Chapter 1

The following day, late in the evening, the miller was brought to the small chamber above the

guardhouse allocated to the witcher. He was led in by a soldier in a hooded coat.

The conversation did not yield any significant results. The miller was terrified; he mumbled

and stammered, and his scars told the witcher more than he did. The striga could open her

jaws impressively wide and had extremely sharp teeth, including very long upper fangs -

four of them, two on each side. Her claws were sharper than a wildcat's, but less curved. And

it was only because of that the miller had managed to tear himself away.

Having finished his examination Geralt nodded to the miller and soldier, dismissing them.

The soldier pushed the peasant through the door and lowered his hood. It was Foltest himself.

'Sit, do not get up,' said the king. 'This visit is unofficial. Are you happy with the interview? I

heard you were at the palace this morning.'

'Yes, your Majesty.'

'When will you set about your task?'

'It is four days until the full moon. After that.'

'You prefer to have a look at her yourself beforehand?'

'There is no need. But having had her fill the- the princess will be less active.'

'Striga, master witcher, striga. Let us not play at diplomacy. She will be a princess afterwards.

And that is what I have come to talk about. Answer me unofficially, briefly and clearly: will it

work or not? Don't hide behind your code.'

Geralt rubbed his brow.

'I confirm, your Majesty, that the spell might be reversed. And, unless I am mistaken, it can be

done by spending the night at the palace. The third crowing of the cock, as long as it catches

the striga outside her sarcophagus, will end the spell. That is what is usually done with

strigas.'

'So simple?'

'It is not simple. First you have to survive the night. Then there are exceptions to the rule, for

example, not one night but three. Consecutively. There are also cases which are . . . well . . .

hopeless.'

Yes,' Foltest bristled. 'I keep hearing that from some people. Kill the monster because it's an

incurable case. Master witcher, I

am sure they have already spoken to you. Am I right? Hack the man-eater to death without

any more fuss, at the beginning, and tell the king nothing else could be done. I won't pay, but

they will. Very convenient. And cheap. Because the king will order the witcher beheaded or

hanged and the gold will remain in their pockets.'

'The king unconditionally orders the witcher to be beheaded?' Geralt grimaced.

Foltest looked the Rivian in the eyes for a long while.

'The king does not know,' he finally said. 'But the witcher should bear such an eventuality in

mind.'

Geralt was silent for a moment. 'I intend to do what is in my power,' he said. 'But if it goes

badly I will defend my life. Your Majesty, you must also be prepared for such an eventuality.'

Foltest got up. 'You do not understand me. It's obvious you'll kill her if it becomes necessary,

whether I like it or not. Because otherwise she'll kill you, surely and inevitably. I won't punish

anyone who kills her in self-defence. But I will not allow her to be killed without trying to

save her. There have already been attempts to set fire to the old palace. They shot at her with

arrows, dug pits and set traps and snares, until I hung a few of her attackers. But that is not the

point. Witcher, listen!'

'I'm listening.'

'After the third crowing of the cock, there will be no striga, if I understand correctly. What

will there be?'

'If all goes well, a fourteen-year-old girl.'

With red eyes? Crocodile's teeth?'

'A normal fourteen-year-old. Except that . . .'

Well?'

'Physically.'

'I see. And mentally? Every day, a bucket of blood for breakfast? A little girl's thigh?'

'No. Mentally . . . There is no telling. On the level, I think, of a three- or four-year-old child.

She'll require loving care for a long while.'

'That's obvious. Witcher?'

'I'm listening.'

'Can it happen to her again? Later on?'

Geralt was silent.

'Aha,' said the king. 'It can. And what then?'

'Should she die after a long swoon lasting several days, her body will have to be burned.

Quickly.'

Foltest grew gloomy.

'I do not think it will come to that,' added Geralt. 'Just to be sure, I will give you some

instructions, your Majesty, to lessen the danger.'

'Right now? Is it not too soon, master witcher? And if-'

'Right now,' interrupted the Rivian. 'Many things may happen, your Majesty. It could be that

you'll find a princess in the morning, the spell already broken, and my corpse.'

'Even so? Despite my permission to defend yourself? Which, it seems, wasn't that important

to you.'

'This is a serious matter, your Majesty. The risk is great. That is why you must listen: the

princess should always wear a sapphire around her neck, or better, an inclusion, on a silver

chain. Day and night.'

'What is an inclusion?'

'A sapphire with a pocket of air trapped within the stone. Aside from that, every now and then

you should burn juniper, broom and aspen in the fireplace of her chamber.'

Foltest grew pensive. 'I thank you for your advice, witcher. I will pay heed if- And now

listen to me carefully. If you find the case is hopeless, kill her. If you undo the spell but the

girl is not . . . normal. If you have a shadow of a doubt as to whether you have been entirely

successful, kill her. Do not worry, you have nothing to fear from me. I'll shout at you in front

of others, banish you from the palace and the town, nothing more. Of course I won't give you

the reward, but maybe you'll manage to negotiate something from you know who.'

They were both quiet for a while.

'Geralt.' For the first time Foltest called the witcher by his name.

'Yes.'

'How much truth is there in the rumour that the child is as she is because Adda was my sister?'

'Not much. A spell has to be cast, they don't cast themselves. But I think your congress with

your sister was the reason the spell was cast, and this is the result.'

'As I thought. That is what some of the Knowing Ones said, although not all of them. Geralt?

Where do such things come from? Spells, magic?'

'I don't know, your Majesty. Knowing Ones study the causes of such phenomena. For us

witchers the knowledge that concentrated will can cause such phenomena is enough. That and

the knowledge to fight them.'

'And kill them?'

'Usually. Besides, that is what we're usually paid for. Only a few demand the reversal of

spells, your Majesty. As a rule, people simply want to defend themselves from danger. If the

monster has men on its conscience then revenge can also come into play.'

The king got up, took a few paces across the chamber, and stopped in front of the witcher's

sword hanging on the wall.

'With this?' he asked, not looking at Geralt.

'No. That is for men.'

'So I heard. Do you know what, Geralt? I'm going to the crypt with you.'

'Out of the question.'

Foltest turned, his eyes glinted. 'Do you know, sorcerer, that I have not seen her? Neither after

she was born, nor later. I was afraid. I may never see her, am I not right? At least I have the

right to see my daughter while you're murdering her.'

'I repeat, it's out of the question. It is certain death. For me as well as you. If my attention, my

will falters- No, your Majesty.'

Foltest turned away, started towards the door. For a moment Geralt thought he would leave

without a word, without a parting gesture, but the king stopped and looked at him.

'You inspire trust,' he said, 'although I know what a rogue you are. I was told what happened

at the tavern. I'm sure you killed

those thugs solely for word to spread, to shock people, to shock me. It's obvious that you

could have dealt with them without killing. I'm afraid I'll never know whether you are going

there to save my daughter, or to kill her. But I agree to it. I have to agree. Do you know why?'

Geralt did not reply.

'Because I think,' said the king, 'I think that she is suffering. Am I not right?'

The witcher fixed his penetrating eyes on the king. He didn't confirm it, didn't nod, didn't

make the slightest gesture, but Foltest knew. He knew the answer.