Chapter 3

Ostrit quickly regained consciousness and looked around in the total darkness. He noticed that

he was tied up. He did not see Geralt standing right beside him. But he realised where he was

and let out a prolonged, terrifying howl.

'Keep quiet,' said the witcher. 'Otherwise you'll lure her out before her time.'

'You damned murderer! Where are you? Untie me immediately, you louse! You'll hang for

this, you son-of-a-bitch!'

'Quiet.'

Ostrit panted heavily.

'You're leaving me here to be devoured by her! Tied up?' he asked, quieter now, whispering a

vile invective.

'No,' said the witcher. I'll let you go. But not now.'

'You scoundrel,' hissed Ostrit. 'To distract the striga?'

'Yes.'

Ostrit didn't say anything. He stopped wriggling and lay quietly.

'Witcher?'

'Yes.'

'It's true that I wanted to overthrow Foltest. I'm not the only one. But I am the only one who

wanted him dead. I wanted him to die in agony, to go mad, to rot alive. Do you know why?'

Geralt remained silent.

'I loved Adda. The king's sister. The king's mistress. The king's trollop. I loved her- Witcher,

are you there?'

'I am.'

'I know what you're thinking. But it wasn't like that. Believe me, I didn't cast any spells. I

don't know anything about magic. Only once in anger did I say . . . Only once. Witcher? Are

you listening?'

1 am.

'It's his mother, the old queen. It must be her. She couldn't watch him and Adda- It wasn't

me. I only once, you know, tried to persuade them but Adda- Witcher! I was besotted, and

said . . . Witcher? Was it me? Me?'

'It doesn't matter anymore.'

Witcher? Is it nearly midnight?'

'It's close.'

'Let me go. Give me more time.'

'No.'

Ostrit did not hear the scrape of the tomb lid being moved aside, but the witcher did. He leant

over and, with his dagger, cut the magnate's bonds. Ostrit did not wait for the word. He

jumped up, numb, hobbled clumsily, and ran. His eyes had grown accustomed enough to the

darkness for him to see his way from the main hall to the exit.

The slab blocking the entrance to the crypt opened and fell to the floor with a thud. Geralt,

prudently behind the staircase balustrade, saw the misshapen figure of the striga speeding

swiftly and unerringly in the direction of Ostrit's receeding footsteps. Not the slightest sound

issued from the striga.

A terrible, quivering, frenzied scream tore the night, shook the old walls, continued rising and

falling, vibrating. The witcher couldn't make out exactly how far away it was - his sharpened

hearing deceived him - but he knew that the striga had caught up with Ostrit quickly. Too

quickly.

He stepped into the middle of the hall, stood right at the entrance to the crypt. He threw down

his coat, twitched his shoulders, adjusted the position of his sword, pulled on his gauntlets. He

still had some time. He knew that the striga, although well fed after the last full moon, would

not readily abandon Ostrit's corpse. The heart and liver were, for her, valuable reserves of

nutrition for the long periods spent in lethargic sleep.

The witcher waited. By his count, there were about three hours left until dawn. The cock's

crow could only mislead him. Besides, there were probably no cocks in the neighbourhood.

He heard her. She was trudging slowly, shuffling along the floor. And then he saw her.

The description had been accurate. The disproportionately large head set on a short neck was

surrounded by a tangled, curly halo of reddish hair. Her eyes shone in the darkness like an

animal's. The striga stood motionless, her gaze fixed on Geralt. Suddenly she opened her jaws

- as if proud of her rows of pointed white teeth - then snapped them shut with a crack like a

chest being closed. And leapt, slashing at the witcher with her bloodied claws.

Geralt jumped to the side, spun a swift pirouette. The striga rubbed against him, also spun

around, slicing through the air with her talons. She didn't lose her balance and attacked anew,

mid-spin, gnashing her teeth fractions of an inch from Geralt's chest. The Rivian jumped

away, changing the direction of his spin with a fluttering pirouette to confuse the striga. As he

leapt away he dealt a hard blow to the side of her head with the silver spikes studding the

knuckles of his gauntlet.

The striga roared horribly, filling the palace with a booming echo, fell to the ground, froze

and started to howl hollowly and furiously.

The witcher smiled maliciously. His first attempt, as he had hoped, had gone well. Silver was

fatal to the striga, as it was for most monsters brought into existence through magic. So there

was a chance: the beast was like the others, and that boded well for lifting the spell, while the

silver sword would, as a last resort, assure his life.

The striga was in no hurry with her next attack. She approached slowly, baring her fangs,

dribbling repulsively. Geralt backed away and, carefully placing his feet, traced a semi-circle.

By slowing and quickening his movements he distracted the striga, making it difficult for her

to leap. As he walked the witcher unwound a long, strong silver chain, weighted at the end.

The moment the striga tensed and leapt the chain whistled through the air and, coiling like a

snake, twined itself around the monster's shoulders, neck and head. The striga's jump became

a tumble, and she let out an ear-piercing whistle. She thrashed around on the floor, howling

horribly with fury or from the burning pain inflicted by the despised metal. Geralt was content

- if he wanted he could kill the striga without great difficulty. But the witcher did not draw his

sword. Nothing in the striga's behaviour had given him reason to think she might be an

incurable case. Geralt moved to a safer distance and, without letting the writhing shape on the

floor out of his sight, breathed deeply, focused himself.

The chain snapped. The silver links scattered like rain in all directions, ringing against the

stone. The striga, blind with fury, tumbled to the attack, roaring. Geralt waited calmly and,

with his raised right hand, traced the Sign of Aard in front of him.

The striga fell back as if hit by a mallet but kept her feet, extended her talons, bared her fangs.

Her hair stood on end and fluttered as if she were walking against a fierce wind. With

difficulty, one rasping step at a time, she slowly advanced. But she did advance.

Geralt grew uneasy. He did not expect such a simple Sign to paralyse the striga entirely but

neither did he expect the beast to overcome it so easily. He could not hold the Sign for long, it

was too exhausting, and the striga had no more than ten steps to go. He lowered the Sign

suddenly, and sprung aside. The striga, taken by surprise, flew forward, lost her balance, fell,

slid along the floor and tumbled down the stairs into the crypt's entrance, yawning in the floor.

Her infernal scream reverberated from below.

To gain time Geralt jumped on to the stairs leading to the

gallery. He had not even climbed halfway up when the striga ran out of the crypt, speeding

along like an enormous black spider. The witcher waited until she had run up the stairs after

him, then leapt over the balustrade. The striga turned on the stairs, sprang and flew at him in

an amazing ten-metre leap. She did not let herself be deceived by his pirouettes this time;

twice her talons left their mark on the Rivian's leather tunic. But another desperately hard

blow from the silver spiked gauntlet threw the striga aside, shook her. Geralt, feeling fury

building inside him, swayed, bent backwards and, with a mighty kick, knocked the beast off

her legs.

The roar she gave was louder than all the previous ones. Even the plaster crumbled from the

ceiling.

The striga sprang up, shaking with uncontrolled anger and lust for murder. Geralt waited. He

drew his sword, traced circles with it in the air, and skirted the striga, taking care that the

movement of his sword was not in rhythm with his steps. The striga did not jump. She

approached slowly, following the bright streak of the blade with her eyes.

Geralt stopped abruptly, froze with his sword raised. The striga, disconcerted, also stopped.

The witcher traced a slow semi-circle with the blade, took a step in the striga's direction. Then

another. Then he leapt, feigning a whirling movement with his sword above her head.

The striga curled up, retreated in a zigzag. Geralt was close again, the blade shimmering in his

hand. His eyes lit up with an ominous glow, a hoarse roar tore through his clenched teeth. The

striga backed away, pushed by the power of concentrated hatred, anger and violence which

emanated from the attacking man and struck her in waves, penetrating her mind and body.

Terrified and pained by feelings unknown to her she let out a thin, shaking squeak, turned on

the spot and ran off in a desperate, crazy escape down the dark tangle of the palace's

corridors.

Geralt stood quivering in the middle of the hall. Alone. It had taken a long time, he thought,

before this dance on the edge of an abyss, this mad, macabre ballet of a fight, had achieved

the desired effect, allowed him to psychically become one with his opponent,

to reach the underlayers of concentrated will which permeated the striga. The evil, twisted

will from which the striga was born. The witcher shivered at the memory of taking on that

evil to redirect it, as if in a mirror, against the monster. Never before had he come across such

a concentration of hatred and murderous frenzy, not even from basilisks, who enjoyed a

ferocious reputation for it.

All the better, he thought as he walked toward the crypt entrance and the blackness that spread

from it like an enormous puddle. All the better, all the stronger, was the blow received by the

striga. This would give him a little more time until the beast recovered from the shock. The

witcher doubted whether he could repeat such an effort. The elixirs were weakening and it

was still a long time until dawn. But the striga could not return to her crypt before first light,

or all his trouble would come to nothing.

He went down the stairs. The crypt was not large; there was room for three stone sarcophagi.

The slab covering the first was half pushed aside. Geralt pulled the third vial from beneath his

tunic, quickly drank its contents, climbed into the tomb and stretched out in it. As he had

expected, it was a double tomb -for mother and daughter.

He had only just pulled the cover closed when he heard the striga's roar again. He lay on his

back next to Adda's mummified corpse and traced the Sign of Yrden on the inside of the slab.

He laid his sword on his chest, stood a tiny hourglass filled with phosphorescent sand next to

it and crossed his arms. He no longer heard the striga's screams as she searched the palace. He

had gradually stopped hearing anything as the true-love and celandine began to work.