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The Last Wish

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Extract

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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 though 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,' Velerod 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?'