, a faint smile appearing on his narrow lips. “I am called Rience. You do not know me, Master Dandilion, and that is no surprise. You are too famous and well known to know all of your admirers. Yet everyone who admires your talents feels he knows you, knows you so well that a certain degree of familiarity is permissible. This applies to me, too. I know it is a misconception, so please graciously forgive me.”

“I graciously forgive you.”

“Then I can count on you agreeing to answer a few questions—”

“No! No you cannot,” interrupted the poet, putting on airs. “Now, if you will graciously forgive me, I am not willing to discuss the subjects of my work, its inspiration or its characters, fictitious or otherwise. To do so would deprive poetry of its poetic veneer and lead to triteness.”

“Is that so?”

“It certainly is. For example, if, having sung the ballad about the miller’s merry wife, I were to announce it’s really about Zvirka, Miller Loach’s wife, and I included an announcement that Zvirka can most easily be bedded every Thursday because on Thursdays the miller goes to market, it would no longer be poetry. It would be either rhyming couplets, or foul slander.”

“I understand, I understand,” Rience said quickly. “But perhaps that is a bad example. I am not, after all, interested in anyone’s peccadilloes or sins. You will not slander anyone by answering my questions. All I need is one small piece of information: what really happened to Cirilla, the Queen of Cintra’s granddaughter? Many people claim she was killed during the siege of the town; there are even eye-witnesses to support the claim. From your ballad, however, it would appear that the child survived. I am truly interested to know if this is your imagination at work, or the truth? True or false?”

“I’m extremely pleased you’re so interested.” Dandilion smiled broadly. “You may laugh, Master whatever-your-name-is, but that was precisely what I intended when I composed the ballad. I wished to excite my listeners and arouse their curiosity.”

“True or false?” repeated Rience coldly.

“If I were to give that away I would destroy the impact of my work. Goodbye, my friend. You have used up all the time I can spare you. And two of my many inspirations are waiting out there, wondering which of them I will choose.”

Rience remained silent for a long while, making no move to leave. He stared at the poet with his unfriendly, moist eyes, and the poet felt a growing unease. A merry din came from the bawdy-house’s main room, punctuated from time to time by high-pitched feminine giggles. Dandilion turned his head away, pretending to show derisive haughtiness but, in fact, he was judging the distance to the corner of the room and the tapestry showing a nymph sprinkling her breasts with water poured from a jug.

“Dandilion,” Rience finally spoke, slipping his hand back into the pocket of his sepia-colored tunic, “answer my questions. Please. I have to know the answer. It’s incredibly important to me. To you, too, believe me, because if you answer of your own free will then—”

“Then what?”

A hide-ous grimace crept over Rience’s narrow lips.

“Then I won’t have to force you to speak.”

“Now listen, you scoundrel.” Dandilion stood up and pretended to pull a threatening face. “I loathe violence and force, but I’m going to call Mama Lantieri in a minute and she will call a certain Gruzila who fulfils the honourable and responsible role of bouncer in this establishment. He is a true artist in his field. He’ll kick your arse so hard you’ll soar over the town roofs with such magnificence that the few people passing by at this hour will take you for a Pegasus.”

Rience made an abrupt gesture and something glistened in his hand.

“Are you sure,” he asked, “you’ll have time to call her?”

Dandilion had no intention of checking if he would have time. Nor did he intend to wait. Before the stiletto had locked in Rience’s hand Dandilion had taken a long leap to the corner of the room, dived under the nymph tapestry, kicked open a secret door and rushed headlong down the winding stairs, nimbly steering himself with the aid of the well-worn banisters. Rience darted after him, but the poet was sure of himself – he knew the secret passage like the back of his hand, having used it numerous times to flee creditors, jealous husbands and furious rivals from whom he had, from time to time, stolen rhymes and tunes. He knew that after the third turning he would be able to grope for a revolving door, behind which there was a ladder leading down to the cellar. He was sure that his persecutor would be unable to stop in time, would run on and step on a trapdoor through which he would fall and land in the pigsty. He was equally sure that – bruised, covered in shit and mauled by the pigs – his persecutor would give up the chase.

Dandilion was mistaken, as was usually the case whenever he was too confident. Something flashed a sudden blue behind his back and the poet felt his limbs grow numb, lifeless and stiff. He couldn’t slow down for the revolving door, his legs wouldn’t obey him. He yelled and rolled down the stairs, bumping against the walls of the little corridor. The trapdoor opened beneath him with a dry crack and the troubadour tumbled down into the darkness and stench. Before thumping his head on the dirt floor and losing consciousness, he remembered Mama Lantieri saying something about the pigsty being repaired.

The pain in his constricted wrists and shoulders, cruelly twisted in their joints, brought him back to his senses. He wanted to scream but couldn’t; it felt as though his mouth had been stuck up with clay. He was kneeling on the dirt floor with a creaking rope hauling him up by his wrists. He tried to stand, wanting to ease the pressure on his shoulders, but his legs, too, were tied together. Choking and suffocating he somehow struggled to his feet, helped considerably by the rope which tugged mercilessly at him.

Rience was standing in front of him and his evil eyes glinted in the light of a lantern held aloft by an unshaven ruffian who stood over six feet tall. Another ruffian, probably no shorter, stood behind him. Dandilion could hear his breathing and caught a whiff of stale sweat. It was the reeking man who tugged on the rope looped over a roof beam and fastened to the poet’s wrists.

Dandilion’s feet tore off the dirt floor. The poet whistled through his nose, unable to do anything more.

“Enough,” Rience snapped at last – he spoke almost immediately, yet it had seemed an age to Dandilion. The bard’s feet touched the ground but, despite his most heart-felt desire, he could not kneel again – the tight drawn rope was still holding him as taut as a string.

Rience came closer. There was not even a trace of emotion on his face; the damp eyes had not changed their expression in the least. His tone of voice, too, remained calm, quiet, even a little bored.

“You nasty rhymester. You runt. You scum. You arrogant nobody. You tried to run from me? No one has escaped me yet. We haven’t finished our conversation, you clown, you sheep’s head. I asked you a question under much pleasanter circumstances than these. Now you are going to answer all my questions, and in far less pleasant circumstances. Am I right?”

Dandilion nodded eagerly. Only now did Rience smile and make a sign. The bard squealed helplessly, feeling the rope tighten and his arms, twisted backwards, cracking in their joints.

“You can’t talk,” Rience confirmed, still smiling loathsomely, “and it hurts, doesn’t it? For the moment, you should know I’m having you strung up like this for my own pleasure – just because I love watching people suffer. Go on, just a little higher.”

Dandilion was wheezing so hard he almost choked.

“Enough,” Rience finally ordered, then approached the poet and grabbed him by his shirt ruffles. “Listen to me, you little cock. I’m going to lift the spell so you can talk. But if you try to raise your charming voice any louder than necessary, you’ll be sorry.”

He made a gesture with his hand, touched the poet’s cheek with his ring and Dandilion felt sensation return to his jaw, tongue and palate.

“Now,” Rience continued quietly, “I am going to ask you a few questions and you are going to answer them quickly, fluently and comprehensively. And if you stammer or hesitate even for a moment, if you give me the slightest reason to doubt the truth of your words, then… Look down.”

Dandilion obeyed. He discovered to his horror that a short rope had been tied to the knots around his ankles, with a bucket full of lime attached to the other end.

“If I have you pulled any higher,” Rience smiled cruelly, “and this bucket lifts with you, then you will probably never regain the feeling in your hands. After that, I doubt you will be capable of playing anything on a lute. I really doubt it. So I think you’ll talk to me. Am I right?”

Dandilion didn’t agree because he couldn’t move his head or find his voice out of sheer fright. But Rience did not seem to require confirmation.

“It is to be understood,” he stated, “that I will know immediately if you are telling the truth, if you try to trick me I will realise straight away, and I won’t be fooled by any poetic ploys or vague erudition. This is a trifle for me – just as paralysing you on the stairs was a trifle. So I advise you to weigh each word with care, you piece of scum. So, let’s get on with it and stop wasting time. As you know, I’m interested in the heroine of one of your beautiful ballads, Queen Calanthe of Cintra’s granddaughter, Princess Cirilla, endearingly known as Ciri. According to eye-witnesses this little person died during the siege of the town, two years ago. Whereas in your ballad you so vividly and touchingly described her meeting a strange, almost legendary individual, the… witcher… Geralt, or Gerald. Leaving the poetic drivel about destiny and the decrees of fate aside, from the rest of the ballad it seems the child survived the Battle of Cintra in one piece. Is that true?”

“I don’t know…” moaned Dandilion. “By all the gods, I’m only a poet! I’ve heard this and that, and the rest…”

“Well?”

“The rest I invented. Made it up! I don’t know anything!” The bard howled on seeing Rience give a sign to the reeking man and feeling the rope tighten. “I’m not lying!”

“True.” Rience nodded. “You’re not lying outright, I would have sensed it. But you are beating about the bush. You wouldn’t have thought the ballad up just like that, not without reason. And you do know the witcher, after all. You have often been seen in his company. So talk, Dandilion, if you treasure your joints. Everything you know.”

“This Ciri,” panted the poet, “was destined for the witcher. She’s a so-called Child Surprise… You must have heard it, the story’s well known. Her parents swore to hand her over to the witcher—”

“Her parents are supposed to have handed the child over to that crazed mutant? That murderous mercenary? You’re lying, rhymester. Keep such tales for women.”

“That’s what happened, I swear on my mother’s soul,” sobbed Dandilion. “I have it from a reliable source… The witcher—”

“Talk about the girl. For the moment I’m not interested in the witcher.”

“I don’t know anything about the girl! I only know that the witcher was going to fetch her from Cintra when the war broke out. I met him at the time. He heard about the massacre, about Calanthe’s death, from me… He asked me about the child, the queen’s granddaughter… But I knew everyone in Cintra was killed, not a single soul in the last bastion survived—”

“Go on. Fewer metaphors, more hard facts!”

“When the witcher learned of the massacre and fall of Cintra he forsook his journey. We both escaped north. We parted ways in Hengfors and I haven’t seen him since… But because he talked, on the way, a bit about this… Ciri, or whatever-her-name-is… and about destiny… Well, I made up this ballad. I don’t know any more, I swear!”

Rience scowled at him.

“And where is this witcher now?” he asked. “This hired monster murderer, this poetic butcher who likes to discuss destiny?”

“I told you, the last time I saw him—”

“I know what you said,” Rience interrupted. “I listened carefully to what you said. And now you’re going to listen carefully to me. Answer my questions precisely. The question is: if no one has seen Geralt, or Gerald, the Witcher for over a year, where is he hiding? Where does he usually hide?”

“I don’t know where it is,” the troubadour said quickly. “I’m not lying. I really don’t know—”

“Too quick, Dandilion, too quick.” Rience smiled ominously. “Too eager. You are cunning but not careful enough. You don’t know where it is, you say. But I warrant you know what it is.”

Dandilion clenched his teeth with anger and despair.

“Well?” Rience made a sign to the reeking man. “Where is the witcher hiding? What is the place called?”

The poet remained silent. The rope tightened, twisting his hands painfully, and his feet left the ground. Dandilion let out a howl, brief and broken because Rience’s wizardly ring immediately gagged him.

“Higher, higher.” Rience rested his hands on his hips. “You know, Dandilion, I could use magic to sound out your mind, but it’s exhausting. Besides, I like seeing people’s eyes pop out of their sockets from pain. And you’re going to tell me anyway.”

Dandilion knew he would. The rope secured to his ankles grew taut, the bucket of lime scraped along the ground.

“Sir,” said the first ruffian suddenly, covering the lantern with his cloak and peering through the gap in the pigsty door, “someone’s coming. A lass, I think.”

“You know what to do,” Rience hissed. “Put the lantern out.”

The reeking man released the rope and Dandilion tumbled inertly to the ground, falling in such a way that he could see the man with the lantern standing at the door and the reeking man, a long knife in his hand, lying in wait on the other side. Light broke in from the bawdy-house through gaps in the planks, and the poet heard the singing and hubbub.

The door to the pigsty creaked open revealing a short figure wrapped in a cloak and wearing a round, tightly fitting cap. After a moment’s hesitation, the woman crossed the threshold. The reeking man threw himself at her, slashing forcefully with his knife, and tumbled to his knees as the knife met with no resistance, passing through the figure’s throat as though through a cloud of smoke. Because the figure really was a cloud of smoke – one which was already starting to disperse. But before it completely vanished another figure burst into the pigsty, indistinct, dark and nimble as a weasel. Dandilion saw it throw a cloak at the lantern man, jump over the reeking one, saw something glisten in its hand, and heard the reeking man wheeze and choke savagely. The lantern man disentangled himself from the cloak, jumped, took a swing with his knife. A fiery lightning bolt shot from the dark figure with a hiss, slapped over the tough’s face and chest with a crack and spread over him like flaming oil. The ruffian screamed piercingly and the grim reek of burning meat filled the pigsty.

Then Rience attacked. The spell he cast illuminated the darkness with a bluish flash in which Dandilion saw a slender woman wearing man’s clothes gesticulating strangely with both hands. He only glimpsed her for a second before the blue glow disappeared with a bang and a blinding flash. Rience fell back with a roar of fury and collapsed onto the wooden pigsty walls, breaking them with a crash. The woman dressed in man’s clothing leapt after him, a stiletto flashing in her hand. The pigsty filled with brightness again – this time golden – beaming from a bright oval which suddenly appeared in the air. Dandilion saw Rience spring up from the dusty floor, leap into the oval and immediately disappear. The oval dimmed but, before it went out entirely, the woman ran up to it shouting incomprehensibly, stretching out her hand. Something crackled and rustled and the dying oval boiled with roaring flames for a moment. A muffled sound, as if coming from a great distance, reached Dandilion’s ears – a sound very much like a scream of pain. The oval went out completely and darkness engulfed the pigsty again. The poet felt the power which gagged him disappear.

“Help!” he howled. “Help!”

“Stop yelling, Dandilion,” said the woman, kneeling next to him and slicing through the knots with Rience’s stiletto.

“Yennefer? Is that you?”

“Surely you’re not going to say you don’t remember how I look. And I’m sure my voice is not unfamiliar to your musical ear. Can you get up? They didn’t break any bones, did they?”

Dandilion stood with difficulty, groaned and stretched his aching shoulders.

“What’s with them?” He indicated the bodies lying on the ground.

“We’ll check.” The enchantress snicked the stiletto shut. “One of them should still be alive. I’ve a few questions for him.”

“This one,” the troubadour stood over the reeking man, “probably still lives.”

“I doubt it,” said Yennefer indifferently. “I severed his windpipe and carotid artery. There might still be a little murmur in him but not for long.”

Dandilion shuddered.

“You slashed his throat?”

“If, out of inborn caution, I hadn’t sent an illusion in first, I would be the one lying there now. Let’s look at the other one… Bloody hell. Such a sturdy fellow and he still couldn’t take it. Pity, pity—”

“He’s dead, too?”

“He couldn’t take the shock. Hmm… I fried him a little too hard… See, even his teeth are charred— What’s the matter with you, Dandilion? Are you going to be sick?”

“I am,” the poet replied indistinctly, bending over and leaning his forehead against the pigsty wall.

“That’s everything?” The enchantress put her tumbler down and reached for the skewer of roast chickens. “You haven’t lied about anything? Haven’t forgotten anything?”

“Nothing. Apart from ‘thank you’. Thank you, Yennefer.”

She looked him in the eyes and nodded her head lightly, making her glistening, black curls writhe and cascade down to her shoulders. She slipped the roast chicken onto a trencher and began dividing it skilfully. She used a knife and fork. Dandilion had only known one person, up until then, who could eat a chicken with a knife and fork as skilfully. Now he knew how, and from whom, Geralt had learnt the knack. Well, he thought, no wonder. After all, he did live with her for a year in Vengerberg and before he left her, she had instilled a number of strange things into him. He pulled the other chicken from the skewer and, without a second thought, ripped off a thigh and began eating it, pointedly holding it with both hands.

“How did you know?” he asked. “How did you arrive with help on time?”

“I was beneath Bleobheris during your performance.”

“I didn’t see you.”

“I didn’t want to be seen. Then I followed you into town. I waited here, in the tavern – it wasn’t fitting, after all, for me to follow you in to that haven of dubious delight and certain gonorrhoea. But I eventually became impatient and was wandering around the yard when I thought I heard voices coming from the pigsty. I sharpened my hearing and it turned out it wasn’t, as I’d first thought, some sodomite but you. Hey, innkeeper! More wine, if you please!”

“At your command, honoured lady! Quick as a flash!”

“The same as before, please, but this time without the water. I can only tolerate water in a bath, in wine I find it quite loathsome.”

“At your service, at your service!”

Yennefer pushed her plate aside. There was still enough meat on the chicken, Dandilion noticed, to feed the innkeeper and his family for breakfast. A knife and fork were certainly elegant and refined, but they weren’t very effective.

“Thank you,” he repeated, “for rescuing me. That cursed Rience wouldn’t have spared my life. He’d have squeezed everything from me and then butchered me like a sheep.”

“Yes, I think he would.” She poured herself and the bard some wine then raised her tumbler. “So let’s drink to your rescue and health, Dandilion.”

“And to yours, Yennefer,” he toasted her in return. “To health for which – as of today – I shall pray whenever the occasion arises. I’m indebted to you, beautiful lady, and I shall repay the debt in my songs. I shall explode the myth which claims wizards are insensitive to the pain of others, that they are rarely eager to help poor, unfortunate, unfamiliar mortals.”

“What to do.” She smiled, half-shutting her beautiful violet eyes. “The myth has some justification; it did not spring from nowhere. But you’re not a stranger, Dandilion. I know you and like you.”

“Really?” The poet smiled too. “You have been good at concealing it up until now. I’ve even heard the rumour that you can’t stand me, I quote, any more than the plague.”

“It was the case once.” The enchantress suddenly grew serious. “Later my opinion changed. Later, I was grateful to you.”

“What for, if I may ask?”

“Never mind,” she said, toying with the empty tumbler. “Let us get back to more important questions. Those you were asked in the pigsty while your arms were being twisted out of their sockets. What really happened, Dandilion? Have you really not seen Geralt since you fled the banks of the Yaruga? Did you really not know he returned south after the war? That he was seriously wounded – so seriously there were even rumours of his death? Didn’t you know anything?”

“No. I didn’t. I stayed in Pont Vanis for a long time, in Esterad Thyssen’s court. And then at Niedamir’s in Hengfors—”

“You didn’t know.” The enchantress nodded and unfastened her tunic. A black velvet ribbon wound around her neck, an obsidian star set with diamonds hanging from it. “You didn’t know that when his wounds healed Geralt went to Transriver? You can’t guess who he was looking for?”

“That I can. But I don’t know if he found her.”

“You don’t know,” she repeated. “You, who usually know everything, and then sing about everything. Even such intimate matters as someone else’s feelings. I listened to your ballads beneath Bleobheris, Dandilion. You dedicated a good few verses to me.”

“Poetry,” he muttered, staring at the chicken, “has its rights. No one should be offended—”

“‘Hair like a raven’s wing, as a storm in the night…’” quoted Yennefer with exaggerated emphasis, “ ‘…and in the violet eyes sleep lightning bolts…’ Isn’t that how it went?”

“That’s how I remembered you.” The poet smiled faintly. “May the first who wishes to claim the description is untrue throw the first stone.”

“Only I don’t know,” the Enchantress pinched her lips together, “who gave you permission to describe my internal organs. How did it go? ‘Her heart, as though a jewel, adorned her neck. Hard as if of diamond made, and as a diamond so unfeeling, sharper than obsidian, cutting—’ Did you make that up yourself? Or perhaps…?”

Her lips quivered, twisted.

“…or perhaps you listened to someone’s confidences and grievances?”

“Hmm…” Dandilion cleared his throat and veered away from the dangerous subject. “Tell me, Yennefer, when did you last see Geralt?”

“A long time ago.”

“After the war?”

“After the war…” Yennefer’s voice changed a little. “No, I never saw him after the war. For a long time… I didn’t see anybody. Well, back to the point, Poet. I am a little surprised to discover that you do not know anything, you have not heard anything and that, in spite of this, someone searching for information picked you out to stretch over a beam. Doesn’t that worry you?”

“It does.”

“Listen to me,” she said sharply, banging her tumbler against the table. “Listen carefully. Strike that ballad from your repertoire. Do not sing it again.”

“Are you talking about—”

“You know perfectly well what I’m talking about. Sing about the war against Nilfgaard. Sing about Geralt and me, you’ll neither harm nor help anyone in the process, you’ll make nothing any better or worse. But do not sing about the Lion Cub of Cintra.”

She glanced around to check if any of the few customers at this hour were eavesdropping, and waited until the lass clearing up had returned to the kitchen.

“And do try to avoid one-to-one meetings with people you don’t know,” she said quietly. “People who ‘forget’ to introduce themselves by conveying greetings from a mutual acquaintance. Understand?”

He looked at her surprised. Yennefer smiled.

“Greetings from Dijkstra, Dandilion.”

Now the bard glanced around timidly. His astonishment must have been evident and his expression amusing because the sorceress allowed herself a quite derisive grimace.

“While we are on the subject,” she whispered, leaning across the table, “Dijkstra is asking for a report. You’re on your way back from Verden and he’s interested in hearing what’s being said at King Ervyll’s court. He asked me to convey that this time your report should be to the point, detailed and under no circumstances in verse. Prose, Dandilion. Prose.”

The poet swallowed and nodded. He remained silent, pondering the question.

But the enchantress anticipated him. “Difficult times are approaching,” she said quietly. “Difficult and dangerous. A time of change is coming. It would be a shame to grow old with the uncomfortable conviction that one had done nothing to ensure that these changes are for the better. Don’t you agree?”

He agreed with a nod and cleared his throat. “Yennefer?”

“I’m listening, Poet.”

“Those men in the pigsty… I would like to know who they were, what they wanted, who sent them. You killed them both, but rumour has it that you can draw information even from the dead.”

“And doesn’t rumour also have it that necromancy is forbidden, by edict of the Chapter? Let it go, Dandilion. Those thugs probably didn’t know much anyway. The one who escaped… Hmm… He’s another matter.”

“Rience. He was a wizard, wasn’t he?”

“Yes. But not a very proficient one.”

“Yet he managed to escape from you. I saw how he did it – he teleported, didn’t he? Doesn’t that prove anything?”

“Indeed it does. That someone helped him. Rience had neither the time nor the strength to open an oval portal suspended in the air. A portal like that is no joke. It’s clear that someone else opened it. Someone far more powerful. That’s why I was afraid to chase him, not knowing where I would land. But I sent some pretty hot stuff after him. He’s going to need a lot of spells and some effective burn elixirs, and will remain marked for some time.”

“Maybe you will be interested to hear that he was a Nilfgaardian.”

“You think so?” Yennefer sat up and with a swift movement pulled the stiletto from her pocket and turned it in her palm. “A lot of people carry Nilfgaardian knives now. They’re comfortable and handy – they can even be hidden in a cleavage—”

“It’s not the knife. When he was questioning me he used the term ‘battle for Cintra’, ‘conquest of the town’ or something along those lines. I’ve never heard anyone describe those events like that. For us, it has always been a massacre. The Massacre of Cintra. No one refers to it by any other name.”

The magician raised her hand, scrutinised her nails. “Clever, Dandilion. You have a sensitive ear.”

“It’s a professional hazard.”

“I wonder which profession you have in mind?” She smiled coquettishly. “But thank you for the information. It was valuable.”

“Let it be,” he replied with a smile, “my contribution to making changes for the better. Tell me, Yennefer, why is Nilfgaard so interested in Geralt and the girl from Cintra?”

“Don’t stick your nose into that business.” She suddenly turned serious. “I said you were to forget you ever heard of Calanthe’s granddaughter.”

“Indeed, you did. But I’m not searching for a subject for a ballad.”

“What the hell are you searching for then? Trouble?”

“Let’s take it,” he said quietly, resting his chin on his clasped hands and looking the enchantress in the eye. “Let’s take it that Geralt did, in fact, find and rescue the child. Let’s take it that he finally came to believe in the power of destiny, and took the child with him. Where to? Rience tried to force it out of me with torture. But you know, Yennefer. You know where the witcher is hiding.”

“I do.”

“And you know how to get there.”

“I know that too.”

“Don’t you think he should be warned? Warned that the likes of Rience are looking for him and the little girl? I would go, but I honestly don’t know where it is… That place whose name I prefer not to say…”

“Get to the point, Dandilion.”

“If you know where Geralt is, you ought to go and warn him. You owe him that, Yennefer. There was, after all, something between you.”

“Yes,” she acknowledged coldly. “There was something between us. That’s why I know him a bit. He does not like having help imposed on him. And if he was in need of it he would seek it from those he could trust. A year has gone by since those events and I… I’ve not had any news from him. And as for our debt, I owe him exactly as much as he owes me. No more and no less.”

“So I’ll go then.” He raised his head high. “Tell me—”

“I won’t,” she interrupted. “Your cover’s blown, Dandilion. They might come after you again; the less you know the better. Vanish from here. Go to Redania, to Dijkstra and Philippa Eilhart, stick to Vizimir’s court. And I warn you once more: forget the Lion Cub of Cintra. Forget about Ciri. Pretend you have never heard the name. Do as I ask. I wouldn’t like anything bad to happen to you. I like you too much, owe you too much—”

“You’ve said that already. What do you owe me, Yennefer?”

The sorceress turned her head away, did not say anything for a while.

“You travelled with him,” she said finally. “Thanks to you he was not alone. You were a friend to him. You were with him.”

The bard lowered his eyes.

“He didn’t get much from it,” he muttered. “He didn’t get much from our friendship. He had little but trouble because of me. He constantly had to get me out of some scrape… help me…”

She leaned across the table, put her hand on his and squeezed it hard without saying anything. Her eyes held regret.

“Go to Redania,” she repeated after a moment. “To Tretogor. Stay in Dijkstra’s and Philippa’s care. Don’t play at being a hero. You have got yourself mixed up in a dangerous affair, Dandilion.”

“I’ve noticed.” He grimaced and rubbed his aching shoulder. “And that is precisely why I believe Geralt should be warned. You are the only one who knows where to look for him. You know the way. I guess you used to be… a guest there…?”

Yennefer turned away. Dandilion saw her lips pinch, the muscles in her cheek quiver.

“Yes, in the past,” she said and there was something elusive and strange in her voice. “I used to be a guest there, sometimes. But never uninvited.”

The wind howled savagely, rippling through the grasses growing over the ruins, rustling in the hawthorn bushes and tall nettles. Clouds sped across the sphere of the moon, momentarily illuminating the great castle, drenching the moat and few remaining walls in a pale glow undulating with shadows, and revealing mounds of skulls baring their broken teeth and staring into nothingness through the black holes of their eye-sockets. Ciri squealed sharply and hid her face in the witcher’s cloak.

The mare, prodded on by the witcher’s heels, carefully stepped over a pile of bricks and passed through the broken arcade. Her horseshoes, ringing against the flagstones, awoke weird echoes between the walls, muffled by the howling gale. Ciri trembled, digging her hands into the horse’s mane.

“I’m frightened,” she whispered.

“There’s nothing to be frightened of,” replied the witcher, laying his hand on her shoulder. “It’s hard to find a safer place in the whole world. This is Kaer Morhen, the Witchers’ Keep. There used to be a beautiful castle here. A long time ago.”

She did not reply, bowing her head low. The witcher’s mare, called Roach, snorted quietly, as if she too wanted to reassure the girl.

They immersed themselves in a dark abyss, in a long, unending black tunnel dotted with columns and arcades. Roach stepped confidently and willingly, ignoring the impenetrable darkness, and her horseshoes rang brightly against the floor.

In front of them, at the end of the tunnel, a straight, vertical line suddenly flared with a red light. Growing taller and wider it became a door beyond which was a faint glow, the flickering brightness of torches stuck in iron mounts on the walls. A black figure stood framed in the door, blurred by the brightness.

“Who comes?” Ciri heard a menacing, metallic voice which sounded like a dog’s bark. “Geralt?”

“Yes, Eskel. It’s me.”

“Come in.”

The witcher dismounted, took Ciri from the saddle, stood her on the ground and pressed a bundle into her little hands which she grabbed tightly, only regretting that it was too small for her to hide behind completely.

“Wait here with Eskel,” he said. “I’ll take Roach to the stables.”

“Come into the light, laddie,” growled the man called Eskel. “Don’t lurk in the dark.”

Ciri looked up into his face and barely restrained her frightened scream. He wasn’t human. Although he stood on two legs, although he smelled of sweat and smoke, although he wore ordinary human clothes, he was not human. No human can have a face like that, she thought.

“Well, what are you waiting for?” repeated Eskel.

She didn’t move. In the darkness she heard the clatter of Roach’s horseshoes grow fainter. Something soft and squeaking ran over her foot. She jumped.

“Don’t loiter in the dark, or the rats will eat your boots.”

Still clinging to her bundle Ciri moved briskly towards the light. The rats bolted out from beneath her feet with a squeak. Eskel leaned over, took the package from her and pulled back her hood.

“A plague on it,” he muttered. “A girl. That’s all we need.”

She glanced at him, frightened. Eskel was smiling. She saw that he was human after all, that he had an entirely human face, deformed by a long, ugly, semi-circular scar running from the corner of his mouth across the length of his cheek up to the ear.

“Since you’re here, welcome to Kaer Morhen,” he said. “What do they call you?”

“Ciri,” Geralt replied for her, silently emerging from the darkness. Eskel turned around. Suddenly, quickly, wordlessly, the witchers fell into each other’s arms and wound their shoulders around each other tight and hard. For one brief moment.

“Wolf, you’re alive.”

“I am.”

“All right.” Eskel took a torch from its bracket. “Come on. I’m closing the inner gates to stop the heat escaping.”

They walked along the corridor. There were rats here, too; they flitted under the walls, squeaked from the dark abyss, from the branching passages, and skittered before the swaying circle of light thrown by the torch. Ciri walked quickly, trying to keep up with the men.

“Who’s wintering here, Eskel? Apart from Vesemir?”

“Lambert and Coën.”

They descended a steep and slippery flight of stairs. A gleam was visible below them. Ciri heard voices, detected the smell of smoke.

The hall was enormous, and flooded with light from a huge hearth roaring with flames which were being sucked up into the heart of the chimney. The centre of the hall was taken up by an enormous, heavy table. At least ten people could sit around that table. There were three. Three humans. Three witchers, Ciri corrected herself. She saw nothing but their silhouettes against the fire in the hearth.

“Greetings, Wolf. We’ve been waiting for you.”

“Greetings, Vesemir. Greetings, lads. It’s good to be home again.”

“Who have you brought us?”

Geralt was silent for a moment, then put his hand on Ciri’s shoulder and lightly pushed her forward. She walked awkwardly, hesitantly, huddled up and hunched, her head lowered. I’m frightened, she thought. I’m very frightened. When Geralt found me, when he took me with him, I thought the fear wouldn’t come back. I thought it had passed… And now, instead of being at home, I’m in this terrible, dark, ruined old castle full of rats and dreadful echoes… I’m standing in front of a red wall of fire again. I see sinister black figures, I see dreadful, menacing, glistening eyes staring at me—

“Who is this child, Wolf? Who is this girl?”

“She’s my…” Geralt suddenly stammered. She felt his strong, hard hands on her shoulders. And suddenly the fear disappeared, vanished without a trace. The roaring red fire gave out warmth. Only warmth. The black silhouettes were the silhouettes of friends. Carers. Their glistening eyes expressed curiosity. Concern. And unease…

Geralt’s hands clenched over her shoulders.

“She’s our destiny.”

Verily, there is nothing so hide-ous as the monsters, so contrary to nature, known as witchers for they are the offspring of foul sorcery and devilry. They are rogues without virtue, conscience or scruple, true diabolic creations, fit only for killing. There is no place amidst honest men for such as they.

And Kaer Morhen, where these infamous beings nestle, where they perform their foul practices, must be wiped from the surface of this earth, and all trace of it strewn with salt and saltpetre.

Anonymous, Monstrum, or Description of the Witcher

Intolerance and superstition has always been the domain of the more stupid amongst the common folk and, I conjecture, will never be uprooted, for they are as eternal as stupidity itself. There, where mountains tower today, one day there will be seas; there where today seas surge, will one day be deserts. But stupidity will remain stupidity.

Nicodemus de Boot, Meditations on life, Happiness and Prosperity

CHAPTER TWO

Triss Merigold blew into her frozen hands, wriggled her fingers and murmured a magic formula. Her horse, a gelding, immediately reacted to the spell, snorting and turning its head, looking at the enchantress with eyes made watery by the cold and wind.

“You’ve got two options, old thing,” said Triss, pulling on her gloves. “Either you get used to magic or I sell you to some peasants to pull a plough.”

The gelding pricked up its ears, snorted vapour through its nostrils and obediently started down the wooded mountainside. The magician leaned over in the saddle, avoiding being lashed by the frosty branches.

The magic worked quickly; she stopped feeling the sting of cold in her elbows and on her neck, and the unpleasant sensation of cold which had made her hunch her shoulders and draw her head in disappeared. The spell, warming her, also muffled the hunger which had been eating at her for several hours. Triss cheered up, made herself comfortable in the saddle and, with greater attention than before, started to take stock of her surroundings.

Ever since she had left the beaten track, she had been guided by the greyish-white wall of mountains and their snow-capped summits which glistened gold in those rare moments when the sun pierced the clouds – usually in the morning or just before sunset. Now that she was closer to the mountain chain she had to take greater care. The land around Kaer Morhen was famous for its wildness and inaccessibility, and the gap in the granite wall that was a vital landmark was not easy for an inexperienced eye to find. It was enough to turn down one of the numerous gullies and gorges to lose sight of it. And even she who knew the land, knew the way and knew where to look for the pass, could not allow herself to lose her concentration for an instant.

The forest came to an end. A wide valley opened before the enchantress, strewn with boulders which ran across the valley to the sheer mountain-slope on the other side. The Gwenllech, the River of White Stones, flowed down the heart of the valley, foam seething between the boulders and logs washed along by the current. Here, in its upper reaches, the Gwenllech was no more than a wide but shallow stream. Up here it could be crossed without any difficulty. Lower down, in Kaedwen, in its middle reaches, the river was an insurmountable obstacle, rushing and breaking against the beds of its deep chasms.

The gelding, driven into the water, hastened its step, clearly wanting to reach the opposite bank as quickly as possible. Triss held it back lightly – the stream was shallow, reaching just above the horse’s fetlocks, but the pebbles covering the bed were slippery and the current was sharp and quick. The water churned and foamed around her mount’s legs.

The magician looked up at the sky. The growing cold and increasing wind here, in the mountains, could herald a blizzard and she did not find the prospect of spending yet another night in a grotto or rocky nook too attractive. She could, if she had to, continue her journey even through a blizzard; she could locate the path using telepathy, she could – using magic – make herself insensitive to the cold. She could, if she had to. But she preferred not to have to.

Luckily, Kaer Morhen was already close. Triss urged the gelding on to flat scree, over an enormous heap of stones washed down by glaciers and streams, and rode into a narrow pass between rocky outcrops. The gorge walls rose vertically and seemed to meet high above her, only divided by a narrow line of sky. It grew warmer, the wind howling above the rocks could no longer reach to lash and sting at her.

The pass broadened, leading through a ravine and then into the valley, opening onto a huge depression, covered by forest, which stretched out amidst jagged boulders. The magician ignored the gentle, accessible depression rim and rode down towards the forest, into the thick backwoods. Dry branches cracked under the gelding’s hooves. Forced to step over fallen tree trunks, the horse snorted, danced and stamped. Triss pulled at the reins, tugged at her mount’s shaggy ear and scolded it harshly with spiteful allusions to its lameness. The steed, looking for all the world as though it were ashamed of itself, walked with a more even and sprightly gait and picked its way through the thicket.

Before long they emerged onto clearer land, riding along the trough of a stream which barely trickled along the ravine bed. The magician looked around carefully, finally finding what she was looking for. Over the gully, supported horizontally by enormous boulders, lay a mighty tree trunk, dark, bare and turning green with moss. Triss rode closer, wanting to make sure this was, indeed, the Trail and not a tree accidentally felled in a gale. But she spied a narrow, indistinct pathway disappearing into the woods. She could not be mistaken – this was definitely the Trail, a path encircling the old castle of Kaer Morhen and beset with obstacles, where witchers trained to improve their running speeds and controlled breathing. The path was known as the Trail, but Triss knew young witchers had given it their own name: The Killer.

She clung to the horse’s neck and slowly rode under the trunk. At that moment, she heard stones grating. And the fast, light footsteps of someone running.

She turned in her saddle, pulled on the reins and waited for the witcher to run out onto the log.

A witcher did run out onto the log, flitted along it like an arrow without slowing down, without even using his arms to aid his balance – running nimbly, fluently, with incredible grace. He flashed by, approaching and disappearing amongst the trees without disturbing a single branch. Triss sighed loudly, shaking her head in disbelief.

Because the witcher, judging by his height and build, was only about twelve.

The magician eased the reins, nudged the horse with her heels and trotted upstream. She knew the Trail cut across the ravine once more, at a spot known as the Gullet. She wanted to catch a glimpse of the little witcher once again – children had not been trained in Kaer Morhen for near to a quarter of a century.

She was not in a great hurry. The narrow Killer path meandered and looped its way through the forest and, in order to master it, the little witcher would take far longer than she would, following the shortcut. However, she could not loiter either. Beyond the Gullet, the Trail turned into the woods and led straight to the fortress. If she did not catch the boy at the precipice, she might not see him at all. She had already visited Kaer Morhen a few times, and knew she saw only what the witchers wanted her to see. Triss was not so naïve as to be unaware that they wanted to show her only a tiny fraction of the things to be seen in Kaer Morhen.

After a few minutes riding along the stony trough of the stream she caught sight of the Gullet – a leap over the gully created by two huge mossy rocks, overgrown with gnarled, stunted trees. She released the reins. The horse snorted and lowered its head towards the water trickling between pebbles.

She did not have to wait long. The witcher’s silhouette appeared on the rock and the boy jumped, not slowing his pace. The magician heard the soft smack of his landing and a moment later a rattle of stones, the dull thud of a fall and a quiet cry. Or rather, a squeal.

Triss instantly leaped from her saddle, threw the fur off her shoulders and dashed across the mountainside, pulling herself up using tree branches and roots. Momentum aided her climb until she slipped on the conifer needles and fell to her knees next to a figure huddled on the stones. The youngster, on seeing her, jumped up like a spring, backed away in a flash and nimbly grabbed the sword slung across his back – then tripped and collapsed between the junipers and pines. The magician did not rise from her knees; she stared at the boy and opened her mouth in surprise.

Because it was not a boy.

From beneath an ash-blonde fringe, poorly and unevenly cut, enormous emerald eyes – the predominant features in a small face with a narrow chin and upturned nose – stared out at her. There was fear in the eyes.

“Don’t be afraid,” Triss said tentatively.

The girl opened her eyes even wider. She was hardly out of breath and did not appear to be sweating. It was clear she had already run the Killer more than once.

“Nothing’s happened to you?”

The girl did not reply; instead she sprang up, hissed with pain, shifted her weight to her left leg, bent over and rubbed her knee. She was dressed in a sort of leather suit sewn together – or rather stuck together – in a way which would make any tailor who took pride in his craft howl in horror and despair. The only pieces of her equipment which seemed to be relatively new, and fitted her, were her knee-high boots, her belts and her sword. More precisely, her little sword.

“Don’t be afraid,” repeated Triss, still not rising from her knees. “I heard your fall and was scared, that’s why I rushed here—”

“I slipped,” murmured the girl.

“Have you hurt yourself?”

“No. You?”

The enchantress laughed, tried to get up, winced and swore at the pain in her ankle. She sat down and carefully straightened her foot, swearing once more.

“Come here, little one, help me get up.”

“I’m not little.”

“If you say so. In that case, what are you?”

“A witcher!”

“Ha! So, come here and help me get up, witcher.”

The girl did not move from the spot. She shifted her weight from foot to foot, and her hands, in their fingerless, woollen gloves, toyed with her sword belt as she glanced suspiciously at Triss.

“Have no fear,” said the enchantress with a smile. “I’m not a bandit or outsider. I’m called Triss Merigold and I’m going to Kaer Morhen. The witchers know me. Don’t gape at me. I respect your suspicion, but be reasonable. Would I have got this far if I hadn’t known the way? Have you ever met a human on the Trail?”

The girl overcame her hesitation, approached and stretched out her hand. Triss stood with only a little assistance. Because she was not concerned with having help. She wanted a closer look at the girl. And to touch her.

The green eyes of the little witcher-girl betrayed no signs of mutation, and the touch of her little hand did not produce the slight, pleasant tingling sensation so characteristic of witchers. Although she ran the Killer path with a sword slung across her back, the ashen-haired girl had not been subjected to the Trial of Grasses or to Changes. Of that, Triss was certain.

“Show me your knee, little one.”

“I’m not little.”

“Sorry. But surely you have a name?”

“I do. I’m… Ciri.”

“It’s a pleasure. A bit closer if you please, Ciri.”

“It’s nothing.”

“I want to see what ‘nothing’ looks like. Ah, that’s what I thought. ‘Nothing’ looks remarkably like torn trousers and skin grazed down to raw flesh. Stand still and don’t be scared.”

“I’m not scared… Awww!”

The magician laughed and rubbed her palm, itching from casting the spell, against her hip. The girl bent over and gazed at her knee.

“Oooh,” she said. “It doesn’t hurt any more! And there’s no hole… Was that magic?”

“You’ve guessed it.”

“Are you a witch?”

“Guessed again. Although I prefer to be called an enchantress. To avoid getting it wrong you can call me by my name, Triss. Just Triss. Come on, Ciri. My horse is waiting at the bottom. We’ll go to Kaer Morhen together.”

“I ought to run.” Ciri shook her head. “It’s not good to stop running because you get milk in your muscles. Geralt says—”

“Geralt is at the keep?”

Ciri frowned, pinched her lips together and shot a glance at the enchantress from beneath her ashen fringe. Triss chuckled again.

“All right,” she said. “I won’t ask. A secret’s a secret, and you’re right not to disclose it to someone you hardly know. Come on. When we get there we’ll see who’s at the castle and who isn’t. And don’t worry about your muscles – I know what to do about lactic acid. Ah, here’s my mount. I’ll help you…”

She stretched out her hand, but Ciri didn’t need any help. She jumped agilely into the saddle, lightly, almost without taking off. The gelding started, surprised, and stamped, but the girl quickly took up the reins and reassured it.

“You know how to handle a horse, I see.”

“I can handle anything.”

“Move up towards the pommel.” Triss slipped her foot into the stirrup and caught hold of the mane. “Make a bit of room for me. And don’t poke my eye out with that sword.”

The gelding, spurred on by her heels, moved off along the stream bed at a walking pace. They rode across another gully and climbed the rounded mountainside. From there they could see the ruins of Kaer Morhen huddled against the stone precipices – the partially demolished trapezium of the defensive wall, the remains of the barbican and gate, the thick, blunt column of the donjon.

The gelding snorted and jerked its head, crossing what remained of the bridge over the moat. Triss tugged at the reins. The decaying skulls and skeletons strewn across the river bed made no impression on her. She had seen them before.

“I don’t like this,” the girl suddenly remarked. “It’s not as it should be. The dead should to be buried in the ground. Under a barrow. Shouldn’t they?”

“They should,” the magician agreed calmly. “I think so, too. But the witchers treat this graveyard as a… reminder.”

“Reminder of what?”

“Kaer Morhen,” Triss said as she guided the horse towards the shattered arcades, “was assaulted. There was a bloody battle here in which almost all the witchers died. Only those who weren’t in the keep at the time survived.”

“Who attacked them? And why?”

“I don’t know,” she lied. “It was a terribly long time ago, Ciri. Ask the witchers about it.”

“I have,” grunted the girl. “But they didn’t want to tell me.”

I can understand that, thought the magician. A child trained to be a witcher, a girl, at that, who has not undergone the mutations, should not be told such things. A child like that should not hear about the massacre. A child like that should not be terrified by the prospect that they too may one day hear words describing it like those which were screamed by the fanatics who marched on Kaer Morhen long ago. Mutant. Monster. Freak. Damned by the gods, a creature contrary to nature. No, I do not blame the witchers for not telling you about it, little Ciri. And I shan’t tell you either. I have even more reason to be silent. Because I am a wizard, and without the aid of wizards those fanatics would never have conquered the castle. And that hide-ous lampoon, that widely distributed Monstrum which stirred the fanatics up and drove them to such wickedness was also, apparently, some wizard’s anonymous work. But I, little Ciri, do not recognise collective responsibility, I do not feel the need to expiate the events which took place half a century before my birth. And the skeletons which are meant to serve as an eternal reminder will ultimately rot away completely, disintegrate into dust and be forgotten, will disappear with the wind which constantly whips the mountainside…

“They don’t want to lie like that,” said Ciri suddenly. “They don’t want to be a symbol, a bad conscience or a warning. But neither do they want their dust to be swept away by the wind.”

Triss raised her head, hearing a change in the girl’s voice. Immediately she sensed a magical aura, a pulsating and a rush of blood in her temples. She grew tense but did not utter a word, afraid of breaking into or disrupting what was happening.

“An ordinary barrow.” Ciri’s voice was becoming more and more unnatural, metallic, cold and menacing. “A mound of earth which will be overgrown with nettles. Death has cold blue eyes, and the height of the obelisk does not matter, nor does the writing engraved on it matter. Who can know that better than you, Triss Merigold, the Fourteenth One of the Hill?”

The enchantress froze. She saw the girl’s hands clench the horse’s mane.

“You died on the Hill, Triss Merigold.” The strange, evil voice spoke again. “Why have you come here? Go back, go back at once and take this child, the Child of Elder Blood, with you. Return her to those to whom she belongs. Do this, Fourteenth One. Because if you do not you will die once more. The day will come when the Hill will claim you. The mass grave, and the obelisk on which your name is engraved, will claim you.”

The gelding neighed loudly, tossing its head. Ciri jerked suddenly, shuddered.

“What happened?” asked Triss, trying to control her voice.

Ciri coughed, passed both hands through her hair and rubbed her face.

“Nn… nothing…” she muttered hesitantly. “I’m tired, that’s why… That’s why I fell asleep. I ought to run…”

The magical aura disappeared. Triss experienced a sudden cold wave sweeping through her entire body. She tried to convince herself it was the effect of the defensive spell dying away, but she knew that wasn’t true. She glanced up at the stone blocks of the castle, the black, empty eye-sockets of its ruined loop-holes gaping at her. A shudder ran through her.

The horse’s shoes rang against the slabs in the courtyard. The magician quickly leaped from the saddle and held out her hand to Ciri. Taking advantage of the touch of their hands she carefully emitted a magical impulse. And was astounded. Because she didn’t feel anything. No reaction, no reply. And no resistance. In the girl who had, just a moment ago, manifested an exceptionally strong aura there was not a trace of magic. She was now an ordinary, badly dressed child whose hair had been incompetently cut.

But a moment ago, this child had been no ordinary child.

Triss did not have time to ponder the strange event. The grate of an iron-clad door reached her, coming from the dark void of the corridor which gaped behind the battered portal. She slipped the fur cape from her shoulders, removed her fox-fur hat and, with a swift movement of the head, tousled her hair – long, full locks the color of fresh chestnuts, with a sheen of gold, her pride and identifying characteristic.

Ciri sighed with admiration. Triss smiled, pleased by the effect she’d had. Beautiful, long, loose hair was a rarity, an indication of a woman’s position, her status, the sign of a free woman, a woman who belonged to herself. The sign of an unusual woman – because “normal” maidens wore their hair in plaits, “normal” married women hid theirs beneath a caul or a coif. Women of high birth, including queens, curled their hair and styled it. Warriors cut it short. Only druids and magicians – and whores – wore their hair naturally so as to emphasise their independence and freedom.

The witchers appeared unexpectedly and silently, as usual, and, also as usual, from nowhere. They stood before her, tall, slim, their arms crossed, the weight of their bodies on their left legs – a position from which, she knew, they could attack in a split second. Ciri stood next to them, in an identical position. In her ludicrous clothes, she looked very funny.

“Welcome to Kaer Morhern, Triss.”

“Greetings, Geralt.”

He had changed. He gave the impression of having aged. Triss knew that, biologically, this was impossible – witchers aged, certainly, but too slowly for an ordinary mortal, or a magician as young as her, to notice the changes. But one glance was enough for her to realise that although mutation could hold back the physical process of ageing, it did not alter the mental. Geralt’s face, slashed by wrinkles, was the best evidence of this. With a sense of deep sorrow Triss tore her gaze away from the white-haired witcher’s eyes. Eyes which had evidently seen too much. What’s more, she saw nothing of what she had expected in those eyes.

“Welcome,” he repeated. “We are glad you’ve come.”

Eskel stood next to Geralt, resembling the Wolf like a brother apart from the color of his hair and the long scar which disfigured his cheek. And the youngest of the Kaer Morhen witchers, Lambert, was there with his usual ugly, mocking expression. Vesemir was not there.

“Welcome and come in,” said Eskel. “It is as cold and blustery as if someone has hung themselves. Ciri, where are you off to? The invitation does not apply to you. The sun is still high, even if it is obscured. You can still train.”

“Hey.” The Enchantress tossed her hair. “Politeness comes cheap in Witchers’ Keep now, I see. Ciri was the first to greet me, and brought me to the castle. She ought to keep me company—”

“She is undergoing training here, Merigold.” Lambert grimaced in a parody of a smile. He always called her that: “Merigold,” without giving her a title or a name. Triss hated it. “She is a student, not a major domo. Welcoming guests, even such pleasant ones as yourself, is not one of her duties. We’re off, Ciri.”

Triss gave a little shrug, pretending not to see Geralt and Eskel’s embarrassed expressions. She did not say anything, not wanting to embarrass them further. And, above all, she did not want them to see how very intrigued and fascinated she was by the girl.

“I’ll take your horse,” offered Geralt, reaching for the reins. Triss surreptitiously shifted her hand and their palms joined. So did their eyes.

“I’ll come with you,” she said naturally. “There are a few little things in the saddle-bags which I’ll need.”

“You gave me a very disagreeable experience not so long ago,” he muttered as soon as they had entered the stable. “I studied your impressive tombstone with my own eyes. The obelisk in memory of your heroic death at the battle of Sodden. The news that it was a mistake only reached me recently. I can’t understand how anyone could mistake anyone else for you, Triss.”

“It’s a long story,” she answered. “I’ll tell you some time. And please forgive me for the disagreeable moment.”

“There’s nothing to forgive. I’ve not had many reasons to be happy of late and the feelings I experienced on hearing that you lived cannot compare to any other. Except perhaps what I feel now when I look at you.”

Triss felt something explode inside her. Her fear of meeting the white-haired witcher, which had accompanied her throughout her journey, had struggled within her with her hope of having such a meeting. Followed by the sight of that tired, jaded face, those sick eyes which saw everything, cold and calculating, which were unnaturally calm but yet so infused with emotion…

She threw her arms around his neck, instantly, without thinking. She caught hold of his hand, abruptly placed it on the nape of her neck, under her hair. A tingling ran down her back, penetrated her with such rapture she almost cried out. In order to muffle and restrain the cry her lips found his lips and stuck to them. She trembled, pressing hard against him, her excitement building and increasing, forgetting herself more and more.

Geralt did not forget himself.

“Triss… Please.”

“Oh, Geralt… So much…”

“Triss.” He moved her away delicately. “We’re not alone… They’re coming.”

She glanced at the entrance and saw the shadows of the approaching witchers only after some time, heard their steps even later. Oh well, her hearing, which she considered very sensitive, could not compete with that of a witcher.

“Triss, my child!”

“Vesemir!”

Vesemir was really very old. Who knows, he could be even older than Kaer Morhen. But he walked towards her with a brisk, energetic and sprightly step; his grip was vigorous and his hands strong.

“I am happy to see you again, Grandfather.”

“Give me a kiss. No, not on the hand, little sorceress. You can kiss my hand when I’m resting on my bier. Which will, no doubt, be soon. Oh, Triss, it is a good thing you have come… Who can cure me if not you?”

“Cure, you? Of what? Of behaving like a child, surely! Take your hand from my backside, old man, or I’ll set fire to that grey beard of yours!”

“Forgive me. I keep forgetting you are grown up, and I can no longer put you on my knee and pat you. As to my health… Oh, Triss, old age is no joke. My bones ache so I want to howl. Will you help an old man, child?”

“I will.” The enchantress freed herself from his bearlike embrace and cast her eye over the witcher accompanying Vesemir. He was young, apparently the same age as Lambert, and wore a short, black beard which did not hide the severe disfigurement left behind by smallpox. This was unusual; witchers were generally highly immune to infectious diseases.

“Triss Merigold, Coën.” Geralt introduced them to each other. “This is Coën’s first winter with us. He comes from the north, from Poviss.”

The young witcher bowed. He had unusually pale, yellow-green irises and the whites of his eyes, riddled with red threads, indicated difficult and troublesome processes during his mutation.

“Let us go, child,” uttered Vesemir, taking her by the arm. “A stable is no place to welcome a guest, but I couldn’t wait to see you.”

In the courtyard, in a recess in the wall sheltered from the wind, Ciri was training under Lambert’s instructions. Deftly balancing on a beam hanging on chains, she was attacking – with her sword – a leather sack bound with straps to make it resemble a human torso. Triss stopped to watch.

“Wrong!” yelled Lambert. “You’re getting too close! Don’t hack blindly at it! I told you, the very tip of the sword, at the carotid artery! Where does a humanoid have its carotid artery? On top of its head? What’s happening? Concentrate, Princess!”

Ha, thought Triss. So it is truth, not a legend. She is the one. I guessed correctly.

She decided to attack without delay, not allowing the witchers to try any ruses.

“The famous Child Surprise?” she said indicating Ciri. “I see you have applied yourselves to fulfilling the demands of fate and destiny? But it seems you have muddled the stories, boys. In the fairy-tales I was told, shepherdesses and orphans become princesses. But here, I see, a princess is becoming a witcher. Does that not appear somewhat daring to you?”

Vesemir glanced at Geralt. The white-haired witcher remained silent, his face perfectly still; he did not react with even the slightest quiver of his eyelids to Vesemir’s unspoken request for support.

“It’s not what you think.” The old man cleared his throat. “Geralt brought her here last autumn. She has no one apart from— Triss, how can one not believe in destiny when—”

“What has destiny to do with waving a sword around?”

“We are teaching her to fence,” Geralt said quietly, turning towards her and looking her straight in the eyes. “What else are we to teach her? We know nothing else. Destiny or no, Kaer Morhen is now her home. At least for a while. Training and swordsmanship amuse her, keep her healthy and fit. They allow her to forget the tragedy she has lived through. This is her home now, Triss. She has no other.”

“Masses of Cintrians,” the enchantress said, holding his gaze, “fled to Verden after the defeat, to Brugge, Temeria and the Islands of Skellige. Amongst them are magnates, barons, knights. Friends, relations… as well as this girl’s subjects.”

“Friends and relations did not look for her after the war. They did not find her.”

“Because she was not destined for them?” She smiled at him, not very sincerely but very prettily. As prettily as she could. She did not want him to use that tone of voice.

The witcher shrugged. Triss, knowing him a little, immediately changed tactics and gave up the argument.

She looked at Ciri again. The girl, agilely stepping along the balance beam, executed a half-turn, cut lightly, and immediately leaped away. The dummy, struck, swayed on its rope.

“Well, at last!” shouted Lambert. “You’ve finally got it! Go back and do it again. I want to make sure it wasn’t a fluke!”

“The sword,” Triss turned to the witchers, “looks sharp. The beam looks slippery and unstable. And Lambert looks like an idiot, demoralising the girl with all his shouting. Aren’t you afraid of an unfortunate accident? Or maybe you’re relying on destiny to protect the child against it?”

“Ciri practised for nearly six months without a sword,” said Coën. “She knows how to move. And we are keeping an eye on her because—”

“Because this is her home,” finished Geralt quietly but firmly. Very firmly. Using a tone which put an end to the discussion.

“Exactly. It is.” Vesemir took a deep breath. “Triss, you must be tired. And hungry?”

“I cannot deny it,” she sighed, giving up on trying to catch Geralt’s eye. “To be honest, I’m on my last legs. I spent last night on the Trail in a shepherd’s hut which was practically falling apart, buried in straw and sawdust. I used spells to insulate the shack; if it weren’t for that I would probably be dead. I long for clean linen.”

“You will have supper with us now. And then you will sleep as long as you wish, and rest. We have prepared the best room for you, the one in the tower. And we have put the best bed we could find in Kaer Morhen there.”

“Thank you.” Triss smiled faintly. In the tower, she thought. All right, Vesemir. Let it be the tower for today, if appearances matter so much to you. I can sleep in the tower in the best of all the beds in Kaer Morhen. Although I would prefer to sleep with Geralt in the worst.

“Let’s go, Triss.”

“Let’s go.”

\* \* \*

The wind hammered against the shutters and ruffled the remains of the moth-eaten tapestries which had been used to insulate the window. Triss lay in perfect darkness in the best bed in the whole of Kaer Morhen. She couldn’t sleep – and not because the best bed in Kaer Morhen was a dilapidated antique. Triss was thinking hard. And all the thoughts chasing sleep away revolved around one fundamental question.

What had she been summoned to the fortress for? Who had summoned her? Why? For what purpose?

Vesemir’s illness was just a pretext. Vesemir was a witcher. The fact that he was also an old man did not change the fact that many a youngster could envy him his health. If the old man had been stung by a manticore or bitten by a werewolf Triss would have accepted that she had been summoned to aid him. But “aching bones” was a joke. For an ache in his bones, not a very original complaint within the horrendously cold walls of Kaer Morhen, Vesemir could have treated with a witchers’ elixir or – an even simpler solution – with strong rye vodka, applied internally and externally in equal proportions. He didn’t need a magician, with her spells, philtres and amulets.

So who had summoned her? Geralt?

Triss thrashed about in the bedclothes, feeling a wave of heat come over her. And a wave of arousal, made all the stronger by anger. She swore quietly, kicked her quilt away and rolled on to her side. The ancient bedstead squeaked and creaked. I’ve no control over myself, she thought. I’m behaving like a stupid adolescent. Or even worse – like an old maid deprived of affection. I can’t even think logically.

She swore again.

Of course it wasn’t Geralt. Don’t get excited, little one. Don’t get excited, just think of his expression in the stable. You’ve seen expressions like that before. You’ve seen them, so don’t kid yourself. The foolish, contrite, embarrassed expressions of men who want to forget, who regret, who don’t want to remember what happened, don’t want to go back to what has been. By all the gods, little one, don’t fool yourself it’s different this time. It’s never different. And you know it. Because, after all, you’ve had a fair amount of experience.

As far as her erotic life was concerned, Triss Merigold had the right to consider herself a typical enchantress. It had began with the sour taste of forbidden fruit, made all the more exciting by the strict rules of the academy and the prohibitions of the mistress under whom she practised. Then came her independence, freedom and a crazy promiscuity which ended, as it usually does, in bitterness, disillusionment and resignation. Then followed a long period of loneliness and the discovery that if she wanted to release her tension and stress then someone who wanted to consider himself her lord and master – as soon as he had turned on his back and wiped the sweat from his brow – was entirely superfluous. There were far less troublesome ways of calming her nerves – ones with the additional advantages of not staining her towels with blood, not passing wind under the quilt and not demanding breakfast. That was followed by a short-lived and entertaining fascination with the same sex, which ended in the conclusion that soiling towels, passing wind and greediness were by no means exclusively male attributes. Finally, like all but a few magicians, Triss moved to affairs with other wizards, which proved sporadic and frustrating in their cold, technical and almost ritual course.

Then Geralt of Rivia appeared. A witcher leading a stormy life, and tied to her good friend Yennefer in a strange, turbulent and almost violent relationship.

Triss had watched them both and was jealous even though it seemed there was little to be jealous of. Their relationship quite obviously made them both unhappy, had led straight to destruction, pain and yet, against all logic… it had lasted. Triss couldn’t understand it. And it had fascinated her. It had fascinated her to such an extent that…

…she had seduced the witcher – with the help of a little magic. She had hit on a propitious moment, a moment when he and Yennefer had scratched at each other’s eyes yet again and had abruptly parted. Geralt had needed warmth, and had wanted to forget.

No, Triss had not desired to take him away from Yennefer. As a matter of fact, her friend was more important to her than he was. But her brief relationship with the witcher had not disappointed. She had found what she was looking for – emotions in the form of guilt, anxiety and pain. His pain. She had experienced his emotions, it had excited her and, when they parted, she had been unable to forget it. And she had only recently understood what pain is. The moment when she had overwhelmingly wanted to be with him again. For a short while – just for a moment – to be with him.

And now she was so close…

Triss clenched her fist and punched the pillow. No, she thought, no. Don’t be silly. Don’t think about it. Think about…

About Ciri. Is she…

Yes. She was the real reason behind her visit to Kaer Morhen. The ash-blonde girl who, here in Kaer Morhen, they want to turn into a witcher. A real witcher. A mutant. A killing machine, like themselves.

It’s clear, she suddenly thought, feeling a passionate arousal of an entirely different nature. It’s obvious. They want to mutate the child, subject her to the Trial of Grasses and Changes, but they don’t know how to do it. Vesemir was the only witcher left from the previous generation, and he was only a fencing instructor. The Laboratorium, hidden in the vaults of Kaer Morhen, with its dusty demi-johns of elixirs, the alembics, ovens and retorts… None of the witchers knew how to use them. The mutagenic elixirs had been concocted by some renegade wizard in the distant past and then perfected over the years by the wizard’s successors, who had, over the years, magically controlled the process of Changes to which children were subjected. And at a vital moment the chain had snapped. There was no more magical knowledge or power. The witchers had the herbs and Grasses, they had the Laboratorium. They knew the recipe. But they had no wizard.

Who knows, she thought, perhaps they have tried?Have they given children concoctions prepared without the use of magic?

She shuddered at the thought of what might have happened to those children.

And now they want to mutate the girl but can’t. And that might mean… They may ask me to help. And then I’ll see something no living wizard has seen, I’ll learn something no living wizard has learned. Their famous Grasses and herbs, the secret virus cultures, the renowned, mysterious recipes…

And I will be the one to give the child a number of elixirs, who will watch the Changes of mutation, who will watch, with my own eyes…

Watch the ashen-haired child die.

Oh, no. Triss shuddered again. Never. Not at such a price.

Besides, she thought, I’ve probably got excited too soon again. That’s probably not what this is about. We talked over supper, gossiped about this and that. I tried to guide the conversation to the Child Surprise several times to no avail. They changed the subject at once.

She had watched them. Vesemir had been tense and troubled; Geralt uneasy, Lambert and Eskel falsely merry and talkative, Coën so natural as to be unnatural. The only one who had been sincere and open was Ciri, rosy-cheeked from the cold, dishevelled, happy and devilishly voracious. They had eaten beer potage, thick with croutons and cheese, and Ciri had been surprised they had not served mushrooms as well. They had drunk cider, but the girl had been given water and was clearly both astonished and revolted by it. “Where’s the salad?” she had yelled, and Lambert had rebuked her sharply and ordered her to take her elbows off the table.

Mushrooms and salad. In December?

Of course, thought Triss. They’re feeding her those legendary cave saprophytes – a mountain plant unknown to science – giving her the famous infusions of their mysterious herbs to drink. The girl is developing quickly, is acquiring a witcher’s infernal fitness. Naturally, without the mutation, without the risk, without the hormonal upheaval. But the magician must not know this. It is to be kept a secret from the magician. They aren’t going to tell me anything; they aren’t going to show me anything.

I saw how that girl ran. I saw how she danced on the beam with her sword, agile and swift, full of a dancer’s near-feline grace, moving like an acrobat. I must, she thought, I absolutely must see her body, see how she’s developing under the influence of whatever it is they’re feeding her. And what if I managed to steal samples of these “mushrooms” and “salads” and take them away? Well, well…

And trust? I don’t give a fig for your trust, witchers. There’s cancer out there in the world, smallpox, tetanus and leukaemia, there are allergies, there’s cot death. And you’re keeping your “mushrooms”, which could perhaps be distilled and turned into life-saving medicines, hidden away from the world. You’re keeping them a secret even from me, and others to whom you declare your friendship, respect and trust. Even I’m forbidden to see not just the Laboratorium, but even the bloody mushrooms!

So why did you bring me here? Me, a magician?

Magic!

Triss giggled. Ha, she thought, witchers, I’ve got you! Ciri scared you just as she did me. She “withdrew” into a daydream, started to prophesy, gave out an aura which, after all, you can sense almost as well as I can. She automatically reached for something psychokinetically, or bent a pewter spoon with her will as she stared at it during lunch. She answered questions you only thought, and maybe even some which you were afraid to ask yourselves. And you felt fear. You realised that your Surprise is more surprising than you had imagined.

You realised that you have the Source in Kaer Morhen.

And that, you can’t manage without a magician.

And you don’t have a single friendly magician, not a single one you could trust. Apart from me and…

And Yennefer.

The wind howled, banged the shutter and swelled the tapestry. Triss rolled on to her back and, lost in thought, started to bite her thumb nail.

Geralt had not invited Yennefer. He had invited her. Does that mean…?

Who knows. Maybe. But if it’s as I think then why…?

Why…?

“Why hasn’t he come to me?” she shouted quietly into the darkness, angry and aroused.

She was answered by the wind howling amidst the ruins.

The morning was sunny but devilishly cold. Triss woke chilled through and through, without having had enough sleep, but finally assured and decided.

She was the last to go down to the hall. She accepted the tribute of gazes which rewarded her efforts – she had changed her travel clothes for an attractive but simple dress and had skilfully applied magical scents and nonmagical but incredibly expensive cosmetics. She ate her porridge chatting with the witchers about unimportant and trivial matters.

“Water again?” muttered Ciri suddenly, peering into her tumbler. “My teeth go numb when I drink water! I want some juice! That blue one!”

“Don’t slouch,” said Lambert, stealing a glance at Triss from the corner of his eye. “And don’t wipe your mouth with your sleeve! Finish your food; it’s time for training. The days are getting shorter.”

“Geralt.” Triss finished her porridge. “Ciri fell on the Trail yesterday. Nothing serious, but it was because of that jester’s outfit she wears. It all fits so badly, and it hinders her movements.”

Vesemir cleared his throat and turned his eyes away. Aha, thought the enchantress, so it’s your work, master of the sword. Predictable enough, Ciri’s short tunic does look as if it has been cut out with a knife and sewn together with an arrow-head.

“The days are, indeed, getting shorter,” she continued, not waiting for a comment. “But we’re going to make today shorter still. Ciri, have you finished? Come with me, if you please. We shall make some vital adjustments to your uniform.”

“She’s been running around in this for a year, Merigold,” said Lambert angrily. “And everything was fine until…”

“…until a woman arrived who can’t bear to look at clothes in poor taste which don’t fit? You’re right, Lambert. But a woman has arrived, and the old order’s collapsed; a time of great change has arrived. Come on, Ciri.”

The girl hesitated, looked at Geralt. Geralt nodded his agreement and smiled. Pleasantly. Just as he had smiled in the past when, when…

Triss turned her eyes away. His smile was not for her.

Ciri’s little room was a faithful replica of the witchers’ quarters. It was, like theirs, devoid of almost all fittings and furniture. There was practically nothing there beside a few planks nailed together to form a bed, a stool and a trunk. Witchers decorated the walls and doors of their quarters with the skins of animals they killed when hunting – stags, lynx, wolves and even wolverines. On the door of Ciri’s little room, however, hung the skin of an enormous rat with a hide-ous scaly tail. Triss fought back her desire to tear the stinking abomination down and throw it out of the window.

The girl, standing by the bed, stared at her expectantly.

“We’ll try,” said the enchantress, “to make this… sheath fit a little better. I’ve always had a knack for cutting and sewing so I ought to be able to manage this goatskin, too. And you, little witcher-girl, have you ever had a needle in your hand? Have you been taught anything other than making holes with a sword in sacks of straw?”

“When I was in Transriver, in Kagen, I had to spin,” muttered Ciri unwillingly. “They didn’t give me any sewing because I only spoilt the linen and wasted thread; they had to undo everything. The spinning was terribly boring – yuk!”

“True,” giggled Triss. “It’s hard to find anything more boring. I hated spinning, too.”

“And did you have to? I did because… But you’re a wi— magician. You can conjure anything up! That amazing dress… did you conjure it up?”

“No.” Triss smiled. “Nor did I sew it myself. I’m not that talented.”

“And my clothes, how are you going to make them? Conjure them up?”

“There’s no need. A magic needle is enough, one which we shall charm into working more vigorously. And if there’s a need…”

Triss slowly ran her hand across the torn hole in the sleeve of Ciri’s jacket, murmuring a spell while stimulating an amulet to work. Not a trace remained of the hole. Ciri squealed with joy.

“That’s magic! I’m going to have a magical jacket! Wow!”

“Only until I make you an ordinary – but good – one. Right, now take all that off, young lady, and change into something else. These aren’t your only clothes, surely?”

Ciri shook her head, lifted the lid of the trunk and showed her a faded loose dress, a dark grey tunic, a linen shirt and a woollen blouse resembling a penitent’s sack.

“This is mine,” she said. “This is what I came in. But I don’t wear it now. It’s woman’s stuff.”

“I understand.” Triss grimaced mockingly. “Woman’s or not, for the time being you’ll have to change into it. Well, get on with it, get undressed. Let me help you… Damn it! What’s this? Ciri?”

The girl’s shoulders were covered in massive bruises, suffused with blood. Most of them had already turned yellow; some were fresh.

“What the hell is this?” the magician repeated angrily. “Who beat you like this?”

“This?” Ciri looked at her shoulders as if surprised by the number of bruises. “Oh, this… That was the windmill. I was too slow.”

“What windmill? Bloody hell!”

“The windmill,” repeated Ciri, raising her huge eyes to look up at the magician. “It’s a sort of… Well… I’m using it to learn to dodge while attacking. It’s got these paws made of sticks and it turns and waves the paws. You have to jump very quickly and dodge. You have to learn a lefrex. If you haven’t got the lefrex the windmill wallops you with a stick. At the beginning, the windmill gave me a really terribly horrible thrashing. But now—”

“Take the leggings and shirt off. Oh, sweet gods! Dear girl! Can you really walk? Run?”

Both hips and her left thigh were black and blue with haematomas and swellings. Ciri shuddered and hissed, pulling away from the magician’s hand. Triss swore viciously in Dwarvish, using inexpressibly foul language.

“Was that the windmill, too?” she asked, trying to remain calm.

“This? No. This, this was the windmill.” Ciri pointed indifferently to an impressive bruise below her left knee, covering her shin. “And these other ones… They were the pendulum. I practise my fencing steps on the pendulum. Geralt says I’m already good at the pendulum. He says I’ve got… Flair. I’ve got flair.”

“And if you run out of flair” – Triss ground her teeth together – “I take it the pendulum thumps you?”

“But of course,” the girl confirmed, looking at her, clearly surprised at this lack of knowledge. “It thumps you, and how.”

“And here? On your side? What was that? A smith’s hammer?”

Ciri hissed with pain and blushed.

“I fell off the comb…”

“…and the comb thumped you,” finished Triss, controlling herself with increasing difficulty. Ciri snorted.

“How can a comb thump you when it’s buried in the ground? It can’t! I just fell. I was practising a jumping pirouette and it didn’t work. That’s where the bruise came from. Because I hit a post.”

“And you lay there for two days? In pain? Finding it hard to breathe?”

“Not at all. Coën rubbed it and put me straight back on the comb. You have to, you know? Otherwise you catch fear.”

“What?”

“You catch fear,” Ciri repeated proudly, brushing her ashen fringe from her forehead. “Didn’t you know? Even when something bad happens to you, you have to go straight back to that piece of equipment or you get frightened. And if you’re frightened you’ll be hopeless at the exercise. You mustn’t give up. Geralt said so.”

“I have to remember that maxim,” the enchantress murmured through her teeth. “And that it came from Geralt. Not a bad prescription for life although I’m not sure it applies in every situation. But it is easy to put into practise at someone else’s expense. So you mustn’t give up? Even though you are being thumped and beaten in a thousand ways, you’re to get up and carry on practising?”

“Of course. A witcher’s not afraid of anything.”

“Is that so? And you, Ciri? You aren’t afraid of anything? Answer truthfully.”

The girl turned away and bit her lip.

“You won’t tell anybody?”

“I won’t.”

“I’m frightened of two pendulums. Two at the same time. And the windmill, but only when it’s set to go fast. And there’s also a long balance, I still have to go on that… with a safety de— A safety device. Lambert says I’m a sissy and a wimp but that’s not true. Geralt told me my weight is distributed a little differently because I’m a girl. I’ve simply got to practise more unless… I wanted to ask you something. May I?”

“You may.”

“If you know magic and spells… If you can cast them… Can you turn me into a boy?”

“No,” Triss replied in an icy tone. “I can’t.”

“Hmm…” The little witcher-girl was clearly troubled. “But could you at least…”

“At least what?”

“Could you do something so I don’t have to…” Ciri blushed. “I’ll whisper it in your ear.”

“Go on.” Triss leaned over. “I’m listening.”

Ciri, growing even redder, brought her head closer to the enchantress’s chestnut hair.

Triss sat up abruptly, her eyes flaming.

“Today? Now?”

“Mhm.”

“Hell and bloody damnation!” the enchantress yelled, and kicked the stool so hard that it hit the door and brought down the rat skin. “Pox, plague, shit and leprosy! I’m going to kill those cursed idiots!”

“Calm down, Merigold,” said Lambert. “It’s unhealthy to get so worked up, especially with no reason.”

“Don’t preach at me! And stop calling me ‘Merigold’! But best of all, stop talking altogether. I’m not speaking to you. Vesemir, Geralt, have any of you seen how terribly battered this child is? She hasn’t got a single healthy spot on her body!”

“Dear child,” said Vesemir gravely, “don’t let yourself get carried away by your emotions. You were brought up differently, you’ve seen children being brought up in another way. Ciri comes from the south where girls and boys are brought up in the same way, like the elves. She was put on a pony when she was five and when she was eight she was already riding out hunting. She was taught to use a bow, javelin and sword. A bruise is nothing new to Ciri—”

“Don’t give me that nonsense,” Triss flared. “Don’t pretend you’re stupid. This is not some pony or horse or sleigh ride. This is Kaer Morhen! On these windmills and pendulums of yours, on this Killer path of yours, dozens of boys have broken their bones and twisted their necks, boys who were hard, seasoned vagabonds like you, found on roads and pulled out of gutters. Sinewy scamps and good-for-nothings, pretty experienced despite their short lives. What chance has Ciri got? Even though she’s been brought up in the south with elven methods, even growing up under the hand of a battle-axe like Lioness Calanthe, that little one was and still is a princess. Delicate skin, slight build, light bones… She’s a girl! What do you want to turn her into? A witcher?”

“That girl,” said Geralt quietly and calmly, “that petite, delicate princess lived through the Massacre of Cintra. Left entirely to her own devices, she stole past Nilfgaard’s cohorts. She successfully fled the marauders who prowled the villages, plundering and murdering anything that still lived. She survived on her own for two weeks in the forests of Transriver, entirely alone. She spent a month roaming with a pack of fugitives, slogging as hard as all the others and starving like all the others. For almost half a year, having been taken in by a peasant family, she worked on the land and with the livestock. Believe me, Triss, life has tried, seasoned and hardened her no less than good-for-nothings like us, who were brought to Kaer Morhen from the highways. Ciri is no weaker than unwanted bastards, like us, who were left with witchers in taverns like kittens in a wicker basket. And her gender? What difference does that make?”

“You still ask? You still dare ask that?” yelled the magician. “What difference does it make? Only that the girl, not being like you, has her days! And bears them exceptionally badly! And you want her to tear her lungs out on the Killer and some bloody windmills!”

Despite her outrage, Triss felt an exquisite satisfaction at the sight of the sheepish expressions of the young witchers, and Vesemir’s jaw suddenly dropping open.

“You didn’t even know.” She nodded in what was now a calm, concerned and gentle reproach. “You’re pathetic guardians. She’s ashamed to tell you because she was taught not to mention such complaints to men. And she’s ashamed of the weakness, the pain and the fact that she is less fit. Has any one of you thought about that? Taken any interest in it? Or tried to guess what might be the matter with her? Maybe her very first bleed happened here, in Kaer Morhen? And she cried to herself at night, unable to find any sympathy, consolation or even understanding from anyone? Has any one of you given it any thought whatsoever?”

“Stop it, Triss,” moaned Geralt quietly. “That’s enough. You’ve achieved what you wanted. And maybe even more.”

“The devil take it,” cursed Coën. “We’ve turned out to be right idiots, there’s no two ways about it, eh, Vesemir, and you—”

“Silence,” growled the old witcher. “Not a word.”

It was Eskel’s behaviour which was most unlikely; he got up, approached the enchantress, bent down low, took her hand and kissed it respectfully. She swiftly withdrew her hand. Not so as to demonstrate her anger and annoyance but to break the pleasant, piercing vibration triggered by the witcher’s touch. Eskel emanated powerfully. More powerfully than Geralt.

“Triss,” he said, rubbing the hide-ous scar on his cheek with embarrassment, “help us. We ask you. Help us, Triss.”

The enchantress looked him in the eye and pursed her lips. “With what? What am I to help you with, Eskel?”

Eskel rubbed his cheek again, looked at Geralt. The white-haired witcher bowed his head, hiding his eyes behind his hand. Vesemir cleared his throat loudly.

At that moment, the door creaked open and Ciri entered the hall. Vesemir’s hawking changed into something like a wheeze, a loud indrawn breath. Lambert opened his mouth. Triss suppressed a laugh.

Ciri, her hair cut and styled, was walking towards them with tiny steps, carefully holding up a dark-blue dress – shortened and adjusted, and still showing the signs of having been carried in a saddle-bag. Another present from the enchantress gleamed around the girl’s neck – a little black viper made of lacquered leather with a ruby eye and gold clasp.

Ciri stopped in front of Vesemir. Not quite knowing what to do with her hands, she planted her thumbs behind her belt.

“I cannot train today,” she recited in the utter silence, slowly and emphatically, “for I am… I am…”

She looked at the enchantress. Triss winked at her, smirking like a rascal well pleased with his mischief, and moved her lips to prompt the memorised lines.

“Indisposed!” ended Ciri loudly and proudly, turning her nose up almost to the ceiling.

Vesemir hawked again. But Eskel, dear Eskel, kept his head and once more behaved as was fitting.

“Of course,” he said casually, smiling. “We understand and clearly we will postpone your exercises until your indisposition has passed. We will also cut the theory short and, if you feel unwell, we will put it aside for the time being, too. If you need any medication or—”

“I’ll take care of that,” Triss cut in just as casually.

“Aha…” Only now did Ciri blush a little – she looked at the old witcher. “Uncle Vesemir, I’ve asked Triss… that is, Miss Merigold, to… that is… Well, to stay here with us. For longer. For a long time. But Triss said you have to agree forsooth. Uncle Vesemir! Say yes!”

“I agree…” Vesemir wheezed out. “Of course, I agree…”

“We are very happy.” Only now did Geralt take his hand from his forehead. “We are extremely pleased, Triss.”

The enchantress nodded slightly towards him and innocently fluttered her eyelashes, winding a chestnut lock around her finger. Geralt’s face seemed almost graven from stone.

“You behaved very properly and politely, Ciri,” he said, “offering Miss Merigold our ongoing hospitality in Kaer Morhen. I am proud of you.”

Ciri reddened and smiled broadly. The enchantress gave her the next pre-arranged sign.

“And now,” said the girl, turning her nose up even higher, “I will leave you alone because you no doubt wish to talk over various important matters with Triss. Miss Merigold. Uncle Vesemir, gentlemen… I bid you goodbye. For the time being.”

She curtseyed gracefully then left the hall, walking up the stairs slowly and with dignity.

“Bloody hell.” Lambert broke the silence. “To think I didn’t believe that she really is a princess.”

“Have you understood, you idiots?” Vesemir cast his eye around. “If she puts a dress on in the morning I don’t want to see any exercises… Understood?”

Eskel and Coën bestowed a look which was entirely devoid of respect on the old man. Lambert snorted loudly. Geralt stared at the enchantress and the enchantress smiled back.

“Thank you,” he said. “Thank you, Triss.”

“Conditions?” Eskel was clearly worried. “But we’ve already promised to ease Ciri’s training, Triss. What other conditions do you want to impose?”

“Well, maybe ‘conditions’ isn’t a very nice phrase. So let us call it advice. I will give you three pieces of advice, and you are going to abide by each of them. If, of course, you really want me to stay and help you bring up the little one.”

“We’re listening,” said Geralt. “Go on, Triss.”

“Above all,” she began, smiling maliciously, “Ciri’s menu is to be more varied. And the secret mushrooms and mysterious greens in particular have to be limited.”

Geralt and Coën controlled their expressions wonderfully, Lambert and Eskel a little less so, Vesemir not at all. But then, she thought, looking at his comically embarrassed expression, in his day the world was a better place. Duplicity was a character flaw to be ashamed of. Sincerity did not bring shame.

“Fewer infusions of your mystery-shrouded herbs,” she continued, trying not to giggle, “and more milk. You have goats here. Milking is no great art. You’ll see, Lambert, you’ll learn how to do it in no time.”

“Triss,” started Geralt, “listen—”

“No, you listen. You haven’t subjected Ciri to violent mutations, haven’t touched her hormones, haven’t tried any elixirs or Grasses on her. And that’s to be praised. That was sensible, responsible and humane. You haven’t harmed her with any of your poisons – all the more so you must not cripple her now.”

“What are you talking about?”

“The mushrooms whose secrets you guard so carefully,” she explained, “do, indeed, keep the girl wonderfully fit and strengthen her muscles. The herbs guarantee an ideal metabolic rate and hasten her development. All this taken together and helped along by gruelling training causes certain changes in her build, in her adipose tissue. She’s a woman, and as you haven’t crippled her hormonal system, do not cripple her physically now. She might hold it against you later if you so ruthlessly deprive her of her womanly… attributes. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

“And how,” muttered Lambert, brazenly eyeing Triss’s breasts which strained against the fabric of her dress. Eskel cleared his throat and looked daggers at the young witcher.

“At the moment,” Geralt asked slowly, also gliding his eyes over this and that, “you haven’t noticed anything irreversible in her, I hope?”

“No.” She smiled. “Fortunately, not. She is developing healthily and normally and is built like a young dryad – it’s a pleasure to look at her. But I ask you to be moderate in using your accelerants.”

“We will,” promised Vesemir. “Thank you for the warning, child. What else? You said three… pieces of advice.”

“Indeed. This is the second: Ciri must not be allowed to grow wild. She has to have contact with the world. With her peers. She has to be decently educated and prepared for a normal life. Let her wave her sword about for the time being. You won’t turn her into a witcher without mutation anyway, but having a witcher’s training won’t harm her. Times are hard and dangerous; she’ll be able to defend herself when necessary. Like an elf. But you must not bury her alive here, in the middle of nowhere. She has to enter normal life.”

“Her normal life went up in flames along with Cintra,” murmured Geralt, “but regarding this, Triss, as usual you’re right. We’ve already thought about it. In spring I’m going to take her to the Temple school. To Nenneke. To Ellander.”

“That’s a very good idea and a wise decision. Nenneke is an exceptional woman and Goddess Melitele’s sanctuary an exceptional place. Safe, sure, and it guarantees an appropriate education for the girl. Does Ciri know yet?”

“She does. She kicked up a fuss for a few days but finally accepted the idea. Now she is even looking forward to spring with impatience, excited by the prospect of an expedition to Temeria. She’s interested in the world.”

“So was I at her age.” Triss smiled. “And that comparison brings us dangerously close to the third piece of advice. The most important piece. And you already know what it is. Don’t pull silly faces. I’m a magician, have you forgotten? I don’t know how long it took you to recognise Ciri’s magical abilities. It took me less than half an hour. After that I knew who, or rather what, the girl is.”

“And what is she?”

“A Source.”

“That’s impossible!”

“It’s possible. Certain even. Ciri is a Source and has mediumistic powers. What is more, these powers are very, very worrying. And you, my dear witchers, are perfectly well aware of this. You’ve noticed these powers and they have worried you too. That is the one and only reason you brought me here to Kaer Morhen? Am I right? The one and only reason?”

“Yes,” Vesemir confirmed after a moment’s silence.

Triss breathed an imperceptible sigh of relief. For a moment, she was afraid that Geralt would be the one to confirm it.

The first snow fell the following day, fine snowflakes initially, but soon turning into a blizzard. It fell throughout the night and, in the early morning, the walls of Kaer Morhen were drowned beneath a snowdrift. There could be no question of running the Killer, especially since Ciri was still not feeling very well. Triss suspected that the witchers’ accelerants might be the cause of the girl’s menstrual problems. She could not be sure, however, knowing practically nothing about the drugs, and Ciri was, beyond doubt, the only girl in the world to whom they had been administered. She did not share her suspicions with the witchers. She did not want to worry or annoy them and preferred to apply her own methods. She gave Ciri elixirs to drink, tied a string of active jaspers around her waist, under her dress, and forbade her to exert herself in any way, especially by chasing around wildly hunting rats with a sword.

Ciri was bored. She roamed the castle sleepily and finally, for lack of any other amusement, joined Coën who was cleaning the stable, grooming the horses and repairing a harness.

Geralt – to the enchantress’s rage – disappeared somewhere and appeared only towards evening, bearing a dead goat. Triss helped him skin his prey. Although she sincerely detested the smell of meat and blood, she wanted to be near the witcher. Near him. As near as possible. A cold, determined resolution was growing in her. She did not want to sleep alone any longer.

“Triss!” yelled Ciri suddenly, running down the stairs, stamping. “Can I sleep with you tonight? Triss, please, please say yes! Please, Triss!”

The snow fell and fell. It brightened up only with the arrival of Midinváerne, the Day of the Winter Equinox.

On the third day all the children died save one, a male barely ten. Hitherto agitated by a sudden madness, he fell all at once into deep stupor. His eyes took on a glassy gaze; incessantly with his hands did he clutch at clothing, or brandish them in the air as if desirous of catching a quill. His breathing grew loud and hoarse; sweat cold, clammy and malodorous appeared on his skin. Then was he once more given elixir through the vein and the seizure it did return. This time a nose-bleed did ensue, coughing turned to vomiting, after which the male weakened entirely and became inert.

For two days more did symptoms not subside. The child’s skin, hitherto drenched in sweat, grew dry and hot, the pulse ceased to be full and firm – albeit remaining of average strength, slow rather than fast. No more did he wake, nor did he scream.

Finally, came the seventh day. The male awoke and opened his eyes, and his eyes were as those of a viper…

Carla Demetia Crest, The Trial of Grasses and other secret Witcher practices, seen with my own eyes, manuscript exclusively accessible to the Chapter of Wizards

CHAPTER THREE

“Your fears were unfounded, entirely ungrounded.” Triss grimaced, resting her elbows on the table. “The time when wizards used to hunt Sources and magically gifted children, tearing them from their parents or guardians by force or deceit, is long gone. Did you really think I might want to take Ciri away from you?”

Lambert snorted and turned his face away. Eskel and Vesemir looked at Geralt, and Geralt said nothing. He continued to gaze off to the side, playing incessantly with his silver witcher medallion, depicting the head of a snarling wolf. Triss knew the medallion reacted to magic. On such a night as Midinváerne, when the air itself was vibrating with magic, the witchers’ medallions must be practically humming. It must be both irritating and bothersome.

“No, child,” Vesemir finally said. “We know you would not do such a thing. But we also know that you do, ultimately, have to tell the Chapter about her. We’ve known for a long time that every wizard, male or female, is burdened with this duty. You don’t take talented children from their parents and guardians any more. You observe such children so that later – at the right moment – you can fascinate them in magic, influence them—”

“Have no fear,” she interrupted coldly. “I will not tell anyone about Ciri. Not even the Chapter. Why are you looking at me like that?”

“We’re amazed by the ease with which you pledge to keep this secret,” said Eskel calmly. “Forgive me, Triss, I do not mean to offend you, but what has happened to your legendary loyalty to the Council and Chapter?”

“A lot has happened. The war changed many things, and the battle for Sodden Hill changed even more. I won’t bore you with the politics, especially as certain issues and affairs are bound by secrets I am not allowed to divulge. But as for loyalty��� I am loyal. And believe me, in this matter I can be loyal to both you and to the Chapter.”

“Such double loyalty” – Geralt looked her in the eyes for the first time that evening – “is devilishly difficult to manage. Rarely does it succeed, Triss.”

The enchantress turned her gaze on Ciri. The girl was sitting on a bearskin with Coën, tucked away in the far corner of the hall, and both were busy playing a handslapping game. The game was growing monotonous as both were incredibly quick – neither could manage to slap the other’s hand in any way. This, however, clearly neither mattered to them nor spoiled their game.

“Geralt,” she said, “when you found Ciri, on the Yaruga, you took her with you. You brought her to Kaer Morhen, hid her from the world and do not let even those closest to the child know she is alive. You did this because something – about which I know nothing – convinced you that destiny exists, holds sway over us, and guides us in everything we do. I think the same, and have always done so. If destiny wants Ciri to become a magician, she will become one. Neither the Chapter nor the Council have to know about her, they don’t have to observe or encourage her. So in keeping your secret I won’t betray the Chapter in any way. But as you know, there is something of a hitch here.”

“Were it only one,” sighed Vesemir. “Go on, child.”

“The girl has magical abilities, and that can’t be neglected. It’s too dangerous.”

“In what way?”

“Uncontrolled powers are an ominous thing. For both the Source and those in their vicinity. The Source can threaten those around them in many ways. But they threaten themselves in only one. Mental illness. Usually catatonia.”

“Devil take it,” said Lambert after a long silence. “I am listening to you half-convinced that someone here has already lost their marbles and will, any moment now, present a threat to the rest of us. Destiny, sources, spells, hocus-pocus… Aren’t you exaggerating, Merigold? Is this the first child to be brought to the Keep? Geralt didn’t find destiny; he found another homeless, orphaned child. We’ll teach the girl the sword and let her out into the world like the others. True, I admit we’ve never trained a girl in Kaer Morhen before. We’ve had some problems with Ciri, made mistakes, and it’s a good thing you’ve pointed them out to us. But don’t let us exaggerate. She is not so remarkable as to make us fall on our knees and raise our eyes to the heavens. Is there a lack of female warriors roaming the world? I assure you, Merigold, Ciri will leave here skilful and healthy, strong and able to face life. And, I warrant, without catatonia or any other epilepsy. Unless you delude her into believing she has some such disease.”

“Vesemir,” Triss turned in her chair, “tell him to keep quiet, he’s getting in the way.”

“You think you know it all,” said Lambert calmly, “but you don’t. Not yet. Look.”

He stretched his hand towards the hearth, arranging his fingers together in a strange way. The chimney roared and howled, the flames burst out violently, the glowing embers grew brighter and rained sparks. Geralt, Vesemir and Eskel glanced at Ciri anxiously but the girl paid no attention to the spectacular fireworks.

Triss folded her arms and looked at Lambert defiantly.

“The Sign of Aard,” she stated calmly. “Did you think to impress me? With the use of the same sign, strengthened through concentration, will-power and a spell, I can blow the logs from the chimney in a moment and blast them so high you will think they are stars.”

“You can,” he agreed. “But Ciri can’t. She can’t form the Sign of Aard. Or any other sign. She has tried hundreds of times, to no effect. And you know our Signs require minimal power. Ciri does not even have that. She is an absolutely normal child. She has not the least magical power – she has, in fact, a comprehensive lack of ability. And here you are telling us she’s a Source, trying to threaten us—”

“A Source,” she explained coldly, “has no control over their skills, no command over them. They are a medium, something like a transmitter. Unknowingly they get in touch with energy, unknowingly they convert it. And when they try to control it, when they strain trying to form the Signs perhaps, nothing comes of it. And nothing will come of it, not just after hundreds of attempts but after thousands. It is one characteristic of a Source. Then, one day, a moment comes when the Source does not exert itself, does not strain, is daydreaming or thinking about cabbage and sausages, playing dice, enjoying themselves in bed with a partner, picking their nose… and suddenly something happens. A house might go up in flames. Or sometimes, half a town goes up.”

“You’re exaggerating, Merigold.”

“Lambert.” Geralt released his medallion and rested his hands on the table. “First, stop calling Triss ‘Merigold’. She has asked you a number of times not to. Second, Triss is not exaggerating. I saw Ciri’s mother, Princess Pavetta, in action with my own eyes. I tell you, it was really something. I don’t know if she was a Source or not, but no one suspected she had any power at all until, save by a hair’s breadth, she almost reduced the royal castle of Cintra to ashes.”

“We should assume, therefore,” said Eskel, lighting the candles in yet another candle-stick, “that Ciri could, indeed, be genetically burdened.”

“Not only could,” said Vesemir, “she is so burdened. On the one hand Lambert is right. Ciri is not capable of forming Signs. On the other… We have all seen…”

He fell silent and looked at Ciri who, with a joyful squeal, acknowledged that she had the upper hand in the game. Triss spied a small smile on Coën’s face and was sure he had allowed her to win.

“Precisely,” she sneered. “You have all seen. What have you seen? Under what circumstances did you see it? Don’t you think, boys, that the time has come for more truthful confessions? Hell, I repeat, I will keep your secret. You have my word.”

Lambert glanced at Geralt; Geralt nodded in assent. The younger witcher stood and took a large rectangular crystal carafe and a smaller phial from a high shelf. He poured the contents of the phial into the carafe, shook it several times and poured the transparent liquid into the chalices on the table.

“Have a drink with us, Triss.”

“Is the truth so terrible,” she mocked, “that we can’t talk about it soberly? Do I have to get drunk in order to hear it?”

“Don’t be such a know-all. Take a sip. You will find it easier to understand.”

“What is it?”

“White Seagull.”

“What?”

“A mild remedy,” Eskel smiled, “for pleasant dreams.”

“Damn it! A witcher hallucinogenic? That’s why your eyes shine like that in the evenings!”

“White Seagull is very gentle. It’s Black Seagull that is hallucinogenic.”

“If there’s magic in this liquid I’m not allowed to take it!”

“Exclusively natural ingredients,” Geralt reassured her but he looked, she noticed, disconcerted. He was clearly afraid she would question them about the elixir’s ingredients. “And diluted with a great deal of water. We would not offer you anything that could harm you.”

The sparkling liquid, with its strange taste, struck her throat with its chill and then dispersed warmth throughout her body. The magician ran her tongue over her gums and palate. She was unable to recognise any of the ingredients.

“You gave Ciri some of this… Seagull to drink,” she surmised. “And then—”

“It was an accident,” Geralt interrupted quickly. “That first evening, just after we arrived… she was thirsty, and the Seagull stood on the table. Before we had time to react, she had drunk it all in one go. And fallen into a trance.”

“We had such a fright,” Vesemir admitted, and sighed. “Oh, that we did, child. More than we could take.”

“She started speaking with another voice,” the magician stated calmly, looking at the witchers’ eyes gleaming in the candlelight. “She started talking about events and matters of which she could have no knowledge. She started… to prophesy. Right? What did she say?”

“Rubbish,” said Lambert dryly. “Senseless drivel.”

“Then I have no doubt” – she looked straight at him – “that you understood each other perfectly well. Drivel is your speciality – and I am further convinced of it every time you open your mouth. Do me a great favour and don’t open it for a while, all right?”

“This once,” said Eskel gravely, rubbing the scar across his cheek, “Lambert is right, Triss. After drinking Seagull Ciri really was incomprehensible. That first time it was gibberish. Only after—”

He broke off. Triss shook her head.

“It was only the second time that she started talking sense,” she guessed. “So there was a second time, too. Also after she drank a drug because of your carelessness?”

“Triss.” Geralt raised his head. “This is not the time for your childish spitefulness. It doesn’t amuse us. It worries and upsets us. Yes, there was a second time, too, and a third. Ciri fell, quite by accident, during an exercise. She lost consciousness. When she regained it, she had fallen into another trance. And once again she spoke nonsense. Again it was not her voice. And again it was incomprehensible. But I have heard similar voices before, heard a similar way of speaking. It’s how those poor, sick, demented women known as oracles speak. You see what I’m thinking?”

“Clearly. That was the second time, get to the third.”

Geralt wiped his brow, suddenly beaded with sweat, on his forearm. “Ciri often wakes up at night,” he continued. “Shouting. She has been through a lot. She does not want to talk about it but it is clear that she saw things no child should see in Cintra and Angren. I even fear that… that someone harmed her. It comes back to her in dreams. Usually she is easy to reassure and she falls asleep without any problem… But once, after waking… she was in a trance again. She again spoke with someone else’s, unpleasant, menacing voice. She spoke clearly and made sense. She prophesied. Foresaw the future. And what she foretold…”

“What? What, Geralt?”

“Death,” Vesemir said gently. “Death, child.”

Triss glanced at Ciri, who was shrilly accusing Coën of cheating. Coën put his arms around her and burst out laughing. The magician suddenly realised that she had never, up until now, heard any of the witchers laugh.

“For whom?” she asked briefly, still gazing at Coën.

“Him,” said Vesemir.

“And me,” Geralt added. And smiled.

“When she woke up—”

“She remembered nothing. And we didn’t ask her any questions.”

“Quite so. As to the prophecy… Was it specific? Detailed?”

“No.” Geralt looked her straight in the eyes. “Confused. Don’t ask about it, Triss. We are not worried by the contents of Ciri’s prophecies and ravings but about what happens to her. We’re not afraid for ourselves but—”

“Careful,” warned Vesemir. “Don’t talk about it in front of her.”

Coën approached the table carrying the girl piggy-back.

“Wish everybody goodnight, Ciri,” he said. “Say goodnight to those night owls. We’re going to sleep. It’s nearly midnight. In a minute it’ll be the end of Midinváerne. As of tomorrow, every day brings spring closer!”

“I’m thirsty.” Ciri slipped off his back and reached for Eskel’s chalice. Eskel deftly moved the vessel beyond her reach and grabbed a jug of water. Triss stood quickly.

“Here you are.” She gave her half-full chalice to the girl while meaningfully squeezing Geralt’s arm and looking Vesemir in the eye. “Drink.”

“Triss,” whispered Eskel, watching Ciri drink greedily, “what are you doing? It’s—”

“Not a word, please.”

They did not have to wait long for it to take effect. Ciri suddenly grew rigid, cried out, and smiled a broad, happy smile. She squeezed her eyelids shut and stretched out her arms. She laughed, spun a pirouette and danced on tiptoes. Lambert moved the stool away in a flash, leaving Coën standing between the dancing girl and the hearth.

Triss jumped up and tore an amulet from her pouch – a sapphire set in silver on a thin chain. She squeezed it tightly in her hand.

“Child…” groaned Vesemir. “What are you doing?”

“I know what I’m doing,” she said sharply. “Ciri has fallen into a trance and I am going to contact her psychically. I am going to enter her. I told you, she is something like a magical transmitter – I’ve got to know what she is transmitting, how, and from where she is drawing the aura, how she is transforming it. It’s Midinváerne, a favourable night for such an undertaking…”

“I don’t like it.” Geralt frowned. “I don’t like it at all.”

“Should either of us suffer an epileptic fit,” the magician said ignoring his words, “you know what to do. A stick between our teeth, hold us down, wait for it to pass. Chin up, boys. I’ve done this before.”

Ciri ceased dancing, sank to her knees, extended her arms and rested her head on her lap. Triss pressed the now warm amulet to her temple and murmured the formula of a spell. She closed her eyes, concentrated her willpower and gave out a burst of magic.

The sea roared, waves thundered against the rocky shore and exploded in high geysers amidst the boulders. She flapped her wings, chasing the salty wind. Indescribably happy, she dived, caught up with a flock of her companions, brushed the crests of the waves with her claws, soared into the sky again, shedding water droplets, and glided, tossed by the gale whistling through her pinfeathers. Force of suggestion, she thought soberly. It is only force of suggestion. Seagull!

Triiiss! Triiss!

Ciri? Where are you?

Triiiss!

The cry of the seagulls ceased. The magician still felt the wet splash of the breakers but the sea was no longer below her. Or it was – but it was a sea of grass, an endless plateau stretching as far as the horizon. Triss, with horror, realised she was looking at the view from the top of Sodden Hill. But it was not the Hill. It could not be the Hill.

The sky suddenly grew dark, shadows swirled around her. She saw a long column of indistinct figures slowly climbing down the mountainside. She heard murmurs superimposed over each other, mingling into an uncanny, incomprehensible chorus.

Ciri was standing nearby with her back turned to her. The wind was blowing her ashen hair about.

The indistinct, hazy figures continued past in a long, unending column. Passing her, they turned their heads. Triss suppressed a cry, watching the listless, peaceful faces and their dead, unseeing eyes. She did not know all of the faces, did not recognise them. But some of them she did know.

Coral. Vanielle. Yoël. Pox-marked Axel…

“Why have you brought me here?” she whispered. “Why?”

Ciri turned. She raised her arm and the magician saw a trickle of blood run down her life-line, across her palm and onto her wrist.

“It is the rose,” the girl said calmly. “The rose of Shaerrawedd. I pricked myself. It is nothing. It is only blood. The blood of elves…”

The sky grew even darker, then, a moment later, flared with the sharp, blinding glare of lightning. Everything froze in the silence and stillness. Triss took a step, wanting to make sure she could. She stopped next to Ciri and saw that both of them stood on the edge of a bottomless chasm where reddish smoke, glowing as though it was lit from behind, was swirling. The flash of another soundless bolt of lightning suddenly revealed a long, marble staircase leading into the depths of the abyss.

“It has to be this way,” Ciri said in a shaky voice. “There is no other. Only this. Down the stairs. It has to be this way because… Va’esse deireádh aep eigean…”

“Speak,” whispered the magician. “Speak, child.”

“The Child of Elder Blood… Feainnewedd… Luned aep Hen Ichaer… Deithwen… The White Flame… No, no… No!”

“Ciri!”

“The black knight… with feathers in his helmet… What did he do to me? What happened? I was frightened… I’m still frightened. It’s not ended, it will never end. The lion cub must die… Reasons of state… No… No…”

“Ciri!”

“No!” The girl turned rigid and squeezed her eyelids shut. “No, no, I don’t want to! Don’t touch me!”

Ciri’s face suddenly changed, hardened; her voice became metallic, cold and hostile, resounding with threatening, cruel mockery.

“You have come all this way with her, Triss Merigold? All the way here? You have come too far, Fourteenth One. I warned you.”

“Who are you?” Triss shuddered but she kept her voice under control.

“You will know when the time comes.”

“I will know now!”

The magician raised her arms, extended them abruptly, putting all her strength into a Spell of Identification. The magic curtain burst but behind it was a second… A third… A fourth…

Triss sank to her knees with a groan. But reality continued to burst, more doors opened, a long, endless row leading to nowhere. To emptiness.

“You are wrong, Fourteenth One,” the metallic, inhuman voice sneered. “You’ve mistaken the stars reflected on the surface of the lake at night for the heavens.”

“Do not touch— Do not touch that child!”

“She is not a child.”

Ciri’s lips moved but Triss saw that the girl’s eyes were dead, glazed and vacant.

“She is not a child,” the voice repeated. “She is the Flame, the White Flame which will set light to the world. She is the Elder Blood, Hen Ichaer. The blood of elves. The seed which will not sprout but burst into flame. The blood which will be defiled… When Tedd Deireádh arrives, the Time of End. Va’esse deireádh aep eigean!”

“Are you foretelling death?” shouted Triss. “Is that all you can do, foretell death? For everyone? Them, her… Me?”

“You? You are already dead, Fourteenth One. Everything in you has already died.”

“By the power of the spheres,” moaned the magician, activating what little remained of her strength and drawing her hand through the air, “I throw a spell on you by water, fire, earth and air. I conjure you in thought, in dream and in death, by all that was, by what is and by what will be. I cast my spell on you. Who are you? Speak!”

Ciri turned her head away. The vision of the staircase leading down into the depths of the abyss disappeared, dissolved, and in its place appeared a grey, leaden sea, foaming, crests of waves breaking. And the seagull’s cries burst through the silence once more.

“Fly,” said the voice, through the girl’s lips. “It is time. Go back to where you came from, Fourteenth of the Hill. Fly on the wings of a gull and listen to the cry of other seagulls. Listen carefully!”

“I conjure you—”

“You cannot. Fly, seagull!”

And suddenly the wet salty air was there again, roaring with the gale, and there was the flight, a flight with no beginning and no end. Seagulls cried wildly, cried and commanded.

Triss?

Ciri?

Forget about him! Don’t torture him! Forget! Forget, Triss!

Forget!

Triss! Triss! Trisss!

“Triss!”

She opened her eyes, tossed her head on the pillow and moved her numb hands.

“Geralt?”

“I’m here. How are you feeling?”

She cast her eyes around. She was in her chamber, lying on the bed. On the best bed in the whole of Kaer Morhen.

“What is happening to Ciri?”

“She is asleep.”

“How long—”

“Too long,” he interrupted. He covered her with the duvet and put his arms around her. As he leaned over the wolf’s head medallion swayed just above her face. “What you did was not the best of ideas, Triss.”

“Everything is all right.” She trembled in his embrace. That’s not true, she thought. Nothing’s all right. She turned her face so that the medallion didn’t touch her. There were many theories about the properties of witcher amulets and none advised magicians to touch them during the Equinox.

“Did… Did we say anything during the trance?”

“You, nothing. You were unconscious throughout. Ciri… just before she woke up… said: ‘Va’esse deireádh aep eigean’.”

“She knows the Elder Speech?”

“Not enough to say a whole sentence.”

“A sentence which means: ‘Something is ending’.” The magician wiped her face with her hand. “Geralt, this is a serious matter. The girl is an exceptionally powerful medium. I don’t know what or who she is contacting, but I think there are no limits to her connection. Something wants to take possession of her. Something which is too powerful for me. I am afraid for her. Another trance could end in mental illness. I have no control over it, don’t know how to, can’t… If it proved necessary, I would not be able to block or suppress her powers; I would not even be capable, if there were no other option, of permanently extinguishing them. You have to get help from another magician. A more gifted one. More experienced. You know who I’m talking about.”

“I do.” He turned his head away, clenched his lips.

“Don’t resist. Don’t defend yourself. I can guess why you turned to me rather than her. Overcome your pride, crush your rancour and obstinacy. There is no point to it, you’ll torture yourself to death. And you are risking Ciri’s health and life in the process. Another trance is liable to be more dangerous to her than the Trial of Grasses. Ask Yennefer for help, Geralt.”

“And you, Triss?”

“What about me?” She swallowed with difficulty. “I’m not important. I let you down. I let you down… in everything. I was… I was your mistake. Nothing more.”

“Mistakes,” he said with effort, “are also important to me. I don’t cross them out of my life, or memory. And I never blame others for them. You are important to me, Triss, and always will be. You never let me down. Never. Believe me.”

She remained silent a long while.

“I will stay until spring,” she said finally, struggling against her shaking voice. “I will stay with Ciri… I will watch over her. Day and night. I will be with her day and night. And when spring is here… when spring is here we will take her to Melitele’s Temple in Ellander. The thing that wants to possess her might not be able to reach her in the temple. And then you will ask Yennefer for help.”

“All right, Triss. Thank you.”

“Geralt?”

“Yes.”

“Ciri said something else, didn’t she? Something only you heard. Tell me what it was.”

“No,” he protested and his voice quivered. “No, Triss.”

“Please.”

“She wasn’t speaking to me.”

“I know. She was speaking to me. Tell me, please.”

“After coming to… When I picked her up… She whispered: ‘Forget about him. Don’t torture him.’”

“I won’t,” she said quietly. “But I can’t forget. Forgive me.”

“I am the one who ought to be asking for forgiveness. And not only asking you.”

“You love her that much,” she stated, not asking.

“That much,” he admitted in a whisper after a long moment of silence.

“Geralt.”

“Yes, Triss?”

“Stay with me tonight.”

“Triss…”

“Only stay.”

“All right.”

Not long after Midinváerne the snow stopped falling. The frost came.

Triss stayed with Ciri day and night. She watched over her. She surrounded her with care, visible and invisible.

The girl woke up shouting almost every night. She was delirious, holding her cheek and crying with pain. The magician calmed her with spells and elixirs, put her to sleep, cuddling and rocking her in her arms. And then she herself would be unable to sleep for a long time, thinking about what Ciri had said in her sleep and after she came to. And she felt a mounting fear. Va’esse deireádh aep eigean… Something is ending…

That is how it was for ten days and nights. And finally it passed. It ended, disappeared without a trace. Ciri calmed, she slept peacefully with no nightmares, and no dreams.

But Triss kept a constant watch. She did not leave the girl for a moment. She surrounded her with care. Visible and invisible.

“Faster, Ciri! Lunge, attack, dodge! Half-pirouette, thrust, dodge! Balance! Balance with your left arm or you’ll fall from the comb! And you’ll hurt your… womanly attributes!”

“What?”

“Nothing. Aren’t you tired? We’ll take a break, if you like.”

“No, Lambert! I can go on. I’m not that weak, you know. Shall I try jumping over every other post?”

“Don’t you dare! You might fall and then Merigold will tear my— my head off.”

“I won’t fall!”

“I’ve told you once and I’m not going to say it again. Don’t show off! Steady on your legs! And breathe, Ciri, breathe! You’re panting like a dying mammoth!”

“That’s not true!”

“Don’t squeal. Practise! Attack, dodge! Parry! Half-pirouette! Parry, full pirouette! Steadier on the posts, damn it! Don’t wobble! Lunge, thrust! Faster! Half-pirouette! Jump and cut! That’s it! Very good!”

“Really? Was that really very good, Lambert?”

“Who said so?”

“You did! A moment ago!”

“Slip of the tongue. Attack! Half-pirouette! Dodge! And again! Ciri, where was the parry? How many times do I have to tell you? After you dodge you always parry, deliver a blow with the blade to protect your head and shoulders! Always!”

“Even when I’m only fighting one opponent?”

“You never know what you’re fighting. You never know what’s happening behind you. You always have to cover yourself. Foot and sword work! It’s got to be a reflex. Reflex, understand? You mustn’t forget that. You forget it in a real fight and you’re finished. Again! At last! That’s it! See how such a parry lands? You can take any strike from it. You can cut backwards from it, if you have to. Right, show me a pirouette and a thrust backwards.”

“Haaa!”

“Very good. You see the point now? Has it got through to you?”

“I’m not stupid!”

“You’re a girl. Girls don’t have brains.”

“Lambert! If Triss heard that!”

“If ifs and ands were pots and pans. All right, that’s enough. Come down. We’ll take a break.”

“I’m not tired!”

“But I am. I said, a break. Come down from the comb.”

“Turning a somersault?”

“What do you think? Like a hen off its roost? Go on, jump. Don’t be afraid, I’m here for you.”

“Haaaa!”

“Nice. Very good – for a girl. You can take off the blindfold now.”

“Triss, maybe that’s enough for today? What do you think? Maybe we could take the sleigh and ride down the hill? The sun’s shining, the snow’s sparkling so much it hurts the eyes! The weather’s beautiful!”

“Don’t lean out or you’ll fall from the window.”

“Let’s go sleighing, Triss!”

“Suggest that again in Elder Speech and we’ll end the lesson there. Move away from the window, come back to the table… Ciri, how many times do I have to ask you? Stop waving that sword about and put it away.”

“It’s my new sword! It’s real, a witcher’s sword! Made of steel which fell from heaven! Really! Geralt said so and he never lies, you know that!”

“Oh, yes. I know that.”

“I’ve got to get used to this sword. Uncle Vesemir had it adjusted just right for my weight, height and arm-length. I’ve got to get my hand and wrist accustomed to it!”

“Accustom yourself to your heart’s content, but outside. Not here! Well, I’m listening. You wanted to suggest we get the sleigh out. In Elder Speech. So – suggest it.”

“Hmmm… What’s ‘sleigh’”

“Sledd as a noun. Aesledde as a verb.”

“Aha… Vaien aesledde, ell’ea?”

“Don’t end a question that way, it’s impolite. You form questions using intonation.”

“But the children from the Islands—”

“You’re not learning the local Skellige jargon but classical Elder Speech.”

“And why am I learning the Speech, tell me?”

“So that you know it. It’s fitting to learn things you don’t know. Anyone who doesn’t know other languages is handicapped.”

“But people only speak the common tongue anyway!”

“True. But some speak more than just it. I warrant, Ciri, that it is better to count yourself amongst those few than amongst everyone. So, I’m listening. A full sentence: ‘The weather today is beautiful, so let’s get the sleigh.’”

“Elaine… Hmmm… Elaine tedd a’taeghane, a va’en aesledde?”

“Very good.”

“Ha! So let’s get the sleigh.”

“We will. But let me finish applying my make-up.”

“And who are you putting make-up on for, exactly?”

“Myself. A woman accentuates her beauty for her own self-esteem.”

“Hmmm… Do you know what? I feel pretty poorly too. Don’t laugh, Triss!”

“Come here. Sit on my knee. Put the sword away, I’ve already asked you! Thank you. Now take that large brush and powder your face. Not so much, girl, not so much! Look in the mirror. See how pretty you are?”

“I can’t see any difference. I’ll do my eyes, all right? What are you laughing at? You always paint your eyes. I want to too.”

“Fine. Here you are, put some shadow on your eyelids with this. Ciri, don’t close both your eyes or you won’t see anything – you’re smudging your whole face. Take a tiny bit and only skim over the eyelids. Skim, I said! Let me, I’ll just spread it a little. Close your eyes. Now open them.”

“Oooo!”

“See the difference? A tiny bit of shadow won’t do any harm, even to such beautiful eyes as yours. The elves knew what they were doing when they invented eye shadow.”

“Elves?”

“You didn’t know? make-up is an elvish invention. We’ve learned a lot of useful things from the Elder People. And we’ve given bloody little back in return. Now take the pencil and draw a thin line across your upper lids, just above the lashes. Ciri, what are you doing?”

“Don’t laugh! My eyelid’s trembling! That’s why!”

“Part your lips a little and it’ll stop trembling. See?”

“Ooooh!”

“Come on, now we’ll go and stun the witchers with our beauty. It’s hard to find a prettier sight. And then we’ll take the sleigh and smudge our make-up in the deep snowdrifts.”

“And we’ll make ourselves up again!”

“No. We’ll tell Lambert to warm the bathroom and we’ll take a bath.”

“Again? Lambert says we’re using up too much fuel with our baths.”

“Lambert cáen me a’báeth aep arse.”

“What? I didn’t understand…”

“With time you’ll master the idioms, too. We’ve still got a lot of time for studying before spring. But now… Va’en aesledde, me elaine luned!”

“Here, on this engraving… No, damn it, not on that one… On this one. This is, as you already know, a ghoul. Tell us, Ciri, what you’ve learned about ghouls… Hey, look at me! What the devil have you got on your eyelids?”

“Greater self-esteem!”

“What? Never mind, I’m listening.”

“Hmm… The ghoul, Uncle Vesemir, is a corpse-devouring monster. It can be seen in cemeteries, in the vicinity of barrows, anywhere the dead are buried. At nec— necropolia. On battlegrounds, on fields of battle…”

“So it’s only a danger to the dead, is that right?”

“No, not only. A ghoul may also attack the living if it’s hungry or falls into a fury. If, for example, there’s a battle… A lot of people killed…”

“What’s the matter, Ciri?”

“Nothing…”

“Ciri, listen. Forget about that. That will never return.”

“I saw… In Sodden and in Transriver… Entire fields… They were lying there, being eaten by wolves and wild dogs. Birds were picking at them… I guess there were ghouls there too…”

“That’s why you’re learning about ghouls now, Ciri. When you know about something it stops being a nightmare. When you know how to fight something, it stops being so threatening. So how do you fight a ghoul, Ciri?”

“With a silver sword. The ghoul is sensitive to silver.”

“And to what else?”

“Bright light. And fire.”

“So you can fight it with light and fire?”

“You can, but it’s dangerous. A witcher doesn’t use light or fire because it makes it harder to see. Every light creates a shadow and shadows make it harder to get your bearings. One must always fight in darkness, by moon or starlight.”

“Quite right. You’ve remembered it well, clever girl. And now look here, at this engraving.”

“Eeeueeeuuueee—”

“Oh well, true enough, it is not a beautiful cu— creature. It’s a graveir. A graveir is a type of ghoul. It looks very much like a ghoul but is considerably larger. He can also be told apart, as you can see, by these three bony combs on his skull. The rest is the same as any other corpse-eater. Take note of the short, blunt claws, adapted for digging up graves, and churning the earth. Strong teeth for shattering bones and a long, narrow tongue used to lick the decaying marrow from them. Such stinking marrow is a delicacy for the graveir… What’s the matter?”

“Nnnnothing.”

“You’re completely pale. And green. You don’t eat enough. Did you eat breakfast?”

“Yeeees. I diiiidddddd.”

“What was I… Aha. I almost forgot. Remember, because this is important. Graveirs, like ghouls and other monsters in this category, do not have their own ecological niche. They are relicts from the age of the interpenetration of spheres. Killing them does not upset the order and interconnections of nature which prevail in our present sphere. In this sphere these monsters are foreign and there is no place for them. Do you understand, Ciri?”

“I do, Uncle Vesemir. Geralt explained it to me. I know all that. An ecological niche is—”

“All right, that’s fine. I know what it is. If Geralt has explained it to you, you don’t have to recite it to me. Let us return to the graveir. Graveirs appear quite rarely, fortunately, because they’re bloody dangerous sons-of-bitches. The smallest wound inflicted by a graveir will infect you with corpse venom. Which elixir is used to treat corpse venom poisoning, Ciri?”

“ ‘Golden Oriole’.”

“Correct. But it is better to avoid infection to begin with. That is why, when fighting a graveir, you must never get close to the bastard. You always fight from a distance and strike from a leap.”

“Hmm… And where’s it best to strike one?”

“We’re just getting to that. Look…”

“Once more, Ciri. We’ll go through it slowly so that you can master each move. Now, I’m attacking you with tierce, taking the position as if to thrust… Why are you retreating?”

“Because I know it’s a feint! You can move into a wide sinistra or strike with upper quarte. And I’ll retreat and parry with a counterfeint!”

“Is that so? And if I do this?”

“Auuu! It was supposed to be slow! What did I do wrong, Coën?”

“Nothing. I’m just taller and stronger than you are.”

“That’s not fair!”

“There’s no such thing as a fair fight. You have to make use of every advantage and every opportunity that you get. By retreating you gave me the opportunity to put more force into the strike. Instead of retreating you should have executed a half-pirouette to the left and tried to cut at me from below, with quarte dextra, under the chin, in the cheek or throat.”

“As if you’d let me! You’ll do a reverse pirouette and get my neck from the left before I can parry! How am I meant to know what you’re doing?”

“You have to know. And you do know.”

“Oh, sure!”

“Ciri, what we’re doing is fighting. I’m your opponent. I want to and have to defeat you because my life is at stake. I’m taller and stronger than you so I’m going to watch for opportunities to strike in order to avoid or break your parry – as you’ve just seen. What do I need a pirouette for? I’m already in sinistra, see? What could be simpler than to strike with a seconde, under the arm, on the inside? If I slash your artery, you’ll be dead in a couple of minutes. Defend yourself!”

“Haaaa!”

“Very good. A beautiful, quick parry. See how exercising your wrist has come in useful? And now pay attention – a lot of fencers make the mistake of executing a standing parry and freeze for a second, and that’s just when you can catch them out, strike – like so!”

“Haa!”

“Beautiful! Now jump away, jump away immediately, pirouette! I could have a dagger in my left hand! Good! Very good! And now, Ciri? What am I going to do now?”

“How am I to know?”

“Watch my feet! How is my body weight distributed? What can I do from this position?”

“Anything!”

“So spin, spin, force me to open up! Defend yourself! Good! And again! Good! And again!”

“Owwww!”

“Not so good.”

“Uff… What did I do wrong?”

“Nothing. I’m just faster. Take your guards off. We’ll sit for a moment, take a break. You must be tired, you’ve been running the Trail all morning.”

“I’m not tired. I’m hungry.”

“Bloody hell, so am I. And today’s Lambert’s turn and he can’t cook anything other than noodles… If he could only cook those properly…”

“Coën?”

“Aha?”

“I’m still not fast enough—”

“You’re very fast.”

“Will I ever be as fast as you?”

“I doubt it.”

“Hmm… And are you—? Who’s the best fencer in the world?”

“I’ve no idea.”

“You’ve never known one?”

“I’ve known many who believed themselves to be the best.”

“Oh! What were they? What were their names? What could they do?”

“Hold on, hold on, girl. I haven’t got an answer to those questions. Is it all that important?”

“Of course it’s important! I’d like to know who these fencers are. And where they are.”

“Where they are? I know that.”

“Ah! So where?”

“In cemeteries.”

“Pay attention, Ciri. We’re going to attach a third pendulum now – you can manage two already. You use the same steps as for two only there’s one more dodge. Ready?”

“Yes.”

“Focus yourself. Relax. Breathe in, breathe out. Attack!”

“Ouch! Owwww… Damn it!”

“Don’t swear. Did it hit you hard?”

“No, it only brushed me… What did I do wrong?”

“You ran in at too even a pace, you sped the second half-pirouette up a bit too much, and your feint was too wide. And as a result you were carried straight under the pendulum.”

“But Geralt, there’s no room for a dodge and turn there! They’re too close to each other!”

“There’s plenty of room, I assure you. But the gaps are worked out to force you to make arrhythmic moves. This is a fight, Ciri, not ballet. You can’t move rhythmically in a fight. You have to distract the opponent with your moves, confuse his reactions. Ready for another try?”

“Ready. Start those damn logs swinging.”

“Don’t swear. Relax. Attack!”

“Ha! Ha! Well, how about that? How was that, Geralt? It didn’t even brush me!”

“And you didn’t even brush the second sack with your sword. So I repeat, this is a fight. Not ballet, not acrobatics— What are you muttering now?”

“Nothing.”

“Relax. Adjust the bandage on your wrist. Don’t grip the hilt so tightly, it distracts you and upsets your equilibrium. Breathe calmly. Ready?”

“Yes.”

“Go!”

“Ouch! May you— Geralt, it’s impossible! There’s not enough room for a feint and a change of foot. And when I strike from both legs, without a feint…”

“I saw what happens when you strike without a feint. Does it hurt?”

“No. Not much…”

“Sit down next to me. Take a break.”

“I’m not tired. Geralt, I’m not going to be able to jump over that third pendulum even if I rest for ten years. I can’t be any faster—”

“And you don’t have to be. You’re fast enough.”

“Tell me how to do it then. Half-pirouette, dodge and hit at the same time?”

“It’s very simple; you just weren’t paying attention. I told you before you started – an additional dodge is necessary. Displacement. An additional half-pirouette is superfluous. The second time round, you did everything well and passed all the pendulums.”

“But I didn’t hit the sack because… Geralt, without a half-pirouette I can’t strike because I lose speed, I don’t have the… the, what do you call it…”

“Impetus. That’s true. So gain some impetus and energy. But not through a pirouette and change of foot because there’s not enough time for it. Hit the pendulum with your sword.”

“The pendulum? I’ve got to hit the sacks!”

“This is a fight, Ciri. The sacks represent your opponent’s sensitive areas, you’ve got to hit them. The pendulums – which simulate your opponent’s weapon – you have to avoid, dodge past. When the pendulum hits you, you’re wounded. In a real fight, you might not get up again. The pendulum mustn’t touch you. But you can hit the pendulum… Why are you screwing your nose up?”

“I’m… not going to be able to parry the pendulum with my sword. I’m too weak… I’ll always be too weak! Because I’m a girl!”

“Come here, girl. Wipe your nose, and listen carefully. No strongman, mountain-toppling giant or muscle-man is going to be able to parry a blow aimed at him by a dracolizard’s tail, gigascorpion’s pincers or a griffin’s claws. And that’s precisely the sort of weapons the pendulum simulates. So don’t even try to parry. You’re not deflecting the pendulum, you’re deflecting yourself from it. You’re intercepting its energy, which you need in order to deal a blow. A light, but very swift deflection and instantaneous, equally swift blow from a reverse half-turn is enough. You’re picking impetus up by rebounding. Do you see?”

“Mhm.”

“Speed, Ciri, not strength. Strength is necessary for a lumberjack axing trees in a forest. That’s why, admittedly, girls are rarely lumberjacks. Have you got that?”

“Mhm. Start the pendulums swinging.”

“Take a rest first.”

“I’m not tired.”

“You know how to now? The same steps, feint—”

“I know.”

“Attack!”

“Haaa! Ha! Haaaaa! Got you! I got you, you griffin! Geraaaalt! Did you see that?”

“Don’t yell. Control your breathing.”

“I did it! I really did it!! I managed it! Praise me, Geralt!”

“Well done, Ciri. Well done, girl.”

In the middle of February, the snow disappeared, whisked away by a warm wind blowing from the south, from the pass.

\* \* \*

Whatever was happening in the world, the witchers did not want to know.

In the evenings, consistently and determinedly, Triss guided the long conversations held in the dark hall, lit only by the bursts of flames in the great hearth, towards politics. The witchers’ reactions were always the same. Geralt, a hand on his forehead, did not say a word. Vesemir nodded, from time to time throwing in comments which amounted to little more than that “in his day” everything had been better, more logical, more honest and healthier. Eskel pretended to be polite, and neither smiled nor made eye contact, and even managed, very occasionally, to be interested in some issue or question of little importance. Coën yawned openly and looked at the ceiling, and Lambert did nothing to hide his disdain.

They did not want to know anything, they cared nothing for dilemmas which drove sleep from kings, wizards, rulers and leaders, or for the problems which made councils, circles and gatherings tremble and buzz. For them, nothing existed beyond the passes drowning in snow or beyond the Gwenllech river carrying ice-floats in its leaden current. For them, only Kaer Morhen existed, lost and lonely amongst the savage mountains.

That evening Triss was irritable and restless – perhaps it was the wind howling along the great castle’s walls. And that evening they were all oddly excited – the witchers, apart from Geralt, were unusually talkative. Quite obviously, they only spoke of one thing – spring. About their approaching departure for the Trail. About what the Trail would have in store for them – about vampires, wyverns, leshys, lycanthropes and basilisks.

This time it was Triss who began to yawn and stare at the ceiling. This time she was the one who remained silent – until Eskel turned to her with a question. A question which she had anticipated.

“And what is it really like in the south, on the Yaruga? Is it worth going there? We wouldn’t like to find ourselves in the middle of any trouble.”

“What do you mean by trouble?”

“Well, you know…” he stammered, “you keep telling us about the possibility of a new war… About constant fighting on the borders, about rebellions in the lands invaded by Nilfgaard. You said they’re saying the Nilfgaardians might cross the Yaruga again—”

“So what?” said Lambert. “They’ve been hitting, killing and striking against each other constantly for hundreds of years. It’s nothing to worry about. I’ve already decided – I’m going to the far South, to Sodden, Mahakam and Angren. It’s well known that monsters abound wherever armies have passed. The most money is always made in places like that.”

“True,” Coën acknowledged. “The neighbourhood grows deserted, only women who can’t fend for themselves remain in the villages… scores of children with no home or care, roaming around… Easy prey attracts monsters.”

“And the lord barons and village elders,” added Eskel, “have their heads full of the war and don’t have the time to defend their subjects. They have to hire us. It’s true. But from what Triss has been telling us all these evenings, it seems the conflict with Nilfgaard is more serious than that, not just some local little war. Is that right, Triss?”

“Even if it were the case,” said the magician spitefully, “surely that suits you? A serious, bloody war will lead to more deserted villages, more widowed women, simply hordes of orphaned children—”

“I can’t understand your sarcasm.” Geralt took his hand away from his forehead. “I really can’t, Triss.”

“Nor I, my child.” Vesemir raised his head. “What do you mean? Are you thinking about the widows and children? Lambert and Coën speak frivolously, as youngsters do, but it is not the words that are important. After all, they—”

“…they defend these children,” she interrupted crossly. “Yes, I know. From the werewolf who might kill two or three a year, while a Nilfgaardian foray can kill and burn an entire settlement in an hour. Yes, you defend orphans. While I fight that there should be as few of those orphans as possible. I’m fighting the cause, not the effect. That’s why I’m on Foltest of Temeria’s council and sit with Fercart and Keira Metz. We deliberate on how to stop war from breaking out and, should it come to it, how to defend ourselves. Because war is constantly hovering over us like a vulture. For you it’s an adventure. For me, it’s a game in which the stakes are survival. I’m involved in this game, and that’s why your indifference and frivolity hurt and insult me.”

Geralt sat up and looked at her.

“We’re witchers, Triss. Can’t you understand that?”

“What’s there to understand?” The enchantress tossed her chestnut mane back. “Everything’s crystal-clear. You’ve chosen a certain attitude to the world around you. The fact that this world might at any moment fall to pieces has a place in this choice. In mine, it doesn’t. That’s where we differ.”

“I’m not sure it’s only there we differ.”

“The world is falling to ruins,” she repeated. “We can watch it happen and do nothing. Or we can counteract it.”

“How?” He smiled derisively. “With our emotions?”

She did not answer, turning her face to the fire roaring in the hearth.

“The world is falling to ruins,” repeated Coën, nodding his head in feigned thoughtfulness. “How many times I’ve heard that.”

“Me, too,” Lambert grimaced. “And it’s not surprising – it’s a popular saying of late. It’s what kings say when it turns out that a modicum of brains is necessary to rule after all. It’s what merchants say when greed and stupidity have led them to bankruptcy. It’s what wizards say when they start to lose their influence on politics or income. And the person they’re speaking to should expect some sort of proposal straight away. So cut the introduction short, Triss, and present us with your proposition.”

“Verbal squabbling has never amused me,” the enchantress declared, gauging him with cold eyes, “or displays of eloquence which mock whoever you’re talking to. I don’t intend to take part in anything like that. You know only too well what I mean. You want to hide your heads in the sand, that’s your business. But coming from you, Geralt, it’s a great surprise.”

“Triss.” The white-haired witcher looked her straight in the eyes again. “What do you expect from me? To take an active part in the fight to save a world which is falling to pieces? Am I to enlist in the army and stop Nilfgaard? Should I, if it comes to another battle for Sodden, stand with you on the Hill, shoulder to shoulder, and fight for freedom?”

“I’d be proud,” she said quietly, lowering her head. “I’d be proud and happy to fight at your side.”

“I believe that. But I’m not gallant enough. Nor valiant enough. I’m not suited to be a soldier or a hero. And having an acute fear of pain, mutilation and death is not the only reason. You can’t stop a soldier from being frightened but you can give him motivation to help him overcome that fear. I have no such motivation. I can’t have. I’m a witcher: an artificially created mutant. I kill monsters for money. I defend children when their parents pay me to. If Nilfgaardian parents pay me, I’ll defend Nilfgaardian children. And even if the world lies in ruin – which does not seem likely to me – I’ll carry on killing monsters in the ruins of this world until some monster kills me. That is my fate, my reason, my life and my attitude to the world. And it is not what I chose. It was chosen for me.”

“You’re embittered,” she stated, tugging nervously at a strand of hair. “Or pretending to be. You forget that I know you, so don’t play the unfeeling mutant, devoid of a heart, of scruples and of his own free will, in front of me. And the reasons for your bitterness, I can guess and understand. Ciri’s prophecy, correct?”

“No, not correct,” he answered icily. “I see that you don’t know me at all. I’m afraid of death, just like everyone else, but I grew used to the idea of it a very long time ago – I’m not under any illusions. I’m not complaining about fate, Triss – this is plain, cold calculation. Statistics. No witcher has yet died of old age, lying in bed dictating his will. Not a single one. Ciri didn’t surprise or frighten me. I know I’m going to die in some cave which stinks of carcases, torn apart by a griffin, lamia or manticore. But I don’t want to die in a war, because they’re not my wars.”

“I’m surprised at you,” she replied sharply. “I’m surprised that you’re saying this, surprised by your lack of motivation, as you learnedly chose to describe your supercilious distance and indifference. You were at Sodden, Angren and Transriver. You know what happened to Cintra, know what befell Queen Calanthe and many thousands of people there. You know the hell Ciri went through, know why she cries out at night. And I know, too, because I was also there. I’m afraid of pain and death too, even more so now than I was then – I have good reason. As for motivation, it seems to me that back then I had just as little as you. Why should I, a magician, care about the fates of Sodden, Brugge, Cintra or other kingdoms? The problems of having more or less competent rulers? The interests of merchants and barons? I was a magician. I, too, could have said it wasn’t my war, that I could mix elixirs for the Nilfgaardians on the ruins of the world. But I stood on that Hill next to Vilgefortz, next to Artaud Terranova, next to Fercart, next to Enid Findabair and Philippa Eilhart, next to your Yennefer. Next to those who no longer exist – Coral, Yoël, Vanielle… There was a moment when out of sheer terror I forgot all my spells except for one – and thanks to that spell I could have teleported myself from that horrific place back home, to my tiny little tower in Maribor. There was a moment, when I threw up from fear, when Yennefer and Coral held me up by the shoulders and hair—”

“Stop. Please, stop.”

“No, Geralt. I won’t. After all, you want to know what happened there, on the Hill. So listen – there was a din and flames, there were flaming arrows and exploding balls of fire, there were screams and crashes, and I suddenly found myself on the ground on a pile of charred, smoking rags, and I realised that the pile of rags was Yoël and that thing next to her, that awful thing, that trunk with no arms and no legs which was screaming so horrifically was Coral. And I thought the blood in which I was lying was Coral’s blood. But it was my own. And then I saw what they had done to me, and I started to howl, howl like a beaten dog, like a battered child— Leave me alone! Don’t worry, I’m not going to cry. I’m not a little girl from a tiny tower in Maribor any more. Damn it, I’m Triss Merigold, the Fourteenth One Killed at Sodden. There are fourteen graves at the foot of the obelisk on the Hill, but only thirteen bodies. You’re amazed such a mistake could have been made? Most of the corpses were in hard-to-recognise pieces – no one identified them. The living were hard to account for, too. Of those who had known me well, Yennefer was the only one to survive, and Yennefer was blind. Others knew me fleetingly and always recognised me by my beautiful hair. And I, damn it, didn’t have it any more!”

Geralt held her closer. She no longer tried to push him away.

“They used the highest magics on us,” she continued in a muted voice, “spells, elixirs, amulets and artefacts. Nothing was left wanting for the wounded heroes of the Hill. We were cured, patched up, our former appearances returned to us, our hair and sight restored. You can hardly see the marks. But I will never wear a plunging neckline again, Geralt. Never.”

The witchers said nothing. Neither did Ciri, who had slipped into the hall without a sound and stopped at the threshold, hunching her shoulders and folding her arms.

“So,” the magician said after a while, “don’t talk to me about motivation. Before we stood on that Hill the Chapter simply told us: ‘That is what you have to do.’ Whose war was it? What were we defending there? The land? The borders? The people and their cottages? The interests of kings? The wizards’ influence and income? Order against Chaos? I don’t know! But we defended it because that’s what had to be done. And if the need arises, I’ll stand on the Hill again. Because if I don’t, it will make the sacrifices made the first time futile and unnecessary.”

“I’ll stand beside you!” shouted Ciri shrilly. “Just wait and see, I’ll stand with you! Those Nilfgaardians are going to pay for my grandmother, pay for everything… I haven’t forgotten!”

“Be quiet,” growled Lambert. “Don’t butt into grownups’ conversations—”

“Oh sure!” The girl stamped her foot and in her eyes a green fire kindled. “Why do you think I’m learning to fight with a sword? I want to kill him, that black knight from Cintra with wings on his helmet, for what he did to me, for making me afraid! And I’m going to kill him! That’s why I’m learning it!”

“And therefore you’ll stop learning,” said Geralt in a voice colder than the walls of Kaer Morhen. “Until you understand what a sword is, and what purpose it serves in a witcher’s hand, you will not pick one up. You are not learning in order to kill and be killed. You are not learning to kill out of fear and hatred, but in order to save lives. Your own and those of others.”

The girl bit her lip, shaking from agitation and anger.

“Understood?”

Ciri raised her head abruptly. “No.”

“Then you’ll never understand. Get out.”

“Geralt, I—”

“Get out.”

Ciri spun on her heel and stood still for a moment, undecided, as if waiting – waiting for something that could not happen. Then she ran swiftly up the stairs. They heard the door slam.

“Too severe, Wolf,” said Vesemir. “Much too severe. And you shouldn’t have done it in Triss’s presence. The emotional ties—”

“Don’t talk to me about emotions. I’ve had enough of all this talk about emotions!”

“And why is that?” The magician smiled derisively and coldly. “Why, Geralt? Ciri is normal. She has normal feelings, she accepts emotions naturally, takes them for what they really are. You, obviously, don’t understand and are therefore surprised by them. It surprises and irritates you. The fact that someone can experience normal love, normal hatred, normal fear, pain and regret, normal joy and normal sadness. That it is coolness, distance and indifference which are considered abnormal. Oh yes, Geralt, it annoys you, it annoys you so much that you are starting to think about Kaer Morhen’s vaults, about the Laboratorium, the dusty demi-johns full of mutagenic poisons—”

“Triss!” called Vesemir, gazing at Geralt’s face, suddenly grown pale. But the enchantress refused to be interrupted and spoke faster and faster, louder and louder.

“Who do you want to deceive, Geralt? Me? Her? Or maybe yourself? Maybe you don’t want to admit the truth, a truth everyone knows except you? Maybe you don’t want to accept the fact that human emotions and feelings weren’t killed in you by the elixirs and Grasses! You killed them! You killed them yourself! But don’t you dare kill them in the child!”

“Silence!” he shouted, leaping from the chair. “Silence, Merigold!”

He turned away and lowered his arms defencelessly. “Sorry,” he said quietly. “Forgive me, Triss.” He made for the stairs quickly, but the enchantress was up in a flash and threw herself at him, embracing him.

“You are not leaving here alone,” she whispered. “I won’t let you be alone. Not right now.”

They knew immediately where she had run to. Fine, wet snow had fallen that evening and had covered the forecourt with a thin, impeccably white carpet. In it they saw her footsteps.

Ciri was standing on the very summit of the ruined wall, as motionless as a statue. She was holding the sword above her right shoulder, the cross-guard at eye level. The fingers of her left hand were lightly touching the pommel.

On seeing them, the girl jumped, spun in a pirouette and landed softly in an identical but reverse mirror position.

“Ciri,” said the witcher, “come down, please.”

It seemed she hadn’t heard him. She did not move, not even a muscle. Triss, however, saw the reflection of the moon, thrown across her face by the blade, glisten silver over a stream of tears.

“No one’s going to take the sword away from me!” she shouted. “No one! Not even you!”

“Come down,” repeated Geralt.

She tossed her head defiantly and the next second leaped once more. A loose brick slipped beneath her foot with a grating sound. Ciri staggered, trying to find her balance. And failed.

The witcher jumped.

Triss raised her hand, opening her mouth to utter a formula for levitation. She knew she couldn’t do it in time. She knew that Geralt would not make it. It was impossible.

Geralt did make it.

He was forced down to the ground, thrown on his knees and back. He fell. But he did not let go of Ciri.

The magician approached them slowly. She heard the girl whisper and sniff. Geralt too was whispering. She could not make out the words. But she understood their meaning.

A warm wind howled in the crevices of the wall. The witcher raised his head.

“Spring,” he said quietly.

“Yes,” she acknowledged, swallowing. “There is still snow in the passes but in the valleys… In the valleys, it is already spring. Shall we leave, Geralt? You, Ciri and I?”

“Yes. It is high time.”

Upriver we saw their towns, as delicate as if they were woven from the morning mist out of which they loomed. It seemed as if they would disappear a moment later, blown away on the wind which rippled the surface of the water. There were little palaces, white as nenuphar flowers; there were little towers looking as though they were plaited out of ivy; there were bridges as airy as weeping willows. And there were other things for which we could find no word or name. Yet we already had names for everything which our eyes beheld in this new, reborn world. Suddenly, in the far recesses of our memories, we found the words for dragons and griffins, mermaids and nymphs, sylphs and dryads once more. For the white unicorns which drank from the river at dusk, inclining their slender necks towards the water. We named everything. And everything seemed to be close to our hearts, familiar to us, ours.

Apart from them. They, although so resembling us, were alien. So very alien that, for a long time, we could find no word for their strangeness.

Hen Gedymdeith, Elves and Humans

A good elf is a dead elf.

Marshal Milan Raupenneck

CHAPTER FOUR

The misfortune behaved in the eternal manner of misfortunes and hawks – it hung over them for some while waiting for an appropriate moment before it attacked. It chose its moment, when they had passed the few settlements on the Gwenllech and Upper Buina, passed Ard Carraigh and plunged into the forest below, deserted and intersected by gorges. Like a hawk striking, this misfortune’s aim was true. It fell accurately upon its victim, and its victim was Triss.

Initially it seemed nasty but not too serious, resembling an ordinary stomach upset. Geralt and Ciri discreetly tried to take no notice of the stops the enchantress’s ailment necessitated. Triss, as pale as death, beaded with sweat and painfully contorted, tried to continue riding for several hours longer, but at about midday, and having spent an abnormally long time in the bushes by the road, she was no longer in any condition to sit on a saddle. Ciri tried to help her but to no avail – the enchantress, unable to hold on to the horse’s mane, slid down her mount’s flank and collapsed to the ground.

They picked her up and laid her on a cloak. Geralt unstrapped the saddle-bags without a word, found a casket containing some magic elixirs, opened it and cursed. All the phials were identical and the mysterious signs on the seals meant nothing to him.

“Which one, Triss?”

“None of them,” she moaned, with both hands on her belly. “I can’t… I can’t take them.”

“What? Why?”

“I’m sensitised—”

“You? A magician?”

“I’m allergic!” she sobbed with helpless exasperation and despairing anger. “I always have been! I can’t tolerate elixirs! I can treat others with them but can only treat myself with amulets.”

“Where is the amulet?”

“I don’t know.” She ground her teeth. “I must have left it in Kaer Morhen. Or lost it—”

“Damn it. What are we going to do? Maybe you should cast a spell on yourself?”

“I’ve tried. And this is the result. I can’t concentrate because of this cramp…”

“Don’t cry.”

“Easy for you to say!”

The witcher got up, pulled his saddle-bags from Roach’s back and began rummaging through them. Triss curled up, her face contracted and her lips twisted in a spasm of pain.

“Ciri…”

“Yes, Triss?”

“Do you feel all right? No… unusual sensations?”

The girl shook her head.

“Maybe it’s food poisoning? What did I eat? But we all ate the same thing… Geralt! Wash your hands. Make sure Ciri washes her hands…”

“Calm down. Drink this.”

“What is it?”

“Ordinary soothing herbs. There’s next to no magic in them so they shouldn’t do you any harm. And they’ll relieve the cramps.”

“Geralt, the cramps… they’re nothing. But if I run a fever… It could be… dysentery. Or paratyphoid.”

“Aren’t you immune?”

Triss turned her head away without replying, bit her lip and curled up even tighter. The witcher did not pursue the question.

Having allowed her to rest for a while they hauled the enchantress onto Roach’s saddle. Geralt sat behind her, supporting her with both hands, while Ciri rode beside them, holding the reins and leading Triss’s gelding. They did not even manage a mile. The enchantress kept falling from Geralt’s hands; she could not stay in the saddle. Suddenly she started trembling convulsively, and instantly burned with a fever. The gastritis had grown worse. Geralt told himself that it was an allergic reaction to the traces of magic in his witcher’s elixir. He told himself that. But he did not believe it.

“Oh, sir,” said the sergeant, “you have not come at a good time. Indeed, you could not have arrived at a worse moment.”

The sergeant was right. Geralt could neither contest it nor argue.

The fort guarding the bridge, where there would usually be three soldiers, a stable-boy, a tollcollector and – at most – a few passers-by, was swarming with people. The witcher counted over thirty lightly armed soldiers wearing the colors of Kaedwen and a good fifty shield bearers, camping around the low palisade. Most of them were lying by campfires, in keeping with the old soldier’s rule which dictates that you sleep when you can and get up when you’re woken. Considerable activity could be seen through the thrown-open gates – there were a lot of people and horses inside the fort, too. At the top of the little leaning lookout tower two soldiers were on duty, with their crossbows permanently at the ready. On the worn bridge trampled by horses’ hooves, six peasant carts and two merchant wagons were parked. In the enclosure, their heads lowered sadly over the mud and manure, stood umpteen unyoked oxen.

“There was an assault on the fort – last night.” The sergeant anticipated his question. “We just got here in time with the relief troops – otherwise we’d have found nothing here but charred earth.”

“Who were your attackers? Bandits? Marauders?”

The soldier shook his head, spat and looked at Ciri and Triss, huddled in the saddle.

“Come inside,” he said, “your Enchantress is going to fall out of her saddle any minute now. We already have some wounded men there; one more won’t make much difference.”

In the yard, in an open, roofed shelter, lay several people with their wounds dressed with bloodied bandages. A little further, between the palisade fence and a wooden well with a sweep, Geralt made out six still bodies wrapped in sacking from which only pairs of feet in worn, dirty boots protruded.

“Lay her there, by the wounded men.” The soldier indicated the shelter. “Oh sir, it truly is bad luck she’s sick. A few of our men were hurt during the battle and we wouldn’t turn down a bit of magical assistance. When we pulled the arrow out of one of them its head stuck in his guts. The lad will peter out by the morning, he’ll peter out like anything… And the enchantress who could have saved him is tossing and turning with a fever and seeking help from us. A bad time, I say, a bad time—”

He broke off, seeing that the witcher could not tear his eyes from the sacking-wrapped bodies.

“Two guards from here, two of our relief troops and two… two of the others,” he said, pulling up a corner of the stiff material. “Take a look, if you wish.”

“Ciri, step away.”

“I want to see, too!” The girl leaned out around him, staring at the corpses with her mouth open.

“Step away, please. Take care of Triss.”

Ciri huffed, unwilling, but obeyed. Geralt came closer.

“Elves,” he noted, not hiding his surprise.

“Elves,” the soldier confirmed. “Scoia’tael.”

“Who?”

“Scoia’tael,” repeated the soldier. “Forest bands.”

“Strange name. It means ‘Squirrels’, if I’m not mistaken?”

“Yes, sir. Squirrels. That’s what they call themselves in elvish. Some say it’s because sometimes they wear squirrel tails on their fur caps and hats. Others say it’s because they live in the woods and eat nuts. They’re getting more and more troublesome, I tell you.”

Geralt shook his head. The soldier covered the bodies again and wiped his hands on his tunic.

“Come,” he said. “There’s no point standing here. I’ll take you to the commandant. Our corporal will take care of your patient if he can. He knows how to sear and stitch wounds and set bones so maybe he knows how to mix up medicines and what not too. He’s a brainy chap, a mountain-man. Come, witcher.”

In the dim, smoky toll-collector’s hut a lively and noisy discussion was underway. A knight with closely cropped hair wearing a habergeon and yellow surcoat was shouting at two merchants and a greeve, watched by the toll-collector, who had an indifferent, rather gloomy expression, and whose head was wrapped in bandages.

“I said, no!” The knight thumped his fist on the rickety table and stood up straight, adjusting the gorget across his chest. “Until the patrols return, you’re not going anywhere! You are not going to roam the highways!”

“I’s to be in Daevon in two days!” the greeve yelled, shoving a short notched stick with a symbol branded into it under the knight’s nose. “I have a transport to lead! The bailiff’s going to have me head if it be late! I’ll complain to the voivode!”

“Go ahead and complain,” sneered the knight. “But I advise you to line your breeches with straw before you do because the voivode can do a mean bit of arse-kicking. But for the time being I give the orders here – the voivode is far away and your bailiff means no more to me than a heap of dung. Hey, Unist! Who are you bringing here, sergeant? Another merchant?”

“No,” answered the sergeant reluctantly. “A witcher, sir. He goes by the name Geralt of Rivia.”

To Geralt’s astonishment, the knight gave a broad smile, approached and held a hand out in greeting.

“Geralt of Rivia,” he repeated, still smiling. “I have heard about you, and not just from gossip and hearsay. What brings you here?”

Geralt explained what brought him there. The knight’s smile faded.

“You have not come at a good time. Or to a good place. We are at war here, witcher. A band of Scoia’tael is doing the rounds and there was a skirmish yesterday. I am waiting here for relief forces and then we’ll start a counterattack.”

“You’re fighting elves?”

“Not just elves! Is it possible? Have you, a witcher, not heard of the Squirrels?”

“No. I haven’t.”

“Where have you been these past two years? Beyond the seas? Here, in Kaedwen, the Scoia’tael have made sure everybody’s talking about them, they’ve seen to it only too well. The first bands appeared just after the war with Nilfgaard broke out. The cursed non-humans took advantage of our difficulties. We were fighting in the south and they began a guerrilla campaign at our rear. They counted on the Nilfgaardians defeating us, started declaring it was the end of human rule and there would be a return to the old order. ‘Humans to the sea!’ That’s their battle cry, as they murder, burn and plunder!”

“It’s your own fault and your own problem,” the greeve commented glumly, tapping his thigh with the notched stick, a mark of his position. “Yours, and all the other noblemen and knights. You’re the ones who oppressed the non-humans, would not allow them their way of life, so now you pay for it. While we’ve always moved goods this way and no one stopped us. We didn’t need an army.”

“What’s true is true,” said one of the merchants who had been sitting silently on a bench. “The Squirrels are no fiercer than the bandits who used to roam these ways. And who did the elves take in hand first? The bandits!”

“What do I care if it’s a bandit or an elf who runs me through with an arrow from behind some bushes?” the toll-collector with the bandaged head said suddenly. “The thatch, if it’s set on fire above my head in the night, burns just the same. What difference does it make who lit the fire-brand? You say, sir, that the Scoia’tael are no worse than the bandits? You lie. The bandits wanted loot, but the elves are after human blood. Not everyone has ducats, but we all have blood running through our veins. You say it’s the nobility’s problem, greeve? That’s an even greater folly. What about the lumberjacks shot in the clearing, the tar-makers hacked to pieces at the Beeches, the refugee peasants from the burned down hamlets, did they hurt the non-humans? They lived and worked together, as neighbours, and suddenly they got an arrow in the back… And me? Never in my life have I harmed a non-human and look, my head is broken open by a dwarf’s cutlass. And if it were not for the soldiers you’re snapping at, I would be lying beneath an ell of turf—”

“Exactly!” The knight in the yellow surcoat thumped his fist against the table once again. “We are protecting your mangy skin, greeve, from those, as you call them, oppressed elves, who, according to you, we did not let live. But I will say something different – we have emboldened them too much. We tolerated them, treated them as humans, as equals, and now they are stabbing us in the back. Nilfgaard is paying them for it, I’d stake my life, and the savage elves from the mountains are furnishing them with arms. But their real support comes from those who always lived amongst us – from the elves, half-elves, dwarves, gnomes and halflings. They are the ones who are hiding them, feeding them, supplying them with volunteers—”

“Not all of them,” said another merchant, slim, with a delicate and noble face – in no way a typical merchant’s features. “The majority of non-humans condemn the Squirrels, sir, and want nothing to do with them. The majority of them are loyal, and sometimes pay a high price for that loyalty. Remember the burgomaster from Ban Ard. He was a half-elf who urged peace and co-operation. He was killed by an assassin’s arrow.”

“Aimed, no doubt, by a neighbour, some halfling or dwarf who also feigned loyalty,” scoffed the knight. “If you ask me, none of them are loyal! Every one of them— Hey there! Who are you?”

Geralt looked around. Ciri stood right behind him casting her huge emerald eyes over everyone. As far as the ability to move noiselessly was concerned, she had clearly made enormous progress.

“She’s with me,” he explained.

“Hmmm…” The knight measured Ciri with his eyes then turned back to the merchant with the noble face, evidently considering him the most serious partner in the discussion. “Yes, sir, do not talk to me about loyal non-humans. They are all our enemies, it’s just that some are better than others at pretending otherwise. Halflings, dwarves and gnomes have lived amongst us for centuries – in some sort of harmony, it would seem. But it sufficed for the elves to lift their heads, and all the others grabbed their weapons and took to the woods too. I tell you, it was a mistake to tolerate the free elves and dryads, with their forests and their mountain enclaves. It wasn’t enough for them, and now they’re yelling: ‘It’s our world! Begone, strangers!’. By the gods, we’ll show them who will be gone, and of which race even the slightest traces will be wiped away. We beat the hides off the Nilfgaardians and now we will do something about these rogue bands.”

“It’s not easy to catch an elf in the woods,” said the witcher. “Nor would I go after a gnome or dwarf in the mountains. How large are these units?”

“Bands,” corrected the knight. “They’re bands, witcher. They can count up to a hundred heads, sometimes more. They call each pack a ‘commando’. It’s a word borrowed from the gnomes. And in saying they are hard to catch you speak truly. Evidently you are a professional. Chasing them through the woods and thickets is senseless. The only way is to cut them off from their supplies, isolate them, starve them out. Seize the non-humans who are helping them firmly by the scruff of their necks. Those from the towns and settlements, villages and farms—”

“The problem is,” said the merchant with noble features, “that we still don’t know which of the non-humans are helping them and which aren’t.”

“Then we have to seize them all!”

“Ah.” The merchant smiled. “I understand. I’ve heard that somewhere before. Take everyone by the scruff of their neck and throw them down the mines, into enclosed camps, into quarries. Everyone. The innocent, too. Women and children. Is that right?”

The knight raised his head and slammed his hand down on his sword hilt.

“Just so, and no other way!” he said sharply. “You pity the children, yet you’re like a child yourself in this world, dear sir. A truce with Nilfgaard is a very fragile thing, like an egg-shell. If not today then the war might start anew tomorrow, and anything can happen in war. If they defeated us, what do you think would happen? I’ll tell you what – elven commandos would emerge from the forests, they’d emerge strong and numerous and these ‘loyal elements’ would instantly join them. Those loyal dwarves of yours, your friendly halflings, do you think they are going to talk of peace, of reconciliation then? No, sir. They’ll be tearing our guts out. Nilfgaard is going to deal with us through their hands. And they’ll drown us in the sea, just as they promise. No, sir, we must not pussyfoot around them. It’s either them or us. There’s no third way!”

The door of the hut squeaked and a soldier in a bloodied apron stood in the doorway.

“Forgive me for disturbing you,” he hawked. “Which of you, noble sirs, be the one who brought this sick woman here?”

“I did,” said the witcher. “What’s happened?”

“Come with me, please.”

They went out into the courtyard.

“It bodes not well with her, sir,” said the soldier, indicating Triss. “Firewater with pepper and saltpetre I gave her – but it be no good. I don’t really…”

Geralt made no comment because there was nothing to say. The magician, doubled over, was clear evidence of the fact that firewater with pepper and saltpetre was not something her stomach could tolerate.

“It could be some plague.” The soldier frowned. “Or that, what’s it called… Zintery. If it were to spread to our men—”

“She is a wizard,” protested the witcher. “Wizards don’t fall sick…”

“Just so,” the knight who had followed them out threw in cynically. “Yours, as I see, is just emanating good health. Geralt, listen to me. The woman needs help and we cannot offer such. Nor can I risk an epidemic amongst my troops. You understand.”

“I understand. I will leave immediately. I have no choice – I have to turn back towards Daevon or Ard Carraigh.”

“You won’t get far. The patrols have orders to stop everyone. Besides, it is dangerous. The Scoia’tael have gone in exactly that direction.”

“I’ll manage.”

“From what I’ve heard about you” – the knight’s lips twisted – “I have no doubt you would. But bear in mind you are not alone. You have a gravely sick woman on your shoulders and this brat…”

Ciri, who was trying to clean her dung-smeared boot on a ladder rung, raised her head. The knight cleared his throat and looked down. Geralt smiled faintly. Over the last two years Ciri had almost forgotten her origins and had almost entirely lost her royal manners and airs, but her glare, when she wanted, was very much like that of her grandmother. So much so that Queen Calanthe would no doubt have been very proud of her granddaughter.

“Yeeessss, what was I…” the knight stammered, tugging at his belt with embarrassment. “Geralt, sir, I know what you need to do. Cross beyond the river, south. You will catch up with a caravan which is following the trail. Night is just around the corner and the caravan is certain to stop for a rest. You will reach it by dawn.”

“What kind of caravan?”

“I don’t know.” The knight shrugged. “But it is not a merchant or an ordinary convoy. It’s too orderly, the wagons are all the same, all covered… A royal bailiff’s, no doubt. I allowed them to cross the bridge because they are following the Trail south, probably towards the fords on the Lixela.”

“Hmmm…” The witcher considered this, looking at Triss. “That would be on my way. But will I find help there?”

“Maybe yes,” the knight said coldly. “Maybe no. But you won’t find it here, that’s for sure.”

They did not hear or see him as he approached, engrossed as they were in conversation, sitting around a campfire which, with its yellow light, cadaverously illuminated the canvas of the wagons arranged in a circle. Geralt gently pulled up his mare and forced her to neigh loudly. He wanted to warn the caravan, which had set up camp for the night, wanted to temper the surprise of having visitors and avoid a nervous reaction. He knew from experience that the release mechanisms on crossbows did not like nervous moves.

The campers leaped up and, despite his warning, performed numerous agitated movements. Most of them, he saw at once, were dwarves. This reassured him somewhat – dwarves, although extremely irascible, usually asked questions first in situations such as these and only then aimed their crossbows.

“Who’s that?” shouted one of the dwarves hoarsely and with a swift, energetic move, prised an axe from a stump by the campfire. “Who goes there?”

“A friend.” The witcher dismounted.

“I wonder whose,” growled the dwarf. “Come closer. Hold your hands out so we can see them.”

Geralt approached, holding his hands out so they could be seen even by someone afflicted with conjunctivitis or night blindness.

“Closer.”

He obeyed. The dwarf lowered his axe and tilted his head a little.

“Either my eyes deceive me,” he said, “or it’s the witcher Geralt of Rivia. Or someone who looks damn like him.”

The fire suddenly shot up into flames, bursting into a golden brightness which drew faces and figures from the dark.

“Yarpen Zigrin,” declared Geralt, astonished. “None other than Yarpen Zigrin in person, complete with beard!”

“Ha!” The dwarf waved his axe as if it were an osier twig. The blade whirred in the air and cut into a stump with a dull thud. “Call the alarm off! This truly is a friend!”

The rest of the gathering visibly relaxed and Geralt thought he heard deep sighs of relief. The dwarf walked up to him, holding out his hand. His grip could easily rival a pair of iron pincers.

“Welcome, you warlock,” he said. “Wherever you’ve come from and wherever you’re going, welcome. Boys! Over here! You remember my boys, witcher? This is Yannick Brass, this one’s Xavier Moran and here’s Paulie Dahlberg and his brother Regan.”

Geralt didn’t remember any of them, and besides they all looked alike, bearded, stocky, practically square in their thick quilted jerkins.

“There were six of you,” one by one he squeezed the hard, gnarled hands offered him, “if I remember correctly.”

“You’ve a good memory,” laughed Yarpen Zigrin. “There were six of us, indeed. But Lucas Corto got married, settled down in Mahakam and dropped out of the company, the stupid oaf. Somehow we haven’t managed to find anybody worthy of his place yet. Pity, six is just right, not too many, not too few. To eat a calf, knock back a barrel, there’s nothing like six—”

“As I see,” with a nod Geralt indicated the rest of the group standing undecided by the wagons, “there are enough of you here to manage three calves, not to mention a quantity of poultry. What’s this gang of fellows you’re commanding, Yarpen?”

“I’m not the one in command. Allow me to introduce you. Forgive me, Wenck, for not doing so straight away but me and my boys have known Geralt of Rivia for a long time – we’ve a fair number of shared memories behind us. Geralt, this is Commissar Vilfrid Wenck, in the service of King Henselt of Ard Carraigh, the merciful ruler of Kaedwen.”

Vilfrid Wenck was tall, taller than Geralt and near twice the dwarf’s height. He wore an ordinary, simple outfit like that worn by greeves, bailiffs or mounted messengers, but there was a sharpness in his movements, a stiffness and sureness which the witcher knew and could faultlessly recognise, even at night, even in the meagre light of the campfire. That was how men accustomed to wearing hauberks and belts weighed down with weapons moved. Wenck was a professional soldier. Geralt was prepared to wager any sum on it. He shook the proffered hand and gave a little bow.

“Let’s sit down.” Yarpen indicated the stump where his mighty axe was still embedded. “Tell us what you’re doing in this neighbourhood, Geralt.”

“Looking for help. I’m journeying in a threesome with a woman and youngster. The woman is sick. Seriously sick. I caught up with you to ask for help.”

“Damn it, we don’t have a medic here.” The dwarf spat at the flaming logs. “Where have you left them?”

“Half a furlong from here, by the roadside.”

“You lead the way. Hey, you there! Three to the horses, saddle the spare mounts! Geralt, will your sick woman hold up in the saddle?”

“Not really. That’s why I had to leave her there.”

“Get the sheepskin, canvas sheet and two poles from the wagon! Quick!”

Vilfrid Wenck, crossing his arms, hawked loudly.

“We’re on the trail,” Yarpen Zigrin said sharply, without looking at him. “You don’t refuse help on the Trail.”

“Damn it.” Yarpen removed his palm from Triss’s forehead. “She’s as hot as a furnace. I don’t like it. What if it’s typhoid or dysentery?”

“It can’t be typhoid or dysentery,” Geralt lied with conviction, wrapping the horse blankets around the sick woman. “Wizards are immune to those diseases. It’s food poisoning, nothing contagious.”

“Hmm… Well, all right. I’ll rummage through the bags. I used to have some good medicine for the runs, maybe there’s still a little left.”

“Ciri,” muttered the witcher, passing her a sheepskin unstrapped from the horse, “go to sleep, you’re barely on your feet. No, not in the wagon. We’ll put Triss in the wagon. You lie down next to the fire.”

“No,” she protested quietly, watching the dwarf walk away. “I’m going to lie down next to her. When they see you keeping me away from her, they won’t believe you. They’ll think it’s contagious and chase us away, like the soldiers in the fort.”

“Geralt?” the enchantress moaned suddenly. “Where… are we?”

“Amongst friends.”

“I’m here,” said Ciri, stroking her chestnut hair. “I’m at your side. Don’t be afraid. You feel how warm it is here? A campfire’s burning and a dwarf is just going to bring some medicine for… For your stomach.”

“Geralt,” sobbed Triss, trying to disentangle herself from the blankets. “No… no magic elixirs, remember…”

“I remember. Lie peacefully.”

“I’ve got to… Oooh…”

The witcher leaned over without a word, picked up the enchantress together with her cocoon of caparisons and blankets, and marched to the woods, into the darkness. Ciri sighed.

She turned, hearing heavy panting. Behind the wagon appeared the dwarf, hefting a considerable bundle under his arm. The campfire flame gleamed on the blade of the axe behind his belt; the rivets on his heavy leather jerkin also glistened.

“Where’s the sick one?” he snarled. “Flown away on a broomstick?”

Ciri pointed to the darkness.

“Right.” The dwarf nodded. “I know the pain and I’ve known the same nasty complaint. When I was younger I used to eat everything I managed to find or catch or cut down, so I got food poisoning many a time. Who is she, this Enchantress?”

“Triss Merigold.”

“I don’t know her, never heard of her. I rarely have anything to do with the Brotherhood anyway. Well, but it’s polite to introduce oneself. I’m called Yarpen Zigrin. And what are you called, little goose?”

“Something other than Little Goose,” snarled Ciri with a gleam in her eyes.

The dwarf chuckled and bared his teeth.

“Ah.” He bowed with exaggeration. “I beg your forgiveness. I didn’t recognise you in the darkness. This isn’t a goose but a noble young lady. I fall at your feet. What is the young lady’s name, if it’s no secret?”

“It’s no secret. I’m Ciri.”

“Ciri. Aha. And who is the young lady?”

“That,” Ciri turned her nose up proudly, “is a secret.”

Yarpen snorted again.

“The young lady’s little tongue is as sharp as a wasp. If the young lady will deign to forgive me, I’ve brought the medicine and a little food. Will the young lady accept it or will she send the old boor, Yarpen Zigrin, away?”

“I’m sorry…” Ciri had second thoughts and lowered her head. “Triss really does need help, Master… Zigrin. She’s very sick. Thank you for the medicine.”

“It’s nothing.” The dwarf bared his teeth again and patted her shoulder amicably. “Come on, Ciri, you help me. The medicine has to be prepared. We’ll roll some pellets according to my grandmother’s recipe. No disease sitting in the guts will resist these kernels.”

He unwrapped the bundle, extracted something shaped like a piece of turf and a small clay vessel. Ciri approached, curious.

“You should know, Ciri,” said Yarpen, “that my grandmother knew her medicine like nobody’s business. Unfortunately, she believed that the source of most disease is idleness, and idleness is best cured through the application of a stick. As far as my siblings and I were concerned, she chiefly used this cure preventively. She beat us for anything and for nothing. She was a rare old hag. And once when, out of the blue, she gave me a chunk of bread with dripping and sugar, it was such a surprise that I dropped it in astonishment, dripping down. So my gran gave me a thrashing, the nasty old bitch. And then she gave me another chunk of bread, only without the sugar.”

“My grandmother,” Ciri nodded in understanding, “thrashed me once, too. With a switch.”

“A switch?” The dwarf laughed. “Mine whacked me once with a pickaxe handle. But that’s enough reminiscing, we have to roll the pellets. Here, tear this up and mould it into little balls.”

“What is it? It’s sticky and messy… Eeeuuggh… What a stink!”

“It’s mouldy oil-meal bread. Excellent medicine. Roll it into little balls. Smaller, smaller, they’re for a magician, not a cow. Give me one. Good. Now we’re going to roll the ball in medicine.”

“Eeeeuuuugggghh!”

“Stinks?” The dwarf brought his upturned nose closer to the clay pot. “Impossible. Crushed garlic and bitter salt has no right to stink, even if it’s a hundred years old.”

“It’s foul, uugghh. Triss won’t eat that!”

“We’ll use my grandmother’s method. You squeeze her nose and I’ll shove the pellets in.”

“Yarpen,” Geralt hissed, emerging abruptly from the darkness with the magician in his arms. “Watch out or I’ll shove something down you.”

“It’s medicine!” The dwarf took offence. “It helps! Mould, garlic…”

“Yes,” moaned Triss weakly from the depths of her cocoon. “It’s true… Geralt, it really ought to help…”

“See?” Yarpen nudged Geralt with his elbow, turning his beard up proudly and pointing to Triss, who swallowed the pellets with a martyred expression. “A wise magician. Knows what’s good for her.”

“What are you saying, Triss?” The witcher leaned over. “Ah, I see. Yarpen, do you have any angelica? Or saffron?”

“I’ll have a look, and ask around. I’ve brought you some water and a little food—”

“Thank you. But they both need rest above all. Ciri, lie down.”

“I’ll just make up a compress for Triss—”

“I’ll do it myself. Yarpen, I’d like to talk to you.”

“Come to the fire. We’ll broach a barrel—”

“I want to talk to you. I don’t need an audience. Quite the contrary.”

“Of course. I’m listening.”

“What sort of convoy is this?”

The dwarf raised his small, piercing eyes at him.

“The king’s service,” he said slowly and emphatically.

“That’s what I thought.” The witcher held the gaze. “Yarpen, I’m not asking out of any inappropriate curiosity.”

“I know. And I also know what you mean. But this convoy is… hmm… special.”

“So what are you transporting?”

“Salt fish,” said Yarpen casually, and proceeded to embellish his lie without batting an eyelid. “Fodder, tools, harnesses, various odds and ends for the army. Wenck is a quartermaster to the king’s army.”

“If he’s quartermaster then I’m a druid,” smiled Geralt. “But that’s your affair – I’m not in the habit of poking my nose into other people’s secrets. But you can see the state Triss is in. Let us join you, Yarpen, let us put her in one of the wagons. Just for a few days. I’m not asking where you’re going because this trail goes straight to the south without forking until past the Lixela and it’s a ten-day journey to the Lixela. By that time the fever will have subsided and Triss will be able to ride a horse. And even if she isn’t then I’ll stop in a town beyond the river. Ten days in a wagon, well covered, hot food… Please.”

“I don’t give the orders here. Wenck does.”

“I don’t believe you lack influence over him. Not in a convoy primarily made up of dwarves. Of course he has to bear you in mind.”

“Who is this Triss to you?”

“What difference does it make in this situation?”

“In this situation – none. I asked out of an inappropriate curiosity born of the desire to start new rumours going around the inns. But be that as it may, you’re mighty attracted to this enchantress, Geralt.”

The witcher smiled sadly.

“And the girl?” Yarpen indicated Ciri with his head as she wriggled under the sheepskin. “Yours?”

“Mine,” he replied without thinking. “Mine, Zigrin.”

The dawn was grey, wet, and smelled of night rain and morning mist. Ciri felt she had slept no more than a few minutes, as though she had been woken up the very minute she laid her head down on the sacks heaped on the wagon.

Geralt was just settling Triss down next to her, having brought her in from another enforced expedition into the woods. The rugs cocooning the enchantress sparkled with dew. Geralt had dark circles under his eyes. Ciri knew he had not closed them for an instant – Triss had run a fever through the night and suffered greatly.

“Did I wake you? Sorry. Sleep, Ciri. It’s still early.”

“What’s happening with Triss? How is she?”

“Better,” moaned the magician. “Better, but… Listen, Geralt… I’d like to—”

“Yes?” The witcher leaned over but Triss was already asleep. He straightened himself, stretched.

“Geralt,” whispered Ciri, “are they going to let us travel on the wagon?”

“We’ll see.” He bit his lip. “Sleep while you can. Rest.”

He jumped down off the wagon. Ciri heard the sound of the camp packing up – horses stamping, harnesses ringing, poles squeaking, swingle-trees grating, and talking and cursing. And then, nearby, Yarpen Zigrin’s hoarse voice and the calm voice of the tall man called Wenck. And the cold voice of Geralt. She raised herself and carefully peered out from behind the canvas.

“I have no categorical interdictions on this matter,” declared Wenck.

“Excellent.” The dwarf brightened. “So the matter’s settled?”

The commissar raised his hand a little, indicating that he had not yet finished. He was silent for a while, and Geralt and Yarpin waited patiently.

“Nevertheless,” Wenck said finally, “when it comes to the safe arrival of this caravan, it’s my head on the line.”

Again he said nothing. This time no one interrupted. There was no question about it – one had to get used to long intervals between sentences when speaking to the commissar.

“For its safe arrival,” he continued after a moment. “And for its timely arrival. Caring for this sick woman might slow down the march.”

“We’re ahead of schedule on the route,” Yarpen assured him, after a significant pause. “We’re ahead of time, Wenck, sir, we won’t miss the deadline. And as for safety… I don’t think the witcher’s company will harm that. The Trail leads through the woods right up to the Lixela, and to the right and left there’s a wild forest. And rumour has it all sorts of evil creatures roam the forest.”

“Indeed,” the commissar agreed. Looking the witcher straight in the eye, he seemed to be weighing out every single word. “One can come across certain evil creatures in Kaedwen forests, lately incited by other evil creatures. They could jeopardise our safety. King Henselt, knowing this, empowered me to recruit volunteers to join our armed escort. Geralt? That would solve your problem.”

The witcher’s silence lasted a long while, longer than Wenck’s entire speech, interspersed though it had been with regular pauses.

“No,” he said finally. “No, Wenck. Let us put this clearly. I am prepared to repay the help given Lady Merigold, but not in this manner. I can groom the horses, carry water and firewood, even cook. But I will not enter the king’s service as a soldier. Please don’t count on my sword. I have no intention of killing those, as you call them, evil creatures on the order of other creatures whom I do not consider to be any better.”

Ciri heard Yarpen Zigrin hiss loudly and cough into his rolled-up sleeve. Wenck stared at the witcher calmly.

“I see,” he stated dryly. “I like clear situations. All right then. Zigrin, see to it that the speed of our progress does not slow. As for you, Geralt… I know you will prove to be useful and helpful in a way you deem fit. It would be an affront to both of us if I were to treat your good stead as payment for aid offered to a suffering woman. Is she feeling better today?”

The witcher gave a nod which seemed, to Ciri, to be somewhat deeper and politer than usual. Wenck’s expression did not change.

“That pleases me,” he said after a normal pause. “In taking Lady Merigold aboard a wagon in my convoy I take on the responsibility for her health, comfort and safety. Zigrin, give the command to march out.”

“Wenck.”

“Yes, Geralt?”

“Thank you.”

The commissar bowed his head, a bit more deeply and politely, it seemed to Ciri, than the usual, perfunctory politeness required.

Yarpen Zigrin ran the length of the column, giving orders and instructions loudly, after which he clambered onto the coachman’s box, shouted and whipped the horses with the reins. The wagon jolted and rattled along the forest trail. The bump woke Triss up but Ciri reassured her and changed the compress on her forehead. The rattling had a soporific effect and the magician was soon asleep; Ciri, too, fell to dozing.

When she woke the sun was already high. She peered out between the barrels and packages. The wagon she was in was at the vanguard of the convoy. The one following them was being driven by a dwarf with a red kerchief tied around his neck. From conversations between the dwarves, she had gathered that his name was Paulie Dahlberg. Next to him sat his brother Regan. She also saw Wenck riding a horse, in the company of two bailiffs.

Roach, Geralt’s mare, tethered to the wagon, greeted her with a quiet neigh. She couldn’t see her chestnut anywhere or Triss’s dun. No doubt they were at the rear, with the convoy’s spare horses.

Geralt was sitting on the coachman’s box next to Yarpen. They were talking quietly, drinking beer from a barrel perched between them. Ciri pricked up her ears but soon grew bored – the discussion concerned politics and was mainly about King Henselt’s intentions and plans, and some special service or missions to do with secretly aiding his neighbour, King Demawend of Aedirn, who was being threatened by war. Geralt expressed interest about how five wagons of salted fish could help Aedirn’s defence. Yarpen, ignoring the gibe in Geralt’s voice, explained that some species of fish were so valuable that a few wagon-loads would suffice to pay an armoured company for a year, and each new armoured company was a considerable help. Geralt was surprised that the aid had to be quite so secretive, to which the dwarf replied that was why the secret was a secret.

Triss tossed in her sleep, shook the compress off and talked indistinctly to herself. She demanded that someone called Kevyn kept his hands to himself, and immediately after that declared that destiny cannot be avoided. Finally, having stated that everyone, absolutely everyone, is a mutant to a certain degree, she fell into a peaceful sleep.

Ciri also felt sleepy but was brought to her senses by Yarpen’s chuckle, as he reminded Geralt of their past adventures. This one concerned a hunt for a golden dragon who instead of allowing itself to be hunted down had counted the hunters’ bones and then eaten a cobbler called Goatmuncher. Ciri began to listen with greater interest.

Geralt asked about what had happened to the Slashers but Yarpen didn’t know. Yarpen, in turn, was curious about a woman called Yennefer, at which Geralt grew oddly uncommunicative. The dwarf drank more beer and started to complain that Yennefer still bore him a grudge although a good few years had gone by since those days.

“I came across her at the market in Gors Velen,” he recounted. “She barely noticed me – she spat like a she-cat and insulted my deceased mother horribly. I fled for all I was worth, but she shouted after me that she’d catch up with me one day and make grass grow out of my arse.”

Ciri giggled, imagining Yarpen with the grass. Geralt grunted something about women and their impulsive natures – which the dwarf considered far too mild a description for maliciousness, obstinacy and vindictiveness. Geralt did not take up the subject and Ciri fell into dozing once more.

This time she was woken by raised voices. Yarpen’s voice to be exact – he was yelling.

“Oh yes! So you know! That’s what I’ve decided!”

“Quieter,” said the witcher calmly. “There’s a sick woman in the wagon. Understand, I’m not criticising your decisions or your resolutions…”

“No, of course not,” the dwarf interrupted sarcastically. “You’re just smiling knowingly about them.”

“Yarpen, I’m warning you, as one friend to another: both sides despise those who sit on the fence, or at best they treat them with suspicion.”

“I’m not sitting. I’m unambiguously declaring myself to be on one side.”

“But you’ll always remain a dwarf for that side. Someone who’s different. An outsider. While for the other side…”

He broke off.

“Well!” growled Yarpen, turning away. “Well, go on, what are you waiting for? Call me a traitor and a dog on a human leash who for a handful of silver and a bowl of lousy food, is prepared to be set against his rebelling kinsmen who are fighting for freedom. Well, go on, spit it out. I don’t like insinuations.”

“No, Yarpen,” said Geralt quietly. “No. I’m not going to spit anything out.”

“Ah, you’re not?” The dwarf whipped the horses. “You don’t feel like it? You prefer to stare and smile? Not a word to me, eh? But you could say it to Wenck! ‘Please don’t count on my sword.’ Oh, so haughtily, nobly and proudly said! Shove your haughtiness up a dog’s arse, and your bloody pride with it!”

“I just wanted to be honest. I don’t want to get mixed up in this conflict. I want to remain neutral.”

“It’s impossible!” yelled Yarpen. “It’s impossible to remain neutral, don’t you understand that? No, you don’t understand anything. Oh, get off my wagon, get on your horse, and get out of my sight, with your arrogant neutrality. You get on my nerves.”

Geralt turned away. Ciri held her breath in anticipation. But the witcher didn’t say a word. He stood and jumped from the wagon, swiftly, softly and nimbly. Yarpen waited for him to untether his mare from the ladder, then whipped his horses once again, growling something incomprehensible, sounding terrifying under his breath.

She stood up to jump down too, and find her chestnut. The dwarf turned and measured her with a reluctant eye.

“And you’re just a nuisance, too, little madam,” he snorted angrily. “All we need are ladies and girls, damn it. I can’t even take a piss from the box – I have to stop the cart and go into the bushes!”

Ciri put her hands on her hips, shook her ashen fringe and turned up her nose.

“Is that so?” she shrilled, enraged. “Drink less beer, Zigrin, and then you won’t have to!”

“My beer’s none of your shitin’ business, you chit!”

“Don’t yell, Triss has just fallen asleep!”

“It’s my wagon! I’ll yell if I want to!”

“Stumpy!”

“What? You impertinent brat!”

“Stump!”

“I’ll show you stump… Oh, damn it! Pprrr!”

The dwarf leaned far back, pulling at the reins at the very last moment, just as the two horses were on the point of stepping over a log blocking their way. Yarpen stood up in the box and, swearing in both human and dwarvish, whistling and roaring, brought the cart to a halt. Dwarves and humans alike, leaping from their wagons, ran up and helped lead the horses to the clear path, tugging them on by their halters and harnesses.

“Dozing off, eh Yarpen?” growled Paulie Dahlberg as he approached. “Bloody hell, if you’d ridden over that the axle would be done for, and the wheels shattered to hell. Damn it, what were you—”

“Piss off, Paulie!” roared Yarpen Zigrin and furiously lashed the horses’ hindquarters with the reins.

“You were lucky,” said Ciri, ever so sweetly, squeezing onto the box next to the dwarf. “As you can see, it’s better to have a witcher-girl on your wagon than to travel alone. I warned you just in time. But if you’d been in the middle of pissing from the box and ridden onto that log, well, well. It’s scary to think what might have happened—”

“Are you going to be quiet?”

“I’m not saying any more. Not a word.”

She lasted less than a minute.

“Zigrin, sir?”

“I’m not a sir.” The dwarf nudged her with his elbow and bared his teeth. “I’m Yarpen. Is that clear? We’ll lead the horses together, right?”

“Right. Can I hold the reins?”

“If you must. Wait, not like that. Pass them over your index finger and hold them down with your thumb, like this. The same with the left. Don’t tug them, don’t pull too hard.”

“Is that right?”

“Right.”

“Yarpen?”

“Huh?”

“What does it mean, ‘remain neutral’”

“To be indifferent,” he muttered reluctantly. “Don’t let the reins hang down. Pull the left one closer to yourself!”

“What’s indifferent? Indifferent to what?”

The dwarf leaned far out and spat under the wagon.

“If the Scoia’tael attack us, your Geralt intends to stand by and look calmly on as they cut our throats. You’ll probably stand next to him, because it’ll be a demonstration class. Today’s subject: the witcher’s behaviour in the face of conflict between intelligent races.”

“I don’t understand.”

“That doesn’t surprise me in the least.”

“Is that why you quarrelled with him and were angry? Who are these Scoia’tael anyway? These… Squirrels?”

“Ciri,” Yarpen tussled his beard violently, “these aren’t matters for the minds of little girls.”

“Aha, now you’re angry at me. I’m not little at all. I heard what the soldiers in the fort said about the Squirrels. I saw… I saw two dead elves. And the knight said they also kill. And that it’s not just elves amongst them. There are dwarves too.”

“I know,” said Yarpen sourly.

“And you’re a dwarf.”

“There’s no doubt about that.”

“So why are you afraid of the Squirrels? It seems they only fight humans.”

“It’s not so simple as that.” He grew solemn. “Unfortunately.”

Ciri stayed silent for a long time, biting her lower lip and wrinkling her nose.

“Now I know,” she said suddenly. “The Squirrels are fighting for freedom. And although you’re a dwarf, you’re King Henselt’s special secret servant on a human leash.”

Yarpen snorted, wiped his nose on his sleeve and leaned out of the box to check that Wenck had not ridden up too close. But the commissar was far away, engaged in conversation with Geralt.

“You’ve got pretty good hearing, girl, like a marmot.” He grinned broadly. “You’re also a bit too bright for someone destined to give birth, cook and spin. You think you know everything, don’t you? That’s because you’re a brat. Don’t pull silly faces. Faces like that don’t make you look any older, just uglier than usual. You’ve grasped the nature of the Scoia’taels quickly, you like the slogans. You know why you understand them so well? Because the Scoia’taels are brats too. They’re little snotheads who don’t understand that they’re being egged on, that someone’s taking advantage of their childish stupidity by feeding them slogans about freedom.”

“But they really are fighting for freedom.” Ciri raised her head and gazed at the dwarf with wide-open green eyes. “Like the dryads in the Brokilon woods. They kill people because people… some people are harming them. Because this used to be your country, the dwarves’ and the elves’ and those… halflings’, gnomes’ and other… And now there are people here so the elves—”

“Elves!” snorted Yarpen. “They – to be accurate – happen to be strangers just as much as you humans, although they arrived in their white ships a good thousand years before you. Now they’re competing with each other to offer us friendship, suddenly we’re all brothers, now they’re grinning and saying: ‘we, kinsmen’, ‘we, the Elder Races’. But before, shi— Hm, hm… Before, their arrows used to whistle past our ears when we—”

“So the first on earth were dwarves?”

“Gnomes, to be honest. As far as this part of the world is concerned – because the world is unimaginably huge, Ciri.”

“I know. I saw a map—”

“You couldn’t have. No one’s drawn a map like that, and I doubt they will in the near future. No one knows what exists beyond the Mountains of Fire and the Great Sea. Even elves, although they claim they know everything. They know shit all, I tell you.”

“Hmm… But now… There are far more people than… Than there are you.”

“Because you multiply like rabbits.” The dwarf ground his teeth. “You’d do nothing but screw day in day out, without discrimination, with just anyone and anywhere. And it’s enough for your women to just sit on a man’s trousers and it makes their bellies swell… Why have you gone so red, crimson as a poppy? You wanted to know, didn’t you? So you’ve got the honest truth and faithful history of a world where he who shatters the skulls of others most efficiently and swells women’s bellies fastest, reigns. And it’s just as hard to compete with you people in murdering as it is in screwing—”

“Yarpen,” said Geralt coldly, riding up on Roach. “Restrain yourself a little, if you please, with your choice of words. And Ciri, stop playing at being a coachwoman and have a care for Triss, check if she’s awake and needs anything.”

“I’ve been awake for a long time,” the magician said weakly from the depths of the wagon. “But I didn’t want to… interrupt this interesting conversation. Don’t disturb them, Geralt. I’d like… to learn more about the role of screwing in the evolution of society.”

“Can I heat some water? Triss wants to wash.”

“Go ahead,” agreed Yarpen Zigrin. “Xavier, take the spit off the fire, our hare’s had enough. Hand me the cauldron, Ciri. Oh, look at you, it’s full to the brim! Did you lug this great weight from the stream by yourself?”

“I’m strong.”

The elder of the Dahlberg brothers burst out laughing.

“Don’t judge her by appearances, Paulie,” said Yarpen seriously as he skilfully divided the roasted grey hare into portions. “There’s nothing to laugh at here. She’s skinny but I can see she’s a robust and resilient lass. She’s like a leather belt: thin, but it can’t be torn apart in your hands. And if you were to hang yourself on it, it would bear your weight, too.”

No one laughed. Ciri squatted next to the dwarves sprawled around the fire. This time Yarpen Zigrin and his four “boys” had lit their own fire at the camp because they did not intend to share the hare which Xavier Moran had shot. For them alone there was just enough for one, at most two, mouthfuls each.

“Add some wood to the fire,” said Yarpen, licking his fingers. “The water will heat quicker.”

“That water’s a stupid idea,” stated Regan Dahlberg, spitting out a bone. “Washing can only harm you when you’re sick. When you’re healthy, too, come to that. You remember old Schrader? His wife once told him to wash, and Schrader went and died soon afterwards.”

“Because a rabid dog bit him.”

“If he hadn’t washed, the dog wouldn’t have bitten him.”

“I think,” said Ciri, checking the temperature of the water in the cauldron with her finger, “it’s excessive to wash every day too. But Triss asked for it – she even started crying once… So Geralt and I—”

“We know.” The elder Dahlberg nodded. “But that a witcher should… I’m constantly amazed. Hey, Zigrin, if you had a woman would you wash her and comb her hair? Would you carry her into the bushes if she had to—”

“Shut up, Paulie.” Yarpen cut him short. “Don’t say anything against that witcher, because he’s a good fellow.”

“Am I saying anything? I’m only surprised—”

“Triss,” Ciri butted in cheekily, “is not his woman.”

“I’m all the more surprised.”

“You’re all the more a blockhead, you mean,” Yarpen summed up. “Ciri, pour a bit of water in to boil. We’ll infuse some more saffron and poppy seeds for the magician. She felt better today, eh?”

“Probably did,” murmured Yannick Brass. “We only had to stop the convoy six times for her. I know it wouldn’t do to deny aid on the trail, and he’s a prick who thinks otherwise. And he who denies it would be an archprick and base son-of-a-bitch. But we’ve been in these woods too long, far too long, I tell you. We’re tempting fate, damn it, we’re tempting fate too much, boys. It’s not safe here. The Scoia’tael—”

“Spit that word out, Yannick.”

“Ptoo, ptoo. Yarpen, fighting doesn’t frighten me, and a bit of blood’s nothing new but… If it comes to fighting our own… Damn it! Why did this happen to us? This friggin’ load ought to be transported by a hundred friggin’ cavalrymen, not us! The devil take those know-alls from Ard Carraigh, may they—”

“Shut up, I said. And pass me the pot of kasha. The hare was a snack, damn it, now we have to eat something. Ciri, will you eat with us?”

“Of course.”

For a long while all that could be heard was the smacking of lips, munching, and the crunch of wooden spoons hitting the pot.

“Pox on it,” said Paulie Dahlberg and gave a long burp. “I could still eat some more.”

“Me, too,” declared Ciri and burped too, delighted by the dwarves’ unpretentious manners.

“As long as it’s not kasha,” said Xavier Moran. “I can’t stomach those milled oats any more. I’ve gone off salted meat, too.”

“So gorge yourself on grass, if you’ve got such delicate taste-buds.”

“Or rip the bark off the birch with your teeth. Beavers do it and survive.”

“A beaver – now that’s something I could eat.”

“As for me, a fish.” Paulie lost himself in dreams as he crunched on a husk pulled from his beard. “I’ve a fancy for a fish, I can tell you.”

“So let’s catch some fish.”

“Where?” growled Yannick Brass. “In the bushes?”

“In the stream.”

“Some stream. You can piss to the other side. What sort of fish could be in there?”

“There are fish.” Ciri licked her spoon clean and slipped it into the top of her boot. “I saw them when I went to get the water. But they’re sick or something, those fish. They’ve got a rash. Black and red spots—”

“Trout!” roared Paulie, spitting crumbs of husk. “Well, boys, to the stream double-quick! Regan! Get your breeches down! We’ll turn them into a fishing-trap.”

“Why mine?”

“Pull them off, at the double, or I’ll wallop you, snothead! Didn’t mother say you have to listen to me?”

“Hurry up if you want to go fishing because dusk is just round the corner,” said Yarpen. “Ciri, is the water hot yet? Leave it, leave it, you’ll burn yourself and get dirty from the cauldron. I know you’re strong but let me – I’ll carry it.”

Geralt was already waiting for them; they could see his white hair through the gap in the canvas covering the wagon from afar. The dwarf poured the water into the bucket.

“Need any help, witcher?”

“No, thank you, Yarpen. Ciri will help.”

Triss was no longer running a high temperature but she was extremely weak. Geralt and Ciri were, by now, efficient at undressing and washing her. They had also learned to temper her ambitious but, at present, unrealistic attempts to manage on her own. They coped exceptionally well – he supported the enchantress in his arms, Ciri washed and dried her. Only one thing had started to surprise and annoy Ciri – Triss, in her opinion, snuggled up to Geralt too tightly. This time she was even trying to kiss him.

Geralt indicated the magician’s saddle-bags with his head. Ciri understood immediately because this, too, was part of the ritual – Triss always demanded to have her hair combed. She found the comb and knelt down beside her. Triss, lowering her head towards her, put her arms around the witcher. In Ciri’s opinion, definitely a little too tightly.

“Oh, Geralt,” she sobbed. “I so regret… I so regret that what was between us—”

“Triss, please.”

“…it should have happened… now. When I’m better… It would be entirely different… I could… I could even—”

“Triss.”

“I envy Yennefer… I envy her you—”

“Ciri, step out.”

“But—”

“Go, please.”

She jumped out of the wagon and straight onto Yarpen who was waiting, leaning against a wheel and pensively chewing a blade of grass. The dwarf put his arm around her. He did not need to lean over in order to do so, as Geralt did. He was no taller than her.

“Never make the same mistake, little witcher-girl,” he murmured, indicating the wagon with his eyes. “If someone shows you compassion, sympathy and dedication, if they surprise you with integrity of character, value it but don’t mistake it for… something else.”

“It’s not nice to eavesdrop.”

“I know. And it’s dangerous. I only just managed to jump aside when you threw out the suds from the bucket. Come on, let’s go and see how many trout have jumped into Regan’s breeches.”

“Yarpen?”

“Huh?”

“I like you.”

“And I like you, kid.”

“But you’re a dwarf. And I’m not.”

“And what diff— Ah, the Scoia’tael. You’re thinking about the Squirrels, aren’t you? It’s not giving you any peace, is it?”

Ciri freed herself from his heavy arm.

“Nor you,” she said. “Nor any of the others. I can plainly see that.”

The dwarf said nothing.

“Yarpen?”

“Yes?”

“Who’s right? The Squirrels or you? Geralt wants to be… neutral. You serve King Henselt even though you’re a dwarf. And the knight in the fort shouted that everybody’s our enemy and that everyone’s got to be… Everyone. Even the children. Why, Yarpen? Who’s right?”

“I don’t know,” said the dwarf with some effort. “I’m not omniscient. I’m doing what I think right. The Squirrels have taken up their weapons and gone into the woods. ‘Humans to the sea,’ they’re shouting, not realising that their catchy slogan was fed them by Nilfgaardian emissaries. Not understanding that the slogan is not aimed at them but plainly at humans, that it’s meant to ignite human hatred, not fire young elves to battle. I understood – that’s why I consider the Scoia’tael’s actions criminally stupid. What to do? Maybe in a few years time I’ll be called a traitor who sold out and they’ll be heroes… Our history, the history of our world, has seen events turn out like that.”

He fell silent, ruffled his beard. Ciri also remained silent.

“Elirena…” he muttered suddenly. “If Elirena was a hero, if what she did is heroism, then that’s just too bad. Let them call me a traitor and a coward. Because I, Yarpen Zigrin, coward, traitor and renegade, state that we should not kill each other. I state that we ought to live. Live in such a way that we don’t, later, have to ask anyone for forgiveness. The heroic Elirena… She had to ask. Forgive me, she begged, forgive me. To hell with that! It’s better to die than to live in the knowledge that you’ve done something that needs forgiveness.”

Again he fell quiet. Ciri did not ask the questions pressing to her lips. She instinctively felt she should not.

“We have to live next to each other,” Yarpen continued. “We and you, humans. Because we simply don’t have any other option. We’ve known this for two hundred years and we’ve been working towards it for over a hundred. You want to know why I entered King Henselt’s service, why I made such a decision? I can’t allow all that work to go to waste. For over a hundred years we’ve been trying to come to terms with the humans. The halflings, gnomes, us, even the elves – I’m not talking about rusalkas, nymphs and sylphs, they’ve always been savages, even when you weren’t here. Damn it all, it took a hundred years but, somehow or other, we managed to live a common life, next to each other, together. We managed to partially convince humans that we’re not so very different—”

“We’re not different at all, Yarpen.”

The dwarf turned abruptly.

“We’re not different at all,” repeated Ciri. “After all, you think and feel like Geralt. And like… like I do. We eat the same things, from the same pot. You help Triss and so do I. You had a grandmother and I had a grandmother… My grandmother was killed by the Nilfgaardians. In Cintra.”

“And mine by the humans,” the dwarf said with some effort. “In Brugge. During the pogrom.”

“Riders!” shouted one of Wenck’s advance guards. “Riders ahead!”

The commissar trotted up to Yarpen’s wagon and Geralt approached from the other side.

“Get in the back, Ciri,” he said brusquely. “Get off the box and get in the back! Stay with Triss.”

“I can’t see anything from there!”

“Don’t argue!” growled Yarpen. “Scuttle back there and be quick about it! And hand me the martel. It’s under the sheepskin.”

“This?” Ciri held up a heavy, nasty-looking object, like a hammer with a sharp, slightly curved hook at its head.

“That’s it,” confirmed the dwarf. He slipped the handle into the top of his boot and laid the axe on his knees. Wenck, seeming calm, watched the highway while sheltering his eyes with his hand.

“Light cavalry from Ban Gleán,” he surmised after a while. “The so-called Dun Banner – I recognise them by their cloaks and beaver hats. Remain calm. And stay sharp. Cloaks and beaver hats can be pretty quick to change owners.”

The riders approached swiftly. There were about ten of them. Ciri saw Paulie Dahlberg, in the wagon behind her, place two readied crossbows on his knee and Regan covered them with a cloak. Ciri crept stealthily out from under the canvas, hiding behind Yarpen’s broad back. Triss tried to raise herself, swore and collapsed against her bedding.

“Halt!” shouted the first of the riders, no doubt their leader. “Who are you? From whence and to where do you ride?”

“Who asks?” Wenck calmly pulled himself upright in the saddle. “And on whose authority?”

“King Henselt’s army, inquisitive sir! Lance-corporal Zyvik asks, and he is unused to asking twice! So answer at the double! Who are you?”

“Quartermaster’s service of the King’s army.”

“Anyone could claim that! I see no one here bearing the King’s colors!”

“Come closer, lance-corporal, and examine this ring.”

“Why flash a ring at me?” The soldier grimaced. “Am I supposed to know every ring, or something? Anyone could have a ring like that. Some significant sign!”

Yarpen Zigrin stood up in the box, raised his axe and with a swift move pushed it under the soldier’s nose.

“And this sign,” he snarled. “You know it? Smell it and remember how it smells.”

The lance-corporal yanked the reins and turned his horse.

“Threaten me, do you?” he roared. “Me? I’m in the king’s service!”

“And so are we,” said Wenck quietly. “And have been for longer than you at that, I’m sure. I warn you, trooper, don’t overdo it.”

“I’m on guard here! How am I to know who you are?”

“You saw the ring,” drawled the commissar. “And if you didn’t recognise the sign on the jewel then I wonder who you are. The colors of your unit bear the same emblem so you ought to know it.”

The soldier clearly restrained himself, influenced, no doubt, equally by Wenck’s calm words and the serious, determined faces peering from the escort’s carts.

“Hmm…” he said, shifting his fur-hat towards his left ear. “Fine. But if you truly are who you claim to be, you will not, I trust, have anything against my having a look to see what you carry in the wagons.”

“We will indeed.” Wenck frowned. “And very much, at that. Our load is not your business, lance-corporal. Besides, I do not understand what you think you may find there.”

“You do not understand.” The soldier nodded, lowering his hand towards the hilt of his sword. “So I shall tell you, sir. Human trafficking is forbidden and there is no lack of scoundrels selling slaves to the Nilfgaardians. If I find humans in stocks in your wagons, you will not convince me that you are in the king’s service. Even if you were to show me a dozen rings.”

“Fine,” said Wenck dryly. “If it is slaves you are looking for, then look. You have my permission.”

The soldier cantered to the wagon in the middle, leaned over from the saddle and raised the canvas.

“What’s in those barrels?”

“What do you expect? Prisoners?” sneered Yannick Brass, sprawled in the coachman’s box.

“I am asking you what’s in them, so answer me!”

“Salt fish.”

“And in those trunks there?” The warrior rode up to the next wagon and kicked the side.

“Hooves,” snapped Paulie Dahlberg. “And there, in the back, are buffalo skins.”

“So I see.” The lance-corporal waved his hand, smacked his lips at his horse, rode up to the vanguard and peered into Yarpen’s wagon.

“And who is that woman lying there?”

Triss Merigold smiled weakly, raised herself to her elbow and traced a short, complicated sign with her hand.

“Who am I?” she asked in a quiet voice. “But you can’t see me at all.”

The soldier winked nervously, shuddered slightly.

“Salt fish,” he said, convinced, lowering the canvas. “All is in order. And this child?”

“Dried mushrooms,” said Ciri, looking at him impudently. The soldier fell silent, frozen with his mouth open.

“What’s that?” he asked after a while, frowning. “What?”

“Have you concluded your inspection, warrior?” Wenck showed cool interest as he rode up on the other side of the cart. The soldier could barely look away from Ciri’s green eyes.

“I have concluded it. Drive on, and may the gods guide you. But be on your guard. Two days ago, the Scoia’tael wiped out an entire mounted patrol up by Badger Ravine. It was a strong, large command. It’s true that Badger Ravine is far from here but elves travel through the forest faster than the wind. We were ordered to round them up, but how do you catch an elf? It’s like trying to catch the wind—”

“Good, enough, we’re not interested,” the commissar interrupted him brusquely. “Time presses and we still have a long journey ahead of us.”

“Fare you well then. Hey, follow me!”

“You heard, Geralt?” snarled Yarpen Zigrin, watching the patrol ride away. “There are bloody Squirrels in the vicinity. I felt it. I’ve got this tingling feeling in my back all the time as if some archer was already aiming at me. No, damn it, we can’t travel blindly as we’ve been doing until now, whistling away, dozing and sleepily farting. We have to know what lies ahead of us. Listen, I’ve an idea.”

Ciri pulled her chestnut up sharply, and then launched into a gallop, leaning low in the saddle. Geralt, engrossed in conversation with Wenck, suddenly sat up straight.

“Don’t run wild!” he called. “No madness, girl! Do you want to break your neck? And don’t go too far—”

She heard no more – she had torn ahead too fiercely. She had done it on purpose, not wanting to listen to the daily cautions. Not too quickly, not too fiercely, Ciri! Pah-pah. Don’t go too far! Pah-pah-pah. Be careful! Pah-pah!Exactly as if I were a child, she thought. And I’m almost thirteen and have a swift chestnut beneath me and a sharp sword across my back. And I’m not afraid of anything!

And it’s spring!

“Hey, careful, you’ll burn your backside!”

Yarpen Zigrin. Another know-it-all. Pah-pah!

Further, further, at a gallop, along the bumpy path, through the green, green grasses and bushes, through the silver puddles, through the damp golden sand, through the feathery ferns. A frightened fallow deer disappeared into the woods, flashing the black and white lantern of its tail and rump as it skipped away. Birds soared up from the trees – colorful jays and bee-eaters, screaming black magpies with their funny tails. Water splashed beneath her horse’s hooves in the puddles and the clefts.

Further, even further! The horse, which had been trudging sluggishly behind the wagon for too long, carried her joyously and briskly; happy to be allowed speed, it ran fluidly, muscles playing between her thighs, damp mane thrashing her face. The horse extended its neck as Ciri gave it free rein. Further, dear horse, don’t feel the bit, further, at the gallop, at the gallop, sharp, sharp! Spring!

She slowed and glanced back. There, alone at last. Far away at last. No one was going to tell her off any more, remind her of something, demand her attention, threaten that this would be the end of such rides. Alone at last, free, at ease and independent.

Slower. A light trot. After all, this wasn’t just a fun ride, she also had responsibilities. Ciri was, after all, a mounted foray now, a patrol, an advance guard. Ha, she thought, looking around, the safety of the entire convoy depends on me now. They’re all waiting impatiently for me to return and report: the way is clear and passable, I didn’t see anyone – there are no traces of wheels or hooves. I’ll report it, and thin Master Wenck with his cold, blue eyes will nod his head gravely, Yarpen Zigrin will bare his yellow, horse teeth, Paulie Dahlberg will shout: “Well done, little one!’, and Geralt will smile faintly. He’ll smile, although he very rarely smiles recently.

Ciri looked around and took a mental note. Two felled birches – no problem. A heap of branches – nothing the wagons couldn’t pass. A cleft washed out by the rain – a small obstacle, the wheels of the first wagon will run over it, the others will follow in the ruts. A huge clearing – a good place for a rest…

Traces? What traces can there be here? There’s no one here. There’s the forest. There are birds screeching amidst fresh, green leaves. A red fox runs leisurely across the path… And everything smells of spring.

The track broke off halfway up the hill, disappeared in the sandy ravine, wound through the crooked pines which clung to the slopes. Ciri abandoned the path and, wanting to scrutinise the area from a height, climbed the steep slope. And so she could touch the wet, sweet-smelling leaves…

She dismounted, threw the reins over a snag in a tree and slowly strolled among the junipers which covered the hill. On the other side of the hill was an open space, gaping in the thick of the forest like a hole bitten out of the trees – left, no doubt, after a fire which had raged here a very long time ago, for there was no sign of blackened or charred remains, everywhere was green with low birches and little fir trees. The trail, as far as the eye could see, seemed clear and passable.

And safe.

What are they afraid of? she thought. The Scoia’tael? But what was there to be afraid of? I’m not frightened of elves. I haven’t done anything to them.

Elves. The Squirrels. Scoia’tael.

Before Geralt had ordered her to leave, Ciri had managed to take a look at the corpses in the fort. She remembered one in particular – his face covered by hair stuck together with darkened blood, his neck unnaturally twisted and bent. Pulled back in a ghastly, set grimace, his upper lip revealed teeth, very white and very tiny, non-human. She remembered the elf’s boots, ruined and reaching up to the knees, laced at the bottom and fastened at the top with many wrought buckles.

Elves who kill humans and die in battles themselves. Geralt says you have to remain neutral… And Yarpen says you have to behave in such a way that you don’t have to ask for forgiveness…

She kicked a molehill and, lost in thought, dug her heel into the sand.

Who and whom, whom and what should one forgive?

The Squirrels kill humans. And Nilfgaard pays them for it. Uses them. Incites them. Nilfgaard.

Ciri had not forgotten – although she very much wanted to forget – what had happened in Cintra. The wandering, the despair, the fear, the hunger and the pain. The apathy and torpor, which came later, much later when the druids from Transriver had found her and taken her in. She remembered it all as though through a mist, and she wanted to stop remembering it.

But it came back. Came back in her thoughts, into her dreams. Cintra. The thundering of horses and the savage cries, corpses, flames… And the black knight in his winged helmet… And later… Cottages in Transriver… A flame-blackened chimney amongst charred ruins… Next to it, by an unscathed well, a black cat licking a terrible burn on its side. A well… A sweep… A bucket…

A bucket full of blood.

Ciri wiped her face, looked down at her hand, taken aback. Her palm was wet. The girl sniffed and wiped the tears with her sleeve.

Neutrality? Indifference? She wanted to scream. A witcher looking on indifferently? No! A witcher has to defend people. From the leshy, the vampire, the werewolf. And not only from them. He has to defend people from every evil. And in Transriver I saw what evil is.

A witcher has to defend and save. To defend men so that they aren’t hung on trees by their hands, aren’t impaled and left to die. To defend fair girls from being spread-eagled between stakes rammed into the ground. Defend children so they aren’t slaughtered and thrown into a well. Even a cat burned alive in a torched barn deserves to be defended. That’s why I’m going to become a witcher, that’s why I’ve got a sword, to defend people like those in Sodden and Transriver – because they don’t have swords, don’t know the steps, half-turns, dodges and pirouettes. No one has taught them how to fight, they are defenceless and helpless in face of the werewolf and the Nilfgaardian marauder. They’re teaching me to fight so that I can defend the helpless. And that’s what I’m going to do. Never will I be neutral. Never will I be indifferent.

Never!

She didn’t know what warned her – whether it was the sudden silence which fell over the forest like a cold shadow, or a movement caught out of the corner of her eye. But she reacted in a flash, instinctively – with a reaction she had learnt in the woods of Transriver when, escaping from Cintra, she had raced against death. She fell to the ground, crawled under a juniper bush and froze, motionless. Just let the horse not neigh, she thought.

On the other side of the ravine something moved again; she saw a silhouette show faintly, hazily amidst the leaves. An elf peered cautiously from the thicket. Having thrown the hood from his head, he looked around for a moment, pricked up his ears and then, noiselessly and swiftly, moved along the ridge. After him, two more leaned out. And then others moved. Many of them. In single file. About half were on horseback – these rode slowly, straight in their saddles, focused and alert. For a moment she saw them all clearly and precisely as, in utter silence, they flowed across a bright breach in the wall of trees, framed against the background of the sky – before they disappeared, dissolved in the shimmering shadows of the wild forest. They vanished without a rustle or a sound, like ghosts. No horse tapped its hoof or snorted, no branch cracked under foot or hoof. The weapons slung across them did not clang.

They disappeared but Ciri did not move. She lay flat on the ground under the juniper bush, trying to breathe as quietly as possible. She knew that a frightened bird or animal could give her away, and a bird or animal could be frightened by any sound or movement – even the slightest, the most careful. She got up only when the woods had grown perfectly calm and the magpies chattered again among the trees where the elves had disappeared.

She rose only to find herself in a strong grip. A black, leather glove fell across her mouth, muffled the scream of fear.

“Be quiet.”

“Geralt?”

“Quiet, I said.”

“You saw them?”

“I did.”

“It’s them…” she whispered. “The Scoia’tael. Isn’t it?”

“Yes. Quick back to the horses. Watch your feet.”

They rode carefully and silently down the slope without returning to the trail; they remained in the thicket. Geralt looked around, alert. He did not allow her to ride independently; he did not give her the chestnut’s reins; he led the horse himself.

“Ciri,” he said suddenly. “Not a word about what we saw. Not to Yarpen, not to Wenck. Not to anybody. Understand?”

“No,” she grunted, lowering her head. “I don’t understand. Why shouldn’t I say anything? They have to be warned. Whose side are we on, Geralt? Whose side are we against? Who’s our friend and who’s our enemy?”

“We’ll part with the convoy tomorrow,” he said after a moment’s silence. “Triss is almost recovered. We’ll say goodbye and go our own way. We have problems of our own, our own worries and our own difficulties. Then, I hope, you’ll finally stop dividing the inhabitants of this world into friends and enemies.”

“We’re to be… neutral? Indifferent, is that right? And if they attack…”

“They won’t.”

“And if—”

“Listen to me.” He turned to her. “Why do you think that such a vital load of gold and silver, King Henselt’s secret aid for Aedirn, is being escorted by dwarves and not humans? I saw an elf watching us from a tree yesterday. I heard them pass by our camp during the night. The Scoia’tael will not attack the dwarves, Ciri.”

“But they’re here,” she muttered. “They are. They’re moving around, surrounding us…”

“I know why they’re here. I’ll show you.”

He turned the horse abruptly and threw the reins to her. She kicked the chestnut with her heels and moved away faster, but he motioned for her to stay behind him. They cut across the trail and reentered the wild forest. The witcher led, Ciri following in his tracks. Neither said anything. Not for a long time.

“Look.” Geralt held back his horse. “Look, Ciri.”

“What is it?” she sighed.

“Shaerrawedd.”

In front of them, as far as the woods allowed them to see, rose smoothly hewn blocks of granite and marble with blunt corners, worn away by the winds, decorated with patterns long leached out by the rains, cracked and shattered by frost, split by tree roots. Amongst the trunks broken columns flashed white, arcades, the remains of ornamental friezes entwined with ivy, and wrapped in a thick layer of green moss.

“This was… a castle?”

“A palace. The elves didn’t build castles. Dismount, the horses won’t manage in the rubble.”

“Who destroyed it all? Humans?”

“No, they did. Before they left.”

“Why?”

“They knew they wouldn’t be coming back. It happened following their second clash with the humans, more than two hundred years ago. Before that, they used to leave towns untouched when they retreated. Humans used to build on the foundations left by the elves. That’s how Novigrad, Oxenfurt, Wyzima, Tretogor, Maribor and Cidaris were built. And Cintra.”

“Cintra?”

He confirmed it with a nod of the head, not taking his eyes off the ruins.

“They left,” whispered Ciri, “but now they’re coming back. Why?”

“To have a look.”

“At what?”

Without a word he laid his hand on her shoulder and pushed her gently before him. They jumped down the marble stairs, climbing down holding on to the springy hazel, clusters of which had burst through every gap, every crevice in the moss-covered, cracked plates.

“This was the centre of the palace, its heart. A fountain.”

“Here?” she asked, surprised, gazing at the dense thicket of alders and white birch trunks amongst the misshapen blocks and slabs. “Here? But there’s nothing there.”

“Come.”

The stream feeding the fountain must have changed its course many times, patiently and constantly washing the marble blocks and alabaster plates which had sunk or fallen to form dams, once again changing the course of the current. As a result the whole area was divided up by shallow gullies. Here and there the water cascaded over the remains of the building, washing it clean of leaves, sand and litter. In these places, the marble, terracotta and mosaics were still as vibrant with color, as fresh as if they had been lying there for three days, not two centuries.

Geralt leapt across the stream and went in amongst what remained of the columns. Ciri followed. They jumped off the ruined stairs and, lowering their heads, walked beneath the untouched arch of the arcade, half buried beneath a mound of earth. The witcher stopped and indicated with his hand. Ciri sighed loudly.

From rubble colorful with smashed terracotta grew an enormous rose bush covered with beautiful white-lilied flowers. Drops of dew as bright as silver glistened on the petals. The bush wove its shoots around a large slab of white stone and from it a sad, pretty face looked out at them; the downpours and snows had not yet managed to blur or wash away its delicate and noble features. It was a face which the chisels of plunderers digging out golden ornaments, mosaics and precious stones from the relief sculpture had not managed to disfigure.

“Aelirenn,” said Geralt after a long silence.

“She’s beautiful,” whispered Ciri, grabbing him by the hand. The witcher didn’t seem to notice. He stared at the sculpture and was far away, far away in a different world and time.

“Aelirenn,” he repeated after a while. “Known as Elirena by dwarves and humans. She led them into battle two hundred years ago. The elders of the elves were against it, they knew they had no chance. That they would not be able to pick themselves up after the defeat. They wanted to save their people, wanted to survive. They decided to destroy their towns and retreat to the inaccessible, wild mountains… and to wait. Elves live a long time, Ciri. By our time scale they are almost eternal. They thought humans were something that would pass, like a drought, like a heavy winter, or a plague of locust, after which comes rain, spring, a new harvest. They wanted to sit it out. Survive. They decided to destroy their towns and palaces, amongst them their pride – the beautiful Shaerrawedd. They wanted to weather out the storm, but Elirena… Elirena stirred up the young. They took up arms and followed her into their last desperate battle. And they were massacred. Mercilessly massacred.”

Ciri did not say anything, staring at the beautiful, still face.

“They died with her name on their lips,” the witcher continued quietly. “Repeating her challenge, her cry, they died for Shaerrawedd. Because Shaerrawedd was a symbol. They died for this stone and marble… and for Aelirenn. Just as she promised them, they died with dignity, heroically and honourably. They saved their honour but they brought nothing but ruin as a result, condemned their own race to annihilation. Their own people. You remember what Yarpen told you? Those who rule the world and those who die out? He explained it to you coarsely but truly. Elves live for a long time, but only their youngsters are fertile, only the young can have offspring. And practically all the elven youngsters had followed Elirena. They followed Aelirenn, the White Rose of Shaerrawedd. We are standing in the ruins of her palace, by the fountain whose waters she listened to in the evenings. And these… these were her flowers.”

Ciri was silent. Geralt drew her to himself, put his arm around her.

“Do you know now why the Scoia’tael were here, do you see what they wanted to look at? And do you understand why the elven and dwarven young must not be allowed to be massacred once again? Do you understand why neither you nor I are permitted to have a hand in this massacre? These roses flower all year round. They ought to have grown wild by now, but they are more beautiful than any rose in a tended garden. Elves continue to come to Shaerrawedd, Ciri. A variety of elves. The impetuous and the foolish ones for whom the cracked stone is a symbol as well as the sensible ones for whom these immortal, forever reborn flowers are a symbol. Elves who understand that if this bush is torn from the ground and the earth burned out, the roses of Shaerrawedd will never flower again. Do you understand?”

She nodded.

“Do you understand what this neutrality is, which stirs you so? To be neutral does not mean to be indifferent or insensitive. You don’t have to kill your feelings. It’s enough to kill hatred within yourself. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” she whispered. “I understand. Geralt, I… I’d like to take one… One of these roses. To remind me. May I?”

“Do,” he said after some hesitation. “Do, in order to remember. Let’s go now. Let’s return to the convoy.”

Ciri pinned the rose under the lacing of her jerkin. Suddenly she cried out quietly, lifted her hand. A trickle of blood ran from her finger down her palm.

“Did you prick yourself?”

“Yarpen…” whispered the girl, looking at the blood filling her life-line. “Wenck… Paulie…”

“What?”

“Triss!” she shouted with a piercing voice which was not hers, shuddered fiercely and wiped her face with her arm. “Quick, Geralt! We’ve got to help! To the horses, Geralt!”

“Ciri! What’s happening?”

“They’re dying!”

She galloped with her ear almost touching the horse’s neck and spurred her mount on, kicking with her heels and shouting. The sand of the forest path flew beneath the hooves. She heard screaming in the distance, and smelt smoke.

Coming straight at them, blocking the path, raced two horses dragging a harness, reins and a broken shaft behind them. Ciri did not hold her chestnut back and shot past them at full speed, flakes of froth skimming across her face. Behind her she heard Roach neigh and Geralt’s curses as he was forced to a halt.

She tore around a bend in the path in to a large glade.

The convoy was in flames. From thickets, flaming arrows flew towards the wagons like fire birds, perforating the canvas and digging into the boards. The Scoia’tael attacked with war-cries and yells.

Ciri, ignoring Geralt’s shouts from behind her, directed her horse straight at the first two wagons brought to the fore. One was lying on its side and Yarpen Zigrin, axe in one hand, crossbow in the other, stood next to it. At his feet, motionless, with her blue dress hitched halfway up her thighs, lay…

“Triiiiiisss!” Ciri straightened in the saddle, thumping her horse with her heels. The Scoia’tael turned towards her and arrows whistled past the girl’s ears. She shook her head without slowing her gallop. She heard Geralt shout, ordering her to flee into the woods. She did not intend to obey. She leaned down and bolted straight towards the archers shooting at her. Suddenly she smelt the overpowering scent of the white rose pinned to her jerkin.

“Triiiiisss!”

The elves leaped out of the way of the speeding horses. Ciri caught one lightly with her stirrup. She heard a sharp buzz, her steed struggled, whinnied and threw itself to the side. Ciri saw an arrow dug deep, just below the withers, right by her thigh. She tore her feet from the stirrups, jumped up, squatted in the saddle, bounced off strongly and leaped.

She fell softly on the body of the overturned wagon, used her hands to balance herself and jumped again, landing with bent knees next to Yarpen who was roaring and brandishing his axe. Next to them, on the second wagon, Paulie Dahlberg was fighting while Regan, leaning back and bracing his legs against the board, was struggling to hold on to the harnessed horses. They neighed wildly, stamped their hooves and yanked at the shaft in fear of the fire devouring the canvas.

She rushed to Triss, who lay amongst the scattered barrels and chests, grabbed her by her clothes and started to drag her towards the overturned wagon. The enchantress moaned, holding her head just above the ear. Right by Ciri’s side, hooves suddenly clattered and horses snorted – two elves, brandishing their swords, were pressing the madly fighting Yarpen hard. The dwarf spun like a top and agilely deflected the blows directed against him with his axe. Ciri heard curses, grunts and the whining clang of metal.

Another span of horses detached itself from the flaming convoy and rushed towards them, dragging smoke and flames behind it and scattering burning rags. The wagonman hung inertly from the box and Yannick Brass stood next to him, barely keeping his balance. With one hand he wielded the reins, with the other he was cutting himself away from two elves galloping one at each side of the wagon. A third Scoia’tael, keeping up with the harnessed horses, was shooting arrow after arrow into their sides.

“Jump!” yelled Yarpen, shouting over the noise. “Jump, Yannick!”

Ciri saw Geralt catch up with the speeding wagon and with a short, spare slash of his sword swipe one of the elves from his saddle while Wenck, riding up on the opposite side, hewed at the other, the elf shooting the horses. Yannick threw the reins down and jumped off – straight under the third Scoia’tael’s horse. The elf stood in his stirrups and slashed at him with his sword. The dwarf fell. At that moment the flaming wagon crashed into those still fighting, parting and scattering them. Ciri barely managed to pull Triss out from beneath the crazed horses’ hooves at the last moment. The swingle-tree tore away with a crack, the wagon leaped into the air, lost a wheel and overturned, scattering its load and smouldering boards everywhere.

Ciri dragged the enchantress under Yarpen’s overturned wagon. Paulie Dahlberg, who suddenly found himself next to her, helped, while Geralt covered them both, shoving Roach between them and the charging Scoia’tael. All around the wagon, battle seethed: Ciri heard shouting, blades clashing, horses snorting, hooves clattering. Yarpen, Wenck and Geralt, surrounded on all sides by the elves, fought like raging demons.

The fighters were suddenly parted by Regan’s span as he struggled in the coachman’s box with a halfling wearing a lynx fur hat. The halfling was sitting on Regan trying to jab him with a long knife.

Yarpen deftly leaped onto the wagon, caught the halfling by the neck and kicked him overboard. Regan gave a piercing yell, grabbed the reins and lashed the horses. The span jerked, the wagon rolled and gathered speed in a flash.

“Circle, Regan!” roared Yarpen. “Circle! Go round!”

The wagon turned and descended on the elves again, parting them. One of them sprang up, grabbed the right lead-horse by the halter but couldn’t stop him; the impetus threw him under the hooves and wheels. Ciri heard an excruciating scream.

Another elf, galloping next to them, gave a backhanded swipe with his sword. Yarpen ducked, the blade rang against the hoop supporting the canvas and the momentum carried the elf forward. The dwarf hunched abruptly and vigorously swung his arm. The Scoia’tael yelled, stiffened in the saddle and tumbled to the ground. A martel protruded between his shoulder blades.

“Come on then, you whoresons!” Yarpen roared, whirling his axe. “Who else? Chase a circle, Regan! Go round!”

Regan, tossing his bloodied mane of hair, hunched in the box amidst the whizzing of arrows, howled like the damned, and mercilessly lashed the horses on. The span dashed in a tight circle, creating a moving barricade belching flames and smoke around the overturned wagon beneath which Ciri had dragged the semi-conscious, battered magician.

Not far from them danced Wenck’s horse, a mouse-colored stallion. Wenck was hunched over; Ciri saw the white feathers of an arrow sticking out of his side. Despite the wound, he was skilfully hacking his way past two elves on foot, attacking him from both sides. As Ciri watched another arrow struck him in the back. The commissar collapsed forward onto his horse’s neck but remained in the saddle. Paulie Dahlberg rushed to his aid.

Ciri was left alone.

She reached for her sword. The blade which throughout her training had leaped out from her back in a flash would not let itself be drawn for anything; it resisted her, stuck in its scabbard as if glued in tar. Amongst the whirl seething around her, amongst moves so swift that they blurred in front of her eyes, her sword seemed strangely, unnaturally slow; it seemed ages would pass before it could be fully drawn. The ground trembled and shook. Ciri suddenly realised that it was not the ground. It was her knees.

Paulie Dahlberg, keeping the elf charging at him at bay with his axe, dragged the wounded Wenck along the ground. Roach flitted past, beside the wagon, and Geralt threw himself at the elf. He had lost his headband and his hair streamed out behind him with his speed. Swords clashed.

Another Scoia’tael, on foot, leaped out from behind the wagon. Paulie abandoned Wenck, pulled himself upright and brandished his axe. Then froze.

In front of him stood a dwarf wearing a hat adorned with a squirrel’s tail, his black beard braided into two plaits. Paulie hesitated.

The black-beard did not hesitate for a second. He struck with both arms. The blade of the axe whirred and fell, slicing into the collar-bone with a hide-ous crunch. Paulie fell instantly, without a moan; it looked as if the force of the blow had broken both his knees.

Ciri screamed.

Yarpen Zigrin leaped from the wagon. The black-bearded dwarf spun and cut. Yarpen avoided the blow with an agile half-turn dodge, grunted and struck ferociously, chopping in to black-beard – throat, jaw and face, right up to the nose. The Scoia’tael bent back and collapsed, bleeding, pounding his hands against the ground and tearing at the earth with his heels.

“Geraaaallllttt!” screamed Ciri, feeling something move behind her. Sensing death behind her.

There was only a hazy shape, caught in a turn, a move and a flash but the girl – like lightning – reacted with a diagonal parry and feint taught her in Kaer Morhen. She caught the blow but had not been standing firmly enough, had been leaning too far to the side to receive the full force. The strength of the strike threw her against the body of the wagon. Her sword slipped from her hand.

The beautiful, long-legged elf wearing high boots standing in front of her grimaced fiercely and, tossing her hair free of her lowered hood, raised her sword. The sword flashed blindingly, the bracelets on the Squirrel’s wrists glittered.

Ciri was in no state to move.

But the sword did not fall, did not strike. Because the elf was not looking at Ciri but at the white rose pinned to her jerkin.

“Aelirenn!” shouted the Squirrel loudly as if wanting to shatter her hesitation with the cry. But she was too late. Geralt, shoving Ciri away, slashed her broadly across the chest with his sword. Blood spurted over the girl’s face and clothes, red drops spattered on the white petals of the rose.

“Aelirenn…” moaned the elf shrilly, collapsing to her knees. Before she fell on her face, she managed to shout one more time. Loudly, lengthily, despairingly:

“Shaerraweeeeedd!”

Reality returned just as suddenly as it had disappeared. Through the monotonous, dull hum which filled her ears, Ciri began to hear voices. Through the flickering, wet curtain of tears, she began to see the living and the dead.

“Ciri,” whispered Geralt who was kneeling next to her. “Wake up.”

“A battle…” she moaned, sitting up. “Geralt, what—”

“It’s all over. Thanks to the troops from Ban Gleán which came to our aid.”

“You weren’t…” she whispered, closing her eyes, “you weren’t neutral…”

“No, I wasn’t. But you’re alive. Triss is alive.”

“How is she?”

“She hit her head falling out of the wagon when Yarpen tried to rescue it. But she’s fine now. Treating the wounded.”

Ciri cast her eyes around. Amidst the smoke from the last wagons, burning out, silhouettes of armed men flickered. And all around lay chests and barrels. Some of were shattered and the contents scattered. They had contained ordinary, grey field stones. She stared at them, astounded.

“Aid for Demawend from Aedirn.” Yarpen Zigrin, standing nearby, ground his teeth. “Secret and exceptionally important aid. A convoy of special significance!”

“It was a trap?”

The dwarf turned, looked at her, at Geralt. Then he looked back at the stones pouring from the barrels and spat.

“Yes,” he confirmed. “A trap.”

“For the Squirrels?”

“No.”

The dead were arranged in a neat row. They lay next to each other, not divided – elves, humans and dwarves. Yannick Brass was amongst them. The dark-haired elf in the high boots was there. And the dwarf with his black, plaited beard, glistening with dried blood. And next to them…

“Paulie!” sobbed Regan Dahlberg, holding his brother’s head on his knees. “Paulie! Why?”

No one said anything. No one. Even those who knew why. Regan turned his contorted face, wet with tears, towards them.

“What will I tell our mother?” he wailed. “What am I going to say to her?”

No one said anything.

Not far away, surrounded by soldiers in the black and gold of Kaedwen, lay Wenck. He was breathing with difficulty and every breath forced bubbles of blood to his lips. Triss knelt next to him and a knight in shining armour stood over them both.

“Well?” asked the knight. “Lady enchantress? Will he live?”

“I’ve done everything I can.” Triss got to her feet, pinched her lips. “But…”

“What?”

“They used this.” She showed him an arrow with a strange head to it and struck it against a barrel standing by them. The tip of the arrow fell apart, split into four barbed, hook-like needles. The knight cursed.

“Fredegard…” Wenck uttered with difficulty. “Fredegard, listen—”

“You mustn’t speak!” said Triss severely. “Or move! The spell is barely holding!”

“Fredegard,” the commissar repeated. A bubble of blood burst on his lips and another immediately appeared in its place. “We were wrong… Everyone was wrong. It’s not Yarpen… We suspected him wrongly… I vouch for him. Yarpen did not betray… Did not betr—”

“Silence!” shouted the knight. “Silence, Vilfrid! Hey, quick now, bring the stretcher! Stretcher!”

“No need,” the magician said hollowly, gazing at Wenck’s lips where no more bubbles appeared. Ciri turned away and pressed her face to Geralt’s side.

Fredegard drew himself up. Yarpen Zigrin did not look at him. He was looking at the dead. At Regan Dahlberg still kneeling over his brother.

“It was necessary, Zigrin,” said the knight. “This is war. There was an order. We had to be sure…”

Yarpen did not say anything. The knight lowered his eyes.

“Forgive us,” he whispered.

The dwarf slowly turned his head, looked at him. At Geralt. At Ciri. At them all. The humans.

“What have you done to us?” he asked bitterly. “What have you done to us? What have you made of us?”

No one answered him.

The eyes of the long-legged elf were glassy and dull. Her contorted lips were frozen in a soundless cry.

Geralt put his arms around Ciri. Slowly, he unpinned the white rose, spattered with dark stains, from her jerkin and, without a word, threw it on the Squirrel’s body.

“Farewell,” whispered Ciri. “Farewell, Rose of Shaerrawedd. Farewell and…”

“And forgive us,” added the witcher.

They roam the land, importunate and insolent, nominating themselves the stalkers of evil, vanquishers of werewolves and exterminators of spectres, extorting payment from the gullible and, on receipt of their ignoble earnings, moving on to dispense the same deceit in the near vicinity. The easiest access they find at cottages of honest, simple and unwitting peasants who readily ascribe all misfortune and ill events to spells, unnatural creatures and monsters, the doings of windsprites or evil spirits. Instead of praying to the gods, instead of bearing rich offerings to the temple, such a simpleton is ready to give his last penny to the base witcher, believing the witcher, the godless changeling, will turn around his fate and save him from misfortune.

Anonymous, Monstrum, or Description of the Witcher

I have nothing against witchers. Let them hunt vampires. As long as they pay taxes.

Radovid III the Bold, King of Redania

If you thirst for justice, hire a witcher.

Graffitti on the wall of the Faculty of Law, University of Oxenfurt

CHAPTER FIVE

“Did you say something?”

The boy sniffed and pushed his over-sized velvet hat, a pheasant’s feather hanging rakishly to the side, back from his forehead.

“Are you a knight?” he repeated, gazing at Geralt with wide eyes as blue as the sky.

“No,” replied the witcher, surprised that he felt like answering. “I’m not.”

“But you’ve got a sword! My daddy’s one of King Foltest’s knights. He’s got a sword, too. Bigger than yours!”

Geralt leaned his elbows on the railing and spat into the water eddying at the barge’s wake.

“You carry it on your back,” the little snot persisted. The hat slipped down over his eyes again.

“What?”

“The sword. On your back. Why have you got the sword on your back?”

“Because someone stole my oar.”

The little snot opened his mouth, demanding that the impressive gaps left by milk teeth be admired.

“Move away from the side,” said the witcher. “And shut your mouth or flies will get in.”

The boy opened his mouth even wider.

“Grey-haired yet stupid!” snarled the little snot’s mother, a richly attired noblewoman, pulling her offspring away by the beaver collar of his cloak. “Come here, Everett! I’ve told you so many times not to be familiar with the passing rabble!”

Geralt sighed, gazing at the outline of islands and islets looming through the morning mist. The barge, as ungainly as a tortoise, trudged along at an appropriate speed – that being the speed of a tortoise – dictated by the lazy Delta current. The passengers, mostly merchants and peasants, were dozing on their baggage. The witcher unfurled the scroll once more and returned to Ciri’s letter.

…I sleep in a large hall called a Dormitorium and my bed is terribly big, I tell you. I’m with the Intermediary Girls. There are twelve of us but I’m most friendly with Eurneid, Katye and Iola the Second. Whereas today I Ate Broth and the worst is that sometimes we have to Fast and get up very early at Dawn. Earlier than in Kaer Morhen. I will write the rest tomorrow for we shall presently be having Prayers. No one ever prayed in Kaer Morhen, I wonder why we have to here. No doubt because this is a Temple.

Geralt. Mother Nenneke has read and said I must not write Silly Things and write clearly without mistakes. And about what I’m studying and that I feel well and healthy. I feel well and am healthy if unfortunately Hungry, but Soone be Dinner. And Mother Nenneke also said write that prayer has never harmed anybody yet, neither me nor, certainly, you.

Geralt, I have some free time again, I will write therefore that I am studying. To read and write correct Runes. History. Nature. Poetry and Prose. To express myself well in the Common Speech and in the Elder Speech. I am best at the Elder Speech, I can also write Elder Runes. I will write something for you and you will see for yourself. Elaine blath, Feainnewedd. That meant: Beautiful flower, child of the Sun. You see for yourself that I can. And also—

Now I can write again for I have found a new quill for the old one broke. Mother Nenneke read this and praised me that it was correct. That I am obedient, she told me to write, and that you should not worry. Don’t worry, Geralt.

Again I have some time so I will write what happened. When we were feeding the turkey hens, I, Iola and Katye, One Enormous Turkey attacked us, a red neck it had and was Terrible Horrible. First it attacked Iola and then it wanted to attack me but I was not afraid because it was smaller and slower than the Pendulum anyway. I dodged and did a pirouette and walloped it twice with a switch until it Made Off. Mother Nenneke does not allow me to carry My Sword here, a pity, for I would have shown that Turkey what I learned in Kaer Morhen. I already know that in the Elder Runes it would be written Caer a’Muirehen and that it means Keep of the Elder Sea. So no doubt that is why there are Shells and Snails there as well as Fish imprinted on the stones. And Cintra is correctly written Xin’trea. Whereas my name comes from Zireael for that means Swallow and that means that…

“Are you busy reading?”

He raised his head.

“I am. So? Has anything happened? Someone noticed something?”

“No, nothing,” replied the skipper, wiping his hands on his leather jerkin. “There’s calm on the water. But there’s a mist and we’re already near Crane Islet—”

“I know. It’s the sixth time I’ve sailed this way, Boatbug, not counting the return journeys. I’ve come to know the trail. My eyes are open, don’t worry.”

The skipper nodded and walked away to the prow, stepping over travellers’ packages and bundles stacked everywhere. Squeezed in amidships, the horses snorted and pounded their hooves on the deck-boards. They were in the middle of the current, in dense fog. The prow of the barge ploughed the surface of water lilies, parting their clumps. Geralt turned back to his reading.

…that means I have an elven name. But I am not, after all, an elf, Geralt, there is also talk about the Squirrels here. Sometimes even the Soldiers come and ask questions and say that we must not treat wounded elves. I have not squealed a word to anyone about what happened in spring, don’t worry. And I also remember to practise, don’t think otherwise. I go to the park and train when I have time. But not always, for I also have to work in the kitchen or in the orchard like all the girls. And we also have a terrible amount of studying to do. But never mind, I will study. After all, you too studied in the Temple, Mother Nenneke told me. And she also told me that just any idiot can brandish a sword but a witcher-girl must be wise.

Geralt, you promised to come. Come.

Your Ciri

PS Come, come.

PS II. Mother Nenneke told me to end with Praise be to Great Melitele, may her blessing and favour always go with you. And may nothing happen to you.

Ciri

I’d like to go to Ellander, he thought, putting away the letter. But it’s dangerous. I might lead them to— These letters have got to end. Nenneke makes use of temple mail but still… Damn it, it’s too risky.

“Hmmm… Hmm…”

“What now, Boatbug? We’ve passed Crane Islet.”

“And without incident, thank the gods,” sighed the skipper. “Ha, Geralt, I see this is going to be another peaceful trip. Any moment now the mist is going to clear and when the sun peeps through, the fear is over. The monster won’t show itself in the sunlight.”

“That won’t worry me in the least.”

“So I should think.” Boatbug smiled wryly. “The company pays you by the trip. Regardless whether something happens or not a penny falls into your pouch, doesn’t it?”

“You ask as if you didn’t know. What is this – envy talking? That I earn money standing leaning against the side, watching the lapwings? And what do you get paid for? The same thing. For being on board. When everything is going smoothly you haven’t got anything to do. You stroll from prow to stern, grinning at the women or trying to entice merchants to have a drink. I’ve been hired to be on board too. Just in case. The transport is safe because a witcher is on board. The cost of the witcher is included in the price of the trip, right?”

“Well, that certainly is true,” sighed the skipper. “The company won’t lose out. I know them well. This is the fifth year I sail the Delta for them from Foam to Novigrad, from Novigrad to Foam. Well, to work, witcher, sir. You go on leaning against the side and I’ll go for a stroll from prow to stern.”

The mist thinned a little. Geralt extracted another letter from his bag, one he had recently received from a strange courier. He had already read it about thirty times.

Dear friend…

The witcher swore quietly, looking at the sharp, angular, even runes drawn with energetic sweeps of the pen, faultlessly reflecting the author’s mood. He felt once again the desire to try to bite his own backside in fury. When he was writing to the enchantress a month ago he had spent two nights in a row contemplating how best to begin. Finally, he had decided on “Dear friend.” Now he had his just deserts.

Dear friend, your unexpected letter – which I received not quite three years after we last saw each other – has given me much joy. My joy is all the greater as various rumours have been circulating about your sudden and violent death. It is a good thing that you have decided to disclaim them by writing to me; it is a good thing, too, that you are doing so so soon. From your letter it appears that you have lived a peaceful, wonderfully boring life, devoid of all sensation. These days such a life is a real privilege, dear friend, and I am happy that you have managed to achieve it.

I was touched by the sudden concern which you deigned to show as to my health, dear friend. I hasten with the news that, yes, I now feel well; the period of indisposition is behind me, I have dealt with the difficulties, the description of which I shall not bore you with.

It worries and troubles me very much that the unexpected present you received from Fate brings you worries. Your supposition that this requires professional help is absolutely correct. Although your description of the difficulty – quite understandably – is enigmatic, I am sure I know the Source of the problem. And I agree with your opinion that the help of yet another magician is absolutely necessary. I feel honoured to be the second to whom you turn. What have I done to deserve to be so high on your list?

Rest assured, my dear friend; and if you had the intention of supplicating the help of additional magicians, abandon it because there is no need. I leave without delay, and go to the place which you indicated in an oblique yet, to me, understandable way. It goes without saying that I leave in absolute secrecy and with great caution. I will surmise the nature of the trouble on the spot and will do all that is in my power to calm the gushing source. I shall try, in so doing, not to appear any worse than other ladies to whom you have turned, are turning or usually turn with your supplications. I am, after all, your dear friend. Your valuable friendship is too important to me to disappoint you, dear friend.

Should you, in the next few years, wish to write to me, do not hesitate for a moment. Your letters invariably give me boundless pleasure.

Your friend Yennefer

The letter smelled of lilac and gooseberries.

Geralt cursed.

He was torn from his reverie by the movement on deck and a rocking of the barge that indicated they were changing course. Some of the passengers crowded starboard. Skipper Boatbug was yelling orders from the bow; the barge was slowly and laboriously turning towards the Temerian shore, leaving the fairway and ceding right of way to two ships looming through the mist. The witcher watched with curiosity.

The first was an enormous three-masted galliass at least a hundred and forty yards long, carrying an amaranth flag with a silver eagle. Behind it, its forty oars rhythmically hard at work, glided a smaller, slim galley adorned with a black ensign with gold-red chevron.

“Ooohh, what huge dragons,” said Boatbug standing next to the witcher. “They’re pushing a heck of a wave, the way they’re ploughing the river.”

“Interesting,” muttered Geralt. “The galliass is sailing under the Redanian flag but the galley is from Aedirn.”

“From Aedirn, very much so,” confirmed the skipper. “And it carries the Governor of Hagge’s pennon. But note, both ships have sharp keels, near on four yards’ draught. That means they’re not sailing to Hagge itself – they wouldn’t cross the rapids and shallows up the river. They’re heading to Foam or White Bridge. And look, there are swarms of soldiers on the decks. These aren’t merchants. They’re war ships, Geralt.”

“Someone important is on that galliass. They’ve set up a tent on deck.”

“That’s right, that’s how the nobles travel.” Boatbug nodded, picking his teeth with a splinter peeled from the barge’s side. “It’s safer by river. Elven commandos are roaming the forests. There’s no knowing which tree an arrow’s going to come flying from. But on the water there’s no fear. Elves, like cats, don’t like water. They prefer dwelling in brushwood…”

“It’s got to be someone really important. The tent is rich.”

“That’s right, could be. Who knows, maybe King Vizimir himself is favouring the river with his presence? All sorts of people are travelling this way now… And while we’re at it, in Foam you asked me to keep my ears open in case anyone was interested in you, asking about you. Well, that weakling there, you see him?”

“Don’t point, Boatbug. Who is he?”

“How should I know? Ask him yourself, he’s coming over. Just look at his stagger! And the water’s as still as a mirror, pox on it; if it were to swell just a little he’d probably be on all fours, the oaf.”

The “oaf” turned out to be a short, thin man of uncertain age, dressed in a large, woollen and none-too-clean cloak pinned in place with a circular brass brooch. Its pin, clearly lost, had been replaced by a crooked nail with a flattened head. The man approached, cleared his throat and squinted with his myopic eyes.

“Hmm… Do I have the pleasure of speaking to Geralt of Rivia, the witcher?”

“Yes, sir. You do.”

“Allow me to introduce myself. I am Linus Pitt, Master Tutor and Lecturer in Natural History at the Oxenfurt Academy.”

“My very great pleasure.”

“Hmm… I’ve been told that you, sir, are on commission from the Malatius and Grock Company to protect this transport. Apparently from the danger of some monster attack. I wonder what this ‘monster’ could be.”

“I wonder myself.” The witcher leaned against the ship’s side, gazing at the dark outline of the marshy meadows on the Temerian river bank looming in the mist. “And have come to the conclusion that I have most likely been hired as a precaution against an attack from a Scoia’tael commando force said to be roaming the vicinity. This is my sixth journey between Foam and Novigrad and no aeschna has shown itself—”

“Aeschna? That’s some kind of common name. I would rather you used the scientific terminology. Hmm… aeschna… I truly do not know which species you have in mind—”

“I’m thinking of a bumpy and rough-skinned monster four yards in length resembling a stump overgrown with algae and with ten paws and jaws like cut-saws.”

“The description leaves a lot to be desired as regards scientific precision. Could it be one of the species of the Hyphydridae family?”

“I don’t exclude the possibility,” sighed Geralt. “The aeschna, as far as I know, belongs to an exceptionally nasty family for which no name can be abusive. The thing is, Master Tutor, that apparently a member of this unsympathetic clan attacked the Company’s barge two weeks ago. Here, on the Delta, not far from where we are.”

“He who says this” – Linus Pitt gave a screeching laugh – “is either an ignoramus or a liar. Nothing like that could have happened. I know the fauna of the Delta very well. The family Hyphydridae does not appear here at all. Nor do any other quite so dangerous predatory species. The considerable salinity and atypical chemical composition of the water, especially during high tide—”

“During high tide,” interrupted Geralt, “when the incoming tide wave passes the Novigrad canals, there is no water – to use the word precisely – in the Delta at all. There is a liquid made up of excrement, soapsuds, oil and dead rats.”

“Unfortunately, unfortunately.” The Master Tutor grew sad. “Degradation of the environment… You may not believe it, but of more than two thousand species of fish living in this river only fifty years ago, not more than nine hundred remain. It is truly sad.”

They both leaned against the railing and stared into the murky green depths. The tide must have already been coming in because the stench of the water was growing stronger. The first dead rats appeared.

“The white-finned bullhead has died off completely.” Linus Pitt broke the silence. “The mullet has died, as have the snakehead, the kithara, the striped loach, the redbelly dace, the long-barbel gudgeon, the king pickerel…”

At a distance of about twenty yards from the ship’s side, the water surged. For a moment, both men saw a twenty-pound or more specimen of the king pickerel swallowing a dead rat and disappearing into the depths, having gracefully flashed its tail fin.

“What was that?” The Master Tutor shuddered.

“I don’t know.” Geralt looked at the sky. “A penguin maybe?”

The scholar glanced at him and bit his lips.

“In all certainty it was not, however, your mythical aeschna! I have been told that witchers possess considerable knowledge about some rare species. But you, you not only repeat rumours and tales, you are also mocking me in a most crude manner… Are you listening to me at all?”

“The mist isn’t going to lift,” said Geralt quietly.

“Huh?”

“The wind is still weak. When we sail into the arm of the river, between the islets, it will be even weaker. It is going to be misty right up to Novigrad.”

“I’m not going to Novigrad. I get off at Oxenfurt,” declared Pitt dryly. “And the mist? It is surely not so thick as to render navigation impossible; what do you think?”

The little boy in the feathered hat ran past them and leaned far out, trying, with his stick, to fish out a rat bouncing against the boat. Geralt approached and tore the stick from him.

“Scram. Don’t get near the side!”

“Muuuummyyyy!”

“Everett! Come here immediately!”

The Master Tutor pulled himself up and glared at the witcher with piercing eyes.

“It seems you really do believe we are in some danger?”

“Master Pitt,” said Geralt as calmly as he could, “two weeks ago something pulled two people off the deck of one of the Company’s barges. In the mist. I don’t know what it was. Maybe it was your hyphydra or whatever its name is. Maybe it was a long-barbel gudgeon. But I think it was an aeschna.”

The scholar pouted. “Conjecture,” he declared, “should always be based on solid scientific foundations, not on rumours and gossip. I told you, the hyphydra, which you persist in calling an aeschna, does not appear in the waters of the Delta. It was wiped out a good half-century ago, due – incidentally – to the activity of individuals such as yourself who are prepared to kill anything that does not instantly look right, without forethought, tests, observation or considering its ecological niche.”

For a moment, Geralt felt a sincere desire to tell the scholar where he could put the aeschna and its niche, but he changed his mind.

“Master Tutor,” he said calmly, “one of those pulled from the deck was a young pregnant girl. She wanted to cool her swollen feet in the water. Theoretically, her child could, one day, have become chancellor of your college. What do you have to say to such an approach to ecology?”

“It is unscientific; it is emotional and subjective. Nature is governed by its own rules and although these rules are cruel and ruthless, they should not be amended. It is a struggle for survival!” The Master Tutor leaned over the railing and spat into the water. “And nothing can justify the extermination of a species, even a predatory one. What do you say to that?”

“I say that it’s dangerous to lean out like that. There might be an aeschna in the vicinity. Do you want to try out the aeschna’s struggle for survival on your own skin?”

Linus Pitt let go of the railing and abruptly jumped away. He turned a little pale but immediately regained his self-assurance and pursed his lips again.

“No doubt you know a great deal about these fantastical aeschna, witcher?”

“Certainly less than you. So maybe we should make use of the opportunity? Enlighten me, Master Tutor, expound a little upon your knowledge of aquatic predators. I’ll willingly listen, and the journey won’t seem so long.”

“Are you making fun of me?”

“Not at all. I would honestly like to fill in the gaps in my education.”

“Hmmm… If you really… Why not? Listen then to me. The Hyphydridae family, belonging to the Amphipoda order, includes four species known to science. Two live exclusively in tropical waters. In our climate, on the other hand, one can come across – though very rarely now – the not-so-large Hyphydra longicauda and the somewhat larger Hyphydra marginata. The biotope of both species is stagnant water or water which flows very slowly. The species are, indeed, predatory, preferring to feed on warm-blooded creatures… Have you anything to add?”

“Not right now. I’m listening with bated breath.”

“Yes, hmm… Mention can also be found, in the great books, of the subspecies Pseudohyphydra, which lives in the marshy waters of Angren. However, the learned Bumbler of Aldersberg recently proved that this is an entirely different species, one from the Mordidae family. It feeds exclusively on fish and small amphibians. It has been named Ichthyovorax bumbleri.”

“The monster’s lucky,” smiled the witcher. “That’s the third time he was named.”

“How come?”

“The creature you’re talking about is an ilyocoris, called a cinerea in Elder Speech. And if the learned Bumbler states that it feeds exclusively on fish then I assume he has never bathed in a lake with an ilyocoris. But Bumbler is right on one account: the aeschna has as much in common with a cinerea as I do with a fox. We both like to eat duck.”

“What cinerea?” The Master Tutor bridled. “The cinerea is a mythical creature! Indeed, your lack of knowledge disappoints me. Truly, I am amazed—”

“I know,” interrupted Geralt. “I lose a great deal of my charm when one gets to know me better. Nevertheless I will permit myself to correct your theories a little further, Master Pitt. So, aeschnae have always lived in the Delta and continue to do so. Indeed, there was a time when it seemed that they had become extinct. For they lived off those small seals—”

“River porpoises,” corrected the Master Tutor. “Don’t be an ignoramus. Don’t mistake seals for—”

“—they lived off porpoises and the porpoises were killed off because they looked like seals. They provided seal-like skins and fat. Then, later, canals were dug out in the upper reaches of the river, dams and barriers built. The current grew weaker; the Delta got silted up and overgrown. And the aeschna underwent mutation. It adapted.”

“Huh?”

“Humans have rebuilt its food chain. They supplied warm-blooded creatures in the place of porpoises. Sheep, cattle, swine began to be transported across the Delta. The aeschnae learned in a flash that every barge, raft or barque on the Delta was, in fact, a large platter of food.”

“And the mutation? You spoke of mutation!”

“This liquid manure” – Geralt indicated the green water – “seems to suit the aeschna. It enhances its growth. The damn thing can become so large, apparently, that it can drag a cow off a raft with no effort whatsoever. Pulling a human off a deck is nothing. Especially the deck of one of these scows the Company uses to transport passengers. You can see for yourselves how low it sits in the water.”

The Master Tutor quickly backed away from the ship’s side, as far as the carts and baggage allowed.

“I heard a splash!” he gasped, staring at the mist between the islets. “Witcher! I heard—”

“Calm down. Apart from the splashing you can also hear oars squeaking in rowlocks. It’s the customs officers from the Redanian shore. You’ll see them in a moment and they’ll cause more of a commotion than three, or even four, aeschnae.”

Boatbug ran past. He cursed obscenely as the little boy in the feathered hat got under his feet. The passengers and messengers, all extremely nervous, were going through their possessions trying to hide any smuggled goods.

After a little while, a large boat hit the side of the barge and four lively, angry and very noisy individuals jumped on board. They surrounded the skipper, bawled threateningly in an effort to make themselves and their positions seem important, then threw themselves enthusiastically at the baggage and belongings of the travellers.

“They check even before we land!” complained Boatbug, coming up to the witcher and the Master Tutor. “That’s illegal, isn’t it? After all, we’re not on Redanian soil yet. Redania is on the right bank, half a mile from here!”

“No,” contradicted the Master Tutor. “The boundary between Redania and Temeria runs through the centre of the Pontar current.”

“And how the shit do you measure a current? This is the Delta! Islets, shoals and skerries are constantly changing its layout – the Fairway is different every day! It’s a real curse! Hey! You little snot! Leave that boathook alone or I’ll tan your arse black and blue! Honourable lady! Watch your child! A real curse!”

“Everett! Leave that alone or you’ll get dirty!”

“What’s in that chest?” shouted the customs officers. “Hey, untie that bundle! Whose is that cart? Any currency? Is there any currency, I say? Temerian or Nilfgaardian money?”

“That’s what a customs war looks like,” Linus Pitt commented on the chaos with a wise expression on his face. “Vizimir forced Novigrad to introduce the ius stapulae. Foltest of Temeria retaliated with a retortive, absolute ius stapulae in Wyzima and Gors Velen. That was a great blow for Redanian merchants so Vizimir increased the tax on Temerian products. He is defending the Redanian economy. Temeria is flooded with cheap goods coming from Nilfgaardian manufactories. That’s why the customs officers are so keen. If too many Nilfgaardian goods were to cross the border, the Redanian economy would collapse. Redania has practically no manufactories and the craftsmen wouldn’t be able to cope with competition.”

“In a nutshell,” smiled Geralt, “Nilfgaard is slowly taking over with its goods and gold that which it couldn’t take with arms. Isn’t Temeria defending itself? Hasn’t Foltest blocked his southern borders?”

“How? The goods are coming through Mahakam, Brugge, Verden and the ports in Cidaris. Profit is all the merchants are interested in, not politics. If King Foltest were to block his borders, the merchants’ guilds would raise a terrible outcry—”

“Any currency?” snarled an approaching customs officer with bloodshot eyes. “Anything to declare?”

“I’m a scholar!”

“Be a prince if you like! I’m asking what you’re bringing in?”

“Leave them, Boratek,” said the leader of the group, a tall, broad-shouldered customs officer with a long, black moustache. “Don’t you recognise the witcher? Greetings, Geralt. Do you know him? Is he a scholar? So you’re going to Oxenfurt, are you, sir? With no luggage?”

“Quite so. To Oxenfurt. With no luggage.”

The customs officer pulled out an enormous handkerchief and wiped his forehead, moustache and neck.

“And how’s it going today, Geralt?” he asked. “The monster show itself?”

“No. And you, Olsen, seen anything?”

“I haven’t got time to look around. I’m working.”

“My daddy,” declared Everett, creeping up without a sound, “is one of King Foltest’s knights! And he’s got an even bigger moustache than you!”

“Scram, kid,” said Olsen, then sighed heavily. “Got any vodka, Geralt?”

“No.”

“But I do.” The learned man from the Academy, pulling a flat skin from his bag, surprised them all.

“And I’ve got a snack,” boasted Boatbug looming up as if from nowhere. “Smoked burbot!”

“And my daddy—”

“Scarper, little snot.”

They sat on coils of rope in the shade of the carts parked amidships, sipping from the skin and devouring the burbot in turn. Olsen had to leave them momentarily when an argument broke out. A dwarven merchant from Mahakam was demanding a lower tax and trying to convince the customs officers that the furs he was bringing in were not silver fox but exceptionally large cats. The mother of the nosey and meddlesome Everett, on the other hand, did not want to undergo an inspection at all, shrilly evoking her husband’s rank and the privileges of nobility.

The ship, trailing braids of gathered nenuphars, water lilies and pond-weed at its sides, slowly glided along the wide strait amongst shrub-covered islets. Bumble bees buzzed menacingly amongst the reeds, and tortoises whistled from time to time. Cranes, standing on one leg, gazed at the water with stoical calm, knowing there was no point in getting worked up – sooner or later a fish would swim up of its own accord.

“And what do you think, Geralt?” Boatbug uttered, licking the burbot’s skin clean. “Another quiet voyage? You know what I’d say? That monster’s no fool. It knows you’re lying in ambush. Hearken to this – at home in our village, there was a river and in that river lived an otter which would creep into the yard and strangle hens. It was so crafty that it never crept in when Father was home, or me and my brothers. It only showed up when Grandpa was left by himself. And our grandpa, hearken, was a bit feeble in the head and paralysis had taken his legs. It was as if the otter, that son-of-a-bitch, knew. Well then, one day our pa—”

“Ten per cent ad valorem!” yelled the dwarven merchant from amidships, waving the fox skin about. “That’s how much I owe you and I’m not going to pay a copper more!”

“Then I’ll confiscate the lot!” roared Olsen angrily. “And I’ll let the Novigrad guards know so you’ll go to the clink together with your ‘Valorem’! Boratek, charge him to the penny! Hey, have you left anything for me? Have you guzzled it down to the dregs?”

“Sit down, Olsen.” Geralt made room for him on the ropes. “Stressful job you’ve got, I see.”

“Ah, I’ve had it up to my ears,” sighed the customs officer, then took a swig from the skin and wiped his moustache. “I’m throwing it in, I’m going back to Aedirn. I’m an honest Vengerberger who followed his sister and brother-in-law to Redania but now I’m going back. You know what, Geralt? I’m set on enlisting in the army. They say King Demawend is recruiting for special troops. Half a year’s training in a camp and then it’s a soldier’s pay, three times what I get here, bribes included. This burbot’s too salty.”

“I’ve heard about this special army,” confirmed Boatbug. “It’s getting ready for the Squirrels because the regular army can’t deal with the elven commandos. They particularly want half-elves to enlist, I hear. But that camp where they teach them to fight is real hell apparently. They leave fifty-fifty, some to get soldier’s pay, some to the burial ground, feet first.”

“And so it should be,” said the customs officer. “The special army, skipper, isn’t just any old unit. It’s not some shitty shield-bearers who just need to be shown which end of the javelin pricks. A special army has to know how to fight like nobody’s business!”

“So you’re such a fierce warrior, are you, Olsen? And the Squirrels, aren’t you afraid of them? That they’ll spike your arse with arrows?”

“Big deal! I know how to draw a bow too. I’ve already fought Nilfgaard, so elves are nothing to me.”

“They say,” Boatbug said with a shudder, “if someone falls into their hands alive, the Scoia’taels’… It’s better they hadn’t been born. They’ll be tortured horrifically.”

“Ah, do yourself a favour and shut your face, skipper. You’re babbling like a woman. War is war. You whack the enemy in the backside, and they whack you back. Captured elves aren’t pampered by our men either, don’t you worry.”

“The tactic of terror.” Linus Pitt threw the burbot’s head and backbone overboard. “Violence breeds violence. Hatred has grown into hearts… and has poisoned kindred blood…”

“What?” Olsen grimaced. “Use a human language!”

“Hard times are upon us.”

“So they are, true,” agreed Boatbug. “There’s sure to be a great war. Every day the sky is thick with ravens, they smell the carrion already. And the seeress Ithlin foretold the end of the world. White Light will come to be, the White Chill will then follow. Or the other way round, I’ve forgotten how it goes. And people are saying signs were also visible in the sky—”

“You keep an eye on the fairway, skipper, ’stead of the sky, or this skiff of yours is going to end up in the shallows. Ah, we’re already level with Oxenfurt. Just look, you can see the Cask!”

The mist was clearly less dense now so that they could see the hillocks and marshy meadows of the right bank and, rising above them, a part of the aqueduct.

“That, gentlemen, is the experimental sewage purification plant,” boasted the Master Tutor, refusing his turn to drink. “A great success for science, a great achievement for the Academy. We repaired the old elven aqueduct, canals and sediment trap and we’re already neutralising the sewers of the university, town and surrounding villages and farms. What you call the Cask is a sediment trap. A great success for science—”

“Heads down, heads down!” warned Olsen, ducking behind the rail. “Last year, when that thing exploded, the shit flew as far as Crane Islet.”

The barge sailed in between islands and the squat tower of the sediment trap and the aqueduct disappeared in the mist. Everyone sighed with relief.

“Aren’t you sailing straight by way of the Oxenfurt arm, Boatbug?” asked Olsen.

“I’m putting in at Acorn Bay first. To collect fish traders and merchants from the Temerian side.”

“Hmm…” The customs officer scratched his neck. “At the Bay… Listen, Geralt, you aren’t in any conflict with the Temerians by any chance, are you?”

“Why? Was someone asking about me?”

“You’ve guessed it. As you see, I remember you asked me to keep an eye out for anyone interested in you. Well, just imagine, the Temerian Guards have been enquiring about you. The customs officers there, with whom I have a good understanding, told me. Something smells funny here, Geralt.”

“The water?” Linus Pitt was afraid, glancing nervously at the aqueduct and the great scientific success.

“That little snotrag?” Boatbug pointed to Everett who was still milling around nearby.

“I’m not talking about that.” The customs officer winced. “Listen, Geralt, the Temerian customs men said these Guards were asking strange questions. They know you sail with the Malatius and Grock barges. They asked… if you sail alone. If you have— Bloody hell, just don’t laugh! They were going on about some underage girl who has been seen in your company, apparently.”

Boatbug chuckled. Linus Pitt looked at the witcher with eyes filled with the distaste which befitted someone looking at a white-haired man who has drawn the attention of the law on account of his preference for underage girls.

“That’s why,” Olsen hawked, “the Temerian customs officers thought it might be some private matters being settled, into which the Guards had been drawn. Like… Well, the girl’s family or her betrothed. So the officers cautiously asked who was behind all this. And they found out. Well, apparently it’s a nobleman with a tongue ready as a chancellor’s, neither poor nor miserly, who calls himself… Rience, or something like that. He’s got a red mark on his left cheek as if from a burn. Do you know anyone like that?”

Geralt got up.

“Boatbug,” he said. “I’m disembarking in Acorn Bay.”

“How’s that? And what about the monster?”

“That’s your problem.”

“Speaking of problems,” interrupted Olsen, “just look starboard, Geralt. Speak of the devil.”

From behind an island, from the swiftly lifting mist, loomed a lighter. A black burgee dotted with silver lilies fluttered lazily from its mast. The crew consisted of several men wearing the pointed hats of Temerian Guards.

Geralt quickly reached into his bag and pulled out both letters – the one from Ciri and the one from Yennefer. He swiftly tore them into tiny shreds and threw them into the river. The customs officer watched him in silence.

“Whatever are you doing, may I ask?”

“No. Boatbug, take care of my horse.”

“You want to…” Olsen frowned. “You intend to—”

“What I intend is my business. Don’t get mixed up in this or there’ll be an incident. They’re sailing under the Temerian flag.”

“Bugger their flag.” The customs officer moved his cutlass to a more accessible place on his belt and wiped his enamelled gorget, an eagle on a red background, with his sleeve. “If I’m on board carrying out an inspection, then this is Redania. I will not allow—”

“Olsen,” the witcher interrupted, grabbing him by the sleeve, “don’t interfere, please. The man with a burned face isn’t on the lighter. And I have to know who he is and what he wants. I’ve got to see him face to face.”

“You’re going to let them put you in the stocks? Don’t be a fool! If this is a private settling of scores, privately commissioned revenge, then as soon as you get past the islet, on the Whirl, you’ll fly overboard with an anchor round your neck. You’ll be face to face all right, but it’ll be with crabs at the bottom of the river!”

“They’re Temerian Guards, not bandits.”

“Is that so? Then just look at their mugs! Besides, I’ll know instantly who they really are. You’ll see.”

The lighter, approaching rapidly, reached the barge. One of the Guards threw the rope over while another attached the boathook to the railing.

“I be the skipper!” Boatbug blocked the way as three men leaped on deck. “This is a ship belonging to the Malatius and Grock Company! What…”

One of the men, stocky and bald, pushed him brusquely aside with his arm, thick as the branch of an oak.

“A certain Gerald, called Gerald of Rivia!” he thundered, measuring the skipper with his eyes. “Is such a one on board?”

“No.”

“I am he.” The witcher stepped over the bundles and packages and drew near. “I am Geralt, and called Geralt. What is this about?”

“I arrest you in the name of the law.” The bald man’s eyes skimmed over the passengers. “Where’s the girl?”

“I’m alone.”

“You lie!”

“Hold it, hold it.” Olsen emerged from behind the witcher’s back and put his hand on his shoulder. “Keep calm, no shouting. You’re too late, Temerians. He has already been arrested and in the name of the law at that. I caught him. For smuggling. I’m taking him to the guardhouse in Oxenfurt according to orders.”

“What’s that?” The bald man frowned. “And the girl?”

“There is no girl here, nor has there been.”

The Guards looked at each other in uncertain silence. Olsen grinned broadly and turned up his black moustache.

“You know what we’ll do?” he snorted. “Sail with us to Oxenfurt, Temerians. We and you are simple folk, how are we to know the ins and outs of law? The commandant of the Oxenfurt guardhouse is a wise and worldly man, he’ll judge the matter. You know our commandant, don’t you? Because he knows yours, the one from the Bay, very well. You’ll present your case to him… Show him your orders and seals… You do have a warrant with all the necessary seals, don’t you, eh?”

The bald man just stared grimly at the customs officer.

“I don’t have the time or the inclination to go to Oxenfurt!” he suddenly bawled. “I’m taking the rogue to our shore and that’s that! Stran, Vitek! Get on with it, search the barge! Find me the girl, quick as a flash!”

“One minute, slow down.” Olsen was not perturbed by the yelling and drew out his words slowly and distinctly. “You’re on the Redanian side of the Delta, Temerians. You don’t have anything to declare, by any chance, do you? Or any contraband? We’ll have a look presently. We’ll do a search. And if we do find something then you will have to take the trouble to go to Oxenfurt for a while, after all. And we, if we wish to, we can always find something. Boys! Come here!”

“My daddy,” squeaked Everett all of a sudden, appearing at the bald man’s side as if from nowhere, “is a knight! He’s got an even bigger blade than you!”

In a flash, the bald man caught the boy by his beaver collar and snatched him up from the deck, knocking his feathered hat off. Wrapping his arm around the boy’s waist he put the cutlass to his throat.

“Move back!” he roared. “Move back or I’ll slash the brat’s neck!”

“Evereeeeett!” howled the noblewoman.

“Curious methods,” said the witcher slowly, “you Temerian Guards use. Indeed, so curious that it makes it hard to believe you’re Guards.”

“Shut your face!” yelled the bald one, shaking Everett, who was squealing like a piglet. “Stran, Vitek, get him! Fetter him and take him to the lighter! And you, move back! Where’s the girl, I’m asking you? Give her to me or I’ll slaughter this little snot!”

“Slaughter him then,” drawled Olsen giving a sign to his men and pulling out his cutlass. “Is he mine or something? And when you’ve slaughtered him, we can talk.”

“Don’t interfere!” Geralt threw his sword on the deck and, with a gesture, held back the customs officers and Boatbug’s sailors. “I’m yours, liar-guard, sir. Let the boy go.”

“To the lighter!” The bald man retreated to the side of the barge without letting Everett go, and grabbed a rope. “Vitek, tie him up! And all of you, to the stern! If any of you move, the kid dies!”

“Have you lost your mind, Geralt?” growled Olsen.

“Don’t interfere!”

“Evereeeett!”

The Temerian lighter suddenly rocked and bounced away from the barge. The water exploded with a splash and two long green, coarse paws bristling with spikes like the limbs of a praying mantis, shot out. The paws grabbed the Guard holding the boathook and, in the wink of an eye, dragged him under water. The bald Guard howled savagely, released Everett, and clung onto the ropes which dangled from the lighter’s side. Everett plopped into the already-reddening water. Everybody – those on the barge and those on the lighter – started to scream as if possessed.

Geralt tore himself away from the two men trying to bind him. He thumped one in the chin then threw him overboard. The other took a swing at the witcher with an iron hook, but faltered and drooped into Olsen’s hands with a cutlass buried to the hilt in his ribs.

The witcher leaped over the low railing. Before the water – thick with algae – closed in over his head, he heard Linus Pitt, the Lecturer of Natural History at the Academy of Oxenfurt, shout, “What is that? What species? No such animal exists!”

He emerged just by the Temerian lighter, miraculously avoiding the fishing spear which one of baldy’s men was jabbing at him. The Guard didn’t have time to strike him again before he splashed into the water with an arrow in his throat. Geralt, catching hold of the dropped spear, rebounded with his legs against the side of the boat, dived into the seething whirlpool and forcefully jabbed at something, hoping it was not Everett.

“It’s impossible!” he heard the Master Tutor’s cries. “Such an animal can’t exist! At least, it shouldn’t!”

I agree with that last statement entirely, thought the witcher, jabbing the aeschna’s armour, bristling with its hard bumps. The corpse of the Temerian Guard was bouncing up and down inertly in the sickle-shaped jaws of the monster, trailing blood. The aeschna swung its flat tail violently and dived to the bottom, raising clouds of silt.

He heard a thin cry. Everett, stirring the water like a little dog, had caught hold of baldy’s legs as he was trying to climb on to the lighter by the ropes hanging down the side. The ropes gave way and both the Guard and the boy disappeared with a gurgle under the surface of the water. Geralt threw himself in their direction and dived. The fact that he almost immediately came across the little boy’s beaver collar was nothing but luck. He tore Everett from the entangled algae, swam out on his back and, kicking with his legs, reached the barge.

“Here, Geralt! Here!” He heard cries and shouts, each louder than the other: “Give him here!”, “The rope! Catch hold of the rope!”, “Pooooox!”, “The rope! Geraaalt!”, “With the boathook, with the boathook!”, “My booyyyy!”.

Someone tore the boy from his arms and dragged him upwards. At the same moment, someone else caught Geralt from behind, struck him in the back of the head, covered him over with his bulk and pushed him under the water. Geralt let go of the fishing spear, turned and caught his assailant by the belt. With his other hand he tried to grab him by the hair but in vain. It was baldy.

Both men emerged, but only for an instant. The Temerian lighter had already moved a little from the barge and both Geralt and baldy, locked in an embrace, were in between them. Baldy caught Geralt by the throat; the witcher dug a thumb in his eye. The Guard yelled, let go and swam away. Geralt could not swim – something was holding him by the leg and dragging him into the depths. Next to him, half a body bounced to the surface like a cork. And then he knew what was holding him; the information Linus Pitt yelled from the barge deck was unnecessary.

“It’s an anthropod! Order Amphipoda! Group Mandibulatissimae!”

Geralt violently thrashed his arms in the water, trying to yank his leg from the aeschna’s claws as they pulled him towards the rhythmical snap of its jaws. The Master Tutor was correct once again. The jaws were anything but small.

“Grab hold of the rope!” yelled Olsen. “The rope, grab it!”

A fishing spear whistled past the witcher’s ear and plunged with a smack into the monster’s algae-ridden armour as it surfaced. Geralt caught hold of the shaft, pressed down on it, bounced forcefully away, brought his free leg in and kicked the aeschna violently. He tore himself away from the spiked paws, leaving his boot, a fair part of his trousers and a good deal of skin behind. More fishing spears and harpoons whizzed through the air, most of them missing their mark. The aeschna drew in its paws, swished its tail and gracefully dived into the green depths.

Geralt seized the rope which fell straight onto his face. The boathook, catching him painfully in the side, caught him by the belt. He felt a tug, rode upwards and, taken up by many hands, rolled over the railing and tumbled on deck dripping with water, slime, weeds and blood. The passengers, barge crew and customs officers crowded around him. Leaning over the railings, the dwarf with the fox furs and Olsen were firing their bows. Everett, wet and green with algae, his teeth clattering, sobbed in his mother’s arms explaining to everybody that he hadn’t meant to do it.

“Geralt!” Boatbug yelled at his ear, “are you dead?”

“Damn it…” The witcher spat out seaweed. “I’m too old for this sort of thing… Too old…”

Nearby, the dwarf released his bowstring and Olsen roared joyously.

“Right in the belly! Ooh-ha-ha! Great shot, my furry friend! Hey, Boratek, give him back his money! He deserves a tax reduction for that shot!”

“Stop…” wheezed the witcher, attempting in vain to stand up. “Don’t kill them all, damn it! I need one of them alive!”

“We’ve left one,” the customs officer assured him. “The bald one who was bickering with me. We’ve shot the rest. But baldy is over there, swimming away. I’ll fish him out right away. Give us the boathooks!”

“Discovery! A great discovery!” shouted Linus Pitt, jumping up and down by the barge side. “An entirely new species unknown to science! Absolutely unique! Oh, I’m so grateful to you, witcher! As of today, this species is going to appear in books as… As Geraltia maxiliosa pitti!”

“Master Tutor,” Geralt groaned, “if you really want to show me your gratitude, let that damn thing be called Everetia.”

“Just as beautiful,” consented the scholar. “Oh, what a discovery! What a unique, magnificent specimen! No doubt the only one alive in the Delta—”

“No,” uttered Boatbug suddenly and grimly. “Not the only one. Look!”

The carpet of water lilies adhering to the nearby islet trembled and rocked violently. They saw a wave and then an enormous, long body resembling a rotting log, swiftly paddling its many limbs and snapping its jaws. The bald man looked back, howled horrifically and swam away, stirring up the water with his arms and legs.

“What a specimen, what a specimen,” Pitt quickly noted, thrilled no end. “Prehensile cephalic limbs, four pairs of chelae… Strong tail-fan… Sharp claws…”

The bald man looked back again and howled even more horribly. And the Everetia maxiliosa pitti extended its prehensile cephalic limbs and swung its tail-fan vigorously. The bald man surged the water in a desperate, hopeless attempt to escape.

“May the water be light to him,” said Olsen. But he did not remove his hat.

“My daddy,” rattled Everett with his teeth, “can swim faster than that man!”

“Take the child away,” growled the witcher.

The monster spread its claws, snapped its jaws. Linus Pitt grew pale and turned away.

Baldy shrieked briefly, choked and disappeared below the surface. The water throbbed dark red.

“Pox.” Geralt sat down heavily on the deck. “I’m too old for this sort of thing… Far, far too old…”

\* \* \*

What can be said? Dandilion simply adored the town of Oxenfurt.

The university grounds were surrounded by a wall and around this wall was another ring – that of the huge, loud, breathless, busy and noisy townlet. The wooden, colorful town of Oxenfurt with its narrow streets and pointed roofs. The town of Oxenfurt which lived off the Academy, off its students, lecturers, scholars, researchers and their guests, who lived off science and knowledge, off what accompanies the process of learning. In the town of Oxenfurt, from the by-products and chippings of theory, practice, business and profit were born.

The poet rode slowly along a muddy, crowded street, passing workshops, studios, stalls, shops small and large where, thanks to the Academy, tens of thousands of articles and wonderful things were produced and sold which were unattainable in other corners of the world where their production was considered impossible, or pointless. He passed inns, taverns, stands, huts, counters and portable grills from which floated the appetising aromas of elaborate dishes unknown elsewhere in the world, seasoned in ways not known elsewhere, with garnishes and spices neither known of nor used anywhere else. This was Oxenfurt, the colorful, joyful, noisy and sweet-smelling town of miracles into which shrewd people, full of initiative, had turned dry and useless theories drawn little by little from the university. It was also a town of amusements, constant festivities, permanent holidays and incessant revelry. Night and day the streets resounded with music, song, and the clinking of chalices and tankards, for it is well known that nothing is such thirsty work as the acquisition of knowledge. Although the chancellor’s orders forbade students and tutors to drink and play before dusk, drinking and playing took place around the clock in Oxenfurt, for it is well known that if there is anything that makes men thirstier than the acquisition of knowledge it is the full or partial prohibition of drinking.

Dandilion smacked his lips at his bay gelding and rode on, making his way through the crowds roaming the streets. Vendors, stall-holders and travelling charlatans advertised their wares and services loudly, adding to the confusion which reigned all around them.

“Squid! Roast squid!”

“Ointment for all spots’n’boils! Only sold here! Reliable, miraculous ointment!”

“Cats, mouse-catching, magic cats! Just listen, my good people, how they miaow!”

“Amulets! Elixirs! Philtres, love potions, guaranteed aphrodisiacs! One pinch and even a corpse will regain its vigour! Who’ll buy, who’ll buy?”

“Teeth extracted! Almost painless! Cheap, very cheap!”

“What do you mean by cheap?” Dandilion was curious as he bit into a stick-skewered squid as tough as a boot.

“Two farthings an hour!”

The poet shuddered and spurred his gelding on. He looked back surreptitiously. Two people who had been following in his tracks since the town hall stopped at the barber-shop pretending to ponder over the price of the barber’s services displayed on a chalkboard. Dandilion did not let himself be deceived. He knew what really interested them.

He rode on. He passed the enormous building of the bawdy-house The Rosebud, where he knew refined services either unknown or simply unpopular in other corners of the world were offered. For some time his rational mind struggled against his character and that desire to enter for an hour. Reason triumphed. Dandilion sighed and rode on towards the university trying not to look in the direction of the taprooms from which issued the sounds of merriment.

Yes, what more can be said – the troubadour loved the town of Oxenfurt.

He looked around once more. The two individuals had not made use of the barber’s services, although they most certainly should have. At present they were standing outside a musical instrument shop, pretending to ponder over the clay ocarinas. The shopkeeper was falling over himself praising his goods and counting on making some money. Dandilion knew there was nothing to count on.

He directed his horse towards the Philosophers’ Gate, the main gate to the Academy. He dealt swiftly with the formalities, which consisted of signing into a guest book and someone taking his gelding to the stables.

Beyond the Philosophers’ Gate a different world greeted him. The college land was excluded from the ordinary infrastructure of town buildings; unlike the town it was not a place of dogged struggle for every square yard of space. Everything here was practically as the elves had left it. Wide lanes – laid with colorful gravel – between neat, eye-pleasing little palaces, open-work fences, walls, hedges, canals, bridges, flower-beds and green parks had been crushed in only a few places by some huge, crude mansion constructed in later, post-elven times. Everything was clean, peaceful and dignified – any kind of trade or paid service was forbidden here, not to mention entertainment or carnal pleasures.

Students, absorbed in large books and parchments, strolled along the lanes. Others, sitting on benches, lawns and in flower-beds, repeated their homework to each other, discussed or discreetly played at evens or odds, leapfrog, pile-up or other games demanding intelligence. Professors engrossed in conversation or debate also strolled here with dignity and decorum. Younger tutors milled around with their eyes glued to the backsides of female students. Dandilion ascertained with joy that, since his day, nothing had changed in the Academy.

A breeze swept in from the Delta carrying the faint scent of the sea and the somewhat stronger stink of hydrogen sulphide from the direction of the grand edifice of the Department of Alchemy which towered above the canal. Grey and yellow linnets warbled amongst the shrubs in the park adjacent to the students’ dormitories, while an orang-utan sat in the poplar having, no doubt, escaped from the zoological gardens in the Department of Natural History.

Not wasting any time, the poet marched briskly through the labyrinth of lanes and hedges. He knew the University grounds like the back of his hand – and no wonder, considering he had studied there for four years, then had lectured for a year in the Faculty of Trouvereship and Poetry. The post of lecturer had been offered to him when he had passed his final exams with full marks, to the astonishment of professors with whom he had earned the reputation of lazybones, rake and idiot during his studies. Then, when, after several years of roaming around the country with his lute, his fame as a minstrel had spread far and wide, the Academy had taken great pains to have him visit and give guest lectures. Dandilion yielded to their requests only sporadically, for his love of wandering was constantly at odds with his predilection for comfort, luxury and a regular income. And also, of course, with his liking for the town of Oxenfurt.

He looked back. The two individuals, not having purchased any ocarinas, pipes or violins, strode behind him at a distance, paying great attention to the treetops and façades.

Whistling lightheartedly the poet changed direction and made towards the mansion which housed the Faculty of Medicine and Herbology. The lane leading to the faculty swarmed with female students wearing characteristic pale green cloaks. Dandilion searched intently for familiar faces.

“Shani!”

A young medical student with dark red hair cropped just below her ears raised her head from a volume on anatomy and got up from her bench.

“Dandilion!” She smiled, squinting her happy, hazel eyes. “I haven’t seen you for years! Come on, I’ll introduce you to my friends. They adore your poems—”

“Later,” muttered the bard. “Look discreetly over there, Shani. See those two?”

“Snoops.” The medical student wrinkled her upturned nose and snorted, amazing Dandilion – not for the first time – with how easily students could recognise secret agents, spies and informers. Students’ aversion to the secret service was legendary, if not very rational. The university grounds were extraterritorial and sacred, and students and lecturers were untouchable while there – and the service, although it snooped, did not dare to bother or annoy academics.

“They’ve been following me since the market place,” said Dandilion, pretending to embrace and flirt with the medical student. “Will you do something for me, Shani?”

“Depends what.” The girl tossed her shapely neck like a frightened deer. “If you’ve got yourself into something stupid again…”

“No, no,” he quickly reassured her. “I only want to pass on some information and can’t do it myself with these shits stuck to my heels—”

“Shall I call the lads? I’ve only got to shout and you’ll have those snoops off your back.”

“Oh, come on. You want a riot to break out? The row over the bench ghetto for non-humans has just about ended and you can’t wait for more trouble? Besides, I loathe violence. I’ll manage the snoops. However, if you could…”

He brought his lips closer to the girl’s hair and took a while to whisper something. Shani’s eyes opened wide.

“A witcher? A real witcher?”

“Quiet, for the love of gods. Will you do that, Shani?”

“Of course.” The medical student smiled readily. “Just out of curiosity to see, close up, the famous—”

“Quieter, I asked you. Only remember: not a word to anyone.”

“A physician’s secret.” Shani smiled even more beautifully and Dandilion was once more filled with the desire to finally compose a ballad about girls like her – not too pretty but nonetheless beautiful, girls of whom one dreams at night when those of classical beauty are forgotten after five minutes.

“Thank you, Shani.”

“It’s nothing, Dandilion. See you later. Take care.”

Duly kissing each other’s cheeks, the bard and the medical student briskly moved off in opposite directions – she towards the faculty, he towards Thinkers’ Park.

He passed the modern, gloomy Faculty of Technology building, dubbed the “Deus ex machina” by the students, and turned on to Guildenstern Bridge. He did not get far. Two people lurked around a corner in the lane, by the flowerbed with a bronze bust of the first chancellor of the Academy, Nicodemus de Boot. As was the habit of all snoops in the world, they avoided meeting others’ eyes and, like all snoops in the world, they had coarse, pale faces. These they tried very hard to furnish with an intelligent expression, thanks to which they resembled demented monkeys.

“Greetings from Dijkstra,” said one of the spies. “We’re off.”

“Likewise,” the bard replied impudently. “Off you go.”

The spies looked at each other then, rooted to the spot, fixed their eyes on an obscene word which someone had scribbled in charcoal on the plinth supporting the chancellor’s bust. Dandilion sighed.

“Just as I thought,” he said, adjusting the lute on his shoulder. “So am I going to be irrevocably forced to accompany you somewhere, gentlemen? Too bad. Let’s go then. You go first, I’ll follow. In this particular instance, age may go before beauty.”

\* \* \*

Dijkstra, head of King Vizimir of Redania’s secret service, did not resemble a spy. He was far from the stereotype which dictated that a spy should be short, thin, rat-like, and have piercing eyes forever casting furtive glances from beneath a black hood. Dijkstra, as Dandilion knew, never wore hoods and had a decided preference for bright colored clothing. He was almost seven foot tall and probably only weighed a little under two quintals. When he crossed his arms over his chest – which he did with habitual pleasure – it looked as if two cachalots had prostrated themselves over a whale. As far as his features, hair color and complexion were concerned, he looked like a freshly scrubbed pig. Dandilion knew very few people whose appearance was as deceptive as Dijkstra’s – because this porky giant who gave the impression of being a sleepy, sluggish moron, possessed an exceptionally keen mind. And considerable authority. A popular saying at King Vizimir’s court held that if Dijkstra states it is noon yet darkness reigns all around, it is time to start worrying about the fate of the sun.

At present, however, the poet had other reasons to worry.

“Dandilion,” said Dijkstra sleepily, crossing the cachalots over the whale, “you thick-headed halfwit. You unmitigated dunce. Do you have to spoil everything you touch? Couldn’t you, just once in your life, do something right? I know you can’t think for yourself. I know you’re almost forty, look almost thirty, think you’re just over twenty and act as though you’re barely ten. And being aware of this, I usually furnish you with precise instructions. I tell you what you have to do, when you have to do it and how you’re to go about it. And I regularly get the impression that I’m talking to a stone wall.”

“I, on the other hand,” retorted the poet, feigning insolence, “regularly have the impression that you talk simply to exercise your lips and tongue. So get to the point, and eliminate the figures of speech and fruitless rhetoric. What are you getting at this time?”

They were sitting at a large oak table amongst bookshelves crammed with volumes and piled with rolls of parchment, on the top floor of the vice-chancellor’s offices, in leased quarters which Dijkstra had amusingly named the Faculty of Most Contemporary History and Dandilion called the Faculty of Comparative Spying and Applied Sabotage. There were, including the poet, four present – apart from Dijkstra, two other people took part in the conversation. One of these was, as usual, Ori Reuven, the aged and eternally sniffing secretary to the chief of Redanian spies. The other was no ordinary person.

“You know very well what I’m getting at,” Dijkstra replied coldly. “However, since you clearly enjoy playing the idiot I won’t spoil your game and will explain using simple words. Or maybe you’d like to make use of this privilege, Philippa?”

Dandilion glanced at the fourth person present at the meeting, who until then had remained silent. Philippa Eilhart must have only recently arrived in Oxenfurt, or was perhaps intending to leave at once, since she wore neither a dress nor her favourite black agate jewellery nor any sharp make-up. She was wearing a man’s short jacket, leggings and high boots – a “field” outfit as the poet called it. The enchantress’s dark hair, usually loose and worn in a picturesque mess, was brushed smooth and tied back at the nape of her neck.

“Let’s not waste time,” she said, raising her even eyebrows. “Dandilion’s right. We can spare ourselves the rhetoric and slick eloquence which leads nowhere when the matter at hand is so simple and trivial.”

“Ah, even so.” Dijkstra smiled. “Trivial. A dangerous Nilfgaardian agent, who could now be trivially locked away in my deepest dungeon in Tretogor, has trivially escaped, trivially warned and frightened away by the trivial stupidity of two gentlemen known as Dandilion and Geralt. I’ve seen people wander to the scaffolds over lesser trivialities. Why didn’t you inform me about your ambush, Dandilion? Did I not instruct you to keep me informed about all the witcher’s intentions?”

“I didn’t know anything about Geralt’s plans,” Dandilion lied with conviction. “I told you that he went to Temeria and Sodden to hunt down this Rience. I also told you that he had returned. I was convinced he had given up. Rience had literally dissolved into thin air, the witcher didn’t find the slightest trail, and this – if you remember – I also told you—”

“You lied,” stated the spy coldly. “The witcher did find Rience’s trail. In the form of corpses. That’s when he decided to change his tactics. Instead of chasing Rience, he decided to wait for Rience to find him. He signed up to the Malatius and Grock Company barges as an escort. He did so intentionally. He knew that the Company would advertise it far and wide, that Rience would hear of it and then venture to try something. And so Rience did. The strange, elusive Master Rience. The insolent, self-assured Master Rience who does not even bother to use aliases or false names. Master Rience who, from a mile off, smells of Nilfgaardian chimney smoke. And of being a renegade sorcerer. Isn’t that right, Philippa?”

The magician neither affirmed nor denied it. She remained silent, watching Dandilion closely and intently. The poet lowered his eyes and hawked hesitantly. He did not like such gazes.

Dandilion divided women – including magicians – into very likeable, likeable, unlikeable and very unlikeable. The very likeable reacted to the proposition of being bedded with joyful acquiescence, the likeable with a happy smile. The unlikeable reacted unpredictably. The very unlikeable were counted by the troubadour to be those to whom the very thought of presenting such a proposition made his back go strangely cold and his knees shake.

Philippa Eilhart, although very attractive, was decidedly very unlikeable.

Apart from that, Philippa Eilhart was an important figure in the Council of Wizards, and King Vizimir’s trusted court magician. She was a very talented enchantress. Word had it that she was one of the few to have mastered the art of polymorphy. She looked thirty. In truth she was probably no less than three hundred years old.

Dijkstra, locking his chubby fingers together over his belly, twiddled his thumbs. Philippa remained silent. Ori Reuven coughed, sniffed and wriggled, constantly adjusting his generous toga. His toga resembled a professor’s but did not look as if it had been presented by a senate. It looked more as if it had been found on a rubbish heap.

“Your witcher, however,” suddenly snarled the spy, “underestimated Master Rience. He set a trap but – demonstrating a complete lack of common sense – banked on Rience troubling himself to come in person. Rience, according to the witcher’s plan, was to feel safe. Rience wasn’t to smell a trap anywhere, wasn’t to spy Master Dijkstra’s subordinates lying in wait for him. Because, on the witcher’s instructions, Master Dandilion had not squealed to Master Dijkstra about the planned ambush. But according to the instructions received, Master Dandilion was duty bound to do so. Master Dandilion had clear, explicit instructions in this matter which he deigned to ignore.”

“I am not one of your subordinates.” The poet puffed up with pride. “And I don’t have to comply with your instructions and orders. I help you sometimes but I do so out of my own free will, from patriotic duty, so as not to stand by idly in face of the approaching changes—”

“You spy for anyone who pays you,” Dijkstra interrupted coldly. “You inform on anyone who has something on you. And I’ve got a few pretty good things on you, Dandilion. So don’t be saucy.”

“I won’t give in to blackmail!”

“Shall we bet on it?”

“Gentlemen.” Philippa Eilhart raised her hand. “Let’s be serious, if you please. Let’s not be diverted from the matter in hand.”

“Quite right.” The spy sprawled out in the armchair. “Listen, poet. What’s done is done. Rience has been warned and won’t be duped a second time. But I can’t let anything like this happen in the future. That’s why I want to see the witcher. Bring him to me. Stop wandering around town trying to lose my agents. Go straight to Geralt and bring him here, to the faculty. I have to talk to him. Personally, and without witnesses. Without the noise and publicity which would arise if I were to arrest the witcher. Bring him to me, Dandilion. That’s all I require of you at present.”

“Geralt has left,” the bard lied calmly. Dijkstra glanced at the magician. Dandilion, expecting an impulse to sound out his mind, tensed but he did not feel anything. Philippa was watching him, her eyes narrowed, but nothing indicated that she was using spells to verify his truthfulness.

“Then I’ll wait until he’s back,” sighed Dijkstra, pretending to believe him. “The matter I want to see him about is important so I’ll make some changes to my schedule and wait for the witcher. When he’s back, bring him here. The sooner the better. Better for many people.”

“There might be a few difficulties,” Dandilion grimaced, “in convincing Geralt to come here. He – just imagine it – harbors an inexplicable aversion to spies. Although to all intents and purposes he seems to understand it is a job like any other, he feels repulsion for those who execute it. Patriotic reasons, he’s wont to say, are one thing, but the spying profession attracts only out-and-out scoundrels and the lowest—”

“Enough, enough.” Dijkstra waved his hand carelessly. “No platitudes, please, platitudes bore me. They’re so crude.”

“I think so, too,” snorted the troubadour. “But the witcher’s a simple soul, a straightforward honest simpleton in his judgement, nothing like us men-of-the-world. He simply despises spies and won’t want to talk to you for anything in the world, and as for helping the secret services, there’s no question about it. And you haven’t got anything on him.”

“You’re mistaken,” said the spy. “I do. More than one thing. But for the time being that brawl on the barge near Acorn Bay is enough. You know who those men who came on board were? They weren’t Rience’s men.”

“That’s not news to me,” said the poet casually. “I’m sure they were a few scoundrels of the likes of which there is no shortage in the Temerian Guards. Rience has been asking about the witcher and no doubt offering a nice sum for any news about him. It’s obvious that the witcher is very important to him. So a few crafty dogs tried to grab Geralt, bury him in some cave and then sell him to Rience, dictating their conditions and trying to bargain as much out of him as possible. Because they would have got very little, if anything at all, for mere information.”

“My congratulations on such perspicacity. The witcher’s, of course, not yours – it would never have occurred to you. But the matter is more complex than you think. My colleagues, men belonging to King Foltest’s secret service, are also, as it turns out, interested in Master Rience. They saw through the plan of those – as you called them – crafty dogs. It is they who boarded the barge, they who wanted to grab the witcher. Perhaps as bait for Rience, perhaps for a different end. At Acorn Bay, Dandilion, the witcher killed Temerian agents. Their chief is very, very angry. You say Geralt has left? I hope he hasn’t gone to Temeria. He might never return.”

“And that’s what you have on him?”

“Indeed. That’s what I have. I can pacify the Temerians. But not for nothing. Where has the witcher gone, Dandilion?”

“Novigrad,” the troubadour lied without thinking. “He went to look for Rience there.”

“A mistake, a mistake,” smiled the spy, pretending not to have caught the lie. “You see what a shame it is he didn’t overcome his repulsion and get in touch with me. I’d have saved him the effort. Rience isn’t in Novigrad. Whereas there’s no end of Temerian agents there. Probably all waiting for the witcher. They’ve caught on to something I’ve known for a long time. Namely, that Geralt, the witcher from Rivia, can answer all kinds of questions if he’s asked in the right manner. Questions which the secret services of each of the Four Kingdoms are beginning to ask themselves. The arrangement is simple: the witcher comes here, to the department, and gives me the answers to these questions. And he’ll be left in peace. I’ll calm the Temerians and guarantee his safety.”

“What questions are you talking about? Maybe I can answer them?”

“Don’t make me laugh, Dandilion.”

“Yet,” Philippa Eilhart said suddenly, “perhaps he can? Maybe he can save us time? Don’t forget, Dijkstra, our poet is mixed up to his ears in this affair and we’ve got him here but we haven’t got the witcher. Where is the child seen with Geralt in Kaedwen? The girl with ashen hair and green eyes? The one Rience asked you about back in Temeria when he caught and tortured you? Eh, Dandilion? What do you know about the girl? Where has the witcher hidden her? Where did Yennefer go when she received Geralt’s letter? Where is Triss Merigold hiding, and why is she hiding?”

Dijkstra did not stir, but his swift glance at the magician showed Dandilion that the spy was taken aback. The questions Philippa had raised had clearly been asked too soon. And directed to the wrong person. The questions appeared rash and careless. The trouble was that Philippa Eilhart could be accused of anything but rashness and carelessness.

“I’m very sorry,” he said slowly, “but I don’t know the answer to any of the questions. I’d help you if I could. But I can’t.”

Philippa looked him straight in the eyes.

“Dandilion,” she drawled. “If you know where that girl is, tell us. I assure you that all that I and Dijkstra care about is her safety. Safety which is being threatened.”

“I have no doubt,” lied the poet, “that’s all you care about. But I really don’t know what you’re talking about. I’ve never seen the child you’re so interested in. And Geralt—”

“Geralt,” interrupted Dijkstra, “never confided in you, never said a word even though, no doubt, you inundated him with questions. Why do you think that might be, Dandilion? Could it be that this simple soul, this simpleton who despises spies, sensed who you really are? Leave him alone, Philippa, it’s a waste of time. He knows shit-all, don’t be taken in by his cocksure expressions and ambiguous smirks. He can help us in only one way. When the witcher emerges from his hide-out, he’ll get in touch with him, no one else. Just imagine, he considers him to be a friend.”

Dandilion slowly raised his head.

“Indeed,” he confirmed. “He considers me to be such. And just imagine, Dijkstra, that it’s not without reason. Finally accept the fact and draw your conclusions. Have you drawn them? Right, so now you can try blackmail.”

“Well, well,” smiled the spy. “How touchy you are on that point. But don’t sulk, poet. I was joking. Blackmail between us comrades? Out of the question. And believe me, I don’t wish that witcher of yours any ill nor am I thinking of harming him. Who knows – maybe I’ll even come to some understanding with him, to the advantage of us both? But in order for that to happen I’ve got to see him. When he appears, bring him to me. I ask you sincerely, Dandilion, very sincerely. Have you understood how sincerely?”

The troubadour snorted. “I’ve understood how sincerely.”

“I’d like to believe that’s true. Well, go now. Ori, show our troubadour to the door.”

“Take care.” Dandilion got to his feet. “I wish you luck in your work and your personal life. My regards, Philippa. Oh, and Dijkstra! Those agents traipsing after me. Call them off.”

“Of course,” lied the spy. “I’ll call them off. Is it possible you don’t believe me?”

“Nothing of the kind,” lied the poet. “I believe you.”

Dandilion stayed on the Academy premises until evening. He kept looking around attentively but didn’t spot any snoops following him. And that was precisely what worried him most.

At the Faculty of Trouvereship he listened to a lecture on classical poetry. Then he slept sweetly through a seminar on modern poetry. He was woken up by some tutors he knew and together they went to the Department of Philosophy to take part in a long-enduring stormy dispute on “The essence and origins of life.” Before it had even grown dark, half of the participants were outright drunk while the rest were preparing for blows, out-shouting each other and creating a hullabaloo hard to describe. All this proved handy for the poet.

He slipped unseen into the garret, clambered out by the window vent, slid down by way of the gutter onto the roof of the library, and – nearly breaking his leg – jumped across onto the roof of the dissecting theatre. From there he got into the garden adjacent to the wall. Amidst the dense gooseberry bushes he found a hole which he himself had made bigger when a student. Beyond the hole lay the town of Oxenfurt.

He merged into the crowd, then quickly sneaked down the backstreets, dodging like a hare chased by hounds. When he reached the coach house he waited a good half hour, hidden in the shadows. Not spotting anything suspicious, he climbed the ladder to the thatch and leaped onto the roof of the house belonging to Wolfgang Amadeus Goatbeard, a brewer he knew. Gripping the moss-covered roof tiles, he finally arrived at the window of the attic he was aiming for. An oil lamp was burning inside the little room. Perched precariously on the guttering, Dandilion knocked on the lead frames. The window was not locked and gave way at the slightest push.

“Geralt! Hey, Geralt!”

“Dandilion? Wait… Don’t come in, please…”

“What’s that, don’t come in? What do you mean, don’t come in?” The poet pushed the window. “You’re not alone or what? Are you bedding someone right now?”

Neither receiving nor waiting for an answer he clambered onto the sill, knocking over the apples and onions lying on it.

“Geralt…” he panted and immediately fell silent. Then cursed under his breath, staring at the light green robes of a medical student strewn across the floor. He opened his mouth in astonishment and cursed once more. He could have expected anything. But not this.

“Shani.” He shook his head. “May the—”

“No comments, thank you very much.” The witcher sat down on the bed. And Shani covered herself, yanking the sheet right up to her upturned nose.

“Well, come in then.” Geralt reached for his trousers. “Since you’re coming by way of the window, this must be important. Because if it isn’t I’m going to throw you straight back out through it.”

Dandilion clambered off the sill, knocking down the rest of the onions. He sat down, pulling the high-backed, wooden chair closer with his foot. The witcher gathered Shani’s clothes and his own from the floor. He looked abashed and dressed in silence. The medical student, hiding behind him, was struggling with her shirt. The poet watched her insolently, searching in his mind for similes and rhymes for the golden color of her skin in the light of the oil lamp and the curves of her small breasts.

“What’s this about, Dandilion?” The witcher fastened the buckles on his boots. “Go on.”

“Pack your bags,” he replied dryly. “Your departure is imminent.”

“How imminent?”

“Exceptionally.”

“Shani…” Geralt cleared his throat. “Shani told me about the snoops following you. You lost them, I understand?”

“You don’t understand anything.”

“Rience?”

“Worse.”

“In that case I really don’t understand… Wait. The Redanians? Tretogor? Dijkstra?”

“You’ve guessed.”

“That’s still no reason—”

“It’s reason enough,” interrupted Dandilion. “They’re not concerned about Rience any more, Geralt. They’re after the girl and Yennefer. Dijkstra wants to know where they are. He’s going to force you to disclose it to him. Do you understand now?”

“I do now. And so we’re fleeing. Does it have to be through the window?”

“Absolutely. Shani? Will you manage?”

The student of medicine smoothed down her robe.

“It won’t be my first window.”

“I was sure of that.” The poet scrutinised her intently, counting on seeing a blush worthy of rhyme and metaphor. He miscalculated. Mirth in her hazel eyes and an impudent smile were all he saw.

A big grey owl glided down to the sill without a sound. Shani cried out quietly. Geralt reached for his sword.

“Don’t be silly, Philippa,” said Dandilion.

The owl disappeared and Philippa Eilhart appeared in its place, squatting awkwardly. The magician immediately jumped into the room, smoothing down her hair and clothes.

“Good evening,” she said coldly. “Introduce me, Dandilion.”

“Geralt of Rivia. Shani of Medicine. And that owl which so craftily flew in my tracks is no owl. This is Philippa Eilhart from the Council of Wizards, at present in King Vizimir’s service and pride of the Tretogor court. It’s a shame we’ve only got one chair in here.”

“It’s quite enough.” The enchantress made herself comfortable in the high-backed chair vacated by Dandilion, and cast a smouldering glance over those present, fixing her eyes somewhat longer on Shani. The medical student, to Dandilion’s surprise, suddenly blushed.

“In principle, what I’ve come about is the sole concern of Geralt of Rivia,” Philippa began after a short pause. “I’m aware, however, that to ask anybody to leave would be tactless, and so…”

“I can leave,” said Shani hesitantly.

“You can’t,” muttered Geralt. “No one can until the situation’s made clear. Isn’t that so, my lady?”

“Philippa to you,” smiled the enchantress. “Let’s throw formalities aside. And no one has to go – no one’s presence bothers me. Astonishes me, at most, but what to do? – life is an endless train of surprises… as one of my friends says… As our mutual friend says, Geralt. You’re studying medicine, are you, Shani? What year?”

“Third,” grunted the girl.

“Ah,” Philippa Eilhart was looking not at her but at the witcher, “seventeen, what a beautiful age. Yennefer would give a lot to be that age again. What do you reckon, Geralt? Because I’ll ask her when I get the chance.”

The witcher smiled nastily.

“I’ve no doubt you will ask. I’ve no doubt you’ll follow the question with a commentary. I’ve no doubt it’ll amuse you no end. Now come to the point, please.”

“Quite right.” The magician nodded, growing serious. “It’s high time. And you haven’t got much time. Dandilion has, no doubt, already informed you that Dijkstra has suddenly acquired the wish to see and talk to you to establish the location of a certain girl. Dijkstra has orders from King Vizimir in this matter and so I think he will be very insistent that you reveal this place to him.”

“Of course. Thank you for the warning. Only one thing puzzles me a little. You say Dijkstra received instructions from the king. And you didn’t receive any? After all, you hold a prominent seat in Vizimir’s council.”

“Indeed.” The magician was not perturbed by the gibe. “I do. I take my responsibilities seriously, and they consist of warning the king against making mistakes. Sometimes – as in this particular instance – I am not allowed to tell the king outright that he is committing a mistake, or to dissuade him from a hasty action. I simply have to render it impossible for him to make a mistake. You understand what I’m saying?”

The witcher confirmed with a nod. Dandilion wondered whether he really did understand, because he knew that Philippa was lying through her teeth.

“So I see,” said Geralt slowly, proving that he understood perfectly well, “that the Council of Wizards is also interested in my ward. The wizards wish to find out where my ward is. And they want to get to her before Vizimir or anybody else does. Why, Philippa? What is it about my ward? What makes her so very interesting?”

The magician’s eyes narrowed. “Don’t you know?” she hissed. “Do you know so little about her? I wouldn’t like to draw any hasty conclusions but such a lack of knowledge would indicate that your qualifications as her guardian amount to nothing. In truth, I’m surprised that being so unaware and so lacking in information, you decided to look after her. And not only that – you decided to deny the right to look after her to others, others who have both the qualifications and the right. And, on top of that, you ask why? Careful, Geralt, or your arrogance will be the end of you. Watch out. And guard that child, damn it! Guard that girl as though she’s the apple of your eye! And if you can’t do so yourself, ask others to!”

For a moment Dandilion thought the witcher was going to mention the role undertaken by Yennefer. He would not be risking anything, and would flatten Philippa’s arguments. But Geralt said nothing. The poet guessed why. Philippa knew everything. Philippa was warning him. And the witcher understood her warning.

He concentrated on observing their eyes and faces, wondering whether by any chance something in the past had tied the two together. Dandilion knew that similar duels of words and allusions – demonstrating a mutual fascination – waged between the witcher and enchantresses very often ended in bed. But observation, as usual, gave him nothing. There was only one way to find out whether something had tied the witcher to anyone – one had to enter through the window at the appropriate moment.

“To look after someone,” the enchantress continued after a while, “means to take upon oneself the responsibility for the safety of a person unable to assure that safety for herself. If you expose your ward… If she comes to any misfortune, the responsibility falls on you, Geralt. Only you.”

“I know.”

“I’m afraid you still know too little.”

“So enlighten me. What makes so many people suddenly want to free me from the burden of that responsibility, want to take on my duties and care for my ward? What does the Council of Wizards want from Ciri? What do Dijkstra and King Vizimir want from her? What do the Temerians want from her? What does a certain Rience, who has already murdered three people in Sodden and Temeria who were in touch with me and the girl two years ago, want from her? Who almost murdered Dandilion trying to extract information about her? Who is this Rience, Philippa?”

“I don’t know,” said the magician. “I don’t know who Rience is. But, like you, I’d very much like to find out.”

“Does this Rience –” Shani unexpectedly – “have a third-degree burn on his face? If so, then I know who he is. And I know where he is.”

In the silence which fell the first drops of rain knocked on the gutter outside the window.

Murder is always murder, regardless of motive or circumstance. Thus those who murder or who prepare to murder are malefactors and criminals, regardless of who they may be: kings, princes, marshals or judges. None who contemplates and commits violence has the right to consider himself better than an ordinary criminal. Because it is in the nature of all violence to lead inevitably to crime.

Nicodemus de Boot, Meditations on Life, Happiness and Prosperity

CHAPTER SIX

“Let us not commit a mistake,” said Vizimir, King of Redania, sliding his ringed fingers through the hair at his temples. “We can’t afford to make a blunder or mistake now.”

Those assembled said nothing. Demawend, ruler of Aedirn, sprawled in his armchair staring at the tankard of beer resting on his belly. Foltest, the Lord of Temeria, Pontar, Mahakam and Sodden, and recently Senior Protector of Brugge, presented his noble profile to everyone by turning his head towards the window. At the opposite side of the table sat Henselt, King of Kaedwen, running his small, piercing eyes – glistening from a face as bearded as a brigand’s – over the other participants of the council. Meve, Queen of Lyria, toyed pensively with the enormous rubies in her necklace, occasionally twisting her beautiful full lips into an ambiguous grimace.

“Let us not commit a mistake,” repeated Vizimir, “because a mistake could cost us too much. Let us make use of the experience of others. When our ancestors landed on the beaches five hundred years ago the elves also hid their heads in the sand. We tore the country away from them piece by piece, and they retreated, thinking all the while that this would be the last border, that we would encroach no further. Let us be wiser! Because now it is our turn. Now we are the elves. Nilfgaard is at the Yaruga and I hear: ‘So, let them stay there’. I hear: ‘They won’t come any further’. But they will, you’ll see. So I repeat, let us not make the same mistake as the elves!”

Raindrops knocked against the window panes and the wind howled eerily. Queen Meve raised her head. She thought she heard the croaking of ravens and crows, but it was only the wind. The wind and rain.

“Do not compare us to the elves,” said Henselt of Kaedwen. “You dishonour us with such a comparison. The elves did not know how to fight – they retreated before our ancestors and hid in the mountains and forests. The elves did not treat our ancestors to a Sodden. But we showed the Nilfgaardians what it means to pick a quarrel with us. Do not threaten us with Nilfgaard, Vizimir, don’t sow the seeds of propaganda. Nilfgaard, you say, is at the Yaruga? I say that Nilfgaard is sitting as quiet as a church mouse beyond the river. Because we broke their spine at Sodden. We broke them militarily, and above all we broke their morale. I don’t know whether it is true that Emhyr var Emreis was, at the time, against aggression on such a scale, that the attack on Cintra was the work of some party hostile to him – I take it that if they had defeated us, he would be applauding, and distributing privileges and endowments amongst them. But after Sodden it suddenly turns out he was against it, and that everything which occurred was due to his marshals’ insubordination. And heads fell. The scaffolds flowed with blood. These are certain facts, not rumours. Eight solemn executions, and many more modest ones. Several apparently natural yet mysterious deaths, a good many cases of people suddenly choosing to retire. I tell you, Emhyr fell into a rage and practically finished off his own commanders. So who will lead their army now? The sergeants?”

“No, not the sergeants,” said Demawend of Aedirn coldly. “It will be young and gifted officers who have long waited for such an opportunity and have been trained by Emhyr for an equally long time. Those whom the older marshals stopped from taking command, prevented from being promoted. The young, gifted commanders about whom we already hear. Those who crushed the uprisings in Metinna and Nazair, who rapidly broke up the rebels in Ebbing. Commanders who appreciate the roles of out-flanking manoeuvres, of far-reaching cavalry raids, of swift infantry marches and of landing operations from the sea. They use the tactics of crushing assaults in specific directions, they use the newest siege techniques instead of relying on the uncertainties of magic. They must not be underestimated. They are itching to cross the Yaruga and prove that they have learned from the mistakes of their old marshals.”

“If they have truly learned anything,” Henselt shrugged, “they will not cross the Yaruga. The river estuary on the border between Cintra and Verden is still controlled by Ervyll and his three strongholds: Nastrog, Rozrog and Bodrog. They cannot be seized just like that – no new technology is going to help them there. Our flank is defended by Ethain of Cidaris’s fleet, and thanks to it we control the shore. And also thanks to the pirates of Skellige. Jarl Crach an Craite, if you remember, didn’t sign a truce with Nilfgaard, and regularly bites them, attacking and setting fire to their maritime settlements and forts in the Provinces. The Nilfgaardians have nicknamed him Tirth ys Muire, Sea Boar. They frighten children with him!”

“Frightening Nilfgaardian children,” smiled Vizimir wryly, “will not ensure our safety.”

“No,” agreed Henselt. “Something else will. Without control of the estuary or the shore and with a flank exposed, Emhyr var Emreis will be in no position to ensure provisions reach any detachments he might care to send across the Yaruga. What swift marches, what cavalry raids? Ridiculous. The army will come to a standstill within three days of crossing the river. Half will lay siege to the stronghold and the rest will be slowly dispersed to plunder the region in search of fodder and food. And when their famed cavalry has eaten most of its own horses, we’ll give them another Sodden. Damn it, I’d like them to cross the river! But don’t worry, they won’t.”

“Let us say,” Meve of Lyria said suddenly, “that they do not cross the Yaruga. Let us say that Nilfgaard will simply wait. Now let us consider: who would that suit, them or us? Who can let themselves wait and do nothing and who can’t?”

“Exactly!” picked up Vizimir. “Meve, as usual, does not say much but she hits the nail on the head. Emhyr has time on his hands, gentlemen, but we don’t. Can’t you see what is happening? Three years ago, Nilfgaard disturbed a small stone on the mountainside and now they are calmly waiting for an avalanche. They can simply wait while new stones keep pouring down the slope. Because, to some, that first small stone looked like a boulder which would be impossible to move. And since it turned out that a mere touch sufficed to set it rolling, others appeared for whom an avalanche would prove convenient. From the Grey Mountains to Bremervoord, elven commandos rove the forests – this is no longer a small group of guerrilla fighters, this is war. Just wait and we’ll see the free elves of Dol Blathanna rising to fight. In Mahakam the dwarves are rebelling, the dryads of Brokilon are growing bolder and bolder. This is war, war on a grand scale. Civil war. Domestic. Our own. While Nilfgaard waits… Whose side you think time is on? The Scoia’tael commandos have thirty- or forty-year old elves fighting for them. And they live for three hundred years! They have time, we don’t!”

“The Scoia’tael,” admitted Henselt, “have become a real thorn in the backside. They’re paralysing my trade and transport, terrorising the farmers… we have to put an end to this!”

“If the non-humans want war, they will get it,” threw in Foltest of Temeria. “I have always been an advocate of mutual agreement and co-existence but if they prefer a test of strength then we will see who is the stronger. I am ready. I undertake to put an end to the Squirrels in Temeria and Sodden within six months. Those lands have already run with elven blood once, shed by our ancestors. I consider the blood-letting a tragedy, but I do not see an alternative – the tragedy will be repeated. The elves have to be pacified.”

“Your army will march against the elves if you give the order,” nodded Demawend. “But will it march against humans? Against the peasantry from which you muster your infantry? Against the guilds? Against the free towns? Speaking of the Scoia’tael, Vizimir described only one stone in the avalanche. Yes, yes, gentlemen, do not gape at me like that! Word is already going round the villages and towns that on the lands already taken by the Nilfgaard, peasants, farmers and craftsmen are having an easier life, freer and richer, and that merchants’ guilds have more privileges… We are inundated with goods from Nilfgaardian manufactories. In Brugge and Verden their coin is ousting local currency. If we sit and do nothing we will be finished, at odds with our neighbours, embroiled in conflict, tangled up in trying to quell rebellions and riots, and slowly subdued by the economic strength of the Nilfgaardians. We will be finished, suffocating in our own stuffy parochial corner because – understand this – Nilfgaard is cutting off our route to the South and we have to develop, we have to be expansive, otherwise there won’t be enough room here for our grandchildren!”

Those gathered said nothing. Vizimir of Redania sighed deeply, grabbed one of the chalices standing on the table and took a long draught. Rain battered against the windows throughout the prolonged silence, and the wind howled and pounded against the shutters.

“All the worries of which we talk,” said Henselt finally, “are the work of Nilfgaard. It is Emhyr’s emissaries who are inciting the non-humans, spreading propaganda and calling for riots. It is they who are throwing gold around and promising privileges to corporations and guilds, assuring barons and dukes they will receive high positions in the provinces they plan to create in place of our kingdoms. I don’t know what it’s like in your countries, but in Kaedwen we’ve been inundated with clerics, preachers, fortune-tellers and other shitty mystics all appearing out of the blue, all preaching the end of the world…”

“It’s the same in my country,” agreed Foltest. “Damn it, for so many years there was peace. Ever since my grandfather showed the clerics their place and decimated their ranks, those who remained stuck to useful tasks. They studied books and instilled knowledge in children, treated the sick, took care of the poor, the handicapped and the homeless. They didn’t get mixed up in politics. And now all of a sudden they’ve woken up and are yelling nonsense to the rabble – and the rabble is listening and believes they know, at last, why their lives are so hard. I put up with it because I’m less impetuous than my grandfather and less sensitive about my royal authority and dignity than he was. What sort of dignity or authority would it be, anyway, if it could be undermined by the squealings of some deranged fanatic? But my patience is coming to an end. Recently the main topic of preaching has been of a Saviour who will come from the south. From the south! From beyond the Yaruga!”

“The White Flame,” muttered Demawend. “White Chill will come to be, and after it the White Light. And then the world will be reborn through the White Flame and the White Queen… I’ve heard it, too. It’s a travesty of the prophecy of Ithlinne aep Aevenien, the elven seeress. I gave orders to catch one cleric who was going on about it in the Vengerberg market place and the torturer asked him politely and at length how much gold the prophet had received from Emhyr for doing it… But the preacher only prattled on about the White Flame and the White Queen… the same thing, to the very end.”

“Careful, Demawend,” grimaced Vizimir. “Don’t make any martyrs. That’s exactly what Emhyr is after. Catch all the Nilfgaardian agents you please, but do not lay hands on clerics, the consequences are too unpredictable. They still are held in regard and have an important influence on people. We have too much trouble with the Squirrels to risk riots in our towns or war against our own peasants.”

“Damn it!” snorted Foltest, “let’s not do this, let’s not risk that, we mustn’t this, we mustn’t that… Have we gathered here to talk about all we can’t do? Is that why you dragged us all to Hagge, Demawend, to cry our hearts out and bemoan our weakness and helplessness? Let us finally do something! Something must be done! What is happening has to be stopped!”

“I’ve been saying that from the start.” Vizimir pulled himself up. “I propose action.”

“What sort of action?”

“What can we do?”

Silence fell again. The wind blustered, the shutters banged against the castle wall.

“Why,” said Meve suddenly, “are you all looking at me?”

“We’re admiring your beauty,” Henselt mumbled from the depths of his tankard.

“That too,” seconded Vizimir. “Meve, we all know you can find a solution to everything. You have a woman’s intuition, you’re a wise wo—”

“Stop flattering me.” The Queen of Lyria clasped her hands in her lap and fixed her gaze on the darkened tapestries with their depictions of hunting scenes. Hounds, extended in a leap, were turning their muzzles up towards the flanks of a fleeing white unicorn. I’ve never seen a live unicorn, thought Meve. Never. And I probably never will.

“The situation in which we find ourselves,” she said after a while, tearing her eyes away from the tapestry, “reminds me of long, winter evenings in Rivian Castle. Something always hung in the air. My husband would be contemplating how to get his hands on yet another maid-of-honour. The marshal would be working out how to start a war which would make him famous. The wizard would imagine he was king. The servants wouldn’t feel like serving, the jester would be sad, gloomy and excruciatingly dull, the dogs would howl with melancholy and the cats sleep, careless of any mice that might be scuttling around on the table. Everybody was waiting for something. Everyone was scowling at me. And I… then I… I showed them. I showed them all what I was capable of, in a way that made the very walls shake and the local grizzly bears wake in their winter lairs. And any silly thoughts disappeared from their heads in a trice. Suddenly everyone knew who ruled.”

No one uttered a word. The wind howled a little louder. The guards on the buttresses outside hailed each other casually. The patter of drops on the panes in the lead window frames grew to a frenzied staccato.

“Nilfgaard is watching and waiting,” continued Meve slowly, toying with her necklace. “Nilfgaard is observing us. Something is hanging in the air, silly thoughts are springing up in many heads. So let us show them what we are capable of. Let us show them who is really king here. Let us shake the walls of this great castle plunged into a winter torpor!”

“Eradicate the Squirrels,” said Henselt quickly. “Start a huge joint military operation. Treat the non-humans to a blood bath. Let the Pontar, Gwenllech and Buina flow with elven blood from source to estuary!”

“Send a penal expedition to smother the free elves of Dol Blathanna,” added Demawend, frowning. “March an interventionary force into Mahakam. Allow Ervyll of Verden a chance, at last, to get at the dryads in Brokilon. Yes, a blood bath! And any survivors – to the reservations!”

“Set Crach an Craite at the Nilfgaardian shores,” picked up Vizimir. “Support him with Ethain of Cidaris’s fleet, let them go ravaging from the Yaruga to Ebbing! A show of strength—”

“Not enough.” Foltest shook his head. “All of that is still not enough. We need… I know what we need.”

“So tell us!”

“Cintra.”

“What?”

“To take Cintra back from the Nilfgaardians. Let us cross the Yaruga, be the first to attack. Now, while they don’t expect it. Let us throw them out, back beyond the Marnadal.”

“How? We’ve just said that it’s impossible for an army to cross the Yaruga—”

“Impossible for Nilfgaard. But we have control of the river. We hold the estuary in our grasp, and the supply routes, and our flank is protected by Skellige, Cidaris and the strongholds in Verden. For Nilfgaard, getting forty or fifty thousand men across the river is a considerable effort. We can get far more across to the left bank. Don’t gape, Vizimir. You wanted something to put an end to the waiting? Something spectacular? Something which will make us true kings again? That something is Cintra. Cintra will bind us and our rule together because Cintra is a symbol. Remember Sodden! If it were not for the massacre of that town and Calanthe’s martyrdom, there would not have been such a victory then. The forces were equal – no one counted on our crushing them like that. But our armies threw themselves at their throats like wolves, like rabid dogs, to avenge the Lioness of Cintra. And there are those whose fury was not quelled by the blood spilt on the field of Sodden. Remember Crach an Craite, the Wild Boar of the Sea!”

“That is true,” nodded Demawend. “Crach swore bloody vengeance on Nilfgaard. For Eist Tuirseach, killed at Marnadal. And for Calanthe. If we were to strike at the left bank, Crach would back us up with all the strength of Skellige. By the gods, this has a chance at success! I back Foltest! Let us not wait, let us strike first, let us liberate Cintra and chase those sons-of-bitches beyond the Amell pass!”

“Slow down,” snarled Henselt. “Don’t be in such a hurry to tug the lion’s whiskers, because this lion is not dead yet. That is for starters. Secondly, if we are the first to strike, we will put ourselves in the position of aggressors. We will be breaking the truce to which we all put our seals. We will not be backed by Niedamir and his League, we will not be backed by Esterad Thyssen. I don’t know how Ethain of Cidaris will react. An aggressive war will also be opposed by our guilds, merchants, nobles… And above all, the wizards. Do not forget the wizards!”

“The wizards won’t back an assault on the left bank,” confirmed Vizimir. “The peace agreement was the work of Vilgefortz of Roggeveen. It is well known that his plan was for the armistice to gradually turn into permanent peace. Vilgefortz will not back a war. And the Chapter, believe me, will do whatever Vilgefortz wishes. After Sodden he has become the most important person in the Chapter – let other magicians say what they will, Vilgefortz plays first fiddle there.”

“Vilgefortz, Vilgefortz,” bridled Foltest. “He has grown too large for us, that magician. Taking into account Vilgefortz’s and the Chapter’s plans – plans which I am not acquainted with anyway, and which I do not understand at that – is beginning to annoy me. But there is a way around that, too, gentlemen. What if it were Nilfgaard who was the aggressor? At Dol Angra for example? Against Aedirn and Lyria? We could arrange that somehow… could stage some tiny provocation… A border incident caused by them? An attack on a border fort, let us say? We will, of course, be prepared – we will react decisively and forcefully, with everybody’s full acceptance, including that of Vilgefortz and the entire Chapter of Wizards. And when Emhyr var Emreis turns his eyes from Sodden and Transriver, the Cintrians will demand their country back – all those the emigrants and refugees who are gathering themselves in Brugge under Vissegerd’s leadership. Nearly eight thousand of them are armed. Could there be a better spearhead? They live in the hope of regaining the country they were forced to flee. They are burning to fight. They are ready to strike the left bank. They await only the battle cry.”

“The battle cry,” bore out Meve, “and the promise that we will back them up. Because Emhyr can command eight thousand men at his border garrison; with that strength he won’t even have to send for relief troops. Vissegerd knows this very well and won’t move until he has the assurance that your armies, Foltest, reinforced by Redanian corps, will disembark on the left bank at his heels. But above all Vissegerd is waiting for the Lion Cub of Cintra. Apparently the queen’s granddaughter survived the slaughter. Allegedly, she was seen amongst the refugees, but the child mysteriously disappeared. The emigrants persist in their search for her… Because they need someone of royal blood to sit on their regained throne. Someone of Calanthe’s blood.”

“Nonsense,” said Foltest coldly. “More than two years have passed. If the child has not been found by now, she’s dead. We can forget that myth. Calanthe is no more and there is no Lion Cub, no royal blood to whom the throne belongs. Cintra… will never again be what it was during the Lioness’s lifetime. Obviously, we cannot say that to Vissegerd’s emigrants.”

“So you are going to send Cintrian guerrillas to their deaths?” Meve narrowed her eyes. “In the line of attack? Not telling them that Cintra can only be reborn as a vassal country under your protectorship? You are proposing, to all of us, an attack on Cintra for your own gain? You have suborned Sodden and Brugge for yourself, are sharpening your teeth on Verden and now you have caught a whiff of Cintra, is that right?”

“Admit it, Foltest,” snapped Henselt. “Is Meve right? Is that why you are inciting us to this affair?”

“Come on, leave it.” The ruler of Temeria furrowed his noble brow and bristled angrily. “Don’t make me out as some conqueror dreaming of an empire. What are you talking about? Sodden and Brugge? Ekkehard of Sodden was my mother’s half-brother. Are you surprised that following his death the Free States brought the crown to me, his relative? Blood not water! And yes Venzlav of Brugge paid me homage as a vassal – but without coercion! He did it to protect his country because, on a fine day, he can see Nilfgaardian lances flashing on the left bank of the Yaruga!”

“And we are talking about the left bank,” drawled out the Queen of Lyria. “The bank we are to strike. And the left bank is Cintra. Destroyed, burned out, ruined, decimated and occupied… but still Cintra. The Cintrians won’t bring you their crown, Foltest, nor will they pay you homage. Cintra will not agree to be a vassal state. Blood, not water!”

“Cintra, if we… When we liberate it, it should become our joint protectorate,” said Demawend of Aedirn. “Cintra is at the mouth of the Yaruga, in too important a strategic position to allow ourselves to lose control over it.”

“It has to be a free country,” objected Vizimir. “Free, independent and strong. A country which will be an iron gateway, a bulwark to the north, and not a strip of burned ground over which the Nilfgaardian cavalry will be able to gather speed!”

“Is it possible to rebuild such a Cintra? Without Calanthe?”

“Don’t get all worked up, Foltest,” pouted Meve. “I’ve already told you, the Cintrians will never accept a protectorate or foreign blood on their throne. If you try to force yourself on them as their lord the tables will be turned. Vissegerd will again prepare his troops for battle, but this time under Emhyr’s wings. And one day those detachments are going to assail us in the vanguard of a Nilfgaardian onslaught. As the spear point, as you just vividly described it.”

“Foltest knows that,” snorted Vizimir. “That’s why he’s searching so hard for this Lion Cub, for Calanthe’s granddaughter. Don’t you understand? Blood not water, the crown through marriage. It’s enough for him to find the girl and force her to marry—”

“Are you out of your mind?” choked out the King of Temeria. “The Lion Cub is dead! I’m not looking for the girl at all, but if I were… It has not even occurred to me to force her to do such a thing—”

“You wouldn’t have to force her,” interrupted Meve, smiling charmingly. “You are still a strapping, handsome man, cousin. And Calanthe’s blood runs through the Lion Cub. Very hot blood. I knew Cali when she was young. When she saw a fellow she liked, she leaped up and down so fast that if you put dry twigs beneath her feet they would have caught real fire. Her daughter, Pavetta, the Lion Cub’s mother, was exactly the same. So, no doubt, the Lion Cub has not fallen far from the apple tree. A bit of effort, Foltest, and the girl would not be long in resisting. That is what you are counting on, admit it.”

“Of course he’s counting on it,” chuckled Demawend. “Our king has thought up a cunning little plan for himself! We assail the left bank and before we realise it our Foltest will have found the girl, won her heart and have a young wife whom he will place on the throne of Cintra while her people cry for joy and pee in their knickers for happiness. For they will have their queen, blood of the blood and flesh of the flesh of Calanthe. They will have a queen… albeit one who comes with a king. King Foltest.”

“What rubbish!” yelled Foltest, turning red then white in turn. “What’s got into you? There’s not a grain of sense in your prattling!”

“There is a whole lot of sense,” said Vizimir dryly. “Because I know that someone is searching for the child very earnestly. Who, Foltest?”

“It’s obvious! Vissegerd and the Cintrians!”

“No, it’s not them. At least, not just them. Someone else is, too. Someone who is leaving a trail of corpses behind them. Someone who does not shrink from blackmail, bribery or torture… While we are on the subject, is a gentleman by the name of Rience in any of your services? Ah, I see from your expressions that either he isn’t or you won’t admit it – which comes to the same thing. I repeat: they are searching for Calanthe’s granddaughter, and searching in such a way as to make you think twice about their intentions. Who is looking for her, I ask?”

“Hell!” Foltest thumped his fist on the table. “It’s not me! It never occurred to me to marry some child for some throne! After all, I—”

“After all, you have been secretly sleeping with the Baroness La Valette for the past four years.” Meve smiled again. “You love each other like two turtle doves and just wait for the old baron to finally kick the bucket. What are you staring at? We all know about it. What do you think we pay our spies for? But for the throne of Cintra, cousin, many a king would be prepared to sacrifice his personal happiness—”

“Hold on.” Henselt scratched his beard with a rasp. “Many a king, you say. Then leave Foltest in peace for a moment. There are others. In her time, Calanthe wanted to give her granddaughter’s hand to Ervyll of Verden’s son. Ervyll, too, might have caught a whiff of Cintra. And not just him…”

“Hmm…” muttered Vizimir. “True. Ervyll has three sons… And what about those present here who also have male descendants? Huh? Meve? Are you not, by any chance, pulling wool over our eyes?”

“You can count me out.” The Queen of Lyria smiled even more charmingly. “It is true, two of my offspring are roaming the world – the fruits of delightful abandon – if they have not been brought to the gallows yet. I doubt that either of them would suddenly desire to be king. They were neither predisposed nor inclined that way. Both were even stupider than their father, may he rest in peace. Whoever knew my deceased husband will understand what I mean.”

“That’s a fact,” agreed the King of Redania. “I knew him. Are your sons really more stupid? Damn it, I thought it wasn’t possible to get any more stupid… Forgive me, Meve…”

“It’s nothing, Vizimir.”

“Who else has sons?”

“You do, Henselt.”

“My son is married!”

“And what is poison for? For the throne of Cintra, as someone here so wisely said, many would sacrifice their personal happiness. It would be worth it!”

“I will not permit such insinuations! And leave me alone! Others have sons, too!”

“Niedamir of Hengfors has two. And is a widower himself. And he isn’t old. And don’t forget Esterad Thyssen of Kovir.”

“I would count those out.” Vizimir shook his head. “The Hengfors League and Kovir are planning a dynastic union with each other. They are not interested in Cintra or the south. Hmm… But Ervyll of Verden… It’s not so far from him.”

“There is someone else who is just as near,” remarked Demawend suddenly.

“Who?”

“Emhyr var Emreis. He is not married. And he is younger than you, Foltest.”

“Bloody hell.” The King of Redania frowned. “If that were true… Emhyr would bugger us without grease! It’s obvious that the people and nobility of Cintra will follow Calanthe’s blood. Imagine what would happen if Emhyr were to get his hands on the Lion Cub? Damn it, that’s all we need! Queen of Cintra, and Empress of Nilfgaard!”

“Empress!” snorted Henselt. “You exaggerate, Vizimir. What does Emhyr need the girl for, what the hell does he need to get married for? The throne of Cintra? Emhyr already has Cintra! He conquered the country and made it a province of Nilfgaard! He’s got his whole butt on the throne and still has enough room to wriggle about!”

“Firstly,” noted Foltest, “Emhyr grips Cintra by law, or rather by an aggressor’s lawlessness. If he had the girl and married her, he could rule legally. You understand? Nilfgaard bound in marriage to Calanthe’s blood is no longer Nilfgaard the invader, at which the entire north bares its teeth. It is Nilfgaard the neighbour whom one has to take into account. How would you want to force such a Nilfgaard beyond Marnadal, beyond the Amell passes? Attacking a kingdom whose throne is legally occupied by the Lion Cub, granddaughter of the Lioness of Cintra? Pox! I don’t know who’s looking for that child. I’m not looking for her. But I declare that now I’m going to start to. I still believe the girl is dead, but we can’t take the risk. It looks as if she is too important. If she survived then we must find her!”

“And shall we decide now who she will marry when we find her?” Henselt grimaced. “Such matters should not be left to chance. We could, for that matter, hand her over to Vissegerd’s guerrillas as a battle standard, tied to a long pole – they could carry her before the front line as they attack the left bank. But if the recaptured Cintra is to be useful to us all… Surely you see what I mean? If we attack Nilfgaard and retrieve Cintra, the Lion Cub can be put on the throne. But the Lion Cub can have only one husband. One who will look after our interests at the mouth of the Yaruga. Who of those present is going to volunteer?”

“Not me,” joked Meve. “I waive the privilege.”

“I wouldn’t exclude those who aren’t present here,” said Demawend seriously. “Neither Ervyll, nor Niedamir, nor the Thyssens. And bear in mind that Vissegerd could surprise you and put the standard attached to a long pole to unexpected use. You’ve heard about morganatic marriages? Vissegerd is old and as ugly as cow’s dung but with enough decoctions of absinthe and damiana down her throat, the Lion Cub might unexpectedly fall in love with him! Is King Vissegerd included in our plans?”

“No,” muttered Foltest, “not in mine.”

“Hmm…” Vizimir hesitated. “Nor in mine. Vissegerd is a tool, not a partner, that’s the role he is to play in our plans for attacking Nilfgaard – that and no other. Besides, if the one who is so earnestly seeking the Lion Cub is indeed Emhyr var Emreis, we cannot take the risk.”

“Absolutely not,” seconded Foltest. “The Lion Cub cannot fall into Emhyr’s hands. She cannot fall into anybody’s— Into the wrong hands… Alive.”

“Infanticide?” Meve grimaced. “An ugly solution, my kings. Unworthy. And surely unnecessarily drastic. First of all, let us find the girl – because we still don’t have her. And when we have found her, give her to me. I’ll keep her in some castle in the mountains for a couple of years, and marry her off to one of my knights. When you see her again, she will already have two children and a belly out to here.”

“Leading to, if I count correctly, at least three future eventual pretenders and usurpers?” Vizimir nodded. “No, Meve. It is ugly, indeed, but the Lion Cub, if she has survived, must now die. For reasons of state. Gentlemen?”

The rain hammered against the windows. The gale howled among the towers of Hagge castle.

The kings grew silent.

“Vizimir, Foltest, Demawend, Henselt and Meve,” repeated the marshal. “They met in a secret council in Hagge Castle on the Pontar. They conferred in privacy.”

“How symbolic,” said the slender, black-haired man wearing an elk tunic marked with the imprints of armour and rust stains, without looking round. “After all, it was at Hagge, not forty years ago, that Virfuril defeated Medell’s armies, strengthened his control over the Pontar Valley and established today’s borders between Aedirn and Temeria. And today Demawend, Virfuril’s son, invites Foltest, Medell’s son, to Hagge, summoning Vizimir of Tretogor, Henselt of Ard Carraigh and the merry widow Meve of Lyria to complete the set. They are meeting now and holding council in secrecy. Can you guess what they are discussing, Coehoorn?”

“I can,” the marshal replied succinctly. He did not say a word more. He knew that the man with his back turned hated anyone to display any eloquence or comment on obvious facts in his presence.

“They did not invite Ethain of Cidaris.” The man in the elk tunic turned away from the window, clasped his hands behind his back and strolled slowly from the window to the table and then back again. “Nor Ervyll of Verden. They did not invite Esterad Thyssen or Niedamir. Which means they are either very sure of themselves, or very unsure. They did not invite anyone from the Chapter of Wizards. Which is interesting, and significant. Coehoorn, try to see to it that the wizards learn of this council. Let them know that their monarchs do not treat them as equals. It seems to me that the wizards of the Chapter have had some doubts in this respect. Disperse them.”

“It’s an order.”

“Any news from Rience?”

“None.”

The man paused at the window and stood there for a long while gazing at the hills drenched in rain. Coehoorn waited, restlessly clenching and unclenching his fist around the pommel of his sword. He was afraid he would be forced to listen to a long monologue. The marshal knew that the man standing at the window considered his monologues a conversation, and viewed conversation as a privilege and proof of trust. He knew this, but still didn’t like listening to the monologues.

“How do you find the country, Governor? Have you grown to like your new province?”

He shuddered, taken unawares. He did not expect the question. But he did not ponder the answer for long. Insincerity and indecisiveness could cost him a great deal.

“No, your Highness. I haven’t. That country is so… gloomy.”

“It was different once,” the man replied without looking round. “And it will be different again. You will see. You will still see a beautiful, happy Cintra, Coehoorn. I promise you. But don’t be saddened, I shan’t keep you here long. Someone else will take over the governorship of the province. I’ll be needing you in Dol Angra. You’ll leave immediately once the rebellion is quashed. I need someone responsible in Dol Angra. Someone who will not allow himself to be provoked. The merry widow of Lyria or Demawend… will want to provoke us. You’ll take the young officers in hand. Cool their hot heads. You will let yourselves be provoked only when I give the order. No sooner.”

“Yes, sir!”

The clatter of arms and spurs and the sound of raised voices came from the antechamber. Someone knocked on the door. The man in the elk tunic turned away from the window and nodded his head in consent. The marshal bowed a little and left.

The man returned to the table, sat down and lowered his head over some maps. He studied them for a long time then finally rested his brow on his interlocked hands. The enormous diamond in his ring sparkled in the candlelight as if a thousand flames.

“Your Highness?” The door squeaked faintly.

The man did not change his position. But the marshal noticed that his hands twitched. He spotted it by the flash of the diamond. He closed the door carefully and quietly behind him.

“News, Coehoorn? From Rience maybe?”

“No, your Highness. But good news. The rebellion in the province has been quelled. We have broken up the rebels. Only a few managed to escape to Verden. And we’ve caught their leader, Duke Windhalm of Attre.”

“Good,” said the man after a while, still not raising his head from his hands. “Windhalm of Attre… Order him to be beheaded. No… Not beheaded. Executed in some other way. Spectacularly, lengthily and cruelly. And publicly, it goes without saying. A terrifying example is necessary. Something that will frighten others. Only please, Coehoorn, spare me the details. You don’t have to bother with a vivid description in your report. I take no pleasure from it.”

The marshal nodded, then swallowed hard. He too found no pleasure in it. No pleasure whatsoever. He intended to leave the preparation and performance of the execution to the specialists, and he did not have the least intention of asking those specialists for details. And, above all, he did not intend to be there.

“You will be present at the execution.” The man raised his head, picked a letter up from the table and broke the seal. “Officially. As the Governor of the Province of Cintra. You will stand in for me. I don’t intend to watch it. That’s an order, Coehoorn.”

“Yes, sir!” The marshal did not even try to hide his embarrassment and discomfort. The man who had given the order did not allow anything to be kept from him. And rarely did anyone succeed in doing so.

The man glanced at the open letter and almost immediately threw it into the fire, into the hearth.

“Coehoorn.”

“Yes, your Highness?”

“I am not going to wait for Rience’s report. Set the magicians to work and have them prepare a telecommunication link with their point of contact in Redania. Let them pass on my verbal orders, which must immediately be sent to Rience. The order is to run as follows: Rience is to stop pussyfooting around, and to stop playing with the witcher. Else it could end badly. No one toys with the witcher. I know him, Coehoorn. He is too clever to lead Rience to the Trail. I repeat, Rience is to organise the assassination immediately, to take the witcher out of the game at once. He’s to kill him, and then disappear, bide his time and await my orders. If he comes across the enchantress’s trail before that he is to leave her alone. Not a hair on Yennefer’s head is to be harmed. Have you remembered that, Coehoorn?”

“Yes, sir.”

“The communiqué is to be coded and firmly secured against any magical deciphering. Forewarn the wizards about this. If they bungle it, if any undesirables learn of my order, I will hold them responsible.”

“Yes, sir.” The marshal hawked and pulled himself up straight.

“What else, Coehoorn?”

“The count… He is here already, your Highness. He came at your command.”

“Already?” He smiled. “Such speed is worthy of admiration. I hope he didn’t exhaust that black horse of his everyone envies so much. Have him come in.”

“Am I to be present during the conversation, your Highness?”

“Of course, Governor of Cintra.”

Summoned from the antechambers, the knight entered the chamber with an energetic, strong and noisy stride, his black armour grating. He stopped short, drew himself up proudly, threw his wet, muddy black cloak back from his shoulder, and laid his hand on the hilt of his mighty sword. He leaned his black helmet, adorned with wings of a bird of prey, on his hip. Coehoorn looked at the knight’s face. He saw there the hard pride of a warrior, and impudence. He did not see any of the things that should have been visible in the face of one who had spent the past two years incarcerated in a place from which – as everything had indicated – he would only leave for the scaffold. A faint smile touched the marshal’s lips. He knew that the disdain for death and crazy courage of youngsters stemmed from a lack of imagination. He knew that perfectly well. He had once been such a youngster himself.

The man sitting at the table rested his chin on his interlaced fingers and looked at the knight intently. The youngster pulled himself up taut as a string.

“In order for everything to be perfectly clear,” the man behind the table addressed him, “you should understand that the mistake you made in this town two years ago has not been forgiven. You are getting one more chance. You are getting one more order. My decision as to your ultimate fate depends on the way in which you carry it out.”

The young knight’s face did not twitch, and nor did a single feather on the wings adorning the helmet at his hip.

“I never deceive anyone, I never give anyone false illusions,” continued the man. “So let it be known that, naturally, the prospect of saving your neck from the executioner’s axe exists only if you do not make a mistake this time. Your chances of a full pardon are small. Your chances of my forgiving and forgetting are… non-existent.”

The young knight in the black armour did not flinch this time either, but Coehoorn detected the flash in his eyes. He doesn’t believe him, he thought. He doesn’t believe him and is deluding himself. He is making a great mistake.

“I command your full attention,” continued the man behind the table. “Yours, too, Coehoorn, because the orders I am about to give concern you too. They come in a moment, for I have to give some thought to their substance and delivery.”

Marshal Menno Coehoorn, Governor of the Province of Cintra and future Commander-in-Chief of the Dol Angra army, lifted his head and stood to attention, his hand on the pommel of his sword. The same attitude was assumed by the knight in black armour with the bird-of-prey-winged helmet. They both waited. In silence. Patiently. The way one should wait for orders, the substance and presentation of which were being pondered by the Emperor of Nilfgaard, Emhyr var Emreis, Deithwen Addan yn Carn aep Morvudd, the White Flame Dancing on the Grave-Mounds of Enemies.

Ciri woke.

She was lying, or rather half-sitting, with her head resting high on several pillows. The compresses on her forehead had grown warm and only slightly damp. She threw them off, unable to bear their unpleasant weight and their stinging against her skin. She found it hard to breathe. Her throat was dry and her nose almost completely blocked with clots of blood. But the elixirs and spells had worked – the pain which had exploded within her skull and dimmed her sight a few hours ago had disappeared and given way to a dull throbbing and a sensation of pressure on her temples.

Carefully she touched her nose with the back of her hand. It was no longer bleeding.

What a strange dream I had, she thought. The first dream for many days. The first where I wasn’t afraid. The first which wasn’t about me. I was an… observer. I saw everything as if from above, from high up… As if I were a bird… A night bird…

A dream in which I saw Geralt.

In the dream it was night. And the rain, which furrowed the surface of the canal, spattered on the shingle roofs and thatches of sheds, glistened on the planks of foot-bridges and the decks of boats and barges… And Geralt was there. Not alone. There was a man with him in a funny hat with a feather, limp from the damp. And a slim girl in a green cloak with a hood… All three were walking slowly and carefully along a wet foot-bridge… And I saw them from above. As if I were a bird. A night bird…

Geralt had stopped short. “Is it still far?” he had asked. “No,” the slim girl had answered, shaking the water off her green cloak. “We’re almost there… Hey, Dandilion, don’t lag behind or you’ll get lost in these culde-sacs… And where the hell is Philippa? I saw her a moment ago, she was flying alongside the canal… What foul weather… Let’s go. Lead on, Shani. And between you and me, where do you know this charlatan from? What have you got to do with him?”

“I sometimes sell him medicaments looted from the college workshop. What are you staring at me like that for? My stepfather can barely pay for my tuition… I sometimes need a little money… And the charlatan, having real medicaments, treats people… Or at least he doesn’t poison them… Well, let’s get going.”

Strange dream, thought Ciri. Shame I woke up. I’d like to have seen what was going to happen… I’d like to know what they were doing there. Where they were going…

From the chamber next door came the sound of voices, the voices which had woken her. Mother Nenneke was speaking quickly, clearly worked up, agitated and angry. “You betrayed my trust,” she was saying. “I shouldn’t have allowed it. I might have guessed that your dislike of her would lead to disaster. I shouldn’t have allowed you to— Because, after all, I know you. You’re ruthless, you’re cruel, and to make matters worse, it turns out you’re also irresponsible and careless. You’re torturing that child mercilessly, forcing her to try things which she can’t possibly do. You’ve no heart.

“You really have no heart, Yennefer.”

Ciri pricked up her ears, wanting to hear the enchantress’s reply, her cold, hard and melodious voice. Wanting to hear how she reacted, how she sneered at the high priestess, how she ridiculed her over-protectiveness. She wanted to hear her say what she usually said – that using magic is no joke, that it isn’t an occupation for young ladies made of porcelain, for dolls blown from thin glass. But Yennefer answered quietly, so quietly that the girl could neither understand nor even make out the individual words.

I’ll fall asleep, she thought, carefully and delicately feeling her nose which was still tender, painful and blocked with clotted blood. I’ll go back to my dream. I’ll see what Geralt is doing there, in the night, in the rain, by the canal…

Yennefer was holding her by the hand. They were both walking down a long, dark corridor, between stone columns or, perhaps, statues. Ciri could not make out their forms in the thick darkness. But there was someone there, in that darkness, someone hiding and observing them as they walked. She heard whispers, quiet as the rustle of the wind.

Yennefer was holding her by the hand, walking briskly and assuredly, full of decisiveness, so much so that Ciri could barely keep up with her. Doors opened before them in succession, one after another. An infinite number of doors with gigantic, heavy leaves opened up before them noiselessly.

The darkness thickened. Ciri saw yet another great door in front of her. Yennefer did not slow her stride but Ciri suddenly knew that this door would not open of its own accord. And she suddenly had an overwhelming certainty that this door must not be opened. That she must not go through it. That, behind this door, something was waiting for her…

She stopped short, tried to pull away, but Yennefer’s hand was strong and unyielding and unrelentingly dragged her forward. And Ciri finally understood that she had been betrayed, deceived, sold out. That, ever since the first meeting, from the very beginning, from the first day, she had been no more than a marionette, a puppet on a string. She tugged harder, tore herself away from that grip. The darkness undulated like smoke and the whispering in the dark, all of a sudden, died away. The magician took a step forward, stopped, turned round and looked at her.

If you’re afraid, turn back.

That door mustn’t be opened. You know that.

I do.

But you’re still leading me there.

If you’re afraid, turn back. You still have time to turn back. It’s not too late.

And you?

For me, it is.

Ciri looked around. Despite the omnipresent darkness she saw the door which they had passed through – and a long, distant vista. And there, from a distance, from the darkness, she heard…

The clatter of hooves. The grating of black armour. And the flutter of the wings of a bird of prey. And the voice. That quiet voice, boring into her skull…

You have made a mistake. You mistook the stars reflected in the surface of the lake at night for the heavens.

She woke and lifted her head abruptly, displacing the compress, fresh because it was still cool and wet. She was drenched in sweat; the dull pain was ringing and throbbing in her temples again. Yennefer was sitting beside on the bed. Her head was turned away so that Ciri did not see her face. She saw only the tempest of black hair.

“I had a dream…” whispered Ciri. “In the dream…”

“I know,” the magician said in a strange voice not her own. “That’s why I’m here. I’m beside you.”

Beyond the window, in the darkness, the rain rustled in the leaves of the trees.

“Damn it,” snarled Dandilion, shaking water from the brim of his hat, soggy from the rain. “It’s a veritable fortress, not a house. What’s that fraud frightened of, fortifying himself like that?”

Boats and barges moored to the bank rocked lazily on water furrowed by the rain, bumping against each other, creaking and rattling their chains.

“It’s the port,” explained Shani. “There’s no shortage of thugs and scum, both local and just passing through. Quite a few people visit Myhrman, bringing money… Everybody knows that. And that he lives alone. So he’s secured himself. Are you surprised?”

“Not in the least.” Geralt looked at the mansion built on stakes dug into the bottom of the canal some ten yards from the shore. “I’m trying to work out how to get to that islet, to that waterside cottage. We’ll probably have to borrow one of those boats on the quiet—”

“No need,” said the student of medicine. “There’s a drawbridge.”

“And how are you going to persuade that charlatan to lower it? Besides, there’s also the door, and we didn’t bring a battering ram with us—”

“Leave it to me.”

An enormous grey owl landed soundlessly on the deck’s railing, fluttered its wings, ruffled its feathers and turned into Philippa Eilhart, equally ruffled and wet.

“What am I doing here?” the magician mumbled angrily. “What am I doing here with you, damn it? Balancing on a wet bar… And on the edge of betraying the state. If Dijkstra finds out I was helping you… And on top of it all, this endless drizzle! I hate flying in the rain. Is this it? This is Myhrman’s house?”

“Yes,” confirmed Geralt. “Listen, Shani, we’ll try…”

They bunched together and started whispering, concealed in the dark under the eaves of a hut’s reed roof. A strip of light fell on the water from the tavern on the opposite side of the canal. Singing, laughter and yelling resounded. Three bargemen rolled out on to the shore. Two were arguing, tugging, shoving each other and repeatedly swearing the same curses to the point of boredom. The third, leaning against a stake, was peeing into the canal and whistling. He was out of tune.

Dong, metallically reverberated the iron sheet tied by a strap to a pole by the deck. Dong.

The charlatan Myhrman opened a tiny window and peered out. The lantern in his hand only blinded him, so he set it aside.

“Who the devil is ringing at this time of the night?” he bawled furiously. “Whack yourself on that empty head of yours, you shit, you lame dick, when you get the urge to knock! Get out, get lost, you old soaks, right now! I’ve got my crossbow at the ready here! Does one of you want six inches of crossbow bolt in their arse?”

“Master Myhrman! It’s me, Shani!”

“Eh?” The charlatan leaned out further. “Miss Shani? Now, in the night? How come?”

“Lower the bridge, Master Myhrman! I’ve brought you what you asked for!”

“Right now, in the dark? Couldn’t you do it during the day, miss?”

“Too many eyes here, during the day.” A slim outline in a green cloak loomed on the deck. “If word gets out about what I’m bringing you they’ll throw me out of the Academy. Lower the bridge, I’m not going to stand around in the rain, I’m soaked!”

“You’re not alone, miss,” the charlatan noted suspiciously. “You usually come alone. Who’s there with you?”

“A friend, a student like me. Was I supposed to come alone, at night, to this forsaken neighbourhood of yours? What, you think I don’t value my maidenhood or something? Let me in, damn it!”

Muttering under his breath, Myhrman released the stopper on the winch and the bridge creaked down, hitting the planks of the deck. The old fraud minced to the door and pulled back the bolts and locks. Without putting his crossbow aside, he carefully peered out.

He didn’t notice the fist clad in a black silver-studded glove as it flew towards the side of his head. But although the night was dark, the moon was new and the sky overcast, he suddenly saw ten thousand dazzlingly bright stars.

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Toublanc Michelet drew the whetstone over the blade of his sword once more, looking totally engrossed in this activity.

“So we are to kill one man for you.” He set the stone aside, wiped the blade with a piece of greased rabbit skin and closely examined the blade. “An ordinary fellow who walks around the streets of Oxenfurt by himself, without a guard, an escort or bodyguards. Doesn’t even have any knaves hanging about. We won’t have to clamber into any castles, town halls, mansion houses or garrisons to get at him… Is that right, honourable Rience? Have I understood you correctly?”

The man with a face disfigured by a burn nodded, narrowing his moist eyes with their unpleasant expression a little.

“On top of that,” Toublanc continued, “after killing this fellow we won’t be forced to remain hidden somewhere for the next six months because no one is going to chase or follow us. No one is going to set a posse or reward seekers on us. We won’t get drawn into any blood feuds or vendettas. In other words, Master Rience, we’re to finish off an ordinary, common fool of no importance to you?”

The man with the scar did not reply. Toublanc looked at his brothers sitting motionless and stiff on the bench. Rizzi, Flavius and Lodovico, as usual, said nothing. In the team they formed, it was they who killed, Toublanc who talked. Because only Toublanc had attended the Temple school. He was as efficient at killing as his brothers but he could also read and write. And talk.

“And in order to kill such an ordinary dunce, Master Rience, you’re hiring not just any old thug from the port but us, the Michelet brothers? For a hundred Novigrad crowns?”

“That is your usual rate,” drawled the man with the scar, “correct?”

“Incorrect,” contradicted Toublanc coldly. “Because we’re not for the killing of ordinary fools. But if we do… Master Rience, this fool you want to see made a corpse is going to cost you two hundred. Two hundred untrimmed, shining crowns with the stamp of the Novigrad mint on them. Do you know why? Because there’s a catch here, honourable sir. You don’t have to tell us what it is, we can manage without that. But you will pay for it. Two hundred, I say. You shake on that price and you can consider that no-friend of yours dead. You don’t want to agree, find someone else for the job.”

Silence fell in the cellar reeking of mustiness and soured wine. A cockroach, briskly moving its limbs, scudded along the dirt floor. Flavius Michelet, moving his leg in a flash, flattened it with a crunch – hardly changing his position and not changing his expression in the least.

“Agreed,” said Rience. “You get two hundred. Let’s go.”

Toublanc Michelet, professional killer from the age of fourteen, did not betray his surprise with so much as the flicker of an eyelid. He had not counted on being able to bargain for more than a hundred and twenty, a hundred and fifty at the most. Suddenly he was sure that he had named too low a price for the snag hidden in his latest job.

Charlatan Myhrman came to on the floor of his own room. He was lying on his back, trussed up like a sheep. The back of his head was excruciatingly painful and he recalled that, in falling, he had thumped his head on the door-frame. The temple, where he had been struck, also hurt. He could not move because his chest was being heavily and mercilessly crushed by a high boot fastened with buckles. The old fraud, squinting and wrinkling up his face, looked up. The boot belonged to a tall man with hair as white as milk. Myhrman could not see his face – it was hidden in a darkness not dispersed by the lantern standing on the table.

“Spare my life…” he groaned. “Spare me, I swear by the gods… I’ll hand you my money… Hand you everything… I’ll show you where it’s hidden…”

“Where’s Rience, Myhrman?”

The charlatan shook at the sound of the voice. He was not a fearful man; there were not many things of which he was afraid. But the voice of the white-haired man contained them all. And a few others in addition.

With a superhuman effort of the will, he overcame the fear crawling in his viscera like some foul insect.

“Huh?” He feigned astonishment. “What? Who? What did you say?”

The man bent over and Myhrman saw his face. He saw his eyes. And the sight made his stomach slip right down to his rectum.

“Don’t beat about the bush, Myhrman, don’t twist up your tail.” The familiar voice of Shani, the medical student, came from the shadows. “When I was here three days ago, here, in this high-backed chair, at this table, sat a gentleman in a cloak lined with musk-rat. He was drinking wine, and you never entertain anybody – only the best of friends. He flirted with me, brazenly urged me to go dancing at the Three Little Bells. I even had to slap his hand because he was starting to fondle me, remember? And you said: ‘Leave her alone, Master Rience, don’t frighten her, I needs must be on good terms with the little academics and do business’. And you both chuckled, you and your Master Rience with the burned face. So don’t start playing dumb now because you’re not dealing with someone dumber than yourself. Talk while you’re still being asked politely.”

Oh, you cocksure little student, thought the charlatan. You treacherous creep, you red-haired hussy, I’m going to find you and pay you back… Just let me get myself out of this.

“What Rience?” he yelped, writhing, trying in vain to free himself from the heel pressing down on his breast-bone. “And how am I to know who he is and where he is? All sorts come here, what am I—?”

The white-haired man leaned over further, slowly pulling the dagger from his other boot while pressing down harder on the charlatan’s chest with his first.

“Myrhman,” he said quietly, “believe me or don’t – as you like. But if you don’t immediately tell me where Rience is… If you don’t immediately reveal how you contact him… Then I will feed you, piece by piece, to the eels in the canal. Starting with your ears.”

There was something in the white-haired man’s voice which made the charlatan believe his every word. He stared at the stiletto blade and knew that it was sharper than the knives with which he punctured ulcers and boils. He started to shake so hard that the boot resting on his chest bounced nervously. But he did not say anything. He could not say anything. Not for the time being. Because if Rience were to return and ask why he had betrayed him, Myhrman would have to be able to show him why. One ear, he thought, one ear I have to endure. Then I’ll tell him…

“Why waste time and mess about with blood?” A woman’s soft alto suddenly resounded from the semi-darkness. “Why risk him twisting the truth and lying? Allow me to take care of him my way. He’ll talk so fast he’ll bite his own tongue. Hold him down.”

The charlatan howled and struggled against his fetters but the white-haired man crushed him to the floor with his knee, grabbed him by the hair and twisted his head. Someone knelt down next to them. He smelled perfume and wet bird feathers, felt the touch of fingers on his temple. He wanted to scream but terror choked him – all he managed was a croak.

“You want to scream already?” The soft alto right next to his ear purred like a cat. “Too soon, Myhrman, too soon. I haven’t started yet. But I will in a moment. If evolution has traced any groove at all in your brain then I’m going to plough it somewhat deeper. And then you’ll see what a scream can really be.”

“And so,” said Vilgefortz, having heard the report, “our kings have started to think independently. They have started to plan independently, in an amazingly short time evolving from thinking on a tactical level to a strategic one? Interesting. Not so long ago – at Sodden – all they could do was gallop around with savage cries and swords raised at the van of their company without even looking around to check their company hadn’t by chance been left behind, or wasn’t galloping in an entirely different direction. And today, there they are – in Hagge Castle – deciding the fate of the world. Interesting. But to be honest, I expected as much.”

“We know,” confirmed Artaud Terranova. “And we remember, you warned us about it. That’s why we’re telling you about it.”

“Thank you for remembering,” smiled the wizard, and Tissaia de Vries was suddenly sure that he had already been aware of each of the facts just presented to him, and had been for a long time. She did not say a word. Sitting upright in her armchair, she evened up her lace cuffs as the left fell a little differently from the right. She felt Terranova’s unfavourable gaze and Vilgefortz’s amused eyes on her. She knew that her legendary pedantry either annoyed or amused everybody. But she did not care in the least.

“What does the Chapter say to all this?”

“First of all,” retorted Terranova, “we would like to hear your opinion, Vilgefortz.”

“First of all,” smiled the wizard, “let us have something to eat and drink. We have enough time – allow me to prove myself a good host. I can see you are frozen through and tired from your journeys. How many changes of portals, if I may ask?”

“Three.” Tissaia de Vries shrugged.

“It was nearer for me,” added Artaud. “Two proved enough. But still complicated, I must admit.”

“Such foul weather everywhere?”

“Everywhere.”

“So let us fortify ourselves with good fare and an old red wine from Cidaris. Lydia, would you be so kind?”

Lydia van Bredevoort, Vilgefortz’s assistant and personal secretary, appeared from behind the curtain like an ethereal phantom and smiled with her eyes at Tissaia de Vries. Tissaia, controlling her face, replied with a pleasant smile and bow of her head. Artaud Terranova stood up and bowed with reverence. He, too, controlled his expression very well. He knew Lydia.

Two servants, bustling around and rustling their skirts, swiftly laid out the tableware, plates and platters. Lydia van Bredevoort, delicately conjuring up a tiny flame between her thumb and index finger, lit the candles in the candelabras. Tissaia saw traces of oil paint on her hand. She filed it in her memory so later, after supper, she could ask the young enchantress to show her her latest work. Lydia was a talented artist.

They supped in silence. Artaud Terranova did not stint himself and reached without embarrassment for the platters and – probably a little too frequently, and without his host’s encouragement – clanged the silver top of the carafe of red wine. Tissaia de Vries ate slowly, devoting more attention to arranging her plates, cutlery and napkins symmetrically – although, in her opinion, they still lay irregularly and hurt her predilection for order and her aesthetic sensibility – than to the fare. She drank sparingly. Vilgefortz ate and drank even more sparingly. Lydia, of course, did not drink or eat at all.

The candle flames undulated in long red and golden whiskers of fire. Drops of rain tinkled against the stained glass of the windows.

“Well, Vilgefortz,” said Terranova finally, rummaging in a platter with his fork in search of an adequately fatty piece of game. “What is your position regarding our monarchs’ behaviour? Hen Gedymdeith and Francesca sent us here because they want to know your opinion. Tissaia and I are also interested. The Chapter wants to assume a unanimous stand in this matter. And, should it come to action, we also want to act unanimously. So what do you advise?”

“It flatters me greatly” – with a gesture, Vilgefortz thanked Lydia, who was offering to put more broccoli on his plate – “that my opinion in this matter should be decisive for the Chapter.”

“No one said that.” Artaud poured himself some more wine. “We’re going to make a collective decision anyway, when the Chapter meets. But we wish to let everybody have the opportunity to express themselves beforehand so we can have an idea of all the various views. We’re listening, therefore.”

If we’ve finished supping, let us go through into the workshop, Lydia proposed telepathically, smiling with her eyes. Terranova looked at her smile and quickly downed what he had in his chalice. To the dregs.

“Good idea.” Vilgefortz wiped his fingers on a napkin. “We’ll be more comfortable there. My protection against magical eavesdropping is stronger there, too. Let us go. You can bring the carafe, Artaud.”

“I won’t say no. It’s my favourite vintage.”

They went through to the workshop. Tissaia could not stop herself from casting an eye over the workbench weighed down with retorts, crucibles, test-tubes, crystals and numerous magical utensils. All were enveloped in a screening spell, but Tissaia de Vries was an Archmage – there was no screen she could not penetrate. And she was a little curious as to what the mage had been doing of late. She worked out the configuration of the recently used apparatus in a flash. It served for the detection of persons who had disappeared while enabling a psychic vision by means of the “crystal, metal, stone” method. The wizard was either searching for someone or resolving a theoretical, logistical problem. Vilgefortz of Roggeveen was well known for his love of solving such problems.

They sat down in carved ebony armchairs. Lydia glanced at Vilgefortz, caught the sign transmitted by his eye and immediately left. Tissaia sighed imperceptibly.

Everyone knew that Lydia van Bredevoort was in love with Vilgefortz of Roggeveen, that she had loved him for years with a silent, relentless and stubborn love. The wizard, it is to be understood, also knew about this but pretended not to. Lydia made it easier for him by never betraying her feelings to him – she never took the slightest step or made the slightest gesture, transmitted no sign by thought and, even if she could speak, would never have said a word. She was too proud. Vilgefortz, too, did nothing because he did not love Lydia. He could, of course, simply have have made her his lover, tied her to him even more strongly and, who knows, maybe even made her happy. There were those who advised him to do so. But Vilgefortz did not. He was too proud and too much a man of principle. The situation, therefore, was hopeless but stable, and this patently satisfied them both.

“So.” The young wizard broke the silence. “The Chapter are racking their brains about what to do about the initiatives and plans of our kings? Quite unnecessarily. Their plans must simply be ignored.”

“I beg your pardon?” Artaud Terranova froze with the chalice in his left hand, the carafe in his right. “Did I understand you correctly? We are to do nothing? We’re to let—”

“We already have,” interrupted Vilgefortz. “Because no one asked us for our permission. And no one will. I repeat, we ought to pretend that we know nothing. That is the only rational thing to do.”

“The things they have thought up threaten war, and on a grand scale at that.”

“The things they have thought up have been made known to us thanks to enigmatic and incomplete information, which comes from a mysterious and highly dubious source. So dubious that the word ‘disinformation’ stubbornly comes to mind. And even if it were true, their designs are still at the planning stage and will remain so for a long while yet. And if they move beyond that stage… Well, then we will act accordingly.”

“You mean to say,” Terranova screwed up his face, “we will dance to the tune they play?”

“Yes, Artaud.” Vilgefortz looked at him and his eyes flashed. “You will dance to the tune they play. Or you will take leave of the dance-floor. Because the orchestra’s podium is too high for you to climb up there and tell the musicians to play some other tune. Realise that at last. If you think another solution is possible, you are making a mistake. You mistake the stars reflected in the surface of the lake at night for the heavens.”

The Chapter will do as he says, disguising his order as advice, thought Tissaia de Vries. We are all pawns on his chess board. He’s moved up, grown, obscured us with his brightness, subordinated us to him. We’re pawns in his game. A game the rules of which we do not know.

Her left cuff had once again arranged itself differently from the right. The enchantress adjusted it with care.

“The kings’ plans are already at the stage of practical realisation,” she said slowly. “In Kaedwen and Aedirn an offensive against the Scoia’tael has begun. The blood of young elves is flowing. It is reaching the point of persecution and pogroms against non-humans. There is talk of an attack on the free elves of Dol Blathanna and the Grey Mountains. This is mass murder. Are we to say to Gedymdeith and Enid Findabair that you advise us to stand idly by, to watch and do nothing? Pretending we can’t see anything?”

Vilgefortz turned his head towards her. Now you’re going to change tactics, thought Tissaia. You’re a player, you can hear which way the dice roll on the table. You’re going to change tactics. You’re going to strike a different note.

Vilgefortz did not lower his eyes from hers.

“You are right,” he said curtly. “You are right, Tissaia. War with Nilfgaard is one thing but we must not look on idly at the massacre of non-humans and do nothing. I suggest we call a convention, a general convention of everyone up to and including Masters of the Third Degree, including those who have been sitting on royal councils since Sodden. At the convention we will make them see reason and order them to keep their monarchs in check.”

“I second this proposition,” said Terranova. “Let us call a convention and remind them to whom they owe first loyalty. Note that even some members of our Council now advise kings. The kings are served by Carduin, Philippa Eilhart, Fercart, Radcliffe, Yennefer—”

At the last name Vilgefortz twitched internally. But Tissaia de Vries was an Archmage. Tissaia sensed the thought, the impulse leaping from the workbench and magical apparatus to the two volumes lying on the table. Both books were invisible, enveloped in magic. The magician focused herself and penetrated the screen.

Aen Ithlinnespeath, the prophecy foretold by Ithlinne Aegli aep Aevenien, the elven seeress. The prophecy of the end of civilisation, the prophecy of annihilation, destruction and the return of barbarianism which are to come with the masses of ice pressing down from the borders of the eternal freeze. And the other book… Very old… Falling apart… Aen Hen Ichaer… The Elder Blood… The Blood of Elves?

“Tissaia? And what do you think?”

“I second it.” The enchantress adjusted her ring which had turned the wrong way round. “I second Vilgefortz’s plan. Let us call a convention. As soon as possible.”

Metal, stone, crystal, she thought. Are you looking for Yennefer? Why? And what does she have to do with Ithlin’s prophecy? Or with the Elder Blood of the Elves? What are you brewing, Vilgefortz?

I’m sorry, said Lydia van Bredevoort telepathically, coming in without a sound. The wizard stood up.

“Forgive me,” he said, “but this is urgent. I’ve been waiting for this letter since yesterday. It will only take a minute.”

Artaud yawned, muffled a belch and reached for the carafe. Tissaia looked at Lydia. Lydia smiled. With her eyes. She could not do so any other way.

The lower half of Lydia van Bredevoort’s face was an illusion.

Four years ago, on Vilgefortz’s – her master’s – recommendation, Lydia had taken part in experiments concerning the properties of an artefact found amongst the excavations of an ancient necropolis. The artefact turned out to be cursed. It activated only once. Of the five wizards taking part in the experiment, three died on the spot. The fourth lost his eyes, both hands and went mad. Lydia escaped with burns, a mangled jaw and a mutation of the larynx and throat which, to this day, effectively resisted all efforts at regeneration. A powerful illusion was therefore drawn so that people did not faint at the sight of Lydia’s face. It was a very strong, very efficiently placed illusion, difficult for even the Chosen Ones to penetrate.

“Hmm…” Vilgefortz put the letter aside. “Thank you, Lydia.”

Lydia smiled. The messenger is waiting for a reply, she said.

“There will be no reply.”

I understand. I have given orders to prepare chambers for your guests.

“Thank you. Tissaia, Artaud, I apologise for the short delay. Let us continue. Where were we?”

Nowhere, thought Tissaia de Vries. But I’m listening carefully to you. Because at some stage you’ll finally mention the thing which really interests you.

“Ah,” began Vilgefortz slowly. “Now I know what I wanted to say. I’m thinking about those members of the Council who have had the least experience. Fercart and Yennefer. Fercart, as far as I know, is tied to Foltest of Temeria and sits on the king’s council with Triss Merigold. But who is Yennefer tied to? You said, Artaud, that she is one of those who are serving kings.”

“Artaud exaggerated,” said Tissaia calmly. “Yennefer is living in Vengerberg so Demawend sometimes turns to her for help, but they do not work together all the time. It cannot be said for certain that she is serving Demawend.”

“How is her sight? Everything is all right, I hope?”

“Yes. Everything’s all right.”

“Good. Very good. I was worried… You know, I wanted to contact her but it turned out she had left. No one knew where for.”

Stone, metal, crystal, thought Tissaia de Vries. “Everything that Yennefer wears is active and cannot be detected using psychic visions. You won’t find her that way, my dear. If Yennefer does not wish anyone to know where she is, no one will find out.

“Write to her,” she said calmly, straightening out her cuffs. “And send the letter in the ordinary way. It will get there without fail. And Yennefer, wherever she is, will reply. She always does.”

“Yennefer,” threw in Artaud, “frequently disappears, sometimes for entire months. The reasons tend to be quite trivial…”

Tissaia looked at him, pursing her lips. The wizard fell silent. Vilgefortz smiled faintly.

“Precisely,” he said. “That is just what I thought. At one time she was closely tied to… a certain witcher. Geralt, if I’m not mistaken. It seems it wasn’t just an ordinary passing affair. It appeared Yennefer was quite strongly involved…”

Tissaia de Vries sat up straight and gripped the armrests of her chair.

“Why are you asking about that? They’re personal matters. It is none of our business.”

“Of course.” Vilgefortz glanced at the letter lying discarded on the pulpit. “It is none of our business. But I’m not being guided by unhealthy curiosity but concern about the emotional state of a member of the Council. I am wondering about Yennefer’s reaction to the news of… of Geralt’s death. I presume she would get over it, come to terms with it, without falling into a depression or exaggerated mourning?”

“No doubt, she would,” said Tissaia coldly. “Especially as such news has been reaching her every now and again – and always proving to be a rumour.”

“That’s right,” confirmed Terranova. “This Geralt, or whatever he’s called, knows how to fend for himself. And why be surprised? He is a mutant, a murdering machine, programmed to kill and not let himself be killed. And as for Yennefer, let us not exaggerate her alleged emotions. We know her. She does not give in to emotions. She toyed with the witcher, that’s all. She was fascinated with death, which this character constantly courts. And when he finally brings it onto himself, that will be the end of it.”

“For the time being,” remarked Tissaia de Vries dryly, “the witcher is alive.”

Vilgefortz smiled and once more glanced at the letter lying in front of him.

“Is that so?” he said. “I don’t think so.”

Geralt flinched a little and swallowed hard. The initial shock of drinking the elixir had passed and the second stage was beginning to take effect, as indicated by a faint but unpleasant dizziness which accompanied the adaptation of his sight to darkness.

The adaptation progressed quickly. The deep darkness of the night paled; everything around him started to take on shades of grey, shades which were at first hazy and unclear then increasingly contrasting, distinct and sharp. In the little street leading to the canal bank which, a moment ago, had been as dark as the inside of a tar barrel, Geralt could now make out the rats roaming through the gutters, and sniffing at puddles and gaps in the walls.

His hearing, too, had been heightened by the witchers’ decoction. The deserted tangle of lanes where, only a moment ago, there had been the sound of rain against guttering, began to come to life, to throb with sounds. He heard the cries of cats fighting, dogs barking on the other side of the canal, laughter and shouting from the taprooms and inns of Oxenfurt, yelling and singing from the bargemen’s tavern, and the distant, quiet warble of a flute playing a jaunty tune. The dark, sleepy houses came to life as well – Geralt could make out the snoring of slumbering people, the thuds of oxen in enclosures, the snorting of horses in stables. From one of the houses in the depths of the street came the stifled, spasmodic moans of a woman in the throes of lovemaking.

The sounds increased, grew louder. He now made out the obscene lyrics of the carousing songs, learned the name of the moaning woman’s lover. From Myhrman’s homestead on the canal came the broken, uncoordinated gibberish of the charlatan who had been put, by Philippa Eilhart’s treatment, into a state of complete and, no doubt, permanent idiocy.

Dawn was approaching. It had finally stopped raining, a wind started up which blew the clouds away. The sky in the east was clearly paling.

The rats in the lane suddenly grew uneasy, scattered in all directions and hid amongst the crates and rubbish.

The witcher heard footsteps. Four or five men; he could not as yet say exactly how many. He looked up but did not see Philippa.

Immediately he changed tactics. If Rience was amongst those approaching he had little chance of grabbing him. He would first have to fight his escort and he did not want to do so. Firstly, as he was under the influence of the elixir, those men would have to die. Secondly, Rience would then have the opportunity to flee.

The footsteps grew nearer. Geralt emerged from the shadows.

Rience loomed out of the lane. The witcher recognised the sorcerer instantly and instinctively, although he had never seen him before. The burn, a gift from Yennefer, was masked by the shadow of his hood.

He was alone. His escort did not reveal themselves, remaining hidden in the little street. Geralt immediately understood why. Rience knew who was waiting for him by the charlatan’s house. Rience had suspected an ambush, yet he had still come. The witcher realised why. And that was even before he had heard the quiet grating of swords being drawn from their scabbards. Fine, he thought. If that’s what you want, fine.

“It is a pleasure hunting for you,” said Rience quietly. “You appear where you’re wanted of your own accord.”

“The same can be said of you,” calmly retorted the witcher. “You appeared here. I wanted you here and here you are.”

“You must have pushed Myhrman hard to tell you about the amulet, to show you where it is hidden. And how to activate it to send out a message. But Myhrman didn’t know that the amulet informs and warns at the same time, and so he could not have told you even if roasted on red coals. I have distributed a good many of these amulets. I knew that sooner or later you would come across one of them.”

Four men emerged from around a corner of the little street. They moved slowly, deftly and noiselessly. They still kept to the areas of darkness and wielded their drawn swords in such a way as not to be betrayed by a flash of blades. The witcher, obviously, saw them clearly. But he did not reveal the fact. Fine, murderers, he thought. If that’s what you want, that’s what you’ll get.

“I waited,” continued Rience without moving from the spot, “and here you are. I intend to finally rid the earth of your burden, you foul changeling.”

“You intend? You overrate yourself. You are nothing but a tool. A thug hired by others to deal with their dirty work. Who hired you, stooge?”

“You want to know too much, mutant. You call me a stooge? And do you know what you are? A heap of dung on the road which has to be removed because someone prefers not to soil their boots. No, I am not going to disclose who that person is to you, although I could. But I will tell you something else so you have something to think about on your way to hell. I already know where to find the little bastard you were looking after. And I know where to find that witch of yours, Yennefer. My patrons don’t care about her but I bear the whore a personal grudge. As soon as I’ve finished with you, I’m going after her. I’ll see to it that she regrets her tricks with fire. Oh, yes, she is going to regret them. For a very long time.”

“You shouldn’t have said that.” The witcher smiled nastily, feeling the euphoria of battle aroused by the elixir, reacting with adrenalin. “Before you said that, you still had a chance to live. Now you don’t.”

A powerful oscillation of his witcher’s medallion warned him of a sudden assault. He jumped aside and, drawing his sword in a flash, deflected and annihilated the violent, paralysing wave of magical energy directed at him with his rune-covered blade. Rience backed away, raised his arm to make a move but at the last moment took fright. Not attempting a second spell, he swiftly retreated down the lane. The witcher could not run after him – the four men who thought they were concealed in the shadows threw themselves at him. Swords flashed.

They were professionals. All four of them. Experienced, skilled professionals working as a team. They came at him in pairs, two on the left, two on the right. In pairs – so that one always covered the other’s back. The witcher chose those on the left. On top of the euphoria produced by the elixir came fury.

The first thug attacked with a feint from dextra only to jump aside and allow the man behind him to execute a deceptive thrust. Geralt spun in a pirouette, evaded and passed by them and with the very tip of his sword slashed the other one from behind across the occiput, shoulders and back. He was angry and hit hard. A fountain of blood spurted on the wall.

The first man backed away with lightning speed, making room for the next pair. These separated for the attack, slashing their swords from two directions in such a way that only one blow could be parried, the other having to meet its aim. Geralt did not parry and, whirling in a pirouette, came between them. In order not to collide, they both had to break their teamed rhythm, their rehearsed steps. One of them managed to turn in a soft, feline feint and leaped away dextrously. The other did not have time. He lost his balance and stumbled backwards. The witcher, turning in a reverse pirouette, used his momentum to slash him across the lower back. He was angry. He felt his sharp witcher’s blade sever the spine. A terrifying howl echoed down the streets. The two remaining men immediately attacked him, showering him with blows which he parried with the greatest of difficulties. He went into a pirouette and tore himself from beneath the flashing blades. But instead of leaning his back against the wall and defending himself, he attacked.

They were not expecting it, did not have time to leap away and apart. One of them countered but the witcher evaded the counter-attack, spun, slashed from behind – blindly – counting on the rush of air. He was angry. He aimed low, at the belly. And hit his mark. He heard a stifled cry but did not have time to look back. The last of the thugs was already at his side, already striking a nasty sinistra with a quarte. Geralt parried at the last moment, statically, without a turn, with a quarte from dextra. The thug, making use of the impetus of the parry, unwound like a spring and slashed from a half-turn, wide and hard. Too hard. Geralt was already spinning. The killer’s blade, considerably heavier than the witcher’s, cut the air and the thug had to follow the blow. The impetus caused him to turn. Geralt slipped out of the half-turn just beside him, very close. He saw his contorted face, his horrified eyes. He was angry. He struck. Short but powerful. And sure. Right in the eyes.

He heard Shani’s terrified scream as she tried to pull herself free of Dandilion on the bridge leading to the charlatan’s house.

Rience retreated into the depths of the lane, raising and spreading both arms in front of him, a magical light already beginning to exude from them. Geralt grasped his sword with both hands and without second thoughts ran towards him. The sorcerer’s nerves could not take it. Without completing his spell, he began to run away, yelling incomprehensibly. But Geralt understood. He knew that Rience was calling for help. Begging for help.

And help arrived. The little street blazed with a bright light and on the dilapidated, sullied walls of a house, flared the fiery oval of a portal. Rience threw himself towards it. Geralt jumped. He was furious.

Toublanc Michelet groaned and curled up, clutching his riven belly. He felt the blood draining from him, flowing rapidly through his fingers. Not far from him lay Flavius. He had still been twitching a moment ago, but now he lay motionless. Toublanc squeezed his eyelids shut, then opened them. But the owl sitting next to Flavius was clearly not a hallucination – it did not disappear. He groaned again and turned his head away.

Some wench, a young one judging by her voice, was screaming hysterically.

“Let me go! There are wounded there! I’ve got to… I’m a medical student, Dandilion! Let me go, do you hear?”

“You can’t help them,” replied Dandilion in a dull voice. “Not after a witcher’s sword… Don’t even go there. Don’t look… I beg you, Shani, don’t look.”

Toublanc felt someone kneel next to him. He detected the scent of perfume and wet feathers. He heard a quiet, gentle, soothing voice. It was hard to make out the words, the annoying screams and sobs of the young wench interfered. Of that… medical student. But if it was the medical student who was yelling then who was kneeling next to him? Toublanc groaned.

“…be all right. Everything will be all right.”

“The son… of… a… bitch,” he grunted. “Rience… He told us… An ordinary fool… But it… was a witcher… Caa… tch… Heee… elp… My… guts…”

“Quiet, quiet, my son. Keep calm. It’s all right. It doesn’t hurt any more. Isn’t that right, it doesn’t hurt? Tell me who called you up here? Who introduced you to Rience? Who recommended him? Who got you into this? Tell me, please, my son. And then everything will be all right. You’ll see, it’ll be all right. Tell me, please.”

Toublanc tasted blood in his mouth. But he did not have the strength to spit it out. His cheek pressing into the wet earth, he opened his mouth and blood poured out.

He no longer felt anything.

“Tell me,” the gentle voice kept repeating. “Tell me, my son.”

Toublanc Michelet, professional murderer since the age of fourteen, closed his eyes and smiled a bloodied smile. And whispered what he knew.

And when he opened his eyes, he saw a stiletto with a narrow blade and a tiny golden hilt.

“Don’t be frightened,” said the gentle voice as the point of the stiletto touched his temple. “This won’t hurt.”

Indeed, it did not hurt.

\* \* \*

He caught up with the sorcerer at the last moment, just in front of the portal. Having already thrown his sword aside, his hands were free and his fingers, extended in a leap, dug into the edge of Rience’s cloak. Rience lost his balance; the tug had bent him backwards, forcing him to totter back. He struggled furiously, violently ripped the cloak from clasp to clasp and freed himself. Too late.

Geralt spun him round by hitting him in the shoulder with his right hand, then immediately struck him in the neck under the ear with his left. Rience reeled but did not fall. The witcher, jumping softly, caught up with him and forcefully dug his fist under his ribs. The sorcerer moaned and drooped over the fist. Geralt grabbed him by the front of his doublet, spun him and threw him to the ground. Pressed down by the witcher’s knee, Rience extended his arm and opened his mouth to cast a spell. Geralt clenched his fist and thumped him from above. Straight in the mouth. His lips split like blackcurrants.

“You’ve already received a present from Yennefer,” he uttered in a hoarse voice. “Now you’re getting one from me.”

He struck once more. The sorcerer’s head bounced up; blood spurted onto the witcher’s forehead and cheeks. Geralt was slightly surprised – he had not felt any pain but had, no doubt, been injured in the fight. It was his blood. He did not bother nor did he have time to look for the wound and take care of it. He unclenched his fist and walloped Rience once more. He was angry.

“Who sent you? Who hired you?”

Rience spat blood at him. The witcher struck him yet again.

“Who?”

The fiery oval of the portal flared more strongly; the light emanating from it flooded the entire lane. The witcher felt the power throbbing from the oval, had felt it even before his medallion had begun to oscillate violently, in warning.

Rience also felt the energy streaming from the portal, sensed help approaching. He yelled, struggling like an enormous fish. Geralt buried his knees in the sorcerer’s chest, raised his arm, forming the Sign of Aard with his fingers, and aimed at the flaming portal. It was a mistake.

No one emerged from the portal. Only power radiated from it and Rience had taken the power.

From the sorcerer’s outstretched fingers grew six-inch steel spikes. They dug into Geralt’s chest and shoulder with an audible crack. Energy exploded from the spikes. The witcher threw himself backwards in a convulsive leap. The shock was such that he felt and heard his teeth, clenched in pain, crunch and break. At least two of them.

Rience attempted to rise but immediately collapsed to his knees again and began to struggle to the portal on all fours. Geralt, catching his breath with difficulty, drew a stiletto from his boot. The sorcerer looked back, sprang up and reeled. The witcher was also reeling but he was quicker. Rience looked back again and screamed. Geralt gripped the knife. He was angry. Very angry.

Something grabbed him from behind, overpowered him, immobilised him. The medallion on his neck pulsated acutely; the pain in his wounded shoulder throbbed spasmodically.

Some ten paces behind him stood Philippa Eilhart. From her raised arms emanated a dull light – two streaks, two rays. Both were touching his back, squeezing his arms with luminous pliers. He struggled, in vain. He could not move from the spot. He could only watch as Rience staggered up to the portal, which pulsated with a milky glow.

Rience, in no hurry, slowly stepped into the light of the portal, sank into it like a diver, blurred and disappeared. A second later, the oval went out, for a moment plunging the little street into impenetrable, dense, velvety blackness.

Somewhere in the lanes fighting cats yowled. Geralt looked at the blade of the sword he had picked up on his way towards the magician.

“Why, Philippa? Why did you do it?”

The magician took a step back. She was still holding the knife which a moment earlier had penetrated Toublanc Michelet’s skull.

“Why are you asking? You know perfectly well.”

“Yes,” he agreed. “Now I know.”

“You’re wounded, Geralt. You can’t feel the pain because you’re intoxicated with the witchers’ elixir but look how you’re bleeding. Have you calmed down sufficiently for me to safely approach and take a look at you? Bloody hell, don’t look at me like that! And don’t come near me. One more step and I’ll be forced to… Don’t come near me! Please! I don’t want to hurt you but if you come near—”

“Philippa!” shouted Dandilion, still holding the weeping Shani. “Have you gone mad?”

“No,” said the witcher with some effort. “She’s quite sane. And knows perfectly well what she’s doing. She knew all along what she was doing. She took advantage of us. Betrayed us. Deceived—”

“Calm down,” repeated Philippa Eilhart. “You won’t understand and you don’t have to understand. I did what I had to do. And don’t call me a traitor. Because I did this precisely so as not to betray a cause which is greater than you can imagine. A great and important cause, so important that minor matters have to be sacrificed for it without second thoughts, if faced with such a choice. Geralt, damn it, we’re nattering and you’re standing in a pool of blood. Calm down and let Shani and me take care of you.”

“She’s right!” shouted Dandilion, “you’re wounded, damn it! Your wound has to be dressed and we’ve got to get out of here! You can argue later!”

“You and your great cause…” The witcher, ignoring the troubadour, staggered forward. “Your great cause, Philippa, and your choice, is a wounded man, stabbed in cold blood once he told you what you wanted to know, but what I wasn’t to find out. Your great cause is Rience, whom you allowed to escape so that he wouldn’t by any chance reveal the name of his patron. So that he can go on murdering. Your great cause is those corpses which did not have to be. Sorry, I express myself poorly. They’re not corpses, they’re minor matters!”

“I knew you wouldn’t understand.”

“Indeed, I don’t. I never will. But I do know what it’s about. Your great causes, your wars, your struggle to save the world… Your end which justifies the means… Prick up your ears, Philippa. Can you hear those voices, that yowling? Those are cats fighting for a great cause. For indivisible mastery over a heap of rubbish. It’s no joking matter – blood is being spilled and clumps of fur are flying. It’s war. But I care incredibly little about either of these wars, the cats’ or yours.”

“That’s only what you imagine,” hissed the magician. “All this is going to start concerning you – and sooner than you think. You’re standing before necessity and choice. You’ve got yourself mixed up in destiny, my dear, far more than you’ve bargained for. You thought you were taking a child, a little girl, into your care. You were wrong. You’ve taken in a flame which could at any moment set the world alight. Our world. Yours, mine, that of the others. And you will have to choose. Like I did. Like Triss Merigold. Choose, as your Yennefer had to. Because Yennefer has already chosen. Your destiny is in her hands, witcher. You placed it in those hands yourself.”

The witcher staggered. Shani yelled and tore herself away from Dandilion. Geralt held her back with a gesture, stood upright and looked straight into the dark eyes of Philippa Eilhart.

“My destiny,” he said with effort. “My choice… I’ll tell you, Philippa, what I’ve chosen. I won’t allow you to involve Ciri in your dirty machinations. I am warning you. Whoever dares harm Ciri will end up like those four lying there. I won’t swear an oath. I have nothing by which to swear. I simply warn you. You accused me of being a bad guardian, that I don’t know how to protect the child. I will protect her. As best I can. I will kill. I will kill mercilessly…”

“I believe you,” said the magician with a smile. “I believe you will. But not today, Geralt. Not now. Because in a minute you’re going to faint from loss of blood. Shani, are you ready?”

No one is born a wizard. We still know too little about genetics and the mechanisms of heredity. We sacrifice too little time and means on research. Unfortunately, we constantly try to pass on inherited magical abilities in, so to say, a natural way. Results of these pseudo-experiments can be seen all too often in town gutters and within temple walls. We see too many of them, and too frequently come across morons and women in a catatonic state, dribbling seers who soil themselves, seeresses, village oracles and miracle-workers, cretins whose minds are degenerate due to the inherited, uncontrolled Force.

These morons and cretins can also have offspring, can pass on abilities and thus degenerate further. Is anyone in a position to foresee or describe how the last link in such a chain will look?

Most of us wizards lose the ability to procreate due to somatic changes and dysfunction of the pituitary gland. Some wizards – usually women – attune to magic while still maintaining efficiency of the gonads. They can conceive and give birth – and have the audacity to consider this happiness and a blessing. But I repeat: no one is born a wizard. And no one should be born one! Conscious of the gravity of what I write, I answer the question posed at the Congress in Cidaris. I answer most emphatically: each one of us must decide what she wants to be – a wizard or a mother.

I demand all apprentices be sterilised. Without exception.

Tissaia de Vries, The Poisoned Source

CHAPTER SEVEN

“I’m going to tell you something,” said Iola the Second suddenly, resting the basket of grain on her hip. “There’s going to be a war. That’s what the duke’s greeve who came to fetch the cheeses said.”

“A war?” Ciri shoved her hair back from her forehead. “With who? Nilfgaard?”

“I didn’t hear,” the novice admitted. “But the greeve said our duke had received orders from King Foltest himself. He’s sending out a call to arms and all the roads are swarming with soldiers. Oh dear! What’s going to happen?”

“If there’s going to be a war,” said Eurneid, “then it’ll most certainly be with Nilfgaard. Who else? Again! Oh gods, that’s terrible!”

“Aren’t you exaggerating a bit with this war, Iola?” Ciri scattered some grains for the chickens and guinea-hens crowding around them in a busy, noisy whirl. “Maybe it’s only another raid on the Scoia’tael?”

“Mother Nenneke asked the greeve the same thing,” declared Iola the Second. “And the greeve said that no, this time it wasn’t about the Squirrels. Castles and citadels have apparently been ordered to store supplies in case of a siege. But elves attack in forests, they don’t lay siege to castles! The greeve asked whether the Temple could give more cheese and other things. For the castle stores. And he demanded goose feathers. They need a lot of goose feathers, he said. For arrows. To shoot from bows, understand? Oh, gods! We’re going to have masses of work! You’ll see! We’ll be up to our ears in work!”

“Not all of us,” said Eurneid scathingly. “Some aren’t going to get their little hands dirty. Some of us only work two days a week. They don’t have any time for work because they are, apparently, studying witchery. But in actual fact they’re probably only idling or skipping around the park thrashing weeds with a stick. You know who I’m talking about, Ciri, don’t you?”

“Ciri will leave for the war no doubt,” giggled Iola the Second. “After all, she is apparently the daughter of a knight! And herself a great warrior with a terrible sword! At last she’ll be able to cut real heads off instead of nettles!”

“No, she is a powerful wizard!” Eurneid wrinkled her little nose. “She’s going to change all our enemies into field mice. Ciri! Show us some amazing magic. Make yourself invisible or make the carrots ripen quicker. Or do something so that the chickens can feed themselves. Well, go on, don’t make us ask! Cast a spell!”

“Magic isn’t for show,” said Ciri angrily. “Magic is not some street market trick.”

“But of course, of course,” laughed the novice. “Not for show. Eh, Iola? It’s exactly as if I were hearing that hag Yennefer talk!”

“Ciri is getting more and more like her,” appraised Iola, sniffing ostentatiously. “She even smells like her. Huh, no doubt some magical scent made of mandrake or ambergris. Do you use magical scents, Ciri?”

“No! I use soap! Something you rarely use!”

“Oh ho.” Eurneid twisted her lips. “What sarcasm, what spite! And what airs!”

“She never used to be like this,” Iola the Second puffed up. “She became like this when she started spending time with that witch. She sleeps with her, eats with her, doesn’t leave her side. She’s practically stopped attending lessons at the Temple and no longer has a moment to spare for us!”

“And we have to do all the work for her! Both in the kitchen and in the garden! Look at her little hands, Iola! Like a princess!”

“That’s the way it is!” squeaked Ciri. “Some have brains, so they get a book! Others are feather-brained, so they get a broom!”

“And you only use a broom for flying, don’t you? Pathetic wizard!”

“You’re stupid!”

“Stupid yourself!”

“No, I’m not!”

“Yes, you are! Come on, Iola, don’t pay any attention to her. Sorceresses are not our sort of company.”

“Of course they aren’t!” yelled Ciri and threw the basket of grain on the ground. “Chickens are your sort of company!”

The novices turned up their noses and left, passing through the horde of cackling fowl.

Ciri cursed loudly, repeating a favourite saying of Vesemir’s which she did not entirely understand. Then she added a few words she had heard Yarpen Zigrin use, the meanings of which were a total mystery to her. With a kick, she dispersed the chickens swarming towards the scattered grain, picked up the basket, turned it upside down, then twirled in a witcher’s pirouette and threw the basket like a discus over the reed roof of the henhouse. She turned on her heel and set off through the Temple park at a run.

She ran lightly, skilfully controlling her breath. At every other tree she passed, she made an agile half-turn leap, marking slashes with an imaginary sword and immediately following them with dodges and feints she had learned. She jumped deftly over the fence, landing surely and softly on bent knees.

“Jarre!” she shouted, turning her head up towards a window gaping in the stone wall of the tower. “Jarre, are you there? Hey! It’s me!”

“Ciri?” The boy leaned out. “What are you doing here?”

“Can I come up and see you?”

“Now? Hmm… Well, all right then… Please do.”

She flew up the stairs like a hurricane, catching the novice unexpectedly just as, with his back turned, he was quickly adjusting his clothes and hiding some parchments on the table under other parchments. Jarre ran his fingers through his hair, cleared his throat and bowed awkwardly. Ciri slipped her thumbs into her belt and tossed her ashen fringe.

“What’s this war everybody’s talking about?” she fired. “I want to know!”

“Please, have a seat.”

She cast her eyes around the chamber. There were four large tables piled with large books and scrolls. There was only one chair. Also piled high.

“War?” mumbled Jarre. “Yes, I’ve heard those rumours… Are you interested in it? You, a g—? No, don’t sit on the table, please, I’ve only just got all the documents in order… Sit on the chair. Just a moment, wait, I’ll take those books… Does Lady Yennefer know you’re here?”

“No.”

“Hmm… Or Mother Nenneke?”

Ciri pulled a face. She knew what he meant. The sixteen-year-old Jarre was the high priestess’s ward, being prepared by her to be a cleric and chronicler. He lived in Ellander where he worked as a scribe at the municipal tribunal, but he spent more time in Melitele’s sanctuary than in the town, studying, copying and illuminating volumes in the Temple library for whole days and sometimes even nights. Ciri had never heard it from Nenneke’s lips but it was well known that the high priestess absolutely did not want Jarre to hang around her young novices. And vice-versa. But the novices, however, did sneak keen glances at the boy and chatted freely, discussing the various possibilities presented by the presence on the Temple grounds of something which wore trousers. Ciri was amazed because Jarre was the exact opposite of everything which, in her eyes, should represent an attractive male. In Cintra, as she remembered, an attractive man was one whose head reached the ceiling, whose shoulders were as broad as a doorway, who swore like a dwarf, roared like a buffalo and stank at thirty paces of horses, sweat and beer, regardless of what time of day or night it was. Men who did not correspond to this description were not recognised by Queen Calanthe’s chambermaids as worthy of sighs and gossip. Ciri had also seen a number of different men – the wise and gentle druids of Angren, the tall and gloomy settlers of Sodden, the witchers of Kaer Morhen. Jarre was different. He was as skinny as a stick-insect, ungainly, wore clothes which were too large and smelled of ink and dust, always had greasy hair and on his chin, instead of stubble, there were seven or eight long hairs, about half of which sprang from a large wart. Truly, Ciri did not understand why she was so drawn to Jarre’s tower. She enjoyed talking to him, the boy knew a great deal and she could learn much from him. But recently, when he looked at her, his eyes had a strange, dazed and cloying expression.

“Well.” She grew impatient. “Are you going to tell me or not?”

“There’s nothing to say. There isn’t going to be any war. It’s all gossip.”

“Aha,” she snorted. “And so the duke is sending out a call to arms just for fun? The army is marching the highways out of boredom? Don’t twist things, Jarre. You visit the town and castle, you must know something!”

“Why don’t you ask Lady Yennefer about it?”

“Lady Yennefer has more important things to worry about!” Ciri spat, but then immediately had second thoughts, smiled pleasantly and fluttered her eyelashes. “Oh, Jarre, tell me, please! You’re so clever! You can talk so beautifully and learnedly, I could listen to you for hours! Please, Jarre!”

The boy turned red and his eyes grew unfocused and bleary. Ciri sighed surreptitiously.

“Hmm…” Jarre shuffled from foot to foot and moved his arms undecidedly, evidently not knowing what to do with them. “What can I tell you? It’s true, people are gossiping in town, all excited by the events in Dol Angra… But there isn’t going to be a war. That’s for sure. You can believe me.”

“Of course, I can,” she snorted. “But I’d rather know what you base this certainty on. You don’t sit on the duke’s council, as far as I know. And if you were made a voivode yesterday, then do tell me about it. I’ll congratulate you.”

“I study historical treatises,” Jarre turned crimson, “and one can learn more from them than sitting on a council. I’ve read The History of War by Marshal Pelligram, Duke de Ruyter’s Strategy, Bronibor’s The Victorious Deeds of Redania’s Gallant Cavalrymen… And I know enough about the present political situation to be able to draw conclusions through analogy. Do you know what an analogy is?”

“Of course,” lied Ciri, picking a blade of grass from the buckle of her shoe.

“If the history of past wars” – the boy stared at the ceiling – “were to be laid over present political geography, it is easy to gauge that minor border incidents, such as the one in Dol Angra, are fortuitous and insignificant. You, as a student of magic, must, no doubt, be acquainted with the present political geography?”

Ciri did not reply. Lost in thought, she skimmed through the parchments lying on the table and turned a few pages of the huge leather-bound volume.

“Leave that alone. Don’t touch it.” Jarre was worried. “It’s an exceptionally valuable and unique work.”

“I’m not going to eat it.”

“Your hands are dirty.”

“They’re cleaner than yours. Listen, do you have any maps here?”

“I do, but they’re hidden in the chest,” said the boy quickly, but seeing Ciri pull a face, he sighed, pushed the scrolls of parchment off the chest, lifted the lid and started to rummage through the contents. Ciri, wriggling in the chair and swinging her legs, carried on flicking through the book. From between the pages suddenly slipped a loose page with a picture of a woman, completely naked with her hair curled into ringlets, entangled in an embrace with a completely naked bearded man. Her tongue sticking out, the girl spent a long time turning the etching around, unable to make out which way up it should be. She finally spotted the most important detail in the picture and giggled. Jarre, walking up with an enormous scroll under his arm, blushed vioently, took the etching from her without a word and hid it under the papers strewn across the table.

“An exceptionally valuable and unique work,” she gibed. “Are those the analogies you’re studying? Are there any more pictures like that in there? Interesting, the book is called Healing and Curing. I’d like to know what diseases are cured that way.”

“You can read the First Runes?” The boy was surprised and cleared his throat with embarrassment. “I didn’t know…”

“There’s still a lot you don’t know.” She turned up her nose. “And what do you think? I’m not just some novice feeding hens for eggs. I am… a wizard. Well, go on. Show me that map!”

They both knelt on the floor, holding down the stiff sheet, which was stubbornly trying to roll up again, with their hands and knees. Ciri finally weighed down one corner with a chair leg and Jarre pressed another down with a hefty book entitled The Life and Deeds of Great King Radovid.

“Hmm… This map is so unclear! I can’t make head or tail of it… Where are we? Where is Ellander?”

“Here.” He pointed. “Here is Temeria, this space. Here is Wyzima, our King Foltest’s capital. Here, in Pontar Valley, lies the duchy of Ellander. And here… Yes, here is our Temple.”

“And what’s this lake? There aren’t any lakes around here.”

“That isn’t a lake. It’s an ink blot…”

“Ah. And here… This is Cintra. Is that right?”

“Yes. South of Transriver and Sodden. This way, here, flows the River Yaruga, flowing into the sea right at Cintra. That country, I don’t know if you know, is now dominated by the Nilfgaardians—”

“I do know,” she cut him short, clenching her fist. “I know very well. And where is this Nilfgaard? I can’t see a country like that here. Doesn’t it fit on this map of yours, or what? Get me a bigger one!”

“Hmm…” Jarre scratched the wart on his chin. “I don’t have any maps like that… But I do know that Nilfgaard is somewhere further towards the south… There, more or less there. I think.”

“So far?” Ciri was surprised, her eyes fixed on the place on the floor which he indicated. “They’ve come all the way from there? And on the way conquered those other countries?”

“Yes, that’s true. They conquered Metinna, Maecht, Nazair, Ebbing, all the kingdoms south of the Amell Mountains. Those kingdoms, like Cintra and Upper Sodden, the Nilfgaardians now call the Provinces. But they didn’t manage to dominate Lower Sodden, Verden and Brugge. Here, on the Yaruga, the armies of the Four Kingdoms held them back, defeating them in battle—”

“I know, I studied history.” Ciri slapped the map with her open palm. “Well, Jarre, tell me about the war. We’re kneeling on political geography. Draw conclusions through analogy and through anything you like. I’m all ears.”

The boy blushed, then started to explain, pointing to the appropriate regions on the map with the tip of a quill.

“At present, the border between us and the South – dominated by Nilfgaard – is demarcated, as you can see, by the Yaruga River. It constitutes an obstacle which is practically insurmountable. It hardly ever freezes over, and during the rainy season it can carry so much water that its bed is almost a mile wide. For a long stretch, here, it flows between precipitous, inaccessible banks, between the rocks of Mahakam…”

“The land of dwarves and gnomes?”

“Yes. And so the Yaruga can only be crossed here, in its lower reaches, in Sodden, and here, in its middle reaches, in the valley of Dol Angra…”

“And it was exactly in Dol Angra, that inci— Incident?”

“Wait. I’m just explaining to you that, at the moment, no army could cross the Yaruga River. Both accessible valleys, those along which armies have marched for centuries, are very heavily manned and defended, both by us and by Nilfgaard. Look at the map. Look how many strongholds there are. See, here is Verden, here is Brugge, here the Isles of Skellige…”

“And this, what is this? This huge white mark?”

Jarre moved closer; she felt the warmth of his knee.

“Brokilon Forest,” he said, “is forbidden territory. The kingdom of forest dryads. Brokilon also defends our flank. The dryads won’t let anyone pass. The Nilfgaardians either…”

“Hmm…” Ciri leaned over the map. “Here is Aedirn… And the town of Vengerberg… Jarre! Stop that immediately!”

The boy abruptly pulled his lips away from her hair and went as red as a beetroot.

“I do not wish you to do that to me!”

“Ciri, I—”

“I came to you with a serious matter, as a wizard to a scholar,” she said icily and with dignity, in a tone of voice which exactly copied that of Yennefer. “So behave!”

The “scholar” blushed an even deeper shade and had such a stupid expression on his face that the “wizard” could barely keep herself from laughing. He leaned over the map once more.

“All this geography of yours,” she continued, “hasn’t led to anything yet. You’re telling me about the Yaruga River but the Nilfgaardians have, after all, already crossed to the other side once. What’s stopping them now?”

“That time,” hawked Jarre, wiping the sweat which had all of a sudden appeared on his brow, “they only had Brugge, Sodden and Temeria against them. Now, we’re united in an alliance. Like at the battle of Sodden. The Four Kingdoms. Temeria, Redania, Aedirn and Kaedwen…”

“Kaedwen,” said Ciri proudly. “Yes, I know what that alliance is based on. King Henselt of Kaedwen offers special, secret aid to King Demawend of Aedirn. That aid is transported in barrels. And when King Demawend suspects someone of being a traitor, he puts stones in the barrels. Sets a trap—”

She broke off, recalling that Geralt had forbidden her to mention the events in Kaedwen. Jarre stared at her suspiciously.

“Is that so? And how can you know all that?”

“I read about it in a book written by Marshal Pelican,” she snorted. “And in other analogies. Tell me what happened in Dol Angra or whatever it’s called. But first, show me where it is.”

“Here. Dol Angra is a wide valley, a route leading from the south to the kingdoms of Lyria and Rivia, to Aedirn, and further to Dol Blathanna and Kaedwen… And through Pontar Valley to us, to Temeria.”

“And what happened there?”

“There was fighting. Apparently. I don’t know much about it, but that’s what they’re saying at the castle.”

“If there was fighting,” frowned Ciri, “there’s a war already! So what are you talking about?”

“It’s not the first time there’s been fighting,” clarified Jarre, but the girl saw that he was less and less sure of himself. “Incidents at the border are very frequent. But they’re insignificant.”

“And how come?”

“The forces are balanced. Neither we nor the Nilfgaardians can do anything. And neither of the sides can give their opponent a casus belli—”

“Give what?”

“A reason for war. Understand? That’s why the armed incidents in Dol Angra are most certainly fortuitous matters, probably attacks by brigands or skirmishes with smugglers… In no way can they be the work of regular armies, neither ours nor those of Nilfgaard… Because that would be precisely a casus belli…”

“Aha. Jarre, tell me—”

She broke off. She raised her head abruptly, quickly touched her temples with her fingers and frowned.

“I’ve got to go,” she said. “Lady Yennefer is calling me.”

“You can hear her?” The boy was intrigued. “At a distance? How…”

“I’ve got to go,” she repeated, getting to her feet and brushing the dust off her knees. “Listen, Jarre. I’m leaving with Lady Yennefer, on some very important matters. I don’t know when we’ll be back. I warn you they are secret matters which concern only wizards, so don’t ask any questions.”

Jarre also stood up. He adjusted his clothing but still did not know what to do with his hands. His eyes glazed over sickeningly.

“Ciri…”

“What?”

“I… I…”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she said impatiently, glaring at him with her huge, emerald eyes. “Nor do you, obviously. I’m off. Take care, Jarre.”

“Goodbye… Ciri. Have a safe journey. I’ll… I’ll be thinking of you…”

Ciri sighed.

“I’m here, Lady Yennefer!”

She flew into the chamber like a shot from a catapult and the door thumped open, slamming against the wall. She could have broken her legs on the stool standing in her way but Ciri jumped over it deftly, gracefully executed a half-pirouette feigning the slash of a sword, and joyfully laughed at her successful trick. Despite running briskly, she did not pant but breathed evenly and calmly. She had mastered breath control to perfection.

“I’m here!” she repeated.

“At last. Get undressed, and into the tub. Quick.”

The enchantress did not look round, did not turn away from the table, looked at Ciri in the mirror. Slowly. She combed her damp, black curls which straightened under the pressure of the comb only to spring back a moment later into shiny waves.

The girl unbuckled her boots in a flash, kicked them off, freed herself of her clothes and with a splash landed in the tub. Grabbing the soap, she started to energetically scrub her forearms.

Yennefer sat motionless, staring at the window and toying with her comb. Ciri snorted, spluttered and spat because soap had got into her mouth. She tossed her head wandering whether a spell existed which could make washing possible without water, soap and wasting time.

The magician put the comb aside but, lost in thought, kept gazing through the window at the swarms of ravens and crows croaking horrifically as they flew east. On the table, next to the mirror and an impressive array of bottled cosmetics, lay several letters. Ciri knew that Yennefer had been waiting for them a long time and that the day on which they were to leave the Temple depended on her receiving these letters. In spite of what she had told Jarre, the girl had no idea where and why they were leaving. But in those letters…

Splashing with her left hand so as to mislead, she arranged the fingers of her right in a gesture, concentrated on a formula, fixed her eyes on the letters and sent out an impulse.

“Don’t you even dare,” said Yennefer, without turning around.

“I thought…” She cleared her throat. “I thought one of them might be from Geralt…”

“If it was, I’d have given it to you.” The magician turned in her chair and sat facing her. “Are you going to be long washing?”

“I’ve finished.”

“Get up, please.”

Ciri obeyed. Yennefer smiled faintly.

“Yes,” she said, “you’ve finished with childhood. You’ve rounded out where necessary. Lower your hands. I’m not interested in your elbows. Well, well, don’t blush, no false shyness. It’s your body, the most natural thing in the world. And the fact that you’re developing is just as natural. If your fate had turned out differently… If it weren’t for the war, you’d have long been the wife of some duke or prince. You realise that, don’t you? We’ve discussed matters concerning your gender often enough and in enough detail for you to know that you’re already a woman. Physiologically, that is to say. Surely you’ve not forgotten what we talked about?”

“No. I haven’t.”

“When you visit Jarre I hope there aren’t any problems with your memory either?”

Ciri lowered her eyes, but only momentarily. Yennefer did not smile.

“Dry yourself and come here,” she said coolly. “No splashing, please.”

Wrapped in a towel, Ciri sat down on the small chair at the magician’s knees. Yennefer brushed the girl’s hair, every now and again snipping off a disobedient wisp with a pair of scissors.

“Are you angry with me?” asked the girl reluctantly. “For, for… going to the tower?”

“No. But Nenneke doesn’t like it. You know that.”

“But I haven’t… I don’t care about Jarre in the least.” Ciri blushed a little. “I only…”

“Exactly,” muttered the enchantress. “You only. Don’t play the child because you’re not one any more, let me remind you. That boy slobbers and stammers at the sight of you. Can’t you see that?”

“That’s not my fault! What am I supposed to do?”

Yennefer stopped combing Ciri’s hair and measured her with a deep, violet gaze.

“Don’t toy with him. It’s base.”

“But I’m not toying with him! I’m only talking to him!”

“I’d like to believe,” the enchantress said as she snipped her scissors, cutting yet another wisp of hair which would not allow itself to be styled for anything in the world, “that during these conversations, you remember what I asked you.”

“I remember, I remember!”

“He’s an intelligent and bright boy. One or two inadvertent words could lead him on the right track, to matters he should know nothing about. No one, absolutely no one must find out who you are.”

“I remember,” repeated Ciri. “I haven’t squealed a word to anyone, you can be sure of that. Tell me, is that why we have to leave so suddenly? Are you afraid that someone’s going to find out I’m here? Is that why?”

“No. There are other reasons.”

“Is it because… there might be a war? Everybody’s talking about another war! Everybody’s talking about it, Lady Yennefer.”

“Indeed,” the magician confirmed coolly, snipping her scissors just above Ciri’s ear. “It’s a subject which belongs to the so-called interminable category. There’s been talk about wars in the past, there is talk now and there always will be. And not without reason – there have been wars and there will be wars. Lower your head.”

“Jarre said… that there’s not going to be a war with Nilfgaard. He spoke of some sort of analogies… Showed me a map. I don’t know what to think myself any more. I don’t know what these analogies are, probably something terribly clever… Jarre reads various learned books and knows it all, but I think…”

“It interests me, what you think, Ciri.”

“In Cintra… That time… Lady Yennefer, my grandmother was much cleverer than Jarre. King Eist was clever, too. He sailed the seas, saw everything, even a narwhal and sea serpent, and I bet he also saw many an analogy. And so what? Suddenly they appeared, the Nilfgaardians…”

Ciri raised her head and her voice stuck in her throat. Yennefer put her arms around her and hugged her tightly.

“Unfortunately,” she said quietly, “unfortunately, you’re right, my ugly one. If the ability to make use of experience and draw conclusions decided, we would have forgotten what war is a long time ago. But those whose goal is war have never been held back, nor will be, by experience or analogy.”

“So… It’s true, after all. There is going to be a war. Is that why we have to leave?”

“Let’s not talk about it. Let’s not worry too soon.”

Ciri sniffed.

“I’ve already seen a war,” she whispered. “I don’t want to see another. Never. I don’t want to be alone again. I don’t want to be frightened. I don’t want to lose everything again, like that time. I don’t want to lose Geralt… or you, Lady Yennefer. I don’t want to lose you. I want to stay with you. And him. Always.”

“You will.” The magician’s voice trembled a little. “And I’m going to be with you, Ciri. Always. I promise you.”

Ciri sniffed again. Yennefer coughed quietly, put down the scissors and comb, got to her feet and crossed over to the window. The ravens were still croaking in their flight towards the mountains.

“When I arrived here,” the lady magician suddenly said in her usual, melodious, slightly mocking voice. “When we first met… You didn’t like me.”

Ciri did not say anything. Our first meeting, she thought. I remember. I was in the Grotto with the other girls. Hrosvitha was showing us plants and herbs. Then Iola the First came in and whispered something in Hrosvitha’s ear. The priestess grimaced with animosity. And Iola the First came up to me with a strange expression on her face. “Get yourself together, Ciri,” she said, “and go the refectory, quick. Mother Nenneke is summoning you. Someone has arrived.”

Strange, meaningful glances, excitement in their eyes. And whispers. Yennefer. “Magician Yennefer. Quick, Ciri, hurry up. Mother Nenneke is waiting. And she is waiting.”

I knew immediately, thought Ciri, that it was her. Because I’d seen her. I’d seen her the night before. In my dream.

Her.

I didn’t know her name then. She didn’t say anything in my dream. She only looked at me and behind her, in the darkness, I saw a closed door…

Ciri sighed. Yennefer turned and the obsidian star on her neck glittered with a thousand reflections.

“You’re right,” admitted the girl seriously, looking straight into the magician’s violet eyes. “I didn’t like you.”

“Ciri,” said Nenneke, “come closer. This is Lady Yennefer from Vengerberg, Mistress of Wizardry. Don’t be frightened. Lady Yennefer knows who you are. You can trust her.”

The girl bowed, interlocking her palms in a gesture of full respect. The enchantress, rustling her long, black dress, approached, took Ciri by the chin and quite off-handedly lifted her head, turning it right and left. The girl felt anger and rebellion rising within her – she was not used to being treated this way. And at the same time, she experienced a burning envy. Yennefer was very beautiful. Compared to the delicate, pale and rather common comeliness of the priestesses and novices who Ciri saw every day, the magician glowed with a conscious, even demonstrative loveliness, emphasised and accentuated in every detail. Her raven-black locks cascading down her shoulders shone, reflected the light like the feathers of a peacock, curling and undulating with every move. Ciri suddenly felt ashamed, ashamed of her grazed elbows, chapped hands, broken nails, her ashen, stringy hair. All of a sudden, she had an overwhelming desire to possess what Yennefer had – a beautiful, exposed neck and on it a lovely black velvet ribbon with a lovely glittering star. Regular eyebrows, accentuated with charcoal, and long eyelashes. Proud lips. And those two mounds which rose with every breath, hugged by black cloth and white lace…

“So this is the famous Surprise.” The magician twisted her lips a little. “Look me in the eyes, girl.”

Ciri shuddered and hunched her shoulders. No, she did not envy Yennefer that one thing – did not desire to have it or even look at it. Those eyes, violet, deep as a fathomless lake, strangely bright, dispassionate and malefic. Terrifying.

The magician turned towards the stout high priestess. The star on her neck flamed with reflections of the sun beaming through the window into the refectory.

“Yes, Nenneke,” she said. “There can be no doubt. One just has to look into those green eyes to know that there is something in her. High forehead, regular arch of the brows, eyes set attractively apart. Narrow nose. Long fingers. Rare hair pigment. Obvious elven blood, although there is not much of it in her. An elven great-grandfather or great-grandmother. Have I guessed correctly?”

“I don’t know her family tree,” the high priestess replied calmly. “It didn’t interest me.”

“Tall for her age,” continued the magician, still appraising Ciri with her eyes. The girl was boiling over with fury and annoyance, struggling with an overpowering desire to scream defiantly, scream her lungs out, stamp her feet and run off to the park, on the way knocking over the vase on the table and slamming the door so as to make the plaster crumble from the ceiling.

“Not badly developed.” Yennefer did not take her eyes off her. “Has she suffered any infectious diseases in childhood? Ha, no doubt you didn’t ask her about that either. Has she been ill since she’s been here?”

“No.”

“Any migraines? Fainting? Inclination to catch cold? Painful periods?”

“No. Only those dreams.”

“I know.” Yennefer gathered the hair from her cheek. “He wrote about that. It appears from his letter that in Kaer Morhen they didn’t try out any of their… experiments on her. I would like to believe that’s true.”

“It is. They gave her only natural stimulants.”

“Stimulants are never natural!” The magician raised her voice. “Never! It is precisely the stimulants which may have aggravated her symptoms in… Damn it, I never suspected him of such irresponsibility!”

“Calm down.” Nenneke looked at her coldly and, all of a sudden, somehow oddly without respect. “I said they were natural and absolutely safe. Forgive me, dear, but in this respect I am a greater authority than you. I know it is exceedingly difficult for you to accept someone else’s authority but in this case I am forced to inflict it on you. And let there be no more talk about it.”

“As you wish.” Yennefer pursed her lips. “Well, come on, girl. We don’t have much time. It would be a sin to waste it.”

Ciri could barely keep her hands from shaking; she swallowed hard and looked inquiringly at Nenneke. The high priestess was serious, as if sad, and the smile with which she answered the unspoken question was unpleasantly false.

“You’re going with Lady Yennefer now,” she said. “Lady Yennefer is going to be looking after you for a while.”

Ciri bowed her head and clenched her teeth.

“You are no doubt baffled,” continued Nenneke, “that a Mistress of Wizardry is suddenly taking you into her care. But you are a reasonable girl, Ciri. You can guess why. You have inherited certain… attributes from your ancestors. You know what I am talking about. You used to come to me, after those dreams, after the nocturnal disturbances in the dormitory. I couldn’t help you. But Lady Yennefer—”

“Lady Yennefer,” interrupted the magician, “will do what is necessary. Let us go, girl.”

“Go,” nodded Nenneke, trying, in vain, to make her smile at least appear natural. “Go, child. Remember it is a great privilege to have someone like Lady Yennefer look after you. Don’t bring shame on the Temple and us, your mentors. And be obedient.”

I’ll escape tonight, Ciri made up her mind. Back to Kaer Morhen. I’ll steal a horse from the stables and that’s the last they’ll see of me. I’ll run away!

“Indeed you will,” said the magician under her breath.

“I beg your pardon?” the priestess raised her head. “What did you say?”

“Nothing, nothing,” smiled Yennefer. “You just thought I did. Or maybe I thought I did? Just look at this ward of yours, Nenneke. Furious as a cat. Sparks in her eyes; just wait and she’ll hiss. And if she could flatten her ears, she would. A witcher-girl! I’ll have to take her firmly in hand, file her claws.”

“Be more understanding.” The high priestess’s features visibly hardened. “Please, be kind-hearted and understanding. She really is not who you take her to be.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“She’s not your rival, Yennefer.”

For a moment they measured each other with their eyes, the enchantress and the priestess, and Ciri felt the air quiver, a strange, terrible force between them growing in strength. This lasted no more than a fraction of a second after which the force disappeared and Yennefer burst out laughing, lightheartedly and sweetly.

“I forgot,” she said. “Always on his side, aren’t you, Nenneke? Always worrying about him. Like the mother he never had.”

“And you’re always against him,” smiled the priestess. “Bestowing him with strong feelings, as usual. And defending yourself as hard as you can not to call the feelings by their rightful name.”

Once again, Ciri felt fury rise up somewhere in the pit of her stomach, and her temples throbbed with spite and rebellion. She remembered how many times and under what circumstances she had heard that name. Yennefer. A name which caused unease, a name which was the symbol of some sinister secret. She guessed what that secret was.

They’re talking quite openly in front of me, without any restraint, she thought, feeling her hands start to shake with anger once more. They’re not bothered about me at all. Ignoring me completely. As if I were a child. They’re talking about Geralt in front of me, in my presence, but they can’t because I… I am…

Who?

“You, on the other hand, Nenneke,” retorted the magician, “are amusing yourself, as usual, analysing other people’s emotions, and on top of that interpreting them to suit yourself!”

“And putting my nose into other people’s business?”

“I didn’t want to say that.” Yennefer tossed her black locks, which gleamed and writhed like snakes. “Thank you for doing so for me. And now let us change the subject, please, because the one we were discussing is exceptionally silly – disgraceful in front of our young pupil. And as for being understanding, as you ask… I will be. But kind-hearted – with that, there might be a problem because, after all, it is widely thought I don’t possess any such organ. But we’ll manage somehow. Isn’t that right, Surprise?”

She smiled at Ciri and, despite herself, despite her anger and annoyance, Ciri had to respond with a smile. Because the enchantress’s smile was unexpectedly pleasant, friendly and sincere. And very, very beautiful.

She listened to Yennefer’s speech with her back ostentatiously turned, pretending to bestow her full attention on the bumble bee buzzing in the flower of one of the hollyhocks growing by the temple wall.

“No one asked me about it,” she mumbled.

“What didn’t anybody ask you about?”

Ciri turned in a half-pirouette and furiously whacked the hollyhock with her fist. The bumble bee flew away, buzzing angrily and ominously.

“No one asked me whether I wanted you to teach me!”

Yennefer rested her fists on her hips; her eyes flashed.

“What a coincidence,” she hissed. “Imagine that – no one asked me whether I wanted to teach you either. Besides, wanting has got nothing to do with it. I don’t apprentice just anybody and you, despite appearances, might still turn out to be a nobody. I was asked to check how things stand with you. To examine what is inside you and how that could endanger you. And I, though not unreluctantly, agreed.”

“But I haven’t agreed yet!”

The magician raised her arm and moved her hand. Ciri experienced a throbbing in her temples and a buzzing in her ears, as if she were swallowing but much louder. She felt drowsy, and an overpowering weakness, tiredness stiffened her neck and softened her knees.

Yennefer lowered her hand and the sensation instantly passed.

“Listen to me carefully, Surprise,” she said. “I can easily cast a spell on you, hypnotise you, or put you in a trance. I can paralyse you, force you to drink an elixir, strip you naked, lay you out on the table and examine you for hours, taking breaks for meals while you lie there, looking at the ceiling, unable to move even your eyeballs. That is what I would do with just any snotty kid. I do not want to do that to you because one can see, at first glance, that you are an intelligent and proud girl, that you have character. I don’t want to put you or myself to shame. Not in front of Geralt. Because he is the one who asked me to take care of your abilities. To help you deal with them.”

“He asked you? Why? He never said anything to me! He never asked me—”

“You keep going back to that,” cut in the magician. “No one asked for your opinion, no one took the trouble to check what you want or don’t want. Could you have given cause for someone to consider you a contrary, stubborn, snotty kid, whom it is not worth asking questions like that? But I’m going to take the risk and am going to ask something no one has ever asked you. Will you allow yourself to be examined?”

“And what will it involve? What are these tests? And why…”

“I have already explained. If you haven’t understood, that’s too bad. I have no intention of polishing your perception or working on your intelligence. I can examine a sensible girl just as well as a stupid one.”

“I’m not stupid! And I understood everything!”

“All the better.”

“But I’m not cut out to be a magician! I haven’t got any abilities! I’m never going to be a magician nor want to be one! I’m destined for Geralt… I’m destined to be a witcher! I’ve only come here for a short period! I’m going back to Kaer Morhen soon…”

“You are persistently staring at my neckline,” said Yennefer icily, narrowing her violet eyes a little. “Do you see anything unusual there or is it just plain jealousy?”

“That star…” muttered Ciri. “What’s it made of? Those stones move and shine so strangely…”

“They pulsate,” smiled the magician. “They are active diamonds, sunken in obsidian. Do you want to see them close up? Touch them?”

“Yes… No!” Ciri backed away and angrily tossed her head, trying to dispel the faint scent of lilac and gooseberries emanating from Yennefer. “I don’t. Why should I? I’m not interested! Not a bit! I’m a witcher! I haven’t got any magical abilities! I’m not cut out to be a magician, surely that’s clear because I’m… And anyway…”

The magician sat on the stone bench under the wall and concentrated on examining her fingernails.

“…and anyway,” concluded Ciri, “I’ve got to think about it.”

“Come here. Sit next to me.”

She obeyed.

“I’ve got to have time to think about it,” she said hesitantly.

“Quite right.” Yennefer nodded, still gazing at her nails. “It is a serious matter. It needs to be thought over.”

Both said nothing for a while. The novices strolling through the park glanced at them with curiosity, whispered, giggled.

“Well?”

“Well what?”

“Have you thought about it?”

Ciri leaped to her feet, snorted and stamped.

“I… I…” she panted, unable to catch her breath from anger. “Are you making fun of me? I need time! I need to think about it! For longer! For a whole day… And night!”

Yennefer looked her in the eyes and Ciri shrivelled under the gaze.

“The saying goes,” said the magician slowly, “that the night brings solutions. But in your case, Surprise, the only thing night can bring is yet another nightmare. You will wake up again, screaming and in pain, drenched in sweat. You will be frightened again, frightened of what you saw, frightened of what you won’t be able to remember. And there will be no more sleep that night. There will be fear. Until dawn.”

The girl shuddered, lowered her head.

“Surprise.” Yennefer’s voice changed imperceptibly. “Trust me.”

The enchantress’s shoulder was warm. The black velvet of her dress asked to be touched. The scent of lilac and gooseberries intoxicated delightfully. Her embrace calmed and soothed, relaxed, tempered excitement, stilled anger and rebellion.

“You’ll submit to the tests, Surprise.”

“I will,” she answered, understanding that she did not really have to reply. Because it was not a question.

“I don’t understand anything any more,” said Ciri. “First you say I’ve got abilities because I’ve got those dreams. But you want to do tests and check… So how is it? Do I have abilities or don’t I?”

“That question will be answered by the tests.”

“Tests, tests.” She pulled a face. “I haven’t got any abilities, I tell you. I’d know if I had them, wouldn’t I? Well, but… If, by some sheer chance, I had abilities, what then?”

“There are two possibilities,” the magician informed her with indifference as she opened the window. “Your abilities will either have to be extinguished or you will have to learn how to control them. If you are gifted and want to, I can try to instil in you some elementary knowledge of magic.”

“What does ‘elementary’ mean?”

“Basic.”

They were alone in the large chamber next to the library in an unoccupied side wing of the building, which Nenneke had allocated to the lady magician. Ciri knew that this chamber was used by guests. She knew that Geralt, whenever he visited the Temple, stayed right here.

“Are you going to want to teach me?” She sat on the bed and skimmed her hand over the damask eiderdown. “Are you going to want to take me away from here? I’m never going to leave with you!”

“So I’ll leave alone,” said Yennefer coldly, untying the straps of her saddle-bags. “And I assure you, I’m not going to miss you. I did tell you that I’ll educate you only if you decide you want to. And I can do so here, on the spot.”

“How long are you going to edu— Teach me for?”

“As long as you want.” The magician leaned over, opened the chest of drawers, pulled out an old leather bag, a belt, two boots trimmed with fur and a clay demi-john in a wicker basket. Ciri heard her curse under her breath while smiling, and saw her hide the finds back in the drawers. She guessed whose they were. Who had left them there.

“What does that mean, as long as I want?” she asked. “If I get bored or don’t like the work—”

“We’ll put an end to it. It’s enough that you tell me. Or show me.”

“Show you? How?”

“Should we decide on educating you, I will demand absolute obedience. I repeat: absolute. If, on the other hand, you get tired of it, it will suffice for you to disobey. Then the lessons will instantly cease. Is that clear?”

Ciri nodded and cast a fleeting glance of her green eyes at the magician.

“Secondly,” continued Yennefer, unpacking her saddle-bags, “I will demand absolute sincerity. You will not be allowed to hide anything from me. Anything. So if you feel you have had enough, it will suffice for you to lie, pretend, feign or close in on yourself. If I ask you something and you do not answer sincerely, that will also indicate an instant end to our lessons. Have you understood?”

“Yes,” muttered Ciri. “And that… sincerity… Does that work both ways? Will I be able to… ask you questions?”

Yennefer looked at her and her lips twisted strangely.

“Of course,” she answered after a while. “That goes without saying. That will be the basis of the learning and protection I aim to give you. Sincerity works both ways. You are to ask me questions. At any time. And I will answer. Sincerely.”

“Any question?”

“Any question.”

“As of now?”

“Yes. As of now.”

“What is there between you and Geralt, Lady Yennefer?”

Ciri almost fainted, horrified at her own impertinence, chilled by the silence which followed the question.

The enchantress slowly approached her, placed her hands on her shoulders, looked her in the eyes from up close – and deeply.

“Longing,” she answered gravely. “Regret. Hope. And fear. Yes, I don’t think I have omitted anything. Well, now we can get on with the tests, you little green-eyed viper. We will see if you’re cut out for this. Although after your question I would be very surprised if it turned out you aren’t. Let’s go, my ugly one.”

Ciri bridled.

“Why do you call me that?”

Yennefer smiled with the corners of her lips.

“I promised to be sincere.”

Ciri, annoyed, pulled herself up straight and wriggled in her hard chair which, after many hours of sitting, hurt her backside.

“Nothing’s going to come of it!” she snarled, wiping her charcoal-smeared fingers on the table. “After all this, nothing… Nothing works out for me! I’m not cut out to be a magician! I knew that right from the start but you didn’t want to listen to me! You didn’t pay any attention!”

Yennefer raised her eyebrows.

“I didn’t want to listen to you, you say? That’s interesting. I usually devote my attention to every sentence uttered in my presence and note it in my memory. The one condition being that there be at least a little sense in the sentence.”

“You’re always mocking me.” Ciri grated her teeth. “And I just wanted to tell you… Well, about these abilities. You see in Kaer Morhen, in the mountains… I couldn’t form a single witcher Sign. Not one!”

“I know.”

“You know?”

“I know. But that doesn’t mean anything.”

“How’s that? Well… But that’s not all!”

“I’m listening in suspense.”

“I’m not cut out for it. Can’t you understand that? I’m… I’m too young.”

“I was younger than you when I started.”

“But I’m sure you weren’t…”

“What do you mean, girl? Stop stuttering! At least one full sentence, please.”

“Because…” Ciri lowered her head and blushed. “Because Iola, Myrrha, Eurneid and Katye – when we were having dinner – laughed at me and said that witchcraft doesn’t have access to me and that I’m not going to perform any magic because… Because I’m… a virgin, that means—”

“I know what it means, believe it or not,” interrupted the magician. “No doubt you’ll see this as another spiteful piece of mockery but I hate to tell you that you are talking a lot of rubbish. Let us get back to the test.”

“I’m a virgin!” repeated Ciri aggressively. “Why the tests? Virgins can’t do magic!”

“I can’t see a solution,” Yennefer leaned back in her chair. “So go out and lose your virginity if it gets in your way so much. But be quick about it if you please.”

“Are you making fun of me?”

“You’ve noticed?” The magician smiled faintly. “Congratulations. You’ve passed the preliminary test in perspicacity. And now for the real test. Concentrate, please. Look: there are four pine trees in this picture. Each one has a different number of branches. Draw a fifth to fit in with the other four and to fit in this space here.”

“Pine trees are silly,” decreed Ciri, sticking out her tongue and drawing a slightly crooked tree with her charcoal. “And boring! I can’t understand what pine trees have to do with magic? What? Lady Yennefer! You promised to answer my questions!”

“Unfortunately,” sighed the magician, picking up the sheet of paper and critically appraising the drawing, “I think I’m going to regret that promise. What do pine trees have in common with magic? Nothing. But you’ve drawn it correctly, and on time. In truth, excellent for a virgin.”

“Are you laughing at me?”

“No. I rarely laugh. I really need to have a good reason to laugh. Concentrate on the next page, Surprise. There are rows of stars, circles, crosses and triangles drawn on it, a different number of each shape in each row. Think and answer: how many stars should there be in the last row?”

“Stars are silly!”

“How many?”

“Three!”

Yennefer did not say anything for a long time. She stared at a detail on the carved wardrobe door known only to her. The mischievous smile on Ciri’s lips started slowly to disappear until finally it disappeared altogether, without a trace.

“No doubt you were curious to learn,” said the magician very slowly, not ceasing to admire the wardrobe, “what would happen if you gave me a senseless and stupid reply. You thought perhaps that I might not notice because I am not in the least interested in your answers? You thought wrongly. You believed, perhaps, that I would simply accept that you are stupid? You were wrong. But if you are bored of being tested and wanted, for a change, to test me… Well, that has clearly worked, hasn’t it? Either way, this test is concluded. Return the paper.”

“I’m sorry, Lady Yennefer.” The girl lowered her head. “There should, of course, be… one star there. I’m very sorry. Please don’t be angry with me.”

“Look at me, Ciri.”

The girl raised her eyes, astonished. Because for the first time the magician had called her by her name.

“Ciri,” said Yennefer. “Know that, despite appearances, I get angry just as rarely as I laugh. You haven’t made me angry. But in apologising you have proved I wasn’t wrong about you. And now take the next sheet of paper. As you can see there are five houses on it. Draw the sixth…”

“Again? I really can’t understand why—”

“…the sixth house.” The lady magician’s voice changed dangerously and her eyes flashed with a violet glow. “Here, in this space. Don’t make me repeat myself, please.”

After apples, pine trees, stars, fishes and houses, came the turn of labyrinths through which she had to quickly find a path, wavy lines, blots which looked like squashed cockroaches, and mosaics which made her go cross-eyed and set her head spinning. Then there was a shining ball on a piece of string at which she had to stare for a long time. Staring at it was as dull as dish-water and Ciri kept falling asleep. Yennefer, surprisingly, did not care even though a few days earlier she had scolded her grimly for napping over one of the cockroach blots.

Poring over the tests had made her neck and back ache and day by day they grew more painful. She missed movement and fresh air and, obliged to be sincere, she immediately told Yennefer. The magician took it easily, as if she had been expecting this for a long time.

For the next two days they both ran through the park, jumped over ditches and fences under the amused or pitying eyes of the priestesses and novices. They exercised and practised their balance walking along the top of the wall which encircled the orchard and farm buildings. Unlike the training in Kaer Morhen, though, the exercises with Yennefer were always accompanied by theory. The magician taught Ciri how to breathe, guiding the movement of her chest and diaphragm with strong pressure from her hand. She explained the rules of movement, how muscles and bones work, and demonstrated how to rest, release tension and relax.

During one such session of relaxation, stretched out on the grass and gazing at the sky, Ciri asked a question which was bothering her. “Lady Yennefer? When are we finally going to finish the tests?”

“Do they bore you so much?”

“No… But I’d like to know whether I’m cut out to be a magician.”

“You are.”

“You know that already?”

“I knew from the start. Few people can detect the activity of my star. Very few. You noticed it straight away.”

“And the tests?”

“Concluded. I already know what I wanted to about you.”

“But some of the tasks… They didn’t work out very well. You said yourself that… Are you really sure? You’re not mistaken? You’re sure I have the ability?”

“I’m sure.”

“But—”

“Ciri.” The enchantress looked both amused and impatient. “From the moment we lay down in the meadow, I have been talking to you without using my voice. It’s called telepathy, remember that. And as you no doubt noticed, it has not made our talking together any more difficult.”

“Magic” – Yennefer, her eyes fixed on the sky above the hills, rested her hands on the pommel of her saddle – “is, in some people’s opinion, the embodiment of Chaos. It is a key capable of opening the forbidden door. The door behind which lurk nightmares, fear and unimaginable horrors, behind which enemies hide and wait, destructive powers, the forces of pure Evil capable of annihilating not only the one who opens the door but with them the entire world. And since there is no lack of those who try to open the door, someone, at some point, is going to make a mistake and then the destruction of the world will be forejudged and inevitable. Magic is, therefore, the revenge and the weapon of Chaos. The fact that, following the Conjunction of the Spheres, people have learned to use magic, is the curse and undoing of the world. The undoing of mankind. And that’s how it is, Ciri. Those who believe that magic is Chaos are not mistaken.”

Spurred on by its mistress’s heels, the magician’s black stallion neighed lengthily and slowly made his way into the heather. Ciri hastened her horse, followed in Yennefer’s tracks and caught up with her. The heather reached to their stirrups.

“Magic,” Yennefer continued after a while, “is, in some people’s opinion, art. Great, elitist art, capable of creating beautiful and extraordinary things. Magic is a talent granted to only a chosen few. Others, deprived of talent, can only look at the results of the artists’ works with admiration and envy, can admire the finished work while feeling that without these creations and without this talent the world would be a poorer place. The fact that, following the Conjunction of the Spheres, some chosen few discovered talent and magic within themselves, the fact that they found Art within themselves, is the blessing of beauty. And that’s how it is. Those who believe that magic is art are also right.”

On the long bare hill which protruded from the heath like the back of some lurking predator lay an enormous boulder supported by a few smaller stones. The magician guided her horse in its direction without pausing her lecture.

“There are also those according to whom magic is a science. In order to master it, talent and innate ability alone are not enough. Years of keen study and arduous work are essential; endurance and self-discipline are necessary. Magic acquired like this is knowledge, learning, the limits of which are constantly stretched by enlightened and vigorous minds, by experience, experiments and practice. Magic acquired in such a way is progress. It is the plough, the loom, the watermill, the smelting furnace, the winch and the pulley. It is progress, evolution, change. It is constant movement. Upwards. Towards improvement. Towards the stars. The fact that following the Conjunction of the Spheres we discovered magic will, one day, allow us to reach the stars. Dismount, Ciri.”

Yennefer approached the monolith, placed her palm on the coarse surface of the stone and carefully brushed away the dust and dry leaves.

“Those who consider magic to be a science,” she continued, “are also right. Remember that, Ciri. And now come here, to me.”

The girl swallowed and came closer. The enchantress put her arm around her.

“Remember,” she repeated, “magic is Chaos, Art and Science. It is a curse, a blessing and progress. It all depends on who uses magic, how they use it, and to what purpose. And magic is everywhere. All around us. Easily accessible. It is enough to stretch out one’s hand. See? I’m stretching out my hand.”

The cromlech trembled perceptibly. Ciri heard a dull, distant noise and a rumble coming from within the earth. The heather undulated, flattened by the gale which suddenly gusted across the hill. The sky abruptly turned dark, covered with clouds scudding across it at incredible speed. The girl felt drops of rain on her face. She narrowed her eyes against the flash of lightning which suddenly flared across the horizon. She automatically huddled up to the enchantress, against her black hair smelling of lilac and gooseberries.

“The earth which we tread. The fire which does not go out within it. The water from which all life is born and without which life is not possible. The air we breathe. It is enough to stretch out one’s hand to master them, to subjugate them. Magic is everywhere. It is in air, in water, in earth and in fire. And it is behind the door which the Conjunction of the Spheres has closed on us. From there, from behind the closed door, magic sometimes extends its hand to us. For us. You know that, don’t you? You have already felt the touch of that magic, the touch of the hand from behind that door. That touch filled you with fear. Such a touch fills everyone with fear. Because there is Chaos and Order, Good and Evil in all of us. But it is possible and necessary to control it. This has to be learnt. And you will learn it, Ciri. That is why I brought you here, to this stone which, from time immemorial, has stood at the crossing of veins of power pulsating with force. Touch it.”

The boulder shook, vibrated, and with it the entire hill vibrated and shook.

“Magic is extending its hand towards you, Ciri. To you, strange girl, Surprise, Child of the Elder Blood, the Blood of Elves. Strange girl, woven into Movement and Change, into Annihilation and Rebirth. Destined and destiny. Magic extends its hand towards you from behind the closed door, towards you, a tiny grain of sand in the workings of the Clock of Fate. Chaos extends its talons towards you, still uncertain if you will be its tool or an obstacle in its design. That which Chaos shows you in your dreams is this very uncertainty. Chaos is afraid of you, Child of Destiny. But it wants you to be the one who feels fear.”

There was a flash of lightning and a long rumble of thunder. Ciri trembled with cold and dread.

“Chaos cannot show you what it really is. So it is showing you the future, showing you what is going to happen. It wants you to be afraid of the coming days, so that fear of what is going to happen to you and those closest to you will start to guide you, take you over completely. That is why Chaos is sending you those dreams. Now, you are going to show me what you see in your dreams. And you are going to be frightened. And then you will forget and master your fear. Look at my star, Ciri. Don’t take your eyes from it!”

A flash. A rumble of thunder.

“Speak! I command you!”

Blood. Yennefer’s lips, cut and crushed, move silently, flow with blood. White rocks flitter past, seen from a gallop. A horse neighs. A leap. Valley, abyss. Screaming. Flight, an endless flight. Abyss…

In the depth of the abyss, smoke. Stairs leading down.

Va’esse deireádh aep eigean… Something is coming to an end… What?

Elaine blath, Feainnewedd… Child of the Elder Blood? Yennefer’s voice seems to come from somewhere afar, is dull, awakens echoes amidst the stone walls dripping with damp. Elaine blath—

“Speak!”

The violet eyes shine, burn in the emaciated, shrivelled face, blackened with suffering, veiled with a tempest of dishevelled, dirty black hair. Darkness. Damp. Stench. The excruciating cold of stone walls. The cold of iron on wrists, on ankles…

Abyss. Smoke. Stairs leading down. Stairs down which she must go. Must because… Because something is coming to an end. Because Tedd Deireádh, the Time of End, the Time of the Wolf’s Blizzard is approaching. The Time of the White Chill and White Light…

The Lion Cub must die! For reasons of state!

“Let’s go,” says Geralt. “Down the stairs. We must. It must be so. There is no other way. Only the stairs. Down!”

His lips are not moving. They are blue. Blood, blood everywhere… The whole stairs in blood… Mustn’t slip… Because the witcher trips just once… The flash of a blade. Screams. Death. Down. Down the stairs.

Smoke. Fire. Frantic galloping, hooves thundering. Flames all around. “Hold on! Hold on, Lion Cub of Cintra!”

The black horse neighs, rears. “Hold on!”

The black horse dances. In the slit of the helmet adorned with the wings of a bird of prey shine and burn merciless eyes.

A broad sword, reflecting the glow of the fire, falls with a hiss. Dodge, Ciri! Feign! Pirouette, parry! Dodge! Dodge! Too sloooowwww!

The blow blinds her with its flash, shakes her whole body, the pain paralyses her for a moment, dulls, deadens, and then suddenly explodes with a terrible strength, sinks its cruel, sharp fangs into her cheek, yanks, penetrates right through, radiates into the neck, the shoulders, chest, lungs…

“Ciri!”

She felt the coarse, unpleasant, still coolness of stone on her back and head. She did not remember sitting down. Yennefer was kneeling next to her. Gently, but decisively, she straightened her fingers, pulled her hand away from her cheek. The cheek throbbed, pulsated with pain.

“Mama…” groaned Ciri. “Mama… How it hurts! Mama…”

The magician touched her face. Her hand was as cold as ice. The pain stopped instantly.

“I saw…” the girl whispered, closing her eyes, “the things I saw in the dreams… A black knight… Geralt… And also… You… I saw you, Lady Yennefer!”

“I know.”

“I saw you… I saw how—”

“Never more. You will never see that again. You won’t dream about it any more. I will give you the force to push those nightmares away. That is why I have brought you here, Ciri – to show you that force. Tomorrow, I am going to start giving it to you.”

Long, arduous days followed, days of intensive study and exhausting work. Yennefer was firm, frequently stern, sometimes masterfully formidable. But she was never boring. Previously, Ciri could barely keep her eyes open in the Temple school and would sometimes even doze off during a lesson, lulled by the monotonous, gentle voice of Nenneke, Iola the First, Hrosvitha or some other teacher. With Yennefer, it was impossible. And not only because of the timbre of the lady magician’s voice and the short, sharply accentuated sentences she used. The most important element was the subject of her studies. The study of magic. Fascinating, exciting and absorbing study.

Ciri spent most of the day with Yennefer. She returned to the dormitory late at night, collapsed into bed like a log and fell asleep immediately. The novices complained that she snored very loudly and tried to wake her. In vain.

Ciri slept deeply.

With no dreams.

“Oh, gods.” Yennefer sighed in resignation and, ruffling her black hair with both hands, lowered her head. “But it’s so simple! If you can’t master this move, what will happen with the harder ones?”

Ciri turned away, mumbled something in a raspy voice and massaged her stiff hand. The magician sighed once more.

“Take another look at the etching. See how your fingers should be spread. Pay attention to the explanatory arrows and runes describing how the move should be performed.”

“I’ve already looked at the drawing a thousand times! I understand the runes! Vort, cáelme. Ys, veloë. Away from oneself, slowly. Down, quickly. The hand… like this?”

“And the little finger?”

“It’s impossible to position it like that without bending the ring finger at the same time!”

“Give me your hand.”

“Ouuuch!”

“Not so loud, Ciri, otherwise Nenneke will come running again, thinking that I’m skinning you alive or frying you in oil. Don’t change the position of your fingers. And now perform the gesture. Turn, turn the wrist! Good. Now shake the hand, relax the fingers. And repeat. No, no! Do you know what you did? If you were to cast a real spell like that, you’d be wearing your hand in splints for a month! Are your hands made of wood?”

“My hand’s trained to hold a sword! That’s why!”

“Nonsense. Geralt has been brandishing his sword for his whole life and his fingers are agile and… mmmm… very gentle. Continue, my ugly one, try again. See? It’s enough to want to. It’s enough to try. Once more. Good. Shake your hand. And once again. Good. Are you tired?”

“A little…”

“Let me massage your hand and arm. Ciri, why aren’t you using the ointment I gave you? Your hands are as rough as crocodile skin… But what’s this? A mark left by a ring, am I right? Was I imagining it or did I forbid you to wear any jewellery?”

“But I won the ring from Myrrha playing spinning tops! And I only wore it for half a day—”

“That’s half a day too long. Don’t wear it any more, please.”

“I don’t understand, why aren’t I allowed—”

“You don’t have to understand,” the magician said cutting her short, but there was no anger in her voice. “I’m asking you not to wear any ornaments like that. Pin a flower in your hair if you want to. Weave a wreath for your hair. But no metal, no crystals, no stones. It’s important, Ciri. When the time comes, I will explain why. For the time being, trust me and do as I ask.”

“You wear your star, earrings and rings! And I’m not allowed? Is that because I’m… a virgin?”

“Ugly one,” Yennefer smiled and stroked her on the head, “are you still obsessed with that? I have already explained to you that it doesn’t matter whether you are or not. Not in the least. Wash your hair tomorrow; it needs it, I see.”

“Lady Yennefer?”

“Yes.”

“May I… As part of the sincerity you promised… May I ask you something?”

“You may. But, by all the gods, not about virginity, please.”

Ciri bit her lip and did not say anything for a long time.

“Too bad,” sighed Yennefer. “Let it be. Ask away.”

“Because, you see…” Ciri blushed and licked her lips, “the girls in the dormitory are always gossiping and telling all sorts of stories… About Belleteyn’s feast and others like that… And they say I’m a snotty kid, a child because it’s time… Lady Yennefer, how does it really work? How can one know that the time has come…”

“…to go to bed with a man?”

Ciri blushed a deep shade of crimson. She said nothing for a while then raised her eyes and nodded.

“It’s easy to tell,” said Yennefer, naturally. “If you are beginning to think about it then it’s a sign the time has come.”

“But I don’t want to!”

“It’s not compulsory. You don’t want to, then you don’t.”

“Ah.” Ciri bit her lip again. “And that… Well… Man… How can you tell it’s the right one to…”

“…go to bed with?”

“Mmmh.”

“If you have any choice at all,” the enchantress twisted her lips in a smile, “but don’t have much experience, you first appraise the bed.”

Ciri’s emerald eyes turned the shape and size of saucers.

“How’s that… The bed?”

“Precisely that. Those who don’t have a bed at all, you eliminate on the spot. From those who remain, you eliminate the owners of any dirty or slovenly beds. And when only those who have clean and tidy beds remain, you choose the one you find most attractive. Unfortunately, the method is not a hundred per cent foolproof. You can make a terrible mistake.”

“You’re joking?”

“No. I’m not joking, Ciri. As of tomorrow, you are going to sleep here with me. Bring your things. From what I hear, too much time is wasted in the novices’ dormitory on gabbling, time which would be better spent resting and sleeping.”

After mastering the basic positions of the hands, the moves and gestures, Ciri began to learn spells and their formulae. The formulae were easier. Written in Elder Speech, which the girl already knew to perfection, they sank easily into her memory. Nor did she have any problems enunciating the frequently complicated intonations. Yennefer was clearly pleased and, from day to day, was becoming more pleasant and sympathetic. More and more frequently, taking breaks in the studies, both gossiped and joked about any old thing; both even began to amuse themselves by delicately poking fun at Nenneke who often “visited” their lectures and exercises – bristling and puffed up like a brooding hen – ready to take Ciri under her protective wing, to protect and save her from the magician’s imagined severity and the “inhuman tortures” of her education.

Obeying instructions, Ciri moved to Yennefer’s chamber. Now they were together not only by day but also by night. Sometimes, their studies would take place during the night – certain moves, formulae and spells could not be performed in daylight.

The magician, pleased with the girl’s progress, slowed the speed of her education. They had more free time. They spent their evenings reading books, together or separately. Ciri waded through Stammelford’s Dialogues on the Nature of Magic, Giambattista’s Forces of the Elements and Richert and Monck’s Natural Magic. She also flicked through – because she did not manage to read them in their entirety – such works as Jan Bekker’s The Invisible World and Agnes of Glanville’s The Secret of Secrets. She dipped into the ancient, yellowed Codex of Mirthe, Ard Aercane, and even the famous, terrible Dhu Dwimmermorc, full of menacing etchings.

She also reached for other books which had nothing to do with magic. She read The History of the World and A Treatise on Life. Nor did she leave out lighter works from the Temple library. Blushing, she devoured Marquis La Creahme’s Gambols and Anna Tiller’s The King’s Ladies. She read The Adversities of Loving and Time of the Moon, collections of poems by the famous troubadour Dandilion. She shed tears over the ballads of Essi Daven, subtle, infused with mystery, and collected in a small, beautifully bound volume entitled The Blue Pearl.

She made frequent use of her privilege to ask questions. And she received answers. More and more frequently, however, she was the one being questioned. In the beginning it had seemed that Yennefer was not at all interested in her lot, in her childhood in Cintra or the later events of war. But in time her questions became more and more concrete. Ciri had to reply and did so very unwillingly because every question the magician asked opened a door in her memory which she had promised herself never to open, which she wanted to keep forever locked. Ever since she had met Geralt in Sodden, she had believed she had begun “another life,” that the other life – the one in Cintra – had been irrevocably wiped out. The witchers in Kaer Morhen never asked her about anything and, before coming to the temple, Geralt had even prevailed upon her not to say a word to anyone about who she was. Nenneke, who, of course knew about everything, saw to it that to the other priestesses and the novices Ciri was exceptionally ordinary, an illegitimate daughter of a knight and a peasant woman, a child for whom there had been no place either in her father’s castle or her mother’s cottage. Half of the novices in Melitele’s Temple were just such children.

And Yennefer too knew the secret. She was the one who “could be trusted.” Yennefer asked. About it. About Cintra.

“How did you get out of the town, Ciri? How did you slip past the Nilfgaardians?”

Ciri did not remember. Everything broke off, was lost in obscurity and smoke. She remembered the siege, saying goodbye to Queen Calanthe, her grandmother; she remembered the barons and knights forcibly dragging her away from the bed where the wounded, dying Lioness of Cintra lay. She remembered the frantic escape through flaming streets, bloody battle and the horse falling. She remembered the black rider in a helmet adorned with the wings of a bird of prey.

And nothing more.

“I don’t remember. I really don’t remember, Lady Yennefer.”

Yennefer did not insist. She asked different questions. She did so gently and tactfully and Ciri grew more and more at ease. Finally, she started to speak herself. Without waiting to be asked, she recounted her years as a child in Cintra and on the Isles of Skellige. About how she learned about the Law of Surprise and that fate had decreed her to be the destiny of Geralt of Rivia, the white-haired witcher. She recalled the war, her exile in the forests of Transriver, her time among the druids of Angren and the time spent in the country. How Geralt had found her there and taken her to Kaer Morhen, the Witchers’ Keep, thus opening a new chapter in her short life.

One evening, of her own initiative, unasked, casually, joyfully and embellishing a great deal, she told the enchantress about her first meeting with the witcher in Brokilon Forest, amongst the dryads who had abducted her and wanted to force her to stay and become one of them.

“Oh!” said Yennefer on listening to the story, “I’d give a lot to see that – Geralt, I mean. I’m trying to imagine the expression on his face in Brokilon, when he saw what sort of Surprise destiny had concocted for him! Because he must have had a wonderful expression when he found out who you were?”

Ciri giggled and her emerald eyes lit up devilishly.

“Oh, yes!” she snorted. “What an expression! Do you want to see? I’ll show you. Look at me!”

Yennefer burst out laughing.

That laughter, thought Ciri watching swarms of black birds flying eastwards, that laughter, shared and sincere, really brought us together, her and me. We understood – both she and I – that we can laugh and talk together about him. About Geralt. Suddenly we became close, although I knew perfectly well that Geralt both brought us together and separated us, and that that’s how it would always be.

Our laughter together brought us closer to each other.

As did the events two days later. In the forest, on the hills. She was showing me how to find…

“I don’t understand why I have to look for these… I’ve forgotten what they’re called again…”

“Intersections,” prompted Yennefer, picking off the burrs which had attached themselves to her sleeve as they crossed the scrubs. “I am showing you how to find them because they’re places from which you can draw the force.”

“But I know how to draw the force already! And you taught me yourself that the force is everywhere. So why are we roaming around in the bushes? After all, there’s a great deal of force in the Temple!”

“Yes, indeed, there is a fair amount there. That’s exactly why the Temple was built there and not somewhere else. And that’s why, on Temple grounds, drawing it seems so easy to you.”

“My legs hurt! Can we sit down for a while?”

“All right, my ugly one.”

“Lady Yennefer?”

“Yes?”

“Why do we always draw the force from water veins? Magical energy, after all, is everywhere. It’s in the earth, isn’t it? In air, in fire?”

“True.”

“And earth… Here, there’s plenty of earth around here. Under our feet. And air is everywhere! And should we want fire, it’s enough to light a bonfire and…”

“You are still too weak to draw energy from the earth. You still don’t know enough to succeed in drawing anything from air. And as for fire, I absolutely forbid you to play with it. I’ve already told you, under no circumstances are you allowed to touch the energy of fire!”

“Don’t shout. I remember.”

They sat in silence on a fallen dry tree trunk, listening to the wind rustling in the tree tops, listening to a woodpecker hammering away somewhere close by. Ciri was hungry and her saliva was thick from thirst, but she knew that complaining would not get her anywhere. In the past, a month ago, Yennefer had reacted to such complaints with a dry lecture on how to control such primitive instincts; later, she had ignored them in contemptuous silence. Protesting was just as useless and produced as few results as sulking over being called “ugly one.”

The magician plucked the last burr from her sleeve. She’s going to ask me something in a moment, thought Ciri, I can hear her thinking about it. She’s going to ask about something I don’t remember again. Or something I don’t want to remember. No, it’s senseless. I’m not going to answer. All of that is in the past, and there’s no returning to the past. She once said so herself.

“Tell me about your parents, Ciri.”

“I can’t remember them, Lady Yennefer.”

“Please try to.”

“I really don’t remember my papa…” she said in a quiet voice, succumbing to the command. “Except… Practically nothing. My mama… My mama, I do. She had long hair, like this… And she was always sad… I remember… No, I don’t remember anything…”

“Try to remember, please.”

“I can’t!”

“Look at my star.”

Seagulls screamed, diving down between the fishing boats where they caught scourings and tiny fish emptied from the crates. The wind gently fluttered the lowered sails of the drakkars, and smoke, quelled by drizzle, floated above the landing-stage. Triremes from Cintra were sailing into the port, golden lions glistening on blue flags. Uncle Crach, who was standing next to her with his hand – as large as the paw of a grizzly bear – on her shoulder, suddenly fell to one knee. Warriors, standing in rows, rhythmically struck their shields with their swords.

Along the gang-plank towards them came Queen Calanthe. Her grandmother. She who was officially called Ard Rhena, the Highest Queen, on the Isles of Skellige. But Uncle Crach an Craite, the Earl of Skellige, still kneeling with bowed head, greeted the Lioness of Cintra with a title which was less official but considered by the islanders to be more venerable.

“Hail, Modron.”

“Princess,” said Calanthe in a cold and authoritative voice, without so much as a glance at the earl, “come here. Come here to me, Ciri.”

Her grandmother’s hand was as strong and hard as a man’s, her rings cold as ice.

“Where is Eist?”

“The King…” stammered Crach. “Is at sea, Modron. He is looking for the remains… And the bodies. Since yesterday…”

“Why did he let them?” shouted the queen. “How could he allow it? How could you allow it, Crach? You’re the Earl of Skellige! No drakkar is allowed to go out to sea without your permission! Why did you allow it, Crach?”

Uncle Crach bowed his head even lower.

“Horses!” said Calanthe. “We’re going to the fort. And tomorrow, at dawn, I am setting sail. I am taking the princess to Cintra. I will never allow her to return here. And you… You have a huge debt to repay me, Crach. One day I will demand repayment.”

“I know, Modron.”

“If I do not claim it, she will do so.” Calanthe looked at Ciri. “You will repay the debt to her, Earl. You know how.”

Crach an Craite got to his feet, straightened himself and the features of his weatherbeaten face hardened. With a swift move, he drew from its sheath a simple, steel sword devoid of ornaments and pulled up the sleeve on his left arm, marked with thickened white scars.

“Without the dramatic gestures,” snorted the queen. “Save your blood. I said: one day. Remember!”

“Aen me Gláeddyv, zvaere a’Bloedgeas, Ard Rhena, Lionors aep Xintra!” Crach an Craite, the Earl of the Isles of Skellige, raised his arms and shook his sword. The warriors roared hoarsely and beat their weapons against their shields.

“I accept your oath. Lead the way to the fort, Earl.”

Ciri remembered King Eist’s return, his stony, pale face. And the queen’s silence. She remembered the gloomy, horrible feast at which the wild, bearded sea wolves of Skellige slowly got drunk in terrifying silence. She remembered the whispers. “Geas Muire… Geas Muire!”

She remembered the trickles of dark beer poured onto the floor, the horns smashed against the stone walls of the hall in bursts of desperate, helpless, senseless anger. “Geas Muire! Pavetta!”

Pavetta, the Princess of Cintra, and her husband, Prince Duny. Ciri’s parents. Perished. Killed. Geas Muire, the Curse of the Sea, had killed them. They had been swallowed up by a tempest which no one had foreseen. A tempest which should not have broken out…

Ciri turned her head away so that Yennefer would not see the tears swelling in her eyes. Why all this, she thought. Why these questions, these recollections? There’s no returning to the past. There’s no one there for me any more. Not my papa, nor my mama, nor my grandmother, the one who was Ard Rhena, the Lioness of Cintra. Uncle Crach an Craite, no doubt, is also dead. I haven’t got anybody any more and am someone else. There’s no returning…

The magician remained silent, lost in thought.

“Is that when your dreams began?” she asked suddenly.

“No,” Ciri reflected. “No, not then. Not until later.”

“When?”

The girl wrinkled her nose.

“In the summer… The one before… Because the following summer there was the war already…”

“Aha. That means the dreams started after you met Geralt in Brokilon?”

She nodded. I’m not going to answer the next question, she decided. But Yennefer did not ask anything. She quickly got to her feet and looked at the sun.

“Well, that’s enough of this sitting around, my ugly one. It’s getting late. Let’s carry on looking. Keep your hand held loosely in front of you, and don’t tense your fingers. Forward.”

“Where am I to go? Which direction?”

“It’s all the same.”

“The veins are everywhere?”

“Almost. You’re going to learn how to discover them, to find them in the open and recognise such spots. They are marked by trees which have dried up, gnarled plants, places avoided by all animals. Except cats.”

“Cats?”

“Cats like sleeping and resting on intersections. There are many stories about magical animals but really, apart from the dragon, the cat is the only creature which can absorb the force. No one knows why a cat absorbs it and what it does with it… What’s the matter?”

“Oooo… There, in that direction! I think there’s something there! Behind that tree!”

“Ciri, don’t fantasise. Intersections can only be sensed by standing over them… Hmmm… Interesting. Extraordinary, I’d say. Do you really feel the pull?”

“Really!”

“Let’s go then. Interesting, interesting… Well, locate it. Show me where.”

“Here! On this spot!”

“Well done. Excellent. So you feel delicate cramps in your ring finger? See how it bends downwards? Remember, that’s the sign.”

“May I draw on it?”

“Wait, I’ll check.”

“Lady Yennefer? How does it work with this drawing of the force? If I gather force into myself then there might not be enough left down below. Is it right to do that? Mother Nenneke taught us that we mustn’t take anything just like that, for the fun of it. Even the cherry has to be left on its tree for the birds, so that it can simply fall.”

Yennefer put her arm around Ciri, kissed her gently on the hair at her temple.

“I wish,” she muttered, “others could hear what you said. Vilgefortz, Francesca, Terranova… Those who believe they have exclusive right to the force and can use it unreservedly. I wish they could listen to the little wise ugly one from Melitele’s Temple. Don’t worry, Ciri. It’s a good thing you’re thinking about it but believe me, there is enough force. It won’t run out. It’s as if you picked one single little cherry from a huge orchard.”

“Can I draw on it now?”

“Wait. Oh, it’s a devilishly strong pocket. It’s pulsating violently. Be careful, ugly one. Draw on it carefully and very, very slowly.”

“I’m not frightened! Pah-pah! I’m a witcher. Ha! I feel it! I feel… Ooouuuch! Lady… Ye… nnnne… feeeeer…”

“Damn it! I warned you! I told you! Head up! Up, I say! Take this and put it to your nose or you’ll be covered in blood! Calmly, calmly, little one, just don’t faint. I’m beside you. I’m beside you… daughter. Hold the handkerchief. I’ll just conjure up some ice…”

There was a great fuss about that small amount of blood. Yennefer and Nenneke did not talk to each other for a week.

For a week, Ciri lazed around, read books and got bored because the magician had put her studies on hold. The girl did not see her for entire days – Yennefer disappeared somewhere at dawn, returned in the evening, looked at her strangely and was oddly taciturn.

After a week, Ciri had had enough. In the evening, when the enchantress returned, she went up to her without a word and hugged her hard.

Yennefer was silent. For a very long time. She did not have to speak. Her fingers, clasping the girl’s shoulders tightly, spoke for her.

The following day, the high priestess and the lady magician made up, having talked for several hours.

And then, to Ciri’s great joy, everything returned to normal.

“Look into my eyes, Ciri. A tiny light. The formula, please!”

“Aine verseos!”

“Good. Look at my hand. The same move and disperse the light in the air.”

“Aine aen aenye!”

“Excellent. And what gesture comes next? Yes, that’s the one. Very good. Strengthen the gesture and draw. More, more, don’t stop!”

“Oooouuuch…”

“Keep your back straight! Arms by your side! Hands loose, no unnecessary moves with your fingers. Every move can multiply the effect. Do you want a fire to burst out here? Strengthen it, what are you waiting for?”

“Oouuch, no… I can’t—”

“Relax and stop shaking! Draw! What are you doing? There, that’s better… Don’t weaken your will! That’s too fast, you’re hyperventilating! Unnecessarily getting hot! Slower, ugly one, calmer. I know it’s unpleasant. You’ll get used to it.”

“It hurts… My belly… Down here—”

“You’re a woman, it’s a typical reaction. Over time you’ll harden yourself against it. But in order to harden yourself you have to practise without any painkillers blocking you. It really is necessary, Ciri. Don’t be afraid of anything, I’m alert and screening you. Nothing can happen to you. But you have to endure the pain. Breathe calmly. Concentrate. The gesture, please. Perfect. And take the force, draw it, pull it in… Good, good… Just a bit more…”

“O… O… Oooouuuch!”

“There, you see? You can do it, if you want to. Now watch my hand. Carefully. Perform the same movement. Fingers! Fingers, Ciri! Look at my hand, not the ceiling! Now, that’s good, yes, very good. Tie it up. And now turn it around, reverse the move and now issue the force in the form of a stronger light.”

“Eeeee… Eeeeek… Aiiiieee…”

“Stop moaning! Control yourself! It’s just cramp! It’ll stop in a moment! Fingers wider, extinguish it, give it back, give it back from yourself! Slower, damn it, or your blood vessels will burst again!”

“Eeeeeek!”

“Too abrupt, ugly one, still too abrupt. I know the force is bursting out but you have to learn to control it. You mustn’t allow outbursts like the one a moment ago. If I hadn’t insulated you, you would have caused havoc here. Now, once more. We’re starting right from the beginning. Move and formula.”

“No! Not again! I can’t!”

“Breathe slowly and stop shaking. It’s plain hysteria this time, you don’t fool me. Control yourself, concentrate and begin.”

“No, please, Lady Yennefer… It hurts… I feel sick…”

“Just no tears, Ciri. There’s no sight more nauseating than a magician crying. Nothing arouses greater pity. Remember that. Never forget that. One more time, from the beginning. Spell and gesture. No, no, this time without copying me. You’re going to do it by yourself. So, use your memory!”

“Aine verseos… Aine aen aenye… Oooouuuuch!”

“No! Too fast!”

Magic, like a spiked iron arrow, lodged in her. Wounded her deeply. Hurt. Hurt with the strange sort of pain oddly associated with bliss.

To relax, they once again ran around the park. Yennefer persuaded Nenneke to take Ciri’s sword out of storage and so enabled the girl to practise her steps, dodges and attacks – in secret, of course, to prevent the other priestesses and novices seeing her. But magic was omnipresent. Ciri learned how – using simple spells and focusing her will – to relax her muscles, combat cramps, control adrenalin, how to master her aural labyrinth and its nerve, how to slow or speed her pulse and how to cope without oxygen for short periods.

The lady magician knew a surprising amount about a witcher’s sword and “dance.” She knew a great deal about the secrets of Kaer Morhen; there was no doubt she had visited the Keep. She knew Vesemir and Eskel. Although not Lambert and Coën.

Yennefer used to visit Kaer Morhen. Ciri guessed why – when they spoke of the Keep – the eyes of the enchantress grew warm, lost their angry gleam and their cold, indifferent, wise depth. If the words had befitted Yennefer’s person, Ciri would have called her dreamy, lost in memories.

Ciri could guess the reason.

There was a subject which the girl instinctively and carefully avoided. But one day, she got carried away and spoke out. About Triss Merigold. Yennefer, as if casually, as if indifferently, asking as if banal, sparing questions, dragged the rest from her. Her eyes were hard and impenetrable.

Ciri could guess the reason. And, amazingly, she no longer felt annoyed.

Magic was calming.

“The so-called Sign of Aard, Ciri, is a very simple spell belonging to the family of psychokinetic magic which is based on thrusting energy in the required direction. The force of the thrust depends on how the will of the person throwing it is focused and on the expelled force. It can be considerable. The witchers adapted the spell, making use of the fact that it does not require knowledge of a magical formula – concentration and the gesture are enough. That’s why they called it a Sign. Where they got the name from, I don’t know, maybe from the Elder Speech – the word ‘ard’, as you know, means ‘mountain’, ‘upper’ or ‘the highest’. If that is truly the case then the name is very misleading because it’s hard to find an easier psychokinetic spell. We, obviously, aren’t going to waste time and energy on something as primitive as the witchers’ Sign. We are going to practise real psychokinesis. We’ll practise on… Ah, on that basket lying under the apple tree. Concentrate.”

“Ready.”

“You focus yourself quickly. Let me remind you: control the flow of the force. You can only emit as much as you draw. If you release even a tiny bit more, you do so at the cost of your constitution. An effort like that could render you unconscious and, in extreme circumstances, could even kill you. If, on the other hand, you release everything you draw, you forfeit all possibility of repeating it, and you will have to draw it again and, as you know, it’s not easy to do and it is painful.”

“Ooooh, I know!”

“You mustn’t slacken your concentration and allow the energy to tear itself away from you of its own accord. My Mistress used to say that emitting the force must be like blowing a raspberry in a ballroom; do it gently, sparingly, and with control. And in such a way that you don’t let those around you to know it was you. Understood?”

“Understood!”

“Straighten yourself up. Stop giggling. Let me remind you that spells are a serious matter. They are cast with grace and pride. The motions are executed fluently but with restraint. With dignity. You do not pull faces, grimace or stick your tongue out. You are handling a force of nature, show Nature some respect.”

“All right, Lady Yennefer.”

“Careful, this time I’m not screening you. You are an independent spell-caster. This is your debut, ugly one. You saw that demi-john of wine in the chest of drawers? If your debut is successful, your mistress will drink it tonight.”

“By herself?”

“Novices are only allowed to drink wine once they are qualified apprentices. You have to wait. You’re smart, so that just means another ten years or so, not more. Right, let’s start. Arrange your fingers. And the left hand? Don’t wave it around! Let it hang loose or rest it on your hip. Fingers! Good. Right, release.”

“Aaaah…”

“I didn’t ask you to make funny noises. Emit the energy. In silence.”

“Haa, ha! It jumped! The basket jumped! Did you see?”

“It barely twitched. Ciri, sparingly does not mean weakly. Psychokinesis is used with a specific goal in mind. Even witchers use the Sign of Aard to throw their opponent off his feet. The energy you emitted would not knock their hat off their head! Once more, a little stronger. Go for it!”

“Ha! It certainly flew! It was all right that time, wasn’t it, Lady Yennefer?”

“Hmmm… You’ll run to the kitchen afterwards and pinch a bit of cheese to go with our wine… That was almost right. Almost. Stronger still, ugly one, don’t be frightened. Lift the basket from the ground and throw it hard against the wall of that shack, make feathers fly. Don’t slouch! Head up! Gracefully, but with pride! Be bold, be bold! Oh, bloody hell!”

“Oh, dear… I’m sorry, Lady Yennefer… I probably… probably used a bit too much…”

“A little bit. Don’t worry. Come here. Come on, little one.”

“And… and the shack?”

“These things happen. There’s no need to take it to heart. Your debut, on the whole, should be viewed as a success. And the shack? It wasn’t too pretty. I don’t think anyone will miss its presence in the landscape. Hold on, ladies! Calm down, calm down, why this uproar and commotion, nothing has happened! Easy, Nenneke! Really, nothing has happened. The planks just need to be cleared away. They’ll make good firewood!”

During the warm, still afternoons the air grew thick with the scent of flowers and grass; pulsating with peace and silence, broken by the buzz of bees and enormous beetles. On afternoons like this Yennefer carried Nenneke’s wicker chair out into the garden and sat in it, stretching her legs out in front of her. Sometimes she studied books, sometimes read letters which she received by means of strange couriers, usually birds. At times she simply sat gazing into the distance. With one hand, and lost in thought, she ruffled her black, shiny locks, with the other she stroked Ciri’s head as she sat on the grass, snuggled up to the magician’s warm, firm thigh.

“Lady Yennefer?”

“I’m here, ugly one.”

“Tell me, can one do anything with magic?”

“No.”

“But you can do a great deal, am I right?”

“You are.” The enchantress closed her eyes for a moment and touched her eyelids with her fingers. “A great deal.”

“Something really great… Something terrible! Very terrible?”

“Sometimes even more so than one would have liked.”

“Hmm… And could I… When will I be able to do something like that?”

“I don’t know. Maybe never. Would that you don’t have to.”

Silence. No words. Heat. The scent of flowers and herbs.

“Lady Yennefer?”

“What now, ugly one?”

“How old were you when you became a wizard?”

“When I passed the preliminary exams? Thirteen.”

“Ha! Just like I am now! And how… How old were you when… No, I won’t ask about that—”

“Sixteen.”

“Aha…” Ciri blushed faintly and pretended to be suddenly interested in a strangely formed cloud hovering over the temple towers. “And how old were you… when you met Geralt?”

“Older, ugly one. A bit older.”

“You still keep on calling me ugly one! You know how I don’t like it. Why do you do it?”

“Because I’m malicious. Wizards are always malicious.”

“But I don’t want to… don’t want to be ugly. I want to be pretty. Really pretty, like you, Lady Yennefer. Can I, through magic, be as pretty as you one day?”

“You… Fortunately you don’t have to… You don’t need magic for it. You don’t know how lucky you are.”

“But I want to be really pretty!”

“You are really pretty. A really pretty ugly one. My pretty little ugly one…”

“Oh, Lady Yennefer!”

“Ciri, you’re going to bruise my thigh.”

“Lady Yennefer?”

“Yes.”

“What are you looking at like that?”

“At that tree. That linden tree.”

“And what’s so interesting about it?”

“Nothing. I’m simply feasting my eyes on it. I’m happy that… I can see it.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Good.”

Silence. No words. Humid.

“Lady Yennefer!”

“What now?”

“There’s a spider crawling towards your leg! Look how hide-ous it is!”

“A spider’s a spider.”

“Kill it!”

“I can’t be bothered to bend over.”

“Then kill it with magic!”

“On the grounds of Melitele’s Temple? So that Nenneke can throw us out head first? No, thank you. And now be quiet. I want to think.”

“And what are you thinking about so seriously? Hmm. All right, I’m not going to say anything now.”

“I’m beside myself with joy. I was worried you were going to ask me another one of your unequal grand questions.”

“Why not? I like your unequal grand answers!”

“You’re getting impudent, ugly one.”

“I’m a wizard. Wizards are malicious and impudent.”

No words. Silence. Stillness in the air. Close humidity as if before a storm. And silence, this time broken by the distant croaking of ravens and crows.

“There are more and more of them.” Ciri looked upwards. “They’re flying and flying… Like in autumn… hide-ous birds… The priestesses say that it’s a bad sign… An omen, or something. What is an omen, Lady Yennefer?”

“Look it up in Dhu Dwimmermorc. There’s a whole chapter on the subject.”

Silence.

“Lady Yennefer…”

“Oh, hell. What is it now?”

“It’s been so long, why isn’t Geralt… Why isn’t he coming?”

“He’s forgotten about you, no doubt, ugly one. He’s found himself a prettier girl.”

“Oh, no! I know he hasn’t forgotten! He couldn’t have! I know that, I know that for certain, Lady Yennefer!”

“It’s good you know. You’re a lucky ugly one.”

“I didn’t like you,” she repeated.

Yennefer did not look at her as she stood at the window with her back turned, staring at the hills looming black in the east. Above the hills, the sky was dark with flocks of ravens and crows.

In a minute she’s going to ask why I didn’t like her, thought Ciri. No, she’s too clever to ask such a question. She’ll dryly draw my attention to my grammar and ask when I started using the past tense. And I’ll tell her. I’ll be just as dry as she is, I’ll parody her tone of voice, let her know that I, too, can pretend to be cold, unfeeling and indifferent, ashamed of my feelings and emotions. I’ll tell her everything. I want to, I have to tell her everything. I want her to know everything before we leave Melitele’s Temple. Before we part to finally meet the one I miss. The one she misses. The one who no doubt misses us both. I want to tell her that…

I’ll tell her. It’s enough for her to ask.

The magician turned from the window and smiled. She did not ask anything.

They left the following day, early in the morning. Both wore men’s travelling clothes, cloaks, hats and hoods which hid their hair. Both were armed.

Only Nenneke saw them off. She spoke quietly and at length with Yennefer, then they both – the magician and the priestess – shook each other’s hand, hard, like men. Ciri, holding the reins of her dapple-grey mare, wanted to say goodbye in the same way, but Nenneke did not allow it. She embraced her, hugged her and gave her a kiss. There were tears in her eyes. In Ciri’s, too.

“Well,” said the priestess finally, wiping her eye with the sleeve of her robe, “now go. May the Great Melitele protect you on your way, my dears. But the goddess has a great many things on her mind, so look after yourselves too. Take care of her, Yennefer. Keep her safe, like the apple of your eye.”

“I hope” – the magician smiled faintly – “that I’ll manage to keep her safer.”

Across the sky, towards Pontar Valley, flew flocks of crows, croaking loudly. Nenneke did not look at them.

“Take care,” she repeated. “Bad times are approaching. It might turn out to be true, what Ithlinne aep Aevenien knew, what she predicted. The Time of the Sword and Axe is approaching. The Time of Contempt and the Wolf’s Blizzard. Take care of her, Yennefer. Don’t let anyone harm her.”

“I’ll be back, Mother,” said Ciri, leaping into her saddle. “I’ll be back for sure! Soon!”

She did not know how very wrong she was.