

II

'By all the gods!' The guard stepped back and lowered the lantern. 'What's the matter with him?'

'Let us through, my good man,' said the witcher quietly, supporting Dandilion, who was huddled up in the saddle. 'We're in great haste, as you see.'

'I do.' The guard swallowed, looking at the poet's pale face and chin covered in black, dried blood. 'Wounded? It looks terrible, sir.'

'I'm in haste,' repeated Geralt. 'We've been travelling since dawn. Let us through, please.'

'We can't,' said the other guard. 'You're only allowed through between sunrise and sunset.'

None may pass at night. That's the order. There's no way through for anyone unless they've got a letter of safe-conduct from the king or the mayor. Or they're nobility with a coat of arms.'

Dandilion croaked, huddled up even more, resting his forehead on the horse's mane, shuddered, shook and retched dryly. Another stream of blood trickled down the branched, dried pattern on his mount's neck.

'My good men,' Geralt said as calmly as he could, 'you can see for yourselves how badly he fares. I have to find someone who can treat him. Let us through. Please.'

'Don't ask.' The guard leant on his halberd. 'Orders are orders. I'll go to the pillory if I let you through. They'll chase me from service, and then how will I feed my children? No, sir, I can't.'

Take your friend down from the horse and put him in the room in the barbican. We'll dress him and he'll last out until dawn, if that's his fate. It's not long now,'

'A dressing's not enough.' The witcher ground his teeth. 'We need a healer, a priest, a gifted doctor—'

'You wouldn't be waking up anyone like that at night anyway,' said the second guard. 'The most we can do is see that you don't have to camp out under the gate until dawn. It's warm in there and there's somewhere to put your friend; he'll fare better there than in the saddle. Come on, let us help you lower him from the horse.'

It was warm, stuffy and cosy in the room within the barbican. A fire crackled merrily in the hearth, and behind it a cricket chirped fiercely.

Three men sat at the heavy square table laid with jugs and plates.

'Forgive us for disturbing you, squires ...' said the guard, holding Dandilion up. 'I trust you won't mind . . . This one here is a knight, hmm . . . And the other one is wounded, so I thought—'

'You thought well,' one of the men turned his slender, sharp, expressive face towards them and got up. 'Here, lay him down on the pallet.'

The man was an elf, like the other one sitting at the table. Both, judging by their clothes, which were a typical mixture of human and elven fashion, were elves who had settled and integrated. The third man, who looked the eldest, was human, a knight, judging by the way he was dressed and by his salt-and-pepper hair, cut to fit beneath a helmet.

'I'm Chireadan,' the taller of the elves, with an expressive face, introduced himself. As was usual with representatives of the Old People, it was difficult to guess his age; he could have been twenty or one hundred and twenty. 'This is my cousin Errdil. And this nobleman is the knight Vratimir.'

'A nobleman,' muttered Geralt, but a closer look at the coat of arms embroidered on his tunic shattered his hopes: a shield divided per cross and bearing golden lilies was cut diagonally by a silver bar. Vratimir was not only illegitimate but came from a mixed, human-nonhuman union. As a result, although he was entitled to use a coat of arms, he couldn't consider himself a true nobleman, and the privilege of crossing the city gate after dusk most certainly wasn't extended to him.

'Unfortunately,' - the witcher's scrutiny did not escape the elf's attention - 'we, too, have to remain here until dawn. The law knows no exceptions, at least not for the likes of us. We invite you to join our company, sir knight.'

'Geralt, of Rivia,' the witcher introduced himself. 'A witcher, not a knight.'

'What's the matter with him?' Chireadan indicated Dandilion, whom the guards had laid on a pallet in the meantime. 'It looks like poisoning. If it is poisoning, then I can help. I've got some good medicine with me.'

Geralt sat down, then quickly gave a guarded account of events at the river. The elves looked at each other, and the knight spat through his teeth and frowned.

'Extraordinary,' Chireadan remarked. 'What could it have been?'

'A djinn in a bottle,' muttered Vratimir. 'Like a fairy tale—'

'Not quite.' Geralt indicated Dandilion, curled up on the pallet. 'I don't know of any fairy tale that ends like this.'

'That poor fellow's injuries,' said Chireadan, 'are evidently of a magical nature. I fear that my medicine will not be of much use. But I can at least lessen his suffering. Have you already given him a remedy, Geralt?'

'A painkilling elixir.'

'Come and help me. You can hold his head up.'

Dandilion greedily drank the medicine, diluted with wine, choked on his last sip, wheezed and covered the leather pillow with spittle.

'I know him,' Errdil said. 'He's Dandilion, the troubadour and poet. I saw him singing at the court of King Ethain in Cidaris once.'

'A troubadour,' repeated Chireadan, looking at Geralt. 'That's bad. Very bad. The muscles of his neck and throat are attacked. Changes in his vocal cords are starting to take place. The spell's action has to be halted as soon as possible otherwise . . . This might be irreversible.'

'That means . . . Does that mean he won't be able to talk?'

'Talk, yes. Maybe. Not sing.'

Geralt sat down at the table without saying a word and rested his forehead on his clenched fists.

'A wizard,' said Vratimir. 'A magical remedy or a curative spell is needed. You have to take him to some other town, witcher.'

'What?' Geralt raised his head. 'And here, in Rinde? Isn't there a wizard here?'

'Magicians are hard to come by in the whole of Redania,' said the knight. 'Isn't that true? Ever since King Heribert placed an exorbitant tax on spells, magicians have boycotted the capital and those towns which are rigorous in executing the king's edicts. And the councillors of Rinde are famous for their zeal in this respect. Chireadan, Errdil, am I right?'

'You are,' confirmed Errdil. 'But . . . Chireadan, may I?'

'You have to,' said Chireadan, looking at the witcher. 'There's no point in making a secret of it; everyone knows anyway. There's a sorceress staying in the town right now, Geralt.'

'Incognito, no doubt?'

'Not very,' smiled the elf. 'The sorceress in question is something of an individualist. She's ignoring both the boycott imposed on Rinde by the Council of Wizards, and the disposition of the local councillors, and is doing rather splendidly out of it: the boycott means there's tremendous demand for magical services here and, of course, the sorceress isn't paying any levies.'

'And the town council puts up with it?'

'The sorceress is staying with a merchant, a trade broker from Novigrad, who is also the honorary ambassador. Nobody can touch her there. She has asylum.'

'It's more like house arrest than asylum,' corrected Errdil. 'She's just about imprisoned there.'

But she has no shortage of clients. Rich clients. She ostentatiously makes light of the councillors, holds balls and extravagant parties—'

'While the councillors are furious, turn whoever they can against her and tarnish her reputation as best they can,' Chireadan cut in. 'They spread foul rumours about her and hope, no doubt, that the Novigrad hierarchy will forbid the merchant to grant her asylum.'

'I don't like meddling in things like that,' muttered Geralt, 'but I've got no choice. What's the merchant-ambassador's name?'

'Beau Berrant.'

The witcher thought that Chireadan grimaced as he pronounced the name.

'Oh well, it really is your only hope. Or rather, the only hope for that poor fellow moaning on the bed. But whether the sorceress will want to help you ... I don't know.'

'Be careful when you go there,' said Errdil. 'The mayor's spies are watching the house. You know what to do if they stop you. Money opens all doors.'

'I'll go as soon as they open the gates. What's the sorceress called?'

Geralt thought he detected a slight flush on Chireadan's expressive face. But it could have been the glow from the fire in the hearth.

'Yennefer of Vergerberg.'

III

'My lord's asleep,' repeated the doorman, looking down at Geralt. He was taller by a head and nearly twice as broad in the shoulders. 'Are you deaf, you vagabond? The lord's asleep, I said.'

'Then let him sleep,' agreed the witcher. 'I've not got business with your lord but with the lady who is staying here.'

'Business, you say.' The doorman, as it turned out, was surprisingly witty for someone of such stature and appearance. 'Then go, you loiterer, to the whorehouse to satisfy your need. Scram.'

Geralt unfastened the purse on his belt and, holding it by the straps, weighed it in his palm.

'You won't bribe me,' the Cerberus said proudly.

'I don't intend to.'

The porter was too huge to have the reflexes which would let him dodge or shield himself from a quick blow given by an ordinary man. He didn't even have time to blink before the witcher's blow landed. The heavy purse struck him in the temple with a metallic crash. He collapsed against the door, grabbing the frame with both hands. Geralt tore him away from it with a kick in the knee, shoved him with his shoulder and fetched him another blow with the purse. The doorman's eyes grew hazy and diverged in a comical squint, and his legs folded under him like two penknives. The witcher, seeing the strapping fellow moving, although almost unconscious, walloped him with force for the third time, right on the crown of his head.

'Money,' he muttered, 'opens all doors.'

It was dark in the vestibule. A loud snoring came from the door on the left. The witcher peeped in carefully. A fat woman, her nightdress hitched up above her hips, was asleep on a tumbled pallet, snoring and snorting through her nose. It wasn't the most beautiful sight.

Geralt dragged the porter into the little room and closed the door.

On the right was another door, half-opened, and behind it stone steps led down. The witcher was about to pass them when an indistinct curse, a clatter and the dry crash of a vessel cracking reached him from below.

The room was a big kitchen, full of utensils, smelling of herbs and resinous wood. On the stone floor, among fragments of a clay jug, knelt a completely naked man with his head hanging low.

'Apple juice, bloody hell,' he mumbled, shaking his head like a sheep which had rammed a wall by a mistake. 'Apple . . . juice. Where . . . Where're the servants?'

'I beg your pardon?' the witcher asked politely.

The man raised his head and swallowed. His eyes were vague and very bloodshot.

'She wants juice from apples,' he stated, then got up with evident difficulty, sat down on a chest covered with a sheepskin coat, and leant against the stove. 'I have to . . . take it upstairs because—'

'Do I have the pleasure of speaking to the merchant Beau Berrant?'

'Quieter,' the man grimaced painfully. 'Don't yell. Listen, in that barrel there . . . Juice. Apple.

Pour it into something . . . and help me get upstairs, all right?'

Geralt shrugged, then nodded sympathetically. He generally avoided overdoing the alcohol but the state in which the merchant

found himself was not entirely unknown to him. He found a jug and a tin mug among the crockery and drew some juice from the barrel. He heard snoring and turned. Beau Berrant was fast asleep, his head hanging on his chest.

For a moment, the witcher considered pouring juice over him to wake him up, but he changed his mind. He left the kitchen, carrying the jug. The corridor ended in a heavy inlaid door. He entered carefully, opening it just enough to slip inside. It was dark, so he dilated his pupils.

And wrinkled his nose.

A heavy smell of sour wine, candles and overripe fruit hung in the air. And something else, that brought to mind a mixture of the scents of lilac and gooseberries.

He looked around. The table in the middle of the chamber bore a battlefield of jugs, carafes, goblets, silver plates, dishes and ivory-handled cutlery. A creased tablecloth, which had been pushed aside, was soaked in wine, covered in purple stains and stiff with wax which had trickled down the candlesticks. Orange peel glowed like flowers among plum and peach stones, pear cores and grape stalks. A goblet had fallen over and smashed. The other was in one piece, half full, with a turkey bone sticking out of it. Next to the goblet stood a black, high-heeled slipper. It was made of basilisk skin. There wasn't a more expensive raw material which could be used in the making of shoes.

The other slipper lay under a chair on top of a carelessly discarded black dress with white frills and an embroidered flowery pattern.

For a moment Geralt stood undecided, struggling with embarrassment and the desire to turn on his heel and leave. But that would have meant his tussle with the Cerberus below had been unnecessary. And the witcher didn't like doing anything unnecessarily. He noticed winding stairs in the corner of the chamber.

On the steps he found four withered white roses and a napkin stained with wine and crimson lipstick. The scent of lilac and gooseberries grew stronger. The stairs led to a bedroom, the floor of which was covered in an enormous, shaggy animal skin. A white shirt with lace cuffs, and umpteen white roses, lay on the skin. And a black stocking.

The other stocking hung from one of the four engraved posts which supported the domed canopy over the bed. The engravings on the posts depicted nymphs and fauns in various positions. Some of the positions were interesting. Others funny. Many repeated themselves.

Geralt cleared his throat loudly, looking at the abundant black locks visible from under the eiderdown. The eiderdown moved and moaned. Geralt cleared his throat even louder.

'Beau?' the abundance of black locks asked indistinctly. 'Have you brought the juice?'

'Yes.'

A pale triangular face, violet eyes and narrow, slightly contorted lips appeared beneath the black tresses.

'Ooooh . . .' The lips became even more contorted. 'Ooooh . . . I'm dying of thirst . . .'

'Here you are.'

The woman sat up, scrambling out of the bedclothes. She had pretty shoulders, a shapely neck and, around it, a black velvet choker with a star-shaped jewel sparkling with diamonds. Apart from the choker she had nothing on.

'Thank you.' She took the mug from his hand, drank greedily, then raised her arms and touched her temples. The eiderdown slipped down even further. Geralt averted his eyes -

politely, but unwillingly.

'Who are you?' asked the black-haired woman, narrowing her eyes and covering herself with the eiderdown. 'What are you doing here? And where, dammit, is Berrant?'

'Which question shall I answer first?'

He immediately regretted his sarcasm. The woman raised her hand and a golden streak shot out from her fingers. Geralt reacted instinctively, crossing both hands in the Sign of Heliotrope, and caught the spell just in front of his face, but the discharge was so strong that it threw him back against the wall. He sank to the floor.

'No need!' he shouted, seeing the woman raise her hand again. 'Lady Yennefer! I come in peace, with no evil intentions!'

A stamping came from the stairs and servants loomed in the bedroom doorway.

'Lady Yennefer!'

'Leave,' the sorceress ordered calmly. 'I don't need you. You're paid to keep an eye on the house. But since this individual has, nevertheless, managed to get in, I'll take care of him myself. Pass that on to Berrant. And prepare a bath for me.'

The witcher got up with difficulty. Yennefer observed him in silence, narrowing her eyes.

'You parried my spell,' she finally said. 'You're not a sorcerer, that's obvious. But you reacted exceptionally fast. Tell me who you are, stranger who has come in peace. And I advise you to speak quickly.'

'I'm Geralt of Rivia. A witcher.'

Yennefer leant out of the bed, grasping a faun - engraved on the pole - by a piece of anatomy well adapted to being grasped. Without taking her eyes off Geralt, she picked a coat with a fur collar up off the floor and wrapped herself up in it tightly before getting up. She poured herself another mug of juice without hurrying, drank it in one go, coughed and came closer.

Geralt discreetly rubbed his lower back which, a moment ago, had collided painfully with the wall.

'Geralt of Rivia,' repeated the sorceress, looking at him from behind black lashes. 'How did you get in here? And for what reason? You didn't hurt Berrant, I hope?'

'No. I didn't. Lady Yennefer, I need your help.'

'A witcher,' she muttered, coming up even closer and wrapping the coat around her more tightly.

'Not only is it the first one I've seen up close but it's none other than the famous White Wolf. I've heard about you.'

'I can imagine.'

'I don't know what you can imagine.' She yawned, then came even closer. 'May I?' She touched his cheek and looked him in the eyes. He clenched his jaw. 'Do your pupils automatically adapt to light or can you narrow and dilate them according to your will?'

'Yennefer,' he said calmly, 'I rode nonstop all day from Rinde. I waited all night for the gates to open. I gave your doorman, who didn't want to let me in, a blow to the head. I disturbed your sleep and peace, discourteously and importunately. All because my friend needs help which only you can give him. Give it to him, please, and then, if you like, we can talk about mutations and aberrations.'

She took a step back and contorted her lips unpleasantly. 'What sort of help do you mean?'

'The regeneration of organs injured through magic. The throat, larynx and vocal cords. An injury caused by a scarlet mist. Or something very much like it.'

'Very much like it,' she repeated. 'To put it in a nutshell, it wasn't a scarlet mist which has injured your friend. So what was it? Speak out. Being torn from my sleep at dawn, I have neither the strength nor the desire to probe your brain.'

'Hmm ... It's best I start from the beginning.'

'Oh, no,' she interrupted him. 'If it's all that complicated then wait. An aftertaste in my mouth, dishevelled hair, sticky eyes and other morning inconveniences strongly affect my perceptive faculties. Go downstairs to the bath-chamber in the cellar. I'll be there in a minute and then you'll tell me everything.'

'Yennefer, I don't want to be persistent but time is pressing. My friend—'

'Geralt,' she interrupted sharply, 'I climbed out of bed for you and I didn't intend to do that before the chime of midday. I'm prepared to do without breakfast. Do you know why?

Because you brought me the apple juice. You were in a hurry, your head was troubled with your friend's suffering, you forced your way in here, and yet you thought of a thirsty woman.

You won me over, so my help is not out of the question. But I won't do anything without hot water and soap. Go. Please.'

'Very well.'

'Geralt.'

'Yes,' he stopped on the threshold.

'Make use of the opportunity to have a bath yourself. I can not only guess the age and breed of your horse, but also its colour, by the smell.'

IV

She entered the bath-chamber just as Geralt, sitting naked on a tiny stool, was pouring water over himself from a bucket. He cleared his throat and modestly turned his back to her.

'Don't be embarrassed,' she said, throwing an armful of clothing on the hook. 'I don't faint at the sight of a naked man. Triss Merigold, a friend, says if you've seen one, you've seen them all.'

He got up, wrapping a towel round his hips.

'Beautiful scar,' she smiled, looking at his chest. 'What was it? Did you fall under the blade in a saw-mill?'

He didn't answer. The sorceress continued to observe him, tilting her head coquettishly.

'The first witcher I can look at from close up, and completely naked at that. Aha!' She leant over, listening. 'I can hear your heart beat. It's very slow. Can you control how much adrenalin you secrete? Oh, forgive me my professional curiosity. Apparently, you're touchy about the qualities of your own body. You're wont to describe these qualities using words which I greatly dislike, lapsing into pompous sarcasm with it, something I dislike even more.'

He didn't answer.

'Well, enough of that. My bath is getting cold.' Yennefer moved as if she wanted to discard her coat, then hesitated. 'I'll take my bath while you talk, to save time. But I don't want to embarrass you and, besides, we hardly know each other. So then, taking decency into account—'

'I'll turn round,' he proposed hesitantly.

'No. I have to see the eyes of the person I'm talking to. I've got a better idea.'

He heard an incantation being recited, felt his medallion quiver and saw the black coat softly slip to the floor. Then he heard the water splashing.

'Now I can't see your eyes, Yennefer,' he said. 'And that's a pity.'

The invisible sorceress snorted and splashed in the tub. 'Go on.'

Geralt finished struggling with his trousers, pulling them on under his towel, and sat on the bench. Buckling up his boots, he related the adventure by the river, cutting out most of the skirmish with the catfish. Yennefer didn't seem the type to be interested in fishing.

When he got to the part where the cloud-creature escaped from the jar, the huge soapy sponge froze.

'Well, well,' he heard, 'that's interesting. A djinn in a bottle.'

'No djinn,' he contested. 'It was some variant of scarlet mist. Some new, unknown type—'

'The new and unknown type deserves to be called something,' said the invisible Yennefer.

'The name djinn is no worse than any other. Continue, please.'

He obeyed. The soap in the tub foamed relentlessly as he continued his tale, and the water overflowed. Something caught his eye. Looking more carefully he discerned outlines and shapes revealed by the soap covering the invisible Yennefer. They fascinated him to the extent that he was struck dumb.

'Go on!' a voice coming from nothingness, from above the outlines which so absorbed him, urged. 'What happened next?'

'That's all,' he said. 'I chased him away, that djinn, as you call him—'

'How?' The ladle rose and poured water. The soap vanished, as did the shapes.

Geraltd sighed. 'With an incantation,' he said. An exorcism.'

'Which one?' The ladle poured water once more. The witcher started to observe the ladle's action more diligently because the water, albeit briefly, also revealed this and that. He repeated the incantation, substituting the vowel 'e' with an intake of breath, according to the safety rule. He thought he'd impress the sorceress by knowing the rule so he was surprised when he heard laughter coming from the tub.

'What's so funny?'

'That exorcism of yours . . .' The towel flew off its peg and suddenly began to wipe the rest of the outlines. 'Triss is going to kill herself laughing when I tell her. Who taught you that, witcher? That incantation?'

'A priestess from Huldra's sanctuary. It's a secret language of the temple—'

'Secret to some.' The towel slapped against the brim of the tub, water sprayed on to the floor and wet footprints marked the sorceress's steps. 'That wasn't an incantation, Geraltd. Nor would I advise you to repeat those words in other temples.'

'What was it, if not an incantation?' he asked, watching two black stockings outline shapely legs, one after the other.

'A witty saying.' Frilly knickers clung to nothing in an unusually interesting manner. 'If rather indecent.'

A white shirt with an enormous flower-shaped ruffle fluttered upwards and outlined Yennefer's body. She didn't, the witcher noticed, bother with the whalebone nonsense usually worn by women. She didn't have to.

'What saying?' he asked.

'Never mind.'

The cork sprang from a rectangular crystal bottle standing on the stool. The bath-chamber started to smell of lilac and gooseberries. The cork traced several circles and jumped back into place. The sorceress fastened the cuffs of her shirt, pulled on a dress and materialised.

'Fasten me up.' She turned her back to him while combing her hair with a tortoiseshell comb.

He noticed that the comb had a long, sharp prong which could, if need be, easily take the place of a dagger.

He took a deliberately long time fastening her dress, one hook at a time, enjoying the scent of her hair, which fell halfway down her back in a black cascade.

'Going back to the bottle creature,' said Yennefer, putting diamond earrings in her ears, 'it's obvious that it wasn't your funny incantation that drove him away. The hypothesis that he discharged his fury on your friend and left seems closer to the truth.'

'Probably,' Geralt agreed, gloomily. 'I don't think he flew off to Cidaris to do away with Valdo Marx.'

'Who's Valdo Marx?'

'A troubadour who considers my companion, also a poet and musician, a talentless wastrel who panders to the taste of the masses.'

The sorceress turned round with a strange glimmer in her eyes. 'Could it be that your friend managed to express a wish?'

'Two. Both stupid. Why do you ask? This fulfilling of wishes by genies is nonsense, after all, djinns, spirits of the lamp—'

'Clearly nonsense,' repeated Yennefer with a smile. 'Of course. It's an invention, a fairy tale devoid of any sense, like all the legends in which good spirits and fortune tellers fulfil wishes.

Stories like that are made up by poor simpletons, who can't even dream of fulfilling their wishes and desires themselves. I'm pleased you're not one of them, Geralt of Rivia. It makes you closer in spirit to me. If I want something, I don't dream of it - I act. And I always get what I want.'

'I don't doubt it. Are you ready?'

'I am.' The sorceress finished fastening the straps of her slippers and stood up. Even in high heels, she wasn't impressively tall. She shook her hair which, he found, had retained its picturesque, dishevelled and curling disarray despite the furious combing.

'I've got a question, Geralt. The seal which closed the bottle . . . Has your friend still got it?'

The witcher reflected. He had the seal, not Dandelion. But experience had taught him that sorcerers shouldn't be told too much.

'Hmm ... I think so.' He deceived her as to the reason for his delay in replying. 'Yes, he probably does. Why? Is the seal important?'

'That's a strange question,' she said sharply, 'for a witcher and a specialist in supernatural monstrosities. Someone who ought to know that such a seal is important enough not to touch.

And not to let their friend touch.'

He clenched his jaw. The blow was well aimed.

'Oh, well.' Yennefer changed her tone to a much gentler one. 'No one's infallible and no witcher's infallible, as we see. Everyone can make a mistake. Well, we can get it on our way.

Where's your comrade?'

'Here, in Rinde. At Errdil's. The elf's.'

She looked at him carefully.

'At Errdil's?' she repeated, contorting her lips in a smile. 'I know where that is. And I gather his cousin Chireadan is there too?'

'That's right. But what—?'

'Nothing,' she interrupted, raised her arms and closed her eyes.

The medallion around the witcher's neck pulsed, tugged at the chain.

On the damp bath-chamber wall shone the luminous outline of a door which framed a swirling phosphorescent milky nothingness. The witcher cursed. He didn't like magical portals, or travelling by them.

'Do we have to . . .' He cleared his throat. 'It's not far—'

'I can't walk the streets of this town,' she cut him short. 'They're not too crazy about me here.

They might insult me and throw stones - or do something worse. Several people are effectively ruining my reputation here, thinking they can get away with it. Don't worry, my portals are safe.'

Geralt had once watched as only half a traveller using a safe portal flew through. The other half was never found. He knew of several cases where people had entered a portal and never been seen again.

The sorceress adjusted her hair again and pinned a pearl-embossed purse to her belt. The purse looked too small to hold anything other than a handful of coppers and a lipstick, but Geralt knew it was no ordinary purse.

'Hold me. Tighter. I'm not made of china. On our way!' The medallion vibrated, something flashed and Geralt suddenly found himself in black nothingness, in penetrating cold. He couldn't see, hear or feel anything. Cold was all that his senses could register.

He wanted to curse, but didn't have time.

V

'It's an hour since she went in,' Chireadan turned over the hourglass standing on the table. 'I'm starting to get worried. Was Dandilion's throat really so bad? Don't you think we ought to go and have a look?'

'She made it quite clear that she didn't want us to.' Geralt finished his mug of herb tea, grimacing dreadfully. He valued and liked the settled elves for their intelligence, calm reserve and sense of humour, but he couldn't understand or share their taste in food or drink. 'I don't intend to disturb her, Chireadan. Magic requires time. It can take all day and night, as long as Dandilion gets better.'

'Oh well, you're right.'

A sound of hammering came from the room next door. Errdil, as it turned out, lived in a deserted inn which he had bought intending to renovate and then open with his wife, a quiet, taciturn elf. Vratimir, who had taken to their company after a night spent with the elves in the guardroom, volunteered to help with the repairs. He got down to renovating the wood panelling, working alongside the married couple, as soon as the confusion created by the witcher and Yennefer leaping through the wall in the flash of a portal had subsided.

'I didn't think you'd find it so easy, if I'm to be honest,' Chireadan went on. 'Yennefer isn't the most spontaneous of people when it comes to help. Others' troubles don't particularly bother her, and don't disturb her sleep. In a word, I've never heard of her helping anyone if there wasn't something in it for her. I wonder what's in it for her to help you and Dandilion.'

'Aren't you exaggerating?' The witcher smiled. 'I didn't have such a bad impression of her. She likes to demonstrate her superiority, it's true, but compared with other wizards, with that whole arrogant bunch, she's walking charm and kindness personified.'

Chireadan also smiled. 'It's almost as though you thought a scorpion were prettier than a spider,' he said, 'because it's got such a lovely tail. Be careful, Geralt. You're not the first to have judged her like that without knowing she's turned her charm and beauty into weapons.'

Weapons she uses skilfully and without

scruple. Which, of course, doesn't change the fact that she's a fascinating and good-looking woman. You wouldn't disagree, would you?'

Geralt glanced keenly at the elf. For a second time, he thought he saw traces of a blush on his face. It surprised him no less than Chireadan's words. Pure-blooded elves were not wont to admire human women, even the very beautiful ones, and Yennefer, although attractive in her own way, couldn't pass as a great beauty.

Each to their own taste but, in actual fact, not many would describe sorceresses as good-looking. Indeed, all of them came from social circles where the only fate for daughters would be marriage. Who would have thought of condemning their daughter to years of tedious studies and the tortures of somatic mutations if she could be given away in marriage and advantageously allied? Who wished to have a sorceress in their family? Despite the respect enjoyed by magicians, a sorceress's family did not benefit from her in the least because by the time the girl had completed her education, nothing tied her to her family anymore - only brotherhood counted, to the exclusion of all else. So only daughters with no chance of finding a husband become sorceresses.

Unlike priestesses and druidesses, who only unwillingly took ugly or crippled girls, sorcerers took anyone who showed evidence of a predisposition. If the child passed the first years of training, magic entered into the equation — straightening and evening out legs, repairing bones which had badly knitted, patching hare-lips,

removing scars, birthmarks and pox scars. The young sorceress would become attractive because the prestige of her profession demanded it. The result was pseudo-pretty women with

the angry and cold eyes of ugly girls. Girls who couldn't forget their ugliness had been covered by the mask of magic only for the prestige of their profession.

No, Geralt couldn't understand Chireadan. His eyes, the eyes of a witcher, registered too many details.

'No, Chireadan,' he answered. 'I wouldn't disagree. Thank you for the warning. But this only concerns Dandiliori. He suffered at my side, in my presence. I didn't manage to save him and I couldn't help him. I'd sit on a scorpion with my bare backside if I knew it would help him.'

'That's precisely what you've got to beware of most.' The elf smiled enigmatically. 'Because Yennefer knows it and she likes to make the most of such knowledge. Don't trust her, Geralt.

She's dangerous.'

He didn't answer.

Upstairs, the door squeaked. Yennefer stood at the stairs, leaning on the gallery balustrade.

'Witcher, could you come here?'

'Of course.'

The sorceress leant her back against the door of one of the few rooms with furniture, where they had put the suffering troubadour.

The witcher approached, watchful and silent. He saw her left shoulder, slightly higher than her right. Her nose, slightly too long. Her lips, a touch too narrow. Her chin, receding a little too much. Her brows a little too irregular. Her eyes . . .

He saw too many details. Quite unnecessarily.

'How's Dandilion?'

'Do you doubt my capabilities?'

He continued watching. She had the figure of a twenty-year-old, although he preferred not to guess at her real age. She moved with natural, unaffected grace. No, there was no way of guessing what she had been like before, what had been improved. He stopped thinking about it; there wasn't any sense.

'Your talented friend will be well,' she said. 'He'll recover his vocal talents.'

'You have my gratitude, Yennefer.'

She smiled. You'll have an opportunity to prove it.'

'Can I look in on him?'

She remained silent for a moment, watching him with a strange smile and drumming her fingers on the door-frame. 'Of course. Go in.'

The medallion on the witcher's neck started to quiver, sharply and rhythmically.

A glass sphere the size of a small watermelon, aflame with a milky light, lay in the centre of the floor. The sphere marked the heart of a precisely traced nine-pointed star whose arms reached the corners and walls of the small chamber. A red pentagram was inscribed within the star. The tips of the pentagram were marked by black candles standing in weirdly shaped holders. Black candles had also been lit at the head of the bed where Dandilion, covered with sheepskins, rested. The poet was breathing peacefully; he didn't wheeze or rasp anymore and the rictus of pain had disappeared from his face, to be replaced by an idiotic smile of happiness.

'He's asleep,' said Yennefer. And dreaming.'

Geralt examined the patterns traced on the floor. The magic hidden within them was palpable, but he knew it was a dormant magic. It brought to mind the purr of a sleeping lion, without suggesting how the roar might sound.

'What is this, Yennefer?'

A trap.'

'For what?'

'For you, for the time being.' The sorceress turned the key in the lock, then turned it over in her hand. The key disappeared.

And thus I'm trapped,' he said coldly. 'What now? Are you going to assault my virtue?'

'Don't flatter yourself.' Yennefer sat on the edge of the bed. Dandilion, still smiling like a moron, groaned quietly. It was, without a doubt, a groan of bliss.

'What's this all about, Yennefer? If it's a game, I don't know the rules.'

'I told you,' she began, 'that I always get what I want. As it happens, I desire something that Dandilion has. I'll get it from him and we can part ways. Don't worry, he won't come to any harm—'

'The things you've set on the floor,' he interrupted, 'are used to summon demons. Someone always comes to harm where demons are summoned. I won't allow it.'

'—not a hair of his head will be harmed,' continued the sorceress, without paying any attention to his words. 'His voice will be even more beautiful and he'll be very pleased, even happy. We'll all be happy. And we'll part with no ill-feelings or resentment.'

'Oh, Virginia,' moaned Dandilion without opening his eyes. 'Your breasts are so beautiful, more delicate than a swan's down . . . Virginia . . .'

'Has he lost his mind? Is he raving?'

'He's dreaming,' smiled Yennefer. 'His dream wish is being satisfied in his sleep. I probed his mind to the very depths. There wasn't much there. A few obscenities, several dreams and masses of poetry. But be that as it may. The seal which plugged the bottle with the djinn, Geralt, I know he doesn't have it. You do. Please give it to me.'

'What do you need the seal for?'

'How should I answer your question?' The sorceress smiled coquettishly. 'Let's try this: it's none of your damned business, witcher. Does that satisfy you?'

'No.' His smile was equally nasty. 'It doesn't. But don't reproach yourself for it, Yennefer. I'm not easily satisfied. Only those who are above average have managed so far.'

'Pity. So you'll remain unsatisfied. It's your loss. The seal, please. Don't pull that face, it doesn't suit either your good looks or your complexion. In case you hadn't noticed, let me tell you that you are now beginning to repay the gratitude you owe me. The seal is the first instalment for the price to be paid for the singer's voice.'

'I see you've divided the price into several instalments,' he said coldly. 'Fine. I might have expected that. But let it be a fair trade, Yennefer. I bought your help. And I'll pay.'

She contorted her lips in a smile, but her violet eyes remained wide open and cold.

'You shouldn't have any doubts as to that, witcher.'

'Me,' he repeated. 'Not Dandilion. I'm taking him to a safe place. When I've done that I'll come back and pay your second instalment, and all the others. Because as to the first . . .'

He reached into a secret pocket of his belt and pulled out the brass seal with the sign of a star and broken cross.

'Here, take it. Not as an instalment. Accept it from a witcher as proof of his gratitude for having treated him more kindly, albeit in a calculated manner, than the majority of your brethren would have done. Accept it as evidence of goodwill, which ought to convince you that, having seen to my friend's safety, I'll return to repay you. I didn't see the scorpion amidst the flowers, Yennefer. I'm prepared to pay for my inattention.'

'A pretty speech.' The sorceress folded her arms. 'Touching and pompous. Pity it's in vain. I need Dandilion, so he's staying here.'

'He's already been close to the creature you intend to draw here.' Geralt indicated the patterns on the floor. 'When you've finished your handiwork and brought the djinn here Dandilion is most certainly going to suffer despite all your promises, maybe even more than before.

Because it's the creature from the bottle that you want, isn't it? Do you intend to master it, force it to serve you? You don't have to answer, I know it's none of my damned business. Do what you want, draw ten demons in if you like. But without Dandilion. If you put him at risk, this will no longer be an honest trade, Yennefer, and you don't have the right to demand payment for that. I won't allow—' He broke off.

'I wondered when you'd feel it,' giggled the sorceress.

Geralt tensed his muscles and, clenching his jaw until it hurt, strained his entire will. It didn't help. He was paralysed, like a

stone statue, like a post which had been dug into the ground. He couldn't even wiggle a toe.

'I knew you could deflect a spell thrown straight at you,' said Yennefer. 'I also knew that before you tried anything you'd try to impress me with your eloquence. You were talking while the spell hanging over you was working and slowly breaking you. Now you can only talk. But you don't have to impress me anymore. I know you're eloquent. Any further efforts in that direction will only spoil the effect.'

'Chireadan—' he said with an effort, still fighting the magical paralysis. 'Chireadan will realise that you're up to something. He'll soon work it out, suspect something any minute now, because he doesn't trust you, Yennefer. He hasn't trusted you from the start—'

The sorceress swept her hand in a broad gesture. The walls of the chamber became blurred and took on a uniform dull grey appearance and colour. The door disappeared, the windows disappeared, even the dusty curtains and pictures on the wall, splattered with flies, vanished.

'What if Chireadan does figure it out?' She grimaced maliciously. 'Is he going to run for help?

Nobody will get through my barrier. But Chireadan's not going to run anywhere. He won't do anything against me. Anything. He's under my spell. No, it's not a question of black sorcery. I didn't do anything in that way. It's a simple question of body chemistry. He's fallen in love with me, the blockhead. Didn't you know? Can you imagine, he even intended to challenge Beau to a duel. A jealous elf. That rarely happens. Geralt, it's not for nothing that I chose this house.'

'Beau Berrant, Chireadan, Errdil, Dandilion. You really are heading for your goal as straight as you can. But me, Yennefer, you're not going to use me.'

'Oh I am, I am.' The sorceress got up from the bed and approached him, carefully avoiding the signs and symbols marked out on the floor. 'After all, I did say that you owe me something for curing the poet. It's a matter of a trifle, a small favour. After what I've done, what I intend to do here in a moment, I'm leaving Rinde and I've still got unpaid accounts in this town. I've promised several people here something, and I always keep my promises. Since I won't have time to do so myself, you'll keep those promises for me.'

He wrestled with all his might. In vain.

'Don't struggle, my little witcher.' She smiled spitefully. 'It's pointless. You've got a strong will and quite a bit of resistance to magic but you can't contend with me and my spell. And don't act out a farce for me, don't try to charm me with your hard and insolent masculinity.

You are the only one to think you're insolent and hard. You'd do anything for me in order to save your friend, even without spells at that. You'd pay any price. You'd lick my boots. And maybe something else, too, if I unexpectedly wished to amuse myself.'

He remained silent. Yennefer was standing in front of him, smiling and fiddling with the obsidian star sparkling with diamonds pinned to her velvet ribbon.

'I already knew what you were like,' she continued, 'after exchanging a few words with you in Beau's bedroom. And I knew what form of payment I'd demand from you. My accounts in Rinde could be settled by anyone, including Chireadan. But you're the one who's going to do it because

you have to pay me. For your insolence, for the cold way you look at me, for the eyes which fish for every detail, for your stony face and sarcastic tone of voice. For thinking that you could stand face to face with Yennefer of Vergerberg and believe her to be full of self-admiration and arrogance, a calculating witch, while staring at her soapy tits. Pay up, Geralt of Rivia!

She grabbed his hair with both hands and kissed him violently on the lips, sinking her teeth into them like a vampire. The medallion on his neck quivered and it felt to Geralt as if the chain was shrinking and strangling him. Something blazed in his head while a terrible humming filled his ears. He stopped seeing the sorceress's violet eyes and fell into darkness.

He was kneeling. Yennefer was talking to him in a gentle, soft voice.

'You remember?'

'Yes, my lady.' It was his own voice.

'So go and carry out my instructions.'

'At your command, my lady.'

'You may kiss my hand.'

'Thank you, my lady.'

He felt himself approach her on his knees. Ten thousand bees buzzed in his head. Her hand smelt of lilac and gooseberries. Lilac and gooseberries . . . Lilac and gooseberries ... A flash.

Darkness.

A balustrade, stairs. Chireadan's face.

'Geralt! What's the matter with you? Geralt, where are you going?'

'I have to . . .' His own voice. 'I have to go—'

'Oh, gods! Look at his eyes!'

Vratimir's face, contorted with horror. Errdil's face. And Chireadan's voice.

'No! Errdil! Don't touch him! Don't try to stop him! Out of his way - get out of his way!'

The scent of lilac and gooseberries. Lilac and gooseberries . . .

A door. The explosion of sunlight. It's hot. Humid. The scent of lilac and gooseberries.

There's going to be a storm, he thought.

And that was his last thought.

VI

Darkness. The scent . . .

Scent? No, smell. Stench of urine, rotten straw and wet rags. The stink of a smouldering torch stuck into an iron grip set in a wall of uneven stone blocks. A shadow thrown by the light of the torch, a shadow on the dirt floor—

The shadow of a grille.

The witcher cursed.

'At last.' He felt someone lift him up, rest his back against the damp wall. 'I was beginning to worry, you didn't regain consciousness for so long.'

'Chireadan? Where - dammit, my head's splitting - where are we?'

'Where do you think?'

Geralт wiped his face and looked around. Three rogues were sitting by the opposite wall. He couldn't see them clearly; they were sitting as far from the torch light as possible, in near complete darkness. Something which looked like a heap of rags crouched under the grille which separated them from the lit corridor. It was, in fact, a thin old man with a nose like a stork's

beak. The length of his matted stringy hair and the state of his clothes showed that he hadn't arrived yesterday.

'They've thrown us in the dungeon,' he said gloomily.

'I'm glad you've regained your ability to draw logical conclusions,' said the elf.

'Bloody hell . . . And Dandilion? How long have we been here? How much time has gone by since—?'

'I don't know. I was unconscious, just like you, when I was thrown in here.' Chireadan raked up the straw to sit more comfortably. 'Is it important?'

'And how, dammit! Yennefer— And Dandilion— Dandilion's there, with her, and she's planning— Hey, you! How long have we been in here?'

The other prisoners whispered among themselves. None replied.

'Have you gone deaf?' Geralt spat, still unable to get rid of the metallic taste in his mouth. 'I'm asking you, what time of day is it? Or night? Surely you know what time they feed you?'

They muttered again, cleared their throats. 'Sirs,' said one of them at last. 'Leave us in peace and don't talk to us. We be decent thieves, not some politicals. We didn't try to attack the authorities. We was only stealing.'

'That be it,' said another. 'You've your corner, we've ours. And let each look after his own.'

Chireadan snorted. The witcher spat.

'That's the way it goes,' mumbled the hairy old man with a long nose. 'Everyone in the clink guards his own corner and holds with his own.'

'And you, old man,' asked the elf sneeringly, 'are you with them or with us? Which camp do you count yourself in?'

'None,' he answered proudly, 'because I'm innocent.'

Geralt spat again. 'Chireadan?' he asked, rubbing his temple. 'This attempt on the authorities ... Is it true?'

'Absolutely. You don't remember?'

'I walked out into the street . . . People were looking at me . . . Then . . . Then there was a shop—'

'A pawnbroker's.' The elf lowered his voice. 'You went into the pawnbroker's. As soon as you walked in, you punched the owner in the teeth. Hard. Very hard.'

The witcher ground his teeth and cursed.

'The pawnbroker fell,' Chireadan continued quietly. 'And you kicked him several times in delicate places. The assistant ran to help his master and you threw him out of the window, into the street.'

'I fear,' muttered Geralt, 'that wasn't the end of it.'

'Your fears are well founded. You left the pawnbroker's and marched down the centre of the street, jostling passersby and shouting some nonsense about a lady's honour. There was quite a crowd following you, Errdil, Vratimir and I among them. Then you stopped in front of Laurelnose the apothecary's house, went in, and were back in the street a moment later, dragging Laurelnose by the leg. And you made something of a speech to the crowd.'

'What sort of a speech?'

'To put it simply, you stated that a self-respecting man shouldn't ever call a professional harlot a whore because it's base and repugnant, while using the word whore to describe a woman one has never knocked off or paid any money for doing so, is childish and punishable. The punishment, you announced, would be dealt there and then, and it would be fitting for a spoilt

child. You thrust the apothecary's head between his knees, pulled down his pants and thrashed his arse with a belt.'

'Go on, Chireadan. Go on. Don't spare me.'

'You beat Laurelnose on the backside and the apothecary howled and sobbed, called to gods and men alike for help, begged for

mercy - he even promised to be better in the future, but you clearly didn't believe him. Then several armed bandits, who in Rinde go by the name of guards, came running up.'

'And,' Geralt nodded, 'that's when I made a hit at the authorities?'

'Not at all. You made a hit at them much earlier. Both the pawnbroker and Laurelnose are on the town council. Both had called for Yennefer to be thrown out of town. Not only did they vote for it at the council but they badmouthed her in taverns and spread vulgar gossip.'

'I guessed that. Carry on. You stopped when the guards appeared. They threw me in here?'

'They wanted to. Oh, Geralt, what a sight it was. What you did to them, it's hard to describe.

They had swords, whips, clubs, hatchets, and you only had an ash cane with a pommel, which you'd snatched from some dandy. And when they were all lying on the ground, you walked on. Most of us knew where you were going.'

'I'd be happy to know too.'

'You were going to the temple. Because the priest Krepp, who's also a member of the council, dedicated a lot of time to Yennefer in his sermons. You promised him a lesson in respect for the fair sex. When you spoke of him you omitted his title and threw in other descriptions, to the delight of the children trailing after you.'

'Aha,' muttered Geralt. 'So blasphemy came into it, too. What else? Desecration of the temple?'

'No. You didn't manage to get in there. An entire unit of municipal guards, armed - it seemed to me - with absolutely everything they could lay their hands on in the armoury apart from a catapult, was waiting in front of the temple. It looked as if they were going to slaughter you, but you didn't reach them. You suddenly grasped your head with both hands and fainted.'

'You don't have to finish. So, Chireadan, how were you imprisoned?'

'Several guards ran to attack you when you fell. I got into a dispute with them. I got a blow over the head with a mace and

came to here, in this hole. No doubt they'll accuse me of taking part in an anti-human conspiracy.'

'Since we're talking about accusations,' the witcher ground his teeth again, 'what's in store for us, do you think?'

'If Neville, the mayor, gets back from the capital on time,' muttered Chireadan, 'who knows . . . he's a friend. But if he doesn't, then sentence will be passed by the councillors, including Laurelnose and the pawnbroker, of course. And that means—'

The elf made a brief gesture across his neck. Despite the darkness the gesture left little doubt as to Chireadan's meaning. The witcher didn't reply. The thieves mumbled to each other and the tiny old man, locked up for his innocence, seemed to be asleep.

'Great,' said Geralt finally, and cursed vilely. 'Not only will I hang, but I'll do so with the knowledge that I'm the cause of your death, Chireadan. And Dandilion's, too, no doubt. No, don't interrupt. I know it's Yennefer's prank, but I'm the guilty one. It's my foolishness. She deceived me, took the piss out of me, as the dwarves say.'

'Hmm . . .' muttered the elf. 'Nothing to add, nothing to take away. I warned you against her.'

Dammit, I warned you, and I turned out to be just as big an — pardon the word — idiot.

You're worried that I'm here because of you, but it's quite the opposite. You're locked up because of me. I could have stopped you in the street, overpowered you, not allowed— But I didn't. Because I was afraid that when the spell she'd cast on you had dispelled, you'd go back and . . . harm her. Forgive me.'

'I forgive you, because you've no idea how strong that spell was. My dear elf, I can break an ordinary spell within a few minutes and I don't faint while doing it. You wouldn't have managed to break Yennefer's spell and you would have had difficulty overpowering me.

Remember the guards.'

'I wasn't thinking about you. I repeat: I was thinking about her.'

'Chireadan?'

'Yes?'

'Do you . . . Do you—'

'I don't like grand words,' interrupted the elf, smiling sadly. 'I'm greatly, shall we say, fascinated by her. No doubt you're surprised that anyone could be fascinated by her?'

Geralt closed his eyes to recall an image which, without using grand words, fascinated him inexplicably.

'No, Ghireadan,' he said. 'I'm not surprised.'

Heavy steps sounded in the corridor, and a clang of metal. The dungeon was filled with the shadows of four guards. A key grated. The innocent old man leapt away from the bars like a lynx and hid among the criminals.

'So soon?' The elf, surprised, half-whispered. 'I thought it would take longer to build the scaffold . . .'

One of the guards, a tall, strapping fellow, bald as a knee, his mug covered with bristles like a boar, pointed at the witcher.

'That one,' he said briefly.

Two others grabbed Geralt, hauled him up and pressed him against the wall. The thieves squeezed into their corner; the long-nosed grandad buried himself in the straw. Chireadan wanted to jump up, but he fell to the dirt floor, retreating from the short sword pointed at his chest.

The bald guard stood in front of the witcher, pulled his sleeves up and rubbed his fist.

'Councillor Laurelnose,' he said, 'told me to ask if you're enjoying our little dungeon. Perhaps there's something you need? Perhaps the chill is getting to you? Eh?'

Geralt did not answer. Nor could he kick the bald man, as the guards who restrained him were standing on his feet in their heavy boots.

The bald man took a short swing and punched the witcher in the stomach. It didn't help to tense his muscles in defence. Geralt, catching his breath with an effort, looked at the buckle of his own belt for a while, then the guards hauled him up again.

'Is there nothing you need?' the guard continued, stinking of onions and rotting teeth. 'The councillor will be pleased that you have no complaints.'

Another blow, in the same place. The witcher choked and would have puked, but he had nothing to throw up.

The bald guard turned sideways. He was changing hands.

Wham! Geralt looked at the buckle of his belt again. Although it seemed strange, there was no hole above it through which the wall could be seen.

'Well?' The guard backed away a little, no doubt planning to take a wider swing. 'Don't you have any wishes? Mr Laurelnose asked whether you have any. But why aren't you saying anything? Tongue-tied? I'll get it straight for you!'

Wham!

Geralт didn't faint this time either. And he had to faint because he cared for his internal organs. In order to faint, he had to force the guard to—

The guard spat, bared his teeth and rubbed his fist again.

'Well? No wishes at all?'

'Just one . . .' moaned the witcher, raising his head with difficulty. 'That you burst, you son-of-a-whore.'

The bald guard ground his teeth, stepped back and took a swing - this time, according to Geralt's plan, aiming for his head. But the blow never came. The guard suddenly gobbled like a turkey, grew red, grabbed his stomach with both hands, howled, roared with pain . . .

And burst.

VII

'And what am I to do with you?'

A blindingly bright ribbon of lightning cut the darkened sky outside the window, followed by a sharp, drawn-out crash of thunder. The downpour was getting harder as the storm cloud passed over Rinde.

Geralт and Chireadan, seated on a bench under a huge tapestry depicting the Prophet Lebiodus pasturing his sheep, remained

silent, modestly hanging their heads. Mayor Neville was pacing the chamber, snorting and panting with anger.

'You bloody, shitty sorcerers!' he yelled suddenly, standing still. 'Are you persecuting my town, or what? Aren't there any other towns in the world?'

The elf and witcher remained silent.

'To do something like—' the mayor choked. 'To turn the warder . . . Like a tomato! To pulp!

To red pulp! It's inhuman!'

'Inhuman and godless,' repeated the priest, also present. 'So inhuman that even a fool could guess who's behind it. Yes, mayor. We both know Chireadan and the man here, who calls himself a witcher, wouldn't have enough Force to do this. It is all the work of Yennefer, that witch cursed by the gods!' There was a clap of thunder outside, as if confirming the priest's words. 'It's her and no one else,' continued Krepp. 'There's no question about it. Who, if not Yennefer, would want revenge upon Laurelnose?'

'Hehehe,' chuckled the mayor suddenly. 'That's the thing I'm least angry about. Laurelnose has been scheming against me; he's been after my office. And now the people aren't going to respect him. When they remember how he got it in the arse—'

'That's all it needs, Mr Neville, you to applaud the crime,' Krepp frowned. 'Let me remind you that had I not thrown an exorcism at the witcher, he would have raised his hand to strike me and the temple's majesty—'

'And that's because you spoke vilely about her in your sermons, Krepp. Even Berrant complained about you. But what's true is true. Do you hear that, you scoundrels?' The mayor turned to Geralt and Chireadan again. 'Nothing justifies what you've done! I don't intend to tolerate such things here! That's enough, now get on with it, tell me everything, tell me what you have for your defence, because if you don't, I swear by all the relics that I'll lead you such a dance as you won't forget to your dying day! Tell me everything, right now, as you would in a confessional!'

Chireadan sighed deeply and looked meaningfully and pleadingly at the witcher.

Geralt also sighed, then cleared his throat. And he recounted everything. Well, almost everything.

'So that's it,' said the priest after a moment's silence. 'A fine kettle of fish. A genie released from captivity. And an enchantress who has her sights on the genie. Not a bad arrangement.

This could end badly, very badly.'

'What's a genie?' asked Neville. 'And what does this Yennefer want?'

'Enchanters,' explained Krepp, 'draw their power from the forces of nature, or to put it more accurately, from the so-called Four Elements or Principles, commonly called the natural forces. Air, Water, Fire and Earth. Each of these elements has its own Dimension which is called a Plane in the jargon used by enchanters. There's a Water Plane, Fire Plane and so on.

These Dimensions, which are beyond our reach, are inhabited by what are called genies—'

'That's what they're called in legends,' interrupted the witcher. 'Because as far as I know—'

'Don't interrupt,' Krepp cut him short. 'The fact that you don't know much was evident in your tale, witcher. So be quiet and listen to what those wiser than you have to say. Going back to the genies, there are four sorts, just as there are four Planes. Djinns are air creatures; marides are associated with the principle of water; afreet are Fire genies and d'ao, the genies of Earth—'

'You've run away with yourself, Krepp,' Neville butted in. 'This isn't a temple school, don't lecture us. Briefly, what does Yennefer want with this genie?'

'A genie like this, mayor, is a living reservoir of magical energy. A sorcerer who has a genie at their beck and call can direct that energy in the form of spells. They don't have to draw the Force from Nature, the genie does it for them. The power of such an enchanter is enormous, close to omnipotence—'

'Somehow I've never heard of a wizard who can do everything,' contradicted Neville. 'On the contrary, the power of most of them is clearly exaggerated. They can't do this, they can't—'

'The enchanter Stammelford,' interrupted the priest, once more taking on the tone and poise of an academic lecturer, 'once moved a mountain because it obstructed the view from his tower. Nobody has managed to do the like, before or since.'

Because Stammelford, so they say, had the services of a d'ao, an Earth genie. There are records of deeds accomplished by other magicians on a similar scale. Enormous waves and catastrophic rains are certainly the work of marides. Fiery columns, fires and explosions the work of afreets—'

'Whirlwinds, hurricanes, flights above the earth,' muttered Geralt, 'Geoffrey Monck.'

'Exactly. I see you do know something after all.' Krepp glanced at him more kindly. 'Word has it old Monck had a way of forcing a djinn to serve him. There were rumours that he had more than one. He was said to keep them in bottles and make use of them when need arose. Three wishes from each genie, then it's free and escapes into its own dimension.'

'The one at the river didn't fulfil anything,' said Geralt emphatically. 'He immediately threw himself at Dandilion's throat.'

'Genies,' Krepp turned up his nose, 'are spiteful and deceitful beings. They don't like being packed into bottles and ordered to move mountains. They do everything they possibly can to make it impossible for you to express your wishes and then they fulfil them in a way which is hard to control and foresee, sometimes literally, so you have to be careful what you say. To subjugate a genie you need a will of iron, nerves of steel, a strong Force and considerable abilities. From what you say, it looks like your abilities, witcher, were too modest.'

'Too modest to subjugate the cad,' agreed Geralt. 'But I did chase him away; he bolted so fast the air howled. And that's also something. Yennefer, it's true, ridiculed my exorcism—'

'What was the exorcism? Repeat it.'

Geralt repeated it, word for word.

'What?!' The priest first turned pale, then red and finally blue. 'How dare you! Are you making fun of me?'

'Forgive me,' stuttered Geralt. 'To be honest, I don't know . . . what the words mean.'

'So don't repeat what you don't know! I've no idea where you could have heard such filth!'

'Enough of that.' The mayor waved it all aside. 'We're wasting time. Right. We now know what the sorceress wants the genie for. But you said, Krepp, that it's bad. What's bad? Let her catch him and go to hell, what do I care? I think—'

No one ever found out what Neville was thinking, even if it wasn't a boast. A luminous rectangle appeared on the wall next to the tapestry of Prophet Lebiodus, something flashed and Dandilion landed in the middle of the town hall.

'Innocent!' yelled the poet in a clear, melodious tenor, sitting on the floor and looking around, his eyes vague. 'Innocent! The witcher is innocent! I wish you to believe it!'

'Dandilion!' Geralt shouted, holding Krepp back, who was clearly getting ready to perform an exorcism or a curse. 'Where have you . . . here . . . Dandilion!'

'Geralt!' The bard jumped up.

'Dandilion!'

'Who's this?' Neville growled. 'Dammit, if you don't put an end to your spells, there's no guarantee what I'll do. I've said that spells are forbidden in Rinde! First you have to put in a written application, then pay a tax and stamp duty . . . Eh? Isn't it that singer, the witch's hostage?'

'Dandilion,' repeated Geralt, holding the poet by the shoulders. 'How did you get here?'

'I don't know,' admitted the bard with a foolish, worried expression. 'To be honest, I'm rather unaware of what happened to me. I don't remember much and may the plague take me if I know what of that is real and what's a nightmare. But I do remember quite a pretty, black-haired female with fiery eyes—'

'What are you telling me about black-haired women for?' Neville interrupted angrily. 'Get to the point, squire, to the point. You yelled that the witcher is innocent. How am I to understand that? That Laurelnose thrashed his own arse with his hands? Because if the witcher's innocent, it couldn't have been otherwise. Unless it was a mass hallucination.'

'I don't know anything about any arses or hallucinations,' said Dandilion proudly. 'Or anything about laurel noses. I repeat, that the last thing I remember was an elegant woman dressed in tastefully co-ordinated black and white. She threw me into a shiny hole, a magic portal for sure. But first she gave me a clear and precise errand. As soon as I'd arrived I was immediately to say, I quote: "My wish is for you to believe the witcher is not guilty for what occurred. That, and no other, is my wish." Word for word. Indeed, I tried to ask what all this was, what it was all about, and why. The black-haired woman didn't let me get a word in edgeways. She scolded me most inelegantly, grasped me by the neck and threw me into the portal. That's all. And now . . .'

Dandilion pulled himself up, brushed his doublet, adjusted his collar and fancy - if dirty - ruffles. '. . perhaps, gentlemen, you'd like to tell me the name of the best tavern in town and where it can be found.'

'There are no bad taverns in my town,' said Neville slowly. 'But before you see them for yourself, you'll inspect the best dungeon in this town very thoroughly. You and your companions. Let me remind you that you're still not free, you scoundrels! Look at them! One tells incredible stories while the other leaps out of the wall and shouts about innocence, I wish, he yells, you to believe me. He has the audacity to wish—'

'My gods!' the priest suddenly grasped his bald crown. 'Now I understand! The wish! The last wish!'

'What's happened to you, Krepp?' the mayor frowned. 'Are you ill?'

'The last wish!' repeated the priest. 'She made the bard express the last, the third wish. And Yennefer set a magical trap and, no doubt, captured the genie before he managed to escape into his own dimension! Mr Neville, we must—'

It thundered outside. So strongly that the walls shook.

'Dammit,' muttered the mayor, going up to the window. 'That was close. As long as it doesn't hit a house. All I need now is a fire— Oh gods! Just look! Just look at this! Krepp! What is it?'

All of them, to a man, rushed to the window.

'Mother of mine!' yelled Dandilion, grabbing his throat. 'It's him! It's that son-of-a-bitch who strangled me!'

'The djinn!' shouted Krepp. 'The Air genie!'

'Above Errdil's tavern!' shouted Chireadan, 'above his roof!'

'She's caught him!' The priest leant out so far he almost fell. 'Can you see the magical light?'

The sorceress has caught the genie!'

Geralt watched in silence.

Once, years ago, when a little snot-faced brat following his studies in Kaer Morhen, the Witchers' Settlement, he and a friend, Eskel, had captured a huge forest bumble-bee and tied it to a jug with a thread. They were in fits of laughter watching the antics of the tied bumble-bee, until Vesemir, their tutor, caught them at it and tanned their hides with a leather strap.

The djinn, circling above the roof of Errdil's tavern, behaved exactly like that bumble-bee. He flew up and fell, he sprang up and dived, he buzzed furiously in a circle. Because the djinn, exactly like the bumble-bee in Kaer Morhen, was tied down. Twisted threads of blindingly bright light of various colours were tightly wrapped around him and ended at the roof. But the djinn

had more options than the bumble-bee, which couldn't knock down surrounding roofs, rip thatches to shreds, destroy chimneys, and shatter towers and garrets. The djinn could. And did.

'It's destroying the town,' wailed Neville. 'That monster's destroying my town!'

'Hehehe,' laughed the priest. 'She's found her match, it seems! It's an exceptionally strong djinn! I really don't know who's caught whom, the witch him or he the witch! Ha, it'll end with the djinn grinding her to dust. Very good! Justice will be done!'

'I shit on justice!' yelled the mayor, not caring if there were any voters under the window.

'Look what's happening there, Krepp! Panic, ruin! You didn't tell me that, you bald idiot! You played the wise guy, gabbled on, but not a word about what's most important! Why didn't you tell me that that demon . . . Witcher! Do something! Do you hear, innocent sorcerer? Do something about that demon! I forgive you all your offences, but—'

'There's nothing can be done here, Mr Neville,' snorted Krepp. 'You didn't listen to what I was saying, that's all. You never listen to me. This, I repeat, is an exceptionally strong djinn. If it wasn't for that, the sorceress would have hold of him already. Her spell is soon going to weaken, and then the djinn is going to crush her and escape. And we'll have some peace.'

'And in the meantime, the town will go to ruins?'

'We've got to wait,' repeated the priest, 'but not idly. Give out the orders, mayor. Tell the people to evacuate the surrounding houses and get ready to extinguish fires. What's happening there now is nothing compared to the hell that's going to break loose when the genie has finished with the witch.'

Geralt raised his head, caught Chireadan's eye and looked away.

'Mr Krepp,' he suddenly decided, 'I need your help. It's about the portal through which Dandilion appeared here. The portal still links the town hall to—'

'There's not even a trace of the portal anymore,' the priest said coldly, pointing to the wall.

'Can't you see?'

'A portal leaves a trace, even when invisible. A spell can stabilise such a trace. I'll follow it.'

'You must be mad. Even if a passage like that doesn't tear you to pieces, what do you expect to gain by it? Do you want to find yourself in the middle of a cyclone?'

'I asked if you can cast a spell which could stabilise the trace.'

'Spell?' the priest proudly raised his head. 'I'm not a godless sorcerer! I don't cast spells! My power comes from faith and prayer!'

'Can you or can't you?'

'I can.'

'Then get on with it, because time's pressing on.'

'Geralt,' said Dandilion, 'you've gone stark raving mad! Keep away from that bloody strangled'

'Silence, please,' said Krepp, 'and gravity. I'm praying.'

'To hell with your prayers!' Neville hollered. 'I'm off to gather the people. We've got to do something and not stand here gabbling! Gods, what a day! What a bloody day!'

The witcher felt Chireadan touch his shoulder. He turned. The elf looked him in the eyes, then lowered his own.

'You're going there because you have to, aren't you?'

Geralt hesitated. He thought he smelled the scent of lilac and gooseberries.

'I think so,' he said reluctantly. 'I do have to. I'm sorry, Chireadan—'

'Don't apologise. I know what you feel.'

'I doubt it. Because I don't know myself.'

The elf smiled. The smile had little to do with joy. 'That's just it, Geralt. Precisely it.'

Krepp pulled himself upright and took a deep breath. 'Ready,' he said, pointing with pride at the barely visible outline on the wall. 'But the portal is unsteady and won't stay there for long.

And there's no way to be sure it won't break. Before you step through, sir, examine your conscience. I can give you a blessing, but in order to forgive you your sins—'

'—there's no time,' Geralt finished the sentence for him. 'I know, Mr Krepp. There's never enough time for it. Leave the chamber, all of you. If the portal explodes it'll burst your eardrums.'

'I'll stay,' said Krepp, when the door had closed behind Dan-dilion and the elf. He waved his hands in the air, creating a pulsating aura around himself. 'I'll spread some protection, just in case. And if the portal does burst . . . I'll try and pull you out, witcher. What are eardrums to me? They grow back.'

Geralt looked at him more kindly.

The priest smiled. 'You're a brave man,' he said. 'You want to save her, don't you? But bravery isn't going to be of much use to you. Djinns are vengeful beings. The sorceress is lost. And if you go there, you'll be lost, too. Examine your conscience.'

'I have.' Geralt stood in front of the faintly glowing portal. 'Mr Krepp, sir?'

Yes.'

'That exorcism which made you so angry . . . What do the words mean?'

'Indeed, what a moment for quips and jokes—'

'Please, Mr Krepp, sir.'

'Oh, well,' said the priest, hiding behind the mayor's heavy oak table. 'It's your last wish, so I'll tell you. It means . . . Hmm . . . Hmm . . . essentially . . . get out of here and go fuck yourself!'

Geralt entered the nothingness, where cold stifled the laughter which was shaking him.

VIII

The portal, roaring and whirling like a hurricane, spat him out with a force that bruised his lungs. The witcher collapsed on the floor, panting and catching his breath with difficulty.

The floor shook. At first he thought he was trembling after his journey through the splitting hell of the portal, but he rapidly realised his mistake. The whole house was vibrating, trembling and creaking.

He looked around. He was not in the small room where he had last seen Yennefer and Dandelion but in the large communal hall of Errdil's renovated tavern.

He saw her. She was kneeling between tables, bent over the magical sphere. The sphere was aflame with a strong, milky light, so bright, enough to shine red through her fingers. The light from the sphere illuminated a scene, flickering and swaying, but clear. Geralt saw the small room with a star and pentagram traced on the floor, blazing with white heat. He saw many-coloured, creaking, fiery lines shooting from the pentagram and disappearing up over the roof towards the furious roar of the captured djinn.

Yennefer saw him, jumped up and raised her hand.

'No!' he shouted, 'don't do this! I want to help you!'

'Help?' She snorted. 'You?'

'Me.'

'In spite of what I did to you?'

'In spite of it.'

'Interesting. But not important. I don't need your help. Get out of here.'

'No.'

'Get out of here!' she yelled, grimacing ominously. 'It's getting dangerous! The whole thing's getting out of control, do you understand? I can't master him. I don't get it, but the scoundrel isn't weakening at all! I caught him once he'd fulfilled the troubadour's third wish and I should have him in the sphere by now. But he's not getting any weaker! Dammit, it looks as if he's getting stronger! But I'm still going to get the better of him, I'll break—'

'You won't break him, Yennefer. He'll kill you.'

'It's not so easy to kill me—'

She broke off. The whole roof of the tavern suddenly flared up. The vision projected by the sphere dissolved in the brightness. A huge fiery rectangle appeared on the ceiling. The sorceress cursed as she lifted her hands, and sparks gushed from her fingers.

'Run, Geralt!'

'What's happening, Yennefer?'

'He's located me ...' She groaned, flushing red with effort. 'He wants to get at me. He's creating his own portal to get in. He can't break loose but he'll get in by the portal. I can't— I can't stop him!'

'Yennefer—'

'Don't distract me! I've got to concentrate . . . Geralt, you've got to get out of here. I'll open my portal, a way for you to escape. Be careful, it'll be a random portal, I haven't got time or strength for any other ... I don't know where you'll end up . . . but you'll be safe . . . Get ready—'

A huge portal on the ceiling suddenly flared blindingly, expanded and grew deformed. Out of the nothingness appeared the shapeless mouth already known to the witcher, snapping its drooping lips and howling loudly enough to pierce his ears. Yennefer jumped, waved her arms and shouted an incantation. A net of light shot from her palm and fell on the djinn. It gave a roar and

sprouted long paws which shot towards the sorceress's throat like attacking cobras. Yennefer didn't back away.

Geralt threw himself towards her, pushed her aside and sheltered her. The djinn, tangled in the magical light, sprang from the portal like a cork from a bottle and threw himself at them, opening his jaws. The witcher clenched his teeth and hit him with the Sign without any apparent effect. But the genie didn't attack. He hung in the air just below the ceiling, swelled to an impressive size, goggled at Geralt with his pale eyes and roared. There was something in that roar, something like a command, an order. He didn't understand what it was.

'This way!' shouted Yennefer, indicating the portal which she had conjured up on the wall by the stairs. In comparison to the one created by the genie, the sorceress's portal looked feeble, extremely inferior. 'This way, Geralt! Run for it!'

'Only with you!'

Yennefer, sweeping the air with her hands, was shouting incantations and the many-coloured fetters showered sparks and creaked. The djinn whirled like the bumble-bee, pulling the bonds tight, then loosening them. Slowly but surely he was drawing closer to the sorceress. Yennefer did not back away.

The witcher leapt to her, deftly tripped her up, grabbed her by the waist with one hand and dug the other into her hair at the nape. Yennefer cursed nastily and thumped him in the neck with her elbow. He didn't let go of her. The penetrating smell of ozone, created by the curses, didn't kill the smell of lilac and gooseberries. Geralt stilled the sorceress's kicking legs and jumped, raising her straight up to the opalescently flickering nothingness of the lesser portal.

The portal which led into the unknown.

They flew out in a tight embrace, fell onto a marble floor and slid across it, knocking over an enormous candlestick and a table from which crystal goblets, platters of fruit and a huge bowl of crushed ice, seaweed and oysters showered down with a crash. Screams and squeals came from around the room.

They were lying in the very centre of a ballroom, bright with candelabra. Richly-clad gentlemen and ladies, sparkling with

jewels, had stopped dancing and were watching them in stunned silence. The musicians in the gallery finished their piece in a cacophony which grated on the ears.

'You moron!' Yennefer yelled, trying to scratch out his eyes. You bloody idiot! You stopped me! I nearly had him!'

'You had shit-all!' he shouted back, furious. 'I saved your life, you stupid witch!'

She hissed like a furious cat, her palms showered sparks.

Geralt, turning his face away, caught her by both wrists and they rolled among the oysters, seaweed and crushed ice.

'Do you have an invitation?' A portly man with the golden chain of a chamberlain on his chest was looking at them with a haughty expression.

'Screw yourself!' screamed Yennefer, still trying to scratch Geralt's eyes out.

'It's a scandal,' the chamberlain said emphatically. 'Verily, you're exaggerating with this teleportation. I'm going to complain to the Council of Wizards. I'll demand—'

No one ever heard what the chamberlain would demand. Yennefer wrenched herself free, slapped the witcher in the ear with her open palm, kicked him forcefully in the shin and jumped into the fading portal in the wall.

Geralt threw himself after her, catching her hair and belt with a practised move.

Yennefer, also having gained practise, landed him a blow with her elbow.

The sudden move split her dress at the armpit, revealing a shapely breast. An oyster flew from her torn dress.

They both fell into the nothingness of the portal. Geralt could still hear the chamberlain's voice.

'Music! Play on! Nothing has happened. Please take no notice of that pitiful incident!'

The witcher was convinced that with every successive journey through the portal, the risk of misfortune was multiplying and he wasn't mistaken. They hit the target, Errdil's tavern, but they materialised just under the ceiling. They fell, shattering the stair balustrade and, with a deafening crash, landed on the table. The table had the right not to withstand the blow, and it didn't.

Yennefer found herself under the table. He was sure she had lost consciousness. He was mistaken.

She punched him in the eye and fired a volley of insults straight at him which would do credit to a dwarven undertaker - and they were renowned for their foul language. The curses were accompanied by furious, chaotic blows dealt blindly, randomly.

Geralt grabbed her by the hands and, to avoid being hit by her forehead, thrust his face into the sorceress's cleavage which smelled of lilac, gooseberries and oysters.

'Let me go!' she screamed, kicking like a pony. 'You idiot! Let go! The fetters are going to break any moment now. I've got to strengthen them or the djinn will escape!'

He didn't answer, although he wanted to. He grasped her even more tightly, trying to pin her down to the floor. Yennefer swore horribly, struggled, and with all her strength, kicked him in the crotch with her knee. Before he could catch his breath she broke free and screamed an incantation. He felt a terrible force drag him from the ground and hurl him across the hall until, with a violence that near-stunned him, he slammed against a carved two-doored chest of drawers and shattered it completely.

IX

'What's happening there?!' Dandilion, clinging to the wall, strained his neck, trying to see through the downpour. 'Tell me what's happening there, dammit!'

'They're fighting!' yelled an urchin, springing away from the tavern window as if he'd burnt himself. His tattered friends also escaped, slapping the mud with their bare heels. 'The sorcerer and the witch are fighting!'

'Fighting?' Neville was surprised. 'They're fighting, and that shitty demon is ruining my town!'

Look, he's knocked another

chimney down. And damaged the brick-kiln! Hey, you get over there, quick! Gods, we're lucky it's raining or there'd be a fire like nobody's business!'

'This won't last much longer,' Krepp said gloomily. 'The magical light is weakening, the bonds will break at any moment. Mr Neville! Order the people to move back! All hell's going to break loose over there at any minute! There'll be only splinters left of that house! Mr Errdil, what are you laughing at? It's your house. What makes you so amused?'

'I had that wreck insured for a massive sum!'

'Does the policy cover magical and supernatural events?'

'Of course.'

'That's wise, Mr Elf. Very wise. Congratulations. Hey, you people, get to some shelter! Don't get any closer, if you value your lives!'

A deafening crash came from within Errdil's house, and lightning flashed. The small crowd retreated, hiding behind the pillars.

'Why did Geralt go there?' groaned Dandilion. 'What the hell for? Why did he insist on saving that witch? Why, dammit? Chireadan, do you understand?'

The elf smiled sadly. 'Yes, I do, Dandilion,' he said. 'I do.'

X

Geralт leapt away from another blazing orange shaft which shot from the sorceress's fingers.

She was clearly tired, the shafts were weak and slow, and he avoided them with no great difficulty.

'Yennefer!' he shouted. 'Calm down! Will you listen!? You won't be able—'

He didn't finish. Thin red bolts of lightning spurted from the sorceress's hands, reaching him in many places and wrapping him up thoroughly. His clothes hissed and started to smoulder.

'I won't be able to?' she said through her teeth, standing over him. 'You'll soon see what I'm capable of. It will suffice for you to lie there for a while and not get in my way.'

'Get this off me!' he roared, struggling in the blazing spider's web. 'I'm burning, dammit!'

'Lie there and don't move,' she advised, panting heavily. 'It only burns when you move ... I can't spare you any more time, witcher. We had a romp, but enough's enough. I've got to take care of the djinn; he's ready to run away—'

'Run away?' Geralт screamed. 'It's you who should run away! That djinn . . . Yennefer, listen to me carefully. I've got to tell you the truth.'

The djinn gave a tug at the fetters, traced a circle, tightened the lines holding it, and swept the little tower off Beau Berrant's house.

'What a roar he's got!' Dandilion frowned, instinctively clasping his throat. 'What a terrible roar! It looks as if he's bloody furious!'

'That's because he is,' said Krepp. Chireadan glanced at him.

'What?'

'He's furious,' repeated Krepp. 'And I'm not surprised. I'd be furious too if I had to fulfil, to the letter, the first wish accidentally expressed by the witcher—'

'How's that?' shouted Dandilion. 'Geralt? Wish?'

'He's the one who held the seal which imprisoned the djinn. The djinn's fulfilling his wishes.

That's why the witch can't master it. But the witcher mustn't tell her, even if he's caught on to it by now. He shouldn't tell her.'

'Dammit,' muttered Chireadan. 'I'm beginning to understand. The warder in the dungeon burst ...'

'That was the witcher's second wish. He's still got one left. The last one. But, gods help us, he shouldn't reveal that to Yennefer!'

She stood motionless, leaning over him, paying no attention to the djinn struggling at its bonds above the tavern roof. The building shook, lime and splinters poured from the ceiling, furniture crept along the floor, shuddering spasmodically.

'So that's how it is,' she hissed. 'Congratulations. You deceived me. Not Dandilion, but you.

That's why the djinn's fighting so hard! But I haven't lost yet, Geralt. You underestimate me, and you underestimate my power. I've still got the djinn and you in my hand. You've still got one last wish, haven't you? So make it. You'll free the djinn and then I'll bottle it.'

'You haven't got enough strength left, Yennefer.' 'You underestimate my strength. The wish, Geralt!' 'No, Yennefer. I can't . . . The djinn might fulfil it, but it won't spare you. It'll kill you when it's free. It'll take its revenge on you . . . You won't manage to catch it and you won't manage to defend yourself against it. You're weakened, you can barely stand. You'll die, Yennefer.'

'That's my risk!' she shouted, enraged. 'What's it to you what happens to me? Think rather what the djinn can give you! You've still got one wish! You can ask what you like! Make use of it! Use it, witcher! You can have anything! Anything!'

XIII

'Are they both going to die?' wailed Dandilion. 'How come? Krepp, why? After all, the witcher— Why, by all perfidious and unexpected plagues, isn't he escaping? Why? What's keeping him? Why doesn't he leave that bloody witch to her fate and run away? It's senseless!'

'Absolutely senseless,' repeated Chireadan bitterly. 'Absolutely.'

'It's suicide. And plain idiocy!'

'It's his job, after all,' interrupted Neville. 'The witcher's saving my town. May the gods be my witness - if he defeats the witch and chases the demon away, I'll reward him handsomely . . .'

Dandilion snatched the hat decorated with a heron's feather from his head, spat into it, threw it in the mud and trampled on it, spitting out words in various languages as he did.

'But he's . . . 'he groaned suddenly, 'still got one wish in reserve! He could save both her and himself! Mr Krepp!'

'It's not that simple,' the priest pondered. 'But if . . . If he expressed the right wish ... If he somehow tied his fate to the fate . . . No, I don't think it would occur to him. And it's probably better that it doesn't.'

XIV

'The wish, Geralt! Hurry up! What do you desire? Immortality? Riches? Fame? Power?

Might? Privileges? Hurry, we haven't any time!' He was silent. 'Humanity,' she said suddenly, smiling nastily. 'I've guessed, haven't I? That's what you want, that's what you dream of! Of

release, of the freedom to be who you want, not who you have to be. The djinn will fulfil that wish, Geralt. Just say it.'

He stayed silent.

She stood over him in the nickering radiance of the wizard's sphere, in the glow of magic, amidst the flashes of rays restraining the djinn, streaming hair and eyes blazing violet, erect, slender, dark, terrible . . .

And beautiful.

All of a sudden she leant over and looked him in the eyes. He caught the scent of lilac and gooseberries.

'You're not saying anything,' she hissed. 'So what is it you desire, witcher? What is your most hidden dream? Is it that you don't know or you can't decide? Look for it within yourself, look deeply and carefully because, I swear by the Force, you won't get another chance like this!'

But he suddenly knew the truth. He knew it. He knew what she used to be. What she remembered, what she couldn't forget, what she lived with. Who she really was before she had become a sorceress.

Her cold, penetrating, angry and wise eyes were those of a hunchback.

He was horrified. No, not of the truth. He was horrified that she would read his thoughts, find out what he had guessed. That she would never forgive him for it. He deadened that thought within himself, killed it, threw it from his memory forever, without trace, feeling, as he did so, enormous relief. Feeling that—

The ceiling cracked open. The djinn, entangled in the net of the now fading rays, tumbled right on top of them, roaring, and in that roar were triumph and murder lust. Yennefer leapt to meet him. Light beamed from her hands. Very feeble light.

The djinn opened his mouth and stretched his paws towards her.

The witcher suddenly understood what it was he wanted.

And he made his wish.

XV

The house exploded. Bricks, beams and planks flew up in a cloud of smoke and sparks. The djinn spurted from the dust-storm, as huge as a barn. Roaring and choking with triumphant laughter the Air genie, free now, not tied to anyone's will, traced three circles above the town, tore the spire from the town hall, soared into the sky and vanished.

'It's escaped! It's escaped!' called Krepp. 'The witcher's had his way! The genie has flown away! It won't be a threat to anyone anymore!'

'Ah,' said Errdil with genuine rapture, 'what a wonderful ruin!' 'Dammit, dammit!' hollered Dandilion, huddled behind the

wall. 'It's shattered the entire house! Nobody could survive that! Nobody, I tell you!'

'The witcher, Geralt of Rivia, has sacrificed himself for the town,' mayor Neville said ceremoniously. 'We won't forget him. We'll revere him. We'll think of a statue . . .'

Dandilion shook a piece of wicker matting bound with clay from his shoulder, brushed his jerkin free of lumps of rain-dampened plaster, looked at the mayor and, in a few well-chosen words, expressed his opinion about sacrifice, reverence, memory and all the statues in the world.

XVI

Geralt looked around. Water was slowly dripping from the hole in the ceiling. There were heaps of rubble and stacks of timber all around. By a strange coincidence, the place where they lay was completely clear. Not one plank or one brick had fallen on them. It was as if they were being protected by an invisible shield.

Yennefer, slightly flushed, knelt by him, resting her hands on her knees.

'Witcher.' She cleared her throat. 'Are you dead?'

'No.' Geralt wiped the dust from his face and hissed.

Slowly, Yennefer touched his wrist and delicately ran her fingers along his palm. 'I burnt you—'

'It's nothing. A few blisters—'

'I'm sorry. You know, the djinn's escaped. For good.'

'Do you regret it?'

'Not much.'

'Good. Help me up, please.'

'Wait,' she whispered. 'That wish of yours ... I heard what you wished for. I was astounded, simply astounded. I'd have expected anything but to . . . What made you do it, Geralt? Why . .

. Why me?'

'Don't you know?'

She leant over him, touched him. He felt her hair, smelling of lilac and gooseberries, brush his face and he suddenly knew that he'd never forget that scent, that soft touch, knew that he'd never be able to compare it to any other scent or touch. Yennefer kissed him and he understood that he'd never desire any lips other than hers, so soft and moist, sweet with lipstick. He knew that, from that moment, only she would exist, her neck, shoulders and breasts freed from her black dress, her delicate, cool skin, which couldn't be compared to any other he had ever touched. He gazed into her violet eyes, the most beautiful eyes in the world, eyes which he feared would become . . .

Everything. He knew.

'Your wish,' she whispered, her lips very near his ear. 'I don't know whether such a wish can ever be fulfilled. I don't know whether there's such a Force in Nature that could fulfil such a wish. But if there is, then you've condemned yourself. Condemned yourself to me.'

He interrupted her with a kiss, an embrace, a touch, caresses and then with everything, his whole being, his every thought, his only thought, everything, everything, everything. They broke the silence with sighs and the rustle of clothing strewn on the floor. They broke the silence very gently, lazily, and they were considerate and very thorough. They were caring and tender and, although neither quite knew what caring and tenderness were, they succeeded because they very much wanted to. And they were in no hurry whatsoever. The whole world had ceased to exist for a brief moment, but to them, it seemed like a whole eternity.

And then the world started to exist again; but it existed very differently.

'Geralt?'

'Mmm?'

'What now?'

'I don't know.'

'Nor do I. Because, you see, I ... I don't know whether it was worth condemning yourself to me. I don't know how— Wait, what are you doing . . . ? I wanted to tell you—'

'Yennefer . . . Yen.'

'Yen,' she repeated, giving in to him completely. 'Nobody's ever called me that. Say it again.'

'Yen.' 'Geralt.'

XVII

It had stopped raining. A rainbow appeared over Rinde and cut the sky with a broken, coloured arc. It looked as if it grew straight from the tavern's ruined roof.

'By all the gods,' muttered Dandilion, 'what silence . . . They're dead, I tell you. Either they've killed each other or my djinn's finished them off.'

'We should go and see,' said Vratimir, wiping his brow with his crumpled hat. 'They might be wounded. Should I call a doctor?'

'An undertaker, more like it,' said Krepp. 'I know that witch, and that witcher's got the devil in his eyes too. There's no two ways about it, we've got to start digging two pits in the cemetery.'

I'd advise sticking an aspen stake into that Yennefer before burying her.'

'What silence,' repeated Dandilion. 'Beams were flying all over the place a moment ago and now it's as quiet as a grave.'

They approached the tavern ruins very cautiously and slowly.

'Let the carpenter get the coffins ready,' said Krepp. 'Tell the carpenter—'

'Quiet,' interrupted Errdil. 'I heard something. What was it, Chireadan?'

The elf brushed the hair off his pointed ear and tilted his head.

'I'm not sure . . . Let's get closer.'

'Yennefer's alive,' said Dandilion suddenly, straining his musical ear. 'I heard her moan.'

There, she moaned again!

'Uhuh,' confirmed Errdil. 'I heard it, too. She moaned. She must really be suffering. Chireadan, where are you going? Careful!' The elf backed away from the shattered window through which he had carefully peeped.

'Let's get out of here,' he said quietly. 'Let's not disturb them.'

'They're both alive? Chireadan? What are they doing?'

'Let's get out of here,' repeated the elf. 'Let's leave them alone for a bit. Let them stay there, Yennefer, Geralt and his last wish.'

Let's wait in a tavern; they'll join us before long. Both of them.' 'What are they doing?'

Dandilion was curious. 'Tell me,

dammit!'

The elf smiled. Very, very sadly. 'I don't like grand words,' he said. 'And it's impossible to give it a name without using grand words.'

THE VOICE OF REASON 7

Falwick, in full armour, without a helmet and with the crimson coat of the Order flung over his shoulder, stood in the glade. Next to him, with his arms across his chest, was a stocky, bearded dwarf in an overcoat lined with fox-fur over, a chain-mail shirt of iron rings. Tailles, wearing no armour but a short, quilted doublet, paced slowly, brandishing his unsheathed sword from time to time.

The witcher looked about, restraining his horse. All around glinted the cuirasses and flat helmets of soldiers armed with lances.

'Bloody hell,' muttered Geralt. 'I might have expected this.'

Dandilion turned his horse and quietly cursed at the sight of the lances cutting off their retreat.

'What's this about, Geralt?'

'Nothing. Keep your mouth shut and don't butt in. I'll try to lie my way out of it somehow.'

'What's it about, I ask you? More trouble?'

'Shut up.'

'It was a stupid idea after all, to ride into town,' groaned the troubadour, glancing towards the nearby towers of the temple visible above the forest. 'We should have stayed at Nenneke's and not stirred beyond the walls—'

'Shut up. It'll all become clear, you'll see.'

'Doesn't look like it.'

Dandilion was right. It didn't. Tailles, brandishing his naked sword, continued pacing without looking in their direction. The soldiers, leaning on their spears, were watching gloomily and indifferently, with the expression of professionals for whom killing does not provoke much interest.

They dismounted. Falwick and the dwarf slowly approached.

'You've insulted Tailles, a man of good birth, witcher,' said the count without preamble or the customary courtesies. 'And Tailles, as you no doubt remember, threw down the gauntlet. It was not fit to press you within the grounds of the temple, so we waited until you emerged from behind the priestess's skirt. Tailles is waiting. You must fight.'

'Must?'

'Must.'

'But do you not think, Falwick,' Geralt smiled disapprovingly, 'that Tailles, a man of good birth, does me too much honour? I never attained the honour of being knighted, and it's best not to mention the circumstances of my birth. I fear I'm not sufficiently worthy of . . . How does one say it, Dandilion?'

'Unfit to give satisfaction and joust in the lists,' recited the poet, pouting. 'The code of chivalry proclaims—'

'The Chapter of the Order is governed by its own code,' interrupted Falwick. 'If it were you who challenged a Knight of the Order, he could either refuse or grant you satisfaction, according to his will. But this is the reverse: it is the knight who challenges you and by this he raises you to his own level - but, of course, only for the time it takes to avenge the insult. You can't refuse. The refusal of accepting the dignity would render you unworthy.'

'How logical,' said Dandilion with an ape-like expression. 'I see you've studied the philosophers, sir Knight.'

'Don't butt in.' Geralt raised his head and looked into Falwick's eyes. 'Go on, sir. I'd like to know where this is leading. What would happen if I turned out to be . . . unworthy?'

'What would happen?' Falwick gave a malicious smile. 'I'd order you hung from a branch, you rat-catcher.'

'Hold on,' the dwarf said hoarsely. 'Take it easy, sir. And no invective, all right?'

'Don't you teach me manners, Cranmer,' hissed the knight. 'And remember, the prince has given you orders which you're to execute to the letter.'

'It's you who shouldn't be teaching me, Count.' The dwarf rested his hand on the double-headed axe thrust into his belt. 'I know how to carry out orders, and I can do without your advice.'

Allow me, Geralt sir. I'm Dennis Cranmer, captain of Prince Hereward's guards.'

The witcher bowed stiffly, looking into the dwarf's eyes, light grey and steel-like beneath the bushy flaxen eyebrows.

'Stand your ground with Tailles, sir,' Dennis Cranmer continued calmly. 'It'll be better that way. It's not a fight to the death, only until one of you is rendered helpless. So fight in the field and let him render you helpless.'

'I beg your pardon?'

'Sir Tailles is the prince's favourite,' said Falwick, smiling spitefully. 'If you touch him with your sabre during the fight, you mutant, you will be punished. Captain Cranmer will arrest you and take you to face his Highness. To be punished. Those are his orders.'

The dwarf didn't even glance at the knight; his cold, steel eyes did not leave Geralt.

The witcher smiled faintly but quite nastily. 'If I understand correctly,' he said, 'I'm to fight the duel because, if I refuse, I'll be hanged. If I fight I'm to allow my opponent to injure me because if I wound him I'll be put to the rack. What charming alternatives. Maybe I should save you the bother? I'll thump my head against the pine tree and render myself helpless. Will that grant you satisfaction?'

'Don't sneer,' hissed Falwick. 'Don't make your situation any worse. You've insulted the Order, you vagabond, and you have to be punished for it, do you understand? And young Tailles needs the fame of defeating a witcher, so the Chapter wants to give it to him.

Otherwise you'd be hanging already. You allow yourself to be defeated and you save your miserable life. We don't care about your corpse, we want Tailles to nick your skin. And your mutant skin heals quickly. So, go ahead. Decide. You've got no choice.'

'That's what you think, is it, sir?' Geralt smiled even more nastily and looked around at the soldiers appraisingly. 'But I think I do.'

Yes, that's true,' admitted Dennis Cranmer. You do. But then there'll be bloodshed, great bloodshed. Like at Blaviken. Is that

what you want? Do you want to burden your conscience with blood and death? Because the alternative you're thinking of, Geralt, is blood and death.'

'Your argument is charming, Captain, fascinating even,' mocked Dandilion. 'You're trying to bait a man ambushed in the forest with humanitarianism, calling on his nobler feelings. You're asking him, as I understand, to deign not to spill the blood of the brigands who attacked him.

He's to take pity on the thugs because the thugs are poor, have got wives, children and, who knows, maybe even mothers. But don't you think, Captain Cranmer, that your worrying is premature? Because I look at your lancers and see that their knees are shaking at the very thought of fighting with Geralt of Rivia, the witcher who dealt with a striga alone, with his bare hands. There won't be any bloodshed here; nobody will be harmed here — aside from those who might break their legs running away.'

'I,' said the dwarf calmly and pugnaciously, 'have nothing to reproach my knees with. I've never run away from anyone and I'm not about to change my ways. I'm not married, don't know anything about any children and I'd prefer not to bring my mother, a woman with whom I'm not very well acquainted, into this. But I will carry out the orders I've been given. To the letter, as always. Without calling on any feelings, I ask Geralt of Rivia to make a decision. I will accept whatever he decides and will behave accordingly.'

They looked each other in the eyes, the dwarf and the witcher.

'Very well,' Geralt said finally. 'Let's deal with it. It's a pity to waste the day.'

'You agree then.' Falwick raised his head and his eyes glistened. 'You'll fight a duel with the high-born Tailles of Dorndal?'

'Yes.'

'Good. Prepare yourself.'

'I'm ready.' Geralt pulled on his gauntlets. 'Let's not waste time. There'll be hell if Nenneke finds out about this. So let's sort it out quickly. Dandilion, keep calm. It's got nothing to do with you. Am I right, Cranmer, sir?'

'Absolutely,' the dwarf stated firmly and looked at Falwick. 'Absolutely, sir. Whatever happens, it only concerns you.'

The witcher took the sword from his back.

'No,' said Falwick, drawing his. 'You're not going to fight with that razor of yours. Take my sword.'

Geralt shrugged. He took the count's blade and swiped it to try it out.

'Heavy,' he said coldly. 'We could just as easily use spades.'

'Tailles has the same. Equal chances.'

'You're very funny, Falwick.'

The soldiers surrounded the glade, forming a loose circle. Tailles and the witcher stood facing each other.

'Tailles? What do you say to an apology?'

The young knight screwed up his lips, folded his left arm behind his back and froze in a fencing position.

'No?' Geralt smiled. 'You don't want to listen to the voice of reason? Pity.'

Tailles squatted down, leapt and attacked without warning. The witcher didn't even make an effort to parry and avoided the flat point with a swift half-turn. The knight swiped broadly.

The blade cut through the air once more. Geralt dodged beneath it in an agile pirouette, jumped softly aside and, with a short, light feint, threw Tailles off his rhythm. Tailles cursed, cut broadly from the right, lost his balance for a moment and tried to regain it while, instinctively, clumsily, holding his sword high to defend himself. The witcher struck with the speed and force of a lightning bolt, extending his arm to its full length and slashing straight ahead. The heavy sword thundered against Tailles' blade, deflecting it so hard it hit the knight in the face. Tailles howled, fell to his knees and touched the grass with his forehead.

Falwick ran up to him.

Geralt dug his sword into the ground and turned around.

'Hey, guards!' yelled Falwick, getting up. 'Take him!'

'Stand still! To your places!' growled Dennis Cranmer, touching his axe. The soldiers froze.

'No, Count,' the dwarf said slowly. 'I always execute orders to the letter. The witcher did not touch Tailles. The kid hit himself with his own iron. His hard luck.'

'His face is destroyed! He's disfigured for life!'

'Skin heals.' Dennis Cranmer fixed his steel eyes on the witcher and bared his teeth. 'And the scar? For a knight, a scar is a commendable reminder, a reason for fame and glory, which the Chapter so desired for him. A knight without a scar is a prick, not a knight. Ask him, Count, and you'll see that he's pleased.'

Tailles was writhing on the ground, spitting blood, whimpering and wailing; he didn't look pleased in the least.

'Cranmer!' roared Falwick, tearing his sword from the ground, 'you'll be sorry for this, I swear!'

The dwarf turned around, slowly pulled the axe from his belt, coughed and spat into his palm.

'Oh, Count, sir,' he rasped. 'Don't perjure yourself. I can't stand perjurers and Prince Hereward has given me the right to punish them. I'll turn a deaf ear to your stupid words. But don't repeat them, if you please.'

'Witcher,' Falwick, puffing with rage, turned to Geralt. 'Get yourself out of Ellander.'

Immediately. Without a moment's delay!'

'I rarely agree with him,' muttered Dennis, approaching the witcher and returning his sword,

'but in this case he's right. I'd ride out pretty quick.'

'We'll do as you advise.' Geralt slung the belt across his back. 'But before that I have words for the count. Falwick!'

The Knight of the White Rose blinked nervously and wiped his palms on his coat.

'Let's just go back to your Chapter's code for a minute,' continued the witcher, trying not to smile. 'One thing really interests me. If I, let us say, felt disgusted and insulted by your attitude in this whole affair, if I challenged you to the sword right now, what would you do?

Would you consider me sufficiently worthy to cross blades with? Or would you refuse, even though you knew that by doing so I would take you to be unworthy even to be spat on, punched in the face and kicked in the arse under

the eyes of the foot soldiers? Count Falwick, be so gracious as to satisfy my curiosity.'

Falwick grew pale, took a step back, looked around. The soldiers avoided his eyes. Dennis Cranmer grimaced, stuck his tongue out and sent a jet of saliva a fair distance.

'Even though you're not saying anything,' continued Geralt, 'I can hear the voice of reason in your silence, Falwick, sir. You've satisfied my curiosity, now I'll satisfy yours. If the Order bothers Mother Nenneke or the priestesses in any way, or unduly intrudes upon Captain Cranmer, then may you know, Count, that I'll find you and, not caring about any code, will bleed you like a pig.'

The knight grew even paler.

'Don't forget my promise, Count. Come on, Dandilion. It's time for us to leave. Take care, Dennis.'

'Good luck, Geralt.' The dwarf gave a broad smile. 'Take care. I'm very pleased to have met you, and hope we'll meet again.'

'The feeling's mutual, Dennis.'

They rode away with ostensible slowness, not looking back. They began to canter only once they were hidden by the forest.

'Geralt,' the poet said suddenly, 'surely we won't head straight south? We'll have to make a detour to avoid Ellander and Here-ward's lands, won't we? Or do you intend to continue with this show?'

'No, Dandilion, I don't. We'll go through the forests and then join the Traders' Trail.

Remember, not a word in Nenneke's presence about this quarrel. Not a word.'

'We are riding out without any delay, I hope?'

'Immediately.'

Geralt leant over, checked the repaired hoop of his stirrup and fitted the stirrup leather, still stiff, smelling of new skins and hard to buckle. He adjusted the saddle-girth, the travel bags, the horse-blanket rolled up behind the saddle and the silver sword strapped to it. Nenneke was motionless next to him, her arms folded.

Dandilion approached, leading his bay gelding.

'Thank you for the hospitality, Venerable One,' he said seriously. 'And don't be angry with me anymore. I know that, deep down, you like me.'

'Indeed,' agreed Nenneke without smiling. 'I do, you dolt, although I don't know why myself.

Take care.'

'So long, Nenneke.'

'So long, Geralt. Look after yourself.'

The witcher's smile was surly.

'I prefer to look after others. It turns out better in the long run.'

From the temple, from between columns entwined with ivy, Iola emerged in the company of two younger pupils. She was carrying the witcher's small chest. She avoided his eyes awkwardly and

her troubled smile combined with the blush on her freckled, chubby face made a charming picture. The pupils accompanying her didn't hide their meaningful glances and barely stopped themselves from giggling.

'For Great Melitele's sake,' sighed Nenneke, 'an entire parting procession. Take the chest, Geralt. I've replenished your elixirs. You've got everything that was in short supply. And that medicine, you know the one. Take it regularly for two weeks. Don't forget. It's important.'

'I won't. Thanks, lola.'

The girl lowered her head and handed him the chest. She so wanted to say something. She had no idea what ought to be said, what words ought to be used. She didn't know what she'd say, even if she could. She didn't know. And yet she so much wanted to.

Their hands touched.

Blood. Blood. Blood. Bones like broken white sticks. Tendons like whitish cords exploding from beneath cracking skin cut by enormous paws bristling with thorns, and sharp teeth. The hideous sound of torn flesh, and shouting — shameless and horrifying in its shamelessness.

The shamelessness of the end. Of death. Blood and shouting. Shouting. Blood. Shouting—
lola!'

Nenneke, with extraordinary speed considering her girth, rushed to the girl lying on the ground, shaken by convulsions, and held her down by her shoulders and hair. One of the pupils stood as if paralysed, the other, more clear-headed, knelt on lola's legs. lola arched her back, opened her mouth in a soundless, mute cry.

'lola!' Nenneke shouted. 'lola! Speak! Speak, child! Speak!'

The girl stiffened even more, clenched her jaws, and a thin trickle of blood ran down her cheek. Nenneke, growing red with the effort, shouted something which the witcher didn't understand,

but his medallion tugged at his neck so hard that he was forced to bend under the pressure of its invisible weight.

Iola stilled.

Dandilion, pale as a sheet, sighed deeply. Nenneke raised herself to her knees and stood with an effort.

'Take her away,' she said to the pupils. There were more of them now; they'd gathered, grave and silent.

'Take her,' repeated the priestess, 'carefully. And don't leave her alone. I'll be there in a minute.'

She turned to Geralt. The witcher was standing motionless, fiddling with the reins in his sweaty hands.

'Geralt . . . Iola—'

'Don't say anything, Nenneke.'

'I saw it, too ... for a moment. Geralt, don't go.'

'I've got to.'

'Did you see . . . did you see that?'

'Yes. And not for the first time.'

And?"

'There's no point in looking over your shoulder.'

'Don't go, please.'

'I've got to. See to Iola. So long, Nenneke.' The priestess slowly shook her head, sniffed and, in an abrupt move, wiped a tear away with her wrist.

'Farewell,' she whispered, not looking him in the eye.