

I

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 towards 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 coarse, 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 Honourable Ravix of Fourhorn. As guest of honour 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 leant 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 arse 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.'

II

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 announed 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 grey-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 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 colourful 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 neighbourhood. 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 chequered woollen 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 honour,' 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,' smiled Eist Tuirseach, 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 travelled 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 leant over to the marshal. 'Let's begin, Vissegerd.'

The marshal clapped his hands. The servants, carrying platters and jugs, moved towards 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 molluscs 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 neighbours 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-grey 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 bumble-bee, '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 towards 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 judgement? 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 his curtain of grey 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 honour 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 honoured 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 honour 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 honour 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. Afterwards 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 neighbourhood, 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, towards 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 neighbours' faces and tunics with sauce. 'And so weaken the centre? A key position? Ludicrous!'

'Only someone who's blind or sick in the head would miss the opportunity to manoeuvre 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 arse 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 manoeuvres 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 moulded 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 treat. 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 leant 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 Honourable 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.

'Honourable 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 colour of her hair was identical to her mother's - ash-grey - 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 Tuir-seach. 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 realise 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 time

about a little goat with horns and a vengeful old woman with no sense of humour.

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 leant 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 armour of iron sheets and leather treated with wax. His convex, angular, black and blue breast-plate overlapped a segmented apron and short thigh pads. The armour-plated brassards 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, honourable 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 armour 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, loo, 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, defenceless, 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 top 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 towards 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 honourable 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 every one 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 labour. 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 towards 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 Skellig 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 behaviour!'

'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. Honourable 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, honourable 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 traveller 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 Rumpelstelt, and in return promised him her first-born?

Zivelena didn't keep her promise when Rumpelstelt 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,' bowed Coodcoodak. '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 dishonour they have experienced here, at the ridicule poured on them. I am not to blame.'

Amidst 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 armour gauntlets, fell to his sides lifelessly, and the spiked helmet swayed unsteadily.

The strange, unknown Force suddenly grew thicker, filling the hall like a grey 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 armoured 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, grey, 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.'

Andrzej Sapkowski The Last Wish

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.

Geralт 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 grey sauce and the few remaining arched ribs of a roast boar. Rainfarn leapt towards 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 armoured 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 immobilised 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 breast-plate. The guards, crossing their spear-shafts, pinned him to the sculpted chimney. Rainfarn, who was

hanging onto his belt, found a chink in the armour 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 towards 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 centre 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 unwieldy piece of furniture against the floor with great force and, with what remained in 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 chair brandished by Eist like the magic sword Balmur in the hand of the legendary Zatrete 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. And then 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 towards 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 towards 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 sauce-boat 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 Graite 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 towards 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 centres of which the Force - like a battering ram which exploded the skull, put out the eyes and paralysed the breath — descended on them. Together with the Force, glass, majolica, platters, candlesticks, bones, nibbled loaves of bread, planks, slats and smouldering 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 smouldering 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 towards the hearth. There, with his back resting against the wall, sat Urcheon, awkwardly trying to remove his blood-smeared armour.

'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 armour 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 Maeht; 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,' nodded Calanthe. '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,' grimaced Duny. '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 towards 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,' smiled Duny. '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, Mouse-sack. 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 honoured.'

'I think,' the queen turned her head towards the window. 'It's dawn. Time to—V

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 Mouse-sack. '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 Rainfarn 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. Rainfam'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 apologise 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 colour 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 Rainfam'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 5

'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 Dandilion 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 Dandilion 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. Dandilion, 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 gate-keeper 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, Dandilion. How did you know I was here?'

The poet straightened himself and yanked his trousers up. 'I was in Wyzim,' 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.'

Dandilion sat and peeped into the book lying on the lectern. 'History?' he smiled. 'Roderick de Novembre? I've read him, I have. History was second on my list of favourite 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?' Dandilion knew all the kings, princes, lords and feudal lords from Jaruga 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, Dandilion. Far south. I won't find any work here. Civilisation. 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 civilisation? 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, chimerea, 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, Dandilion. 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 philosophising 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 Novembre. 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 Dandilion 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 favourite 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 Dandilion. '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.'

Dandilion crossed his legs and examined his worn sole with interest. 'You remind me, Geralt, of an old fisherman who, towards 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 ratcatchers 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 ratcatchers . . . 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 Novembre? 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, chimerae 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 forktail 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 chimerae, 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 recognise 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 fete 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 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 civilisation, the furthest point on the border of two worlds . . . Remember?'

'I remember.'

THE EDGE OF THE WORLD

I

Dandilion 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.

A number of 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 realised 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 Dandilion yet again. 'A witcher, do you understand? He kills strigas and spectres. 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.'

Dandilion 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 dishonourable doings, or their simple existence. Geralt and Dandilion learnt of misguids and mamunes, which prevent an honest peasant from finding his way home in a drunken stupour, 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 Dandilion.

'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 Dandilion, 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, Dandilion.'

'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!' Dandilion 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 travelled past them in the opposite direction. The bard pulled his leg over the saddle-bow, 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 Dandilion, 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.' Dandilion 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 coloured 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, Dandilion.'

The road led straight towards 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.

Dandilion 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.

'Woooooaaaaahhhh!' 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 Dandilion, 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.'

Dandilion 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.'

Dandilion 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, honourable 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 arses on the saddle?'

'Too true.'

They climbed onto the cart. The witcher stretched out comfortably on the straw. Dandilion, 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 civilisation,' said Dandilion. '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 Dandilion 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,' Dandilion 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.

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 Dandilion 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 Dandilion - 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 Dandilion. '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, Dandilion,' said Geralt in a calm voice. 'And go on, honourable 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 Dandilion, trying to remove a fly from his beer. A devil?'

'Don't interrupt, Dandilion. 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 fertilises 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.'

Dandilion cackled again, then nicked 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. 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.'

Dandilion 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?' frowned Dhun.

'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 prowls the whole neighbourhood 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.' Dandilion 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,' grimaced Geralt. '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 Dandilion, I could never resist the temptation of having a look at something that doesn't exist.'

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?' Dandilion 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.'

Dandilion 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, Dandilion.'

'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,' Dandilion 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 ..." Dandilion 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'yaeb! aep arse”, which means—'

'I know what it means. You're babbling, Dandilion.'

Dandilion 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, Dandilion.'

In the very centre 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 unrecognisable 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 arse, little goat?' Dandilion couldn't stop himself.

'Uk! Uk! Beeeeee!' bleated the goathorn in agreement, or denial, or simply bleating for the sake of it.

'Shut up, Dandilion,' growled the witcher. 'Not a word.'

'Blebleblebeeeee!' The creature gurgled furiously, his lips parting wide to expose yellow horse-like teeth. 'Uk! Uk! Bleubeeee-ubleuuuubleeeeeeeee!'

'Most certainly,' nodded Dandilion, '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. Dandilion howled and sat down hard on the path, claspig 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 Dandilion 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. Dandilion 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 Dandilion's feet scurrying away along the path.

And then silence fell.

IV

'Well, well, Geralt.' Dandilion 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 grey-haired old woman, twisted as a pretzel, led by a fair-haired and painfully thin teenage girl.

'Honourable Dhun, honourable 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 amongst 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 talonned 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, Dandilion.'

'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 Dandilion.

'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 grey heron's fat—'

'Good, well done. Hmm . . . And here? What's this?'

The etching showed a dishevelled 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 Dandilion 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 mänge 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 Dandilion. '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 Dandilion.

'—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 utricule, of birch tar a second. Of grey 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 Dandilion. '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 towards 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?' Dandilion 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,' smiled the witcher. '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, honourable 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.

'I noticed,' Geralt said through his teeth, making no effort to be cordial. 'But be so gracious as to understand something, honourable 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, honourable 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,' Dandilion 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 arse. 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 favour 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 learnt 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—'

'Hm . . .' 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, honourable Dhun. My questions aim to establish the bond between Lille and the devil. You've probably realised 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,' Dandilion 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. Honourable Dhun, honourable Nettly, if you're counting on my help costing you a silver penny or three halves, then you are bloody well mistaken.'

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:

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 leant 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.

VI

There was sand on his lips. When he tried to spit it out he realised 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, Dandilion'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. '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 round.

'Geralt . . .' he heard a whisper. 'Are you awake?'

'Dandilion . . .' he whispered back. 'Where are we . . .? What's happening?'

Dandilion 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 Dandilion'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 Dandilion, a poe—'

Geralt heard the sound of a blow. He turned round, twisted his head.

The elf standing over Dandilion 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 woollen leggings tucked into riding boots.

Her hips were wrapped around with a coloured shawl which reached halfway down her thighs.

'Que glosse?' she asked, looking at the witcher and playing with the hilt of the long dagger in her belt. 'Que l'en pavienn, ell'ea?'

'Nell'ea,' he contested. 'T'en pavienn, Aen Seidhe.'

'Did you hear?' The elf turned to her companion, the tall Seidhe who, not bothering to check Geralt's knots, was strumming away at Dandilion'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 leant 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 leant 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!' Dandilion 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 luten-ist!'

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 Dandilion'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 up 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 colourful 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!'

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 colour, 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 Dandilion 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 Dandilion. '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 Dandilion. '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, Dahdilion. 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 Dandilion'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.'

'Eeeeeee, 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 Fila-vandrel 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.'

Geralт 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 forwards, 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 neighbours 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 defence 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 has to 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 realise 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 practiced. 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,' Dandilion, 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 plateaux, 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 honourably, in battle, and not in sick beds of misery, where anaemia, 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 Dandilion 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!' Dandilion 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, Dandilion,' 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 Dandilion 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,' Dandilion 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.'

'Duwelsheyss, 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 Dandilion. '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!'

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 . . .' Dandilion 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 Meadhbh,' 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 Meadhbh,' repeated Filavandrel.

Lille didn't answer. She stopped several paces short of the elf and swept her blue eyes over Dandilion 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 lightening.

'Come with us, Dana Meadhbh,' 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.

Dandilion 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 . . .' he said. And didn't finish.

The elf nodded. From her saddle-bow, she took a lute, a marvellous instrument of light, tastefully inlaid wood with a slender, engraved neck. Without a word, she handed the lute to Dandilion. 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 honourably. 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.'

VII

'By the gods, Geralt.' Dandilion 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 neighbourhood hears you.'

'Duvvelsheyss, not neighbourhood,' 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 Dandilion, 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 sullyng 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. Dandilion 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.

Til describe our whole expedition to the edge of the world in a ballad,' declared Dandilion.

'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,' Dandilion strummed the melodious strings of Toru-viel's lute, 'read us something, Geralt.'

The witcher leant 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 Blo-emenmagde."'

'Danamebi,' muttered Dandilion. '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.'

'Hm . . . 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 6

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, recognising some rare specimens - those which made up the ingredients of a witcher's medicines and elixirs, magical philtres 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 recognised 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 mousetail orchid.

In the shady part of the grotto bulged caps of the sewant mushroom, grey as stones in a field.

Not far from them grew reachcluster, an antidote to every known toxin and venom. The modest yellow-grey brushes peering from chests deeply sunken into the ground revealed scarix, a root with powerful and universal medicinal qualities.

The centre of the cave was taken up by aqueous plants. Geralt saw vats full of homwort 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, moulds 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 recognise. 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 towards 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 quarrelled. 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 quarrelled 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 Wyzim striga.'

'For a torn neck,' grimaced the priestess. '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 Wyzim 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 safe-keeping?'

'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, knick-knacks 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 leant 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 have to be treated. You need therapy. And before that, a trance.'

'Is that why you sent lola 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 recognise.

'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 lola needed some therapy, too. Don't be angry.'

'I'm not angry because of the therapy, or because of lola.'

'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. 'lola'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, lola 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 towards 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.'

Andrzej Sapkowski The Last Wish

'I understand,' nodded the witcher. 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

I

The catfish stuck its barbelled head above the surface, tugged with force, splashed, stirred the water and flashed its white belly.

'Careful, Dandilion!' 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 towards the bend in the river.

The line hissed as Dandilion's and Geralt's gloves smouldered.

'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 Dandilion. '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 smouldered anew.

'Pull, pull! To the bank, the son-of-a-bitch!'

'The line is creaking! Loosen it, Dandilion!'

'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 ...' Dandilion, 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!' Dandilion 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 neighbourhood could hear you, nothing more.'

'You're wrong,' Dandilion 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!'

Dandilion 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!' Dandilion 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 fulfil my three wishes.'

The witcher snorted.

'You can laugh,' Dandilion 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!'

'Dandilion, 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 towards the camp for his sword. Dandilion, folding his arms across his chest, didn't move.

The smoke pulsated and collected in an irregular sphere level with Dandilion's eyes. The sphere formed a six-foot-wide distorted head with no nose, enormous eyes and a sort of beak.

'Djinn!' said Dandilion, 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, Dandilion!'

'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 Dandilion's third wish.

Two monstrous paws emerged from the horrible head and grabbed the bard by the throat.

Dandilion 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 Dandilion 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 materialised 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 Dandilion - 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 towards 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.

'Dandilion? Are you dead? Dandilion, 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 - Dandilion 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.

'Dandilion! What's the matter with you? Answer me!'

'Hhhh . . . eeee . . . kheeeee . . . theeee whhhhorrrrrrre . . . '

'Are you in pain? What's the matter? Dandilion!'

'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.