Chapter 2

Geralt looked out of the palace window for the last time. Dusk was falling rapidly. Beyond

the lake the distant lights of Wyzima twinkled. There was a wilderness around the old palace -

a strip of no-man's land with which, over seven years, the town had cut itself off from this

dangerous place, leaving nothing but a few ruins, rotten beams and the remains of a gap-

toothed palisade which had obviously not been worth dismantling and moving. As far away as

possible - at the opposite end of the settlement - the king had built his new residence. The

stout tower of his new palace loomed black in the distance, against the darkening blue of the

sky.

In one of the empty, plundered chambers, the witcher returned to the dusty table at which he

was preparing, calmly and meticulously. He knew he had plenty of time. The striga would not

leave her crypt before midnight.

On the table in front of him he had a small chest with metal fittings. He opened it. Inside,

packed tightly in compartments lined with dried grass, stood small vials of dark glass. The

witcher removed three.

From the floor, he picked up an oblong packet thickly wrapped

in sheep's skins and fastened with a leather strap. He unwrapped it and pulled out a sword

with an elaborate hilt, in a black, shiny scabbard covered with rows of runic signs and

symbols. He drew the blade, which lit up with a pure shine of mirror-like brightness. It was

pure silver.

Geralt whispered an incantation and drank, one after the other, the contents of two vials,

placing his left hand on the blade of the sword after each sip. Then, wrapping himself tightly

in his black coat, he sat down on the floor. There were no chairs in the chamber, or in the rest

of the palace.

He sat motionless, his eyes closed. His breathing, at first even, suddenly quickened, became

rasping and tense. And then stopped completely. The mixture which helped the witcher gain

full control of his body was chiefly made up of veratrum, stramonium, hawthorn and spurge.

The other ingredients had no name in any human language. For anyone who was not, like

Geralt, inured to it from childhood, it would have been lethal poison.

The witcher turned his head abruptly. In the silence his hearing, sharpened beyond measure,

easily picked out a rustle of footsteps through the courtyard overgrown with stinging nettles.

It could not be the striga. The steps were too light. Geralt threw his sword across his back, hid

his bundle in the hearth of the ruined chimney-place and, silent as a bat, ran downstairs.

It was still light enough in the courtyard for the approaching man to see the witcher's face.

The man, Ostrit, backed away abruptly; an involuntary grimace of terror and repulsion

contorted his lips. The witcher smiled wryly - he knew what he looked like. After drinking a

mixture of banewart, monk's hood and eyebright the face takes on the colour of chalk, and the

pupils fill the entire iris. But the mixture enables one to see in the deepest darkness, and this is

what Geralt wanted.

Ostrit quickly regained control.

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

afraid. I bring you reprieve.'

The witcher did not reply.

'Don't you hear what I say, you Rivian charlatan? You're saved.

And rich.' Ostrit hefted a sizeable purse in his hand and threw it at Geralt's feet. 'A thousand

orens. Take it, get on your horse and get out of here!'

The Rivian still said nothing.

'Don't gawp at me!' Ostrit raised his voice. 'And don't waste my time. I have no intention of

standing here until midnight. Don't you understand? I do not wish you to undo the spell. No,

you haven't guessed. I am not in league with Velerad and Segelin. I don't want you to kill her.

You are simply to leave. Everything is to stay as it is.'

The witcher did not move. He did not want the magnate to realise how fast his movements

and reactions now were. It was quickly growing dark. A relief, as even the semi-darkness of

dusk was too bright for his dilated pupils.

'And why, sir, is everything to remain as it is?' he asked, trying to enunciate each word

slowly.

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

'And what if I already know?'

'Go on.'

'It will be easier to remove Foltest from the throne if the striga frightens the people even

more? If the royal madness completely disgusts both magnates and common folk, am I right?

I came here by way of Redania and Novigrad. There is much talk there that there are those in

Wyzim who look to King Vizimir as their saviour and true monarch. But I, Lord Ostrit, do not

care about politics, or the successions to thrones, or revolutions in palaces. I am here to

accomplish my task. Have you never heard of a sense of responsibility and plain honesty?

About professional ethics?'

'Careful to whom you speak, you vagabond!' Ostrit yelled furiously, placing his hand on the

hilt of his sword. 'I have had enough of this. I am not accustomed to hold such discussions!

Look at you - ethics, codes of practice, morality?! Who are you to talk? A brigand who's

barely arrived before he starts murdering men? Who bends double to Foltest and behind his

back bargains with Velerad like a hired thug? And you dare to turn your nose up at me, you

serf? Play at being a Knowing One? A Magician? You scheming witcher! Be gone before I

run the flat of my sword across your gob!'

The witcher did not stir. He stood calmly.

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

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

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

stone.'

Geralt smiled. The reputation of turtle-stone was as mistaken as it was popular. But the

witcher was not going to lose his strength on spells, much less expose his silver sword to

contact with Ostrit's blade. He dived under the whirling blade and, with the heel of his hand

and his silver-studded cuff, hit him in the temple.