

LESSER EVIL

**A short story by
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I

As usual, cats and children were the first to notice him. A tabby tomcat sleeping on a pile of logs warmed by the sun, twitched and raised his round head, pulled its ears back, spat and made away among the nettle. Three-year-old Drogomir, son of Trigl'a the fisherman, who was doing his best to stain his flimsy tunic, already smudged and filthy, on the doorstep of their cottage, fell a-screaming, fixing his tearful eyes on the horseman passing by.

The witcher was riding slowly, not attempting to take over the hay-laden wagon which hogged the narrow street. Behind him, with its neck stretched, trotted an overladen donkey every now and then strongly tautening the strap, attached to the pommel horn of his saddle. Apart from the usual saddle-bags the beast was lugging a conspicuous form wrapped in a saddle-cloth on its back. One of the donkey's greyish-white sides was covered in black streaks of coagulated gore.

Eventually, the wagon turned into a side street, leading to a granary and wharf, from where breeze blew the smell of tar and ox urine. Geralt sped up. He did not react to the muffled cry of the vegetable stallholder wenches, her gaze fixed at the bony, clawed paw sticking from under the saddle-cloth, swinging to the rhythm of the donkey's steps. He did not look back at the growing rabble following him, moving there and back in anxiety.

There were plenty of carts and wagons in front of the riff's house. Geralt alighted from his saddle, adjusted the

sword on his back, tossed the reins over a wooden balustrade. The crowd following him stood in a semicircle round the donkey.

Shouting of the riff could already be heard some distance from the entrance.

"I'm telling you, It's not allowed! Not allowed, dammit! Don't you understand common, you thickwit?"

Geralt entered. In front of the little pot-bellied riff, red with anger, there was a peasant standing and holding a struggling goose by the neck.

"What... By all the gods! Is that you Geralt? Don't my eyes deceive me?" and then turning to the peasant, "Off with it, you villain! You deaf, or what?"

"They said," mumbled the peasant squinting at the goose, "that something must be brought to you, sir... or else..."

"Who said?, shouted the sheriff, "Who? Meaning what? That I can be greased? I do not allow, I'm telling you! Off, I'm telling you! Welcome, Geralt."

"Welcome, Caldemeyn."

Shaking the witcher's hand, the sheriff gave him a tap on the arm with the other hand.

"You must have been away for two years, Geralt. Eh? Must you be such a rolling stone. Where are you coming from? Well, to hell with it, what difference does it make, where from. Ho there! Someone bring a mug of ale! Sit down, Geralt, take a seat. We've got some commotion here, for it's the fair tomorrow. What's business like? How's things with you! Tell me!"

"Later, let's go out first."

Outside, the crowd must have doubled but the free space around the donkey did not reduce. Geralt lifted the blanket energetically. The crowd gasped and backed. Caldemeyn opened his mouth wide.

"By all the gods, Geralt! What is that?"

"Kikimore. Isn't there a reward to be got for it, Mr Sheriff?"

Caldemeyn moved his weight from one foot to the other, looking at the spidery form, covered by dried black hide, at the glassy eye with a vertical pupil, at the needle-like fangs inside the blood-stained jaws.

"Where... Where from did..."

"Up on the dike, four miles away from the town. On the marches. Caldemeyn, people must have been getting killed there. Children."

"Well, so it's been. But no one... Who could presume... Hey, folks, go home, go to work! This is not a circus! Cover it, Geralt. It's gathering flies."

Back in the chamber and without a word, the sheriff got hold of the tankard of ale and drank it dry, without taking it away from his lips. He sighed deeply, and sniffed.

"There is no reward," he said cheerlessly "No one even supposed that something like that could be dwelling in those salt marshes. True, a few people disappeared thereabouts but... There weren't many to wander over that dike. And how did you get there? Why didn't you follow the main road?"

"It's difficult for me to find business on the main roads, Caldemeyn."

"I forgot," the sheriff muffled a belch by blowing his cheeks, "And such a quiet place it used to be. Even the pixies didn't frequently piss into milk, here. And there it is! A stone's throw to that kinky mare. Looks like I would have to thank you. For to pay, I cannot. I've got no funds.

"Bad luck. Some cash would come in handy for spending the winter," the witcher took a gulp from the tankard, and the froth from his mouth. - I'm planning to be off to Yspaden but I don't know if I'll have made it by the time snow blocks the roads. I may get stuck in one of the fortified boroughs along the Luton road.

"Will you tarry long in Blaviken?"

"Not long. I'm short of time to tarry. Winter is coming."

"Where are you going to stay? How about my place? There's a free room in the attic, why should you let yourself be ripped off by those thieving inn-keepers. We will talk, you'll tell me the news of the wide world."

"With pleasure. But what will your Libushe say? Last time, one could notice that she is not too fond of me."

"In my home, women don't have their say. But, between me, you and the doorpost, in her presence don't do what you did last time during supper again."

"D'you mean throwing the fork at a rat?"

"No, I mean hitting it though it was dark."

"I thought it would be funny."

"It was but do not do it in Libushe's presence. Listen, and that... whatchummacallit... Kiki..."

"Kikimore."

"D'you need it for anything?"

"Pry, what for? If there is no reward you may have it thrown into the dung."

"I quite like the idea. Hey, you, Karelka, Borg, Carrypebble! Anybody there?"

A town guard entered, the partisan resting against his shoulder, its blade loudly catching on the door-frame.

"Carrypebble," said Caldemeyn. "Get someone to help you, take the donkey that's in front of the cottage together with that shit wrapped in a blanket, take it behind the sties and drown in cow dung. Got it?"

"Following your order. But... Master riff ... "

"What?"

"Mabbe, before the horror is to be drowned... "

"Well..."

"Shan't we show it to Master Irion. Chance be that he may need it for something."

Caldemeyn slapped his forehead with an open palm.

"You're not that dumb, Carrypebble. Listen, Geralt, maybe our local sorcerer kick something back for that carcass. Fishermen carry various bizzarfish, octopi, clabatres or nerdfish; many a fisherman got rewarded for that. Come, let's take a stroll to the tower."

"You've come by a sorcerer? For good, or for a while?"

"For good. Master Irion. Has lived in Blaviken for a year. A mighty mage, Geralt, you can tell it just by the way he looks."

"I doubt if a mighty mage will pay for a kikimore," Geralt made a wry face. "As far as I know, he needs it for making no potions. Quite likely your Irion will only abuse me. We, the witchers, are not fond of sorcerers."

"I've never heard Master Irion to abuse anyone. I cannot swear he will pay but trying won't do any harm. There may be more of such kikimores in the marshes, and what then? Let the wizard have a look at the creature, and just in case cast some spell on the marsh, or what."

The witcher considered it for a little while.

"Point for you, Caldemeyn. Well, let us risk a meeting with Master Irion. Shall we be going?"

"We are. Carrypebble, chase these brats away and take the beast by the strap. Where's my cap?"

II

The tower, built from smooth-hewn granite blocks, with crenellate battlements, looked impressively, towering over the broken roof-tiles of the houses and caved-in thatched roofs of the cottages.

"Renewed it, as I see," said Geralt. "With magic, or did he get you to work?"

"With magic, mostly."

"What is he like - this Irion of yours?"

"Decent. Helps people. But he's a recluse and a man of few words. Hardly leaves the tower."

On the door, adored with a rosette intarsiated in light wood, there hung a giant knocker, shaped into a flat bulge-eyed head of a fish holding a brass ring in its toothed mouth. Caldemeyn, obviously knowing how the mechanism worked, approached, cleared his throat and recited: "Greetings from Caldemeyn the riff, having a supplication to Master Irion. Together with him, greets witcher Geralt of Rivia, also having a supplication."

For a long while nothing happened, eventually the fish head moved its toothed jaw and discharged a puff of steam. "Master Irion sees no man. Go in peace, good men."

Caldemeyn moved his feet uneasily, and looked at Geralt. The witcher shrugged his arms. Carrypebble, now solemn and concentrated, was picking his nose. "Master Irion sees no man," repeated the knocker metallically, "Go in peace, good..."

"I am not a good man," interrupted Geralt loudly, "I am a witcher. The thing on the donkey is a kikimore, I killed by the town. It is a duty of every resident sorcerer to care for security of his whereabouts. Master Irion does not have to honour me with a talk, and does not have to entertain me, if that's his will. Yet, let him see the kikimore and draw conclusions. Carrypebble, unstrap the kikimore and dump it here, by the very door."

"Geralt, said the riff silently, "You'll leave and, I'll have to... here..."

"Let's go, Caldemeyn. Carrypebble, get your finger out of your nose and do as you've been told."

"One moment," answered the knocker in a totally different voice, "Is that really you, Geralt?"

The witcher swore under his breath.

"I'm losing my patience. Yes, it is I, indeed. And what does it change that it is I, indeed?"

"Come closer to the door," said the knocker, letting out a puff of smoke, "Just you. I shall let you in."

"What about the kikimore?"

"Screw the kikimore. I want to talk to you, Geralt. Only with you. Please forgive, Sheriff."

"What do I care, Master Irion?" Caldemeyn made a dismissive gesture with his hand, "Take care, Geralt. See you later. Carrypebble! Get the monster into cow dung!"

"You say!"

The witcher approached the intarsiated door, which opened slightly - just enough for him to squeeze through - and immediately slammed shut, leaving him in complete darkness.

"Hey!" he shouted, not concealing his anger.

"Just a minute," answered a strangely familiar voice.

The sensation was so unexpected, that the witcher reeled and stretched out his hand to find a support. He found none.

The orchard was in white and pink bloom, and smelled of rain. The sky was crossed by the multicolour arc of the rainbow, joining the crowns of the trees with the faraway deep-blue mountain range. The house in the middle of the orchard - little and modest - was bathed in mallows. Geralt looked under his feet and decided that he was standing up to his knees in wild thyme.

"Just come on, Geralt," said a voice. "I'm in front of the house."

He walked into the orchard, among the trees. He notice a movement on the left, and turned. A fair-haired girl, totally naked was walking along a row of bushes, carrying a basket full of apples. The witcher promised himself earnestly never to wonder again.

"At last! Welcome, witcher."

"Stregobor!?" Geralt was amazed.

In his life, the witcher used to meet thieves looking like town councillors; town councillors, looking like ragged

beggars, harlots looking like princesses; princesses looking like cows about to calve and kings looking like thieves. But Stregobor always looked like, according to all standards and beliefs, a sorcerer should. He was tall, thin and slouching. He had huge, grey, bushy eyebrows and a long, crooked nose. What is more, he was wearing a black flowing robe with incredibly wide sleeves, and in his hand he was holding a longish staff with a crystal orb. None of the sorcerers known to Geralt looked like Stregobor. What was even more weird: Stregobor was actually a sorcerer.

They sat in wicker armchairs on a porch surrounded by mallows, by a table made of a slab of white marble. A naked blonde, carrying a basketful of apples, approached them, smiled, turned round and returned to the orchard, rocking and swaying her hips.

"Is that also an illusion?" asked Geralt, admiring the sway.

"Also. As everything around here. But it is, my dear, a first-class illusion. The blossom smells, you can eat the apples, the bees may sting you, and her," the sorcerer pointed at the blonde, "you can..."

"Maybe later."

"Well said. What are you doing here, Geralt? Are you still into killing the members of dying species for money? How much did you get for this kikimore? Presumably nothing; otherwise you wouldn't have come here. And just think that there are people who do not believe in predestination! Unless you knew about me... Did you? "

"No, I didn't. This is the last place where I'd expect to meet you. As far as I can remember you used to live in a similar tower in Kovir, in the olden times."

"Much has changed since then."

"Like what they call you. You are said to be Master Irion."

"That was the name of the builder of this tower, He passed away some two hundred years ago. I decided he deserved being honoured in some way, when taking his seat over. I am on a residency here. Most of the locals live off the sea and, as you may remember, apart from illusions, weather has been my cup of fish. Sometimes I calm a storm, sometimes I start another, sometimes with the western wind I'd drive the shoals of whiting and cods closer to the shore. You can make a living. That is," he added bitterly, "you could".

"Why 'could'? And where's all that change of the name from?"

"Destiny has got many faces. Mine is beautiful on the outside, and horrible inside. And it has stretched its blood-dripping claws out towards me..."

"You haven't changed an inch, Stregobor," Geralt made a wry face. "You're talking gibberish, making wise and meaningful faces at the same time. Can't you just speak plainly?"

"I can," sighed the sorcerer, "if this is to make you happy, I can. I reached this faraway place hiding and escaping from a horrible creature, which wants to murder me. The flight was to no avail: she found me. All probabilities considered, she will try to kill me tomorrow, or at furthest the day after.

"A-ha," said the witcher with no emotions. "Now I understand."

"It seems to me, pending death does not impress you much?"

"Stregobor," said Geralt. "That's what the world is like. You see plenty travelling. Two peasants keep killing each other for the footpath in the middle of the field that tomorrow will be trampled by the horses of the knights of two barons trying to kill each other. Along the roads, up on the trees, the hanged are dangling; and in the woods highwaymen slash merchants' throats. With every step you take in the cities, you trip on corpses in sewers. In palaces they stab one another with daggers, and at feasts every now and then someone crashes under the table, pallid from poison. I got used to it. Why, then, the threat of death should impress me, especially if it threatens you?"

"Especially if it threatens me," repeated Stregobor ironically, "And I considered you a friend. I counted on your aid."

"Our last meeting," said Geralt "took place at the court of king Idi in Kovir. I came to collect the reward for killing

the amphisbena which used to browbeat the neighbourhood. Then you and your confrere Zavist, vying with each other, started calling me a charlatan, a thoughtless murdering machine and - if I recall well - a carrion crow. As a result not only did Idi fail to pay me a penny but he granted me twelve hours to leave Kovir as well. And as his hour-glass was out of order, I hardly managed. And now, you say that you're counting on my help. You say there is a monster after you. What are you afraid of, Stregobor? If it gets you, tell it that you like monsters, you protect them, and pay attention that no carrion-eating witcher disturbs their peace. Indeed, it will turn out to be horribly ungrateful on the part of the monster, if it guts and devours you."

Having turned his head away, the sorcerer remained silent. Geralt laughed.

"Don't you get puffed up like a toad, magician. Tell me what the threat is. We'll see what can be done."

"Have you heard of the Curse of the Black Sun?"

"Surely, I did. Though it was called the Mania of Etibald the Deranged. For that was the name of the mage who started the whole pickle, which resulted in having a few tens of girls, some of whom were of noble and even royal families, killed or imprisoned in towers. They were alleged to be possessed by demons, condemned, and contaminated by the Black Sun, as that is how you called an ordinary eclipse in that bombastic jargon of yours."

"Etibald, who was not deranged at all, deciphered the inscriptions on the menhirs of the Dauks, on tombstones in the necropolises of the Wozhgors, researched the legends and lays of the werebobos. They all mentioned the eclipse in a way leaving little place for doubt. The Black Sun was to announce the imminent return of Lilith, worshipped still in the East under the name of Niya, and the doom of the human race. The path for Lilith was to be prepared by 'sixty maids in golden crowns, who with blood shall the valleys of rivers fill'."

"Balderdash," said the witcher. "And what is more, unrhymed. All decent prophecies rhyme. It is generally known what Etibald and the Sorcerers' Council aimed at then. You used the ravings of a moron, to strengthen your power. To break alliances, ruin marriage plans, stir in dynasties, or in other words to give the strings tied to all the puppets in crown a hearty yank. And there you are, telling me about prophecies which a beggar at a fair would be ashamed of."

"One can have reservations to Etibald's theory, to the interpretation of the prophecy. But it is impossible to question the fact of emergence of a horrible mutation among girls born shortly after the eclipse."

"What makes it unquestionable? I heard something just to the contrary."

"I was at the post-mortem of one of them," said the sorcerer. "Geralt, what we found inside the skull and the medulla, couldn't be unequivocally described. A sort of red sponge. Internal organs all mixed up, some of them absent altogether. Everything covered in motile cilia and pale-pink shreds. Six-chambered heart? Two practically in atrophy but still. What'd you say to that?"

"I saw people with aquiline talons instead of hands, and people with lupine fangs. People with extra joints, extra organs and extra senses. All these were the effects of your dabbling with magic."

"You saw different mutations, you say," the sorcerer raised his head. "And how many of them did you bludgeon for money, following your witcher's vocation? Eh? For one may have lupine fangs and do no more than bare them before the maids in an inn, and one may also have a lupine nature and attack children. And that was the case with the girls born after the eclipse. Among them a simply insane tendency to cruelty, aggression, sudden outbursts of anger, as well as exuberant appetites were discovered."

"Each woman may be found to have that." Geralt sneered "What are you trying to peddle here?" You're asking how many mutants I've killed - why then you're not interested in the number of those I freed from a curse or spell? I, a witcher you despise so much. And what have you, oh potent wizards, done?"

"Higher levels of magic were resorted to. Ours as well as the priests', in various shrines. All attempts have ended in death of the girls."

"Which is only evidence against you, and not about the girls. So - we have already come to the first victims."

I understand they all received a post-mortem?"

"Not only. Don't look at me like that. You know too well that more victims followed. Initially it was decided that they all should be eliminated. We disposed of a few... er... dozens. All were examined. In one case it was a vivisection."

"And you, sons of the bitch, dare criticise witchers? Eh, Stregobor, a day will come when people will wizen and get you a good trashing."

"I don't think such a day is near," - said the sorcerer tartly. - "Don't forget that we were acting in defence of people. These female mutants would drown whole kingdoms in blood."

"That is what you, magicians, say looking down at everything from your nimbus of infallibility. Yet, as we're already talking about, you won't tell me that you mistook not even once, in that hunt for the would-be mutants of yours, will you?"

"Let it be," said Stregobor having stayed silent for a long while. "I'll be frank with you, although I shouldn't. In my very interest. We made a mistake, and more than once it was. Selecting them was extremely difficult. Therefore we stopped... disposing of them and we took to isolating them.."

"Your famed towers," the witcher snapped.

"Our towers. That was yet another mistake. We underestimated them and quite a number of them escaped. Some mad fashion of setting the imprisoned beauties free developed among princes and dukes, especially the younger ones, who did not have much to do, and even less to lose. Most of them, luckily, broke their necks.

"As far as I know, having been imprisoned in towers they started passing away quickly. It was rumoured that it wasn't without your help."

"A lie. Indeed, they quickly became apathetic, refused to eat... What's interesting, shortly before their death they manifested the gift of clairvoyance. Another proof of mutation.

"Each next proof is less and less convincing. Haven't you got a few more of them?"

"I have. Silvena, the lady of Narok -we never managed even to approach her, as she seized the power really quick. Now horror is alive in that country. Fialka, the daughter of Evermir, escaped from the tower, using a rope braided from her plaits - at present she's the terror of Northern Velhad. Bernica of Talgar was freed by an idiot prince. Now, blinded, he's biding his time in the dungeon, and the most prominent element of the Talgar countryside are gallows. There are other examples."

"Naturally, there are," said the witcher. "Take Yamurlac for one, where the old Abrad rules: he's got scrofula and not a single tooth, he must have been born a good hundred years before all that eclipse, and he won't fall asleep, unless someone is cruelly murdered in his presence. He has butchered up all his relatives and depopulated a half of his country in insane, as you put it, sudden outbursts of anger. There are also traces of exuberant appetites, he is said to have been called Abrad the Tearskirt in his youth. Yeah, Stregobor, it would be great if the atrocities of rulers could be explained with a mutation or a curse.

"Listen, Geralt..."

"Don't you even think about it!" You'll never convince me to your point of view, even less so that Eltibald wasn't a nefarious moron. But let us return to the monster which is allegedly threatening you. After the introduction you have made, know that I don't like the whole story. Yet I will listen to you telling me the whole of it."

"Butting in none of these caustic remarks of yours?"

"This I can't promise."

"Well, then," Stregobor shoved his palms in the sleeves of his robes. "The longer it will take. So, the whole business started in Creyden, a small duchy in the north. Fredefalk, duke of Creyden's wife was Aridea, a wise and educated woman. She had in her lineage a number of eminent sorcerers accomplished in the art, and she most

probably inherited a potent and rather uncommon artefact: the Looking-Glass of Nehalenia. As you know, the Looking-Glasses of Nehalenia were used mostly by prophets and oracles, as they foretell the future with no mistake, though in a very muddled way. Aridea quite often addressed her Looking-Glass..."

"With the customary question, as I deem," Geralt interrupted. "'Who's the fairest of them all?'" As far as I know all Looking-Glasses of Nehalenia can be divided into the polite and the broken ones."

"You're wrong. Aridea was more interested in the fate of her country. And when asked, the Looking-Glass divined a nasty death of Aridea herself, and of plenty of people, either from the hand of Fredefalk's daughter from his first wife or due to her doings. Aridea did her best to spread the news to the Council, and the Council sent me to Creyden. I do not have to mention that Fredefalk's firstborn was born shortly after the eclipse. I watched her secretly for a short time. In the meantime she managed to torture to death a canary and two puppies; she also plucked out her handmaid's eye with the handle of a comb. I made a few tests with my spells, and most of them confirmed that she was a mutant. I went to tell that to Aridea, as Fredefalk was too much infatuated with his daughter. Aridea, as I have mentioned, was quite a wise woman..."

"Sure," Geralt interrupted again. "She can't have been too fond of her step-daughter. She'd rather her own children inherited the throne. I can guess what followed. Why was there nobody to break her neck. And by the way, yours as well."

Stregobor Sighed, raised his eyes to heaven, where the picturesque rainbow was still glimmering with its many colours.

"I was in favour of isolating her only, by the duke's wife was of different opinion. She sent the little one to the forest with a hired thug: her Master of the Hunt. We found him later in the shrubs. He wasn't wearing any trousers, so it wasn't too difficult to guess what happened. She shoved the pin of her brooch into his brain through the ear. Most probably when he had his attention turned to something else."

"If you think I pity him," Geralt muttered. "You're mistaken."

"We made a comb-out," Stregobor continued. "But we lost trace of her. And I had to hurry away from Creyden, as Fredefalk began suspecting something. Only four years later I had news from Aridea. She spied the little one who was living in Mahakam with seven gnomes, whom she convinced that it paid better to waylay merchants than to chance their lungs to anthracosis in the mines. She's commonly called the Shrike, as she's been particularly partial to impaling those she caught alive on sharpened poles. Aridea hired a few assassins, but none of them returned. Then it was difficult to find anyone willing to: the little one was quite famous. She learned her sword so well that not many a man could face her. Having been summoned to Creyden, I arrived there in secrecy only to learn that Aridea had been poisoned. Fredefalk himself was commonly believed to have done so, as he had sought a younger and a fleshier msalliance for himself, but t seems to me it was Renfri."

"Renfri?"

"That's what she called herself. I told you, she had poisoned Aridea. Shortly afterwards Duke Fredefalk died in a strange accident while hunting, and Aridea's eldest son was lost without a trace. Those must have been the dealings of the little one as well. I call her 'little one', yet she was seventeen at that time. And she was well developed."

"At that time," the sorcerer continued after a while's break. "She and her gnomes were a true terror of the whole Mahakam. Yet, one day they quarrelled over something, I don't know what that was about, whether it was sharing the loot, or taking turns during the nights of the week - enough to say they butchered each other with their knives. The seven gnomes failed to survive this knife business. Only the Shrike did. And she alone. But at that time, I was already in the vicinity. We met eye to eye: she recognised me in an instant and realised what role I played then in Creyden. I'm telling you, Geralt, I hardly had time to say the words of the spell, and my hands were trembling as anything, when that wild vixen was running at me with her sword. I wrapped her in a neat block of rhinestone: six

ells by nine. When she became lethargic, I dropped the block into the gnomes' mine and caved the shaft in."

"A botch," Geralt commented. "That could be dispelled. Couldn't you incinerate her to cinder? You know so many well-suited spells."

"Not me. Not my specialty. But you are right. I botched. An idiot of a prince found her and spent a fortune for a counterspell, he brought her back and triumphantly carried her home, to some god-forgotten kingdom of the east. His father, an old brigand, turned out to be more sensible. He gave his son thrashing, and decided to interrogate the Shrike. He asked her about the treasures she had come by together with the gnomes and hidden deviously. The king's mistake was that when she - stark-naked - was stretched on the executioner's bench, he was assisted by his eldest son. It somehow happened that the very next day that son of his, already an orphan bereft of all the siblings, ruled the kingdom, and the Shrike took the post of the first pet."

"Which means she's not that ugly."

"The question of taste. She wasn't a pet long. Until the first palace revolution, as they pompously called it, as their palace seemed more like a cow-shed. It soon turned out that she did not forget about me either. In Kovir she had three assassins hired to kill me. I decided not to risk and wait until all was over in Pontar. She found me again. That time I escaped to Angren, but she found me even there. I don't know how she does it, as I mask my trail well and leave no tracks. It must be a feature of her mutation."

"What hindered or prevented you from repeating your crystal spell? Remorse?"

"No. I had no such thing. It turned out that she became immune to magic."

"This can't be."

"It is. It is enough to possess an appropriate artefact or aura. Yet, this may again be caused by her mutation, which is progressing. I fled from Angren and I hid myself here in the Baycoves, in Blaviken. I had a year's rest, yet she tracked me again."

"Where do you know it from? Is she already in the town?"

"Yes. I've seen her in the crystal." The sorcerer raised his wand. "She is not alone. She's leading a gang, which means that she's preparing something grave. Geralt, I have nowhere to run, and I know of no place where I could hide. Yes. The fact that you arrived here in this very moment, cannot be a coincidence. It's destiny."

The witcher raised his brows.

"What do you mean?"

"It's natural, isn't it? You'll kill her."

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

"You're not a thug. True."

"It is monsters that I kill for money. Beasts threatening people. Abominations summoned by magic and spells of the likes of you. Not humans."

"She is not a human. Verily, she is a monster, a mutant, a cursed freak. You brought your kikimore here. The Shrike is worse than a kikimore. A kikimore kills because it is hungry, the Shrike for pleasure. Kill her, and I will pay you any sum you name. Reason is the limit, it is to be understood."

"I told you I believe all this thing about the mutation and curse of Lilith to be rubbish. The girl has her reasons to pick a bone or two with you, and I will not meddle. Turn to the riff, to the magistrates. You are the local sorcerer, you are protected by the local law."

"I'm spitting on law, on the riff and his aid!" Stregobor exclaimed. "I need no defence. I want you to kill her! No one will enter this tower. I'm fully safe here. But what good is it? I don't intend to stay here until the end of my days. The Shrike will not give up as long as I am alive, I know that. Am I to stay in this tower and await death?"

"They stayed. You know what, magician? You should have left hunting the girls to other, more potent sorcerers,

you should have foreseen the consequences.”

“Please, Geralt.”

“No, Stregobor.”

The sorcerer remained silent. The un-true sun on the un-true skies moved towards the zenith, but the witcher knew that it was already dusk in Blaviken. He felt hungry.

“Geralt,” said Stregobor. “When we listened to Eltibald, many of us had their doubts. Yet we decided to choose the lesser evil. Now I am asking you for a similar choice.”

“Evil is evil, Stregobor,” said the witcher solemnly, raising from his seat. “Lesser, greater, average, it doesn’t matter, proportions are debatable and the boundaries are blurred. I am not a saintly hermit and it is not only good that I have done in my life. But if I am to choose between one evil and another, I prefer to make no choice at all. Time for me. We’ll see each other tomorrow.”

“Maybe,” said the sorcerer. “If you make it on time.”

III

The Golden Manor, the representative inn of the town, was crowded and noisy. Patrons, locals and travellers alike, were mostly busy with doing things typical for their nations or professions. Very professional merchants were haggling with dwarves about the prices of goods or interests from loans. Not very professional merchants kept pinching the bottoms of the girls carrying around beer and pork stew. Local fools pretended to be well informed. Girlies were trying to look agreeable to those who had money, at the same time discouraging those who had none. Coachmen and fishermen drank as if tomorrow a ban on hops was to be introduced. Sailors were singing a song praising sea waves, courage of captains, and the beauty of mermaids - the last being described in stimulating detail.

“Cudgel thy brains some more, Centurion - said Caldemeyn to the keeper, leaning over the bar, so that he could be heard in the general humdrum. - Six lads and a minx, black clad in silver studded leather, as is the fashion in Novigrad. I saw them at the toll-gates. Are they staying here or at the Tuna?”

Wrinkles could be seen on the bulging forehead of the inn-keeper busily wiping a mug with his striped apron.

“Here, riff,” - he eventually said. - “They spake that they arrived for the fair, yet all at swords, even the damsel. Black, as thou speakest, clad.”

“Well,” the riff nodded. “Where are they now? I can’t see them here.”

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

“I’ll go there alone,” said Geralt. “There’s no point in making it an official case, at least not yet, and not with all of these present. I’ll get here to here.”

“It may be a right thing to do. But be careful! I want no turmoil here.”

“I shall be careful.”

“Judging by the increasing concentration of obscenities, the sailors’ song was already close to its grand finale. Geralt lifted the curtain covering the entrance to the alcove - stiff and clammy with dirt. There were six men at the table in the alcove. She whom he expected to see was not there.

“What?” yelled the one who noticed him first, thinning on top, with his face disfigured by a scar running across the left brow, base of the nose and the right cheek.

“I want to see the Shrike.”

Two identical people stood up from the table. Their faces were identically immobile, fair hair reaching their shoulders was identically disheveled; they were clad in the same tight black leather clothes, glistening with silver

ornaments. With the same type of movement, the twins raised their identical swords from the bench.

"Easy, Vyr. Sit down, Nimir." That was said by the man with the scar, who placed his elbows on the table. "Who's that, that you say, you want to see, brother? Who is that Shrike?"

"You know well who I mean."

"Who's he?" asked the half-naked roughneck, sweating and cross-belted, with spiked gauntlets on his forearms. "D'you know him, Nohorn?"

"I don't." Replied the man with the scar.

"Must be an albino," giggled a slim dark-haired man sitting beside Nohorn. Delicate features, huge black eyes and sharply-tipped ears were unmistakable signs of a half-elf. "An albino, a mutant, a prank of mother nature. Why are the likes of him allowed in an inn, among decent folks."

"I Must have seen him already somewhere," said the stout weather-beaten fellow with plaited hair, scanning Geralt with an evil stare of his half-closed eyes.

"It doesn't matter where you've seen him, Tavik." Nohorn said. "Just listen, brother. Civril has dreadfully offended you a moment ago. Won't you challenge him? Such a boring evening."

"No," said the witcher calmly.

"And will you challenge me, if I pour this fish soup on your noddle? the half-naked one chuckled.

"Easy, Fifteen," said Nohorn. "No means no, and he said it. Well, brother, say what you've got to say and out you are! It's your chance to go out by yourself. If you don't jump at it, the staff will carry you out."

"I have nothing to tell you. I want to see the Shrike. Renfri."

"Have you heard, lads?" Nohorn looked round at the company. "He wants to see Renfri. And why is that so, brother, if one may know, eh?"

"One may not."

Nohorn raised his head and looked at the twins, they took a step forward, the silver buckles of their high boots jingling.

"I know," said the one with the plait suddenly. "Now I remember where I saw him!"

"What are you muttering, Tavik?"

"In front of the riff's house. He brought some kind of a dragon for sale, such a cross between a spider and a crocodile. People thought him to be a witcher."

"What is a witcher?" asked Fifteen, the naked one. "Eh? Civril?"

"A hired witch," answered the half-elf. "A trickster for a handful of silver coins. Told you he was a prank of mother nature. An abhorrence in the eyes of gods and people. Such as him should be burnt."

"We don't like witches, Tavik grinned, unrelentingly scanning Geralt with his half-closed bloodshot eyes. - Something tells me, Civril, that we'll have more work in this dump than we thought we would. There must be more than one of them, and they are known to keep company."

"Birds of a feather flock together," the half-caste grinned. "How can earth bear the likes of you? Who spawns you, freaks?"

"More tolerance, if you could," said Geralt calmly. "Your mother, as far as I can see must have used to walk in the forest often enough for you to have reasons to reflect over your own ancestry."

"That may be," answered the half-elf without losing his smile. "But I at least knew my mother. As a witcher you cannot say it about yourself."

Geralt went slightly pale and bit his lips. Nohorn, who didn't fail to notice that, laughed loudly."

"Uh, brother! An offence like this! You just can't let it pass. What you've got on your back seems to be a sword. So? Will you go out with Civril? The evening's so boring."

The witcher did not react.

"A shitting chicken!" Tavik hissed.

"What has he said about Civril's mother?" Nohorn continued monotonously, resting his chin on clasped hands. "Something horribly gross, as far as I am concerned. That she was smutty, or whatnot? Hey, Fifteen, does it become to listen how some rover offends the mother of a companion? Mother's motherfirkng holy!"

Fifteen eagerly stood up, unbuckled the sword and hurled it onto the table. He inhaled and adjusted the his silver-studded gauntlets on the forearms, spat and took one step forward.

"If you've got any doubts," said Nohorn. "Fifteen is just challenging you to a fist-fight. I told you you'd be carried out. Make room."

Fifteen got closer, raising his fists. Geralt placed his hand on the handle of the sword.

"Beware," he said. "One more step, and you'll be looking for your hand on the floor."

Nohorn and Tavik sprang to their feet, clutching their swords. The silent twins unsheathed theirs with identical motions. Fifteen backed.

Only Civril made no move.

"Dammit! What's going on in here? Can't you just be left alone for a moment?"

Geralt turned back very slowly and looked into the eyes of the colour of sea water.

She was nearly as tall as he. Her hair, of the colour of straw, she had cut unevenly just over the ears. She was standing with one hand leaning against the door, in a short tight velvet doublet, girdled tightly by an ornamented belt. Her skirt was uneven, asymmetrical: on the left it reached the calf, and on the right it exposed a strong thigh over the bootleg of a high boot made of elk skin. There was a sword at her left side, and a dagger with a large ruby in the pommel at the right.

"You lost speech?"

"This is a witcher," Nohorn ventured.

"So what?"

"He wanted to talk to you."

"So what?"

"He's a witch," thundered Fifteen.

"We don't like witches, growl Tavik.

"Easy, boys," said the girl. "He wants to talk to me, and that's no crime. You, go on with having fun on your own. And no disturbance. Tomorrow's a fair day. You can't possibly want your pranks to spoil the fair, it's such an important event in the life of this nice little town?"

In the silence that followed a silent, nasty snigger could be heard. Civril, still carelessly sprawling on his bench, was laughing.

"Eh, you, Renfri," the half-caste grumbled. "Important..... event!"

"Shut up, Civril. This instant!"

Civril stopped laughing. In an instant. Geralt wasn't surprised. There was a very peculiar note sounding in Renfri's voice. Something that could be associated with red reflections of a fire on the blades, yells of the murdered, neighing of horses and the smell of blood. Others must have had similar associations, as there was paleness creeping even over Tavik's weather-beaten kisser.

"Well, chalkhaired," Renfri broke the silence. "Let's go into a larger room, let's join the riff, with whom you came here. He must be willing to talk to me as well."

As soon as he noticed them Caldemeyn, waiting at the bar, broke his silent dialogue with the inn-keeper, stood straight and crossed his hands on the chest.

"Listen, ma'am," he said harshly, losing no time for exchanging brief cordialities. - I know from the Rivian witcher present here, what brings you to here, to Blaviken. Allegedly, you bear our sorcerer a grudge."

"I may. So what?" asked Renfri quietly, also in not too polite a manner.

"So that for such grudges we have either borough or castellan's courts. And ho wants to use iron to avenge a grudge here, in the Baycoves, is oft considered a common thug. And also that either early in the morning you leave Blaviken together with your black company, or I'll put you into the hole, pre... How d'you say that, Geralt?"

"Preventively."

"That's it. Got it, lass?"

Renfri reached into the purse she had at her belt, and fished out a folded parchment.

"Just read that riff, if you're literate. And call me 'lass' no more."

Caldemeyn took the parchment and having read it for a long while, he passed it to Geralt without a word.

"To my barons, knights and free subjects," the witcher read aloud. "I am making it known to all and the sundry that Renfri, the Duchess of Creyden, at our service remains and is pleasant to our eyes, therefore our anger shall follow the one who should raise difficultys to her. Audoen, the king...' Difficulties' spells differently. Though the seal looks authentic."

"For it is authentic," said Renfri, wrenching the parchment from his hands. "It was sealed by Audoen, your graceful sire. Therefore I would advise raising me no difficulties whatsoever. However you spell it, the results may be pitiful for you. You will not, my riff, put me into the hole. Nor address me as 'lass'. I have not disobey any law. For now."

"If you violate it even an inch," Caldemeyn looked as if he wanted to spit. "I'll have you in the hole together with the parchment. I swear by all gods, lass. Come, Geralt."

"With you, witcher," Renfri touched Geralt's arm "one more word."

"Don't be late for supper," said the riff over his shoulder. "Because Libushe will be furious."

"I won't be late."

Geralt leaned against the bar. Playing with the medallion with wolf's head that was hanging on his neck, he was looking in the blue-green eyes of the girl.

"I've heard about you," she said. "You are Geralt of Rivia, the white-haired witcher. Stregobor's your friend?"

"No."

"This makes the matter easier."

"Not too much. I'm not going to watch it idly."

Renfri's eyes narrowed.

"Stregobor will die tomorrow," she said quietly, casting her unevenly cut hair off the forehead. "It would be a lesser evil if only he died."

"If, or rather before Stregobor dies, a few other people will. I see no other way out."

"A few, witcher, is an understatement."

"I need more than words to be alarmed, Shrike."

"Don't call me Shrike. I don't like it. The thing is that I see other ways out. They'd be worth a talk, but - well - Libushe's waiting. Is she at least pretty, that Libushe?"

"Is that all you've had to tell me?"

"No. But now go. Libushe's waiting."

IV

Someone was in his little room in the attic. Geralt knew it before he approached the door, he understood it from the hardly perceptible vibration of the medallion. He extinguished the oil lamp, which he had used to light the stairs. He got a dagger out of his bootleg, and stuck it behind the belt on the back. He pressed the handle. It was dark in the room. Not for a witcher.

Purposefully, he stepped casually over the threshold, closing the door behind him at a leisurely pace. Next second, he took a mighty push, made one long leap, and landed on the someone sitting on his bed, pressing the person into the bedding; thrusting his left forearm under the man's chin, he reached for the dagger. He did not draw it. Something was wrong.

"Quite well begun," she said in a muffled voice, lying motionless under him. "I took this into consideration, but I did not think we'll land in bed so soon. Please, take this hand off my throat, if you could."

"That's you?"

"That's me. Listen: there are two things we can do. The first is: you go off me and we have a chat. The other: we remain in this position, but you will at least let me take my boots off."

The witcher chose the first option. The girl sighed, stood up, and adjusted her hair and skirt.

"Light a candle," she said. "I cannot see in darkness like you, and I like seeing the man I talk to."

She approached the table, tall, slender, and nimble, and sat down, stretching her legs in high boots in front of her. She had no weapons visible.

"Got something to drink here?"

"Nope."

"In that case, it's good I have brought some," she laughed, placing a travel wineskin and two leather cups on the table.

"It's almost midnight," said Geralt coldly. "May we proceed to the matter?"

"In a while. Take it, drink. Your health, Geralt."

"Same to you, Shrike."

"Shit! My name's Renfri," she tossed her head. "I let you skip the ducal title, but stop calling me Shrike!"

"Hush, or you'll wake all the house up. Will I finally learn what you stole into here through the window for?"

"How dumb you are, witcher. I want to save Blaviken from a slaughter. And to discuss that with you I crept along roofs, like a tabby cat in March. Just you appreciate it!

"I do," said Geralt. "Yet I know not what such a discussion may yield. Everything's fair. Stregobor is in his sorcerer's tower, in order to get him you would have to besiege him there. If you do so, your writ will be of no help. Audoen will not be protecting you if you openly break the law. The riff, the guards, all of Blaviken will stand against you."

"If all of Blaviken do so, they will be seriously sorry they had not." Renfri smiled, presenting her predatory white teeth. "Have you had a good look at my boys? I guarantee they know their craft well. Can you imagine what will happen if there is a fight between them and those numskulls from the guard, who trip on their halberds with every step they make?"

"And do you, Renfri, imagine that I will be standing and idly watching such a fight? As you see, I am staying at the riff's. In case of need it would become to stand at his side."

"And I do not doubt that you would," Renfri became serious. "You, probably alone, as all the rest will be hiding in the cellars. There is no warrior in this world who would manage against seven swordsmen. No man can accomplish this. But, chalkhaired, let's stop frightening each other. I said: slaughter and bloodshed can be prevented. Namely, there are two people who can achieve that."

"I'm all ears."

"One," said Renfri. "Is Stregobor himself. He will leave his tower of his own will, and I will take him to some wilderness, and Blaviken will be allowed to plunge in blessed bucolic idleness again and will soon forget the whole affair."

"Stregobor may make the impression of a deranged, yet not to such an extent."

"Who knows, witcher, who knows. There are arguments which cannot be opposed or resisted, there are also offers which cannot be reject. Among these there's for instance the Tridamian ultimatum. I will offer him Tridamian ultimatum.

"What is such an ultimatum?"

"My sweet secret."

"Let it be. Yet I doubt if it's going to be effective. Stregobor's teeth chatter, when talking about you. An ultimatum, which would convince him to surrender of his own accord into your beautiful hands would have to be a mighty one, indeed. Let us then proceed to the other person who can prevent carnage in Blaviken. I shall try to guess who this person is."

"Your sagacity makes me wonder, chalkhaired."

"It's you, Renfri. You yourself. You will display ducal - what am I saying - regal magnanimity indeed and you will renounce vengeance. Have I guessed right?"

Renfri tossed her head back and laughed loudly, timely covering her mouth with her hand. Then she became serious again and, fixed her gleaming at the witcher.

"Geralt," she said. "I was a duchess, but in Creyden. I had all I dreamt about, and I didn't even need to ask. Servants at every request, dresses, shoes. Batiste panties. Jewels and other trinkets, a sorrel pony, goldfish in a pond. Dolls and a house for them, larger than this room of yours here. And it went on till the day when that Stregobor of yours and that whore Aridea made her Master of the Hunt take me to the forest, cut my throat and bring the heart and liver to them. Lovely, wasn't it?"

"No. Rather disgusting. I am happy you managed with the Master of the Hunt, Renfri."

"Shit, I didn't. He pitied me and let me go. But before that he raped me, the bastard, and stole my earrings and a golden coronet."

Geralt looked her straight in the eye, playing with the medallion. She didn't look down.

"And that was the end of the little duchess," she continued. "The dress was torn, the whiteness of batiste was lost never to return. Then came the dirt, the hunger, the stench, the cudgels, and the kicks. Agreeing to being bonked by any nitwit for a bowl of soup or a place to sleep. Do you know what hair I had? Like silk. And they reached well over an ell beyond my bum. When I contracted lice, it was cut with scissors for sheep-shearing, close at the very skin. They have never grew back that much."

She went silent for a while, and removed the uneven locks from her forehead.

"I used to steal, just not to perish of hunger," she continued. "I killed, so that I weren't killed myself. I spent my time in dungeons reeking of urine, not knowing if I were to be hanged the next day, or only whipped and exiled. And all that time my step-mother and that sorcerer of yours were close on my heels, paying assassins, and attempting to poison. They cast spells. To show magnanimity? To forgive him royally? I will tear his head off royally, but maybe both the legs first - we shall see."

"Aridea and Stregobor tried to poison you?"

"True. With an apple, laced with banewort essence. A gnome saved me. He gave me an emetic, after which I thought I would turn my insides out like a stocking. But I survived."

"He was one of the seven gnomes, wasn't he?"

Renfri, who was busily pouring, froze with the wineskin over the cup.

"A-ha," she said "You know quite a lot about me. And what? Got something against gnomes? Or other humanoids? If I am to be precise, they were better for me than most people. But you shouldn't care about that. I've told you: Stregobor and Aridea chased me like a wild beast as long as they were able to do so. Then they stopped being able, and I myself turned into the hunter. Aridea kicked the bucket in her own bed, she was lucky that I hadn't reached her earlier, I had prepared a special program for her. And now I've got one for the wizard. Geralt, has he deserved death according to you? Tell me."

"I am not a judge. I am a witcher."

"That is right. I said that there are two people who can prevent bloodshed in Blaviken. You are the other. The witch will let you into the tower, and then you kill him."

"Renfri," said Geralt calmly. "Didn't you, by any chance, coming to my room slip off the roof head down?"

"Are you a witcher, or not, dammit? They say you killed a kikimore, and brought it here on a donkey for pricing. Stregobor is worse than a kikimore, which is a mindless beast: it kills for so it was designed by the gods. Stregobor is a savage, a maniac, a monster. Bring him to me on a donkey, and I will not spare gold."

"I am not a mercenary rogue, Shrike."

"You aren't," she agreed with a smile. She leaned against the back of her chair and crossed her legs up on the table, making not a least effort to cover her thighs with the skirt. "You are a witcher, the defender of people, whom you defend from Evil. And in this case the Evil is the fire and iron which shall start playing havoc here, when we stand eye to eye against each other. Don't you think that what I have to offer is the lesser evil, the best solution? Even for that bastard Stregobor. You can kill him with mercy - just one unexpected thrust. He will die not knowing he is dying. And I won't vouchsafe that to him. Just the contrary."

Geralt remained silent. Renfri stretched, raising her hands.

"I understand your hesitation," she said. "But I must know the answer this instant."

"Do you know why Stregobor and the Duchess wanted to kill you, then in Creyden, and later?"

Renfri suddenly straightened up and took her legs off the table.

"It's quite obvious," she burst. "They wanted to get rid of the first-born daughter of Fredefalk, as I was heir apparent to the throne. The children of Aridea were of a morganatic wedlock and had no rights to..."

"Renfri, this is not what I meant."

The girl dropped her head but only for a moment Her eyes flashed.

"Well then. I am supposed to be accursed. Corrupted in my mother's womb. I am to be..."

"Finish it."

"A monster."

"And are you?"

For a moment, though a very short one, she looked defenseless and broken down. And very sad too.

"I don't know. Geralt," she whispered. Then her features went hard again. "For how, the hell, should I know? If I hurt my finger I bleed. I also bleed every month. When I pig out, I have a stomach-ache, and if I get drunk - a headache. Jolly I sing; sad I swear. If I hate one I kill him, and if... Well, sod it, it's enough... Your answer, witcher."

"My answer is 'No.'"

"Do you remember what I said?" she asked after a moment's silence. "There are offers one cannot reject, for the results may be terrible. I am warning you in earnest: mine was one of these."

"I have made up my mind. And treat me seriously, as I am also giving you a serious warning."

Renfri remained silent for some time, fidgeting with a string of pearls running three times around her shapely neck, and teasingly dropping between the two shapely spheres visible in the low cut neckline of her doublet.

"Geralt," she said "Has Stregobor asked you to kill me?"

"Yes. He considered it to be lesser evil."

"Can I take it for granted that you refused then, just like you refused a moment ago?"

"You can."

"Why?"

"Because I don't believe in lesser evil."

After Renfri smiled delicately, her lips were contorted by a grimace looking nastily in the yellowish glow of the candle.

"You don't believe, you say. You see, you are right, but only to a certain extent. There is Evil and the Greater Evil, and behind both of them, in the shade, there is the Very Great Evil. Very Great Evil Geralt is one which you cannot even imagine, even though you thought that nothing can surprise you. And you see, Geralt, sometimes it goes so that this Very Great Evil clutches you by the throat and says: "Choose, fella, either me or that one, slightly lesser".

"May I know what you are aiming at?"

"At nothing. I've had some drink and I'm preaching philosophy. I'm looking for general truths. And I've just found one: the lesser evil exists, yet we do not have to choose it by ourselves. This Very Great Evil is capable of forcing us into such a choice. Whether we want it or not."

"I must have drunk too little," the witcher smiled tartly. "And midnight has just passed, like midnights do. Let us proceed to the matter. You won't kill Stregobor in Blaviken, I won't let you do it. I will not allow fighting and slaughter here. I'm suggesting for the second time: renounce your vengeance. Give up killing him. In this way you will prove it to him, and not only to him, that you are not an inhuman, bloodthirsty monster, a mutant and a freak. You'll prove to him that he was wrong. And that he wronged you terribly with his mistake."

For a while, Renfri looked at the witcher's medallion spinning on the chain turned by his fingers.

"And if I tell you, witcher, that I am unable to forgive, nor can I renounce my vengeance, will it be the same as if I admitted to him, and not only to him, that they are right, won't it? In this way I will prove that I am a monster, an inhuman demon cursed by gods? Listen, witcher. At the very beginning of my banishment I was taken by one freeman under his roof. He fancied me. Yet, I did not fancy him, on the contrary, every time he wanted me to be his, he used to beat me so hard I could hardly drag myself off the bunk in the morning. Once I got up when it was still dark and I slit that bastard's throat. With a scythe. Then I did not yet have my skill, and a knife seemed too small. And you see, Geralt, listening to the ceorl gurgling and choking, looking at him jerking his legs. I felt no pain whatsoever in the bruises his cudgel and fists left. And I felt good, so good that even... I went away, whistling cheerfully, healthy, joyful and happy. And each next time it was the same I. If it were different, who would waste time on vengeance?"

"Renfri," said Geralt, "Whatever your justification and reasons are, you shall not leave from here whistling and you will not feel so good that even. You will not leave joyful and happy but you shall leave alive. Early in the morning tomorrow, as the sheriff ordered. I have told you that but I shall repeat. You shall not kill Stregobor in Blaviken."

Renfri's eyes were glowing in the light of the candle, the pearls in the neckline of her short doublet were glistening; the medallion with wolf's head was glimmering and whirling on its silver chain.

"I pity you," said the girl suddenly and slowly, staring at the shimmering silver disk, "You claim that there is lesser evil. You're standing on a market, on the cobbles bathed in blood, alone, so lonely, because you were not able to make a choice. You were not able but you made it. You shall never know: you shall never be sure - you hear me? And your pay shall be a stone and an unkind word. I pity you."

"And you?" asked the witcher quietly, almost in whisper.

"I cannot choose either."

"Who are you?"

"I am what I am."

"Where are you?"

"I'm cold."

"Renfri!" Geralt clasped the medallion in his hand.

She lifted her head up as if suddenly woken up from a dream and blinked her eyes a few times in amazement. For a moment - a very short one - she looked frightened.

"You've won," she said in a sudden harsh tone, "You've won, witcher. Tomorrow morning I am leaving Blaviken, never to return to this lousy little town. Never. Fill up, if there is anything left in the bottle."

Her usual mocking teasing smile returned to her lips when she was putting the empty cup back on the table.

"Geralt?"

"I'm here."

"This bloody roof is steep. I'd rather leave at dawn. When it's dark I can fall down and hurt myself. I am a duchess, and I have a fragile body, I can sense a pea through a mattress. Unless it is well stuffed with straw, naturally. What will you say?"

"Renfri," Geralt smiled, willy-nilly, "does what you say make you a duchess?"

"Hell! What can you know about duchesses? I was one and I know that all the pleasure that there is in being one is the possibility of doing what one feels like. Am I to tell you openly, or will you guess yourself?"

Still smiling, Geralt didn't answer.

"I do not even want to accept the thought that you don't fancy me," the girl frowned. "I prefer to presume that you are scared of walking in the footsteps of that freeman. Eh, white-haired. I've got nothing sharp on me. Well, just see for yourself.

She put her legs on his knees.

"Take my boots off. The bootleg's the best place to hide a knife."

Barefoot, she stood up and tugged at the clasp of her belt.

"I hide nothing here, as you see. Nor here, as you see. Put down that damned candle.

Outside, in the darkness, a cat was caterwauling.

"Renfri?"

"Yes?"

"Is that batiste?"

"Blast it! Naturally! I am a duchess, aren't I?"

V

"Daddy," Marilka wailed monotonously. "When will we go to the fair? To the fair, Daddy!"

"Be quiet, Marilka." Caldemeyn rumbled, wiping his plate with bread. "So, what are you saying, Geralt? Are they moving out from the town?"

"Yes."

"Well, I didn't think it will go that smoothly. They held me by the throat with this parchment sealed by Audeon. I was trying to grin and bear it, but - to tell you the truth - I could do nothing at all to them."

"Even if they openly broke the law? Started a brawl, mutiny, fight?"

"Even then. Audoen, Geralt, is an easily irritable king, he sends you up the gallows for anything. I am married, I have a daughter, I like my job, and I don't have to trouble where to get something to go well with my tomorrow's

groats. In one word: it's good they're leaving. How did it really happen?"

"Daddy I want to the fair!"

"Libushe! Take Marilka away! Well, Geralt, I didn't think so. I questioned Centurion, the innkeeper of the Golden Manor, about that Novigrad company. They are quite a bunch. Some have been identified."

"Well?"

"The one with a scar across his face is Nohorn, former Abergard's sidekick, from the so-called free Angren company. You've heard of the company, haven't you? Apparently you have; who hasn't... That bull of a man, they call Fifteen, too. Even if not, I don't think his name refers to the fifteen good turns he's done in his life. That blackish half-elf is Civril, a highwayman and assassin. He's said to have had something to do with the Tridam massacre."

"Where?"

"In Tridam. You haven't heard? It was common gossip about three... Well, yes, must have been three years ago, for Marilka was two then. The Baron of Tridam kept some thugs in his dungeon. Their companions, they say that that cur, Civril, was also among them, they captured a river ferry teeming with pilgrims, it was at the time of Nis Festivity. They sent to the baron demanded liberation of those. The Baron, as was to be expected, refused, and then they started murdering the pilgrims, one by one, one after another. Before the Baron yielded and released those from the dungeon, they let more than ten go down with the current. Exile, or even the block loomed over the Baron, some were vexed by the fact that he yielded only when so many had been killed; others were agitated, claiming that he had done a great evil: that it was a pre... precedent or what, and that those should have been shot down with crossbows together with the hostages, or be suddenly assaulted from boats, and he should not have gone even an inch their way. At the court, the Baron maintained that he chose the lesser evil, for there were over a quarter of a hundred people on the ferry: women, brats..."

"The Tridam ultimatum." witcher whispered. "Renfri..."

"What?"

"Caldemeyn - the fair!"

"What?"

"Can't you understand, Caldemeyn? She deceived me. They will not leave. They will force Stregobor to leave the tower, just like they forced the Baron of Tridam. Or, they will force me to... Don't you understand? They will start murdering people at the fair. Your market, here within these walls is a true trap!"

"By all the gods, Geralt! Sit down! Where to, Geralt?"

Marilka, frightened by the uproar, sobbed huddling in a corner of the kitchen

"I told you," shouted Libushe, pointing her hand at the witcher, "I told you! He brings only evil."

"Shut up, woman! Geralt! Sit down!"

"They must be prevented. Now, before they enter the market. Call the guards. As soon as they leave the tavern, get good hold of them, and have them bound or fettered."

"Geralt, be sensible. It cannot be done. We mustn't touch them if they have done nothing. They will resist, blood will be shed. They are professionals: they'll slaughter my people. If Audeon learns that, my head will be forfeit. All right, I'll gather my men, I'll go to the fair, and there I'll keep my eye on them..."

"It's good for nothing, Caldemeyn. As soon as the crowd enters the square, you won't prevent panic and carnage. They must be pacified at once, while the market is still empty."

"It's defiance of the law! I may not allow for that. All about this half-elven and Tridam may be only gossip. You may be mistaken, and what then? Audoen will skin me alive."

"One must choose lesser evil!"

"Geralt! I forbid! As the sheriff, I forbid! Leave the sword! Halt!"

Marilka was shouting, having put her little hands over her mouth.

VI

Shading his eyes with his hand, Civril was looking at the sun coming out from behind the trees. The market was beginning to come alive. Wagons and carts were rambling, the first merchants were already beginning to display their goods on the stalls. A hammer was banging, a cockerel was crowing, seagulls were crying loud.

"A fine day this is going to be," said Fifteen deep in thought. Civril looked at him with disgust but said nothing.

"What about the horses, Tavik?" asked Nohorn, pulling on his gauntlets.

"Ready and saddled. Civril, there are still few of them in that market."

"More will come."

"We should eat something."

"Later."

"Sure. You'll have time, later. And you'll feel like it."

"Look," said Fifteen suddenly.

The witcher was approaching from the direction of main street. Now he was walking among the stalls and making straight for them.

"A-ha." said Civril, "Renfri was right. Give me the crossbow, Nohorn."

He bowed down, and pulled the string back, putting his foot on the weapon's stirrup. Then he carefully placed the bolt in its groove. The witcher was walking. Civril raised the crossbow.

"Not a step further, witcher!"

"Geralt halted. He was about forty paces away from the group.

"Where is Renfri?"

The half-caste had a scowl written across his pretty face. "She's at the tower, making a certain proposal to the sorcerer. She knew you would come. She told me to pass two things to you.

"Speak."

"The first is the following message: 'I am what I am. Choose. Either me, or the other, lesser one.' I've been told you sort of know what it means."

The witcher nodded, then raised his hand, grasping the hilt of his sword peeking from over his right shoulder. The blade flashed, drawing an arc over his head. Then he slowly advanced towards the group.

Civril chuckled with evil, mischievous laughter.

"So, still. She anticipated that too, witcher. Then, in a moment, you will get the other thing she asked to pass to you. Straight between the eyes."

The witcher was walking. The half-elven raised the crossbow to his cheek. Everything became very quiet.

The bowstring twanged. The witcher waved his sword, a prolonged whine of stricken metal could be heard, and the bolt flew up and, turning somersaults, clattered on the roof, and thudded in the rainwater pipe. The witcher was walking.

"Diverted it..." Fifteen groaned. "Diverted it in flight..."

"Round up," commanded Civril. Swords, being unsheathed, sang; the group closed their ranks: now standing hand in hand, with their many blades pointing outward.

The witcher quickened his pace, his gait now amazingly soft and smooth, he changed into a run - not headlong onto the group spiked with swords but to its side, encircling it in a closing spiral.

Tavik couldn't stand it and moved on quickly, cutting the distance. The twins followed close.

"Don't disperse!" yelled Civril turning his head and losing the sight of the witcher. He swore and jumped aside, seeing that the group went apart, and were dancing a mad dance among the stalls.

Tavik was first. A moment earlier he had been chasing Geralt, and now all of a sudden he noticed the witcher, running by him in the opposite direction, to the left. He made a few little steps to lessen the impact but the witcher had sped by, before he had time to raise the sword. Tavik felt a mighty stroke just over his hip. He turned to find himself falling. Already down on his knees, Tavik looked at his hip in bewilderment and started to yell.

Attacking simultaneously the black shape rushing at them, the twins ran into each other, and collided with their shoulders, losing the rhythm for a moment. It was enough. Vyr, slashed across the whole chest, folded in half, and with his head bent low took a few steps and fell into a vegetable stall. Nimir was hit on the temple, turned on the spot and dropped into the sewer: heavily, inertly.

The market swarmed with fleeing salesmen, the collapsing stalls gave a groan, raising dust and cries. Tremor in his hands, Tavik tried to lift his weight on them once again and fell.

"From the left, Fifteen!" roared Nohorn, running in a semicircle, to get the witcher from behind.

Fifteen turned fast. Not fast enough. He was slashed across the abdomen; he withstood and prepared a blow. Then he was cut for the second time: on the side of his neck, just below the ear. With muscles tensed, he took four staggering paces and fell heavily on a cart full of fish. The cart wheeled away. Fifteen slid down to the cobbles silver with the scales.

Civril and Nohorn attacked simultaneously from both sides, the elf with a powerful cut from above, Nohorn kneeling, low and flat. Both the blows were parried, two metallic clangs resounding together. Civril jumped to the side, tripped, managed to balance on his legs, clutching to the wooden framework of a stall. Nohorn rushed forward and covered him with his sword held vertically. He deflected a blow, so powerful that he was thrust back, and forced to kneel. Springing to his feet, he got ready to parry, yet he was too slow. He got a slash across the face, symmetrical to his old scar.

Civril used his back to push himself back from the stall, jumped over the falling Nohorn, and attacked with both hands, half-turned. He missed and immediately jumped back. He did not feel the blow. His legs gave way only when, after a subconscious parry, he was trying to pass from a feint to another attack. His sword fell off his hand, slashed on the inner side, just above the elbow. He fell down to his knees, tried to stand up but failed. Dropping his head on his knees, he froze in a red pool, among scattered cabbage, pretzels and fish.

Renfri entered the market.

She was coming slowly, with catlike steps, meandering among the carts and stalls. The crowd previously buzzing like a swarm of hornets in the streets and by the walls of the houses, now silenced. Geralt was standing motionless, sword in his lowered hand. The girl approached him and stopped ten paces away. He noticed that she had chain-mail under her short doublet. It was short, hardly covering the hips.

"You have made a choice," she declared. "You sure it is the right one?"

"There will be not another Tridam here," said Geralt with effort.

"There wouldn't be one. Stregobor jeered at me. He said I could slaughter all of Blaviken and add a few nearby villages, and yet, he shall not leave the tower. And he shall let nobody - you included - in. Why are you staring like that? Yes, I have cheated you. I have cheated throughout my life, if there was a need, why should I have made an exception for you?"

"Go away from here, Renfri."

She laughed.

"No, Geralt," she unsheathed her sword quickly and smoothly.

“Renfri.”

“No, Geralt. You have made your choice. Now, it is my turn.”

With one sharp move she tore her skirt off her hips, whirled it in the air, wrapping the cloth around her left forearm. Geralt backed, raised his hand, shaping his fingers together into a Sign. Renfri laughed again in a short sniggering laughter.

“To no avail, white-haired. Can’t hurt me this way. Only the sword.”

“Renfri,” he repeated, “go away. If we but let the blades cross, I.. will no longer... be able ...”

“I know,” she said. “But I cannot... I cannot do otherwise, either. I just cannot. We are what we are. You and me.”

She advanced in light swaying paces. In her right, outstretched hand there was her sword glistening, in the left one, she had the skirt: its end trailing in the dust. Geralt took two steps back.

She jumped forward, waved her left hand: the skirt swished in the air. Following it close, partially out of sight, the sword flickered in a short, sparing cut. Geralt retreated, the cloth not even touching him, and Renfri’s blade sliding down his inclined parry. Geralt mechanically parried it with the middle of the blade, and engaged both the swords in a short tierce, trying to wrench her weapon. It was a mistake. She parried his blow and immediately - her knees bent, and her hips swaying - she attacked, aiming at the face. Geralt hardly managed to parry that blow, and jumped aside from the cloth of the skirt falling down on him. He whirled in a pirouette, avoiding the blade flashing in rapid slashes, and jumped aside again. She bore straight into him, thrusting her skirt into his eyes and, half-turned, she made a flat cut from a reduced distance. He avoided being hit, turning close to her. He knew that trick. She turned together with him so that he felt her breath. She ran her blade across his chest. He felt the pain jerking his body, yet it didn’t break his rhythm. He turned once again, this time the other way, deflected the blade driven towards his temple, and attacked after a fast feint. Renfri jumped to the side, and prepared for a cut at head. Geralt, kneeling in a lunge, swiftly slashed her from below, with the foible of his sword, through the unprotected thigh and the groin.

She did not cry. Falling to her knee, she let her sword go, and clung with both her hands to the slashed thigh. Blood spurted in a bright stream from between her fingers onto her ornamented belt, onto the elken shoes, on the filthy cobbles. The mob, pressed into the little streets swayed and cried out.

Geralt sheathed the sword.

“Don’t go!” she moaned, curling into a ball.

He did not answer.

“I.. am... cold...”

He did not answer. Renfri moaned again, curling up even more. Little quick torrents of blood were filling the cracks between stones.

“Geralt... embrace me...”

He did not answer.

She turned her head and went still with a cheek touching the cobbles. An extremely thin-bladed stiletto, so far concealed under her body, slipped from her stiffening fingers.

After a while, long as eternity itself, the witcher raised his head hearing the clatter of Stregobor’s stave on the cobbles. The sorcerer was hastily approaching, making his way among the corpses.

“What a carnage,” he gasped, “I saw all of it, Geralt, I saw everything in the crystal...”

He came closer and bent down. In his flowing robe, leaning on the stave, he looked old, very old.

“One would not believe” he turned his head. “The Shrike, quite dead.”

Geralt did not answer.

“Well, Geralt,” the sorcerer stood up straight, “Go, get a cart. We’ll take her to the tower. Post-mortem is waiting.”

He looked at the witcher and, having received no answer, bent down over the body.

Someone the witcher didn't know, reached for the hilt of his sword, and unsheathed it very quickly, indeed.

"Just touch her, sorcerer," said someone the witcher didn't know, "Just touch her, and your head rolls down to the cobbles."

"What? Geralt? Have you gone mad? You're wounded, in a shock! Post-mortem is the only way to prove..."

"Do not touch her!"

Seeing the rising blade, Stregobor jumped aside and waved his stave.

"Right!" He shouted, "as you wish! But you will never know! You will never be sure! Never, you hear me, witcher?"

"Away!"

"As you wish," the sorcerer turned and hit his stave against the cobbles. "I am going back to Kovir. I'm not staying another day in this whistlestop. Come with me and stay not here! These people know nothing: they only saw you kill. And you kill in a nasty way, Geralt. What, you coming?"

Geralt did not answer, he didn't even look at him. He put back his sword. Stregobor shrugged his arms, and left making fast strides, tapping his stave rhythmically.

A stone sailed from the crowd and thudded on the cobbles. Another one followed, flying low over Geralt's arm. The witcher, standing straight, raised both the hands and made a quick gesture with them. The crowd murmured, and more stones were hurled but the Sign pushed them aside: they were passing by their target, protected with an invisible convex shield.

"Enough!!!" yelled Caldemeyn, "End it, dammit all!"

The crowd made a sound like a wave of the tide but the stones did not stop flying. The witcher did not move.

The sheriff approached him.

"Is that," he said, pointing with a sweeping gesture at the still bodies strewn all over the little square, "All over now? Is that the lesser evil you have chosen? Have you settled everything you deem necessary?"

"Yes." Answered Geralt, with an effort, after a pause.

"Is your wound serious?"

"No."

"Then, away with thee."

"Yes," said the witcher. He kept standing for one more moment, avoiding the sheriff's gaze. Then he turned slowly. Very slowly.

"Geralt."

The witcher looked round.

"Never return," said Caldemeyn, "Never."