

### **Annotation**

Watch for the signs! What signs these shall be, I say unto you: first the earth will flow with the blood of Aen Seidhe, the Blood of Elves...

For over a century, humans, dwarves, gnomes, and elves have lived together in relative peace. But times have changed, the uneasy peace is over, and now the races are fighting once again. The only good elf, it seems, is a dead elf.

Geralt of Rivia, the cunning assassin known as The Witcher, has been waiting for the birth of a prophesied child. This child has the power to change the world – for good, or for evil.

As the threat of war hangs over the land and the child is hunted for her extraordinary powers, it will become Geralt's responsibility to protect them all – and the Witcher never accepts defeat.

Following The Last Wish, BLOOD OF ELVES is the new novel starring Geralt of Rivia, the inspiration for the critically-acclaimed videogame The Witcher.

[Andrzej Sapkowski](#)

[CHAPTER ONE](#)

[CHAPTER TWO](#)

[CHAPTER THREE](#)

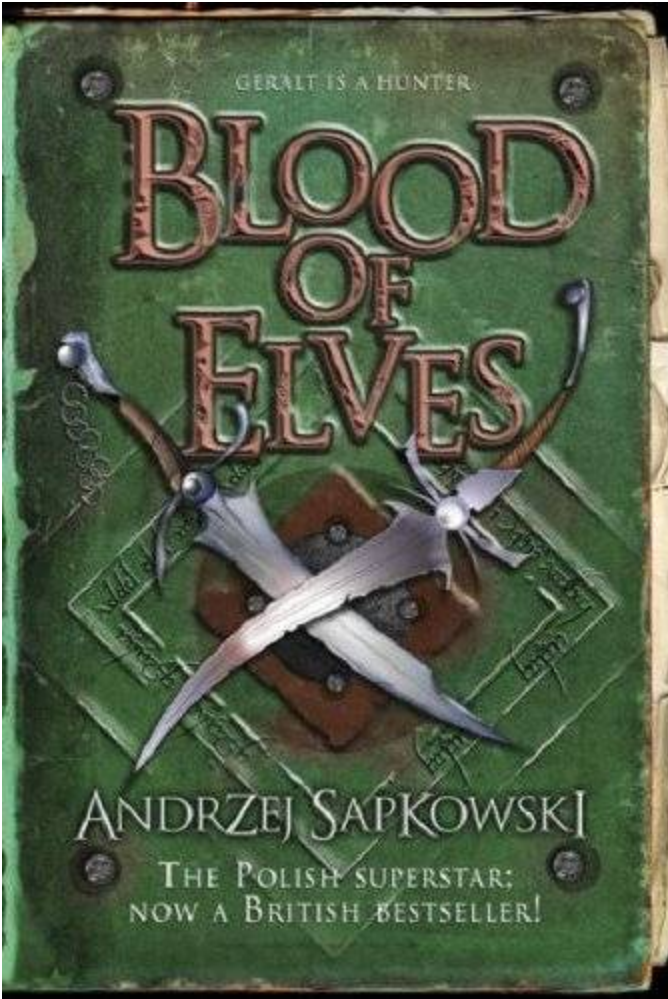
[CHAPTER FOUR](#)

[CHAPTER FIVE](#)

[CHAPTER SIX](#)

[CHAPTER SEVEN](#)

[Andrzej Sapkowski](#)



**Andrzej Sapkowski**

**Blood of Elves**

A book in the Witcher series, 2008

English translation copyright © Danusia Stok 2008

Original title: Krew Elfow, 1994

*Verily I say unto you, the era of the sword and axe  
is nigh, the era of the wolf's blizzard. The Time of the  
White Chill and the White Light is nigh, the Time of*

*Madness and the Time of Contempt: Tedd Deireddh, the  
Time of End. The world will die amidst frost and be  
reborn with the new sun. It will be reborn of the Elder  
Blood, of Hen Ichaer, of the seed that has been sown. A  
seed which will not sprout but will burst into flame.  
Ess'tuath esse! Thus it shall be! Watch for the signs!  
What signs these shall be, I say unto you: first the earth  
will flow with the blood of Aen Seidhe, the Blood of  
Elves...*

*Aen Ithlinnespeath, Ithlinne Aegli aep Aevenien's  
prophecy*

## **CHAPTER ONE**

The town was in flames.

The narrow streets leading to the moat and the first terrace belched smoke and embers, flames devouring the densely clustered thatched houses and licking at the castle walls. From the west, from the harbour gate, the screams and clamour of vicious battle and the dull blows of a battering ram smashing against the walls grew ever louder.

Their attackers had surrounded them unexpectedly, shattering the barricades which had been held by no more than a few soldiers, a handful of

townsmen carrying halberds and some crossbowmen from the guild. Their horses, decked out in flowing black caparisons, flew over the barricades like spectres, their riders' bright, glistening blades sowing death amongst the fleeing defenders.

Ciri felt the knight who carried her before him on his saddle abruptly spur his horse. She heard his cry. 'Hold on,' he shouted. 'Hold on!'

Other knights wearing the colours of Cintra overtook them, sparring, even in full flight, with the Nilfgaardians. Ciri caught a glimpse of the skirmish from the corner of her eye – the crazed swirl of blue-gold and black cloaks amidst the clash of steel, the clatter of blades against shields, the neighing of horses-

Shouts. No, not shouts. Screams.

'Hold on!'

Fear. With every jolt, every jerk, every leap of the horse pain shot through her hands as she clutched at the reins. Her legs contracted painfully, unable to find support, her eyes watered from the smoke. The arm around her suffocated her, choking her, the force compressing her ribs. All around her screaming such as she had never before heard grew louder. What must one do to a man to make him scream so?

Fear. Overpowering, paralysing, choking fear.

Again the clash of iron, the grunts and snorts of the horses. The houses whirled around her and suddenly she could see windows belching fire where a moment before there'd been nothing but a muddy little street strewn with corpses and cluttered with the abandoned possessions of the fleeing population. All at once the knight at her back was wracked by a strange wheezing cough. Blood spurted over the hands grasping the reins. More screams. Arrows whistled past.

A fall, a shock, painful bruising against armour. Hooves pounded past her, a horse's belly and a frayed girth flashing by above her head, then another horse's belly and a flowing black caparison. Grunts of exertion, like a lumberjack's when chopping wood. But this isn't wood; it's iron against iron. A shout, muffled and dull, and something huge and black collapsed into the mud next to her with a splash, spurting blood. An armoured foot quivered, thrashed, goring the earth with an enormous spur.

A jerk. Some force plucked her up, pulled her onto another saddle.

Hold on! Again the bone-shaking speed, the mad gallop. Arms and legs desperately searching for support. The horse rears. Hold on!... There is no support. There is no... There is no... There is blood. The horse falls. It's impossible to jump aside, no way to break free, to escape the tight embrace of these chainmail-clad arms. There is no way to avoid the blood pouring

onto her head and over her shoulders.

A jolt, the squelch of mud, a violent collision with the ground, horrifically still after the furious ride. The horse's harrowing wheezes and squeals as it tries to regain its feet. The pounding of horseshoes, fetlocks and hooves flashing past. Black caparisons and cloaks. Shouting.

The street is on fire, a roaring red wall of flame. Silhouetted before it, a rider towers over the flaming roofs, enormous. His black-caparisoned horse prances, tosses its head, neighs.

The rider stares down at her. Ciri sees his eyes gleaming through the slit in his huge helmet, framed by a bird of prey's wings. She sees the fire reflected in the broad blade of the sword held in his lowered hand.

The rider looks at her. Ciri is unable to move. The dead man's motionless arms wrapped around her waist hold her down. She is locked in place by something heavy and wet with blood, something which is lying across her thigh, pinning her to the ground.

And she is frozen in fear: a terrible fear which turns her entrails inside out, which deafens Ciri to the screams of the wounded horse, the roar of the blaze, the cries of dying people and the pounding drums. The only thing which exists, which counts, which still has any meaning, is fear. Fear embodied in the figure of a black knight wearing a helmet decorated with

feathers frozen against the wall of raging, red flames.

The rider spurs his horse, the wings on his helmet fluttering as the bird of prey takes to flight, launching itself to attack its helpless victim, paralysed with fear. The bird – or maybe the knight -screeches terrifyingly, cruelly, triumphantly. A black horse, black armour, a black flowing cloak, and behind this – flames. A sea of flames.

Fear.

The bird shrieks. The wings beat, feathers slap against her face. Fear! Help! Why doesn't anyone help me? Alone, weak, helpless – I can't move, can't force a sound from my constricted throat. Why does no one come to help me?

I'm terrified!

Eyes blaze through the slit in the huge winged helmet. The black cloak veils everything-

'Ciri!'

She woke, numb and drenched in sweat, with her scream – the scream which had woken her – still hanging in the air, still vibrating somewhere within her, beneath her breast-bone and burning against her parched throat. Her hands ached, clenched around the blanket; her back ached...

'Ciri. Calm down.'



The night was dark and windy, the crowns of the surrounding pine trees rustling steadily and melodiously, their limbs and trunks creaking in the wind. There was no malevolent fire, no screams, only this gentle lullaby. Beside her the campfire flickered with light and warmth, its reflected flames glowing from harness buckles, gleaming red in the leather-wrapped and iron-banded hilt of a sword leaning against a saddle on the ground. There was no other fire and no other iron. The hand against her cheek smelled of leather and ashes. Not of blood.

'Geralt-'

'It was just a dream. A bad dream.'

Ciri shuddered violently, curling her arms and legs up tight.

A dream. Just a dream.

The campfire had already died down; the birch logs were red and luminous, occasionally crackling, giving off tiny spurts of blue flame which illuminated the white hair and sharp profile of the man wrapping a blanket and sheepskin around her.

'Geralt, I-'

'I'm right here. Sleep, Ciri. You have to rest. We've still a long way ahead of us.'

I can hear music, she thought suddenly. Amidst the rustling of the

trees... there's music. Lute music. And voices. The Princess of Cintra... A child of destiny... A child of Elder Blood, the blood of elves. Geralt of Rivia, the White Wolf, and his destiny. No, no, that's a legend. A poet's invention. The princess is dead. She was killed in the town streets while trying to escape...

Hold on...! Hold...

'Geralt?'

'What, Ciri?'

'What did he do to me? What happened? What did he... do to me?'

'Who?'

'The knight... The black knight with feathers on his helmet... I can't remember anything. He shouted... and looked at me. I can't remember what happened. Only that I was frightened... I was so frightened...'

The man leaned over her, the flame of the campfire sparkling in his eyes. They were strange eyes. Very strange. Ciri had been frightened of them, she hadn't liked meeting his gaze. But that had been a long time ago. A very long time ago.

'I can't remember anything,' she whispered, searching for his hand, as tough and coarse as raw wood. 'The black knight-'

'It was a dream. Sleep peacefully. It won't come back.'

Ciri had heard such reassurances in the past. They had been repeated to her endlessly; many, many times she had been offered comforting words when her screams had woken her during the night. But this time it was different. Now she believed it. Because it was Geralt of Rivia, the White Wolf, the Witcher, who said it. The man who was her destiny. The one for whom she was destined. Geralt the Witcher, who had found her surrounded by war, death and despair, who had taken her with him and promised they would never part.

She fell asleep holding tight to his hand.

The bard finished the song. Tilting his head a little he repeated the ballad's refrain on his lute, delicately, softly, a single tone higher than the apprentice accompanying him.

No one said a word. Nothing but the subsiding music and the whispering leaves and squeaking boughs of the enormous oak could be heard. Then, all of a sudden, a goat tethered to one of the carts which circled the ancient tree bleated lengthily. At that moment, as if given a signal, one of the men seated in the large semi-circular audience stood up. Throwing his cobalt blue cloak with gold braid trim back over his shoulder, he gave a stiff, dignified bow.

'Thank you, Master Dandilion,' he said, his voice resonant without

being loud. 'Allow me, Radcliffe of Oxenfurt, Master of the Arcana, to express what I am sure is the opinion of everyone here present and utter words of gratitude and appreciation for your fine art and skill.'

The wizard ran his gaze over those assembled – an audience of well over a hundred people – seated on the ground, on carts, or standing in a tight semi-circle facing the foot of the oak. They nodded and whispered amongst themselves. Several people began to applaud while others greeted the singer with upraised hands. Women, touched by the music, sniffed and wiped their eyes on whatever came to hand, which differed according to their standing, profession and wealth: peasant women used their forearms or the backs of their hands, merchants' wives dabbed their eyes with linen handkerchiefs while elves and noblewomen used kerchiefs of the finest tight-woven cotton, and Baron Vilibert's three daughters, who had, along with the rest of his retinue, halted their falcon hunt to attend the famous troubadour's performance, blew their noses loudly and sonorously into elegant mould-green cashmere scarves.

'It would not be an exaggeration to say,' continued the wizard, 'that you have moved us deeply, Master Dandilion. You have prompted us to reflection and thought; you have stirred our hearts. Allow me to express our gratitude, and our respect.'

The troubadour stood and took a bow, sweeping the heron feather pinned to his fashionable hat across his knees. His apprentice broke off his playing, grinned and bowed too, until Dandilion glared at him sternly and snapped something under his breath. The boy lowered his head and returned to softly strumming his lute strings.

The assembly stirred to life. The merchants travelling in the caravan whispered amongst themselves and then rolled a sizable cask of beer out to the foot of the oak tree. Wizard Radcliffe lost himself in quiet conversation with Baron Vilibert. Having blown their noses, the baron's daughters gazed at Dandilion in adoration -which went entirely unnoticed by the bard, engrossed as he was in smiling, winking and flashing his teeth at a haughty, silent group of roving elves, and at one of them in particular: a dark-haired, large-eyed beauty sporting a tiny ermine cap. Dandilion had rivals for her attention – the elf, with her huge eyes and beautiful torque hat, had caught his audience's interest as well, and a number of knights, students and goliards were paying court to her with their eyes. The elf clearly enjoyed the attention, picking at the lace cuffs of her chemise and fluttering her eyelashes, but the group of elves with her surrounded her on all sides, not bothering to hide their antipathy towards her admirers.

The glade beneath Bleobheris, the great oak, was a place of frequent

rallies, a well-known travellers' resting place and meeting ground for wanderers, and was famous for its tolerance and openness. The druids protecting the ancient tree called it the Seat of Friendship and willingly welcomed all comers. But even during an event as exceptional as the world-famous troubadour's just-concluded performance the travellers kept to themselves, remaining in clearly delineated groups. Elves stayed with elves. Dwarfish craftsmen gathered with their kin, who were often hired to protect the merchant caravans and were armed to the teeth. Their groups tolerated at best the gnome miners and halfling farmers who camped beside them. All non-humans were uniformly distant towards humans. The humans repaid in kind, but were not seen to mix amongst themselves either. Nobility looked down on the merchants and travelling salesmen with open scorn, while soldiers and mercenaries distanced themselves from shepherds and their reeking sheepskins. The few wizards and their disciples kept themselves entirely apart from the others, and bestowed their arrogance on everyone in equal parts. A tight-knit, dark and silent group of peasants lurked in the background. Resembling a forest with their rakes, pitchforks and flails poking above their heads, they were ignored by all and sundry.

The exception, as ever, was the children. Freed from the constraints of silence which had been enforced during the bard's performance, the children

dashed into the woods with wild cries, and enthusiastically immersed themselves in a game whose rules were incomprehensible to all those who had bidden farewell to the happy years of childhood. Children of elves, dwarves, halflings, gnomes, half-elves, quarter-elves and toddlers of mysterious provenance neither knew nor recognised racial or social divisions. At least, not yet.

'Indeed!' shouted one of the knights present in the glade, who was as thin as a beanpole and wearing a red and black tunic emblazoned with three lions passant. 'The wizard speaks the truth!

The ballads were beautiful. Upon my word, honourable Dandilion, if you ever pass near Baldhorn, my lord's castle, stop by without a moment's hesitation. You will be welcomed like a prince- what am I saying?

Welcomed like King Vizimir himself! I swear on my sword, I have heard many a minstrel, but none even came close to being your equal, master.

Accept the respect and tributes those of us born to knighthood, and those of us appointed to the position, pay to your skills!'

Flawlessly sensing the opportune moment, the troubadour winked at his apprentice. The boy set his lute aside and picked up a little casket which served as a collection box for the audience's more measurable expressions of appreciation. He hesitated, ran his eyes over the crowd, then replaced the

little casket and grabbed a large bucket standing nearby. Master Dandilion bestowed an approving smile on the young man for his prudence.

'Master!' shouted a sizeable woman sitting on a cart, the sides of which were painted with a sign for 'Vera Loewenhaupt and Sons', and which was full of wickerwork. Her sons, nowhere to be seen, were no doubt busy wasting away their mother's hard-earned fortune. 'Master Dandilion, what is this? Are you going to leave us in suspense? That can't be the end of your ballad? Sing to us of what happened next!'

'Songs and ballads' the musician bowed – 'never end, dear lady, because poetry is eternal and immortal, it knows no beginning, it knows no end-'

'But what happened next?' The tradeswoman didn't give up, generously rattling coins into the bucket Dandilion's apprentice held out to her. 'At least tell us about it, even if you have no wish to sing of it. Your songs mention no names, but we know the witcher you sing of is no other than the famous Geralt of Rivia, and the enchantress for whom he burns with love is the equally famous Yennefer. And the Child Surprise, destined for the witcher and sworn to him from birth, is Cirilla, the unfortunate Princess of Cintra, the town destroyed by the Invaders. Am I right?'

Dandilion smiled, remaining enigmatic and aloof. 'I sing of universal



matters, my dear, generous lady,' he stated. 'Of emotions which anyone can experience. Not about specific people.'

'Oh, come on!' yelled a voice from the crowd. 'Everyone knows those songs are about Geralt the Witcher!'

'Yes, yes!' squealed Baron Vilibert's daughters in chorus, drying their sodden scarves. 'Sing on, Master Dandilion! What happened next? Did the witcher and Yennefer the Enchantress find each other in the end? And did they love each other? Were they happy? We want to know!'

'Enough!' roared the dwarf leader with a growl in his throat, shaking his mighty waist-length, red beard. 'It's crap – all these princesses, sorceresses, destiny, love and women's fanciful tales. If you'll pardon the expression, great poet, it's all lies, just a poetic invention to make the story prettier and more touching. But of the deeds of war the massacre and plunder of Cintra, the battles of Marnadal and Sodden – you did sing that mightily, Dandilion! There's no regrets in parting with silver for such a song, a joy to a warrior's heart! And I, Sheldon Skaggs, declare there's not an ounce of lies in what you say – and I can tell the lies from the truth because I was there at Sodden. I stood against the Nilfgaard invaders with an axe in my hand..."

'I, Donimir of Troy,' shouted the thin knight with three lions passant

blazoned across his tunic, 'was at both battles of Sodden! But I did not see you there, sir dwarf!'

'No doubt because you were looking after the supply train!' Sheldon Skaggs retorted. 'While I was in the front line where thivings got hot!'

'Mind your tongue, beardy!' said Donimir of Troy flushing, hitching up his sword belt. 'And who you're speaking to!'

'Have a care yourself!' The dwarf whacked his palm against the axe wedged in his belt, turned to his companions and grinned. 'Did you see him there? Frigging knight! See his coat of arms? Ha! Three lions on a shield? Two shitting and the third snarling!'

'Peace, peace!' A grey-haired druid in a white cloak averted trouble with a sharp, authoritative voice. 'This is not fitting, gentlemen! Not here, under Bleobheris' crown, an oak older than all the disputes and quarrels of the world! And not in Poet Dandilion's presence, from whose ballads we ought to learn of love, not contention.'

'Quite so!' a short, fat priest with a face glistening with sweat seconded the druid. 'You look but have no eyes, you listen but have deaf ears.

Because divine love is not in you, you are like empty barrels-'

'Speaking of barrels,' squeaked a long-nosed gnome from his cart, painted with a sign for 'Iron hardware, manufacture and sale', 'roll another

out, guildsmen! Poet Dandilion's throat is surely dry -and ours too, from all these emotions!'

'-Verily, like empty barrels, I tell ye!' The priest, determined not to be put off, drowned out the ironware gnome. 'You have understood nothing of Master Dandilion's ballad, you have learned nothing! You did not see that these ballads speak of man's fate, that we are no more than toys in the hands of the gods, our lands no more than their playground. The ballads about destiny portrayed the destinies of us all, and the legend of Geralt the Witcher and Princess Cirilla – although it is set against the true background of that war – is, after all, a mere metaphor, the creation of a poet's imagination designed to help us-'

'You're talking rubbish, holy man!' hollered Vera Loewenhaupt from the heights of her cart. 'What legend? What imaginative creation? You may not know him, but I know Geralt of Rivia. I saw him with my own eyes in Wyzima, when he broke the spell on King Foltest's daughter. And I met him again later on the Merchants' Trail, where, at Gildia's request, he slew a ferocious griffin which was preying on the caravans and thus saved the lives of many good people. No. This is no legend or fairy-tale. It is the truth, the sincere truth, which Master Dandilion sang for us.'

'I second that,' said a slender female warrior with her black hair

smoothly brushed back and plaited into a thick braid. 'I, Rayla of Lyria, also know Geralt the White Wolf, the famous slayer of monsters. And I've met the enchantress, Lady Yennefer, on several occasions -I used to visit Aedirn and her home town of Vengerberg. I don't know anything about their being in love, though.'

'But it has to be true,' the attractive elf in the ermine toque suddenly said in a melodious voice. 'Such a beautiful ballad of love could not but be true.'

'It could not!' Baron Vilibert's daughters supported the elf and, as if on command, wiped their eyes on their scarves. 'Not by any measure!'

'Honourable wizard!' Vera Loewenhaupt turned to Radcliffe. 'Were they in love or not? Surely you know what truly happened to them, Yennefer and the witcher. Disclose the secret!'

'If the song says they were in love,' replied the wizard, 'then that's what happened, and their love will endure down the ages. Such is the power of poetry.'

'It is said,' interrupted Baron Vilibert all of a sudden, 'that Yennefer of Vengerberg was killed on Sodden Hill. Several enchantresses were killed there-'

'That's not true,' said Donimir of Troy. 'Her name is not on the

monument. I am from those parts and have often climbed Sodden Hill and read the names engraved on the monument. Three enchantresses died there: Triss Merigold, Lytta Neyd, known as Coral... hmm... and the name of the third has slipped my mind...'

The knight glanced at Wizard Radcliffe, who smiled wordlessly.

'And this witcher,' Sheldon Skaggs suddenly called out, 'this Geralt who loved Yennefer, has also bitten the dust, apparently. I heard he was killed somewhere in Transriver. He slew and slew monsters until he met his match. That's how it goes: he who fights with the sword dies by the sword. Everyone comes across someone who will better them eventually, and is made to taste cold hard iron.'

'I don't believe it.' The slender warrior contorted her pale lips, spat vehemently on the ground and crossed her chainmail-clad arms with a crunch. 'I don't believe there is anyone to best Geralt of Rivia. I have seen this witcher handle a sword. His speed is simply inhuman-'

'Well said,' threw in Wizard Radcliffe. 'Inhuman. Witchers are mutated, so their reactions-'

'I don't understand you, magician.' The warrior twisted her lips even more nastily. 'Your words are too learned. I know one thing: no swordsman I have ever seen can match Geralt of Rivia, the White Wolf. And so I will

not accept that he was defeated in battle as the dwarf claims.'

'Every swordsman's an arse when the enemy's not sparse,' remarked

Sheldon Skaggs sententially. 'As the elves say.'

'Elves,' stated a tall, fair-haired representative of the Elder Race coldly, from his place beside the elf with the beautiful toque, 'are not in the habit of using such vulgar language.'

'No! No!' squealed Baron Vilibert's daughters from behind their green scarves. 'Geralt the Witcher can't have been killed! The witcher found Ciri, the child destined for him, and then the Enchantress Yennefer, and all three lived happily ever after! Isn't that true, Master Dandilion?'

"Twas a ballad, my noble young ladies,' said the beer-parched gnome, manufacturer of ironwares, with a yawn. 'Why look for truth in a ballad? Truth is one thing, poetry another. Let's take this – what was her name? – Ciri? The famous Child Surprise. Master Dandilion trumped that up for sure. I've been to Cintra many a time and the king and queen lived in a childless home, with no daughter, no son-'

'Liar!' shouted a red-haired man in a sealskin jacket, a checked kerchief bound around his forehead. 'Queen Calanthe, the Lionness of Cintra, had a daughter called Pavetta. She died, together with her husband, in a tempest which struck out at sea, and the depths swallowed them both.'

'So you see for yourselves I'm not making this up!' The ironware gnome called everyone to be his witnesses. 'The Princess of Cintra was called Pavetta, not Ciri.'

'Cirilla, known as Ciri, was the daughter of this drowned Pavetta,' explained the red-haired man. 'Calanthe's granddaughter. She was not the princess herself, but the daughter of the Princess of Cintra. She was the Child Surprise destined for the witcher, the man to whom – even before she was born – the queen had sworn to hand her granddaughter over to, just as Master Dandilion has sung. But the witcher could neither find her nor collect her. And here our poet has missed the truth.'

'Oh yes, he's missed the truth indeed,' butted in a sinewy young man who, judging by his clothes, was a journeyman on his travels prior to crafting his masterpiece and passing his master's exams. 'The witcher's destiny bypassed him: Cirilla was killed during the siege of Cintra. Before throwing herself from the tower, Queen Calanthe killed the princess's daughter with her own hand, to prevent her from falling into the Nilfgaardians' claws alive.'

'It wasn't like that. Not like that at all!' objected the red-haired man.

'The princess's daughter was killed during the massacre while trying to escape from the town.'

'One way or another,' shouted Ironware, 'the witcher didn't find Cirilla!

The poet lied!'

'But lied beautifully,' said the elf in the toque, snuggling up to the tall, fair-haired elf.

'It's not a question of poetry but of facts!' shouted the journeyman. 'I tell you, the princess's daughter died by her grandmother's hand. Anyone who's been to Cintra can confirm that!'

'And I say she was killed in the streets trying to escape,' declared the red-haired man. 'I know because although I'm not from Cintra I served in the Earl of Skellige's troop supporting Cintra during the war. As everyone knows, Eist Tuirseach, the King of Cintra, comes from the Skellige Isles. He was the earl's uncle. I fought in the earl's troop at Marnadal and Cintra and later, after the defeat, at Sodden-'

'Yet another veteran,' Sheldon Skaggs snarled to the dwarves crowded around him. 'All heroes and warriors. Hey, folks! Is there at least one of you out there who didn't fight at Marnadal or Sodden?'

'That dig is out of place, Skaggs,' the tall elf reproached him, putting his arm around the beauty wearing the toque in a way intended to dispel any lingering doubts amongst her admirers. 'Don't imagine you were the only one to fight at Sodden. I took part in the battle as well.'



'On whose side, I wonder,' Baron Vilibert said to Radcliffe in a highly audible whisper which the elf ignored entirely.

'As everyone knows,' he continued, sparing neither the baron nor the wizard so much as a glance, 'over a hundred thousand warriors stood on the field during the second battle of Sodden Hill, and of those at least thirty thousand were maimed or killed. Master Dandilion should be thanked for immortalising this famous, terrible battle in one of his ballads. In both the lyrics and melody of his work I heard not an exaltation but a warning. So I repeat: offer praise and everlasting renown to this poet for his ballad, which may, perhaps, prevent a tragedy as horrific as this cruel and unnecessary war from occurring in the future.'

'Indeed,' said Baron Vilibert, looking defiantly at the elf. 'You have read some very interesting things into this ballad, honoured sir. An unnecessary war, you say? You'd like to avoid such a tragedy in the future, would you? Are we to understand that if the Nilfgaardians were to attack us again you would advise that we capitulate? Humbly accept the Nilfgaardian yoke?'

'Life is a priceless gift and should be protected,' the elf replied coldly.

'Nothing justifies wide-scale slaughter and sacrifice of life, which is what the battles at Sodden were – both the battle lost and the battle won. Both of

them cost the humans thousands of lives. And with them, you lost unimaginable potential-'

'Elven prattle!' snarled Sheldon Skaggs. 'Dim-witted rubbish! It was the price that had to be paid to allow others to live decently, in peace, instead of being chained, blinded, whipped and forced to work in salt and sulphur mines. Those who died a heroic death, those who will now, thanks to Dandilion, live on forever in our memories, taught us to defend our own homes. Sing your ballads, Dandilion, sing them to everyone. Your lesson won't go to waste, and it'll come in handy, you'll see! Because, mark my words, Nilfgaard will attack us again. If not today, then tomorrow! They're licking their wounds now, recovering, but the day when we'll see their black cloaks and feathered helmets again is growing ever nearer!'

'What do they want from us?' yelled Vera Loewenhaupt. 'Why are they bent on persecuting us? Why don't they leave us in peace, leave us to our lives and work? What do the Nilfgaardians want?'

'They want our blood!' howled Baron Vilibert.

'And our land!' someone cried from the crowd of peasants.

'And our women!' chimed in Sheldon Skaggs, with a ferocious glower.

Several people started to laugh – as quietly and furtively as they could.

Even though the idea that anyone other than another dwarf would desire

one of the exceptionally unattractive dwarf-women was highly amusing, it was not a safe subject for teasing or jests – especially not in the presence of the short, stocky, bearded individuals whose axes and short-swords had an ugly habit of leaping from their belts and into their hands at incredible speed. And the dwarves, for some unknown reason, were entirely convinced that the rest of the world was lecherously lying in wait for their wives and daughters, and were extremely touchy about it.

'This had to happen at some point,' the grey-haired druid declared suddenly. 'This had to happen. We forgot that we are not the only ones in this world, that the whole of creation does not revolve around us. Like stupid, fat, lazy minnows in a slimy pond we chose not to accept the existence of pike. We allowed our world, like the pond, to become slimy, boggy and sluggish. Look around you – there is crime and sin everywhere, greed, the pursuit of profit, quarrels and disagreements are rife. Our traditions are disappearing, respect for our values is fading. Instead of living according to Nature we have begun to destroy it. And what have we got for it? The air is poisoned by the stink of smelting furnaces, the rivers and brooks are tainted by slaughter houses and tanneries, forests are being cut down without a thought... Ha just look! -even on the living bark of sacred Bleobheris, there just above the poet's head, there's a foul phrase carved out

with a knife – and it's misspelled at that – by a stupid, illiterate vandal. Why are you surprised? It had to end badly-'

'Yes, yes!' the fat priest joined in. 'Come to your senses, you Dinners, while there is still time, because the anger and vengeance of the gods hangs over you! Remember Ithlin's oracle, the prophetic words describing the punishment of the gods reserved for a tribe poisoned by crime! "The Time of Contempt will come, when the tree will lose its leaves, the bud will wither, the fruit will rot, the seed turn bitter and the river valleys will run with ice instead of water. The White Chill will come, and after it the White Light, and the world will perish beneath blizzards." Thus spoke Seeress Ithlin! And before this comes to pass there will be visible signs, plagues will ravish the earth – Remember! – the Nilfgaard are our punishment from the gods! They are the whip with which the Immortals will lash you sinners, so that you may-'

'Shut up, you sanctimonious old man!' roared Sheldon Skaggs, stamping his heavy boots. 'Your superstitious rot make me sick! My guts are churning-'

'Careful, Sheldon.' The tall elf cut him short with a smile. 'Don't mock another's religion. It is not pleasant, polite or... safe.'

'I'm not mocking anything,' protested the dwarf. 'I don't doubt the

existence of the gods, but it annoys me when someone drags them into earthly matters and tries to pull the wool over my eyes using the prophecies of some crazy elf. The Nilfgaardians are the instrument of the gods? Rubbish! Search back through your memories to the past, to the days of Dezmod, Radowid and Sambuk, to the days of Abrad, the Old Oak! You may not remember them, because your lives are so very short – you're like Mayflies but I remember, and I'll tell you what it was like in these lands just after you climbed from your boats on the Yaruga Estuary and the Pontar Delta onto the beach. Three kingdoms sprang from the four ships which beached on those shores; the stronger groups absorbed the weaker and so grew, strengthening their positions. They invaded others territories, conquered them, and their kingdoms expanded, becoming ever larger and more powerful. And now the Nilfgaardians are doing the same, because theirs is strong and united, disciplined and tightly knit country. And unless you close ranks in the same way, Nilfgaard will swallow you as a pike does a minnow – just as this wise druid said!

'Let them just try!' Donimir of Troy puffed out his lion-emblazoned chest and shook his sword in its scabbard. 'We beat them hollow on Sodden Hill, and we can do it again!'

'You're very cocksure,' snarled Sheldon Skaggs. 'You've evidently

forgotten, sir knight, that before the battle of Sodden Hill, the Nilfgaard had advanced across your lands like an iron roller, strewing the land between Marnadal and Transriver with the corpses of many a gallant fellow like yourself. And it wasn't loudmouthed smart-arses like you who stopped the Nilfgaardians, but the united strengths of Temeria, Redania, Aedirn and Kaedwen. Concord and unity, that's what stopped them!

'Not just that,' remarked Radcliffe in a cold, resonant voice. 'Not just that, Master Skaggs.'

The dwarf hawked loudly, blew his nose, shuffled his feet then bowed a little to the wizard.

'No one is denying the contribution of your fellowship,' he said.

'Shame on he who does not acknowledge the heroism of the brotherhood of wizards on Sodden Hill. They stood their ground bravely, shed blood for the common cause, and contributed most eminently to our victory. Dandelion did not forget them in his ballad, and nor shall we. But note that these wizards stood united and loyal on the Hill, and accepted the leadership of Vilgefortz of Roggeveen just as we, the warriors of the Four Kingdoms, acknowledged the command of Vizimir of Redania. It's just a pity this solidarity and concord only lasted for the duration of the war, because, with peace, here we are divided again. Vizimir and Foltest are choking each

other with customs taxes and trading laws, Demawend of Aedirn is bickering with Henselt over the Northern Marches while the League of Hengfors and the Thyssenids of Kovir don't give a toss. And I hear that looking for the old concord amongst the wizards is useless, too. We are not closely knit, we have no discipline and no unity. But Nilfgaard does!' 'Nilfgaard is ruled by Emperor Emhyr var Emreis, a tyrant and autocrat who enforces obedience with whip, noose and axe!' thundered Baron Vilibert. 'What are you proposing, sir dwarf? How are we supposed to close ranks? With similar tyranny? And which king, which kingdom, in your opinion, should subordinate the others? In whose hands would you like to see the sceptre and knout?'

'What do I care?' replied Skaggs with a shrug. 'That's a human affair. Whoever you chose to be king wouldn't be a dwarf anyway.'

'Or an elf, or even half-elf,' added the tall representative of the Elder Race, his arm still wrapped around the toque-wearing beauty. 'You even consider quarter-elves inferior-'

'That's where it stings,' laughed Vilibert. 'You're blowing the same horn as Nilfgaard because Nilfgaard is also shouting about equality, promising you a return to the old order as soon as we've been conquered and they've scythed us off these lands. That's the sort of unity, the sort of equality you're

dreaming of, the sort you're talking about and trumpeting! Nilfgaard pays you gold to do it! And it's hardly surprising you love each other so much, the Nilfgaardians being an elven race-'

Nonsense,' the elf said coldly. 'You talk rubbish, sir knight. You're clearly blinded by racism. The Nilfgaardians are human, just like you.'

'That's an outright lie! They're descended from the Black Seidhe and everyone knows it! Elven blood flows through their veins! The blood of elves!'

'And what flows through yours?' The elf smiled derisively. 'We've been combining our blood for generations, for centuries, your race and mine, and doing so quite successfully – fortunately or unfortunately, I don't know. You started persecuting mixed relationships less than a quarter of a century ago and, incidentally, not very successfully. So show me a human now who hasn't a dash of Seidhe Ichaer, the blood of the Elder Race.'

Vilibert visibly turned red. Vera Loewenhaupt also flushed. Wizard Radcliffe bowed his head and coughed. And, most interestingly, the beautiful elf in the ermine toque blushed too.

'We are all children of Mother Earth.' The grey-haired druid's voice resounded in the silence. 'We are children of Mother Nature. And though we do not respect our mother, though we often worry her and cause her pain,



though we break her heart, she loves us. Loves us all. Let us remember that, we who are assembled here in this Seat of Friendship. And let us not bicker over which of us was here first: Acorn was the first to be thrown up by the waves and from Acorn sprouted the Great Bleobheris, the oldest of oaks. Standing beneath its crown, amongst its primordial roots, let us not forget our own brotherly roots, the earth from, which these roots grow. Let us remember the words of Poet Dandilion's song-'

'Exactly!' exclaimed Vera Loewenhaupt. 'And where is he?'

'He's fled,' ascertained Sheldon Skaggs, gazing at the empty place under the oak. 'Taken the money and fled without saying goodbye. Very elf-like!'

'Dwarf-like!' squealed Ironware.

'Human-like,' corrected the tall elf, and the beauty in the toque rested her head against his shoulder.

'Hey, minstrel,' said Mama Lantieri, striding into the room without knocking, the scents of hycinths, sweat, beer and smoked bacon wafting before her. 'You've got a guest. Enter, noble gentleman.'

Dandilion smoothed his hair and sat up in the enormous carved armchair. The two girls sitting on his lap quickly jumped up, covering their charms and pulling down their disordered clothes. The modesty of harlots,

thought the poet, was not at all a bad title for a ballad. He got to his feet, fastened his belt and pulled on his doublet, all the while looking at the nobleman standing at the threshold.

'Indeed,' he remarked, 'you know how to find me anywhere, though you rarely pick an opportune moment. You're lucky I'd not yet decided which of these two beauties I prefer. And at your prices, Lantieri, I cannot afford them both.'

Mama Lantieri smiled in sympathy and clapped her hands. Both girls – a fair-skinned, freckled islander and a dark-haired half-elf – swiftly left the room. The man at the door removed his cloak and handed it to Mama along with a small but well-filled money-bag.

'T'orgive me, master,' he said, approaching the table and making himself comfortable. 'I know this is not a good time to disturb you, But you disappeared out from beneath the oak so quickly... I did not catch you on the High Road as I had intended and did not immediately come across your tracks in this little town. I'll not take much of your time, believe me-'

'They always say that, and it's always a lie,' the bard interrupted.

'Leave us alone, Lantieri, and see to it that we're not disturbed. I'm listening, sir.'

The man scrutinised him. He had dark, damp, almost tearful eyes, a

pointed nose and ugly, narrow lips.

'I'll come to the point without wasting your time,' he declared, waiting for the door to close behind Mama. 'Your ballads interest me, master. To be more specific, certain characters of which you sang interest me. I am concerned with the true fate of your ballad's heroes. If I am not mistaken, the true destinies of real people inspired the beautiful work I heard beneath the oak tree? I have in mind... Little Cirilla of Cintra. Queen Calanthe's granddaughter.'

Dandilion gazed at the ceiling, drumming his fingers on the table.

'Honoured sir,' he said dryly, 'you are interested in strange matters. You ask strange questions. Something tells me you are not the person I took you to be.'

'And who did you take me to be, if I may ask?'

'I'm not sure you may. It depends if you are about to convey greetings to me from any mutual friends. You should have done so initially, but somehow you have forgotten.'

'I did not forget at all.' The man reached into the breast pocket of his sepia-coloured velvet tunic and pulled out a money-bag somewhat larger than the one he had handed the procuress but just as well-filled, which clinked as it touched the table. 'We simply have no mutual friends,

Dandilion. But might this purse not suffice to mitigate the lack?'

'And what do you intend to buy with this meagre purse?' The troubadour pouted. 'Mama Lantieri's entire brothel and all the land surrounding it?'

'Let us say that I intend to support the arts. And an artist. In order to chat with the artist about his work.'

'You love art so much, do you, dear sir? Is it so vital for you to talk to an artist that you press money on him before you've even introduced yourself and, in doing so, break the most elementary rules of courtesy?'

'At the beginning of our conversation' – the stranger's dark eyes narrowed imperceptibly – 'my anonymity did not bother you.'

'And now it is starting to.'

'I am not ashamed of my name,' said the man, a faint smile appearing on his narrow lips. 'I am called Rience. You do not know me, Master Dandilion, and that is no surprise. You are too famous and well known to know all of your admirers. Yet everyone who admires your talents feels he knows you, knows you so well that a certain degree of familiarity is permissible. This applies to me, too. I know it is a misconception, so please graciously forgive me.'

'I graciously forgive you.'

'Then I can count on you agreeing to answer a few questions-'

'No! No you cannot,' interrupted the poet, putting on airs. 'Now, if you will graciously forgive me, I am not willing to discuss the subjects of my work, its inspiration or its characters, fictitious or otherwise. To do so would deprive poetry of its poetic veneer and lead to triteness.'

'Is that so?'

' It certainly is. For example, if, having sung the ballad about the miller's merry wife, I were to announce it's really about Zvirka, Miller Loach's wife, and I included an announcement that Zvirka can most easily be bedded every Thursday because on Thursdays the miller goes to market, it would no longer be poetry. It would be either rhyming couplets, or foul slander.'

'I understand, I understand,' Rience said quickly. 'But perhaps that is a bad example. I am not, after all, interested in anyone's peccadilloes or sins. You will not slander anyone by answering my questions. All I need is one small piece of information: what really happened to Cirilla, the Queen of Cintra's granddaughter? Many people claim she was killed during the siege of the town; there are even eye-witnesses to support the claim. From your ballad, however, it would appear that the child survived. I am truly interested to know if this is your imagination at work, or the truth? True or

false?'

'I'm extremely pleased you're so interested.' Dandilion smiled broadly.

'You may laugh, Master whatever-your-name-is, but that was precisely what I intended when I composed the ballad. I wished to excite my listeners and arouse their curiosity.'

'True or false?' repeated Rience coldly.

'If I were to give that away I would destroy the impact of my work.

Goodbye, my friend. You have used up all the time I can spare you. And two of my many inspirations are waiting out there, wondering which of them I will choose.'

Rience remained silent for a long while, making no move to leave. He stared at the poet with his unfriendly, moist eyes, and the poet felt a growing unease. A merry din came from the bawdy-house's main room, punctuated from time to time by high-pitched feminine giggles. Dandilion turned his head away, pretending to show derisive haughtiness but, in fact, he was judging the distance to the corner of the room and the tapestry showing a nymph sprinkling her breasts with water poured from a jug.

'Dandilion,' Rience finally spoke, slipping his hand back into the pocket of his sepia-coloured tunic, 'answer my questions. Please. I have to know the answer. It's incredibly important to me. To you, too, believe me,

because if you answer of your own free will then-'

'Then what?'

A hideous grimace crept over Rience's narrow lips.

'Then I won't have to force you to speak.'

'Now listen, you scoundrel.' Dandilion stood up and pretended to pull a threatening face. 'I loathe violence and force, but I'm going to call Mama Lantieri in a minute and she will call a certain Gruzila who fulfils the honourable and responsible role of bouncer in this establishment. He is a true artist in his field. He'll kick your arse so hard you'll soar over the town roofs with such magnificence that the few people passing by at this hour will take you for a Pegasus.'

Rience made an abrupt gesture and something glistened in his hand.

'Are you sure,' he asked, 'you'll have time to call her?'

Dandilion had no intention of checking if he would have time. Nor did he intend to wait. Before the stiletto had locked in Rience's hand Dandilion had taken a long leap to the corner of the room, dived under the nymph tapestry, kicked open a secret door and rushed headlong down the winding stairs, nimbly steering himself with the aid of the well-worn banisters.

Rience darted after him, but the poet was sure of himself – he knew the secret passage like the back of his hand, having used it numerous times to

flee creditors, jealous husbands and furious rivals from whom he had, from time to time, stolen rhymes and tunes. He knew that after the third turning he would be able to grope for a revolving door, behind which there was a ladder leading down to the cellar. He was sure that his persecutor would be unable to stop in time, would run on and step on a trapdoor through which he would fall and land in the pigsty. He was equally sure that – bruised, covered in shit and mauled by the pigs – his persecutor would give up the chase.

Dandilion was mistaken, as was usually the case whenever he was too confident. Something flashed a sudden blue behind his back and the poet felt his limbs grow numb, lifeless and stiff. He couldn't slow down for the revolving door, his legs wouldn't obey him. He yelled and rolled down the stairs, bumping against the walls of the little corridor. The trapdoor opened beneath him with a dry crack and the troubadour tumbled down into the darkness and stench. Before thumping his head on the dirt floor and losing consciousness, he remembered Mama Lantieri saying something about the pigsty being repaired.

The pain in his constricted wrists and shoulders, cruelly twisted in their joints, brought him back to his senses. He wanted to scream but couldn't; it felt as though his mouth had been stuck up with clay. He was