

The Last Wish

Andrzej Sapkowski

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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 rumors about you witchers is true?”

“Practically nothing.”

“And what's a lie?”

“That there are fewer and fewer monsters.”

THE VOICE OF REASON

1

She came to him toward morning.

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

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

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

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