

A SHARD OF ICE

I

The dead sheep, swollen and bloated, its stiff legs pointing towards the sky, moved. Geralt, crouching by the wall, slowly drew his sword, careful not to let the blade grate against the scabbard. Ten paces from him, a pile of refuse suddenly arched up and heaved. The Witcher straightened and jumped before the wave of stench emanating from the disturbed midden reached him.

A tentacle ending in a rounded, tapering protuberance, bristling with spikes, suddenly shot out from under the rubbish, hurtling out towards him at incredible speed. The Witcher landed surely on the remains of a broken piece of furniture tottering on a pile of rotten vegetables, swayed, regained his balance, and slashed the tentacle with a short blow of his sword, cutting off the tentacular club. He sprang back at once, but this time slipped from the boards and sank up to his thighs in the boggy midden.

The rubbish heap erupted, throwing up viscous, foul-smelling slime, fragments of pots, rotten rags and pale threads of sauerkraut, and from beneath it all burst an enormous, bulbous body, as deformed as a grotesque potato, lashing the air with three tentacles and the stump of a fourth.

Geralt, trapped and immobilised, struck with a broad twist of his hips, smoothly hacking off another tentacle. The remaining two, as thick as tree boughs, fell on him with force, plunging him more deeply into the waste. The body glided towards him, ploughing into the midden like a barrel being dragged along. He saw the hideous,

bulbous shape snap open, gaping with a wide maw full of large, lumpish teeth.

He let the tentacles encircle his waist, pull him with a squelch from the stinking slime and drag him towards the body, now boring into the refuse heap with circular movements. The toothed maw snapped savagely and ferociously. Having been dragged close to the dreadful jaws, the Witcher struck with his sword, two-handed, the blade biting smoothly and easily. The obnoxious, sweetish odour took his breath away. The monster hissed and shuddered, and the tentacles released their grip, flapping convulsively in the air. Geralt, bogged down in the refuse, slashed again, backhanded, the blade repulsively crunching and grating on the bared teeth. The creature gurgled and drooped, but immediately swelled, hissing, vomiting putrid slime over the Witcher. Keeping his balance with strenuous movements of his legs, still stuck in the muck, Geralt broke free and lunged forward, cleaving the refuse with his chest like a swimmer moving through water, and struck with all his strength from above, powerfully bearing down on the blade as it cut into the body, between the weakly glowing eyes. The monster groaned, flapped around, unfolding onto the pile of muck like a punctured bladder, emitting palpable, warm gusts of stench. The tentacles twitched and writhed among the rubbish.

The Witcher clambered out of the treacly slime and stood on slippery but hard ground. He felt something sticky and revolting which had got into his boot crawling over his calf. To the well, he thought, wash it off, wash off all the repulsiveness as soon as possible. Wash myself. The creature's tentacles flapped on the refuse one last time, sloppy and wet, and then stopped moving.

A star fell, a brief flash of lightning illuminating the black firmament, flecked with unmoving dots of light. The Witcher made no wish.

He was breathing heavily, wheezing, and feeling the effects of the elixirs he had drunk before the fight wearing off. The gigantic heap of rubbish and waste piled up against the town walls, descending steeply towards the glistening ribbon of the river, looked pretty and alluring in the starlight. The Witcher spat.

The monster was dead, now part of the midden where it had dwelled.

Another star fell.

'A garbage heap,' the Witcher said with effort. 'Muck, filth and shit.'

II

‘You reek, Geralt,’ Yennefer grimaced, not turning from the mirror, where she was cleaning off the colouring from her eyelids and eyelashes. ‘Take a bath.’

‘There’s no water,’ he said, looking into the tub.

‘We shall remedy that,’ the sorceress stood up and threw the window open. ‘Do you prefer sea water or fresh water?’

‘Sea water, for a change.’

Yennefer spread her arms vigorously and shouted a spell, making a brief, intricate movement with her hands. Suddenly a sharp, wet coldness blew in through the open window, the shutters juddered, and a green cloud gushed into the room with a hiss, billowing in an irregular sphere. The tub foamed with water, rippling turbulently, banging against the edges and splashing onto the floor. The sorceress sat down and resumed her previously interrupted activity.

‘How did it go?’ she asked. ‘What was it, on the midden?’

‘A zeugl, as I suspected,’ Geralt said, pulling off his boots, discarding his clothes and lowering a foot into the tub. ‘Bloody hell, Yen, that’s cold. Can’t you heat the water?’

‘No,’ the sorceress, moving her face towards the looking glass and instilling something into her eye using a thin glass rod. ‘That spell is bloody wearying and makes me feel sick. And the cold will do you good after the elixirs.’

Geralt did not argue. There was absolutely no point arguing with Yennefer.

‘Did the zeugl cause you any problems?’ The sorceress dipped the rod into a vial and dropped something into her other eye, twisting her lips comically.

‘Not particularly.’

From outside the open window there was a thud, the sharp crack of wood breaking and an inarticulate voice, tunelessly and incoherently repeating the chorus of a popular, obscene song.

‘A zeugl,’ said the sorceress as she reached for another vial from the impressive collection on the table, and removed the cork from it. The fragrance of lilac and gooseberries filled the room. ‘Well, well. Even in a town it’s easy for a witcher to find work, you don’t have to roam through the wilds at all. You know, Istredd maintains it’s becoming a general rule. The place of every creature from the forests and swamps that becomes extinct is occupied by something else, some new mutation, adapted to the artificial environment created by people.’

As usual, Geralt winced at the mention of Istredd. He was beginning to be sick of Yennefer’s admiration for Istredd’s brilliance. Even if Istredd was right.

‘Istredd is right,’ Yennefer continued, applying the lilac-and-gooseberry perfumed something to her cheeks and eyelids. ‘Look for yourself; pseudorats in sewers and cellars, zeugls in rubbish dumps, neocorises in polluted moats and sewers, taggirs in millponds. It’s virtually symbiosis, don’t you think?’

And ghouls in cemeteries, devouring corpses the day after the funeral, he thought, rinsing off the soap. Total symbiosis.

‘Yes,’ the sorceress put aside the vials and jars, ‘witchers can be kept busy in towns, too. I think one day you’ll settle in a city for good, Geralt.’

I’d rather drop dead, he thought. But he did not say it aloud. Contradicting Yennefer, as he knew, inevitably led to a fight, and a fight with Yennefer was not the safest thing.

‘Have you finished, Geralt?’

‘Yes.’

‘Get out of the tub.’

Without getting up, Yennefer carelessly waved a hand and uttered a spell. The water from the tub – including everything which had spilled onto the floor or was dripping from Geralt – gathered itself with a swoosh into a translucent sphere and whistled through the window. He heard a loud splash.