

ANDRZEJ SAPKOWSKI



THE COMPLETE

WITCHER

SAGA

Praise for Andrzej Sapkowski's Witcher series

'Like Miéville and Gaiman, Sapkowski takes the old and makes it new'

Foundation

'Like a complicated magic spell, a Sapkowski novel is a hodge podge of fantasy, intellectual discourse and dry humour. Recommended'

Time Magazine

'An extraordinary tale which highlights Sapkowski's masterful character creation ... one of the best fantasy sagas of all time'

Fantasy Book Review

'The Witcher series is something quite special'

SF Book

'An incredibly nuanced, well-articulated novel, imbued with a self-assured command of description and brimming with Eastern European folklore'

Starburst

'Character interplay is complex, unsentimental and anchored in brutal shared history'

SFX

'There's lots of imagination on show, the writing has a strong voice, and the Witcher is an entertaining character'

Mark Lawrence

'Refreshing and a lot of fun to read'

Grimdark Magazine

'Captivating, often nerve-wracking, and truthfully ... rip-roaring fun'

Fantasy Hive

The Complete Witcher

The Last Wish
Sword of Destiny
Blood of Elves
Time of Contempt
Baptism of Fire
The Tower of the Swallow
The Lady of the Lake
Season of Storms

Andrzej Sapkowski

The Last Wish, Blood of Elves translated by Danusia Stok

Sword of Destiny, Time of Contempt, Baptism of Fire, The Tower of the Swallow, The Lady of the Lake, Season of Storms translated by David French



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By Andrzej Sapkowski

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The Last Wish

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THE VOICE OF REASON 1

She came to him towards morning.

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

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

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

Rocked, he sank into a sea of chamomile as it grew agitated and seethed.

THE WITCHER

I

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

He stopped in front of the Old Narakort Inn, stood there for a moment, listened to the hubbub of voices. As usual, at this hour, it was full of people.

The stranger did not enter the Old Narakort. He pulled his horse further down the street to another tavern, a smaller one, called The Fox. Not enjoying the best of reputations, it was almost empty.

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

'What will it be?'

'Beer,' said the stranger. His voice was unpleasant.

The innkeeper wiped his hands on his canvas apron and filled a chipped earthenware tankard.

The stranger was not old but his hair was almost entirely white. Beneath his coat he wore a worn leather jerkin laced up at the neck and shoulders.

As he took off his coat those around him noticed that he carried a sword – not something unusual in itself, nearly every man in Wyzim carried a weapon – but no one carried a sword strapped to his back as if it were a bow or a quiver.

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

drew from the tankard.

‘I’m looking for a room for the night.’

‘There’s none,’ grunted the innkeeper, looking at the guest’s boots, dusty and dirty. ‘Ask at the Old Narakort.’

‘I would rather stay here.’

‘There is none.’ The innkeeper finally recognised the stranger’s accent. He was Rivian.

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

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

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

‘All Rivians are thieves,’ the pock-marked man went on, his breath smelling of beer, garlic and anger. ‘Do you hear me, you bastard?’

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

‘Pay and leave!’ yelled the pocked man.

Only now did the Rivian look at him.

‘I’ll finish my beer.’

‘We’ll give you a hand,’ the pockmarked man hissed. He knocked the tankard from the stranger’s hand and simultaneously grabbing him by the shoulder, dug his fingers into the leather strap which ran diagonally across the outsider’s chest. One of the men behind him raised a fist to strike. The outsider curled up on the spot, throwing the pockmarked man off balance. The sword hissed in its sheath and glistened briefly in the dim light. The place seethed. There was a scream, and one of the few remaining customers

tumbled towards the exit. A chair fell with a crash and earthenware smacked hollowly against the floor. The innkeeper, his lips trembling, looked at the horribly slashed face of the pocked man, who, clinging with his fingers to the edge of the counter, was slowly sinking from sight. The other two were lying on the floor, one motionless, the other writhing and convulsing in a dark, spreading puddle. A woman's hysterical scream vibrated in the air, piercing the ears as the innkeeper shuddered, caught his breath, and vomited.

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

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

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

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

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

'No need,' said the stranger, lowering his sword. 'I'll come by myself.'

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

The Rivian straightened. He quickly pinned his blade under his left arm and with his right hand raised towards the guards, swiftly drew a complicated sign in the air. The clout-nails which studded his tunic from his wrists to elbows flashed.

The guards drew back, shielding their faces with their arms. One of the customers sprang up while another darted to the door. The woman screamed again, wild and ear-splitting.

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

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

II

Velerad, castellan of Wyzim, scratched his chin. He was neither superstitious nor faint-hearted but he did not relish the thought of being alone with the white-haired man. At last he made up his mind.

‘Leave,’ he ordered the guards. ‘And you, sit down. No, not there. Further away, if you please.’

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

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

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

‘You nail this crossways, in taverns,’ he said quietly. ‘Is what’s written here true?’

‘Ah.’ Velerad grunted, looking at the runes etched into the leather. ‘So that’s it. And I didn’t guess at once. Yes, it’s true. It’s signed by Foltest, King of Temeria, Pontar and Mahakam, which makes it true. A proclamation is a

proclamation, witcher, but law is law – and I take care of law and order in Wyzim. I will not allow people to be murdered! Do you understand?’

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

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

‘My name is Geralt.’

‘Geralt, then. Of Rivia I gather, from your accent?’

‘Of Rivia.’

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

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

‘Three thousand,’ Velerad scowled. ‘And the princess as a wife, or so rumour says, although gracious Foltest has not proclaimed that.’

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

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

‘Certainly.’

Velerad clapped his hands.

‘Beer!’ he called. ‘And sit closer, Geralt. What do I care?’

The beer, when it arrived, was cold and frothy.

‘Foul times,’ Velerad muttered, drinking deep from his tankard. ‘All sorts of filth has sprung up. Mahakam, in the mountains, is teeming with bogeymen. In the past it was just wolves howling in the woods, but now it’s kobolds and spriggans wherever you spit, werewolves or some other vermin.’

Fairies and rusalkas snatch children from villages by the hundreds. We have diseases never heard of before; it makes my hair stand on end. And now, to top it all, this!' He pushed the wad of leather back across the table. 'It's not surprising, Geralt, that you witchers' services are in demand.'

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

Velerad leant back in his chair, locked his hands over his stomach.

'The details? Yes, I know them. Not first-hand perhaps, but from a good source.'

'That's what I want.'

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

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

'But then Foltest stepped in again. Wisdom dictated that the royal bastard should have been burned or buried in the wilderness. Instead, on the orders

of our gracious king, she was laid to rest in a sarcophagus in the vaults beneath the palace.'

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

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

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

Geralt was silent.

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

Geralt smiled, but didn't comment.

'But, to the point.' The castellan peered into his tankard and poured more beer for himself and the Rivian. 'Some of the sorcerers' advice didn't seem so stupid. One suggested burning the striga together with the palace and the sarcophagus. Another advised chopping her head off. The rest were keen on driving aspen stakes into her body during the day, when the she-devil was asleep in her coffin, worn out by her night's delights. Unfortunately one, a jester with a pointed hat and a bald pate, a hunch-backed hermit, argued it was magic: the spell could be undone and the striga would turn into Foltest's little daughter, as pretty as a picture. Someone simply had to stay in the

crypt throughout the night, and that would be that. After which – can you imagine such a fool? – he went to the palace for the night. Little of him was left in the morning, only, I believe, his hat and stick. But Foltest clung to his idea like a burr to a dog's tail. He forbade any attempt to kill the striga and brought in charlatans from all corners of Wyzim to reverse the spell and turn her into a princess. What colourful company! Twisted women, cripples, dirty and louse-ridden. It was pitiful.

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

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

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

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

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

‘There is still no shortage of fraudsters then.’

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

‘I’ll go.’

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

‘I don’t know. And witchers, castellan? Have they tried?’

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

‘And?’

‘The fanged princess spread his entrails over a considerable distance.’

Geralt nodded. ‘That was all of them?’

‘There was one other.’

Velerad remained silent for a while, and the witcher didn’t urge him on.

‘Yes,’ the castellan said finally. ‘There was one more. At first, when Foltest threatened him with the noose if he killed or harmed the striga, he laughed and started packing his belongings. But then—’ Velerad leaned across the table, lowered his voice to almost a whisper. ‘—then he undertook the task.

You see, Geralt, there are some wise men in Wyzim, in high positions, who've had enough of this whole affair. Rumour has it these men persuaded the witcher, in secret, not to fuss around with spells but to batter the striga to death and tell the king the spell had failed, that his dear daughter had been killed in self-defence – an accident at work. The king, of course, would be furious and refuse to pay an oren in reward. But that would be an end to it. The witty witcher replied we could chase strigas ourselves for nothing. Well, what could we do? We collected money, bargained . . . but nothing came of it.'

Geralt raised his eyebrows.

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

Geralt's expression changed a little, in what was probably supposed to be a smile.

'Those wise men,' he said, 'they still have the money, no doubt? Witchers don't take payment in advance.'

'No doubt they still do,' said Velerad.

'Does the rumour say how much they offer?'

Velerad bared his teeth in a smile. 'Some say eight hundred—'

Geralt shook his head.

'Others,' murmured the castellan, 'talk of a thousand.'

'Not much when you bear in mind that rumour likes to exaggerate. And the king is offering three thousand.'

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

'How's it obvious?'

Velerad thumped the table. 'Geralt, do not spoil my impression of witchers! This has been going on for more than seven years! The striga is finishing off up to fifty people a year, fewer now people are avoiding the

palace. Oh no, my friend, I believe in magic. I've seen a great deal and I believe, to a certain extent, in the abilities of wizards and witchers. But all this nonsense about lifting the spell was made up by a hunch-backed, snotty old man who'd lost his mind on his hermit's diet. It's nonsense which no one but Foltest believes. Adda gave birth to a striga because she slept with her brother. That is the truth, and no spell will help. Now the striga devours people – as strigas do – she has to be killed, and that is that. Listen: two years ago peasants from some God-forsaken hole near Mahakam were plagued by a dragon devouring their sheep. They set out together, battered the dragon to death with stanchions, and did not even think it worth boasting about. But we in Wyzim are waiting for a miracle and bolting our doors every full moon, or tying our criminals to a stake in front of the palace, praying the beast stuffs herself and returns to her sarcophagus.'

'Not a bad method,' the witcher smiled. 'Are there fewer criminals?'

'Not a bit of it.'

'Which way to the palace, the new one?'

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

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

'It was to be a thousand.'

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

'Geralt?' Velerad scratched his head. 'One thousand two hundred?'

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

‘Then, witcher,’ Velerad nodded wistfully, ‘our agreement stands. But a word of advice – say nothing to the king about the danger of an accident at work.’

III

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

‘A witcher from Rivia,’ said the king after the moment’s silence which fell after Velerad’s introduction.

‘Yes, your Majesty.’ Geralt lowered his head.

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

‘Yes, your Majesty.’

‘I would love to hear about it.’

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

‘A convenient code, witcher, very convenient. But tell me, have you had anything to do with spriggans?’

‘Yes.’

‘Vampires, leshys?’

‘Those too.’

Foltest hesitated. ‘Strigas?’

Geralt raised his head, looking the king in the eyes. ‘Yes.’

Foltest turned his eyes away. ‘Velerad!’

‘Yes, Gracious Majesty?’

‘Have you given him the details?’

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

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

The king rose, whistled to his dogs and made his way to the door, scattering the straw covering the chamber floor. At the door he paused.

‘If you succeed, witcher, the reward is yours. Maybe I will add something if you do well. Of course, the nonsense spread by common folk about marrying the princess carries not a word of truth. I’m sure you don’t believe I would give my daughter’s hand to a stranger?’

‘No, your Majesty. I don’t.’

‘Good. That shows you have some wisdom.’

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

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

‘Only a few questions.’

‘Ask.’

‘The castellan said that, after the striga’s appearance, the king called up many Knowing Ones.’

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

‘Was there anyone well-known among the Knowing Ones? Anyone famous?’

‘There were such, then and later. I don’t remember the names. Do you, Lord Ostrit?’

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

‘Were they in agreement that the spell can be lifted?’

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

‘Simple indeed,’ snorted Velerad.

‘I would like to hear a description of the . . . the princess.’

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

‘Hold on, Velerad,’ frowned Ostrit, glancing at the door. Segelin smiled faintly.

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

‘It is,’ said the witcher. ‘Do the attacks on people only occur during the full moon?’

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

‘Has there been even one attack during the day?’

‘No.’

‘Does she always devour her victims?’

Velerad spat vehemently on the straw.

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

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

‘Has anyone she’s attacked survived?’ The witcher asked, apparently paying no special attention to the magnate’s outburst.

Segelin and Ostrit looked at each other.

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

‘And then,’ interrupted Velerad, ‘there was another, the miller she attacked near the town. You remember . . . ?’

IV

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

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

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

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

'Yes, your Majesty.'

'When will you set about your task?'

'It is four days until the full moon. After that.'

'You prefer to have a look at her yourself beforehand?'

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

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

Geralt rubbed his brow.

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

'So simple?'

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

'Yes,' Foltest bristled. 'I keep hearing that from some people. Kill the monster because it's an incurable case. Master witcher, I am sure they have

already spoken to you. Am I right? Hack the man-eater to death without any more fuss, at the beginning, and tell the king nothing else could be done. I won't pay, but they will. Very convenient. And cheap. Because the king will order the witcher beheaded or hanged and the gold will remain in their pockets.'

'The king unconditionally orders the witcher to be beheaded?' Geralt grimaced.

Foltest looked the Rivian in the eyes for a long while.

'The king does not know,' he finally said. 'But the witcher should bear such an eventuality in mind.'

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

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

'I'm listening.'

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

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

'With red eyes? Crocodile's teeth?'

'A normal fourteen-year-old. Except that . . .'

'Well?'

'Physically.'

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

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

‘That’s obvious. Witcher?’

‘I’m listening.’

‘Can it happen to her again? Later on?’

Geralt was silent.

‘Aha,’ said the king. ‘It can. And what then?’

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

Foltest grew gloomy.

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

‘Right now? Is it not too soon, master witcher? And if—’

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

‘Even so? Despite my permission to defend yourself? Which, it seems, wasn’t that important to you.’

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

‘What is an inclusion?’

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

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

They were both quiet for a while.

‘Geralt.’ For the first time Foltest called the witcher by his name.

‘Yes.’

‘How much truth is there in the rumour that the child is as she is because Adda was my sister?’

‘Not much. A spell has to be cast, they don’t cast themselves. But I think your congress with your sister was the reason the spell was cast, and this is the result.’

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

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

‘And kill them?’

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

The king got up, took a few paces across the chamber, and stopped in front of the witcher’s sword hanging on the wall.

‘With this?’ he asked, not looking at Geralt.

‘No. That is for men.’

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

‘Out of the question.’

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

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

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

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

Geralt did not reply.

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

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

V

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

In one of the empty, plundered chambers, the witcher returned to the dusty table at which he was preparing, calmly and meticulously. He knew he had plenty of time. The striga would not leave her crypt before midnight.

On the table in front of him he had a small chest with metal fittings. He opened it. Inside, packed tightly in compartments lined with dried grass, stood small vials of dark glass. The witcher removed three.

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

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

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

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

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

Ostrit quickly regained control.

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

The witcher did not reply.

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

The Rivian still said nothing.

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

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

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

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

‘And what if I already know?’

‘Go on.’

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

‘Careful to whom you speak, you vagabond!’ Ostrit yelled furiously, placing his hand on the hilt of his sword. ‘I have had enough of this. I am not accustomed to hold such discussions! Look at you – ethics, codes of practice, morality?! Who are you to talk? A brigand who’s barely arrived before he starts murdering men? Who bends double to Foltest and behind his back

bargains with Velerad like a hired thug? And you dare to turn your nose up at me, you serf? Play at being a Knowing One? A Magician? You scheming witcher! Be gone before I run the flat of my sword across your gob!

The witcher did not stir. He stood calmly.

‘You’d better leave, Lord Ostrit,’ he said. ‘It’s growing dark.’

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

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

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

VI

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

‘Keep quiet,’ said the witcher. ‘Otherwise you’ll lure her out before her time.’

‘You damned murderer! Where are you? Untie me immediately, you louse! You’ll hang for this, you son-of-a-bitch!’

‘Quiet.’

Ostrit panted heavily.

‘You’re leaving me here to be devoured by her! Tied up?’ he asked, quieter now, whispering a vile invective.

‘No,’ said the witcher. ‘I’ll let you go. But not now.’

‘You scoundrel,’ hissed Ostrit. ‘To distract the striga?’

‘Yes.’

Ostrit didn’t say anything. He stopped wriggling and lay quietly.

‘Witcher?’

‘Yes.’

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

Geralt remained silent.

‘I loved Adda. The king’s sister. The king’s mistress. The king’s trollop. I loved her—Witcher, are you there?’

‘I am.’

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

‘I am.’

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

‘It doesn’t matter anymore.’

‘Witcher? Is it nearly midnight?’

‘It’s close.’

‘Let me go. Give me more time.’

‘No.’

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

The slab blocking the entrance to the crypt opened and fell to the floor with a thud. Geralt, prudently behind the staircase balustrade, saw the misshapen figure of the striga speeding swiftly and unerringly in the

direction of Ostrit's receding footsteps. Not the slightest sound issued from the striga.

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

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

The witcher waited. By his count, there were about three hours left until dawn. The cock's crow could only mislead him. Besides, there were probably no cocks in the neighbourhood.

He heard her. She was trudging slowly, shuffling along the floor. And then he saw her.

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

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

The striga roared horribly, filling the palace with a booming echo, fell to the ground, froze and started to howl hollowly and furiously.

The witcher smiled maliciously. His first attempt, as he had hoped, had gone well. Silver was fatal to the striga, as it was for most monsters brought into existence through magic. So there was a chance: the beast was like the others, and that boded well for lifting the spell, while the silver sword would, as a last resort, assure his life.

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

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

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

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

Geralt grew uneasy. He did not expect such a simple Sign to paralyse the striga entirely but neither did he expect the beast to overcome it so easily. He could not hold the Sign for long, it was too exhausting, and the striga had no more than ten steps to go. He lowered the Sign suddenly, and sprung aside.

The striga, taken by surprise, flew forward, lost her balance, fell, slid along the floor and tumbled down the stairs into the crypt's entrance, yawning in the floor.

Her infernal scream reverberated from below.

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

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

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

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

The striga curled up, retreated in a zigzag. Geralt was close again, the blade shimmering in his hand. His eyes lit up with an ominous glow, a hoarse roar tore through his clenched teeth. The striga backed away, pushed by the power of concentrated hatred, anger and violence which emanated from the attacking man and struck her in waves, penetrating her mind and body. Terrified and pained by feelings unknown to her she let out a thin,

shaking squeak, turned on the spot and ran off in a desperate, crazy escape down the dark tangle of the palace's corridors.

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

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

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

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

VII

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

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

Silence.

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

It was empty.

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

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

She swiped him across the neck with her talons, cutting him deeply. Blood splashed on to her face. She howled, striking him in the eyes with her other hand. He fell on her, grabbing her by the wrists, nailing her to the floor. She gnashed her teeth – which were now too short – in front of his face. He butted her in the face with his forehead and pinned her down harder. She had lost her former strength; she could only writhe beneath him, howling, spitting out blood – his blood – which was pouring over her mouth. His

blood was draining away quickly. There was no time. The witcher cursed and bit her hard on the neck, just below the ear. He dug his teeth in and clenched them until her inhuman howling became a thin, despairing scream and then a choking sob – the cry of a hurt fourteen-year-old girl.

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

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

He succeeded. And fainted.

In Wyzim, beyond the lake, a cock, ruffling his feathers in the cold damp, crowed hoarsely for the third time.

VIII

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

'Lie still, witcher,' said Velerad. 'Lie, do not move.'

'My ... sword ...'

'Yes, yes. Of course, what is most important is your witcher's silver sword. It's here, don't worry. Both the sword and your little trunk. And the three thousand orens. Yes, yes, don't utter a word. It is I who am an old fool and

you the wise witcher. Foltest has been repeating it over and over for the last two days.'

'Two—'

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

'The prin . . . cess?'

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

The witcher closed his eyes.

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

The witcher was asleep.

THE VOICE OF REASON 2

I

‘Geralt.’

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

‘It’s late,’ said Nenneke, opening the shutters. ‘You’ve slept in. Off with you, Iola.’

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

‘Wait ...’ he said hesitantly. She looked at him, quickly turned away.

She had changed. There was nothing of the water nymph in her any more, nothing of the luminous, chamomile-scented apparition she had been at dawn. Her eyes were blue, not black. And she had freckles – on her nose, her neckline, her shoulders. They weren’t unattractive, they suited her complexion and reddish hair. But he hadn’t seen them at dawn, when she had been his dream. With shame he realised he felt resentment towards her, resentment that she hadn’t remained a dream, and that he would never forgive himself for it.

‘Wait,’ he repeated. ‘Iola . . . I wanted—’

‘Don’t speak to her, Geralt,’ said Nenneke. ‘She won’t answer you anyway. Off with you, Iola.’

Wrapped in her mantle the girl pattered towards the door, her bare feet slapping the floor – troubled, flushed, awkward. No longer reminding him,

in any way, of—

Yennefer.

‘Nenneke,’ he said, reaching for his shirt. ‘I hope you’re not annoyed that— You won’t punish her, will you?’

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

‘You forbade me to talk to her.’

‘I didn’t forbid you. But I know it’s pointless. Iola doesn’t speak.’

‘What?’

‘She doesn’t speak. She’s taken a vow. It’s a sort of sacrifice through which . . . Oh, what’s the point of explaining, you wouldn’t understand anyway. You wouldn’t even try to understand, I know your views on religion. No, don’t get dressed yet. I want to check your neck.’

She sat on the edge of the bed and skilfully unwound the linen bandages wrapped thickly around the witcher’s neck. He grimaced in pain.

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

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

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

He didn't answer, and smiled faintly.

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

'You're exaggerating.'

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

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

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

'Where will I find you later? In the sanctuary?'

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

'Fine.'

II

Geralt strolled – for the fourth time – along the poplar alley which led from the gate to the dwellings by the sanctuary and main temple block, which

merged into the sheer rock. After brief consideration he decided against returning to shelter, and turned towards the gardens and outbuildings. Umpteen priestesses, clad in grey working garments, were toiling away, weeding the beds and feeding the birds in the henhouses. The majority of them were young or very young, virtually children. Some greeted him with a nod or a smile in passing. He answered their greetings but didn't recognise any of them. Although he often visited the temple – once or even twice a year – he never saw more than three or four faces he knew. The girls came and went – becoming oracles in other temples, midwives and healers specialising in women's and children's diseases, wandering druids, teachers or governesses. But there was never a shortage of priestesses, arriving from all over, even the remotest regions. Melitele's temple in Ellander was well-known and enjoyed well-earned fame.

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

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

help, and Melitele was perfect. And since women gave birth, give birth and will continue to give birth, the goddess Melitele, the poet proved, did not have to fear for her popularity.

‘Geralt.’

‘Nenneke. I was looking for you.’

‘Me?’ The priestess looked at him mockingly. ‘Not Iola?’

‘Iola, too,’ he admitted. ‘Does that bother you?’

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

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

‘While I,’ Nenneke winced, ‘don’t think a trance will harm you in any way.’

‘I can’t be hypnotised, I have immunity. I’m afraid for Iola. It might be too great an effort for a medium.’

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

‘I know.’

‘If you know that then why your reservations about the trance? What are you afraid of? That I’ll make you bow your head to a statue and sing canticles? Geralt, we’ll simply sit together for a while – you, me and Iola – and see if the girl’s talents will let her see into the vortex of power surrounding you. Maybe we’ll discover something worth knowing. And maybe we won’t discover anything. Maybe the power and fate surrounding

you won't choose to reveal themselves to us, will remain hidden and incomprehensible. I don't know. But why shouldn't we try?'

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

'Geralt, you're sick.'

'Injured, you mean.'

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

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

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

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

'No, I don't. And do you know why?'

'No.'

Nenneke leant over and looked him in the eyes with a strange smile on her pale lips.

'Because it would be the first proof I've ever heard of that a lack of faith has any kind of power at all.'

A GRAIN OF TRUTH

I

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Geralt saw the first corpse immediately – the white of the sheepskin jacket and matt-blue of the dress stood out clearly against a yellowing clump of sedge. He didn't see the second corpse but its location was betrayed by three wolves sitting calmly on their haunches watching the witcher. His mare

snorted and the wolves, as if at a command, unhurriedly, trotted into the woods, every now and again turning their triangular heads to watch the newcomer. Geralt jumped off his horse.

The woman in the sheepskin and blue dress had no face or throat, and most of her left thigh had gone. The witcher, not leaning over, walked by her.

The man lay with his face to the ground. Geralt didn't turn the body over, seeing that the wolves and birds hadn't been idle. And there was no need to examine the corpse in detail – the shoulders and back of the woollen doublet were covered with thick black rivulets of dried blood. It was clear the man had died from a blow to the neck, and the wolves had only found the body afterwards.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Leaning over, the witcher pulled back the blanket which covered the horse’s side and uncovered another sword strapped to the saddle-bag – one with a shining, ornate guard and black corrugated hilt.

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

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

‘Although it’s not a werewolf, we won’t take any risks,’ the witcher continued, taking a bunch of dried monkshead from a saddlebag and hanging it by the bit. The mare snorted. Geralt unlaced his tunic a little and pulled out a medallion engraved with a wolf with bared jaws. The medallion,

hanging on a silver chain, bobbed up and down in rhythm to the horse's gait, sparkling in the sun's rays like mercury.

II

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

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

'Is it as bad as all that?' he murmured, looking around and not withdrawing the Sign. 'Easy, Roach, easy.'

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

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

He was being watched.

He turned around smoothly. Roach snorted; the muscles in her neck twitched, moved under her skin.

A girl was standing on the slope of the hill he had just climbed down, one arm resting on the trunk of an alder tree. Her trailing white dress contrasted with the glossy blackness of her dishevelled hair, falling to her shoulders. She seemed to be smiling, but she was too far away to be sure.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Then what?' interrupted Geralt.

The monster suddenly gasped and tilted his monstrous head. 'Look at him, isn't he brave?' He spoke calmly, baring his fangs and glowering at Geralt

with bloodshot eyes. 'Lower that iron, if you please. Perhaps you've not realised you're in my courtyard? Or maybe it's customary, wherever you come from, to threaten people with swords in their own courtyards?'

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

'Pox on it!' The monster got himself worked up. 'And he'll insult me on top of it all, this straggler. A guest, is he? Pushes his way into the yard, ruins someone else's flowers, plays the lord and thinks that he'll be brought bread and salt. Bah!'

The creature spat, gasped and shut his jaws. The lower fangs protruded, making him look like a boar.

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

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

The witcher nimbly slipped the weapon into its scabbard and, without lowering his arm, stroked the hilt which rose above his shoulder.

'I'd prefer you,' he said, 'not to make any sudden moves. This sword can always be drawn again, faster than you imagine.'

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

'I got lost,' lied the witcher.

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

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

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

'Should I be?'

The monster looked around, cleared his throat and yanked up his baggy trousers.

‘Pox on it, what’s the harm of a guest in the house? It’s not every day I meet someone who doesn’t run away or faint at the sight of me. All right then. If you’re a weary but honest wanderer I invite you in. But if you’re a brigand or a thief, then I warn you: this house does what I tell it to. Within these walls I rule!’

He lifted his hairy paw. All the shutters clattered against the wall once more and deep in the dolphin’s stone gullet something rumbled.

‘I invite you in,’ he repeated.

Geralt didn’t move, scrutinising him.

‘Do you live alone?’

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

Geralt bowed stiffly. ‘I accept your invitation,’ he said formally. ‘I won’t slight the right of hospitality.’

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

The interior was in need of extensive repair, although it was reasonably clean and tidy. The furniture had been made by skilled craftsmen, if a very long time ago. A pungent smell of dust hung in the dark rooms.

‘Light!’ growled the monster, and the torch in its iron bracket burst into flames and sooty smoke.

‘Not bad,’ remarked the witcher.

The monster cackled. ‘That’s it? I see you won’t be amazed by any old trick. I told you this house obeys my commands. This way, please. Careful, the stairs are steep. Light!’

On the stairs, the monster turned. ‘What’s that around your neck, dear guest?’

‘Have a look.’

The creature took the medallion in his paw, lifted it up to his eyes, tightening the chain around Geralt’s neck a little.

‘The animal has an unpleasant expression. What is it?’

‘My guild’s badge.’

‘Ah, you make muzzles, no doubt. This way, please. Light!’

The centre of the large room, completely devoid of windows, was taken up by a huge oak table, empty apart from an enormous brass candlestick, slowly turning green and covered with trickles of hardened wax. At the monster’s command the candles lit and flickered, brightening the interior a little.

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

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

‘I won’t deny it, dear host.’

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

‘Yes.’ The monster rubbed his hands. ‘This is better than servants, isn’t it? Help yourself, dear guest. Here is some fowl, here some boar ham, here terrine of . . . I don’t know what. Something. Here we have some hazel

grouse. Pox, no, it's partridge. I got the spells muddled up. Eat up, eat up. This is proper, real food, don't worry.'

'I'm not worried.' Geralt tore the fowl in two.

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

'Geralt. And your name, dear host?'

'Nivellen. But they call me Degen or Fanger around here. And they use me to frighten children.'

The monster poured the contents of an enormous chalice down his throat, after which he sank his fingers in the terrine, tearing half of it from the bowl in one go.

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

'Of course not. Your health, Geralt!'

'And yours, Nivellen.'

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

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

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

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

'Twelve years.'

'How did it happen?'

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

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

'An acceptable reason,' the monster said, and laughed loudly. 'But I don't accept it. It's got nothing to do with you and that's that. But just to satisfy your curiosity a little I'll show you what I used to look like. Look at those

portraits. The first from the chimney is my father. The second, pox only knows. And the third is me. Can you see it?’

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

‘Can you see it?’ repeated Nivellen, baring his fangs.

‘I can.’

‘Who are you?’

‘I don’t understand.’

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

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

‘Ah. Surely it won’t be tactless if I ask, in that case, what you are?’

‘A witcher.’

‘Ah,’ Nivellen repeated after a moment. ‘If I remember rightly, witchers earn their living in an interesting way – they kill monsters for money.’

‘You remember correctly.’

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

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

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

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

'No one. I'm here by accident.'

'You're not lying, by any chance?'

'I'm not in the habit of lying.'

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

Nivellen took the partridge from the dish, put it between his jaws and crunched it like a piece of toast, bones cracking as they were crushed between his teeth.

'Why don't you say anything?' he asked indistinctly, swallowing. 'How much of the rumours about you witchers is true?'

'Practically nothing.'

'And what's a lie?'

'That there are fewer and fewer monsters.'

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

'You aren't a monster, Nivellen,' the witcher said dryly.

'Pox, that's something new. So what am I? Cranberry pudding? A flock of wild geese flying south on a sad November morning? No? Maybe I'm the

virtue that a miller's buxom daughter lost in spring? Well, Geralt, tell me what I am. Can't you see I'm shaking with curiosity?'

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

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

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

'And what if I do?'

'In many cases a spell can be uncast.'

'You, as a witcher, can uncast spells in many cases?'

'I can. Do you want me to try?'

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

'That it has,' admitted Geralt.

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

'There's none left.'

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

'As no doubt you've noticed,' he began, pouring the wine, 'this is quite a remote area. It's a long way to the nearest human settlement. It's because, you see, my father, and my grandfather too, in his time, didn't make themselves particularly loved by our neighbours or the merchants using the highway. If anyone went astray here and my father spotted them from the tower, they lost – at best – their fortune. And a couple of the nearer

settlements were burnt because Father decided the levies were being paid tardily. Not many people liked my father. Except for me, naturally. I cried awfully when what was left of my father after a blow from a two-handed sword was brought home on a cart one day. Grandpa didn't take part in robbery any more because, ever since he was hit on the head with a morningstar, he had a terrible stutter. He dribbled and rarely made it to the privy on time. As their heir, I had to lead the gang.

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

'Which temple, Nivellen?'

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

'What?'

'That I was a monster in human skin, that I'd be a monster in a monster's skin, something about love, blood . . . I can't remember. She must have had the dagger, a little one, hidden in her hair. She killed herself and then—'

'We fled from there, Geralt, I'm telling you – we nearly wore our horses out. It was a bad temple.'

'Go on.'

'Then it was as the priestess had said. A few days later, I woke up and as the servants saw me, they screamed and took to their heels. I went to the mirror . . . You see, Geralt, I panicked, had some sort of an attack, I remember it almost through a haze. To put it briefly, corpses fell. Several. I used whatever came to hand – and I'd suddenly become very strong. And the

house helped as best it could: doors slammed, furniture flew in the air, fires broke out. Whoever could get out ran away in a panic: my aunt and cousin, the lads from the crew. What am I saying? Even the dogs howled and cowered. My cat, Glutton, ran away. Even my aunt's parrot kicked the bucket out of fear. I was alone, roaring, howling, going mad, smashing whatever came to hand, mainly mirrors.'

Nivellen paused, sighed and sniffed.

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

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

'The fat trespasser, when he got his voice back – he'd lost it when he saw me – squealed that he only wanted a few flowers for his daughter, that I should spare him, spare his life and his health. I was just ready to kick him out of the main gate when I remembered something. Stories Lenka, my nanny – the old bag – used to tell me. Pox on it, I thought, if pretty girls turn frogs into princes, or the other way round, then maybe . . . Maybe there's a grain of truth in these stories, a chance . . . I leapt four yards, roared so loud wild vine tumbled from the wall, and I yelled "Your daughter or your life!"

Nothing better came to mind. The merchant, for he was a merchant, began to weep, then confessed that his daughter was only eight. Are you laughing?’

‘No.’

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

Nivellen extended his legs under the table and stretched until the armchair creaked.

‘I came to an understanding with the merchant in no time,’ he continued. ‘He’d leave her with me for a year. I had to help him load the sack onto his mule; he wouldn’t have managed by himself.’

‘And the girl?’

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

‘I locked myself in the house, resigned, and didn’t react for several months to any of the guests who turned up with daughters. But after a year spent with company, I realised how hard it was to live without anyone to talk to.’

The monster made a noise which was supposed to be a sigh but came out more like a hiccough.

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

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

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

‘Carry on, Nivellen. This is interesting.’

‘You think so?’ said the monster, scratching himself between the ears with a rasping sound. ‘All right. The next one, Primula, was the daughter of an impoverished knight. The knight, when he got here, had a skinny horse, a rusty cuirass and incredible debts. He was as hideous as cow dung, I tell you, Geralt, and spread a similar smell. Primula, I’d wager my right hand, was conceived while he was at war, as she was quite pretty. I didn’t frighten her either, which isn’t surprising, really, as compared to her parent I might have appeared quite comely. She had, as it turned out, quite a temperament and I, having gained some self-confidence, seized the moment by the horns. After two weeks Primula and I already had a very close relationship. She liked to pull me by the ears and shout “Bite me to death, you animal!” and “Tear me apart, you beast!” and other equally idiotic things. I ran to the mirror in the

breaks, but just imagine, Geralt, I looked at myself with growing anxiety. Less and less did I long to return to my former shape. You see, Geralt, I used to be a weakling and now I'd become a strapping fellow. I'd keep getting ill, I'd cough, my nose would run, but now I don't catch anything. And my teeth? You wouldn't believe how rotten my teeth had been! And now? I can bite through the leg of a chair. Do you want me to bite a chair leg?'

'No, I don't.'

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

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

'Really? No changes, Nivellen?'

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

'You seem quite sure,' Geralt remarked, playing with an empty chalice, 'that you haven't offended anyone in your present shape. No father, no

daughter. No relative or daughter's betrothed—'

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

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

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

'And nobody else?'

'And nobody else.'

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

'Nivellen,' said the witcher suddenly, 'are you alone now?'

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

'You are. I'm sorry.'

'Pox on your apologies. Have you seen her?'

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

‘So you know about that too? Yes, she’s the reason.’

‘Do you mind if I ask whether—’

‘Yes, I do mind.’

Silence again.

‘Oh well, it’s up to you,’ the witcher finally said, getting up. ‘Thanks for your hospitality, dear host. Time I was on my way.’

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

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

The monster looked at him askance. ‘You think you *could* help me? You’d be able to lift this from me?’

‘I wasn’t only thinking about that sort of help.’

‘You didn’t answer my question. Although . . . you probably did. You wouldn’t be able to.’

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

‘And who does?’

‘So you are interested after all? You said things were fine as they are.’

‘As they are, yes. But not as they might be. I’m afraid that—’

‘What are you afraid of?’

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

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

‘No.’

‘And have—’

‘No. Briefly, please.’

‘You’re rightly afraid.’

‘Can anything be done about it? Briefly, please.’

‘No.’

‘Finally. Let’s go, I’ll see you out.’

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

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

Geralt smiled. ‘Does she like cats too?’

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

Geralt didn’t laugh. ‘You know your Vereena,’ he said, ‘is probably a rusalka?’

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

‘More or less.’ The witcher tightened Roach’s girth-strap. ‘No doubt you think she wouldn’t return if you were to become human?’

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

‘Take care, Nivellen.’ The witcher prodded the mare in the side with his heel and made towards the gate. The monster shuffled along at his side.

‘Geralt?’

‘Yes.’

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

‘Yes.’

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

‘Thanks, Nivellen. I’ll remember about you. Who knows, maybe I’ll find someone who—’

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

Nivellen turned and marched briskly towards the manor. He didn’t look round again.

III

The area was deserted, wild and ominously inhospitable. Geralt didn’t return to the highway before dusk; he didn’t want to take a roundabout route so he took a short-cut through the forest. He spent the night on the bare summit of a high hill, his sword on his knees, beside a tiny campfire into which, every now and then, he threw wisps of monkshood. In the middle of the night he noticed the glow of a fire far away in the valley; he heard mad howling and singing and a sound which could only have been the screaming of a tortured

woman. When dawn had barely broken he made his way there to find nothing but a trampled glade and charred bones in still-warm ashes. Something sitting in the crown of an enormous oak shrieked and hissed. It could have been a harpy, or an ordinary wildcat. The witcher didn't stop to check.

IV

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

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

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

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

V

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

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

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

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

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

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

The witcher halted at a distance of ten paces. His sword, slowly drawn from its black enamelled sheath, glistened and glowed above his head.

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

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

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

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

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

The creature didn't move.

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

The huge black eyes narrowed.

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

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

‘No doubt you consider yourself the lady of this manor now?’

A nod, this time clearer.

‘Are you a moola?’

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

‘Alpor?’

Denial.

The witcher backed away and clasped the hilt of his sword tighter. ‘That means you’re—’

The corners of the lips started to turn up higher and higher, the lips flew open . . .

‘A bruxa!’ the witcher shouted, throwing himself towards the fountain.

From behind the pale lips glistened white, spiky fangs. The vampire jumped up, arched her back like a leopard and screamed.

The wave of sound hit the witcher like a battering ram, depriving him of breath, crushing his ribs, piercing his ears and brain with thorns of pain. Flying backwards he just managed to cross his wrists in the Sign of Heliotrop. The spell cushioned some of his impact with the wall but even so

the world grew dark and the remainder of his breath burst from his lungs in a groan.

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

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

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

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

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

The soundwave was so powerful it broke through the Sign. Black and red circles spun in Geralt's eyes; his temples and the crown of his head throbbed. Through the pain drilling in his ears, he began to hear voices wailing and

moaning, the sound of flute and oboe, the rustle of a gale. The skin on his face grew numb and cold. He fell to one knee and shook his head.

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

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

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

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

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

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

I will kill you. I'll kill you. I'll kill you.

'We shall see.'

'Vereena!' Nivellen, his head hanging low and both hands clinging to the doorframe, stumbled from the mansion. He staggered towards the fountain, waving his paws unsteadily. Blood stained the cuff of his tunic.

'Vereena!' he roared again.

The bruxa jerked her head in his direction. Geralt, raising his sword to strike, jumped towards her, but the vampire's reaction was much faster. A sharp scream and another soundwave knocked the witcher from his feet. He tumbled onto his back and scraped against the gravel of the path. The bruxa arched and tensed to jump, her fangs flashing like daggers. Nivellen,

spreading his paws like a bear, tried to grab her but she screamed straight into his face, throwing him back against the wooden scaffolding under the wall, which broke with a sharp crash and buried him beneath a stack of timber.

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

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

'Vereena!' roared Nivellen.

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

The witcher shook, hearing this sigh.

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

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

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

step and he leaned back against the mansion. The end of the pole scraped against the wall.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The head fell onto the gravel.

There are fewer and fewer monsters?

And I? What am I?

Who's shouting? The birds?

The woman in a sheepskin jacket and blue dress?

The roses from Nazair?

How quiet!

How empty. What emptiness.

Within me.

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

'Get up,' said the witcher.

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

'Geralt! How come? How did this—Geralt!'

'Get up, Nivellen. Get up and come along. I've got some medicine in my saddle-bags. We both need it.'

'I've no longer got . . . I haven't, have I? Geralt? Why?'

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

Nivellen moaned again. 'Vereena—'

'Don't look. Let's go.'

They crossed the courtyard, holding each other up, and passed the blue rosebush.

Nivellen kept touching his face with his free hand. 'Incredible, Geralt. After so many years? How's it possible?'

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

'That what, Geralt?'

'It has to be true love.'

THE VOICE OF REASON 3

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

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

Nenneke, to all appearances smiling light-heartedly and at ease, noticed his surprise.

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

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

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

‘My honour.’ The witcher bowed once more, just as cursorily as before.

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

‘The noble knights have troubled themselves for no reason,’ shrugged Geralt. ‘I don’t intend to settle here. I’m leaving of my own accord without

any additional incentives, and soon at that.'

'Immediately,' growled Tailles. 'With not a moment's delay. The prince orders—'

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

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

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

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

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

'Don't dare threaten me with your spells, priestess! Our soldiers—'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Tailles grew pale and reached to his side.

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

Tailles, his hands shaking, pulled an iron gauntlet from his belt and, with a crash, threw it to the ground at the witcher’s feet.

‘I’ll wash away the insult to the Order with your blood, mutant!’ he yelled. ‘On beaten ground! Go into the yard!’

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

Falwick, restraining the enraged Tailles with an iron grip, bowed, his armour clattering. Then he looked the witcher in the eyes. The witcher didn’t smile. Falwick threw his crimson cloak over his shoulders.

‘This wasn’t our last visit, venerable Nenneke,’ he said. ‘We’ll be back.’

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

THE LESSER EVIL

I

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

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

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

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

Even outside, the alderman's shouts were audible.

‘It’s forbidden, I tell you! Forbidden, goddammit! Can’t you understand what I say, you scoundrel?’

Geralt entered. In front of the alderman, small, podgy and red with rage, stood a villager holding a struggling goose by the neck.

‘What—By all the gods! Is that you, Geralt? Do my eyes deceive me?’ And turning to the peasant again: ‘Take it away, you boor! Are you deaf?’

‘They said,’ mumbled the villager, squinting at the goose, ‘that a wee something must be given to his lordship, otherways—’

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

‘Greetings, Caldemeyn.’

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

‘Later. Come outside first.’

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

‘By all the gods, Geralt! What is it?’

‘A kikimora. Is there any reward for it?’

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

‘Where—From where—?’

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

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

Back inside the alderman grabbed a large jug of beer without a word and drank it to the last drop in one draught. He sighed deeply and sniffed.

‘There’s no reward,’ he said gloomily. ‘No one suspected that there was something like that lurking in the salt marshes. It’s true that several people have disappeared in those parts, but . . . Hardly anyone loitered on that dyke. And why were you there? Why weren’t you taking the main road?’

‘It’s hard for me to make a living on main roads, Caldemeyn.’

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

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

‘Do you plan to stay long in Blaviken?’

‘No. I’ve no time to waste. Winter’s coming.’

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

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

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

‘You mean when I threw my fork at that rat?’

‘No. I mean when you hit it, even in the dark.’

‘I thought it would be amusing.’

‘It was. But don’t do it in front of Libushe. And listen, this . . . what’s it called . . . Kiki—’

‘Kikimora.’

‘Do you need it for anything?’

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

‘That’s not a bad idea. Hey, Karelka, Borg, Carrypebble! Any of you there?’

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

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

‘At your command. But . . . Alderman, sir—’

‘What?’

‘Maybe before we drown that hideous thing—’

‘Well?’

‘We could show it to Master Irion. It might be useful to him.’

Caldemeyn slapped his forehead with his open palm.

‘You’re not stupid, Carrypebble. Listen, Geralt, maybe our local wizard will spare you something for that carcass. The fishermen bring him the oddest of fish – octopedes, clabaters or herrongs – many have made some money on them. Come on, let’s go to the tower.’

‘You’ve got yourselves a wizard? Is he here for good or only passing?’

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

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

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

The witcher thought for a moment.

‘Very well, Caldemeyn. What the heck, we’ll risk a meeting with Master Irion. Shall we go?’

‘We’re off. Carrypebble, chase the kids away and bring the floppyears. Where’s my hat?’

II

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

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

‘Spells, chiefly.’

‘What’s he like, this Irion?’

‘Decent. He helps people. But he’s a recluse, doesn’t say much. He rarely leaves the tower.’

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

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

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

‘Master Irion is not receiving. Leave, my good people.’

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

‘Master Irion is not receiving,’ the knocker repeated metallically. ‘Go, my good—’

‘I’m not a good person,’ Geralt broke in loudly. ‘I’m a witcher. That thing on the donkey is a kikimora, and I killed it not far from town. It is the duty of every resident wizard to look after the safety of the neighbourhood. Master

Irion does not have to honour me with conversation, does not have to receive me, if that is his will. But let him examine the kikimora and draw his own conclusions. Carrypebble, unstrap the kikimora and throw it down by the door.'

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

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

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

The witcher swore quietly.

'I'm losing patience. Yes, it's really me. So what?'

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

'What about the kikimora?'

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

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

'As you command.'

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

'Hey!' he shouted, not hiding his anger.

'Just a moment,' answered a strangely familiar voice.

The feeling was so unexpected that the witcher staggered and stretched out his hand, looking for support. He didn't find any.

The orchard was blossoming with white and pink, and smelled of rain. The sky was split by the many-coloured arc of a rainbow, which bound the crowns of the trees to the distant, blue chain of mountains. The house

nestled in the orchard, tiny and modest, was drowning in hollyhocks. Geralt looked down and discovered that he was up to his knees in thyme.

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

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

‘At last. Greetings, witcher.’

‘Stregobor!’ Geralt was surprised.

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

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

‘Is that an illusion, too?’ asked Geralt, watching the sway.

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

‘Maybe later.’

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

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

‘A great deal has changed since then.’

‘Such as your name. Apparently, you’re Master Irion now.’

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

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

‘Destiny has many faces. Mine is beautiful on the outside and hideous on the inside. She has stretched her bloody talons towards me—’

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

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

‘Aha,’ said the witcher, dispassionately. ‘Now I understand.’

‘My facing death doesn’t impress you much, does it?’

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

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

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

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

‘Have you heard of the Curse of the Black Sun?’

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

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

‘Nonsense,’ said the witcher. ‘And what’s more, it doesn’t rhyme. All decent predictions rhyme. Everyone knows what Eltibald and the Council of

Wizards had in mind at the time. You took advantage of a madman's ravings to strengthen your own authority. To break up alliances, ruin marriage allegiances, stir up dynasties. In a word: to tangle the strings of crowned puppets even more. And here you are lecturing me about predictions, which any old storyteller at the marketplace would be ashamed of.'

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

'And why not? I've heard quite the opposite.'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘And you sons-of-bitches have the nerve to criticise witchers? Oh, Stregobor, the day will come when people will learn, and get the better of you.’

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

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

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

‘Your famous towers,’ snorted the witcher.

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

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

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

‘Your proofs are becoming ever less convincing. Do you have any more?’

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

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

‘Listen, Geralt—’

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

‘Without interrupting with spiteful comments?’

‘That I can’t promise.’

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

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

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

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

Stregobor sighed, raised his eyes to heaven, where the rainbow was still shimmering colourfully and picturesquely.

‘I wanted to isolate her, but Aridea decided otherwise. She sent the little one out into the forest with a hired thug, a trapper. We found him later in the undergrowth . . . without any trousers, so it wasn’t hard to recreate the turn of events. She had dug a brooch-pin into his brain, through his ear, no doubt while his attention was on entirely different matters.’

‘If you think I feel sorry for him,’ muttered Geralt, ‘then you’re wrong.’

‘We organised a manhunt,’ continued Stregobor, ‘but all traces of the little one had disappeared. I had to leave Creyden in a hurry because Fredefalk was beginning to suspect something. Then, four years later I received news from Aridea. She’d tracked down the little one, who was living in Mahakam with seven gnomes whom she’d managed to convince it was more profitable to rob merchants on the roads than to pollute their lungs with dust from the mines. She was known as Shrike because she liked to impale the people she

caught on a sharp pole while they were still alive. Several times Aridea hired assassins, but none of them returned. Well, then it became hard to find anyone to try – Shrike had already become quite famous. She'd learnt to use a sword so well there was hardly a man who could defy her. I was summoned, and arrived in Creyden secretly, only to learn that someone had poisoned Aridea. It was generally believed that it was the work of Fredefalk, who had found himself a younger, more robust mistress – but I think it was Renfri.'

'Renfri?'

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

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

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

'No. It's not my speciality. But you're right, I did make a hash of it. Some idiot prince found her, spent a fortune on a counter-curse, reversed the spell and triumphantly took her home to some out-of-the-way kingdom in the east. His father, an old brigand, proved to have more sense. He gave his son

a hiding, and questioned Shrike about the treasures which she and the gnomes had seized and which she'd hidden. His mistake was to allow his elder son to assist him when he had her stretched out, naked, on the executioner's bench. Somehow, the following day, that same eldest son – now an orphan bereft of siblings – was ruling the kingdom, and Shrike had taken over the office of first favourite.'

'Meaning she can't be ugly.'

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

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

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

'That's impossible.'

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

'How do you know? Is she already in town?'

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

The witcher raised his eyebrows. 'What's on your mind?'

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

'I'm not a hired thug, Stregobor.'

'You're not a thug, agreed.'

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

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

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

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

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

‘Please, Geralt.’

‘No, Stregobor.’

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

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

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

‘Maybe,’ said the wizard. ‘If you get here in time.’

III

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

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

The innkeeper wrinkled his bulging forehead and wiped a tankard on his striped apron.

'Here, Alderman,' he finally said. 'They say they've come for the market but they all carry swords, even the woman. Dressed, as you said, in black.'

'Well,' the alderman nodded. 'Where are they now? I don't see them here.'

'In the lesser alcove. They paid in gold.'

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

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

'I'll be careful.'

The seamen's song, judging by the growing intensity of obscene words, was reaching its grand finale. Geralt drew aside the curtain – stiff and sticky with dirt – which hid the entrance to the alcove.

Six men were seated at the table. Shrike wasn't with them.

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

‘I want to see Shrike.’

Two identical figures stood up – identical motionless faces and fair, dishevelled, shoulder-length hair, identical tight-fitting black outfits glistening with silver ornaments. And with identical movements the twins took identical swords from the bench.

‘Keep calm, Vyr. Sit down, Nimir,’ said the man with the scar, leaning his elbows on the table. ‘Who d’you say you want to see, brother? Who’s Shrike?’

‘You know very well who I mean.’

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

‘No,’ said the man with the scar.

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

‘I’ve seen him somewhere before,’ said a stocky, weatherbeaten man with a plait, measuring Geralt with an evil look in his narrowed eyes.

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

‘No,’ said the witcher calmly.

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

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

‘I don’t have anything to say to you. I want to see Shrike. Renfri.’

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

‘No.’

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

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

‘What’s that you’re mumbling, Tavik?’

‘In front of the alderman’s house. He brought some sort of dragon in to trade, a cross between a spider and a crocodile. People were saying he’s a witcher.’

‘And what’s a witcher?’ Fifteen asked. ‘Eh? Civril?’

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The witcher didn’t react.