The Squirrel

by quills_at_dawn

Summary

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Iorveth hissed and blazed in disbelief at his childhood friend and a shiver rippled through Ciaran’s slender frame as a gust of wind blew in a flurry of snow.

As part of their triple-damned accord with Nilfgaard, they’d been granted leave to offer the emperor a concubine for his harem — a sign of favour, if one could believe it. But Iorveth didn’t see why that should mean Ciaran had to volunteer. Ciaran, who’d been a loyal Scoia’tael lieutenant and done so much, given so much, lost so much for their cause.

“Never!”

Praise for The Squirrel

"Wow i am already so hooked on this story"

— Mel

"you should read [The Squirrel] if you like politics and elves"

— softestpunk
Notes

First of all, huge thanks to gingermaya who is practically co-writing this thing but doesn't want to be credited XD

Set after the events of The Witcher 2: Assassin of Kings but before the events of The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt. Canon-divergent. Mostly based on The Witcher 2 but also draws on elements from The Witcher 1, The Witcher 3, Gwent cards and some of the book lore, as well as on astolat’s world-building in her own Witcher fics (which I highly recommend). Deep knowledge of the lore not required.

For the purposes of this fic, there is not and never was a false Cirilla and Ciaran, along with Iorveth and Isengrim, escaped the slaughter of the officers of the Vrihedd Brigade.

Fuller notes and explanations will be filed in the Addendum section.

Tags will probably be updated and expanded.

Enjoy!

See the end of the work for more notes.
| Prologus + The White Oliphant

Chapter Summary

In which the wheel is set in motion.

Chapter Notes

A recap and a bit of exposition at the start so we all know where we are :D

Also, I'm trialling some music suggestions — the musical notes next to chapter or section starts link to the suggested track (remember to open in a new tab). I may try embedding the actual files at the bottom of the chapter if it doesn't slow loading times too much. We'll see. Leave a comment if you feel strongly one way or the others.

Enjoy! <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The emperor of Nilfgaard’s gamble has paid off — his agent, the witcher and assassin of kings, Letho of Gulet, was able to assassinate King Demavend III of Aedirn and King Foltest of Temeria and place the blame for both deaths on the Lodge of Sorceresses before being killed himself by a fellow witcher, Geralt of Rivia. The commander of Temeria’s Blue Stripes, Vernon Roche, has, for reasons of state and reasons of his own, killed King Henselt of Kaedwen, who had taken advantage of Demavend’s death to invade Upper Aedirn.

After the failed Summit at Loc Muinne — which brought to the table the Conclave and Council of Mages and the Lodge of Sorceresses, as well as representatives from all four major Northern kingdoms and Nilfgaard — the North descends into chaos and war, and at the height of summer, Nilfgaard launches a well-prepared, lightning military campaign led by General Morvran Voorhis and his Alba Division in the East, sweeping up from Angren through Rivia, Lyria, and all other lands east of the Mahakam mountains. The large Aedirnian alod, the elven Kingdom of Dol Blathanna, declares for Nilfgaard and helps broker an alliance with the Scoia’tael elves. Under siege in the castle at Vengerberg where they’d taken refuge, overwhelmed in the face of Nilfgaard’s
superior forces and the annihilation they leave in their wake, some prominent Aedirnian nobles capitulate unconditionally, while north of the Pontar, the forces of King Radovid V of Redania cross the Kestrel mountains and annex Kaedwen.

The rest of the Nilfgaardian army, which had been massed in Cintra, has moved northwards across the Yaruga under the leadership of Field Marshal Havart van Moehorn, and, attacked on all sides and in disarray despite the leadership of constable John Natalis, the Temerian army is soon routed. Many of its soldiers quickly regroup into a resistance movement led by Vernon Roche and that continues to harass both occupation forces, which have reached a deadlock in the No Man’s Land of Velen.

Where warring armies go, plagues of necrophages follow and Temeria is soon overrun. Leaderless, hag-ridden and caught in the crossfire between Nilfgaard and Redania — and faced with the very real prospect of being partitioned between the two, as happened to Aedirn during the Second Northern War — representatives from the Temerian Royal Council, lead by Interrex John Natalis and Vernon Roche, accept Nilfgaard’s protection and Emhyr sets up his headquarters in and around the Temerian capital, Vizima. The Nilfgaardian troops and Temerian resistance fighters previously tied up in fighting each other are now redeployed against Redania and as the year drains down to the dregs, the combined Temerian, Nilfgaardian and Scoia’tael forces drive the Redanian army back across the Pontar, taking the war front to the gates of the free city of Novigrad and a new stalemate there.

Protected by the the wealthy merchant city’s impregnable stone walls and powerful navy, its elite and its underworld come together to play one side against the other and hold the threat of the city’s self-immolation over the heads of both.

Further irritated by the setback his forces suffered on the Skellige Isles, Emhyr var Emreis soon tires of this game and while he hammers out the terms of an accord with Radovid, the Nilfgaardian emperor works to secure peace and stability in his newly-acquired territories.

Flotsam and its environs on both the Temerian and Aedirnian sides are to become the free city of Gwyngaard, administered by Nilfgaard, and Dol Gwennelen — formerly Upper Aedirn, or Lormark, as it is referred to by the Kaedweni, who have long coveted it — has been granted to the Scoia’tael elves and their allies in thanks for their support and in reparation for the hardships they suffered as a consequence of the terms of the Peace of Cintra. This new state lies between the Pontar and Dyphne rivers, from Flotsam to the Blue Mountains.

Lower Aedirn, Lyria and Rivia are consolidated into the new Nilfgaardian province of Aedirnia, hemmed in by the elves of the Pontar to the north, the Mahakam dwarves to the west, with Dol Blathanna within its borders, and the rest of the Empire itself just across the Yaruga.

Temeria is a Nilfgaardian protectorate, to be headed by a Triumvirate hand-picked by the emperor — Baron Orvall La Valette, great-uncle of Anais La Valette, who lives with him and who whispered rumour believes to be Foltest’s illegitimate daughter and possible heir to the Temerian throne; Herevard II, Prince of Ellander; and Vernon Roche, whom Emhyr has made Baron of Crow’s Perch and Lord of Velen as reward for his services to Nilfgaard.

— 1272 —

As the ice on the Pontar starts to melt away, Emhyr and Radovid agree to meet in Oxenfurt to sign a peace treaty by virtue of which both parties and their allies undertake to keep to their respective sides of the Pontar river, and thus bring an end to the Third Nilfgaard-Nordling War.
The emperor has tied up the loose ends. A part of his troops are garrisoned throughout Temeria, Aedirnia, Dol Gwennelen and Gwyngaard to keep the peace, help with reconstruction and quell the last rebellions but the bulk of them are heading back south of the Yaruga.

All that remains is for Emhyr and his new allies to sign the treaty with Redania and for him to officially hand over Temeria to the Triumvirate and Dol Gwennelen to the elves before returning to the imperial capital. His gaze has already turned homewards, to the City of Golden Towers and the grumbling opposition led by the Guild of Merchants that has grown there during his year-long absence in the North, waging an expensive war it did not support.

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**THE WHITE OLIPHANT**

— *Verden environs, Dol Gwennelen, early January, 1272 —*

“You?!
You, concubine to the emperor of Nilfgaard?!”

Iorveth hissed and blazed in disbelief at his childhood friend and a shiver rippled through Ciaran’s slender frame as a gust of wind blew in a flurry of snow.

The long-abandoned and dilapidated watchtower had just enough left of its stone walls and roof that it could still claim to offer shelter from the elements and over the years the two elves had come to it countless times for privacy and protection and they’d used it as a dead drop whenever their missions led them separate ways — a place for them to come together even when they were apart. They had often raced each other to it, leaping along branches or skirting bushes as they rushed through the underbrush, both always eager to spend some time alone together, warmed by the same blanket or cloak as they laughed over shared anecdotes, discussed politics or argued over tactics as the cool-headed omega tried to temper the hot-blooded alpha’s impulses, or pretended, for a few hours, in quiet whispers and murmurs, that the two of them had a future.

When Ciaran had first suggested they meet, Iorveth had already known that things wouldn’t be the same. Ciaran had come on horseback, still too weak to brave the distance in the inclement weather and they sat opposite each other like adversaries. But Iorveth had not anticipated such a decisive break with the past — with him.

He had not expected *this*.

As part of their triple-damned accord with Nilfgaard, they’d been granted leave to offer the emperor a concubine for his harem — a sign of *favour*, if one could believe it. But Iorveth didn’t see why that should mean *Ciaran* had to volunteer. Ciaran, who’d been a loyal Scoia’tael lieutenant and done so much, given so much, *lost* so much for their cause.
“Never!”

“Somebody has to do it. And we’ve always led by example, haven’t we, Iorveth?”

“But not you! You are Scoia’tael!”

“Am I?” Ciaran murmured coolly, his eyes on the steaming wooden cup he held clasped in his hands, “I haven’t felt like it for months.”

Scalded, Iorveth jumped up from his seat at the tumbled piece of masonry that served as a table and started to pace over the uneven ground in the straightened space, desperate to hide the sharp pain that now creased his features.

True, Ciaran hadn’t been on active duty since he’d been brought back, half-dead and broken by what had been done to him on the prison barge in Flotsam, but during his long convalescence in Brokilon, he had started retraining as a healer — the latent magic he had as a pureblood elf gave him an edge and he had learnt quickly — and since then had continued to help the war effort in that way. Besides, one couldn’t just stop being Scoia’tael. It wasn’t something that could be cast off like one of their squirrel tail talismans but a state of being that went to the very marrow of an Aen Seidhe’s identity.

Iorveth turned to look at his friend who continued to sit, preternaturally pale and still and cool, and he noticed that the nails of the slender and now soft hands were tinged with blue.

“Besides, he may not choose me. Probably won’t. Almost anyone would be a better choice. Except we don’t have anyone else to offer him and we can’t ask others to do something that we — we, Scoia’tael — are not prepared to do ourselves. I’ll be the first candidate. I’ll recruit others and handle all the preparations. We only have weeks until the ceremony in Vizima, we’ve already left it too long.”

Iorveth had been shaking his head since the first sentence and did so even more emphatically now.

“No. No, no, no. Not you. Not. You. You are right, we should have started sooner, but we cannot afford to lose you. There is too much to do here.”

Ciaran frowned slightly, setting down the cup and rubbing his hands together.

“What we need now are leaders to give us direction and breeders to have children before it’s too late for all of us,” he paused and Iorveth, slapped by a premonition of what he would say, was seized by a violent desire to grab him by the shoulders and shake him, “I am not a leader and I am barren. I am not what our people needs.”

Iorveth flinched, his jaw clenching.

“You would leave now? Now that we finally have what we spent years fighting and planning for? Now that we have everything we’d nearly given up on? Our dream is within our grasp! As for your heats, they might still return—.”

“I am dying, Iorveth.”

Ciaran raised his gaze to his friend’s and held it.

“I no longer See.”

Iorveth froze, poleaxed. All elves could see something of the future. Not as a certain path but as a journey towards a certain end — the course of events was like water poured from a bucket that
could flow in many directions over and around whatever it found it its path to finally pool into a depression, water drawn from a well of roads not taken and possibilities that would never play out. Where a human might notice morning hoarfrost on the ground and see a cold day or even a harsh winter ahead, an elf might see in it the end of time itself.

“But… all the things we’ve talked about for years, don’t tell me you can’t see them!”

“I can. But like pictures on a wall - they don’t move, they don’t speak to me. I cannot see what they’re trying to show me. And I no longer dream.”

He no longer remembered, either. In tacit recognition of what had happened to him, few approached Ciaran and fewer still dared touch him and yet the truth was that Ciaran remembered few of the particulars of what had been done to him. Perhaps it was better that way but then perhaps the price to pay for that was oblivion.

Iorveth himself had always seen, though his vision of the future had always shifted. Now it was of the elf-led utopia they would build for themselves and their fellow non-humans and humans alike, the laughter of children ringing out and mingling with the gurgle of the Pontar throughout the woods, but before that it had been of a similar free state but with the crown set upon Saskia’s golden head. He and Ciaran had sometimes talked late into the winter nights, level-headed and realistic, envisioning how the Scoia’tael’s sense of purpose might one day fragment in the face of shifting circumstances and the perception of more than one enemy, or a future in which nothing changed and all that lay ahead of them was an endless war of attrition, of mounds of rusted weapons and valleys of bone ash run through by rivers swollen with the blood of elves, in the midst of which they and theirs died or survived only to grow ever older until they too crumbled to dust, as though they’d never been. Just as the elves in Dol Blathanna were dying out. Had died out — they merely hung about there, suspended in time, like the echoing light of stars that had faded many lifetimes ago. And even in his bleakest moments, when he’d seen no future for their kind at all, Iorveth had always been able to console himself with the copper-hued vision of one day licking Vernon Roche’s blood from his fingers.

Oh, they had seen terrible things ahead but what Iorveth’s mind now recoiled from was the vision of a blind immortality, stretching out like a void before him, creeping closer and closer, expanding out around and behind him, until his toes curled in his boots, as though to grip the edge of a precipice and anchor himself against the phantom black of absolute absence.

He raised his gaze and looked into Ciaran’s hazel eyes. Eyes that now always seemed to be looking at things that others couldn’t see — that Iorveth couldn’t see — that might be staring into that very void and to stop his friend from falling, Iorveth lunged and grabbed Ciaran’s arm.

“But you? Go to that bloede dh’oine? After what he did to us?! Plucked us out of one of his own ploughing army divisions — while we were still wearing his colours, you still carrying his standard! — and delivered us straight into the welcoming arms of a war tribunal to be put to death. Death, Ciaran! Or have you forgotten the fifty-two broken skeletons at the bottom of the Ravine of the Hydra? The fifty-two throats slit?”

Ciaran’s eyes flashed in anger and as he put his cup down and wrenched his wrist free, Iorveth was appalled at how slender and brittle it felt.

“We are Aen Seidhe! We do not forget! You should remember that Emhyr var Emreis cannot be trusted! You should be hoping he chooses me!” Ciaran paused to rest the dying voice he’d pushed too far then continued more moderately, “Whoever goes with him will be surrounded by enemies, yes, but also by opportunity. Don’t you think it would be useful for one of us to be in the capital, close to the emperor? If he betrays us again, a month’s notice - even a week’s notice - might make all
“If he decides to betray us, yours will be the first throat he slits!”

“So be it! Better me than another! I am willing to take the risk! How many times have we scorned the Dol Blathanna elves for hiding in their valley while we needed help, Iorveth? For allowing themselves to fade away in comfort and safety while we were still fighting for our survival?” Ciaran lashed out and this time his low voice fractured into hoarseness, “I will not just sit here idly, waiting to die, while there is still something I can do to help! I have been a spy, I can do the job, and if I die the community loses nothing — I am already worthless here. And I will not go quietly! If Nilfgaard takes my life, I will drag as much of Nilfgaard with me as I can! If I can’t have a meaningful life then I want a meaningful death!”

Iorveth stared at his friend, who glared at him, fierce and defiant, and even when a moment later Ciaran’s anger cracked and his strength seemed to leave him, Iorveth was still shaken by this show of feeling in a friend who had never shared his own capacity for strong emotions.

“Please. You have to let me do this, Iorveth. You have to let me go.”

Iorveth opened his mouth to protest but his mouth was dry and the words died in his throat. He could still see, like a mask over Ciaran’s face, the afterimage of what he had looked like when he’d been brought out of Flotsam, kept alive by the barest thread of magic. His first instinct, upon seeing the battered body that no longer resembled that of an elf, had been to give his friend a quick, clean death and end it there. But then, beneath a smear of blood on what had seemed like the only thumbprint of flesh that hadn’t been bruised or broken or mangled, he’d caught sight of a whorl of vine-like markings, more familiar to him than his own, and his courage failed him and he had let the Nilfgaardian medics take Ciaran away.

Ciaran was no longer the elf he’d been as Iorveth’s lieutenant. Oh, the lines and the colours were still the same though his long convalescence and relative inaction had left him more slender than he had been as a soldier and now that he no longer bothered to cut his hair it had grown out to past his shoulders and he wore it in a traditional style, pulled back and braided over the ears as befitted a healer or some other such scholar. A person of study rather than action.

But more than that, it was his eyes that had changed, all the light and life had gone out of them and Iorveth could well believe that they could no longer see.

And yet, there was still something left in Ciaran to break.

“I was going to turn him down anyway, he can keep his ploughing ‘privileges’,” Iorveth half grumbled, half growled, “And bloody Emhyr doesn’t need another concubine. Besides, ‘concubine’ is just high Nilfgaardian for ‘hostage’, that’s why he’s had one from every ploughing province of his empire.”

“You know you can’t.” Ciaran’s mouth curved into a wry smile, “It will be like spying behind enemy lines again. Emhyr var Emreis must be fifty, at least — it’ll only be for ten years, twenty at the most. And he can’t hurt me without endangering the alliance.”

Iorveth hated the idea. And he’d lied. This was not their dream come true, not the culmination of their life’s ambition. They hadn’t won back the Pontar valley - not for themselves nor for Saskia. It had been handed to them by the ploughing emperor of Nilfgaard, the way one gave a trinket to a child to keep it quiet or threw a scrap to a stray dog out of thoughtless pity, and it still galled Iorveth that they were being rewarded for help unknowingly and only coincidentally given to Nilfgaard. It stuck in his gullet like a fishbone that refused to be swallowed that he hadn’t seen that Letho was a
Nilfgaardian agent, blinded as he’d been by his bloodthirsty hatred of the dh’oine and their genocidal monarchs, and that this fatal failing had cost the lives of so many of their number, had nearly cost Ciaran his.

Ciaran looked away and picked up his cup, holding it but not drinking from it.

“Emhyr var Emreis has had at least a dozen concubines for decades and hasn’t produced a single heir with any of them. He might not mind that I can’t give him one. I’m still an elf, an omega, that might be enough for him.”

Iorveth had long forgotten to try to hide his pain and it was evident now as he looked away. It was true. Much as most humans hated elves they still found them alluring and the latent magic that inhabited every one of them meant they were sought after as bed partners, an unusual and addictive pleasure that many a human had tasted. And an omega, so prized by the elves themselves, was a fitting gift for the Conqueror of the North.

In other times, an omega like Ciaran would have been at the centre of an elven court — but Ciaran was still a very young elf, younger even than Iorveth, and he’d been born long after the elves had destroyed the last of their palaces as they fled them. Born into a time of such war and strife that even he, the only omega of his generation, had been sent to the front — more valuable as a commander than a breeder.

In the last war, the White Flame had promised the Scoia’tael a land of their own as reward for their help in fighting the Northern kings only to use them as cannon fodder in battle then abuse their trust by agreeing to a peace treaty that excluded them from Dol Blathanna, but he was now giving them some of the North’s most valuable land on a technicality — he would not pass up another opportunity to humiliate them by taking one of their lieutenants as his whore.

“I’ll have to write a note to the Nilfgaardians to warn them, but I suppose they’ll want information on all the candidates. I’ll take care of that as soon as I’ve finalised a list of names.”

“That’s fine,” Iorveth replied automatically, dimly wondering when he’d agreed to this, “Someone else can do it.”

Part of him wanted to continue arguing, to ask the questions and say the things that would hurt Ciaran, but he knew Ciaran didn’t really want to leave their valley or the Scoia’tael, didn’t want to leave Iorveth himself. And so the other, greater part of him wanted to wrap his arms around the younger elf as he would have done in other times, and tell him that he was safe here, that he had a place where he belonged and a bright future ahead, and that all would be well.

But he had no right to. He hadn’t protected Ciaran. He hadn’t saved him. He hadn’t even known he was still alive somewhere, waiting to be saved.

Ciaran took a small swallow before setting the cup down.

“I need to do something, Iorveth.”

— Verden environs, Dol Gwennelen, January, 1272 —
They seemed so innocuous, the neat information packets sent over by the Nilfgaardians, more imposing because of their sheer heft than their content. Innocuous and out of place, stacked six high as they were on a flat jutting rock and as Ciaran leafed through them, the rustle of paper almost covered the trill of an unseen robin, the occasional crackle of the tinder fire he’d built up and the happy gurgle of the usually timid stream that ran by the disused trap-turned-hunting-blind he’d settled into after stealing away from the elven quarter in Verden with a lantern and a flask of tea.

The winter sun had just set but had left behind a pale apricot glow that reached the tips of the topmost twigs of the bare trees, fading almost to white where it mingled like paint on wet paper with the darkening colour of the sinking night sky. It would be hours and hours yet before true night set in but Ciaran knew that soon it would be just as dark as that and it would feel just like that, like the time of night when he could be alone while all but the owls and bats slept and he was no longer in anyone’s thoughts.

A faint steam rose from the mossy ground as the fire caught and grew and Ciaran drew his wool cloak more tightly around himself to ward off the falling damp then tucked his feet up against a jutting rock, leaning back against a log, pulled the lantern a little closer and propped up the first set of papers against his thighs.

_The Imperial Harem — Hierarchy and Management._ Six recto verso pages, in two different cursive hands.

Ciaran slid it aside to look at the next one.

_The Imperial Harem — Housing Arrangements, the Imperial Garde-Meuble, and the Furnishings Allowance._ Nine recto verso pages, in three different hands.

He sighed and let his head drop back, reflecting that if he never saw the word ‘imperial’ again it would still be too soon.

Ciaran had steeled himself for the conversation with Iorveth then further steeled himself for his dealings with Nilfgaard, but so far the thing he’d found most alarming about the Black Ones was the speed and volume at which they produced and delivered ink-blackened paper.

An eager young liaisons officer with two aides of his own had been assigned to the Scoia’tael leadership and Dol Gwennelen High Council, and when Ciaran had gone to him to bring up the subject he’d immediately been assured that all necessary steps would be taken. Sure enough, from the very next day, papers had started flooding in from the Nilfgaardian Embassy; the Protocols Office; the Impera Brigade; the Imperial Exchequer; the army’s Victualling, Purveyance and Transport office; and the various divisions of the Imperial Household, such as the Grand Maître d’Hôtel’s department, the Imperial Wardrobe, the Keeper of the Privy Purse, the Master of the Palace’s office, on its own behalf and on that of the Keeper of the Imperial Harem, and included a delicately-worded but clear explanation from the Imperial Chamberlain himself of the duties and expectations placed upon an Imperial Concubine of Nilfgaard regarding their behaviour, deportment, appearance, personal hygiene and service to the emperor, as well as a twenty-seven page questionnaire for each candidate to fill in, covering everything from name and birthdate to whether they preferred their winter slippers to be made of knitted wool or shearling — in decuplicate copy, which gave Ciaran an idea of how many candidates they were expecting.

There would not be ten candidates.

Ciaran had barely had ten names on the first list he’d drawn up. Some would take more convincing than others but initially most had either refused to be convinced at all or had living parents who refused on their behalf.
His morning had gone in reading still more of the material from Nilfgaard and preparing the afternoon interviews at which he’d invariably had to regurgitate everything he’d read so far. But it was right that the candidates should know what they were getting themselves into, just as Ciaran himself wanted to have the clearest idea possible. Nonetheless, he hated these interviews spent asking and answering impossible questions.

What did Ciaran know about what Nilfgaardians wore other than that they had the best plate armour and the best mail on the continent and that they favoured black? How could he say whether in Nilfgaard they had those travelling fairs with jugglers and candied apples and panthers in cages and things like that? How could he possibly know the emperor’s preferences in the bedchamber other than that he liked his partners willing, as was stated in the Chamberlain’s paper?

And how could he ask the questions that mattered? Are you aware that you may never see home or your parents ever again once you leave? Will you be able to lie with the emperor even if — even when — he is old and decrepit? Would you give your life to save others if, in a decisive moment, you must risk it to spy or bribe or kill?

The whole thing was a farce and Ciaran was more worried about having to go through with it if he wasn’t chosen. He, at least, felt prepared for the worst.

Sighing, Ciaran settled his earthenware flask among the embers of the fire, added a few broken branches over and around it, then looked over his shortlist, wondering again at what he was doing.

Some days, he could convince himself that this was all necessary and that things were just exactly the way they looked — that all they needed was a small selection of presentable, attractive elves so that Emhyr var Emreis could choose whatever height, build and colouring were most to his taste. On those days, it seemed to Ciaran that the best candidate was the pretty little thing with a headful of curls and clear, wide eyes the colour of polished jade, so young she’d never yet left the elven enclave she’d been born into and whose parents hoped would never know a single day’s hardship. Or perhaps the mighty Imperator merely needed a suitable trophy to parade around Nilfgaard, in which case he might choose the one other elf who had already agreed to be a candidate, who was graceful and slender and beautiful as a blade of wheat, with short layered hair and a smile as bright as the sun and who already dreamt of the dresses and jewels she would wear. On other days, Ciaran couldn’t shake from his mind what concubines were, what they were kept for and what humans liked to do with elves and then thought the handsome, athletic, tawny man-eater of an elf who’d fought in one of the Blue Mountain units, as fierce and fiery as Toruviel, was the only one who would be able to hold her own against the emperor, especially if it ever became a matter of life or death. On a very few days, he could almost believe that this was all for show and that whichever one of them was chosen would be left to languish, alone and useless, in a dusty corner of the emperor’s no doubt vast imperial palace.

But every night he lay awake with the chill in his hands and feet creeping further along his limbs, like a foretaste of death, remembering the charge of the Vrihedd Brigade at the Battle of Brenna and imagining his bones and Iorveth’s lost amongst the hundreds of others that littered the bottom of the Ravine of the Hydra, while in his hand he held the gold floren he always kept with him, rubbing the sensitive pad of his thumb over the profile that rose up from it and trying to imagine the face of the man it belonged to, the unseen godlike being whose will alone moved men to their deaths, this emperor killer of kings and maker of queens, and the relentless thought hard and bright in his mind that he was offering up his fellow elves to such an annihilator of lives. And only the thin, unjustified and unreasoning certainty that Emhyr would pick him could wash away the cold dread that gripped his heart.

Ciaran glanced up and took his hand out of his pocket, jolted out of his thoughts by a presence and
as it approached, he recognised the hoary hair and yellow eyes of Iorveth’s description. The witcher, Geralt of Rivia.

“Gwynbleidd, Iorveth is expecting you.”

Ciaran motioned him to sit so Geralt settled onto the protruding end of a buried boulder, shooing an inquisitive squirrel that had already taken a nibble out of The Cult of the Great Sun and its Rituals.

“Yeah, I’ve seen him. Showed me his Wanted poster and asked me to come and tell you about Emhyr and Nilfgaard. Asked me to bring you this too.”

The witcher passed the elf a bit of cloth into which some small packets had been folded and Ciaran opened it up to find a small glass vial of liquid and several pieces of leaf-wrapped lembas — the usual offering.

A corner of Ciaran’s mouth quirked into a weary smile as he unstopped the vial then drank down the contents before folding the package back up and setting it aside.

“And these for us to share.”

The witcher opened a saddlebag packed full with a couple of bottles of ale, small cuts of red meat wrapped in waxed paper, apples, and another earthenware flask. A much richer offering than the root mash and vegetable stews the elves of the settlement lived on.

“Thank you.”

The low voice was even huskier than it had been when Geralt had last heard it, but then Iorveth had mentioned that the damage to Ciaran’s vocal chords had proved irreversible. Geralt had witnessed firsthand the healing powers of the dryads of Brokilon but even so he hadn’t expected to see the elf again and while he was glad Ciaran had survived, seeing him only fed the growing doubts that plagued his mind.

“I wanted to say, I’m sorry… for leaving you in Flotsam.”

Ciaran shrugged and set aside the papers on his lap.

“I don’t remember it.”

That too reminded Geralt of his stay in Brokilon but he also remembered the state Iorveth’s lieutenant had been in when Triss Merigold and he had found him and wondered whether Ciaran’s memories had been eroded by more than the waters of the enchanted forest.

“Besides, you saved Iorveth, I’m sure that’s what I wanted.”

“It was. Still, I’m sorry.”

Ciaran took the cloth parcel and unfolded it onto a small rock beside them.

“How many elves have you watched die, Gwynbleidd?”

Geralt picked up a dried branch, broke it down and started feeding the pieces to the fire.

“Too many. Too many humans too.”

“Letho?”
“Letho too.”

Ciaran unwrapped one of the packets of meat — a choice piece of venison — and offered it to Geralt, who speared it onto the end of his dagger, before choosing a smaller piece for himself. Soon they were roasting the meat over the fire and Geralt took a swallow from the bottle of ale in his other hand.

“So, do you have any advice, Gwynbleidd?”

“Yeah. Don’t do it. Emhyr var Emreis doesn’t do anything without reason. Iorveth is right, you’ll be a hostage.”

Ciaran smiled.

“We’re honour-bound. If it’s not me then it will be another.”

“If you say so. What do you want to know?”

“What is he like? Is Emhyr var Emreis any better than Henselt or Demavend?”

“No. He’s the most scheming, conniving, brutal, manipulative bastard I’ve ever met. He’s more dangerous than Henselt, Demavend and Foltest put together and if they’d realised that and stayed banded together they might still be alive. Emhyr doesn’t love his army the way Henselt did but he knows and understands it and its strategic capabilities just as well. Demavend was bigoted and rotten to the bone, Emhyr is an equal opportunity tyrant.”

They ate their meat in companionable silence then Ciaran offered him a bread roll, another piece of venison, before selecting a small piece of lembas for himself, breaking off a corner and tossing it to the squirrel, who seemed to have developed a taste for the Great Sun.

Here in the quiet, surrounded by nothing but trees and with nothing but the moon just becoming visible in the still-darkening sky above them, Geralt could almost forget the turmoil that lay just beyond.

He offered Ciaran a bottle of ale but the elf declined it and set about pulling the flask from the fire.

“Emhyr isn’t done bringing war to the North but people don’t care about that for now. They’re more worried about the floods caused by the sudden melts. I killed the kayran and Nilfgaardian soldiers have been dredging and widening the Pontar so it’s not so bad here but the Dyphne has been lying out of its bed for over a week. The people I’ve spoken to are worried about having enough seed stock to sow for the next harvest since most of last year’s was lost or taken, the granaries are all empty and they need to produce enough that after taxes, tithes and purveyance, there’ll be something left for them to live on. They’ve seen that all the killing, raping and pillaging stops dead the moment Nilfgaard signs an accord and that from then on the army eats from its own provisions and that any soldier caught doing otherwise is hanged alongside Lyrian cutpurses and Aedirnian marauders. Velen is still overrun by necrophages so Gwyngaardians,” he made a wry smile, “aren’t too unhappy to see soldiers digging up mass graves and burning corpses. And the air here doesn’t smell like burning flesh, the streets aren’t lined with corpses on spikes like they are in Novigrad.”

“The witch hunt.”

Geralt nodded and as Ciaran uncorked the flask the steam it released carried the scent of Brokilon straight to him.

“Radovid’s always been suspicious of mages and sorceresses so Philippa Eilhart and Síle de
Tansarville setting up Demavend’s assassination the way they did… Well, that gave him the perfect excuse to support the Church of the Eternal Fire. Emhyr probably understands the sentiment — pretty sure he hasn’t forgotten Thanedd — but he won’t be burning sorceresses and mages at the stake.”

Ciaran, who didn’t feel strongly one way or the other about the wholesale massacre of mages but was intrigued by this hint of humanity in the emperor, motioned the witcher to continue then poured himself a cup of tea.

“You seem very sure.”

“I just know. But I’m not trying to make him sound better than he is. Emhyr might seem like the lesser of two evils, and maybe he is too, but when Henselt took Upper Aedirn during the Second War, a Nilfgaardian general shook his hand. Nilfgaard is an absentee landlord. They won’t care if humans and non-humans continue to quietly kill each other so long as you pay your taxes and don’t disrupt trade. Emhyr has no particular love of elves. He won’t persecute you — guess that makes him better than Henselt and Demavend both — but he won’t protect you either. He hasn’t finished conquering the North and his Great Plan is bigger than the North. You and I, the Scoia’tael, Upper Aedirn, the whole North — we’re just pawns in his game. You know this, you’ve been knocked off the board before.”

Ciaran shrugged, his hands wrapped around the hot cup, and Geralt noticed his perfect nails were purpling. The elf hadn’t had any nails left when the witcher had last seen him and Geralt now wondered whether he owed these new ones to the Nilfgaardian medics, the Brokilon dryads or the Scoia’tael healers.

“Yes, but then what can the life of one elf be worth to a man who once agreed to kill fifty-two allies?”

Geralt opened his mouth to speak then shook his head and started over.

“I’m telling you this now because you deserve to know what you’re getting yourself into. Not sure how you’re going to tell the others without telling them but that’s your problem. Things are never the way they seem with Emhyr, that man is just a miserable pile of secrets. De Wett and the others losing the war wasn’t incompetence, it was sabotage. And Letho assassinating Northern kings and blaming it on the Lodge of Sorceresses was sabotage too. Emhyr promised to grant him permission to reopen the School of the Viper if he did it. Now Nilfgaard has half the North, Letho is dead and when I stood before Emhyr in Vizima just weeks ago and told him I’d killed Letho, I knew I’d done what he wanted as clearly as if he’d sent me to kill Letho himself.”

Ciaran gave him a long look over the rim of his cup, which he held up close, breathing in its steam.

“Tying up loose ends.”

“Yeah, that but also… There might have been something else too. Letho told me things — about receiving advice from the imperial mages on how to kill Síle, about Yennefer, about speaking with Emhyr in person, about the Vipers’ library having the most extensive collection of materials about the Hunt. He couldn’t unravel the thread of Emhyr’s Great Plan but he was convinced there was one and he knew Emhyr wanted him dead.”

Geralt took another long swallow from his own bottle, tilting it up to drain its dregs, his gaze lingering on the moon and the sky even as he lowered his bottle.

“And Emhyr already knew I’d done it. He has spies everywhere but sometimes it feels like he’s
always watching. Like even the damn stars are spying for him.”

Ciaran smiled wryly.

“Spying for the Great Sun that shines on all worlds and all peoples?”

Geralt smiled back and the squirrel pricked up its ears up when they both glanced its way.

“Yeah, something like that.”

Ciaran blew on his tea before taking a tentative sip, watching out of the corner of his eye as the squirrel, clearly emboldened, helped itself to the rest of the piece of lembas.

“You seem to know him well.”

“Worked for him a few times over the years.”

“And yet, you don’t like him, much less trust him.”

Geralt accepted Ciaran’s silent offer of a cup of tea with a small nod.

“It’s complicated. I did something for him once, a long time ago. Been bound together by a common interest ever since.”

“And now, despite Letho, you are working for him again.”

Geralt accepted the proffered cup. It was warm in his hand and he watched the three bits of broken tea leaf that swirled around in it. The spring waters of Ceann Treise had once washed away his memories but now the smell of Brokilon’s grasses and leaves steeped in water, being offered to him by a fey, green-eyed creature who watched him, unblinking, surrounded by nothing but darkness and the rustling sound of shallow water and the wind stalking through the bare trees… It all came flooding back and only the memory of the thing — the person — he was looking for, kept him from being carried away.

“Yeah. Wants me to find something for him.”

The witcher knew firsthand how jealously the dryads guarded the secrets of their healing arts and knew what it meant for them to allow even these few leaves out of the confines of their forests. Iorveth had confessed that the dryads had been loathe to return Ciaran to them, had wanted to make him one of their own as they had wanted to do with Ciri. Elves, merfolk, nymphs, and dryads were all cast from the same mould, they were filled with ancient magic different from that of monsters and sorcerers, and the dryads had coveted the omega for his rarity as well as his magic, prized him for ease and skill with which he’d learnt their arts and adapted to their customs.

The elf took a sip of tea as he gave the witcher a long look.

As damaged as he was, Ciaran aep Easnillien remained a precious commodity.

If I’d finished off Ciaran…

Letho hadn’t even sounded regretful, merely analytical, though that one failure had changed the entire course of his life, all their lives. Yes, Ciaran had been one of the lynchpins of the war, just as much as Anaïs or Saskia had been, only in such an invisible way that few would ever know of it — only Geralt, Triss, Iorveth, and now Emhyr, who had wanted to hear of his agent’s deeds and his end. And Ciaran himself — though Iorveth had admitted he couldn’t make out how much Ciaran
really remembered or understood of his own role in how events had unfolded. Sure, people still called Ciaran a hero, but in the way they did of people who had struggled, suffered and somehow survived when they should have died. A passive sort of heroism. Besides, heroism doesn’t stack well and Ciaran would have gone into this Third War already a veteran and hero of the Second.

“Am I very different from what I was then?”

Ciaran was watching him, still and beautiful as an idol and Geralt frowned, trying to shake the feeling that he’d only been speaking to a spectre.

He hesitated then inclined his head and the moment passed.

“Anything else you want to know?”

“What do you know about the imperial concubines?”

“Nothing. You should ask Dandelion about that sort of thing.”

“The bard?”

“The bard is also the viscount of Lettenhove. Knows and understands more about politics than both of us put together. Definitely knows more about Nilfgaard than I do. He’ll turn up hereabouts eventually — last I saw him, he said he wants to ‘see Gwyngaard the White while she’s still in her first bloom’.”

“Gwyngaard the White?”

“Yeah, well, he only speaks the Common Tongue and he says it sounds more poetic that way. Speaking of poetic, if you don’t want to be remembered as “the Elf Who Lived” you’d better tell him so plainly — maybe even throw in a threat or two for good measure.”

Ciaran winced.

“I will.”

— City of Gwyngaard, late January, 1272 —

In the end, there were only four candidates.

Just days before the elven delegation was to leave for Oxenfurt to sign the peace treaty, Ciaran made his way to Gwyngaard to drop off the dossier for each candidate at the Nilfgaardian Embassy-in-waiting. He could have sent them by messenger or via the liaisons officer but this latter had represented to him, in the most delicate terms, that they would prefer him to bring them in person.

All the material from Nilfgaard had helped — nothing could be more mind-numbingly reassuring, even to an overanxious parent, than two close-written pages of drudge on Nilfgaardian regulations concerning tax rebates on remittances to Tier 4 provincial recipients — as had the young liaisons officer, who really was very presentable. Even so, it had taken Ciaran over a week’s worth of gentle but constant persuasion to shift opinions. Meanwhile, he’d continued to make preparations, tasking
his assistants with shortlisting locations, making up guests lists, and solicited the help of their Dol Blathanna cousins.

The list finalised, Ciaran had filled in the paperwork, for himself and for the candidate who had never yet been taught to write, and compiled a biography for each, in triplicate. Predictably, his own had been the hardest to write. He had such distance from the events of his life that being dispassionate had been easy. But as he’d worked at it, trying to include what might be deemed important while leaving out the detail of what information was readily known and available regarding himself, it had felt to him as if everybody knew him better than he knew himself. Though he barely remembered it now, there had been a time when Nilfgaard had known him well, had known him as one of its own, and it knew what he had been since. Iorveth too knew him but he hadn’t dared ask his friend to write it lest Iorveth changed his mind about letting him put forward his candidacy, as he always seemed about to do.

Ciaran had always drawn on Iorveth’s passion and leadership the way Iorveth had leant on Ciaran’s strategic mind and keen sense of politics. He thought Ciaran’s chances as fair as that of any of the other candidates, while Ciaran knew the whole thing was little short of a travesty and consequently wasn’t over-worried by the small number of candidates. He understood his own political and symbolic significance and his sense that all he had to do was demonstrate his adequacy and willingness had been implicitly confirmed by subtle cues from Nilfgaard. Something he had been quite careful to keep Iorveth in the dark about.

Once he handed the files in, however, there would be no more opportunity for minds to be changed. Not for any of them.

But before he did that, he was to meet Dandelion for the talk the Gwynbleidd had recommended.

The city’s main gates were tall, wide, rounded triple arches set between a pair of three-storied, multi-turreted watchtowers of pale stone tastefully patterned by arrow slits and connected to city walls some ten feet thick at least but which petered out after just a few yards where stonemasons and soldiers were hard at work extending them.

As Ciaran passed through one of the two smaller, pedestrian flanking-arches, he felt the edges of the new paving stones jut through the leather of his boots at each step. They would have to start wearing thicker soles.

He hailed and got into a rickshaw manned by a powerful-looking human with a patch over one eye and three fingers missing from his right hand, whom Ciaran judged to be a Koviri mercenary, and they set off towards the city centre.

Ciaran had never been to Flotsam before his capture — and even then hadn’t seen much of it — but they’d had maps and like many other Scoia’tael who’d operated in the area, he’d had a thorough knowledge of the town’s layout on paper. And since this was his first visit to Gwyngaard, the embassy had, of course, sent him a detailed map of the city as it stood so he could find them, and he’d studied it to see how much had changed and what the empire intended for the nominally free city.

What Iorveth had told him of Flotsam had coincided with his own fleeting impressions of mud and dirt, dark streets and shabby, rundown wooden buildings, of fog and noxious dank. But all of that had been blown away. Flotsam had been razed and Gwyngaard built further east along the river, clear of the forest that separated it from Temeria. The haphazard, puddled roads had been replaced by four tree-lined avenues that radiated inward from the four main city gates, their carefully-spaced paving stones glistening with recent rain as they led straight to the heart of the city and its cluster of central squares set close to the river, connected between them by a web-like network of side streets.
All was space and light and order even though the streets bustled with visitors, tradesmen and soldiers — Nilfgaardian, Aedirnian, Temerian, Mahakaman, some Scoia’tael and even a handful of what sounded like Redanians — who assisted the qualified builders and artisans by carrying out a number of menial tasks, fetching and carrying, sharpening tools, mixing cement and grouting.

Few buildings looked anything like finished but the streets were dressed up with makeshift stalls loaded with a wealth of apples, potatoes, breads, wheels and wedges of cheese, legs of mutton, and every type of fish to be had from the Pontar, and as Ciaran watched, one of the vendors exchanged banter with a couple of passing builders and as their laughter rang through the street he tossed them each a bread bun. The essential structures of the downriver dock, so important for trade and the delivery of building materials, had already been completed but very little else had, not even the embassy, since Ciaran knew Nilfgaard still ran most of its administrative operations from Hagge castle, the very castle where Emhyr’s enemies had once assembled to plot against him and which had fallen on his side of the redrawn boundaries.

The bard, who’d been in town for a couple of days already, had suggested they meet at the city’s first fully-functioning tavern in what was clearly to be the fashionable district, a stone’s throw from the embassy, and as he turned onto one of the larger squares, Ciaran came upon a breathtaking view of the Pontar, whose waters now lapped at stone banks.

Thought and vision had gone into every stone and line of the carefully-planned city, a wilful disavowal of all the ill-conceived, haphazard settlements, like Flotsam, that sprang up all over the North. And what was more, as he gazed across the river it seemed to Ciaran too that placing the city’s epicentre right by the riverbank revealed an expectation that it would soon have the other bank of the Pontar to expand to, and that an upriver dock on the other side of the river would help the flow of ships and trade, which had resumed during the ceasefire.

Henselt would have been furious and the elf couldn’t help wondering how the Redanian king felt about it.

The White Oliphant was run by the blue-silk-and-leather-dressed, turbaned Ofieri with three gold rings on each hand who stood by the back wall and whose satisfied, proprietary gaze roved continually about the locale, the atmosphere of which was warm and redolent with the scent of spices and drink and freshly-roasted red meats.

Seated at the window table from which he’d waved at Ciaran and dressed in his usual mulberry ensemble, the bard was like a blot of oil paint against the other, more soberly dressed, mostly Nilfgaardian, patrons.

As Ciaran settled down opposite him, Dandelion raised his cup to him.

“Want one?”

The elf’s nose wrinkled slightly at the smell of the dark, almost black, beverage in the small, chased-metal cup.

“What is it?”

“Something called ‘coffee’, they get it in from Zangvebar. Want to try some?”

“I don’t think so.”

Dandelion waved over a nearby barmaid.

water? There’s as much choice here as in Novigrad and they say that soon the Pontar itself will be clean enough to drink from.”

“I’ll have tea.”

Dandelion took a sip of his coffee then sighed happily.

“You know, I thought I would hate Gwyngaard but actually she’s not half bad and about a million times better than Flotsam,” he made a face as a nearby table of Redanians erupted into laughter, then continued in a lower voice, “They say they’ll accept anyone with enough coin to set up shop. If things get any worse in Novigrad I might sell up and move the Rosemary and Thyme here.”

“That bad?”

“Worse. Geralt told you?”

Ciaran nodded and they both paused and glanced up when his tea arrived, with a biscuit resting in the saucer.

“It’s spread to Oxenfurt now. Radovid has his headquarters there, you know. He shut the Academy down as soon as war broke out, and invited all the medical students, the healers, the herbalists, to join his army. And now they’ve started burning books too.”

“But Oxenfurt is Redanian.”

“Yes, but apparently someone decided the Academy library’s entire section on magic would make perfect fuel for the Eternal Flame. Emhyr’s a piece of work, sure, but those nut jobs at the Church are beyond anything and if Radovid really is behind it…”

Dandelion stared out of the window absently.

“That’s his embassy there, all made of locally-quarried Pontar valley marble, in the Nilfgaardian style. Its north-facing windows must have a great view onto Radovid’s lands and he gave it to Shilard Fitz-Oesterlen, who’s been persona non grata in Redania since before the Peace of Cintra, accused of spying.”

Ciaran reflected that Shilard Fitz-Oesterlen was persona non grata in a few other places besides and for other reasons, and as he raised his cup of pale tea to his mouth and breathed in its rich fragrance before sipping it, his gaze went to the Ofieri at the back, who met it and gave a slow, deliberate nod.

Dandelion turned back to him.

“I suppose you’ll meet Shilard. Be careful of him, he’s the velvet glove on his emperor’s mailed fist — what diplomacy doesn’t achieve the military will. ‘Divide et impera’ — divide and conquer. Emhyr waited just long enough for Temeria to start tearing itself apart at the seams — baron against baron, John Natalis’ partisans against Anaïs’ — then swept in to pick up the pieces and now Vernon Roche has to put them all back together into some kind of shape and pray to whoever Temerians pray to these days that it sticks. Look at this Aedirnia. With Demavend gone, the Aedirnian nobles were so afraid of Saskia’s Springtime of Races that they invited Henselt to invade, thinking he’d be the lesser of two evils, the poor fools. Though I guess they couldn’t have predicted Henselt would be killed too. In any case, people might not trust Saskia the Dragon but Saskia the Dragonslayer’s ideas stuck and under the laws of Nilfgaard, the elves of the Pontar and the dwarves of Mahakam will have the same rights as the humans of Aedirn, Lyria or Rivia. The nobility in these parts will never wrestle those rights back. Never. Even if they wanted to, they’re surrounded on all sides — Mahakam, Gwyngaard, Dol Gwennelen, Dol Blathanna… Emhyr even thought to grant Lyria and
Rivia special status as semi-autonomous regions within Aedirnia, ensuring that their interests don’t completely align with the rest of the province’s.”

Dandelion took a long swallow of coffee then looked the drained cup as though he wished it had held something else.

“You’ve heard my Ballad of the Lion Cub of Cintra? Well, it’s all true. I saw it with my own eyes. That is Nilfgaard. Emhyr knew he’d won and yet he continued to cut and kill his way to the city of Cintra, right up to the fortress, then battered and besieged it — even though he knew it was his, that it had become indefensible — and while the people inside were dying, his mages blasted spells at the wall until they fell. And all his soldiers found inside were the corpses of those who had had to kill themselves or each other to escape them.”

Dandelion set the cup back on its saucer, giving it a little push with the back of his hand.

“The North was always going to lose sooner or later. Nilfgaard is a machine that doesn’t stop for anyone or anything. It rapes and kills and pillages until it gets what it wants.”

“Geralt said the pillaging and violence has stopped.”

“It has, because the Rivians, Lyrians and even the Aedirnian nobles all caved. They remembered what all Nilfgaardian officers are taught — ‘War to the castles, peace to the villages.’ They remembered the truth of that. They remembered Cintra and they remembered that during the Second Nilfgaard War their castle at Vengerberg was almost completely destroyed after a week-long siege. They knew that as soon as they gave in it would all stop. And it did. But even so, Nilfgaard probably had time to take what it wanted in the way of food and slaves. They were pushed back on Skellige but I hear they managed to fill a ship with slaves before they were.”

“Our liaisons officer once said the Wild Hunt appeared there. Is that true or just a rumour to cover up their defeat?”

Dandelion made a face and shrugged.

“Geralt says it’s true. I know, I’m with you — I’ve never seen the Hunt, whereas we all saw at Brenna that even Nilfgaardian officers make mistakes. Still, that’s what he says and I trust him.”

“But do you believe him?”

Dandelion paused, thoughtful.

“I like to think I do.”

Another burst of laughter, Dandelion ducked his head and they raised their cups to their lips, Dandelion looking surprised when he found his empty.

“What do you know about the concubines?”

“Hmm. I think he has seven or eight? One of the girls — probably the latest addition, it happened just last year — is one of the twin daughters of the Nilfgaardian ambassador to Novigrad. I remember I felt sorry for her at the time — she was barely eighteen, perhaps not even — but she’s probably better off. She was spared the war and besides, these days Novigrad is no place for beautiful young ladies. I used to tutor her sister and her. Her sister is charming.”

“Iorveth and the Gwynbleidd think the concubines are just hostages.”
“I guess that’s partly true. At least two of them are the daughters of princes, and one of those princes was also one of the generals involved in that whole Brenna fiasco. That said, officially its primary purpose is the production of heirs. Nilfgaardians are not as attached to primogeniture as we are here in the North.”

“But there are no heirs.”

“No. The talk is that Emhyr is sterile — an injury he got while storming the imperial palace to take back his throne — but that’s the kind of talk that gets you summarily executed in Nilfgaard. There were rumours of a daughter long ago but nobody’d ever seen her then and she’s definitely not been seen since. Where would she have even come from? None of the concubines have ever even been pregnant and there’s never been an empress.”

Ciaran was still thinking about the bard as he made his way across the square to the embassy, having settled the bill and bid the Redanian goodbye and good luck. He had proved a little more useful than Iorveth had implied he would be but just as charming, not that Iorveth had meant that as a compliment. Perhaps the bard did have a few drops of elven blood, as some claimed, but a half-elf or even a quarter? Never.

Sentinels stood to attention under flags that flapped idly in the thin breeze, the gold on them brighter in the gathering dusk, and as Ciaran passed through the doors of the marble-built embassy, one of the two staffers manning the front desk jumped up to greet him and confirm, before Ciaran even had time to name himself, that Ambassador Shilard Fitz-Oesterlen was expecting him.

Fitz-Oesterlen clearly was expecting him and welcomed him, wreathed in smiles, invited him to sit in one of the four armchairs arranged around a low table before offering him a drink, which the elf accepted, as Nilfgaardian custom dictated he should.

The ambassador’s smile and small talk continued the time it took for the staffer to leave then return with a silver tray loaded with fluted white porcelain — just as Ciaran’s silence did.

Finally, the Nilfgaardian allowed his chatter to peter out and Ciaran fought the temptation to let the silence stretch from awkward into contemptuous, aware the ambassador was waiting for just such an insult, watching him with unblinking eyes.

It would be so easy. Give just enough offence, show just enough reluctance that the ambassador would drop into his emperor’s ear the whispered suggestion that Ciaran aep Easnillien not be considered for the position. Ciaran would be mentally struck from the list, passed over on the day, and none would be any the wiser as to the reason why. And all he had to do was remain silent just a few split-seconds longer.

Ciaran’s gaze dropped to the tea tray and found that along with the round-bellied teapot was a taller, more cylindrical, long-spouted pot that he know recognised to be a coffee pot, and a tiny spherical glass teapot containing what was visibly his infusion — the same infusion for which the leaves had to be brought into Dol Gwennelen for him from Brokilon every month at great expense and inconvenience.

He poured himself a cup of tea, recognised the colour and the smell and his first sip from the eggshell-thin, gold-rimmed cup confirmed his impression.

“They serve this tea at the White Oliphant.”

“Ah yes, the elves in Nilfgaard favour it and we buy some of the Oliphant’s stock every so often for our own consumption. The Twisting Dragon is grown high in the mountains on an island far to the
east, off the coast of Haakland. We have a small plantation of our own on the slopes around the Ard Vesaevus but it does not yield quite the same quality.”

Ciaran’s eyes narrowed slightly. Haakland was beyond the impenetrable Blue Moutains whereas Ofier was said to be south of Nilfgaard.

“The Ofieri get this tea from Haakland then bring it all the way back up north to Gwyngaard?”

“Oh, yes, it is troublesome but the Ofieri have a deep, sensuous understanding of the unnecessary, of the superfluous. Their tetrarchs measure their prestige against each other by the number of white oliphants they have. Have you ever seen an oliphant? They are like enormous grey oxen. They can push over a sapling the way you and I would brush aside a trailing vine — without a second thought. A single one can draw a fire scorpion for hours over terrain most horses would lose their footing on or carry two-score men into battle on its back. But a white oliphant… A white oliphant is a rare and sacred beast, an auspicious symbol, and as such it cannot be put to work. Instead it is kept, fed and pampered at great expense lest it die and its death bring misfortune to the nation. A costly frivolity, no?”

The ambassador raised his own cup and smiled, still watching him with dark, staring eyes.

“I myself prefer coffee. We are fortunate that we can have both. One of the benefits of peace is trade.”

One of the other benefits of peace was life and the right to live it. For some anyway.

Ciaran had received two letters signed in the ambassador’s own hand and had sent two back in answer. Nothing in Fitz-Oesterlen’s manner suggested anything beyond just such an acquaintance and yet he knew. He had to know. After all, Shilard Fitz-Oesterlen was the man who had negotiated the Peace of Cintra on Nilfgaard’s behalf just four years ago, the man who had accepted the Northern kings’ demand that they execute all fifty-five ranking officers of the Vrihedd brigade, and who had signed his and Iorveth’s death sentences in Emhyr var Emreis’ name.

Anger, resentment, even rage flickered and flared deep in Ciaran’s chest so he took a sip of tea to recover his equanimity.

“Brave of that Ofieri to invest so much here so soon.”

“A, yes, our Northern neighbours still mistrust our intentions but the Ofieri are merchants at heart who seize opportunity wherever it arises. Besides, they know us well. In many ways, they are our nearest neighbours. After all, it is far easier and faster to reach the northernmost islands of Ofier from our port city of Baccalà than it is to reach the North from Mag Turga through Toussaint or even through Cintra. We and the Ofieri have been trade partners and allies for centuries. They know us and trust us. And they believe Gwyngaard may one day match Novigrad.”

“Or rival it.”

The ambassador’s smile widened fractionally and for the first time, the lines around his eyes creased.

“Indeed.”

The elf’s cool gaze lingered on the Nilfgaardian a moment.

The ambassador was perfectly-placed to facilitate the implantation of new business ventures in this city where the land value probably accrued daily and the elf wondered how he was thanked for this assistance. No doubt the ambassador’s was one of the hands the Ofieri had greased and one of the
strings he’d pulled in order to secure a prime location for his commercial venture. Humans were such greedy creatures — money-grubbing, land-grabbing, resource-squandering vermin.

Ciaran set down his teacup and indicated the envelope he’d set on the table, by the plate of biscuits.

“Everything should be there.”

“Ah, thank you.”

The ambassador made a show of opening the envelope and flipping through the pages as he heaped praise on the elf for his tireless work and efficiency, admiring the small painted portraits of the candidates, confirming that everything they needed was indeed there.

Ciaran observed the lines of the face, still strong but faded past its prime, the sombrely expensive clothes and the shining triangular medallion on its heavy gold chain that stood out against them and that the ambassador sometimes fondled unconsciously. He noted the receding hairline, the cruel mouth whose lines were losing their firmness, the slight sag of the skin along the jawline, the hint of roundness in the shoulders, catalogued every last sign of human decay, and his mouth filled with bile at the thought of being touched by such a creature, of its vile breath, and, worse, at what he might be asked to do for its pleasure. Despite the violent shiver of revulsion that shook him, his features remained in the same mask of stony politeness he had schooled them into on arrival and listened without comment until talk turned to the arrangements for the peace treaty.

The Nilgaardian ambassador assured Ciaran that the Aen Seidhe could rely on Nilfgaard entirely for transport and board, everything had already been planned. They would meet the emperor and the Temerian triumvirs directly at Oxenfurt, where the treaty was to be signed, then they would all travel back to Vizima for the ceremony at which the emperor would formally hand over power to the three Temerian triumvirs. All that would be left then would be to return, via Gwyngaard, to the new elven settlement outside Verden for the banquet at which Emhyr var Emreis would choose his concubine.

All of which Ciaran had already settled with the liaisons officer, though the ambassador raised just enough issues that his being summoned to the embassy wasn’t an obvious waste of time. And all the time, Ciaran was keenly aware of the ambassador observing him, filing away even the smallest reaction for analysis and, no doubt, report to his emperor.

“Would you like another pot of the Dragon?”

“No, thank you,” Ciaran declined politely, refilling his teacup with the infusion, already feeling compromised at having accepted food and drink from Nilfgaard’s hand like some tamed beast.

Shilard even looked like something of lion-tamer or perhaps a dragon-tamer. He wore plenty of velvet but he also wore greaves and on a console table near the door, under an ornate, gilt-framed mirror lay a pair of heavy gauntlets. Appropriate, perhaps, for the ambassador of territory that until recently had been a war zone and that might soon be again, and Ciaran was reminded that Dol Gwennelen was largely reliant on the independent city-state and would be for years yet. Fitz-Oesterlen was a viper and Ciaran had no doubt his venom was deadly — but so long as he remained loyal to them, the Scoia’tael would have a powerful ally in him.

As their hour came to a close, Fitz-Oesterlen even invited him to dinner, and when Ciaran declined, offered him an escort back to Vergen, which Ciaran also declined. The ambassador did, however, insist on seeing the elf to the embassy’s door, which he held for him, still wearing that smile.

“It was a pleasure to finally meet you. You are a credit to the Scoia’tael. I look forward to seeing you again in Vizima.”
Comments and suggestions welcome!
The Vair Cape

Chapter Summary

In which Fates are decided.

Chapter Notes

So I was going for about 10'000 words per chapter but apparently I'm more on the "shameless self-indulgence" side of the scale than on the "ruthless editing" one.

Tags have been updated and probably will be again. Reader discretion advised. Links to suggested music added — I'd recommend opening in a new tab.

Thanks for all the kudos and comments! <3

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

THE VAIR CAPE

— Oxenfurt, Redania, early February, 1272 —

“Bloede dh’oine… The best minds in the North and they can’t even fix one of our aqueducts. The damn rats turned it into a leaky sewer.”

But there was more disdain than venom in Iorveth’s tone as he surveyed Oxenfurt and the renovated elven aqueduct that soared away from it. The Nilfgaardian caravel that had carried them from La Valette had furled its lateens and was warping into the harbour, affording them a spectacular view of the island city.

Sitting astride the Pontar as it did, with bridges stretching out to either shore and haloed by its Academy’s reputation as a place of enlightenment and progress, Oxenfurt was, in some ways, the perfect place for Radovid and Emhyr var Emreis to meet. Yet, it was hardly neutral territory. Rumour had it that it was so solidly Redanian that the kingdom’s secret service had a small office somewhere on the Academy’s very premises and Ciaran wondered why the mighty emperor of Nilfgaard had
agreed to meet here, on enemy territory, as if he were the vanquished party, when he could have insisted on Novigrad or even La Valette.

A small fleet of gleaming black ships ablaze with gilded suns sat in the harbour and tallest among them, looming ahead in a sheltered berth, was the flagship, a darkly handsome carrack with sun-stamped bunting festooned between the tops of its three masts. And standing with his arms crossed on the floating pontoon beside it was Vernon Roche, accompanied by a handful of soldiers from the Impera Brigade, the liaisons officer, who had gone on ahead in a pilot boat, and a well-dressed Nilfgaardian.

Their ship docked and Iorveth leant over the side as the gangplank was pushed out and the small committee came aboard.

“Well, well, if it isn’t Vernon Roche, the once-Commander of the Blue Stripes, now Baron of Crow’s Perch and Lord of Velen.”

Roche came over the side, glaring and tight-lipped, followed by their liaisons officer who looked uncharacteristically nervous, an Impera guard and the mystery Nilfgaardian, who immediately introduced himself.

“I am Henry var Attre, ambassador to Novigrad. Unfortunately, the emperor was called away for some last-minute negotiations and asked me to welcome you in his stead. Vernon Roche you know and this is Evrard var Cleef, brigadier-general of the Impera Brigade.”

Once the rest of the introductions were made, Roche invited Iorveth and Ciaran up to the top, claiming he wanted to show them the view — an announcement that prompted Iorveth to start and stare as if the Temerian had suggested a leisurely stroll on the moon.

Once the three of them had grappled their way up the rigging to the platform attached to the mainmast, Roche turned to them, looking grim.

“This is the only place I’ve found that is free of Nilfgaardian ears, at least as far as I can tell,” he jerked his head at the city beyond, “And the view isn’t bad either.”

The ancient brick-built city looked as dignified as ever and her prestige would no doubt be enhanced by being the seat of a important peace, and yet the dockside’s markets looked forlorn and its cafés were shuttered up. Throughout the venerable city, great billows of black smoke rose up into the air, casting a pall over her.

“There’s a pyre in every major square,” Roche said, his jaw set.

“Books?”

“And worse,” Roche replied grimly, “They roasted their first mage when we arrived yesterday — as a threat or perhaps in Emhyr’s honour, who even knows with these lunatics?”

“Speaking of the great Emhyr, where is he?”

“You heard var Attre, last-minute negotiations,” Roche answered snidely, “And the last time there were delays in a negotiated peace between Radovid and Emhyr, it was because they couldn’t agree on how many of you Squirrels to skin, so I wouldn’t unpack my bags just yet if I were you.”

“So he’s your hero now?” Iorveth sneered.

A muscle twitched in Roche’s jaw.
He’s a bastard.”

The Blue Stripes commander’s jaw clenched again as he remembered being invited to dine in the Temerian monarch’s old dining hall, remembered sitting at Foltest’s table while the emperor sat in his king’s chair and, between one course and the next, told him that of course he didn’t expect Temerians to worship the Great Sun, that they could keep their Meliteles, Eternal Fires, Crones, or whatever other backwater superstitions they clung to.

“But I need him, Iorveth, and so do you. If we don’t want to get caught in the cross-fire between Redania and Nilfgaard, we’ll have to work together.”

Iorveth made a sour face and would have spat on the ground if he hadn’t been standing on three square feet of wood some twenty feet off said ground.

“It’s all agreed, Roche. By this time tomorrow, we’ll all be under the great Nilfgaardian umbrella and Radovid can piss on us as much as he wants.”

Roche gave a noncommittal grunt.

“That may be or it may not. But I’d give a lot to know what they’re discussing.”

“Don’t you have spies yet, kingslayer?”

Roche bared his teeth slightly.

“You have the blood of a king on your hands too, Iorveth!”

“Yes,” Iorveth shrugged, “And now you’re a triumvir of Temeria. Whereas you killed Henselt only to give Kaedwen to Radovid the Mad.”

“You son of a-!”

A shrill whistle then the thwack of an arrow fired into the mast heralded the delivery of a message and it was soon followed by a hail from the weather deck, requesting Iorveth’s presence.

The elf didn’t immediately move, spoiling for a fight, and was still snarling as he swung himself back onto the rigging and started making his way below, leaving Roche and Ciaran alone.

Ciaran’s gaze swept the city and the columns of smoke that punctuated it.

“Radovid is throwing his weight around, forcing Emhyr to walk through his city. And Emhyr is letting him.”

“It would be just like Radovid to put his balls on the table. Just as long as he doesn’t try to kill Emhyr, or worse, actually kill him,” Roche nodded, observing the elf, “I’d always heard that you are the brains of the outfit and I’ve always been inclined to believe it since Iorveth has no brains at all. I need — that is, Temeria needs all the friends she can get, just as Dol Gwennelen does, and I think you’ll soon be in a position to help so I’ll be honest with you. If Emhyr does choose you, and I think he will, we’ll need you to keep your eyes and ears open.”

“And report back to you?” Ciaran asked coldly, swinging his gaze back to the former special forces commander.

“Yes. We’re still weak. The only thing keeping Temeria’s barons in line is the combined threat of another Redanian invasion and direct rule by Nilfgaard. And when Radovid’s ploughing troops
occupied Velen they brought this Eternal Fire filth with them. In Crow’s Perch, followers of the Eternal Flame fight in the streets with Melitele’s and both sects spit on those who believe in the Crones. They won’t even break bread together — I can’t be sure they’d come together to fight against Radovid’s forces if they invaded again. Var Attre’s been in Novigrad for over a decade and even he admits that he’s worried about the Church’s influence — but Emhyr will do nothing. And if Temeria falls, how long before Radovid takes your Alabaster Valley?"

“And I suppose you’ll come rushing to our aid if Radovid attacks Dol Gwennelen first?” Ciaran sneered.

“If it comes to that, Emhyr will make me. Mutual defence — it’s what I’ll be signing up to in the damn treaty,” Roche confirmed dryly, leaning back against the mast and crossing his arms, “But — and this is what I need you to explain to Iorveth — to avoid such an attack, the first thing we have to do is present a united front. A strong united front. Nilfgaard is here now but Emhyr won’t solve all our problems — we can’t and shouldn’t rely on him. And he has problems of his own. You’re right, Radovid’s throwing his weight about and Emhyr is letting him. The question is why? Nilfgaard took half the north in less than six months, why stop now? Emhyr’s supply lines are established, along the coast, through Cintra and Aedirnia and he can draw on us to feed his troops almost indefinitely, he could have spent the months bringing his reservists north for a spring campaign; Kaedwen is still a mess, he could foment revolt and division there too, the way he did in Temeria, until it’s ripe for the picking. Emhyr has spent months in Vizima acting like he owns the place but now all he seems to want is to put an end to these hostilities, have the new boundaries recognised, hand us the reins, pack up his war spoils and go back to Nilfgaard.”

Ciaran looked at the human, trying to hide his disgust. He thought back to all the years of fighting and sacrifice it had taken to bring them to this point, trying to muddle out what kind of victory they’d won if it now meant alliance with and reliance on their bitterest enemies. Somehow their new autonomy felt like a loss of independence

But Roche was right and Ciaran too had wondered at the emperor’s tactical decisions. As for trusting Emhyr var Emreis… The Scoia’tael and theirs had been deceived by Nilfgaard before and this time they had more to lose than just fifty-five commanders. He’d been intending to spy for Iorveth so spying for Roche wouldn’t be any additional work. For now, Temeria was their natural ally and they would have to protect themselves and each other against both a Redanian attack and a Nilfgaardian betrayal.

“You said Emhyr has problems of his own?”

“There are rumours. I’ve put some agents in Novigrad and they’ve heard that there’s unrest back in Nilfgaard,” Roche answered negligently, “That’s the sort of thing we need to know.”

“You seem to think Emhyr var Emreis will ask me to sit on his High Council,” Ciaran snapped back, “He’s selecting a concubine! If he does choose me it will be to prove to you damn Northerners that he has subdued the Scoia’tael.”

“Emhyr is no fool and humans are not as indiscriminate as you elves are when it comes to gender,” Roche said evenly, “If he does choose you it will be because he expects you to spy and to be our backchannel contact. You realise that, don’t you? There will be things that he can’t tell us directly, orders that he can’t give, and you’ll be no use to him if you don’t relay what he wants us to know and do. But what we need is for you to see past what he shows you.” Roche paused then shrugged, “You should have a special understanding of the Black Seidhe, shouldn’t you? Being an elf?”

“You realise only you idiot Northerners call them that?” Ciaran pointed out, allowing himself a touch of sarcasm, “It doesn’t even make sense in Hen Llinge.”
“I’m sure you’re right and I’m sure I don’t care,” Roche dismissed, “Well?”

“I’ll try,” Ciaran agreed in exasperation, “but I’ll be alone and I’ll be watched. They’ll open my mail, read my letters — not that a letter that takes weeks to arrive will do any good if the danger is imminent. Nilfgaard has mages and portals. Emhyr can communicate with his ambassadors and military commanders instantaneously.”

Roche rubbed a thumb over the rasp of stubble on his chin.

“I know. I haven’t found a solution yet.”

“I’ll try to think of something too. But, Roche, if we share what we find out then you have to do the same. You need an embassy in Gwyngaard.”

“We’re planning one but just at the moment we have all the access to Nilfgaard we need,” Roche grimaced, “And more of it than we want.”

Ciaran shook his head.

“Soon, Roche, and the best man you have in it. Verden is nearby so we’re constantly in and out of there even though our embassy isn’t finished. But the Vivaldi bank is opening a branch soon and Sigismund Dijsktra must already have people there. You know what Novigrad’s become.”

Roche considered this then nodded.

“All right,” he continued to look at the elf thoughtfully, then uncrossed his arms and straightened, “You realise that even though Emhyr intends for you to spy on him, that won’t stop him from using it as an excuse if he ever wants to get rid of you?”

“I do.”

Roche gave a curt nod.

“Right. We’d better go down before they start to think we’re conspiring.”

No sooner had they reached the weather deck that a ship’s boy appeared to tell Ciaran that the Novigradi tailor he’d been expecting had arrived.

They found him by the gangway with the liaisons officer.

“You must be Elihal. Thank you for coming.”

Ciaran made introductions then lead the elven tailor below and they reached Ciaran’s neat little cabin just behind two Impera men carrying a large chest that they set down by the two already inside, and followed by the liaisons officer who drew up a couple of chairs and offered them tea.

Ciaran’s gaze hovered over Elihal and his three great chests then he motioned the tailor to take a seat, raking a hand through the thick, dark hair he’d brushed straight but that threatened to curl under persuasion from the briny sea air.

“I hope the journey wasn’t too difficult.”

Elihal shrugged.

“It’s nice to see somewhere different. Although the troubles seem worse here than back home. I will say this for them, those mages do go out with a bang.”
“Where are you staying?”

“One of the dockside inns.”

“I’ll have you moved to one of the ships. It will be safer.

Tea and a plate of biscuits arrived then, when they were alone, Ciaran nodded at the chests.

“May I see?”

Elihal retrieved a flat cedar box from one of the chests, opened it and presented it to Ciaran.

“This is the spare.”

As he lifted it out of the box, the garment spilled out of its folds — a long pearl-white sleeveless tunic with a delicate swan-necked collar and high slits on either side, to be worn over their usual slim-fitting tops and trousers.

Ciaran reached out to touch the slippery, slightly glossy fabric, then rubbed his thumb over the single visible stitch, in spring green thread, at the top of the slit.

“Oh, an 80-hank fine worsted wool flannel,” Elihal explained, “The design is simple and adjustable, just as we discussed.”

Elihal was no longer a young elf and by now few things surprised him and yet this all barely seemed real to him — that he was in Oxenfurt, on a Nilfgaardian ship, showing his work to Ciaran aep Easnillien, the famous veteran of the Second Nilfgaard War, an elf who was the stuff of legend, who had escaped certain death not once but twice and whom the Novigradi bookies had down as the candidate most likely to become the imperial concubine.

Elihal had not left the Scoia’tael on the best terms. His argument that cohabitation with humans and other races was their best chance at a constructive future had been met with disdain by the charitable souls who’d taken it as a convenient excuse to lay down arms and with anger by those who had instantly accused him of cowardice.

Elves did not ostracise other elves but though he’d been allowed to live his new life in Novigrad, the weight of the leadership’s disapproval had been patent and ever-present and so this outstretched hand, this quiet call for help, had come as a surprise.

Dandelion had sent a letter describing Ciaran and what had happened to him, but of course there had been no real need. The story of the elf who had survived the annihilation of his unit by a kingslayer in the pay of sorceresses only to be caught, imprisoned and tortured on the infamous Flotsam prison barge before finally being saved from death in extremis by Nilfgaardian soldiers had reached Novigrad months ago — at least three different versions of it, all much embellished by now.

“Show me.”

Holding the tunic up to himself, Elihal tied a tape around his waist, over the tunic, and demonstrated how the material at the waist could be drawn up through the tape until the top of the slits rested in their proper place, so high on the hip they were almost at the waist, then folded down over the tape.

“When you wind the sash around the waist, it will hide the fold. Then the hems can be shortened or let out so they’re all the same length. A simple and elegant solution adapted from a traditional pattern — intended to be made with the fewest cuts and stitches and the least amount of waste. Here are the fabrics for the sashes.”
Elihal opened the second chest, filled to the brim with brocades and jacquards and richly embroidered silks, and watched Ciaran start to sift through them.

Humans claimed that Iorveth and Ciaran were indestructible, that they had made a pact with the Wild Hunt, who fed on death and destruction, and that the Red Riders themselves had gone to the Ravine of the Hydra and brought their bones back to life so they could continue waging war on humans. Some elves believed that they could not be killed or even separated because Iorveth was the alpha to Ciaran’s omega, and more recently there had been whispers that Ciaran could grant an elf a hundred more years of life with just a touch of his hand and that he’d drunk so much of Brokilon’s waters that he’d become half dryad himself.

But then Elihal remembered what he’d seen of Iorveth’s face and the part of scar that the bandana did not hide and as he watched Ciaran continue to look through the fabrics, straight-backed as he held them up for inspection in that elegant, deliberate way of his, managing every word and gesture as though his energy were a rare and limited resource, Elihal felt a tug at his heartstrings at the thought that Ciaran was just as damaged, though he remained beautiful on the outside.

And Ciaran was beautiful, with a face full of light and shadow chasing each other — sooty lashes like charcoal smudges around hazel eyes flecked into such a sunburst of gold that the green in them was no more than a suggestion; pale, taut skin over firm flesh that folded into dimples and neat creases that bracketed the wide moth whenever it quirked into movement and brought out the hollows under the high cheekbones; and ears just as lovely as Filavandrel’s.

“And the hems are easy to alter?”

“Oh, you just need pinking shears and a ballpoint needle. Any dressmaker or tailor can do it.”

Ciaran looked at him a moment and even in his complete stillness, it was there, in the finely-drawn features offset by the jawline and stark colouring. What Dandelion called the “restlessness” of elven beauty — like Iorveth’s too long neck or Elihal’s own too oblique gaze. How had he put it that evening they first met? “Something less than perfect. Or maybe more than perfect. Something that keeps the eye from resting, something that keeps the gaze interested, searching for the key to the mystery.”

“You must see many Nilfgaardians in Novigrad.”

“Yes, I even have a few as customers.”

“What are they like?”

Elihal shrugged then pulled out more sashes, showing them to Ciaran, moving them slightly to show off the play of light on the shiny threads.

“They’re good customers. Very particular about details and finishings. They demand quality but they’re prepared to pay for it, and you never have to chase them for payment, they always settle their bills promptly not so much on principle but as a matter of course. They find any form of ostentation vulgar — or pretend to, anyway — which is why they favour an almost monochromatic palette but they make up for it in the choice of fabrics, cut and workmanship. For example, the sleeves commonly have some sort of complication and you’ll see them wear a lot of jacquards, which are costly to make, and leather, which is difficult to work.”

Ciaran nodded at him.

“Their plate armour is the same. It isn’t just blacked but also gilded and embossed, which must make
it all a lot more costly.”

“Just so.”

Ciaran indicated the tunic and sashes.

“Will they understand this?”

Elihal held the steady hazel gaze a moment.

The young elf had been clear from the first about what he wanted to achieve with these outfits and though his break with the Scoia’tael had come long before Ciaran’s time, Elihal knew it was still spoken of in reproachful whispers. He knew too that Ciaran had not chosen him by accident. The tunics had required not just a tailor’s skills but also cultural appreciation and Ciaran had surely wanted to draw on his years of experience and knowledge accumulated through years spent living alongside humans. This was merely the first, unspoken acknowledgement that they would all have to learn to compromise and to live together while somehow retaining their identity. The Dol Gwennelen elves were spending a small fortune on this ceremony and Ciaran could have hired the best human tailors on the continent, but he had chosen a fellow elf from the outskirts of the most cosmopolitan city in the north, on the recommendation of a bard and a witcher.

Glancing back at the tunic, Elihal nodded.

“They will see that the style is elven and they’ll appreciate its simplicity. I backed the collars and shoulders to stiffen them and give them some structure. The wool is Toussaint merino — Nilfgaardian and the best that can be had — and the brocaded sashes are just what they like. Perhaps… some jewellery?”

Ciaran nodded, passing a hand over the duck egg blue sash shot with dim gold draped over his knee.

“Our Dol Blathanna guests will bring us silver gorgets, circlets and so on. It will have to do.”

Elihal tried to imagine how the circlets would look, drawing on memories of pictures of the elven princes he’d seen in old books. He sometimes wondered what the Valley of Flowers was like, what a place inhabited only by elves might be like, but even travelling at pace Dol Blathanna was three weeks of road away, much of it through land that until recently had been disputed and war-torn and so he’d never gone.

“I don’t know much about clothes,” Ciaran murmured, stroking a hand over the sash on his knee again, “We only had one or two basic sets of clothes, the rest we scavenged where we could. Iorveth and I barely know how to dress like civilians. But if it’s important to the Nilfgaardians, I’ll have to learn.”

He turned to Elihal.

“What is the most important thing I should know about them?”

Elihal considered a moment.

“They’re usually polite but they don’t lie out of politeness. They are subtle in their way of expressing themselves. It’s not that they lie or wilfully deceive — they say just exactly what they mean, but what you understand may be completely different. If they give a straight answer, either a “yes” or a “no”, then they mean it.”

The young elf’s cool, unwavering gaze reminded Elihal of the mighty Pontar, whose deep waters
flowed by the caravel’s gently creaking hull with barely a ruffle in its smooth, calm surface.

“You should come with us. To Vizima then Gwyngaard and Dol Gwennelen.”

Elihal started, astonished, as Ciaran continued.

“I’ll arrange it, you can share my berth. We’ll say you’re needed to make the final adjustments. You do want to see those places, don’t you?”

“Do you think the Nilfgaardians will agree to it?”

“It will take them a while to come back with an answer — it will probably need paperwork to be approved by at least five people — but they’ll agree.”

Ciaran put the request to the liaisons officer when this latter arrived, some five minutes later, to tell him that the emperor was about embark and, after a nod to Elihal and an invitation to make himself comfortable, Ciaran followed him onto the flagship’s deck, where the rest of the delegation and several other guests were already assembled, just moments before a phalanx of tall Impera men came aboard, large and imposing, all but their eyes hidden by their tall winged helmets and the bevoirs that rose up from their breastplates, the gilded suns on their armour set ablaze by the sunset sky reflected in them.

As Ambassador var Attre pressed his hand to his chest and knelt, the Impera in the centre stepped forward, removed his winged helmet and tucked it under his arm.

“His most Glorious and Imperial Majesty, Emhyr var Emreis, Deithwen Addan yn Carn aep Morvudd, he of the Great Sun that shines on all worlds and all peoples, Imperator of the Empire of Nilfgaard, Suzerain of Toussaint, Lord of Metinna, Ebbing and Gemmera, Sovereign of Nazair, Vicovaro and Aedirnia, King of Cintra, and Lord Protector of Dol Blathanna, Dol Gwennelen and Temeria.”

Ciaran had only a fleeting impression of strength and a familiar profile picked out against the fiery sky before, beside him, Roche knelt and Ciaran too sank down on one knee and bowed his head as the rest of the delegation followed suite.

“Rise,” a low, deep voice bade in a clipped and contained tone, and when Ciaran raised his head, he found the emperor’s clear, topaz eyes on him.

Dinner had been set up for them on the aftercastle, the tables arranged in a rectangle open in two of its corners near the stairs that led up from the ship’s waist, and, after the inevitable round of stiffly protocolary introductions that had followed, it was at the small table between these two short flights of stairs that Ciaran had been seated, with Evrard var Cleef to his left and Baron Orvall La Valette then Ambassador var Attre on his right. The emperor, meanwhile, was seated directly opposite them, with the Nilfgaardian flag attached to the ship’s stern waving idly behind him, a mage at his left shoulder and a taster at his right, a few steps back.

As attendants came around with bowls of warm water and cloths for the guests to wash their hands with, the baron leant towards Ciaran, smiling, and indicated Iorveth and Roche, who sat on the emperor’s right and left respectively.

“Your friends look quite uncomfortable. Can’t say I blame them.”

Ciaran resisted the urge to point out that Vernon Roche had killed too many of his kin to really be termed a friend.
“You sound like you speak from experience,” he remarked instead.

The baron laughed, drained his tankard and signalled an attendant for a refill just as the first selection of dishes started to arrive — enormous tureens of potage, baskets overflowing with freshly baked breads, trays of walnut and spiced dormouse tartlets drizzled in honey and other assorted pies, and one peacock in its plumage for each table.

“I was the guest of honour last night. It should have been Herevard’s turn tonight but he was put ashore as soon as we arrived and hasn’t been seen since — seasick, apparently,” he paused and winked at var Attre, “though I’d bet an oren or two that we’d find him recovering in company at the Rosebud, the hound.”

Ciaran nodded politely and was dubiously eyeing the potage the baron was helping himself to when at his elbow arrived a delicate bowl of clear broth with a few quail eggs, a couple of leaves of sage and a slice of green lemon in it. As he glanced around the tables to see if anyone else had received one, he felt the emperor’s heavy gaze on him and met it briefly.

Unnerved by the clear, glowing eyes, Ciaran looked away.

He had expected a sharp-featured, wizened old man or a well-fed but declining one — not unlike Shilard Fitz-Oesterlen — but the Imperator of Nilfgaard was tall and carried his armour as easily as any of his imperial guards and even though his coal-black hair was winged with grey, he looked strong and younger than his years as he sat, at ease and slouched at an angle in his chair, coolly surveying his guests.

As the last of the light faded, the candles were lit and the flicker of their flames reflected on the silver knives and spoons and trays and tankards, on the dark bottles of Kaedweni stouts and Temerian ciders and on the clear ones of wine from every corner of the continent in every shade of red and pink and white, and on the porcelains so thin they were translucent, just added to the sense of plenty.

With the lights came the musicians, the dancers and the jugglers who performed in the centre, between the tables, and in the relative privacy of semi-darkness and noise, fuelled by food and drink, the atmosphere soon thawed and the baron addressed Ciaran directly a few more times, though he couldn’t help looking appalled when Ciaran offered to help him to the platter of pies and stammered out a refusal before he could regain his composure. A reservation the two Nilfgaardians didn’t seem to share.

“Dormouse is a favourite of mine,” the brigadier confided, smiling broadly as he helped himself to a couple of tartlets, “Especially with this ’68 Chateau var Ochmann. And may I recommend the Sansretour Pinot Grigio?”

Ciaran wet his lips with the delicate wine, which was indeed to his taste and a perfect match for his clear soup, then looked back at his neighbour. The handsome Impera brigadier had ash blond hair, bright blue-green eyes, a squared-off jaw and a manner to match, and after a little more small talk lowered his iron voice to a confidential murmur to tell Ciaran that he was a “true” Nilfgaardian, whatever that meant.

So baldly did var Cleef extol the virtues of his homeland that it occurred to Ciaran that he must have been tasked to do so, perhaps to bolster Ciaran’s own willingness to go there, and the elf saw an even more patent sign of collusion when he caught the brigadier glance at the mage standing behind the emperor and wait for the smallest nod before offering to show Ciaran how to eat the crispy duck skin, a Haakland specialty reserved for the imperial table.

The empty plates and bowls were cleared away and replaced with fresh bread baskets, half a dozen
spit-roasted boars and enormous platters loaded with racks of smoked venison, footed stands piled high with fruits Ciaran had never seen before, dozens of oysters on bowls of chipped ice and, laid out on beds of Nilfgaardian lemons and aromatic herbs, several large, whole Pontar sturgeons and salmons from the Gulf of Praxeda.

“What is Nilfgaard like?”

“Clean and warm!” the brigadier laughed then glanced over at the baron, who was giving the ambassador a blow by blow account of the hunts in the royal forests around Vizima that had yielded some of the game that now graced their table, and lowered his voice to continue, “None of these absurd Nordling superstitions and backwards customs. Everything is order and light under the Great Sun. You would like it, I think.”

Ciaran was saved from answering by the arrival of a plate of halibut poached in milk, sprinkled with pink peppercorns and garnished with a few wedges of blood-red oranges. He offered some to var Cleef who readily helped himself to a small piece, squeezed the juice from the citrus fruits into the milk then watched Ciaran taste it, smiling at his surprise.

“The milk,” he explained, “comes from a hard fruit the size of… well, almost the size of your head, that grows on tall trees that are like bushes on long trunks. I have several in the gardens of my summer home in Venendal. Do you like it?”

“I do. And these oranges?”

“Ah, the sanguines can only be found in an area near the port city of Baccalà, south of the imperial city. They do not travel well and are rarely seen further north than the City.”

When Ciaran finished his dish it was promptly replaced by a fresh one and he belatedly remembered having read in one of the many books he’d received on Nilfgaardian customs that one should leave a spoonful or two at the bottom of one’s bowl or plate to indicate the portion had been sufficient. Elves had a similar custom but it had all but disappeared after decades of uncertainty and deprivation.

Another reshuffle of the dishes and as var Cleef detailed the fresh arrival of wines, the large slate boards loaded not just with Temerian cheese but also Toussaint ones, the myriad bowls of black Zerrikanian olives and green ones from Ebbing, Nazairi walnuts, Dol Blathanna honey, the various fruit preserves — plum, fig, spiced apple — from Maecht, Gemmera and Vicovaro, and the great footed bowls of mulled wine filled with orange slices and spotted with spices like curls of dried bark and seedpod stars, Ciaran remembered Fitz-Oesterlen’s words, that with peace came trade.

As the evening wound down and they finally left the table, the liaison officer accosted Ciaran to tell him that travel arrangements for his tailor had been approved and a berth found for him.

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By mid-morning the following day, the delegation had reached the Academy’s Faculty of Theology, where Radovid had suggested the signing take place. The Impera Brigade had planned and secured a route that didn’t take them past any of the main squares but even so, the smoke could be seen from everywhere in the city now emptied of its youthful, chattering crowds, and the clatter of their horses’ hooves echoed through the otherwise eerily quiet and gloomy streets.

The actual signing of the peace treaty was a dull affair. Radovid signed first, then Emhyr, then each
of the triumvirs and elven leaders, witnessed by var Attre and Ciaran himself, among others, and before noon they started on their return journey to the harbour.

They’d had reports, during the signing, that clashes and riots had flared up in the city again and in response, var Cleef and his men had plotted a new route to minimise the risk of an ambush.

Despite this, now that the new boundaries had been settled in law, the mood had lightened considerably and Herevard had unbent far enough that he was now making small talk with Roche and Iorveth, and even his dun Redanian gelding pranced occasionally.

Caught up in his own thoughts, Ciaran drifted from the group and soon found himself alongside the emperor, again dressed for war in his winged helmet, bristling with armour astride an enormous, gleaming black destrier, barded and caparisoned in Nilfgaardian colours.

“You enjoyed your dinner.”

More statement than interrogation and without preamble, as though they were old acquaintances and not new ones speaking for the first time.

“I did, Your Imperial Majesty. I can’t remember the last time I ate so well. It was very generous of you to have food prepared for me,” Ciaran paused, “Baron Orvall thought it was so he wouldn’t have to eat from the same dishes as me.”

“Does that bother you?”

Ciaran considered this a moment then shook his head, pulling up the reins when his horse sidestepped and as the group turned into a square they saw the used pyre in the centre of it, the remains of books still visible in the smouldering embers, the form of the corpse still bound to the wood pole discernible, and, worse still, the body of a mage impaled on a nearby stake, face contorted in agonised terror, eyes bulging.

A sudden shift in the wind carried the smoke straight to them and Ciaran jerked his head away.

“The killing offends you.”

“No, sire, only the smell,” Ciaran answered coldly, “Humans are brutish savages even when they’re only killing other humans.”

Another gust of wind brought the sounds of raised voices and the clash of metal — an approaching mob. The emperor guided his horse a little closer to Ciaran’s, casting him into shadow, as they continued on their way at a brisker pace.

“The Church of Eternal Fire is not killing humans, it is trying to kill magic itself. All elves have a little magic. Perhaps it is fortunate that you will be leaving here soon.”

Ciaran raised his gaze to the emperor and saw the stern, winged profile.

“You won’t try to stop it.”

“I? Save mages and sorceresses?” the emperor glanced down at him, a sunbeam lighting up his eyes to citrine, “I would sooner save the books.”
It was a crisp, sunny day but cold enough that Ciaran could see his breath and as they made their way through the castle’s carefully manicured and topiary-punctuated gardens, he grinned at Iorveth before blowing out a puff of mist. Iorveth then made a show of exhaling a long breath into a column of vapour while also trying to inhale it through his nose, causing them to dissolve into laughter.

After months of occupation by the Nilfgaardians as the emperor’s headquarters, the royal palace at Vizima looked even more splendid than it had under King Foltest and stood proudly under the blazing sun, its gleaming stonework alive with Temerian banners and Nilfgardian standards, hung and flown from every arch and pole and parapet, the white lilies and black suns dancing together on the breeze.

Eyeing the flags malevolently, Iorveth consoled himself with the thought that soon Vernon Roche would have to kneel and accept the keys to his country's new seat of power - of his dead master’s old castle - from the hand of Emhyr var Emreis himself, and a corner of his mouth curled up into a half-smirk.

Their ever-present liaisons officer was waiting by the horses, talking to an officer astride a magnificent palfrey and flanked by a pair of aides-de-camp.

“That’s General Morvran Voorhis, commander of the Alba Division,” Iorveth told Ciaran, speaking low as they made their way over, “We fought together from Asheberg to Hagge and he held Aedirn while we went into Temeria to hold onto Ellander for that booby, Herevard.”

“And?”

Iorveth hid a fleeting sneer behind a smile.

“A good tactical mind but fresh from the Academy and as green as this grass when we started out — daddy must have put in a good word for him with Emhyr. Brave enough, for a human, but anyone that friendly has to be hiding something. He’ll smile and simper, but only the better to eat us.”

The handover ceremony wasn’t to take place until the afternoon and Emhyr var Emreis had scheduled meetings throughout the morning with the future triumvirs then the Dol Gwennelen and Dol Blathanna elves. As Ciaran wasn’t part of the leadership, he’d been offered and had accepted a tour of the environs. Iorveth had ducked out of the meeting to accompany him.

“Welcome to Temeria!” the general bade in his slightly nasal voice once introductions had been made and Ciaran and Iorveth too were astride horses, “I thought you might be interested in seeing the army’s Centre Camp and to meet Field Marshal Havart var Moehorn. As you know, the field marshal will be staying on as governor of Aedirnia and Temeria until the situation in the North is more settled. Should you have any problems with rebel groups, incursions or anything in the way of a criminal element, you may naturally reach out to him.”

After the crisp Evrard var Cleef, Morvran Voorhis’ dark blonde hair and rounded features seemed almost homely but his friendly manner and speech had a certain dignity, echoed in the high forehead, high-bridged nose and light, deep-set eyes. Perhaps Iorveth was right and he was more aristocrat than soldier. Unlike the others, he wore a sun-embossed boiled leather cuirass and faulds instead of plate
over absurdly voluminous sleeves and Ciaran noticed the general also wore the same triangular medallion as Ambassador Fitz-Oesterlen and large, heavy gauntlets touched up with gold.

Ciaran asked the occasional question but mostly listened, slowly adjusting to the unfamiliar intonation and stresses as Voorhis pointed out places of interest and told them about the army.

“The East Camp is outside Vengerberg — you might have a chance to see it — but it is smaller than the Centre Camp and we have already started sending some of the divisions back South. We will only leave behind what is necessary to keep the peace and help with reconstruction. Many of our conscripts and reservists are farmers, engineers… They will be of help here, I think.”

“Don’t they mind staying?”

“Ah, I suppose they do mind,” Voorhis admitted cheerfully, “The North in winter is no place for Southerners, but we promised to keep them away from the front if they agreed to stay on to contribute their specialist skills and knowledge. Each helps the war effort to the best of his ability.”

“And you?”

“The Alba Division will go south with the emperor.”

Ciaran’s eyes widened in surprise. The Impera, the emperor’s personal guard, numbered some five thousand men, but the Alba had three times as many.

“Yes, it will be quite the retinue,” the general admitted in amusement when he saw Ciaran’s reaction, “The emperor has arranged to meet with the heads of several provinces so the journey back to the capital may take as long as two months,” he shrugged, “But it is probably not a bad thing for the provinces to occasionally see their emperor and his troops.”

Ciaran said nothing to that but asked a few technical questions about the troops, the state of their supplies, how many had been injured, and was surprised, at first, to find them answered fully and without apparent reticence. Then he remembered Brigadier var Cleeff’s unlikely exposition on the culinary delights of the empire and decided this was just more of the same. Clearly Nilfgaard was trying to educate him and while Ciaran was open to learning, he was uncertain about exactly what it wanted him to understand.

“Ah, there is the field marshal.”

The general waved at the figures on horseback a furlong or so ahead of them and one of them waved back.

“Voorhis,” the field marshal acknowledged with a nod once they’d ridden up to him and the general made introductions as they pushed on, mentioning both Ciaran’s and Iorveth’s past in the Vridhedd Brigade and underlining Iorveth’s role within the Scoia’tael leadership.

The field marshal listened, his lined, leonine face impassive, and gave the elves a few measuring looks before nodding gravely, his sun-stamped gorget glinting in the light.

“I have not been to the east. Is there much work to be done?”

Iorveth shrugged.

“North of the Dyphne we just have to clean up the mess the Kaedweni left in Vergen. Nothing like Temeria. Velen must be a ruin.”
Another nod.

“Velen is a swamp — mud-filled, necrophage-ridden battlefields and ruins with bandits hidden behind every bush. I would not keep pigs there. Even if we started the drainage works tomorrow, Roche would not have a decent harvest for two years at least. His men are surly, they dislike seeing us there but they do not like to put their hands to the brick and mortar either,” he sighed then his cadmium eyes gleamed and he half-smiled at them, “But you know what they are like, these Nordlings…”

Ciaran knew well that several Nilfgaardian officers had been killed during the Second Nilgaard War — among them Major General Markus Braibant, under whose command the Vrihedd Brigade had fought as part of the 4th Cavalry Army, and the field marshall at the time, Menno Coehoorn. They had been experienced career soldiers, veterans of the First War, who held onto traditional, perhaps old-fashioned ideas of warfare, and these new men — var Cleef, Voorhis, var Moehorn — were nothing like the ones they’d replaced, their plate armour like shells whose inhabitants had been changed. Even the field marshal, despite his salt-and-pepper hair and weary expression, was likely only in his mid-forties whereas Voorhis and var Cleef were easily a whole decade younger.

The field marshal slowed his horse’s pace.

“Here we are.”

They crested a ridge and saw the Centre Camp laid out before them, a sea of black and yellow and suns that swept down the hillside in row upon orderly row of tens of checkered tents, guarded by the tall watchtowers that punctuated the camp’s palisaded perimeter.

Ciaran caught Iorveth’s sidelong glance as they urged there horses on, following their hosts into the very midst of the vast barracks.

More than anything else, this camp — the people, resources and iron organisation it represented — reminded Ciaran of the might of Nilgaard. The tents were the same he and Iorveth had slept in as Nilfgaardian soldiers, all arranged in lines just the same way as back then, but there were more, vastly more than there had been then and Ciaran realised his impression of unfamiliarity came from the sense of greater unity between the officers, of even greater organisation and efficiency than what he’d known.

“Even during the Second Nilfgaard War, there was nothing like it. And they built it in just two weeks,” Ciaran told Elihal as he sat before the fire, towelling his hair dry.

On returning to the palace he’d washed and changed for the ceremony and the tailor had joined him for a chat and the inevitable mid-afternoon tea Ciaran was always brought and that Elihal so enjoyed.

The still-damp hair wanted to curl at the ends and Elihal watched Ciaran brush it out so that it lay smooth, then gather a strand on either side, just behind his ear, twisting them back and fastening them.

“They say the officers have their own brothel tent, which they stock with the finest and freshest faces they can find. But knowing Nilfgaardians, they probably aren’t allowed to set it up until everything else is done and their sock drawers are properly colour-coded, so they have a vested interest in being fast and efficient,” Elihal drawled as he helped himself to an almond biscuit, “And your hair looks better au naturel.”

“This is more traditional.”
It was and what was more it aged the young elf a little. Not that Ciaran particularly needed it, possessed as he was of an aura of gravitas that rarely left him even in private.

Ciaran stood and joined Elihal at the table littered with tea things and sketches.

The young elf had been thrown by the realisation that Nilfgaard and Nilfgaardians had changed in the years since the last war and that, as Roche had pointed out, they had a plan for him that he hadn’t quite made out yet but this uncertainty only made him more determined to be as prepared as possible for whatever was to come.

The tailor had agreed to help him and had taught Ciaran the names of different types of fabrics, how to recognise them and judge their quality. He’d painstakingly shown him which shapes and cuts would suit him and which not and why, and shown him, by holding different swatches of dyed cotton to his face, which colours flattered him. They had discussed traditional elven and Nilfgaardian styles and how to blend them together, the tailor often sketching out their ideas.

Ciaran selected a lump of sugar and nibbled it, ostentatiously ignoring Elihal’s eye roll. The tailor had told him time and time again that this simply wasn’t the done thing but sugar cost more than its weight in gold and was a luxury still so new to Ciaran that he couldn’t resist, knowing full well his friend wouldn’t betray his secret.

Washing the sweetness down with a sip of tea, he picked up one of the sketches, studied it a moment then looked at Elihal.

“You have real talent. You shouldn’t be working out of a glorified barn on the outskirts of Novigrad. Move to Dol Gwennelen or Gwyngaard.”

Elihal shrugged.

“ Everywhere feels small after Novigrad — even Oxenfurt and Vizima. Where else could I pretend to be so many different people?”

Ciaran shook his head.

Aside from Iorveth, Elihal was the only person who spoke to him with anything approaching familiarity and they had formed a quick friendship. Late one evening, Ciaran had asked Elihal how he’d been able to envision so clearly what image he had intended to project through their outfits — more clearly than even Ciaran himself — and Elihal had confessed all, of his childhood dream of becoming a doppler, of his love of costumes and how they allowed him to slip into the shoes and identities of others.

“I still don’t understand it.”

“Have you really never wanted to become something you’re not?”

Ciaran shook his head again and glanced back at the sketches. He’d never really believed that the Scoia’tael would one day no longer be needed, he’d never seen himself as anything else.

“Really?” Elihal pressed, “Even on a day like today, you don’t wonder what it would be like to be one of the noblemen or an ambassador, a Vernon Roche or an Emhyr var Emreis?”

Ciaran though of the Nilfgaardians he’d met — of var Attre, who looked every inch the aristocratic diplomat, of Shilard Fitz-Oesterlen, the ambassador who wore the plate of a general, and Morvran Vooris, the general who dressed like an aristocrat, and their emperor who dressed like one of his soldiers.
Ciaran looked at his friend curiously.

“If you were pretending to be an imperial concubine of Nilfgaard, how would you act?”

Elihal considered a moment.

“Bend to their way of doing things. To a Nilfgaardian, appearance is merely the reflection and extension of substance. As long as you look and act the part, they’ll be satisfied. When in doubt, ask. Find a few people you can trust and ask and ask and ask until you feel you know how you should behave,” the elf paused, “Avoid making people lose face, especially the emperor. Nilfgaardians respond to the things they dislike with force — sometimes this takes the form of violence but not always. They won’t give you the chance to make the same mistake twice.”

Ciaran was still pondering Elihal’s words when he and Iorveth took up their assigned places opposite the ceremonial dais in the Great Hall.

“Have you ever seen so many Nilfgaardians and Temerians in the same place? This must be someone’s idea of hell,” Iorveth muttered in a tone that made it clear that he was that someone.

The great throne room was filled with guests from North and South — Temerians, Nilfgaardians, and the Aen Seidhe, of course, but also Nilfgaard’s neutral allies, the Mahakam dwarves, Koviri dignitaries almost as soberly dressed as the Nilfgaardians, merchants of all stripes from Novigrad. The ruling, military and commercial classes of the continent had assembled to affix a triple seal of legitimacy to this handing over of power.

Iorveth thought this was just Emhyr rubbing their faces in it but Ciaran knew that the situation in the North was not settled, that the battle for Novigrad would likely continue and that all of this — the pomp and circumstance — was a sign of Temeria’s importance.

Dol Gwennelen, by contrast, had been carved out of Aedirnia and was entirely Emhyr’s to do with as he wished, just as nobody would contest Radovid’s claim to Kaedwen, though the status of both these provinces was about as permanent as the large black and gold banners that hung along the walls between the stone columns of Temerian blue patterned with white lilies.

The pantomime was being acted out on a temporary rostrum in the centre of the hall and visible behind it on its elevation stood Foltest’s empty throne, crowned by the lancet arches that soared above it.

Elven arches, Ciaran reminded himself, for large sections of the human castle belonged to the elven palace that had stood before it and to the Aen Seidhe Foltest’s usurpation of it had been just as illegitimate as Emhyr’s now seemed to Temerians like Vernon Roche.

After the requisite and mutually-congratulatory panegyrics and laudations, the Nilfgaardian emperor finally placed a gleaming chain of office onto the shoulders of each of the kneeling triumvirs. The gold had come from Foltest’s old chain of office, melted down and reforged by Nilfgaardian blacksmiths, and Iorveth was dimly cheered by the thought that Roche would likely be wearing his for years, probably until Anaïs La Valette came of age.

Instead of armour, the emperor wore black and red brocade under a long leather gambeson that fell almost to his ankles, in its own way as imposing as armour since it revealed the emperor’s true breadth and height, and he dominated the three lords he was elevating. His own heavy chain of office hung from his broad shoulders and he wore an oak leaf wreath of old gold on his head.

“Rise.”
And as the triumvirs obeyed, the day’s fading light creeping in through the stained glass windows lit their faces and the emperor pressed a blaze of gold leaf onto each of their foreheads with his thumb.

“May the Great Sun light your path even in darkness.”

Through the clapping, Ciaran could make out the grumblings of a Temerian noble a couple of rows behind them.

“Vernon Roche, Triumvir of Temeria…” the speaker spat, “What next? How many more times will he ask us to bend over for Emhyr so he can become Senator of Nilfgaard?”

“Better this than to get ploughed by the mighty emperor the way one of those rat-elves of the Pontar will be.”

“Hardly matters, elves spread their legs for anything that moves.”

Ciaran ignored Iorveth’s steadily averted gaze and the way his friend’s knuckles tightened at his sides.

As the applause died down, Morvran Voorhis appeared beside them and lead them away.

“Come, I know a vantage point from which to watch the next part.”

As he followed the general to one of the doors onto the small balcony, up by the throne, Ciaran glanced down at his copy of the programme but the entry ‘artificial fires’ left him none the wiser as to what would follow.

All the other guests too were crowding on to the larger balcony that ran the length of the room and as the last glow of sunlight faded a hush of anticipation fell over them.

A minute or two passed in silence and darkness then a muffled report sounded somewhere low in the distance, a flare shot up into the sky, seemed to die away then exploded with a reverberating boom into an enormous ball of white light that hung glittering like an great sun before them amid the gasps and shouts of fear and astonishment, bigger and brighter than the weak winter sun whose place it had taken, reflected in the lake beneath and into which it quietly sank in a slow-moving shower of sparks.

Three smaller ones followed it and Ciaran was astounded to find that by their light he could make out the castle’s surroundings, the islands they were being fired from and even the men manning whatever was firing them. Some were like suns, others long cascades of white fire, others still were small and clustered and moved haphazardly like clouds of fireflies. Several on the islands themselves spouted like fountains of light or fans of shooting stars.

The apprehension had turned to admiration and each new show of light was met by cheers. Morvran Voorhis had drawn Iorveth away and Ciaran again found himself alone by the emperor’s side. At a particularly large and loud fire-burst, he glanced up at the sovereign.

“Magic?”

“No, just science. A recent invention.”

Ciaran turned back to the display, thinking of the deadly Zerrikanian fire the Nilfgaardians loaded onto their scorpions.

“Can it be weaponised?”
“Yes.”

They did not speak again and after a grand finale that turned night to day the entire castle seemed to burst into applause and Ciaran found himself alone.

Back in the throne room, the long drapes hung along the walls had been drawn away and the crowd broke up and drifted towards the long lines of trestle tables tucked away in the galleries on either side of the room where food and drink had been set up but Ciaran’s gaze sought out the emperor who was now settled on the throne, slightly slouched, half a dozen Impera deployed around him and a queue of nobles desiring to present their compliments formed along one side.

The elf was still unnerved by the emperor. It had seemed to Ciaran that the emperor’s words to him in Oxenfurt had been intended to confirm an understanding between them but while observing the emperor throughout the ceremony, he’d had to face the fact that he couldn’t seem to read the emperor at all and suddenly wondered if he’d read too much into a casual comment.

“The best Temeria has to offer,” Iorveth commented as they surveyed the tables, “Roche must have called in every favour he was owed to scrape this together at this time of year.”

February was the leanest month of the year even when it didn’t come at the tail end of a war and though the fare was glaringly Temerian, Ciaran suspected that Nilfgaardian coin accounted for both quantity and quality. There were trays of cheese dabbed with tiny helpings of pickled beets, large bowls of apples and pears and small ones of fruit preserves, deep dishes of roasted parsnips and winter squash, tureens of leek and potato soup being ladled out into pewter tankards, and baskets of rye bread, all tucked away between the scattered platters of pre-carved, spit-roasted boar and venison on beds of round sprouts and chard, the selection of Pontar zander, pike and catfish, along with perch and tench from around Lake Vizima, and even eel pies, and lined up along the back were bottles of cider and whiskey, ales and vodka, and pitchers of mead.

Iorveth was just helping them both to a few slices of honey-glazed ham from a platter of cured meats and dried sausage while eyeing some pears poached in mead when Roche unaccountably sought him out. And though Ciaran wanted to stay to act as a lighting rod, he was buttonholed by one of the Dol Gwennelen elves who wanted to know if the bits of silver jewellery they had brought over in their diplomatic pouches would suit and whether they could offer their cousins any other assistance. Walking as they talked, they wandered into a large corridor in which people were congregating to chatter in twos and three, away from the clamour.

Once he’d disentangled himself, Ciaran started back, hoping he would get back to Iorveth and Roche before actual violence broke out between them, but quickly slipped into an alcove when he spotted a familiar silhouette coming the other way.

“Ah, Fitz-Oesterlen, there you are.”

“My lord Leuvaarden, a pleasure, as always.”

“Your efforts in Kovir were much appreciated and, thank the Great Sun, Emhyr has put an end this madness and cut his losses — our losses. I suppose we also have you to thank for our great emperor finally seeing the light, Shilard?”

“I merely passed on the message. His Imperial Majesty understood it.”

“Still, he can’t have been pleased and I expect he will take it out on the Prince when he returns to the capital. Ah, and here is the providential son himself. Morvran, my boy, so nice to see you! I hear you showed valour in the field. Your father must be proud.”
“You are too kind…”

The group was moving away and the rest of the general’s words were lost in the surrounding chatter.

Ciaran waited a moment then left his hiding place to go in search of Iorveth and as he reached the Great Hall, he glanced at the alcove where the emperor was still seated, saw the glint of light off the golden wreath, met the glowing gaze and felt it follow him until he lost himself in the crowd.

— Verden environs, Dol Gwennelen, mid-February, 1272 —

“I can’t imagine you with a blacksmith.”

“He’s a master swordsmith,” Elihal corrected absently, adjusting the tunic when Ciaran straightened after doing up the laces on his tall kidskin boots, “And he cooks! And massages my feet in the evening! What’s not to like?”

Ciaran shrugged his shoulders in defeat.

After the splendours of Oxenfurt and the palace at Vizima, the elven settlement outside Verden seemed modest and couldn’t compare even with Gwyngaard though construction on both had started at the same time. The buildings, in stone and pale Pontar marble, were still sparse and unfinished and still decades away from the palaces of old, and yet, as he looked out of the window, Ciaran reflected that here at least they’d been built by elven hands and that the branches of the barely budding silver birches were not lost among a profusion of stone and could still throw their wavering dappled shade over grass and moss.

“What about this one?” Elihal asked, holding up an exquisitely-wrought silver gorget, one of the many they’d received from Dol Blathanna.

Ciaran took it from him and held it up to his long throat, checking his dim reflection in a mirror of polished bronze — another gift from the Valley of Flowers.

“It’s perfect. Could you hand out the rest to the other candidates? Choose as you see fit.”

Left alone, Ciaran fastened the gorget around his neck and adjusted it so that it rested inside the tunic’s cleft collar then took another sip of his infusion of Brokilon leaves. The dryads had told him that he would have to drink it for years yet and there were still days when he was so fatigued and enervated that he felt sure he was only kept alive by such potions and tonics. The thought that they would nonetheless enable him to see the emperor of Nilfgaard dead was barely any consolation at all.

Though he did his best to hide it, he was also worn from the travelling, the late nights, and the strain of putting on a brave face and his mind had long since shuttered out the thought that if he was chosen, as he tried to convince himself he still hoped to be, the whole ordeal would be drawn out for weeks more at least.

But he didn’t want to leave. Not really.
The dryads had made it clear to him that to have the best chance at survival he should stay with them in Brokilon but he had so yearned to return to Iorveth and the others, to feel the warm touch of his own kind again and to help them as they built a new place for themselves that he’d endured the difficult journey back to Dol Gwennelen. All that hardship only to find when he arrived that he was too weak to be of any real use and was unwittingly excluded from the communal living he’d so craved by the respectful distance they all allowed him — even Elihal somehow managed to do his hair and help him dress without ever really touching him.

Now he was even giving up the consolation of dying among those he knew and loved to go to a place where no one knew him and no one would remember him.

Closing his eyes a moment, Ciaran traced the raised design of birds and grasses on the back of the mirror with his sensitive fingertips until he heard Elihal’s familiar footsteps.

“I’ll do your hair for you.”

“Are the others almost ready?”

“Yes, no need to fret,” Elihal scolded mildly as he twisted some of Ciaran’s dark locks and pinned them up.

Outside, a robin landed on the grass and hopped around, looking for food, and Ciaran looked at Elihal’s shadowy reflection in the window.

“Did you like Gwyngaard?”

“I did. In a year or two it will be a fine city.”

“Dandelion might move his — the Rosemary and Thyme there.”

“If he does then I’ll be sure to visit,” Elihal murmured, taking the luxuriant flower crown from the plate of water where it rested and patting it dry, “Now turn around.”

The enormous pale peonies, white camellias, nerines and glories of the snow, twining jasmines, and other flowers that made it up had been obtained by magic and they had no spares so Elihal settled the crown onto Ciaran’s head with something approaching reverence then stepped back to admire his handiwork before leaning in to attach a knot of ribbons over a foot long behind the crown at either temple.

“Perfect.”

Ciaran took one final look in the mirror then stood and went to the open trunk by the side of the room, laid the mirror on the clothes already folded into it then closed and locked it. It was now ready to be taken away should he be chosen.

Elihal stopped him to readjust one of the hidden ties that held the wide sash of stiffened brocade folded into elaborate knot at Ciaran’s back and whose free ends hung straight and heavy past the backs of his knees in a sheet of pale willow green whose ends were constellated with glories of snow in blue and white and silver.

The tailor had spent three days painstakingly reverse-engineering the knot from a picture in an ancient book with the help of the venerable nobleman who had brought the book over from Dol Blathanna — an ancient elf who had known Ciaran’s mother and who had seen the knot being tied many times in his youth. Ciaran had looked into the once familiar eyes and sensed that though they could see into the past as clearly as they saw the present, they saw no further into the future than
Ciaran’s did, and he wondered whether the old elf already heard the voices of the dead more clearly than those of the living.

The thought of it reminded him of why he’d decided to leave and how much he wanted this travesty to come to an end.

“Thank you. Come, let’s check on the others.”

Two hours later, the festivities were in full swing.

They’d decided to hold the celebration in the open-structured forum and its gardens, it being the public building whose construction was most advanced. The gardens were nothing more than grass and beaten earth and the several trees already growing on the grounds, now laden with paper lanterns filled with a warm glow.

Food and drink had been set up in the forum and, while it lasted, the chirp and trill of birds mingled with the sounds of the musicians playing just outside it. As the sun sank lower, the settling dark brought out the marble lines of the forum and the glowing lanterns, blurring the edges of all that was unfinished.

Ciaran stood at the margins by the tree line, his gaze going from Iorveth to the emperor, following them as the circulated, sometimes together as they took turns making introductions, sometimes alone, building up new acquaintances.

The emperor was dressed as he had been in Vizima but now also wore a sweeping cloak with a great gold-embroidered sun on it and lavishly trimmed with black wolf’s fur and somehow looked just as large and imposing as he had in his Impera armour when Ciaran had first seen him.

Before meeting the emperor, Ciaran had vaguely resigned himself to using his physical charms to gain what influence he could with the emperor. Back then he’d imagined the emperor of Nilfgaard as an ageing, even decrepit, man who would be easily enticed by the attractions of a young elven body. But though Emhyr var Emreis was not young, he was certainly not decrepit. As he watched the emperor take the time to speak with each of the other candidates, watched as from tongue-tied and respectful they started to answer his questions, to smile and even laugh, Ciaran realised the Nilfgaardian sovereign’s calm manner and aura of power lent him their own form of attractiveness and that he likely did not lack for willing partners. He remembered Vernon Roche’s words and remembered that while his being an omega maintained the fiction of procreation, Emhyr var Emreis’ tastes might simply not run to male elves — he certainly had not sensed any particular attraction. As the evening wore on, apprehension welled up inside him and he began to wonder if the emperor was more fickle than he seemed and might therefore make his choice according to personal preference rather than reasons of state. He frantically looked back over the events of the past few weeks, struck with the dread thought that he had been complacent, had misread the signs or failed to properly respond to the signals he knew Nilfgaard had been sending him.

Finally, the emperor approached and watched as Ciaran bowed his beautiful head as though it were just momentarily weighed down by the profusion of flowers it bore. The elf was holding a half-empty glass and his nails were tinged blue.

“You are cold.”

“I’m fine, Your Imperial Majesty.”

The tawny gaze lingered on the slender elf whose head was still slightly bowed.
“You have not changed your mind.”

Now the elf’s gaze met his, the pupils unusually large in the golden eyes.

“No, sire.”

“Very well,” the emperor looked across at one of his aides and gave the barest of nods, “You are cold and this has gone on long enough.”

A quarter of an hour later, the closing speeches started, then the four candidates lined up on the dais and the emperor stepped forward to make his choice. He came to a stop before Ciaran who quivered when he reached out and hooked a finger behind the trailing ribbons attached to the flower crown, letting the entire long length of them slide over his finger as he drew it away.

“Beautiful as a fallen star.”

He then removed his chain of office and as the full weight of the chain rested on his shoulders a moment, Ciaran felt a sense of drowning, of disoriented sinking. Then it was removed and the emperor placed the chain back around his own neck before holding out his hand to raise Ciaran up.

“You are now Ciaran of Nilfgaard.”

Jarred by the unfamiliar sound of the familiar words and unsteady on his feet, the former Scoia’tael commander gripped the strong hand until it was carefully withdrawn and the emperor slipped his cloak from his shoulders and wrapped it around the slender elf.

“In appreciation of this treasure you bestow upon me and in the hope that it will help speed reconstruction, I hereby decree that Dol Gwennelen shall be exempt from all taxes and tariffs for three years from today.”

The rest of the speeches and formalities were a blur to Ciaran and he was only aware of being led away to the emperor’s waiting litter. The emperor himself handed him up into it and Ciaran’s chest contracted when he turned and saw the emperor get in after him, his bulk blocking the entrance, casting them both into darkness. There was light again when the emperor settled opposite him but Ciaran could still feel the distempered beat of his heart, unable to expand, and willed it to slow and steady. To no avail, however, for at the jolt of the litter as it set in motion, Ciaran’s heart jumped into his throat and the its hammering was so loud in his ears it was blinding.

Once all the loose ends had been tied up after the ceremony, Iorveth mounted a horse and rode straight to the Nilfgaardian camp. He walked through it, unchallenged, until he reached the Impera guards posted outside the imperial compound who would not listen to reason.

“Let me in! I have to speak to Ciaran!”

Suddenly the guards released him and stood to attention, their crossed spears still blocking his path.

In the absolute stillness that followed, the Scoia’tael commander turned to find the emperor at his back, his guards a few paces behind him — he hadn’t heard them approach above the sound of the scuffle and the hot drumming of blood in his ears.

“Aecäemm aen me*, Iorveth.”

And so Iorveth followed the emperor, falling into step behind him and casting a backwards glance at the guards who remained at a discreet distance.
“Lord Ciaran is mine now. You may not see him without my permission. For him to be found alone with you or any other is treason — punishable by death. Remember that.”

“I just need to see him again before…”

The emperor gave him an appraising look over his shoulder then nodded.

“Very well.”

They stopped before a heavily-guarded tent and soon Ciaran himself emerged, still in his ceremonial robes but without his flower crown, weary from having been poked and prodded by the imperial chamberlain, imperial tailors and imperial physicians for close on an hour, and when Iorveth saw him standing there, so pale and slender against the backdrop of dark Impera plate armour, all he wanted to do was wrap his arms around him to keep him safe and sheltered and tell him that all would be well, just as he had years ago when they’d shivered together, trying to be strong as they waited for the executioner.

“Your friend is here to see you. Come to my quarters when you have finished.”

Iorveth watched Ciaran force a nod and swallowed the howl of rage and frustration that clawed its way up from his gut, blasted with white-hot and bitter self-reproach at having allowed this.

As the emperor and his escort left, Ciaran and Iorveth moved away from the tent entrance and Iorveth glared at the Impera guards posted there but they did not move.

“I’ve changed my mind.”

“It’s too late, Iorveth.”

“It’s not. The others are here, he can choose one of them. We’ll say—.”

“No, Iorveth! It’s too late.”

And when Iorveth saw fleeting fear chase the courage in Ciaran’s eyes, every misgiving he’d had came shrieking back.

Ciaran was on a precipice again but this time when he lunged to catch him, Ciaran wretched himself away before Iorveth could touch him.

“Don’t!”

Breathless, Ciaran glanced at the nearby guards.

“It’s too late, Iorveth! Ayd f’haeil moen Hirjeth taenverde.”

Conquer with courage rather than strength.

Iorveth stared at having the words he’d so often spoken as a Scoia’tael commander thrown back at him.

But it would take more than strength and more than courage to leave Ciaran here, to never again watch the green-gold eyes light up at seeing him, never again see those twining tendrils and whorls, and never again see that mouth curve into a wide smile. Perhaps nobody would. Who would make Ciaran smile now?

Iorveth just shook his head and saw his friend’s features crease briefly before he turned away.
“Va faill**, Iorveth.”

And a moment later, Iorveth was alone and after staring at Ciaran’s dark, sun-stamped tent a while longer, he turned and walked away.

Ciaran found the emperor in his great tent, standing before a brazier with his hands clasped behind his back, studying a hanging tapestry depicting the continent with the frontiers of the different lands picked out in different coloured thread and which hung from the rafters nearly to the floor. On a small table beside him stood a beautifully-carved camphorwood chest with inset brass corners and handles.

“Come.”

The elf went to stand as close as he dared, just within the fire’s radius of heat, gaze lowered.

“I am told you do not wish to bring attendants of your own. You may still do so but they must be ready to leave by dawn.”

“No, thank you, sire.”

“No even your tailor?”

It was tempting. Elihal was so full of delicious irony, so resilient. But Elihal was not Ciaran’s to do as he pleased and besides, Ciaran couldn’t help wondering how his friend would fare in Nilgaard, worrying that his friend’s proclivities might be just as frowned upon in the capital and more severely punished if discovered.

“No, there’s nobody, sire.”

“Very well. When we are alone, you may be open with me, I think we will both find it more expeditious if we speak our minds. You may also dispense with titles and honourifics, and you may call me ‘Emhyr’ if you wish.”

Despite the emperor’s cool and clipped tone, the words were cloying with intimacy and Ciaran fought the urge to step away.

The emperor nodded at the chest.

“A gift.”

Ciaran stepped closer and felt the flare of heat on his face and the emperor’s mass tower over him. He raised the heavy lid and lifted out a black hooded cloak with a sun embroidered in gold thread high on the back, all lined in vair*** — hundreds of squirrel pelts, the tails used for the trim.

“Thank you, sire.”

As the emperor turned to him, Ciaran looked up into eyes the exact colour of a piece of amber he and Iorveth had once found, bright as a sunshard or liquid fire trapped into stillness by spells, with a long-dead firefly caught in it.

He quickly looked away. Now that he was an imperial concubine, etiquette dictated that he keep his gaze lowered before the emperor. *His* emperor.

“You may look at me. All my concubines are dispensed from that particular rule of etiquette.”

Ciaran nodded but couldn’t bring himself to raise his gaze.
“Do… Do you wish me to serve you?”

“Not tonight. We can wait until we reach the capital, if you prefer. You are not strong and it would give you time to adjust to the idea.”

This time the temptation was vertiginous. Ciaran had been shown the itinerary and told it could take them as long as two months to make their way back to the capital. Two whole months! He turned to the map and in his mind’s eye traced the miles down almost the entire length of the continent. He was afraid of this emperor so used to being obeyed and to taking what he wanted, this man he no longer dared to look at. But what made cold sweat break out at the back of his neck and sent a shiver down his spine was fear of his own weakness as he felt himself falter and the dread thought that in two more months’ time his courage would fail him entirely.

“No. No, I’m strong enough and — I would prefer…”

“As your wish. The chest will be brought to your quarters.”

Ciaran read the dismissal in the even voice and so bowed and made his way to the exit but was stopped short by the emperor’s next words.

“I do not wish to hurt you.”

Ciaran turned and saw the emperor exactly where he’d left him, outlined tall and large and dark against the brazier’s light. He bowed his head slightly at the broad back then slipped out.

Chapter End Notes

* Aecáemm sen me: Follow me
** Va Fail: Farewell
*** vair: squirrel fur (possibly what Cinderella’s slippers were originally made with, rather than glass — "verre" in French)
The wagon went over a bump and Ciaran gripped his pillow more tightly, pressing his face into it.

The elf had been apologetically woken from feigned sleep just before dawn to be dressed and prepared for their departure and had watched in horrified fascination as his attendants had packed away the cups and candlesticks, the mirror and folding screen, the bottles and vials that held his medicines and every little thing lying about, carried out the rugs and cushions and blankets. Then a handful of soldiers armed with carpenter’s mallets had taken apart the tables, the chairs, the bed, and finally the tent itself, until nothing remained of the ephemeral home he had spent fewer than eight hours in but a stack of large trunks.

His things had been loaded onto baggage carts and Ciaran himself handed into a wagon that looked more like a wheeled prison than anything else. As they had rolled out of the campsite and the distorted outlines of the trees danced grotesquely behind the thick, bubbled glass of his barred windows, Ciaran had been pierced by the certainly that Iorveth was there in the shadows, watching
him leave, and so desperate had been his desire to fly to him that even now, hours later, Ciaran still felt the shattering hollow ache in his chest.

The rest of his morning had been spent in pretending to sleep, trying to block out the unremitting clatter and jolts that rattled through his aching bones and joints and assaulted his keen hearing. He kept himself hidden away behind the curtains that separated the overstuffed divan fitted into the back of the wagon and that served as his bed from the main part of it, where his five attendants were quietly putting things in order or stitching and adjusting clothes for him.

At midday, they came to a stop and Ciaran sat up just as the imperial chamberlain entered.

“His Imperial Majesty wishes to know if you will walk with him.”

Ciaran nodded, allowed himself to be helped into wool-lined boots and bowed to the chamberlain’s and his attendants’ insistence that he wear a wool-lined oilskin cloak. An insistence he understood when the wagon’s door was opened onto a truly dreich* day.

The emperor, once again in his Impera garb, was at the door and handed him out.

“Your Imperial Majesty.”

“You have not eaten.”

This in Nilfgaardian, harsh and guttural.

“I wasn’t hungry. The roads…” Ciaran trailed off. It wasn't a complete lie but it tasted like one.

“I see. Unfortunately, the state of the roads will not improve until we pass the Amell mountains.”

The imperial guard kept a respectful distance as they walked but when they passed a cluster of Alba soldiers watering their horses, these latter bowed and a familiar murmur ran through them.

“Stirwen.”

_White Star._

Ciaran frowned. They had called him that a few times the evening before then again in the morning as he’d made his way past them to his wagon.

Names were deeply meaningful to elves. Aymm Rhoin, the elven ritual of naming, was one of their most important rites of passage and Ciaran bristled at having been renamed two times in as many days by Nilfgaard. To his mind such cavalier behaviour only showed that Southerners were as ignorant as Northerners when it came to elven customs. Names had the power to change destinies and should be chosen with care, not plucked out of thin air on a whim.

“You do not like it?”

“A star shines with its own light,” Ciaran stopped short, annoyed at having given away too much, “I am merely a pale a reflection of your greatness, sire. A spark off the White Flame.”

“As you wish,” the emperor conceded, quietly ironic, “I have much work to do before we reach Vengerberg in a few days’ time but we will dine together in the evenings so you do not feel neglected,” the emperor paused, slowing his stride, “We will stay at the castle overnight. Some of the Aedirnian nobility have had trouble adjusting to the new order so I will have to explain how things now stand in terms they can understand. You will accompany me when we first arrive.”
Ciaran stiffened.

“Meek, submissive and silent? Tamed?” he shot out bitterly then bit his lip.

After weeks spent hardening himself to the idea of being paraded around as a glorified prisoner of war, Ciaran found it still raised his hackles.

“Behave as you have done until now. I merely want them to see you with me.”

Ciaran gave the merest nod of assent then startled slightly when the emperor reached to touch a curling tendril of hair.

“You cannot stay out long in this weather.”

Ciaran wanted to snap back that he’d faced worse things than an overcast sky and a bit of damp but he felt the truth of the emperor’s words in the unrelenting deep ache in his bones and joints that had worsened before he’d even left the wagon. The dryads had warned him but it still filled Ciaran with frustration and his hands clenched into fists briefly.

“If you feel strong enough, my chamberlain, Mererid, will stay with you to help with your instruction. It may distract you from the discomfort of the journey.”

The haughty and elegant Mererid brought with him several tomes, two of which he immediately set down before Ciaran, who tentatively picked up the first and looked at its title. *Rules of Precedence, Titles and Forms of Address in Nilfgaard and the Provinces of the Empire.*

He glanced at the title of the other. *Rules of Precedence, Titles and Forms of Address in Vassal States, Tributary States and Protectorates.*

The imperial chamberlain was watching him, his impassive expression bordering on stern.

“The young gentleman has much to learn. He is of Nilgaard now.”

So as the wagon slowly set off on a muddy tract of road, Ciaran settled down to the now familiar task, curled up on his divan under blankets that had been heated and had the damp driven out of them with a warming pan, propped up against the absurd wealth of pillows and cushions he’d been provided with, and he was soon brought a small silver tankard, a flask of his usual infusion and a tin of biscuits.

Mererid left him to his reading and was soon deep in conversation with his senior attendant, looking over the lists that had been made of his belongings, new and old, and checking the labelling and stowage of his trunks and cases on the mostly empty brass and wood shelves set along the opposite end of the wagon, a leather strap run through their handles to keep them from falling off.

The book on his lap and a finger slipped between the pages, Ciaran paused to take a few more sips of his fortifying brew and allowed his gaze to wander.

From the start, Nilfgaard had signalled its ability and readiness to provide the burdensome care he needed and it was clear that that at least had not been pretence. His own various potions had already been supplemented with tonics concocted by the imperial mage-healers and all of them had been decanted into glass vials with gold stoppers secured by delicate chains so they wouldn’t be lost, housed in a velvet-lined locked casket within which they were arranged around a tall cup holding a long golden funnel. A few sachets of the Brokilon leaves were kept on hand in a small gold case, hinged and shaped like a scallop shell.
Everything was order and ease, as much as it could be in the circumstances. Ciaran’s attendants had spent the morning making the dark, confined wagon comfortable and his discarded shearling slippers now rested on carpets, rugs and sheepskins, layered several inches deep. Tapestries had been secured to the walls of the wagon to brighten them and help keep in the warmth their bodies generated and that of the the small, magic-fuelled brazier they used to heat water and food.

His attendants, however, were unprepossessing and Ciaran now observed them, his features carefully schooled into a look of wooden indifference to hide his deep distaste. One an attractive but uncouth Skelligan, another sounded Cintran while the last two were Aedirnians who not only grovelled and cowered like the first two but also sniffled and moped. Ciaran felt a sharp sense of gratitude for the dire exclusivity that surrounded imperial concubines and which meant the creatures never touched him directly, but even so, their forced, enclosed, stifling proximity made his made very soul recoil away from them within him and Ciaran turned back to his book to cut short his mounting repugnance.

The reference work was, if anything, even more comprehensively dry and dull than the ones Ciaran had had to read before becoming a concubine but the clear instructions and underlying pattern of logic were familiar and oddly reassuring. Even with the curtains drawn back, his position on the divan in its little alcove gave Ciaran a sense of distance and the combination of tea, tedious reading and quiet chatter soon soothed him enough that he ate a couple of biscuits.

He expected to be made to change for dinner with the emperor but was assured by the chamberlain that they would dispense with these formalities until they reached Toussaint and at their next stop, Ciaran made his way from his wagon to the emperor’s on the clean planks that had been laid down for him, still in his comfortable wool trousers and shawl-necked wraparound sweater.

The emperor’s wagon was as luxurious as his but more severely so — no pillows strewn about the floor and more trunks on the shelves, the walls lined with stacked cabinets and bookshelves housed in trunks. The emperor himself sat behind a desk whose x-frame legs had been let out so it sat at the right height for the bench installed along the back of the wagon, still dressed in his Impera uniform but now without the plate — a pewter-coloured, high-necked, padded doublet with slashed sleeves but no plackart or gauntlets, trousers in the same shade and with the distinctive checkerboard band around the thighs, and leather cuissardes but no greaves.

At Mererid’s invitation, Ciaran settled onto some pillows near a low table on which a simple dinner had been laid out — vegetable stew, a roast chicken, some kind of flatbread and dips, a platter of cold cuts of meat, and a bowl of fruit.

The emperor looked up from his papers.

“We will continue to travel until we reach the next camp. It is safer to dispense with knives and other sharp utensils. Will you see to the food?”

At Ciaran’s assent, the emperor nodded at his attendants, dismissing them, then moved out from behind his desk and came over, his head bowed to keep it from hitting the ceiling, to settle by Ciaran who had already set about preparing the roast chicken, his slender fingers reaching in between the thigh and the breast to the joint and applying just enough pressure to snap it delicately, aware the emperor was watching closely.

The wagon soon jolted into movement.

“Well? No recriminations about the Peace of Cintra? Or Dol Blathanna? Nothing about preferring an ignominious death sentence handed down by a war tribunal to having to serve in my bed? You may as well get it off your chest now.”
But Ciaran was determined not to be goaded into making a mistake, especially not so soon. He laid the first chicken thigh onto the emperor’s plate then helped him to the rest of the dishes, studiously quiet.

“So, it is true — you are the ice to Iorveth’s fire,” the emperor murmured, coolly upraising, “Very well. Perhaps tomorrow, when we are better acquainted.”

As they ate, they made desultory comments on the dreary weather and the state of the roads, and Ciaran was aware of the emperor watching him in quiet admiration as he stripped the meat from the bones then delicately picked up the small bite-sized pieces between thumb and forefinger to place them in his mouth.

The elf had been rattled by Roche’s suggestion that the emperor might not be physically attracted to him. Humans disliked the ambiguity of elven androgyne and found the thought of their hermaphroditic omegas especially revolting. They constantly projected their ideas of gender onto them, distinguishing between he-elves and she-elves in ways elves themselves did not. Had not. Traditionally, elves behaved as they liked and loved as they pleased, regardless of what bits they had between their legs. Their omegas were born as both sexes and after puberty they could retain both or change to one gender or the other, over a period of about a decade, to reflect the omega’s own inclination and sense of identity — the pinnacle of elven fluidity of being. They had, in the past, mostly stayed as they’d been born, that perfect third gender that other races had no word for. But they too had succumbed to the gendered view of identity that was becoming prevalent in their societies.

Ciaran knew his omegahood underwrote the pretence that he’d been chosen for reproductive purposes but also knew that for Northerners, he remained an aberration and no Northern king would ever have accepted him, no matter his political and symbolic importance. Ciaran had long been concerned that these latter weighed so heavily in the balance for Nilfgaard that the emperor had discarded all other considerations, writing off any entitlements he might otherwise have expected from a concubine and thereby cutting off an avenue for influence that Ciaran had been counting on. He now felt coldly reassured by this show of interest and the possibility it kept open of his being able to seduce the great Emhyr var Emreis. Humans who were susceptible to the attractions of elves usually fell hard and fast into an addiction they rarely rid themselves of and Ciaran knew that as an omega his magic was uncommonly strong.

Eating little as usual, the elf soon finished and drew to himself the copper finger bowl in which floated a few lemon slices and rinsed his long, slender fingers and their perfect nails in it then waited for the emperor to finish eating. As he washed the large, well-kept hands, he couldn’t quite quell a strange coiling unrest low in his stomach whenever his sensitive fingertips brushed over the emperor’s, then dutifully patted them dry, noting the neat, squared-off nails.

After declining an offer of brandy, Ciaran let his gaze drift around the wagon, taking in the familiar tapestry onto which the boundaries of the different lands had been loosely stitched in with different coloured threads, the leather folders and cases filled with papers, before lighting on the portable library, exquisitely crafted and stocked.

“It contains a selection of essential texts. My father commissioned it when I was born. Some of the volumes have been replaced with updated editions over the years.”

Ciaran stared at the two-score cream vellum-bound volumes.

“You may borrow from it, if you wish. There are political and economic treatises, some on philosophy, history, poetry, even theology. You will find in it everything of importance regarding Nilfgaard.”
Ciaran touched the tip of a finger to one of the gilt-touched spines.

He had sensed, confusedly, that the Nilfgaardian love of the printed word went beyond a need for pamphlets on the best oils and waxes for the upkeep of weapons and armour, and yet he had put forward a candidate who spoke well enough but could barely read, let alone write, knowing full well the emperor would never settle for an illiterate concubine.

Illiterate.

That was what the Aen Seidhe had been reduced to. They who had been the keepers of timeless knowledge, of ageless secrets. Along with their palaces they’d lost their great libraries and had only been able to salvage what they could carry, only the most precious tomes. And most of these had been scattered or lost or destroyed by decades of war, the few survivors jealously guarded by the Dol Blathanna elves who clung to them as symbols of the great civilisation they’d once been.

He remembered Gwyngaard and wondered how long it would take before their settlement outside Verden looked even half as civilised.

“You must think us backward.”

“What you have lost cannot be reconstituted in a day. Your homes must be rebuilt, your cities reconstructed, your cultures revived. Dol Blathanna will help you and so will we. The imperial library holds many ancient texts of the Aen Seidhe, those of greatest importance will be copied for you.”

The emperor paused a moment, watching him closely.

“However, you must accept the help that is offered. The Aen Seidhe are proud, it runs contrary to their character. You must choose between pride and rapid progress.”

Ciaran’s golden eyes narrowed slightly.

“Is that what you want me to do? Advise Iorveth and the others to collaborate with Nilfgaard?”

“Iorveth and the others already have a duty to collaborate with Nilfgaard. But yes, I wish them to accept our help and guidance. I trust that once you have had a chance to properly consider the situation you will see the advantages and help your fellow Scoia’tael to see them as well,” the emperor paused to take a sip of his brandy, “However, before that you must become a fitting representative of Nilfgaard. You must study the things by which people will first judge you — how you behave and how you appear. You must acquire stature and influence to give your opinions weight. Vengerberg will be a test of your willingness. If your performance is acceptable,” he paused and nodded towards the portable library, “you will be taught what befits a high-ranking member of my court to know. Beauclair will be the test of your ability.”

“And if I’m too stupid to learn?”

“You are not, elyennen. And if you wish to continue being useful to your people then you must continue your studies. If you will not learn then you will not be given the chance to advise your friends at all.”

Elyennen.

A spark.

Yet another name. Ciaran hoped to feel anger rise in him at the ironic use of the nickname he’d
inadvertently given himself, waited for it, but it never came. He felt the emperor’s gaze on him and met it coolly. He was at a complete disadvantage. Without Nilfgaard’s help he would not even be able to get a letter out to Iorveth, without the emperor’s implicit acquiescence all his letters would no doubt be “lost” along the way. Despite a certain physical attraction he seemed to discern in the emperor, he sensed that would never be a real advantage, not a complete one. No, his only bargaining chip was his cooperation, his ability to leverage his own political and symbolic value for the emperor’s benefit.

“Nilfgaard is now Dol Gwennelen’s protector but Iorveth and his are now also our allies. I have little use for allies who cannot even defend themselves, who may have to rely on the might of Nilgaard to deter any attack for decades to come simply because they are too proud to adopt the progress made by others and wish to find their own way through the darkness,” the emperor paused and eyed the elf speculatively, “Tell me, what do you See for the North?”

Ciaran stared.

It was not given to humans to understand how elven Sight worked — both because they were inherently unable to grasp its workings and because elves did not talk of such things to mere humans — and yet it was clear the emperor knew.

“I… I no longer See,” he stammered then bowed his head, “Forgive me, I should have mentioned it.”

A second or two of silence crept by during which Ciaran felt the heavy gaze on him.

Only now did it occur to him that the Nilfgaardians might have heard tales of elven sages and their prophecies and that the emperor might have had some expectations in that line. And in this Ciaran couldn’t deliver on even the smallest scale. He no longer Saw at all. No visions, no dreams, no flashes of insight, he couldn’t even remember what it had been like to See. He could see that he would spend the following days much the way he had this one until they reached Vengerberg but what lay ahead for him beyond the Aedirnian capital was hazy and his life in the empire was a nebula he couldn’t seem to project himself into at all.

The emperor’s thoughts seemed to have taken him even further along a similar path.

“So… You cannot see past my death.”

Another silence then the emperor continued in his usual clipped tones.

“No matter. I expect you will live long enough to do your duty to me.”

Ciaran raised his gaze to the emperor, trying to gauge his feelings through the burning sense that this was his first failure.

But the emperor’s behaviour towards him did not change and after dinner Ciaran meekly settled into a corner of the bench behind the desk by the emperor as he was bid, not daring to disobey. And there he stayed, wrapped in a blanket, curled up with his cold feet jammed against the emperor’s thigh to steady himself against the wagon’s bumps and jolts, and he watched quietly as the sovereign went back to work, reading and making arcane annotations on the endless papers that he pulled out of the shagreen** despatch boxes stacked to one side.

Ciaran had a book with him but he was restless and his attention soon strayed to the writing set laid out on the desk’s leather surface and came to rest on the paperweight— an amber-eyed salamander carved out of a white and gold-veined black marble Ciaran had never seen before, curled protectively around a gilded brass sun. When he caught the elf’s curious gaze, the emperor handed him the
paperweight, the matching blotter, the stamp and its attendant ink pad.

And so, in-between toying with the paperweight and pretending to read, Ciaran dutifully soaked up the excess ink wherever the emperor initialed or annotated a sheet then stamped the imperial sun seal onto the top righthand corner in an exact imitation of what he’d watched the emperor do, casting his eyes over the documents to see if there was anything of interest. Short daily accounts from Evrard var Cleef and Morvran Voorhis, a schedule of the meetings he was to have with at the next camp along with a list of local officers, merchants and officials who would be in attendance and a one-page report on each of these.

During the next halt, their dinner was cleared away then the emperor’s personal secretary, the newly-minted Secretary of State for the North, and a couple other of his advisors joined them and they and the emperor went over the reports one by one, reviewing and discussing them, sorting them into piles and categories. Ciaran listened and manned with the imperial stamp, simultaneously trying to be inconspicuous and helpful as he listened in.

None of it was of any kind of confidentiality but Ciaran caught the emperor’s keen gaze on him a few times and understood that he was being allowed to listen in and that this work session would teach him more about Nilfgaard’s way of doing things than anything he could learn from a book.

When they finally reached camp, the emperor left for his meetings and Ciaran returned to his human-infested wagon for the night.

— N —

The column plodded on slowly but unrelentingly through the cold and through the rain, stopping only during the deepest, darkest hours of each night. The Alba’s fifteen thousand men had been sent ahead and placed at relays so that the emperor and his retinue arrived at a ready camp with tents already pitched and food prepared for the tired soldiers in their party, and fresh soldiers ready to leave. This way the enormous bulk of the Alba division was spread out before and behind them.

The Squirrel’s own days varied little and went by in being washed, dressed, fed, watered and dosed, in reading and instruction, games of dice and cards with his cowed attendants who invariably let him win, the incessant bumping and jostling in the dark, dank wagon punctuated only by their halts every couple of hours or so and during which he walked and talked with the emperor. These were their only moments alone, for though they dined together every evening, the emperor did not stop working and conducted meetings throughout the meal — his thin, vulturine secretary stayed with them, going through yet more endless lists and biographies of Aedernian nobles, or reading long messages from the intendant at Vengerberg, reporting on the grain supply, any criminal cases of note or advising on decrees. One time var Cleef swung himself into the wagon while it was in motion to report on both the Impera and the Alba, and to inform Ciaran with a broad smile that General Voorhis and he would be happy to provide him with an escort once they reached Vengerberg, should he want to go exploring.

Every day was a trial for the young elf. Despite the infusions and the care of the imperial medics, the difficult conditions meant his physical discomfort gradually intensified into suffering, to which was added the mental oppression he felt. Ciaran had been prepared to endure being touched by the emperor, which hadn’t yet happened, but he hadn’t considered what it would mean to be always in the presence of his human attendants, always on his best behaviour, never allowing himself an unguarded moment as he was constantly watched and spied upon, hag-ridden by the sight of them
and by the roiling revulsion he felt at the thought that the very air was full of their heat and smell and breath, infiltrating his body, even at night while he slept.

Though he was not permitted to carry them in the emperor’s presence, he’d been allowed to keep his throwing knives and when he was in a particularly bad temper he took vicious pleasure in practicing throwing them at the wooden roof beam on the other side of the wagon, over the heads of his attendants who sat beneath, cowering as they embroidered his clothes. And while Mererid always made his disapproval clear he never said or did anything to stop him — something Ciaran noted with interest.

The hardship was such that despite his best efforts to stay on his best behaviour in the august presence, Ciaran’s ill-humoured jabs sometimes extended to the emperor himself.

“We don’t need as much food as you do,” he snapped in answer to the emperor’s observation that he should try to eat more, “Our bodies are more efficient than yours. They don’t waste so much energy on all that heat and muscle and sixty whole heartbeats a minute.”

“Remember that next time I pretend not to notice your cold soles pressed against me,” the emperor answered mildly and Ciaran instantly snatched away the feet he’d been warming against an imperial thigh.

“And should you slouch like that?” Ciaran shot back petulantly, “Shouldn’t an emperor be exemplary?”

“I have a bad back.”

“Old age?” Ciaran murmured snidely, watching for anger or hurt pride in the human.

“An old injury,” the emperor answered dismissively.

This piqued the elf’s interest and he couldn’t resist another question.

“From when you fought for the throne?”

He’d wanted to know more about the incident ever since Dandelion had mentioned it but none of the books he’d read contained more than a cursory allusion to it and he hadn’t dared ask, sensing it was a sensitive topic.

“Before that. When I was young.”

This only increased Ciaran’s curiosity but despite the emperor’s even tone and expression, Ciaran knew he’d pushed his luck far enough for one evening.

Despite their thorny relationship, the emperor’s wagon became a kind of refuge for the elfling. Ciaran was allowed to sit on the far end of the bench, hidden away from view behind a partially drawn curtain with only the outline of his legs and his feet visible under the blankets that covered them. The emperor rarely had more than two other people in there with them at any given time and this was all the measure of the privacy they were afforded until one rainy evening when Ciaran once again found himself alone with the emperor over dinner.

“Just us?”

“I have finished my work for now,” the emperor leant back as he watched the young elf help him to a couple of slices of the crusted pie of jellied meat they were sharing, “After Vengerberg, I will have more time to spend with you. We should arrive in a couple of hours.”
Ciaran helped himself to a slice, wondering wearily how much longer they’d have to survive on this fare and thought with longing of the better meal that no doubt awaited them at the castle.

“Mererid says you learn quickly.”

“The lessons are not difficult, Your Majesty,” Ciaran answered with the barest touch of acerbity.

“No, I do not expect Vengerberg to be a challenge for you. Mererid and some of my officers and advisors will help you prepare for Toussaint. Nilfgaardian courts are not like Nordling ones.”

“As you wish, sire.”

The emperor quizzed him on his lessons while he watched him eat and when they’d finished, Ciaran washed his own hands then the emperor’s, as had become their custom. Outside, the rain continued to batter the wagon’s wooden sides over the occasional growl of distant thunder.

“If you are tired you may rest until we reach Vengerberg.”

“I’m fine,” Ciaran shook his head, expecting to be relegated to his corner of the bench while the emperor got back to work.

“Very well. Come.”

Ciaran startled but quickly forced himself to obey, settling onto the emperor’s lap, remembering the most important point made in that memorandum from the chamberlain he’d read in what now seemed like a distant past, that the emperor liked his partners willing.

“Look at me.”

A shaft of light hit the emperor’s eyes and set them ablaze like an ember brightening into flame and Ciaran stared.

He’d never been this close to the emperor before and it now seemed to him that the familiar face, with its aquiline nose and hooded eyes, was that of a stranger.

Ciaran knew — everyone did — that the Nilfgaardian emperor claimed an elven heritage. But then he also styled himself the Conqueror of the North despite the fact that his lands only stretched to the Pontar and that the odds were even that he would lose Temeria to inner strife or invasion before the crocuses wilted. However, Ciaran was now close enough that he could smell the blood of elves on the Imperator and when he looked into the amber-lit eyes and at the lines of the stern features, he had a quick sense of… not youth, exactly, but of agelessness.

The emperor tucked a finger under Ciaran’s chin to tilt it up and at the contact with his bare skin, the elder blood in the emperor’s veins seemed to mingle with his own through the frail, smoke-thin barrier of their skins, and as Ciaran drew his breath sharply, he caught the scent of lemons and cardamom and night-blooming flowers.

“What is it?”

Ciaran managed a tiny shake of his head but he couldn’t suppress a hard shiver when the emperor’s mouth touched his and it was worse yet when Emhyr’s tongue slipped past his lips.

“Open your mouth, elyennen.”

Ciaran obeyed and a long forefinger pressed along his jawline to hold him more securely as the
emperor’s tongue probed deeper.

It could have passed for a soft, gentle kiss but it was not. It was unhurried, deliberate and masterful. Not affectionate or playful but carelessly possessive in the manner of one tasting a wine of repute that had been quietly maturing in one’s cellar, lingering and savouring on him that aphrodisiac omegas were so prized for. And when they broke apart, the glowing eyes too were possessive.

“Don't hide your pleasure. I enjoy it.”

The elf’s delicately-carved, translucent nostrils flared slightly as Emhyr ran a crooked finger along the pure, clean line of the exquisite nose, then up again, to rest just below the bridge, causing Ciaran to shiver and half-close his eyes.

That nose had been broken in four places and it had been thought for a time that the elf would never breathe through it again. If he even survived.

The emperor had read the file his services had compiled on Ciaran through and through several times — including the account given by the Alba spearman in one of the fatigue parties tasked with clearing out Flotsam who had found the mangled body among the corpses, recognised it as that of an elf and set it aside so it could be returned to its people and given proper burial rites; the report by the Vicovaro medic who had caught the last breath of life in it and cast the thread of magic that had kept it bound to the body until it could be transferred to one of their medical units; the various operative reports produced by these units as they at first fought to repair the most urgent damage while Iorveth pleaded with the dryads for help, then stabilised Ciaran’s condition enough that he could be transferred, by portal, to Brokilon. He had also seen, firsthand, the unmitigated stupefaction of his own personal physicians that the Squirrel had survived at all.

Life-threatening blood loss, every bone larger than a finger broken, those of his right hand shattered, the ribcage staved in by the same kicks and blows and lashes that had so damaged the internal organs that even now the elf had to be careful of his diet and that had left him incapable of bearing children — the very thing elves venerated in omegas, the unity of male and female in one creational being.

Ciaran’s gaze was lowered and his lashes cast long shadows onto skin as smooth and pale as bisque.

Loredo and his heathen thugs hadn’t meant to spare the elf, no more than Letho had. They had merely left him for dead as they fled Flotsam to save their own skins in the face of the Nilfgaardian advance. Not that it had done them any good. Loredo had already been hanging in chains for four days and nights, gibbering with thirst and hunger and cold, when Emhyr had given Iorveth leave to take him down. The Scoia’tael commander had daubed the inhuman wretch with honey then tied him to an anthill, later gutting him while still alive and burning his entrails and a few other choice body parts before him, finally leaving the still-screaming remains to be devoured by a venomous arachas. Not that any of that had quenched the elf’s anger and thirst for vengeance.

Emhyr slid his hand to the side of Ciaran’s face, brushing his thumb over the clear, fine-grained skin.

“No scars.”

“I practiced on myself while I was training as a healer. It was… convenient.”

For having been the object of many a healing spell and potion over the years, the emperor could well imagine what that convenience had cost. Few forms of healing were painless. Some stung, others burned, and he had once had a bad gash over his hip almost instantly healed by the touch of a vibrating crystal that had felt like he was being stabbed in the gut with an icicle. And, generally, the worse the wound, the greater the pain, so he knew better than to believe Ciaran’s conceit that it had
been a trifle, the sweeping away of mere scratches. Deep wounds destroyed the very matrix of the flesh they cleft, which then had to be continually forced to grow back as it once had, an effort that often left one with drawn-out aches sunk close to the bone and that throbbed their reticence. And even the smallest of these side-effects was enough to disrupt one’s concentration so healers usually did not usually heal themselves.

“I… I still have some scars… on my back… that I-.”

Something flickered in the amber eyes.

“It does not matter.”

The emperor sank his strong fingers into the dark hair and rubbed the delicate skull.

He had great plans for the elf.

The prestige that the recent victory lent his rule was but a veneer on the dissent and rumbling opposition that had been growing for years and that Emhyr knew he could not quell, not durably. He did, however, hope the veneer would last the one or two years he would need to pass the laws and take the measures necessary for the safeguard of the empire, so that it would not be torn apart by its own greedy elites once they had rid themselves of their authoritarian and bellicose sovereign.

A great deal of the veneer’s strength would depend on the young elf.

The emperor and his closest advisors still couldn’t quite believe their good fortune in having so much political and symbolic value rolled into the one being. Ciaran knew and understood the North as well as any of the imperial advisors, he concentrated the alliances of both elven nations and might even marshal the sympathies of Nilfgaardians at home who would see in him an injured veteran, a victim of barbaric Nordlings in desperate need of Nilfgaard’s civilising influence. Word had already spread like wildfire throughout the empire that Nilfgaard had saved the life of the only known omega of his generation on the entire continent.

But the elf was dying. Despite their best efforts, the elf was dying and all they could do was prolong his life in comfort for as long as they could. And though they’d long known the elf was dying, if Ciaran had already lost his Sight then he was dying more quickly than they’d anticipated. The little Squirrel wanted to die a martyr and Emhyr thought it likely they would indulge him in this too but before that Emhyr needed him to survive until they reached the capital, he needed him to survive until his work was done. No matter the cost. The future of the empire was more important than either of them.

The elf’s physical needs were being met as well as they could be but the emperor knew that this would not be enough. Elves were not like humans, mere food and warmth did not suffice for their survival. They needed that ineffable feeling of being connected with the earth and wind and sun and to have those of their kind around them. They slept together or at least within touching distance of each other so that their scents mingled and they breathed as one. Even when they wandered off to be alone they stayed within earshot so they could still hear the distant heartbeats of their kin if they listened for them.

In Oxenfurt, Vizima and especially Dol Gwennelen, the emperor had seen his elfling already being held at arm’s length by his own community and knew that the terrible isolation that came with courtly rank was a slow poison to the elfling and that if Ciaran did not grow stronger he would not live to see the golden towers of Nilfgaard.

“Tonight you will have a hot bath and sleep in a real bed. Tomorrow you may rest for as long as you
need. You will be kept warm and dry and comfortable. But you must be strong a little longer, *elyennenin.*

Ciaran tried to hold onto his anger, tried to formulate the retort that he only needed those things because he’d been ripped from his home. But he was exhausted, bone-tired to his marrow with sorrow and the dull pain and discomfort he’d suffered for days.

So he laid his head against the emperor’s shoulder and let him card his hair, taking in the deeper scents of oakmoss, sandalwood and musk, as the howling wind added a high whistling note to the rain’s constant drumming.

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— *Vengerberg, Aedirnia, mid-February, 1272* —

The storm had broken in earnest by the time the wagon came to a stop before the castle and Mererid appeared holding Ciaran’s vair cape, which the emperor then helped the elf into, pausing to look into the hazel eyes as he adjusted its collar.

“You are an imperial concubine. This is your armour now.”

The emperor stepped out first and as Ciaran prepared to follow he found Morvrin Voorhis at the door holding a waxed paper umbrella, ready to hand him out of the wagon to the shelter of the makeshift awning. The general gallantly drew a handkerchief from his pocket and flicked it over his proffered, gauntleted hand with a flourish, acting for all the world as if they were out for a picnic in the May sunshine.

“We meet again,” the general greeted approvingly as Ciaran reached his level, paused at a cold flood of lightening instantly followed by a mighty crack of thunder then added in conspiratorial tones, “I am very glad it is you.”

They followed the emperor into the castle and through to the opened door of the great hall, where the emperor paused before addressing the assembly of nobles who promptly knelt.

“My lords, it is late and you must be anxious to return to your homes so I will make this brief.”

He strode to the elevated throne behind which stood a dozen Impera in full armour and settled into it before raising a hand.

“I present the imperial concubine, Lord Ciaran of Nilfgaard.”

Ciaran stepped onto the red carpet to make his way to the emperor and as he passed, some of the Aedimian lords stood and turned their backs, others averted their gazes or spat or showed other signs of disgust, only one or two of the more eloquent preferring a muttered “catamite” to “whore”.

Ciaran went to stand on the emperor’s right, ignoring them, and the emperor signalled var Cleef and Voorhis who had come in together just behind him.
The Impera and Alba soldiers that lined the walls stepped forward and took hold of the men who had shown their displeasure and the ensuing movement of panic was quickly quelled by a show of weapons by the soldiers.

The emperor’s secretary came to stand before the first restrained man, whose heavy-jowled, rubicund face had grown purple with indignation.

“Your name, my lord?”

“I am Dagonet, baron of Asheberg! Now unhand me!”

The secretary ran his gaze over his list and punctiliously struck out the baron’s name before giving a small nod, which prompted the soldiers to lead the man away.

“Wait! Wait!”

From passive his resistance became active and in the end he had to be carried bodily out of the room, still howling threats and entreaties, by the powerful armed guards.

For an instant after he’d left the room there was absolute stillness and it seemed an age before the first heartbeat throbbed faintly through the air, then all the other restrained men tried to break free but soon all of them had been wrangled, kicking and screaming, out of the room, while the others, still on their knees, stared at the floor, and they remained there, in an atmosphere thick with horror, until the emperor bade them rise.

The secretary looked a the emperor.

“Sire, we are still missing twelve names.”

Showing the barest signs of boredom, the emperor motioned for him to continue and so the secretary stopped before the man to the right of the second missing person and asked him for his neighbour’s name.

The man stammered out a name and the secretary ran his gaze over his list and put a firm line through the relevant entry.

This continued until he’d finished updating his list, at which point he went to stand to the emperor’s left, then studied his paper.

“Tylbalt of Kalkar, please step forward.”

As the man in question came to kneel before the emperor, thin and obsequious, the secretary read out his credentials, the high points of his biography, his friendship with Count Felart, his actions during the war and since the peace. Kalkar was now part of Dol Gwennelen and the former baron had been granted the use of his old name and a minuscule fiefdom near Scala as consolation.

Ciaran looked at the familiar weak mouth, the ridiculously affected facial hair, and stiffened slightly, glancing at the emperor who sat with one elbow propped on an armrest and two fingers pressed against his temple as though trying to ward off the onset of a migraine. The emperor met his gaze.

“You know him.”

Ciaran did know him. He was one of the lords who had sold out to Henselt, a coward who hid his brutish cruelty behind a facade of obedience, pretending to simply enforce laws beyond his control while taking pleasure in the punishments they allowed him to mete out. Everybody knew Tylbalt of
Kalkar — he was infamous.

“Yes.”

“Does he discriminate against the Aen Seidhe?”

“No,” the word fell like a stone into the absolute stillness and silence of the hundred baited breaths of a hundred watching ghosts, “he persecutes humans and non-humans equally.”

“Take him.”

The emperor signalled his guards, then his fingertips came to rest against his temple again, while the fingers of his other hand drummed along the armrest in vague impatience at the man’s screams for leniency and forgiveness.

The remaining lords stared, the whites of their eyes visible from across the room, but they were unarmed and all the doors heavily-guarded, so they had no choice but to step forward when called. If they were praying for mercy while waiting their turn, they soon saw that it would be to no avail. Only a few of them had an unblemished record and only a few more were only lightly reprimanded before being sent on their way.

Some of those who didn’t make the cut were replaced by lesser nobles from the same area or Nilfgaardian officers. Once, one of the men waiting his turn suddenly shrieked as he made a desperate run for the main door and was carried away without further comment. Ciaran stood by the side of the throne, straight-backed, head held high but eyes downcast like the tearless weeping statues his race once placed outside the tombs of their queens and kings. He watched and waited in silence as dozens of great lords filed before him and blood paid for blood.

After an hour of this, the emperor turned to him.

“You must be tired, you may withdraw.”

Ciaran bowed and this time, as he swept by, every one of the remaining lords knelt deeply at his passage and the two soldiers at the door rapped the ends of their long lances against the ground sharply. To Ciaran, that sound followed by the long creak and groan of the tall wooden doors as they were opened for him were like the death rattle of what the North had been.

— N —

For security reasons, he and the emperor were sharing a solar suite of rooms and Ciaran was soaking in a small, copper slipper tub set up before a large fire and lined with heavy sheets when the emperor came in hours later. The fire had been lit long before their arrival and had had time to warm the stone walls and drive out the cold and damp and several buckets of water were warming before it.

Two of Ciaran’s attendants were washing him through one of his usual thin bathing shirts, never touching him directly but rather used sponges and brushes. Another attendant added a bucketful of hot water to the bath water made cloudy by the addition of scented salts.

Ciaran looked up at the emperor as he approached, his keen eyes watching for the smallest frown or sign of approval. His damp, glossy hair was gathered into a low knot of large curls from which several locks escaped and the emperor now reached out to touch one of these trailing tendrils, smiling
faintly as he felt the coiled resistance in it.

“I prefer it this way.”

The emperor then went to the armchair that had been set out for him near the fire and turned it just a few degrees so that he could continue to watch Ciaran, his back to the fire. One of their attendants poured him a goblet of wine and as Ciaran watched the way the emperor settled into the chair and pushed it back a couple of inches nearer the fire, he realised that the emperor did not like the cold.

“How do you feel?”

“Much better, sire. The salts help.”

“They are extracted from the hot springs around the Ard Vesaevus and are known to alleviate muscle and joint pain.”

“Are they yours?”

“My reserve, yes. Voorhis and var Cleef contributed what was left of theirs and our agents in Beauclair are buying up what they can find.”

Ciaran bowed his head slightly, grateful and mortified.

“Thank you.”

The emperor made the vaguest of dismissive gestures.

“Have you eaten?”

“I had tea and biscuits and some apple sauce earlier.”

“I am having something brought up, will you join me?”

Ciaran nodded and after a final rinse, stood up in his bath, pausing a moment to let the water sluice off him, perfectly aware that his thin bathing shirt clung to every line of his body, before allowing his attendants to help him out of the bath, glancing back discreetly to judge the effect of his little performance in the glowing amber eyes. He disappeared behind a screen where he was dried and soon reappeared in a nightshirt over which he belted the fine wool robe that his attendants had spent days embroidering with vines and whorls that matched those on his skin.

Moving with studied grace, Ciaran joined the emperor at the table now littered with covered dishes of every size and found his place had been set not just with a knife and spoon but also something he’d only heard of and read about in books — a fork.

“Today and tomorrow we can eat like civilised people.”

Ciaran said nothing, mortified, and instead picked up the elegant silver fork.

“There weren’t any forks at the dinner in Oxenfurt.”

“We did not want our Northern guests to feel uncomfortable.”

“Are they commonly used in Nilfgaard?” Ciaran asked nonchalantly, adjusting to the weight of the fork in his hand while he discreetly observed how the emperor used his.

“Some rural communities in the outer provinces may have not adopted them yet but they are
And when the emperor noticed how closely the elf was watching him, he slowed his movements a little, demonstrating his use of the fork he held in his left hand in conjunction with the knife in his right and Ciaran soon tried it himself, again fighting down simultaneous feelings of gratitude and humiliation.

The fire kept Ciaran from losing heat after his bath while the food and the water tinged with wine he was drinking warmed him from the inside. Despite this, however, he couldn’t help a shiver as he watched the emperor eat and drink, his mood and appetite seeming unaffected at having sent more than a score of men to their deaths in cold blood.

“You were perfect earlier, elyennen.”

Ciaran acknowledged the compliment with a graceful bow of his head. He had been in the emperor’s wagon night after night while he and his secretary read through the files and prepared their lists and he knew the man he’d condemned had already had a mark against his name. He knew his words had not changed the settled outcome but even so the impression of secondhand power had pleased him and he’d been mollified by the long soak in the hot bath and the still-warm memory of seeing the great Aedirnian lords treated like cattle being taken to slaughter.

“Is it over?”

“No,” the emperor murmured in clipped tones, pausing as the elf helped him to another cider-cooked pork chop and a few slices of their accompanying apples, “that was just the first cull. Tomorrow I will have face-to-face meetings with those who remain, to judge them a little more closely and to make sure my instructions and wishes are understood. Easier to do it here and now than from Nilfgaard once these misconceptions have already spread unchecked.”

“Aren’t you worried about antagonising them? Don’t you need their cooperation?”

“They should be more worried about antagonising me. Besides, nobody is indispensable. They had months to adjust to the world order, more than enough time to understand that Nilfgaard’s laws and Nilfgaard’s people are to be respected — and that includes the Aen Seidhe.”

“Respect isn’t born of fear.”

The emperor gave the elf an appraising look.

“Perhaps not but I do not have the time to grow respect from seeds. This will have to do until real respect is built up. It may take less time than we think. That dragon’s ideas of equality between races seem to have taken root.”

After dinner, once the table had been cleared, they sent their attendants into the outer room, just out of sight, and the emperor motioned Ciaran.

“Come. Let me look at you.”

Once the elf was settled on his lap, the emperor buried a hand in the thick hair, sifting through the curls as he looked his concubine over.

Ciaran was tall but nothing like as tall as the average Nilfgaardian, most of whom towered above other humans, and even when standing the top of his head barely brushed the emperor’s nose. Besides, he was all leg and perched on the emperor’s lap as he was, his gaze was only level with the emperor’s mouth. A mouth that now brushed against his gently, then a little more insistently, coaxing
and warm, and Ciaran finally returned the kiss. He felt the large hands start to undress him and bowed his head.

“I have scars… I couldn’t remove them from the places I can’t see…”

Ciaran waited, trembling despite his steely determination and the warmth of the room. Beneath his clothes he was too thin, bony even, and he knew from the snippets of whispered conversations he’d overheard that the imperial medics despaired at his inability to put on weight despite the care that was taken of him.

The robe and nightshirt pooled about him on the emperor’s lap. The emperor unbuttoned his doublet with one hand then folded him into it, causing him to splay his hands over the undershirt and the hardness beneath.

Emhyr looked down the length of the pale back then stroked a hand over the scars, the worst of which had been left by the lashes that had damaged one kidney — and very nearly the other — beyond repair.

“It does not bother me. But, if you wish it, they can be taken care of once we reach the capital.”

He continued to stroke a large hand up and down the elf’s back. There were other marks there that even his healers and medics and mages would not be able to remove — the marks left by the welted Conynhaela vines where they had entered the elf’s body, a sharp black-purple mark every third vertebra down the length of the spine, like the chain of miracles that had saved him, one that had taken three nations and four types of healing arts. The beautiful omega was the living symbol of the cooperation between North and South and just as fragile.

The Brokilon cure was known to increase the sensitivity of nerve-endings and to leave a dull ache in the bones and joints that was made worse by the cold and damp. It also hadn’t been enough to completely restore the elf to health — nothing would be — and the imperial physicians had been adamant in their opinion that continued exposure to the harsh weather and conditions in the north would cause a steady decline in his health. Only Nilfgaard could provide the care needed to keep the elf alive and even that might have come too late — Ciaran had already lost his Sight.

“Go to bed, elyenenn, you need rest and I have more work to do,” he said, helping Ciaran back into his nightshirt and robe, “Sleep for as long as you need. Tell Mererid or one of your attendants if you need anything.”

Ciaran nodded, shaken by contradictory feelings.

He knew the emperor had chosen him for reasons of state and that the care taken of him was the same afforded to any other valuable asset, but he also sensed — from the way he watched him eat, let his gaze linger, touched his hair — that the emperor’s attraction was unfeigned. It reassured Ciaran to know that he might have some small amount of leverage there and that he was not just being used as a convenience. It reassured him, but only in the desperate, anxious, clammy way a bather felt reassured at regaining his footing after being tugged off his feet by an unexpected current.

Ciaran was soon tucked away behind the heavy drapes of the canopy bed requisitioned for his use but stayed awake despite his weariness simply to enjoy being warm and dry and comfortable and not feeling watched, and as he drifted in and out of sleep, he could hear the sounds of the emperor bathing then a knock on the door and a voice.

“Sire, they are ready.”
When he awoke the next morning, Ciaran was told that the emperor was already in his meetings but had left instructions that he not be woken and that General Voorhis had offered to take him on a tour of the environs. While he breakfasted in bed, he read another couple of chapters of The Imperial Dynasty, then was dressed and went to meet the general.

“His Imperial Majesty said you were feeling better, I am glad to see the truth of it with my own eyes.”

“I am. And I wanted to thank you for the Darn Dyffra salts, general.”

“Ah, it was nothing,” Voorhis dismissed with a smile then vacillated before continuing, motioning towards a group of nearby Alba men who stood, watching them, “I would like you to meet one of my soldiers, a spearman. You probably do not remember him but it was he who found you in Flotsam. Lord Ciaran, may I present Bastiaan aep Larsen.”

The soldier was a dark-eyed, fresh-faced youth with hair as bleached-bone pale as his skin was fair, who stared at Ciaran a moment before he and his companions all sank to their knees, bowing their heads as the general made the rest of the introductions.

“You saved my life,” Ciaran remarked as the soldiers got back to their feet, “Thank you.”

“Just doing my duty, my lord,” the soldier answered bashfully as they all started to walk along the path towards the river under a low, overcast sky.

The several thousand soldiers encamped around the castle were only about a quarter of the number that made up the Centre Camp but Ciaran did not for a moment doubt that to the people of Vengerberg, underarmed and outnumbered, all of this — the vast tracts of land black with Nilfgaardian army tents, siege engines and even the construction cranes, as tall as the fire scorpions visible in the distance — looked like a complete and absolute occupation.

The general pointed out things and places of interest and kept up a polite chatter but the soldiers were tongue-tied and constrained, barely daring to look at Ciaran and staring in awe whenever they did. Ciaran ran his approving gaze over the orderly rows of tents and as he turned to Voorhis, he noticed the soldiers elbow each other discreetly while trying to hide their grins.

“Ever since we met in Vizima I have wondered how you would get the Alba home. It never occurred to me to use relays. An idea of yours, general?”

“Oh, yes. Usually we would have marched back together but I suggested this to the emperor and he was good enough to see merit in it, though in fact there is little merit — it is a system based on our mail service, which relies on relay points with fresh horses and riders at them to carry on the message bags.”

“Ingenuous. I would like to see that.”

“You shall,” the general nodded with a smile, “Most of the road we will take in the South follows mail routes. They are one of the great advantages of our network of imperial roads. These roads carry the empire’s lifeblood,” the general murmured, looking around them “communication, trade, troops, all the things we will need to improve the North.”
Ciaran had been to Vengerberg before and remembered the castle clearly. It had been damaged — again — during the siege but it was being repaired. A complex system of pulleys had been installed at the top of the turrets to lift building materials and the cranes being operated looked like they’d been put together with repurposed parts from various siege engines.

At least a mile of imperial road had already been laid and both soldiers and locals were working on repairing the main bridge while further along the river Ciaran could see they’d started work on a new one. The gleaming paving stones were a sharp contrast to the muddy paths they replaced and somehow even the river looked cleaner. But here too the bodies of brigands hung from the branches of a large oak.

“You’ve been busy,” Ciaran noted as he glanced at Bastiaan and the other soldiers, “And this on top of your regular training?”

“We’re used to peacetime duties, sir,” Bastiaan smiled, emboldened by the question, “Many of us were in Metinna repairing a dam and a bridge less than a year ago. We’re getting quite good at it.”

“And you haven’t had any problems with necrophages? The infestations are always worse after battles.”

“We’ve been using them as target practice, sir. We’ve pretty much cleared out this area, even the few — what are they called? — nekkers on the edges of our camp. The only thing we haven’t taken care of yet is the dragon. The townsfolk say a dragon came over from somewhere in the direction of Vizima and settled in those hills to the northeast and keeps carrying away sheep and even people on the nearby land. This morning we hung up goat carcasses at the edges of camp to bait it but so far no luck.”

Vengerberg hadn’t yet recovered from the ravages of the second war before this third war had started but even so it was still one of the largest cities in Aedirnia and numbered a couple of thousand inhabitants. Hearing them referred to as townspeople was a first for Ciaran and he was tempted to say so, just as he was tempted to point out that a dragon — if it really was a dragon — was far too intelligent a creature to fall for as crude a ploy as a dead goat.

“You could hire a witcher to take care of it. Geralt of Rivia should be around somewhere, you could ask him.”

“I suppose we will if we can’t manage it ourselves,” Bastiaan said, glancing at the general, “But there are no dragons left in the empire so we wouldn’t mind having a crack at this one. We had nothing more exciting than a Fiend while we were in Velen.”

“You were in Velen?”

“Yes, sir, some of us were sent over to the Centre Camp to help with peacekeeping during the truce and since then also some reconstruction and weeding out as many corpse-eaters and monsters as we could. We can’t bring in civil engineers and colonists until the area is pacified and secure, you see.”

“I see. Were you also in Vizima?”

“Yes, sir, then we went to Verden with General Voorhis,” the youth now beamed, encouraged by Ciaran’s attentive manner, “And we’ve stayed with the imperial convoy since it left Verden.”

“Why didn’t you introduce aep Larsen to me in Vizima?” Ciaran asked the general when they’d stepped back into the castle.

“Ah, we did consider it but then thought it might be indelicate, as if we were trying to remind the
Aen Seidhe of what they owe Nilfgaard or something of that sort,” the general dismissed easily then hesitated fractionally, “You know the witcher, Geralt of Rivia. Do you like him?”

“I only met him once, in Dol Gwennelen. But yes, I liked him.”

The general seemed to hesitate a moment.

“Forgive me for asking, you liked him despite…?”

Ciaran shrugged.

“I don’t remember it.”

The general nodded thoughtfully then escorted him to the door of the solar, where they took leave of each other, and as soon as Ciaran stepped into the warm rooms, Mererid and a half dozen attendants came to help him out of his outerwear and boots and settled him into a comfortable chair by the fire with a small pot of infusion and a thick, soft woollen blanket.

“If the young gentleman will excuse me, I must finish demonstrating the proper technique for scenting clothes. When that is done, perhaps we could discuss the young gentleman’s wardrobe?”

Ciaran made a sign of assent and Mererid went through to the next room where his freshly-laundered clothes had been hung up to dry by the fire.

Despite the wool clothes and brisk pace, Ciaran had felt the aches and pains that had started to ease overnight returning and was relieved to be inside and warm again — but he also despaired at feeling that way. In the months since his return from Brokilon, he had tried to inure himself to these pains the same way he had to discomfort as a soldier, but the realisation that he didn’t have to be in constant pain now made that difficult to do.

He sipped his infusion, willing the pain to go away, and watched Mererid direct his attendants to hang censors beneath the drying clothes so that the fragrant smoke drifting up into the fabric. No doubt that explained why the emperor’s clothes were always so wonderfully scented.

While they worked, Ciaran sat quietly and took in the room.

All the cases that had lined their shelves in the wagons were now neatly stacked in a corner, their little engraved brass plaques announcing the contents of which they’d been emptied — nécessaire de voyage, nécessaire de toilette, nécessaire de bureau, and so on. The emperor’s black enamel and gold toiletries set had been laid out on a table along with the triptych mirror of bright glass that Mererid had had brought to Ciaran’s wagon to replace the polished bronze hand-mirror that had so horrified him, and everything else beside which Ciaran’s plain wood-carved combs seemed desperately commonplace. Even the desk had been brought in and its frame readjusted to a suitable height for the matching chair.

All of this for just a one-night layover.

All of this had come out of the many baggage carts Ciaran had often walked past, encumbered by folding chairs, tall slender tables, chandeliers, oil lamps, anonymous trunks full of unseen things, folded standards and rolled-up carpets, unused serveware, and, unaccountably, a bird cage housing an owl on a dimerithium chain.

This overabundance was typical of humans. They liked to accumulate things, they always needed more and more of them. More clothes — which had to be first made then washed and stored and mended and which consequently required washboards, soaps, closets, needles, patches. They made
work for themselves, the way they did when they started to want to produce more food than they
needed — they needed more land to do it, more tools to sow, prune, harvest and more crates and
carts to carry it in. So much of it that some inevitably never reached maturity or rotted. Always
waste.

The Scoia’tael travelled with nothing more than they could carry. They each had two sets of clothes
— one they wore and the other kept washed and ready. Even their camps had been ephemeral, made
from whatever nature provided.

But this was Nilfgaard and Nilfgaardians had even more clothes, more furniture, more food than any
other humans he’d known. This was luxury such as Ciaran had never known — not even in the
castles of the North, not even in Vizima when he’d been a guest of Nilfgaard — and what astounded
him the most was that it was all so portable and so streamlined, all of it designed to be trundled
around uselessly.

This was Nilfgaard, he realised, and no person outside himself had any notion that the emperor might
travel in any other way. The emperor’s comfort was not a matter of convenience but of status, just as
the luxury was. And Ciaran himself was part of that status and that luxury, his appearance and value
as important as that of the exquisitely-wrought pomander that constantly exuded the emperor’s
personal scent.

Mererid stepped back into the room and caught Ciaran’s roving gaze.

“The young gentleman’s things have been ordered in Beauclair but until then he will have to
continue sharing with His Imperial Majesty.”

Ciaran nodded. Humans were possessive and he’d always taken as a sign of his importance this
sharing of the emperor’s own things with him.

“I don’t mind. And my tailor made some sketches for me before we left Vergen. I keep them in a
leather folder.”

Mererid had one of the attendants bring the folder and they looked over the sketches, the chamberlain
clearly approving.

“Yes. These are very good. I will have copies sent ahead to Beauclair.”

The chamberlain motioned Ciaran’s attendants over to give them instructions and as they filed away,
Mererid and Ciaran watched them go.

“Where are they from?”

“One is a Skelligan who was injured during the fighting and was given time in the North to recover,
another is the daughter of a Cintran rebel who is working to earn her freedom, the other two are
Aedirnians — part of Demavend’s court, they were taken from this very castle. If they do not suit,
the young gentleman may replace them with others when we reach the capital. His Imperial Majesty
has decided to allow the young gentleman eight attendants at the palace.”

Mererid looked through the sketches again then glanced at Ciaran.

“Is the young gentleman displeased with them?”

“They are afraid of me.”

“The young gentleman is an imperial concubine. They are mere slaves. They may be punished or
even executed for their mistakes. And since imperial concubines cannot be punished for minor infractions, their attendants are often punished in their stead or made to take the blame.”

“Punished? What for?”

“Almost anything. The young gentleman might claim one of them wilfully touched him, which is strictly forbidden. If the emperor is displeased by a scent or colour, the attendant who chose it can be held responsible.”

“Is it true? Could I really have one of them executed?” Ciaran asked the emperor as they dined alone together later that evening.

“Minor infractions and punishments can be dealt with by your head of household — Mererid will stand in for him for now. For anything more serious, you would need to have cause and since we do not know each other well yet I would ask you to justify it to me — but yes, in principle. This should have been explained to you.”

Phrases and sentences from the protocol package floated through Ciaran’s mind. Yes, it had all be there, he just hadn’t understood it or believed it. And he suddenly realised that blame for that might now fall on Mererid or the Protocols Officer who had drafted the paper.

“It was, I just didn’t think…”

The emperor gazed at him impassively.

“You are an imperial concubine now, elyen. You are as much a visible sign of my status and power as the imperial palace or the imperial army. You represent the empire and me. This might seem futile to you after your life and death struggles in the Pontar, nonetheless that is your role now. The standard you bear is that of Nilfgaard, only now you do not carry it in your hand but on your person — your behaviour is your shield, your words your weapons and your clothes your armour. You will require the help of your attendants in these things. They are your brigade now.”

Ciaran stared, astonished, and the emperor reached out to touch his cheek.

“They knew that you are Scoia’tael — a hater and killer of humans — before they met you and they have not yet had real reason to disbelieve your reputation. You are the very type of the Aen Seidhe, elynin. Beautiful. Proud. And cruel.”

Ciaran gave him a sharp look but the emperor only smiled lazily.

“Does it bother you? Cruelty is a higher function, the sign of an evolved mind. Is the sheep cruel? Is the wolf? None but humans and elves truly understand it — even dwarves have no talent for it.”

Ciaran stared back at the emperor, wondering how much cruelty was hidden behind the impassive mask.

“And me? You can have me executed.”

“In theory, yes, though in practice tradition dictates that you be allowed to take your own life. I have never ordered it and hope I never have to. Quite apart from the personal aspect, such a thing would have diplomatic repercussions.”

The emperor dropped his napkin onto the table, signalling he’d finished eating and Ciaran washed his hands for him.
“Mererid tells me that you are quick and learn well. You will continue your lessons with him and take some from my protocols offer in preparation for our stay in Beauclair.”

The human equivalent of a circus-trained tiger, Ciaran decided and murmured.

“What must I do?”

“Be as beautiful as you can manage — there, as in Nilfgaard, dressing well and being presentable is considered a courtesy — and in conversation you must be intelligent, polite and unassuming. Mererid claims it should not be a challenge for you.”

A house cat, Ciaran amended bitterly but poured the customary post-prandial brandy with his usual grace. A very lovely and very expensive house cat whose claws had been neatly trimmed and filed.

“I will do my best.”

The emperor accepted the glass from him, watching him closely a long moment before speaking quietly.

“They must forget the Scoia’tael and even the Vrihedd officer in the face of the imperial concubine, elyennen.”

Ciaran raised his gaze to the emperor’s and held it.

“Beautiful, docile, apparently inoffensive?”

The emperor gave the faintest of nods, his eyes glowing in satisfaction as he leant back.

“I will be the envy of Toussaint.”

Ciaran doubted it. The last elves of Toussaint had been driven out or exterminated nearly half a millennium before, abandoning their palaces and cities as they had done in the North, destroying or cursing them. Some of those curses were likely still active. They would not be pleased to see him. Humans were humans everywhere.

From outside came the sound of drums and horns — an alarm — and they went to the window from which they saw, outlined against the very last light of day left in the sky, a great winged beast approaching the castle.

“A wyvern,” the emperor murmured at length.

“A royal wyvern,” Ciaran supplied, his keen eyes picking up more detail, “A female.”

Ciaran opened the window and leant out, looking down on the encampment, the shouts of “Seiâ’fyll!”*** drifting up to him. He could just about make out the scurrying figures below as they collected shields and weapons and hurried to their battalions to get into formation.

The beast flew close past their window and the slow beat of the leathery wings relegated the hubbub below to a great distance.

Ciaran thought of Bastiaan aep Larsen and wondered where the young spearman felt terror, exhilaration or merely disappointment.

“Will they be all right?”

“I expect they can manage a single wyvern without too much trouble,” the emperor answered
carelessly, shrugging off his doublet and draping it about the elf’s slender shoulders, “Zerrikanians may worship dragons but they have learnt to defend against them all the same — some have been known to go mad. We have learnt a trick or two from them.”

As the creature swooped by again, so close Ciaran could make out the vertical pupils in the reptilian eyes, it let out an awful shriek as the first of the archers’ fiery arrows hit it and Ciaran instinctively stepped back at the sound and the noxious smell of singed scales, pressing himself against the emperor, whose arms went around him, and they both watched the infuriated wyvern fold its wings into a dive to attack its assailants.

The archers knelt down and the soldiers that had been crouched around them now stood and raised their shields above their heads into a protective carapace, poking their lances through the gaps left by the rounded edges so that the entire formation bristled with sharp points.

Ciaran’s breath caught at the near balletic perfection of the tirelessly-drilled movements and at the sight of the familiar formation of offensive defence — the eimyr****.

Frustrated but undeterred, the draconid swept up then circled back for another passage and along the edges of the camp a string of green glowing lights burst into existence as the fire scorpions were loaded and readied.

Though a first fireball winged it and another forced it to abort a dive, the wyvern nonetheless managed to make two more passes at the formations of soldiers, one time crashing onto one of the protective domes and pouring venom over it despite the pike points, before one well-aimed fireball hit it squarely in the chest and another burned clean through a wing, and the creature plummeted to the ground, screeching.

Ciaran glanced up at the emperor in surprise, horrified at the projectile’s efficiency even against the horn and scale-armoured beast.

“Our Zerrikanian fire is the closest we have come to reproducing dragon fire. The Zerrikanians gave us the secret to it long ago, before they realised what it was worth and we have improved it over decades,” the emperor remarked offhandedly, “Now we use it to arm our scorpions and temper our steel. Fight fire with fire. Not that this creature possesses a dragon’s breath.”

Ciaran wondered how the soldiers would fare against the fatally-wounded and desperate creature whose shrill screams pierced the night.

“Too stupid to know when to stop fighting,” the emperor concluded, drawing Ciaran back and closing the window.

As they turned away from the window, the emperor nodded at his desk.

“I have prepared a letter for your friend, Iorveth. If you wish, you may write one and we will send it with mine.”

“And how many people will read it?”

At the weary question, the emperor brushed his lips against the dark, silky curls.

“Just myself, this time. You may use my desk.”

Ciaran sat at the well-appointed desk, drew a fresh sheet then, after automatically opening and closing his hand a couple of times to loosen up his joints, began to write to Iorveth, assuring him that he was well and being as well cared for as a rare white oliphant and promising more news in a future
He pointedly brought the letter to the emperor who read it, smiled faintly, then handed it back to Ciaran.

“Very well, I hope it was as much for his benefit as for mine. Fold it into my letter — there in the holder — seal it with wax, and we will have someone give it to a messenger.”

Ciaran did as he was told under the emperor’s amused gaze and was not surprised to be called to the emperor when he’d finished, though he was surprised when Emhyr put his feet up on a nearby stool and slid his hips forward on his chair slightly, leaning back so that Ciaran found himself looking down at him.

The emperor looked just as he always did and it occurred to Ciaran that he must have an iron constitution. War was one thing but Ciaran knew he couldn’t have slept more than four hours a night since they’d left Verden. The emperor had spent his days and nights listening to reports and counsel, dictating and signing letters and orders, speaking with the local commanders, planning the cold-blooded murder of a baker’s dozen or two of Aedirnian nobles that had assembled at Vengerberg for what should have been a formality and who had expected to be home in time to kiss their children goodnight before bed. Yet no matter how closely Ciaran looked, he could find no trace of fatigue or weariness or guilt. Emhyr var Emreis looked as sternly serene and impeccably-groomed as always.

“Aren’t you tired?”

“Not especially,” the emperor answered, combing a hand through Ciaran’s curls then drawing him down for a leisurely kiss, “Now that we have finished here, I will have more time free to spend with you. And you, elyennen, how do you feel?”

Soothed by the pressure of warm palms and fingertips up and down his back, Ciaran settled onto the emperor’s chest, chasing the familiar scent on his skin.

“I’m fine.”

In a flash of contrition, Ciaran gave in to instinct and looked up at the emperor.

“I’m sorry I’m not stronger.”

“It is nothing,” the emperor pressed another long kiss onto his mouth, “What would Nilfgaard be if we could not even take care of one Aen Seidhe?”

As he felt the firm, mobile mouth start to slowly trace the markings on his throat, Ciaran wanted to say something, to make himself more explicitly available, but knew it was bad form to offer the emperor something that was already his to take and couldn’t find the words to say or the sign to make that would allow him to express what he meant without breaking protocol.

Pressed close to the emperor as he was, he could feel a fullness between his legs, contained by the emperor’s clothing, but none of the heat he might have expected and he suddenly remembered the rumours of Emhyr’s impotence and realised an offer on his part might force the emperor to confess that he could not perform, could not effectively take what was offered. A chill blazed through him at this sobering thought and he kept silent, gradually allowing himself to enjoy the caresses and respond to the kisses as he knew Emhyr liked him to do.

“You should rest. We start early tomorrow.”

Through the door, his attendants were placing warming pans between the sheets of his bed and as
Ciaran was seized by a sudden reluctance to go back to their obsequious, constrained company, he tensed in the emperor’s arms and felt them tighten around him.

“I regret the discomfort of the journey. I would have sent you to the City by portal if it had been possible.”

Ciaran froze. The purple living bone of the Conynhaela cure tapped into the nervous system and even those with only a small amount of it in their bodies suffered severe nausea and disorientation when passing through portals. Ciaran, who had it throughout his body, had received the same unequivocal advice from every quarter — that he would experience limb-rending pain and a splintering of the mind that he might not recover from. He was appalled at the thought that the emperor might be enduring the long overland journey for his sake.

“And you? Couldn’t you go without me?”

“I could but my army cannot and I wish to be seen travelling with my men. Besides, I have business in Toussaint, Pereplut and other parts of the Empire. But I can arrange for you to travel at a slower pace with part of the Alba and the Impera. You would have your attendants and perhaps Mererid.”

Ciaran shook his head slightly, resigned and reassured.

“My place is with you.”

The emperor cupped the beautiful face with one hand and brushed the pad of his thumb over a pale cheek, looking into the green-gold eyes, then gave a slow nod.

“We will make the best of this, elyennenin.”

Chapter End Notes

*dreich: bleak, dreary weather, usually with an overcast sky and either set, heavy mist or very very fine rain that hangs in the air.
**shagreen: stingray or sharkskin leather.
***Seïâ'fyll!: Formation!
****eimyr: hedgehog
Chapter Summary

In which we leave the North.

Chapter Notes

Welcome to new readers, welcome back to old readers and thank you all for the kudos and sweet comments <3

The Addendum section has been updated, particularly with some delicious and contradictory maps.

Enjoy! <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

CROSSING THE YARUGA

— Rivia, Aedirnia, late February, 1272 —

It was huge.

Ciaran swallowed a sigh of frustration as he looked at the map, holding out his right arm so one of his attendant could tie the bow-cuff of his undershirt.

Of course, he'd always known the Empire was big and he'd seen maps of it before, but only now that he was expected to memorise every mountain, river, lake, province, provincial capital, every one of the imperial thoroughfares that flowed out of the capital as roads then byroads stretching out to the very edges of the empire like the veining on an oak leaf, did he realise how vast it truly was.

On seeing a map of the North, one might be forgiven for supposing that the world started and ended with the Dragon Mountains in the north, the Amells in the south and the Blue Mountains to the east. North of the Yaruga, the expressions “the South” and “Nilfgaard” were used interchangeably.

However, the empire was three times the size of the North and to Nilfgaardians of any description, “Nilfgaard” was the province from which the empire had sprung and that comprised the imperial capital — or simply “the City”, as it was most often called — while the rest was loosely “the
provinces”, the entirety of it was “the empire”, and they all referred to the individual provinces and territories of the empire as naturally as northerners spoke of the different kingdoms.

Ciaran was also made to study maps of the entire content, minutely detailed along the west where the empire was depicted as a network dotted with tiny illustrations — a copse drawn over Mag Turga, a blue rose over the lowlands of Nazair, a many-masted ship near the port city of Baccalà, and many others, some of which were of nothing Ciaran could recognise. Then to the east, beyond the mountain chain, an empty quarter where a swathe of the Korath lay between the empire and Zerrikania, strewn with fire-breathing dragons, spiders and what looked like long-legged, long-necked, hump-backed sheep. To the north, Haakland’s contours were as nebulous as the clouds that hid the tops of the clustered mountains that structured its landmass while in the south were the tantalising outlines of islands and the northern coasts of Ofier, Barca and even Hannu, amid a sea infested with sirens and other monsters.

When Morvran Voorhis had first seen him studying this map, he had laughed fondly before telling him he’d had to study just such a map as a boy.

On this map, the North was not the centre of the world but just a wedge of continent sequestered by an inclement geography and when he looked at it, Ciaran sometimes felt like a loch fish that had been accidentally released into the ocean.

Sitting on his bench by the little side table that had been temporarily turned into a vanity while the protocols officer seconded to him lectured him about Toussaint, Ciaran now held out his left arm and studied the map. He knew something of the transamelline* lands — of Cintra, of course, but also of Toussaint’s elven roots and the civil war that had annihilated them — but as for the cisamelline** provinces, they’d been almost as unknown to him as Zerrikania or Ofier until the emperor’s aides had started briefing him on them.

Even now it all remained hazy.

He traced a finger over the road they’d covered down to the Yaruga river.

The climate and the topography of the South was much more varied than the North. The mountains of Mahakam were respectable hills compared to the tallest peaks of the Amell range — which, it was said, were covered in snow throughout the year, even at the height of summer — and even they were dwarfed by the Ard Vesaevus, a dormant volcano of the Tir Torchair range that spanned almost the entire length of the empire. In Gemmera, Etolia and Metinna, these mountains sloped down into large plains, some almost as dry, in parts, as the Korath, whereas a little north of the City of Golden Towers was a stretch of coast shrouded in perpetual mist. Most of the rest of the empire was made up of fertile plains and hills and low mountain ranges artfully distributed as though for variety, run through by plenty of rivers flowing nearly parallel to each other from the Tir Torchair down to the sea. Slices of empire.

The four kingdoms had followed crossed paths soaked with blood and sweat and the history of the North was written in battles and skirmishes. Successive monarchies ruled over elites who lorded over peasants, while sending out their armies to attack each other, forever trying to grapple a little more land and influence in what was essentially a zero sum game. Kaedwen and Aedirn had fought over the Pontar valley - the bread basket of the north - for centuries and yet the land had not produced more in Kaedweni hands than it had in Aedirnian ones, though it did produce a lot less in times of conflict and it now occurred to Ciaran that the Aen Seidhe too would be judged on their stewardship of the land and how much yield they could get out of it, just as the Dol Blathanna elves were on theirs.

The South was different. Many of its provinces were the size of Temeria or larger, each with a
healthy smattering of rivers and mountains and arable soil and, as far as Ciaran could make out, they’d all lived in relative peace compared to the North, trading what they made and what they needed between them, each with distinct customs and histories and people, comfortable within their boundaries, until one of them, Nilfgaard, had started methodically taking over the others. Most of that had happened before Ciaran’s birth so he’d only ever known a world where the South and the Nilfgaardian Empire were one and the same.

As his attendant started on his hair, Ciaran stared into the mirror and his mind drifted ahead to Toussaint.

The wealthy little duchy was an intriguing contradiction. Though it held a far more independent status than any of the provinces and despite the fact that until Aedirnia’s annexation it had been one of the outermost reaches of the empire, it was, in many ways, the territory whose customs were most similar to Nilfgaard’s own, having known the rule of several generations of a cadet branch of the imperial family.

“Breaking with tradition is the most serious breach of protocol. You must remember that the Toussaintois are very attached to their customs.”

“Aren’t all Nilfgaardians?” Ciaran asked innocently, “Given that customs and traditions help promote order and a sense of social cohesion?”

“Indeed.”

The protocols officer took the impertinent question in his stride but Ciaran noticed Mererid give him a look and a sniff. The chamberlain’s gaze went to the brass comb that now nestled in the loosely twisted, glossy curls and he sniffed again.

“Do the Toussaintois like outsiders to follow their customs?” the elf asked curiously, “They don’t see it as pretence or usurpation?”

“The Toussaintois delight in other people adopting their customs. It is an instant passport into their society and Nilfgaardian officials are always briefed on Toussaintois traditions and etiquette and are instructed to bend to them whenever possible.”

Ciaran nodded thoughtfully and ran a second comb through the loose tresses that rested on his shoulders a few times before handing it to his attendant so it too could be settled into its place on the other side of his head.

The combs were small, barely the width of Ciaran’s palm, but pleasantly heavy, semi-circles with long teeth on the inside and solar rays along the outside. They were a matching pair that had, the chamberlain had told him in confidence, been a gift from Emhyr’s father to his empress to mark the birth of their heir. It had been the subject of a small battle of influence between the elf, who kept borrowing them, and the chamberlain, who kept retrieving them, that had been resolved only when the emperor had given Ciaran explicit permission to use them.

“And above all else, the Toussaintois value the five chivalric virtues — compassion, generosity, honour, valour, and wisdom,” Ciaran recited obediently, tucking an escaped tendril back into its place.

Ciaran was saved from further dry recitations by hails passed down the line of their procession and soon the wagon came to a shuddering stop. It was not the time of their usual halt and Ciaran instinctively glanced at the barred window despite knowing full well he would not see much out of it.
Mererid opened the door, exchanged a few words with the soldiers outside and soon the emperor himself passed his head through the door to look at the elf.

“Come.”

It was more invitation than order and Ciaran, inquisitive as always, quickly pulled on his boots and a cloak, foregoing the help of his attendants in his impatience, and hopped out after the emperor into a nippy day with an overcast sky.

Getting back into the dark, shaky wagon after the comfortable interlude at Vengerberg had been a trial Ciaran had borne with fortitude but he was still relieved whenever they stopped and he could step out and feel the earth beneath his feet and a breath of air in his face.

The emperor started walking without a word and Ciaran fell into step with him — a privilege granted to him while they were still north of the Yaruga.

This time the soldiers did not bother to hide their broad smiles and the familiar murmur of “stirwen” was louder than ever and the emperor glanced down at the elf.

“Tell Voohis and var Cleef if you do not like it. One word from them will put a stop to it.”

Ciaran shrugged slightly, having decided it sounded no stranger to his ears than “Lord Ciaran” did.

They neared the forest edge and he understood why they had stopped when he saw the ground was carpeted in Glories of the Snow, like a heavy sweep of indigo stars awash at the feet of the dark tree trunks.

The emperor stopped at the edge of the wood but Ciaran, in his soft kidskin boots, brushed through the flowers lightly without breaking their stems, a smile lighting up his face as he did so but as he turned to thank the emperor, shadows clouded his mind. Even in the north it was rare to find such large tracts of nature left untutored — humans liked to change the environments they lived in, they were like dwarves in that way, and Ciaran had no doubt that Nilfgaardians of every description took that tendency to an even higher degree, as they seemed to do everything.

As though to prove his point, as he rejoined the emperor, a convoy of Nilfgaardian colonists filed by with their escort of soldiers and their imposing building equipment, farming machinery and even a printing press loaded onto the back of a cart, secured by rope and a large piece of waxed gabardine — as worrying to Ciaran as siege engines and far more permanent, a second invasion — and it suddenly occurred to the elf that he was already behind enemy lines.

Soon he was again keeping pace with the emperor, the belt knotted low on the emperor’s waist only highlighting the length of his legs as he strode, straight-backed, his hands clasped behind his back, and Ciaran asked him about the monstrous large-wheeled and toothed machines while the soldiers smiled and called out to the newcomers, answering their questions as to the state of the roads ahead and the best place to break their journey that night.

“We have more sophisticated farm machinery in the South. But it requires specialist knowledge to build and use so for this year we will have to make do with these. It seems the North will only accept gradual modernisation.”

“Are they just for your colonists or can anyone use them?”

“They will be at the disposal of the whole community. A good harvest is in the interest of all.”

They’d passed several improved bridges and long tracts of newly-laid imperial roads, all paved with
stone in that distinctly Nilfgaardian way and Ciaran tried to reconcile the enormous outlay of resources with its likely return.

“And what will happen to Vengerberg castle?”

“It was to go to Stennis but as he did not manage to survive the war we will use it as an administrative centre for the governor once he is named.”

“Shouldn’t it be General Voorhis? Isn’t Field Marshal var Moehorn governor in Temeria?”

“He is. Morvran was offered the position but declined it. He is an advisor on my military council and desired to stay in a similar post.”

Ciaran frowned.

“With a promotion?”

“Yes. He will be one of my senior advisors and stay at the palace.”

Ciaran could not shake a sense of dread and vague, impending danger and it still weighed on his mind later that day while he was at his toilette.

Since Vengerberg, Mererid had stepped up his beauty regime — his skin was rubbed with crushed pearl powder morning and evening, his hair brushed through first with a boar bristle brush then its curls and waves restored with a wide-toothed comb dabbed with a flower oil. And as indignant as he’d initially been at the implication that his appearance had somehow been found wanting, Ciaran had to admit that the results were already visible.

One of his attendants was buffing the nails of his left hand while another filed those of his right and as they bumped off the end of a paved stretch of road, the file rasped against his excruciatingly sensitive nail bed and Ciaran hissed as he grabbed the attendant’s wrist and twisted it sharply, viciously glad when he felt the bone snap.

When he found himself before the emperor some time later, he still did not feel the remotest bit penitent but had the good grace to try to look it.

“It was a careless accident,” Mererid concluded, having related the incident, “The attendant has been sufficiently punished, I think, sire. The imperial medics believe the radial break will mend without complications.”

“Very well, we will consider the matter closed.”

Mererid bowed and left them alone with their dinner, and soon after the wagon jostled into motion.

Ciaran had the keen sense of having put himself in the wrong by Nilfgaardian standards and that his current mulishness only underlined it but he’d been hurt and refused to apologise.

“You said I could punish my attendants for small things,” he finally said into the silence, annoyed at hearing himself sound so churlish.

He expected censure but the emperor’s tone remained mild.

“I said you could have them punished by Mererid. You are an imperial concubine and I will do nothing to undermine your authority if I can help it but before you start lopping off heads, consider this — Mererid has arranged for you to have a better class of attendants once we reach the palace but
until then the ones you have will be difficult to replace. You have been a military commander, *elvennen*, and if you think that by ruling through fear you will get the best service from your team, then so be it, I will not interfere. But, between us, *you* are responsible for your performance and it will not suffice for you to claim you were dressed or told to behave in a certain way, or that the conduct of your slave attendants is beyond your control. That sort of passivity will not allow you to meet the high expectations I have for you nor, more importantly, those that I think you have set for yourself.”

Cut to the quick, the young elf said nothing.

The emperor leaned over to peruse the shelves of his portable library, selected a concise medical encyclopaedia and handed it to the elf who looked up at him in surprise.

“You’d let me study healing?”

“And medicine, if you wish, once we reach the capital. It is a useful skill and… it might help you feel more in control.”

They both sat, still and silent.

“Are you hungry?”

Ciaran shook his head, still looking down at small, immaculate book in his hands.

“Very well. Come.”

As Ciaran settled onto the emperor’s lap and felt the hard thighs beneath him and the large hand that twined into his hair, he felt small and frail. He’d always prided himself on being a hard-wearing warrior and had sworn to himself that he would never give the emperor reason to reproach him, yet a pin-prick of blood had been enough to tumble all his good intentions and self-mastery and now he found he could not meet the amber gaze that then fell to his bandaged pinkie.

“Does it still hurt?”

It did but Ciaran wouldn’t admit it. The white-hot, lancing pain that had blazed up his arm, his shoulder, then up the back of his neck like lightening, leaving his nerves bruised and sore, had died down to a numb throb that deepened whenever he moved his arm.

“Shall I kiss it better?”

This said with the faintest smile but the tone was serious and so were the eyes.

Ciaran held out his finger and the emperor cupped the slender hand in his own warm ones before pressing his lips not against the still-tender fingertip but the tiny knuckle above it.

“We are doing all we can for you and if there is anything else that can be done for your comfort then just tell Mererid or the imperial medics. And there is no harm in showing your pain or discomfort — it might remind your attendants to be careful.”

Ciaran said nothing.

He had left Brokilon knowing his fellow elves did not have the means or the facilities that his care required and sure enough it had become increasingly difficult to hide his discomfort at the dull, constant pain in his bones that had steadily deepened over the weeks he’d spent in Dol Gwennelen, and his resignation at constantly being fed lembas, one of the few things readily available that his
restricted diet permitted.

His intention had been to relieve this pressure on his own community by instead becoming a burden to Nilfgaard, who could better bear it. He’d consoled himself with the thought that he could show his discomfort and make the lives of his human carers miserable with it.

And it was working, in part. Nilfgaard’s care of him was painstaking and meticulous. But he’d found he couldn’t bring himself to show any sign of weakness before mere humans, mere slaves. And he was worn out with the effort of pretending that all was well.

“My brave elyennenic, I know you are suffering. I never forget it.”

The emperor kissed his knuckle again and a pleasant shiver went down Ciaran’s spine at the feel of the firm, warm lips moving over his skin and the glow in the amber eyes as they regarded him.

“Better?”

Ciaran nodded and sat quietly as the emperor drank in the sight of him.

There had been no anger and the emperor looked at him just as before, with the same tautly-held yearning that had neither waned nor even faltered in the face of his misstep and Ciaran saw weakness there. For all the emperor’s hard thighs and arms, his steely voice, iron temples and eyes as hard and bright as flaming topaz, there was weakness there.

He withdrew his hand to unbutton the emperor’s doublet then settled into it, noting with satisfaction the deep, vibrating hum that rumbled through the broad chest and the warm hands that slipped under his soft clothes to stroke his back. Soon enough the emperor nudged his face up for a kiss, hard and deepening, then the corner of his mouth up to the hollow beneath his cheekbone, while a finger brushed along one of the long, delicate ears, and Ciaran gasped.

He couldn’t have hidden his pleasure even if he’d wanted to. The emperor was experienced and masterful in his handling of him and the Conynhaela cure had brought the heightened sense of touch common to elves to an exquisite pitch in Ciaran, like one of those minutely vibrating crystals so coveted by mages, so that the tiniest pinprick was agony but the rasp of the emperor’s tongue made him melt right down to this core.

And the emperor loved seeing him in pleasure.

Ciaran buried his face against the emperor’s neck, determined to exploit this weakness and bend it to his advantage, desperate to do so but terrified the emperor would be repulsed by his body. Though he remained unchanged in essence, the recent shift in his emotions — from wanting to be Iorveth to wanting to be with him — has not yet had any visible effect and outwardly he still appeared fully male. Something many human males objected to in their bed partners.

But he would have to try nonetheless. He would have to play up his beauty, grow out his hair, draw on the part of him that had remained feminine, and feed the emperor as much vicarious pleasure as he cared to enjoy. He would become the ideal concubine, Emhyr var Emreis’ favourite. He would give the emperor everything he wanted and would soon have him wrapped around his little finger.

It was easy.

And so every evening Ciaran settled on the emperor’s lap, allowed the emperor to slip his clothes from his shoulders, accepted and encouraged the kisses and caresses even as they became every
evening more intimate, as the emperor’s large hands slid lower down his back then finally slipped beneath his clothes and squeezed his cheeks firmly, relishing them, and the emperor’s breath, his tongue, then his mouth brushed along one of his ears or as the emperor stroked his long thighs, moving higher, before carefully cupping him in his palm, stroking and pulling gently. In that moment, Ciaran was flooded with both relief and desire. He let the emperor soak up every last thrill and tremor, let him drink up his small moans and gasps of pleasure.

The truth that the elf barely admitted to himself was that he enjoyed these moments. Nobody else had dared touch him since his recovery and he loved feeling the cool chill in the air as the emperor’s warm hands and lips travelled over his skin. His long ears twitched and he shivered in pleasure when the emperor eventually stretched out a finger and stroked him there, between his legs, and when, the next evening, he finally breached him carefully, Ciaran felt a bolt of heat run through him. He rested his forehead against the emperor’s shoulder, clinging to him, as he was fingered gently, the long digit inside him crooking slowly, reaching, touching and trying.

Two fingers were bliss, once he adjusted to the stretch, and when it happened, days later, Ciaran closed his eyes, gasping silently, warm and shivering as he felt the familiar fullness. He melted too at the feel of the emperor’s mouth, his tongue and his teeth, along his ears, so relishing the near-forgotten pleasure that he bit the emperor’s bottom lip in passion then looked into his eyes, searching and hungry.

“How…? Where did you learn…?”

The emperor nudged the tip of Ciaran’s nose with his, his breathing catching a little as he spoke.

“There is an ancient elven text… in the Imperial Library.”

“Yes?”

“Yes, they are passed masters in the erotic arts.”

“Really?”

“Perhaps it helps with the fertility problem.”

“And you—?”

Ciaran couldn’t hold back a low moan at feeling the hot mouth on his throat, tracing the markings there, and at the two long fingers slowly stroking him from within.

“Mmm. I read it one summer, years ago.”

“What—? Ah!”

The emperor swallowed up the rest of the question in a kiss then amber eyes looked into hazel as he watched the delicate elf tauten and shiver until he came.

Shaken and mollified by the orgasm that still filled him with a liquid heat like molten gold, Ciaran did not resist as the emperor continued to bite his mouth gently, catching every sound he wrest from him as his fingers continued to coax him.

“What else is in it?” Ciaran finally managed to ask, weak as a kitten, caught between the hard chest and strong arms that supported him, his long throat bared as he looked up at the emperor.

The emperor tipped the elf’s pretty head up further to place a few unhurried kisses along his jaw
before looking into his eyes again.

“All in good time, elyenennie.”

Ciaran looked up at him, still wondering at how easily the emperor handled him, his thoughts disrupted as the emperor covered his mouth with his. The tongue that slipped between his lips probed idly, just as the fingers did, until the emperor finally broke the kiss and withdrew his fingers, releasing the sweet scent of Ciaran’s slickness into the air.

Ciaran tried to summon up some disgust at the thought that perhaps the rumours were true and that elves really were weak to the beast-like seductions of humans but then he caught the emperor’s musky scent and on it a whiff of that elusive elven essence, clearer than ever. He huddled against the emperor, reminding himself that it was the elf in him he was attracted to.

For elves, sex was a sign of affection, a consolation, a pastime, the natural extension of an intimacy of spirit and their constant search for oneness and the unity of all things in the universe. Most of them derided the almost animalistic way in which humans pursued pleasure, gorging themselves on it, whether it came from food, drink or sex, though the ugly truth was that some elves clearly enjoyed it and sought out human partners of their own volition.

The emperor was drinking in the sight of the elf, the keen topaz eyes roving to catch the slightest tremor of pleasure, the barest twitch of an ear and soon leant in to wet his lips against the few beads of sweat that had formed along Ciaran’s hairline and run down to moisten his forehead and streak his temples.

Desire flared up in Ciaran again and though he could feel the heavy fullness between his legs, he didn’t dare run the risk of asking for something the emperor could not give.

So instead he reached up and wound his fingers into the emperor’s hair, at his nape, and looked up into the amber eyes bravely. If watching his pleasure was all the enjoyment the emperor could draw from their intimacies, then Ciaran was determined to provide. This was a gift he could bestow and bestow easily and he allowed his hunger to colour the kiss they shared, answering and deepening it until the emperor drew away gently.

“Elyennen,” the emperor murmured, intruding on his thoughts as he brushed back a few damp curls, “If you can promise not to try to kill me in my sleep, you can spend the night with me.”

Ciaran blinked up at the emperor in surprise but when he opened his mouth to speak he was silenced by the faint shake of the emperor’s head.

“No, think before you promise. I must put a seal spell on you and it cannot be undone until it lapses,” the emperor paused. “It reads intention, so it is not enough for you not to make an attempt, you must not feel the urge at all.”

“What does it do?”

“It causes pain and it will gradually immobilise you to prevent you from carrying out your intentions, starting with your extremities.”

“Do the other concubines…?”

“Yes. They consent to a one-week seal but we will start with daily ones.”

Ciaran remained silent, reading clearly into all the emperor left unsaid.
“I do not want you harmed so if you still harbour reproach or mistrust that might turn into something more than say so. I will not hold it against you.”

Ciaran stared up at the emperor then looked away.

Humans, he reflected bitterly, were always chasing after permanence and made a virtue of keeping promises even when circumstances had changed completely, as if immobility and the mere thought of forever would be enough to lengthen their short lives. They thought elves fickle simply because these latter could only recognise the truth of the moment, as if one ever could tightly bind one’s own feelings for centuries on end.

He could promise. He could promise what the emperor wanted and believed it with all his being. But only in this moment. And he knew it was not enough. The indignation, the fear, the cold anger, even the disdain were all gone, but there, deep in his chest, he could still feel a shard of bitter resentment and that any number of things the emperor could say might enflame it.

He felt the warm, firm lips against his temple and the emperor’s words just a breath against his skin.

“Perhaps tomorrow.”

— N —

…The capital of the duchy, Beauclair, is an architectural gem, full of glorious elven monuments: delicately soaring towers, masterfully carved reliefs and atmospherically mysterious ruins…

Ciaran frowned at the flowery language and surfeit of adjectives then sat bold upright.

“This was written in the North!” he accused the emperor indigantly, slamming shut the latest book he’d been given to study — a worn copy of Toussaint, a Duchy Out Of Tales of Fantasy and Wonder, Volume One.

The emperor glanced up from the fat report he was reading and annotating.

“Yes. You should read the propaganda from both sides then make up your own mind.”

“But your books are not propaganda,” Ciaran pointed out after mulling the matter over a moment.

“Not the ones you have been given so far,” the emperor agreed, leaning back and rubbing the feet Ciaran had yet again tucked up against his thigh for warmth, “We use our publications to inform our decisions, we have no interest in deceiving ourselves. However, few books are purely informative, most are trying to make a point. Even ours.”

“Why this one?” Ciaran asked as he reopened the book and considered the emperor’s words.

“Toussaint will be your first taste of empire and your first opportunity to separate fact from fiction. The empire is not perfect but it is not as black as Nordling prejudices paint it.”

“Nilfgaard has its own prejudices about the North,” Ciaran pointed out then wondered at his obscure need to defend the Northerners.

“Nilfgaard, perhaps,” the emperor conceded before turning his attention back to his papers, “But I know the North better than most people think.”
The imperial medics also seemed to have a better understanding of elven physiology than he’d anticipated, Ciaran later thought to himself when they came to check on him as they did every evening. But then again their surgeons had been the ones to successfully operate on him to remove a large section of his stomach that had been damaged and the infection from which had nearly killed him. The Scoia’tael’s current diet — a haphazard mix of what they could buy, what they could hunt and what they could scavenge and which meant that five days of root mash, nuts and the occasional morsel of blackbird might be followed by a gorging of venison or boar — had been almost wholly incompatible with Ciaran’s need to divide up in his intake into many small, digestible meals.

Nilfgaard, by contrast, appeared to have an endless supply of lean white meats, pulses and vegetables that the imperial chefs arranged into an endless variety of attractively-presented dishes and nutritious stews enlivened by herbs and soft spices. Ciaran was always offered a selection of teas, infusions and barley water throughout the day and he always had a dish of fruit, nuts, sweetmeats or some other tempting snacks within easy reach. In addition to this sympathetic diet, the menus of which were signed off by a board of medics in advance, a number of his tonics and potions were prepared nightly, with subtle adjustments still being made to fine-tune and maximise their efficacy.

Ciaran held out his hands and waited patiently as the medics gravely tested the strength of the nails he had started to grow out since the incident and caught a couple of fleeting glances at his hair. They had, in the past, suggested his hair be cut, concerned that its growth was draining too much of his vitality, but this the elf had categorically declined to do.

All these measures were working. He had fewer stomach pains, the bouts of nausea were fewer, and his appetite was slowly returning though it was often hampered by the discomfort of the journey, which Ciaran knew would have been unendurable without the painkillers and other medication they’d developed for him.

Lifting up the hem of his voluminous nightshirt a couple of inches, he stepped onto the small scale and waited for them to verify and record the resulting amount. They weighed him every single evening and once a week noted down the circumference of his wrists, waist and thighs, as if they could make him gain weight by sheer force of measurement.

Ciaran disliked these inspections but was sharply aware that they could have far more invasive. Despite the necessary dispensations they’d been granted, the medics touched him as little as possible and Ciaran had never undergone any formal verification of his omegahood or any tests as to why his heats had stopped though he knew from overheard whispers that the medics had plenty of interrogations regarding these. Elven fertility was a mysterious thing, a combination of sustained desire and fusional affection for a partner. In the last year, Ciaran had sometimes gone into heat after just three days spent with Iorveth, though they had never consummated it. And while the emperor’s impotence made his omegahood irrelevant, Ciaran knew that rumour, even a founded one, would have no incidence on Nilfgaardian bureaucracy and he had a strong sense that the emperor had waived these checks intentionally to spare him just one of the raft of small humiliations he was now subject to.

This was not the only way in which the emperor passively shielded him from unwanted attention. Ciaran spent increasing amounts of time in the emperor’s wagon, taking his lessons in the main part of the wagon while the emperor worked at his table in the back with his secretary, his officers and advisors, many of them relaying each other in tutoring him. Most of the time, Ciaran sat curled up by the emperor, leaning back against a pile of pillows and half-hidden behind a curtain as he read book after book whenever the wagon’s jostling permitted, ears pricked as he listened in on strategic conversations regarding possible peacetime employment for the troops, changes to the Senate, progress of construction works in Gwyngaard, listened too as the emperor dictated letters,
orders, decrees, and a daily account of Nilfgaard’s progress in the “pacification of the North” to a telepath who transferred them to scribe slaves sitting in the capital or in the advance camps so that all the paperwork would be ready to sign when they arrived.

Messages came and went in every direction and nothing seemed to be beneath the emperor’s notice. One time it was word that the Shaelmaar had been safely delivered to Beauclair, another time news from Rivia that a band of particularly vicious highway brigands had been captured and hanged, and every day a report on the flow of the Yaruga.

And once, the emperor frowned at a letter before holding it out to Ciaran.

“Can you discern what Vernon Roche wants? I do not understand whether he wants me to leave my troops or withdraw them.”

Ciaran took the letter from him and scanned it, raising an eyebrow at Roche’s energetic hand and passive-aggressive tone.

“He would like you to send more troops.”

The emperor made an amused sound, took the letter back and made a note on it — “Granted”.

Since Vengerberg, Morvran Voorhis had accompanied them from post to post, only riding out a couple of hours ahead to make sure the advance camp was ready, and the general always had a smile and a polite remark for Ciaran, usually about whatever book he was reading. Voorhis and var Cleef often came into the wagon to discuss the various reports coming in and those to be send out, and Ciaran knew that the orders the emperor sent out were transcribed into a series of decrees by each commanding officer in charge of a particular town or area.

“Why don’t they just nail your letters with all their fancy seals to the noticeboards?”

“Nilfgaard is too far away. The decrees have more force to them when they are signed with names of the commanders who will mete out punishment if they are not obeyed, the names of commanders the people know and that they can put a face to, rather than that of an emperor that nobody has seen and is as unreal to them as a character in a book. But perhaps you are right. Nordlings are superstitious, they might be more sensitive to the threat of divine retribution.”

“You showed your face in Vengerberg.”

“That is what it took for them to start obeying my orders. They had been nominal Nilfgaardians for months but they had not learnt to respect the Aen Seidhe or put into practice our decrees. Now they know.”

The emperor reached for the next envelope in his tray, glanced at the superscription and a corner of his mouth curled into a sardonic smile.

“From Shilard.”

Ciaran felt the skin of his arms and the back of his neck prickle with distaste and the emperor smiled faintly.

“You did not like him.”

Ciaran said nothing.

“He was very impressed with you.”
“Did he tell you I’d be easy to manage?” Ciaran spat out scornfully.

“He said you would likely not need managing as you seemed perfectly capable of managing yourself.”

Ciaran bit back a hiss but when the emperor motioned him over he obeyed and settled on his lap.

“He was not wrong. Did you dislike him very much, elyennen?”

Ciaran’s mouth curled in disgust at the memory of the ageing ambassador but gave no more direct answer.

“I didn’t trust him. And I… I thought you might be like him.”

He pressed a kiss onto the emperor’s mouth to take some of the sting out of his words and felt the pressure of a large hand on his back, drawing him closer.

“And do you trust me?”

Ciaran looked into the topaz eyes a moment. The truth wasn’t flattering but Emhyr would have no respect for a lie.

“I don’t.”

The emperor’s mouth curved into a lazy smile.

“Good. But remember not to trust anyone else either.”

Ciaran looked at him a moment longer, trying to decide how much he meant it.

“Do you trust me?”

“About as much as you trust me,” the emperor smiled ironically, “We must learn to work together regardless.”

Ciaran sniffed but settled down to watch the emperor slice open the ambassador’s letter and skim it.

“What does that medallion symbolise? The one Morvran Voorhis wears, with the golden star in the triangle.”

“It is the symbol of the Guild of Merchants, of which the Voorhises were founding members. You should be studying the trade corporations.”

“I am. I just didn’t realise they had jewellery.”

Ciaran pondered the answer a moment. The influential trade corporations governed every aspect of trade — which artisans would be given licenses to sell their wares, regulations regarding health and safety, what minimum and maximum prices would be set, who could sell what and where. He remembered the ambassador’s medallion, shiny and new, and his words. It fit and while the ambassador struck him as a man who understood the value of even the most intangible things, he didn’t look like a vulgar merchant and the aristocratic general even less so.

“Are they inherited?” he asked, trying to account for how Voorhis might have one.

“The offspring of Nilgaard’s aristocratic families are usually accepted into the Guild once they reach adulthood. But it can also be earned either by being a successful merchant for long years or by doing
“You don’t have one.”

“No. The emperor must be seen to be above partisan interests.”

Ciaran frowned.

“What did Fitz-Oesterlen do to get his? Was it for Kovir?”

“Kovir?”

“When we were in Vizima I heard someone thank him for what he did in Kovir,” Ciaran frowned slightly, mentally chasing after a fleeting insight, “Someone wearing that medallion.”

The emperor gave the elf a long look, glowing eyes narrowed.

“I am not yet exactly sure what he did to earn it,” he said at length, “Shilard has not had many public successes of late.”

“But you gave him Gwyngaard, the most valuable post in all the North, when you could have given him Temeria, Aedirnia or… Dol Gwennelen,” Ciaran finished, biting his lip at the realisation that the last must be the least prestigious post.

“Novigrad is the most valuable post in the North,” the emperor corrected mildly.

“Gwyngaard will be more important for intelligence, diplomacy and maybe even for trade before the year is out. I’ve been a spy, I know one when I see one and every third person in Gwyngaard is some kind of spy,” Ciaran’s brows came together into a deep frown, “You promised you would tell me the truth. Why would you give Gwyngaard to Fitz-Oesterlen if you don’t trust him?”

The emperor lifted a hand to smooth out Ciaran’s frown with his thumb then tried to comb his fingers through Ciaran’s hair, seeming vaguely irked at all the hairpins and combs that prevented it and so started slowly and methodically finding them and pulling them out.

“Do you play shah, elyennen?”

“Sometimes,” the elf shrugged, “It is a human amusement.”

The emperor placed the first two pins and one of the combs onto the desk then sank his fingers into the dark hair, seeking out the others.

“Shilard is a Tower — a versatile piece just as likely to turn back on you as it is to go forward. He is the most cunning, the most ruthless, the most amoral of my ambassadors. If there is war between Redania and Nilfgaard, Gwyngaard will become the frontline — I need somebody there who is willing and able to do whatever it takes to win but that I can afford to lose. Whatever Shilard did to earn himself that trinket, he and I both know that he has made himself disposable by it. An ambassador without a post loses his influence. In Gwyngaard, Shilard has his back to the edge of the board. He knows Gwyngaard is dangerous but he also knows I will not give him any other post of importance. He must hold Gwyngaard for his own sake even more than for Nilfgaard’s. He knows I will not lift a finger to save him.”

Ciaran frowned, finding it hard to believe that even a Nilfgaardian ambassador could get knocked off the board.
“You wouldn’t defend Gwyngaard against Radovid?”

“I would defend Gwyngaard. But not Shilard Fitz-Oesterlen.”

The other comb and three more pins joined those already on the table and the emperor loosened the twisted tresses, smiling faintly, then sank his long fingers into them but even though the elf closed his eyes and leant into the caress, the small crease between his brows remained.

“What happened in Kovir?”

“Nothing. Kovir was neutral and is still neutral.”

“Why did you send Fitz-Oesterlen there?”

The emperor continued to rub his fingers through the dark hair, stroking his thumb over a long ear.

“To ask for a loan.”

“A loan?” Ciaran echoed, opening his eyes wide and looking affronted, “But isn’t Nilfgaard wealthy?”

“Nilfgaard is, yes, but I cannot spend the empire’s wealth as if I were dipping into my personal Purse. War is expensive — this war has already eaten up a great part of the empire’s liquidities and certain quarters in Nilfgaard have lost their appetite for war.”

“Which quarters?”

“The ones that control the flow of money.”

Ciaran shook his head slightly in confusion.

“Even though you won?”

“Yes. There are limits even to what an emperor can do, elyennen. This war will soon stop looking like a triumph if I have to raise taxes to continue it or sell off palaces and lands to replenish the imperial coffers at the end of it. The price of victory cannot be more than the value of what has been won,” he paused and tilted Ciaran’s head up slightly, “That is why I need you.”

“The spoils of war? Won’t your people expect something better than one battered elf?”

“The North is a remote concept to most people south of the Yelena, they will need a tangible symbol of what we have achieved there. You are an injured veteran of our Great Army and an imperial concubine of indisputable beauty. You are a perfect representation of what the empire owes the North and of its potential. The North needs funds and loans for reconstruction, it will need trade to prosper, and Nilfgaard’s influence must be strengthened there for the protections its laws afford the Aen Seidhe to be effective. You could promote all of these things if you took on the role of unofficial ambassador for your fellow Aen Seidhe and the North.”

Ciaran stared in silence.

He knew exactly what the emperor was doing and had a good idea of what he would be asked to do to earn this prize. It was just the kind of role he’d thought he’d have to fight to earn for himself and now it was being offered to him with far fewer strings than he’d expected. He stared and stared into the topaz eyes, trying to read the truth in them, trying to gauge whether the emperor had been sincere in expressing his needs and expectations, having been forced into this confession by his line of
questioning, or whether some other reason underlay his proposal.

The emperor returned the steady gaze then cupped the elf’s beautiful face in his hands and gently ran both thumbs over the pale brow to smooth the wrinkle in it.

“And you underestimate our attachment to the Aen Seidhe, elynnenin.’’

— N —

The further south they went, the more the stretches of paved roads and number of sunny days increased. Ciaran sometimes had the wagon door left open so he could look out at the cavalry in their polished plate on their gleaming horses, more parading than marching amid the reverberating din of hundreds of horseshoes ringing out against thousands of paving stones that almost drowned out the creak and clatter of wagon wheels, and he returned the men’s salutes with a graceful, complacent nod.

The former commander in him took the keenest pleasure in the perfection of the column and the discipline and obedience that reigned over it. It was a spectacular sight and whenever they passed a village the children would stare and stare at them until their parents dragged them indoors. The soldiers were always polite and well-behaved when they went into the villages on business or to buy themselves additional food and supplies — on pain of punishment but also because it was the Nilfgaardian way. A Nilfgaardian in peace bore little resemblance to one at war but Ciaran knew how hard prejudices were to kill and meanwhile the number of makeshift gallows and corpse-laden trees that lined the roads increased.

The soldiers themselves seemed oblivious to the silent terror they inspired in the local populations. They were never happier than when they had the comfort of an imperial road beneath them and the warmth of the sun from above, and often the rolling thunder of the military drums and bellowing brasses would start up, nearly drowning out the voices as they sang out in low, carrying voices. Not just the aggressive military marches in guttural Nilfgaardian, punctuated by war cries and calls of “Hael Ker’zaer’ at which the soldiers raised their fists and swords and lances, but songs from all over the empire — old Vicovaran folk songs still in the Common Tongue, ancient chants Maechtians used to sing to lend rhythm to the swings of their scythes while cutting hay, Ebbinger lullabies and the laments of Nazairi highland shepherds adapted into slow marches. At times Ciaran felt the words on the tip of his tongue, dredged up from lost memories of the Second War.

The familiar pattern of time Ciaran and the emperor spent together stretched longer into both the day and the night. Every evening went in talks over dinner then in the hour Ciaran spent in the heat of the emperor’s embrace, which grew steadily more intimate as the emperor’s fingers and lips touched and probed with leisurely, methodical single-mindedness to seek out every one of the elf’s sensitive spots. Then followed the inevitable question and its inevitable answer as Ciaran daily struggled and failed to give the asked-for assurance.

Whenever they reached camp and if the weather permitted, Ciaran either accompanied the emperor as he carried out his inspections or wandered around with his small retinue of attendants and Impera guards trailing in his wake.

Even at rest, their encampments bustled with activity as the men and their slaves saw to armour and equipment repairs, camp duties, and the horses. The portable forges seemed to be permanently at work repairing the men’s gear, reshoeing the chargers, reinforcing wagon axles.
There were food tents, gaming tents, pleasure tents, the constant comings and goings of soldiers, and messengers arriving and leaving from all sides as they expanded the imperial mail network. The empire never slept and Ciaran knew that while he would soon retire to his wagon for the night, the emperor would spend most of it in meetings with local lords and officers.

“Were there any casualties from your encounter with the wyvern?” Ciaran asked Bastiaan when he next saw him, standing outside a food tent with a couple of friends.

“Some broken bones and a bit of the poison made it past the shields but nothing fatal,” the young soldier assured him cheerfully, “Glad we got a whack at it while we were still there though, we usually have to go to Zerrikania for that kind of sport — few monsters left in the empire. And hopefully it will create some goodwill with the locals.”

Ciaran wondered if perhaps Bastiaan had forgotten the slaughter that had been that first evening in Vengerberg and the annihilation Nilfgaard had wrought upon the city during the second war but kept his own counsel and walked on.

The soldiers were always respectful and seemed even to want to be friendly but they were as constrained as Ciaran himself felt. Though he socialised with var Cleef and Bastiaan, nobody had decisively settled the propriety of an imperial concubine fraternising with mere soldiers so for a while the question hung about Ciaran like a cloud wherever he went, unanswered.

Ciaran admitted to himself that he was indulged, criminally indulged, by a paternalistic society with a hierarchical command structure that considered his physical person inviolable and his will subordinate only to that of the emperor. But with this great freedom came great risk. Few people around him would — or could — act to prevent him from making a faux pas and so he continued to behave with great circumspection and caution, observing rather than acting.

Although the weather improved and they now travelled at a more moderate pace, Ciaran continued to slowly weaken under the constant pressures of life on the road. Some mornings he woke feeling so disastrously weak he could barely open his eyes and had to gather his strength just to lift his head, whereupon he would be helped up against his pillows where he would lie, wondering if he would be able to manage the few feet to the emperor’s wagon. The will was there and Ciaran often found himself caught in a pitched battle of mind over matter within his own being as he forced his tired, patched-up body to move with the grace he wanted it to or even move at all. He increasingly didn’t recognise his own body, with its too-perfect nails and too-perfect nose, and started to see it as a hostile, alien thing that had to be managed and forced to obey.

Despite his efforts to hide his condition, Ciaran knew the emperor was not fooled by his offhand manner and the brave face he put on. He hated that this weakness showed and couldn’t help the occasional flash of defensiveness, later berating himself and wondering whether this was why his relationship with the emperor improved so slowly even as their physical intimacy deepened nightly.

The emperor enjoyed him, there could be no doubt about that, but Ciaran still worried he should be doing more for the emperor’s pleasure and knew himself to be inexperienced, even by elven standards. Ciaran was not one of those elves who had turned sexual intercourse into an art and who plied their trade in human cities. Elves were famously uninhibited and even very young elves fooled around together a lot but in the same playful, fumbling, affectionate way they played games or shared a meal or stretched out all their muscles first thing after waking. Ciaran had taken part in such shenanigans but perhaps not as much as other elves his age had, having been segregated from the common herd early on by the mystique of his omegahood, then later by his position as an officer and by human ideas on monogamy that had been seeping into their culture and the perception it had created that he was Iorveth’s private reserve. And though he had most often slept with Iorveth, he
had been with other elves too but none of that had prepared him to the confident, deliberate way the emperor had of handling him. The emperor drank up his gasps and looks of surprise, they seemed to amuse him no end, but Ciaran wondered how much longer his inexperience and his elven capacity for quick and oft-repeated climaxes would keep the emperor entertained, let alone satisfied.

“You are tired,” the emperor noted a few evenings later, running a thumb over the dark shadows beneath Ciaran’s sooty eyes, “I am told you are not sleeping well. Can anything be done for your comfort?”

“No, sire,” Ciaran mumbled, pressing himself against the emperor and burrowing against Emhyr’s neck and shoulder as he tried to drown out the wagon’s rattling, breathing in deep to displace the stench of his human attendants that lingered in his nostrils and throat.

“Very well. Try to rest.”

Despite the short respite at Vengerberg, the pressure of these worries and the continued discomforts of travel took their toll on the elfling again. Physical exhaustion and a certain nervous agitation had caused him restless nights and soon the nightmares had started. Security protocols might prevent the emperor from falling asleep alone in Ciaran’s presence but the elfling himself had no such qualms and he was falling into the habit of having a nap after dinner, while he and emperor were alone.

He did so now, settling into his side of the bench, jammed between the wagon’s side the emperor’s thigh, straining his hearing to make out the scratch of the emperor’s quill as he quietly slipped into sleep.

Ciaran snapped awake and lashed out when he felt the threat of a vague presence.

“Elyennenin, it is Emhyr. You are safe. You had a nightmare.”

Ciaran blinked up at him, for a moment unable to place the familiar face or surroundings. Then it all clicked and he realised he still had the emperor’s wrist caught in his teeth and nails.

“I’m sorry!” he murmured, releasing the emperor and looking at the bloody half-moon marks he’d left in the wrist.

“I did not mean to startle you. You were agitated.”

Ciaran nuzzled the large hand that stroked his cheek then grasped it and carefully pressed his mouth to the wounds carefully. They were not deep and within minutes they had been reduced to superficial scratches.

“I’m sorry,” Ciaran said again, head bowed, “I didn’t mean to.”

The emperor inspected his wrist then gently touched Ciaran’s cheek.

“Go back to sleep, elyennen. You’re safe.”

This time, when Ciaran settled under the blankets, his head was pillowed on the emperor’s thigh and he fell asleep with his forehead pressed against the emperor’s hipbone, a heavy hand caressing his hair.

He half woke hours later when the wagon halted for the night and he felt the emperor carefully displace him to get up from the bench.

“Sire,” came Mererid’s voice.
“Let him sleep. He needs rest.”

Ciaran drifted back into light sleep until he again heard the emperor’s voice.

“No. Leave him. I will not sleep long.”

Ciaran forced his eyes open and could just make out in the darkness the chamberlain unrolling and shaking out a sleeping pad while the emperor several layers of clothes.

“I’ll go,” the elfling murmured, sitting up on the bench and trying to wipe the sleep from his eyes, “You can sleep here.”

The emperor came over and pressed a kiss onto his forehead.

“I always sleep on the floor. It is better for my back and I am too tall for the bench. Go back to sleep.”

Ciaran watched the emperor stretch out, hesitated a moment then grabbed two pillows off the bench and went over to the emperor, tucking one under his head.

“Sire!” the chamberlain objected as Ciaran curled up by the emperor, hugging the other pillow.

“It will only be for a couple of hours, Mererid, you can watch over us,” the emperor dismissed, putting an arm around Ciaran, “Lord Ciaran does not intend to murder me tonight. Do you?”

“Not tonight,” Ciaran yawned, stretching his limbs before snuggling closer, already drifting into sleep, “Perhaps tomorrow.”

The next morning, after breakfast, a bathe and a change of clothes, Ciaran returned to the emperor’s wagon to something different.

He stared at the exquisitely-wrought silver box sitting on the desk. Even at that distance he could feel the powerful enchantment placed upon it.

“Open it, elyennenin.”

Ciaran reached for the box, his eyes widening at the weight of the enchantment, then opened it to reveal the largest diamond he had ever seen, glittering up at him from it’s nest of black silk. Cold and flawless, with the faintest indigo cast to its fire, of an elongated square cut he did not recognise, set on a band of white silver, in the elven style, that forked on either side of the stone to hold it.

“Other people can touch it,” the emperor explained when the elf hesitated, “But only you can wear it.”

When Ciaran didn’t move, Emhyr leant forward, took the elf’s hand and slipped the ring onto the middle finger of his left hand, the width of which the stone nearly spanned.

“What do you like it?”

The small movement of Ciaran’s head was neither a nod nor a shake. He was vaguely appalled by the ruinous stone. A Mahakaman stone — Ciaran could think of nowhere else such a stone have been mined — but a gem this large and perfect had to be worth enough to buy most of Mahakam and the weight of it on his finger was like the drag of an anchor caught on rock, binding him to the emperor.

Still holding his hand, Emhyr moved the ring slightly with his thumb.
“The band is too large.”

“ Barely,” Ciaran qualified, wondering if this was the sort of mistake Nilfgaardian silversmiths lost a hand or a head over.

The emperor tested the movement with his thumb again.

“You might still put on weight. If it is still too loose when we reach the capital we will have it adjusted.”

Ciaran spent the rest of the day surreptitiously admiring the ring, moving his hand very slightly to watch the stone spark and fire while studiously pretending not to.

He was still wearing it when the convoy halted and they went for their usual walk and though Ciaran felt like a fraud wearing it, as if he were only playing at being an imperial concubine, nobody seem to think there was anything odd in him wearing it and he heard the soldiers joke that it could be seen from the Imperial City itself and that their Stirwen was so bright he shone even in the day.

“A marvellous stone,” Morvran Voorhis pronounced with the look of a connoisseur when Ciaran showed it to him, “Flawless. This is why we love diamonds. They possess both the fire of the Great Sun and the clarity of Alba’s waters.”

Ciaran knew of diamonds and their worth, he’d even seen a few tiny ones set into rings and necklaces in shop windows of Novigrad and Vizima and seen larger ones worn by the lords and ladies of the North. But he had never been this close to one and never handled one before and though he told himself that it was just a rock, he could barely takes his eyes off it and was fascinated to see that even in shadow it flashed and shone like trapped starlight.

He was still staring at it late that afternoon, pretending to study the book on Toussaint while the emperor and his secretary discussed a report they’d received from the Imperial Exchequer’s office back in the capital, when they heard a trumpeted order to the soldiers who immediately broke stride. Mererid opened the door, exchanged a few words with var Cleef outside before turning back.

“Sire, we are about to cross the Yaruga.”

The young elf sat up on the bench and rattled the small window open, looking out between its metal bars at the river that stretched away before them beneath the dusky sky. And as the wheels of the wagon left the dirt road to jolt against the stone of the bridge, the last thread that bound Ciaran to the North snapped.

Chapter End Notes

*transamelline: beyond the Amells, north of the Amell mountains
**cisamelline: on this side of the Amells, south of the Amell mountains
That night, for the first time since Vengerberg, Ciaran was not to sleep in his wagon but instead in the emperor’s vast imperial tent, in which they, Morvran Voorhis, Evrard var Cleef and a handful of other officers sat down at a table and ate a hot, plentiful meal an hour or so after they arrived at camp. To Ciaran’s astonishment, the emperor, still dressed like any soldier of the Impera or the Alba, also spoke to and treated his officers as equals and while there were the usual discussions on strategy and the recent fighting, there was also talk of Toussaint — its wines, the jousts and games the soldiers were so looking forward to, and the prospect of giving the men and horses a proper rest.

After dinner, Ciaran started to wander off but var Cleef caught up to him to entreat him to accept an escort.

“I’m only going as far as the bridge, brigadier,” Ciaran assured him, then noticed a familiar face in a nearby group of soldiers, “Bastiaan aep Larsen can accompany me, if you allow it.”
Aep Larsen stood shyly and the Impera brigadier general gave a curt nod.

“Please let’s keep to the road, my lord,” aep Larsen begged, “we should avoid the river, there might still be drowners and other such pests in it.”

“There are no drowners here at this time of year,” Ciaran murmured as they started their stroll through the well-lit camp, “They’re washed downstream with the first melts when the Yaruga swells and flows faster and stronger.”

“Really? Does that happen in the Pontar too?”

“No. The Pontar is a very deep, slow-moving river. It is mostly fed by the Blue Mountains and Loc Muinne acts as a natural reservoir and regulator,” Ciaran spoke slowly and quietly, trying to force his voice without staining it in the cold air, “The Yaruga is fed by melts from the Blue Mountains and the Amells and one of its tributaries, the Solveiga, brings water from as far away as the Fiery Mountains. At this time of year, this stretch of it nearly doubles but most of the excess is drawn away in Sodden. Sometimes, around this time of year, the water rises higher than the bridges.”

The young spearman nodded thoughtfully.

“We heard General Voorhis discussing that with his aides, that’s why we were marching double-time to get here. And why we avoid major troop movements here during the winter and spring. I mean, we can sling bridges across, of course, but it’s a sub-optimal system,” he paused thoughtful, “I had never thought of what it would do to the drowners.”

“I suppose there are no drowners in Nilfgaard.”

“There might be in the remoter areas. There are still some left in parts of Cintra, I think. And something like them in Toussaint. Somehow we can’t seem to eradicate them there.”

“What is Toussaint like?”

“It’s… like something out of a fairytale,” the youth said at length, “I think it must be the most beautiful place in the world, after the City. It used to be an elven kingdom, you know.”

Ciaran’s mouth curved into a secret, bitter half-smile.

“Yes, I’ve heard.”

As they continued to walk down to the river the Nilfgaardian spoke about his boyhood dream of becoming a soldier, his mother’s apprehensions when he’d been accepted into the Academy, how this campaign had only deepened his conviction, and his elation at being accepted into the Alba division — only the Impera was more prestigious.

Roche had been correct, in the narrow sense, and after weeks of exposure to it, Ciaran had developed perfect understanding of the Nilfgaardian dialect and the Nilfgaardians, in turn, seemed to have no difficulty at all in understanding his Hen Linge.

Ciaran half-listened to the cheerful chatter while looking out at the dark river that he heard rather than saw. Even now, it was not as wide as the Pontar and certainly not as calm.

Dissatisfied and disappointed and unsure of what he’d expected to feel, Ciaran turned away and on their way back to camp, he and aep Larsen were met by Morvran Voorhis, apparently also out for an evening stroll.
“General,” Bastiaan acknowledged, standing at attention.

“At ease, aep Larsen. Get your things, we leave in an hour.”

The boy grinned and excused himself with a small bow.

“A spearman, barely a year under arms… Now the whole army knows his name,” the general murmured as they watched the boy run off, then smiled at Ciaran, “But he has a steady character and does not let it go to his head.”

“Is he a professional soldier? He mentioned the Academy.”

“Technically, aep Larsen is still a student there. He attended one of the Guild schools under my family’s patronage and his marks were good enough to secure him entry,” Voorhis explained as they made their leisurely way back, “It is also through the Guild that he secured the apprenticeship that allows him to pay his way through the Academy and that ensures his family has employment.”

“He’s very proud of being in the Alba.”

“I am told he worked hard to get top marks throughout his studies and he was already on the shortlist for fast-tracking into the officer’s programme for his final year if he distinguished himself in the war — which he has done.”

“Will he really make an officer?”

Morvran Voorhis considered.

“He could. He has discipline, integrity, loyalty, and enough intelligence. And studying with fellow aspiring officers will reinforce all the right qualities. His service over the last few months has started to give him the maturity he needs and, of course, it means that all the expenses of his final year will be covered by the empire and the Guild.”

“He must be glad. He’ll be able to concentrate all his attention into his studies.”

“Indeed,” the general agreed, glancing at elf, “I came to take my leave of you.”

“Yes. We had reports that the weather might change and since there are only a few places suitable for setting up camp, I will go and ascertain that everything is ready and there are no delays. A heavy snowfall could block the pass for days.”

They stopped before the imperial tent and the general bowed his head graciously.

“I will see you in Beauclair.”

In the light of morning, Ciaran left the tent and found himself in the towering shadow of the Amell mountains. They had loomed ever closer for days before crossing the Yaruga but they had covered so much ground on the last day that Ciaran had been completely unprepared for the sight of the aggressively tall, jagged peaks.

At first, Ciaran was entranced by the savage beauty of the mountains, the spectacular views from them, and the sharp, exquisite purity of the air, but though the roads were torturous and far narrower than those of the plains had been, slowing their progress, the convoy continued its ascent, going higher and higher into the mountains and after just a few days it was too cold for Ciaran to hazard
leaving his wagon even for a short walk and the windows and doors were never opened for more than a few minutes at a time. Shuttered up like this, Ciaran developed a loathing for the hairpin bends in the road that so disorientated him and the uneven roads that so jostled him he was prevented from doing anything, even reading, even thinking, even sleeping.

Then came the snow — a calamitous amount of snow hitherto beyond Ciaran’s ken and that covered everything until it seemed to the elf that he was surrounded by nothing but snow and bare rock and the black of Nilfgaard. The braziers kept permanently alight were no longer enough to drive away the cold and damp and Ciaran’s joints became so stiff and sore he only left the warm cocoon of his blankets and furs to be washed, changed and to have his limbs rubbed through his woollen clothing.

Despite these precautions, the inevitable happened and when they were some two thousand feet above sea level and just a day’s travel away from the pass through the mountains, Ciaran was driven to the very edge of consciousness in a matter of hours by an infection and a fever that burned through all of his muscles and already aching joints.

The emperor came to kneel by the elf’s bedside and stroked the dark head gently as Ciaran looked up at him with fever-lit eyes.

“I’m sorry.”

Emhyr var Emreis shook his head and pressed a kiss against the clammy forehead.

“Should I stay?”

“Yes.”

And so the emperor stroked away the damp curls that clung to the pale temples and soon felt Ciaran slip away.

When they’d first studied his medical file, the imperial medics had opined it was likely that just such an infection would eventually carry off the delicate elf so they had been well prepared for this eventuality. Two of their number now sat in the main part of the wagon with Mererid, closely monitoring their patient’s condition while their colleagues prepared more remedies in their own wagons. Even so, as he looked down at his precious concubine, the emperor was horrified both by the rapid deterioration of the elf’s condition and the empire’s impotence in the face of it.

The medics had more potent physics in their arsenal but they had already given Ciaran as much as they dared. Even before his illness, they had been administering as high a dose of painkillers they thought his one remaining — still recovering — kidney could stand and they now had to decide whether they should risk it being overwhelmed entirely by the cure for the fever, the cure for the pain, the cure for the infection, or the infection itself.

Night fell and still the emperor stayed by the sickbed, having barely moved from it. His tent was ready but Ciaran was too weak to be risked in the cold mountain air even for the greater comfort and warmth of the tent and so the emperor spent the night sitting up in the wagon, watching over the shivering, fever-wracked body.

“Iorveth… I don’t want to die here. I don’t want to die like this.”

“Elyennenin, it is Emhyr. You are not alone. I am here.”

The emperor’s jaw clenched. All the trappings of power, even his title, all felt like a travesty. There was no order he could give, no person he could summon, no punishment he could devise that would help his poor little elf who had already so courageously endured the unendurable and he bit back a
bitter laugh at the thought that all the might of Nilfgaard might not be enough to save one Aen Seidhe from fever. Once they passed the Amell mountains, all the empire’s resources could truly be brought to bear but that was poor consolation since he knew the worst was yet to come.

Another convulsive shake and Emhyr tucked the blankets and furs, one of them his own imperial cloak, more securely around the sleeping figure.

“I’m sorry.”

The elf wasn’t conscious but the emperor shushed him anyway.

Ciaran’s death before they’d even reached Nilfgaard was not an option. Quite apart from the fact that it was the sort of failure the empire did not countenance, the superstitious Temerians would take it as the worst possible omen, the devious Scoia’tael as an excuse to break any inconvenient promises, and Radovid would take advantage of both circumstances to launch an attack. The elf would have to be kept alive at any cost, with magic if all else failed, though the emperor had been warned by his mage-medics that doing so carried incalculable risks. Magic would suppress the symptoms, mask the effects of organ failure, and muddy their appraisal of the elf’s condition, which might go from bad to worse and cause him to die instantly once the magic support was removed.

Emhyr was keenly aware of having been fortunate in a choice that, like most of his life, had been driven by politics and pragmatism. The emperor and his advisors had been wary of staking so much political capital on so young an elf. Elves acquired autonomy far more quickly than their human counterparts but took a great deal longer to reach psychological maturity and thus throughout most of their youths enjoyed the full range of their physical abilities untempered by the moral and intellectual capacity to use them with judgment. Elven children were notoriously impulsive, even rash, and it took the whole community of their elders to manage them and see they came to no harm. The emperor had resigned himself to expending a great deal of the charm he usually reserved for the handsomest and most influential noblewomen of the first rank in order to wrangle the young elf. But the elfling had proved more sensitive to harsh truths than to charm and in the month since they’d met, most of it spent travelling in appalling conditions that Ciaran had borne without complaint, the emperor had come to value the inquisitive, impertinent, disciplined young elf beyond his intrinsic and symbolic value. He delighted in his elfling’s beauty, his pleasure, his quick woodland grace. He admired Ciaran’s ability to keep his own council while he sat quietly, soaking up a wealth of knowledge as he listened and observed and he found himself saddened at the thought of perhaps never again seeing the hazel eyes narrow and gleam with sudden insight, or the dark pupils so blown with pleasure they were only haloed in gold. And the great emperor had had enough hard years of experience to know that if luck came his way he should grab it and hold on tight.

They did not leave camp the next morning nor the following one and instead the emperor sent word ahead to Beauclair that they had been delayed and would be extending their stay by a few days. And all the while the snow kept falling, piling up on the wagons, the tents, the makeshift shelters they’d built for the horses, and into the pass they should be travelling through, and soon even the imperial messengers could no longer force their way through it, breaking their supply lines with Toussaint entirely.

The emperor only left Ciaran’s wagon to wash, change and meet quickly with his lieutenants and otherwise spent every moment by the sickbed, poised to catch his elfling’s rare moments of wakefulness and lucidity, though these too were a trial.

“I don’t want to be trapped in here for the rest of time — please, let me die outside? And… send me back to Iorveth? I want proper funeral rites. Please? It’s important.”

Imperial concubines belonged in the empire and, unless they left service, were always buried in the
imperial mausoleum so they would forever rest alongside their emperor. But Emhyr had lost his appetite for protocol and gave his elf the asked-for assurances, wondering how much Ciaran would even remember of them. He’d always justified his decision to take the damaged elf away from the North with the knowledge that he would have died a slow death there but now it seemed that instead of saving him from it, this removal to Nilfgaard would only hasten it.

Finally, in the early hours of the fifth day, when it seemed that nothing more could be done and the imperial mages, medics and healers were almost reconciled to the idea that they too would lose their lives over this, Ciaran’s fever broke. When he next woke he was given a sponge bath, changed into fresh clothes then tucked back between fresh sheets, crisp and dry and warmed by several bedpans, where he slept without stirring for several hours, clinging weakly to one of the emperor’s large hands while the other rested on his head.

The following day the convoy set off again in a single file and moved along the path that had been shovelled clear through the snowy pass.

Ciaran spent the better part of the next few days sleeping, pillowed and warmed by the emperor’s body beneath his on the divan.

“Can you manage some of the consommé?” the emperor offered when the elf flickered into wakefulness.

Ciaran nodded and took a couple of long swallows of the slightly salty broth before closing his eyes and huddling against the emperor again, soothed by his warmth and the blunt fingertips that stroked over his lower back lightly. He still ached there, his body not having recovered from the effects of infection and dehydration.

Though he’d never admit it, Ciaran was wholly reassured and comforted by the emperor’s presence, his steady heartbeat, the latent strength of his large body, the familiar smell of him. He’d emerged from his fever with a confused sense of embarrassment that had sharpened to mortification when he’d realised the delay and inconvenience he’d caused but it had been allayed not just by the emperor, who always brushed away his failings, but also by the genuine concern shown by his attendants and the emperor’s, by the imperial medics, the emperor’s secretary, the various officers and advisors who sometimes came to consult with the emperor, by Evrard var Cleef whose brash smiles couldn’t hide the concern in his frank blue eyes, and even by the impassive Mererid who clucked and fussed over him like an overprotective hen with a brood of one. It was not, Ciaran realised, for his own sake but that didn’t matter — perhaps they simply saw the whole incident as an operational failure but it was hard not to be touched. Whatever the reason, he was immensely valuable to Nilfgaard and Nilfgaard would do everything it could to protect him.

“How do you feel, elyennenic?”

“Better, thank you.”


Ciaran had never felt more keenly how apt the nickname was. He felt like a dying ember — aggressively protected from even the slightest draught that threatened to snuff him out and hand-fed only a few shavings of the driest tinder at a time for fear he might be smothered. The emperor, usually so physical, had only just started spoon-feeding him tiny morsels of affection, carefully fanning their intimacy back to life with gentle caresses and the occasional brush of his lips.

After only a couple of days Ciaran had had to admit to himself that he missed the sex, missed that moment, when the emperor brought him to completion, when the aches and pains stopped and faded
away for a few hours. He’d long since admitted to himself that the emperor and he had real chemistry, though he’d just as quickly decided that it was the elven part of Emhyr he was attracted to. The emperor enjoyed his pleasure and Ciaran had no objection to showing it and it seemed to Ciaran that the rest of their relationship was built on the intimacy of this odd compatibility. In this as in everything else, they would keep each other’s secrets.

Ciaran leant up and placed a few nips along the emperor’s jaw, smiling contentedly when he felt the arm around him tighten and the press of firm lips against his forehead. The emperor was hard and inflexible as granite and from the start it was as if his attitude to Ciaran had been chiselled into him, destined to never vary. That too was oddly reassuring.

“I’m sorry I’m so weak.”

The elf meant what he said. He despaired at being so fragile and being such a burden despite Nilfgaard’s painstaking care and worried that he would be given up as a lost cause before he’d had a chance to make himself useful to the Scoia’tael at all.

“Do not concern yourself. We will take care of you.”

Ciaran huddled closer as he felt another kiss against his forehead.

“Do you regret your choice?”

A missed beat then a firm answer.

“No.”

He let himself relax against the strong arms that held him and listened to the quiet crackle of the emperor’s papers.

“What would you have done if I hadn’t volunteered?”

“Shilard would have dropped some heavy-handed hints.”

Ciaran considered this a moment, blinking sleepily, soothed by the emperor’s steady heartbeat and regular breathing.

“Why the charade, if you knew you would choose me? It took a lot of work to organise,” he finished a little peevishly.

“It was necessary for the sake of appearances — Dol Gwennnelen had to be seen to offer so that Nilfgaard would not be seen as taking.”

“But you knew it would be me? Because I’m… a symbol.”

“I knew it would be you,” the emperor paused fractionally and dropped his gaze to him briefly, “Because you were the only one who volunteered.”

Ciaran fell silent a moment, his anxiety dulled by this reassurance that he had understood the emperor and correctly interpreted Nilfgaard’s intentions.

There were many occasions — usually when he was trying to read between the lines of what the various aides and officers told him — on which Nilfgaard and its way of doing things were foreign and utterly confusing to him. But then there were moments like these when everything became limpid and Ciaran had a true sense that the Aen Seidhe would always be closer to Nilfgaard than to
the Northerners around them.

“Emhyr? Whose blood do you have? Whose elven blood?”

“That of Shianth of the Golden Leaves and of Rowena, cousin to Queen Methinne*,” the emperor answered, giving the elf an odd look, “Most people do not really believe I have any. Why do you ask?”

“I can taste it. And smell it.”

“Can you?”

The emperor’s eyes narrowed slightly and Ciaran nuzzled his throat before struggling to explain the elusive quality of the scent, like the sun on a foggy day, whose brightness remained discernible yet unseen behind a veil of mist except when it was lifted by a gust of wind and its full force shone through momentarily.

Truly a black sun, Ciaran reflected, since even then it was not quite the scent of the Aen Seidhe but obscurely different, as though corrupted, familiar and yet distinct. This, however, he did not share with the emperor.

“Maybe because it stands out against your human blood,” he finished instead, “Neither entirely human nor entirely Aen Aeidhe.”

The emperor considered this a moment.

“Does it bother you?”

Ciaran shook his head and rested his head against the broad chest, angling his head up to catch a distant whiff of it from the emperor’s neck.

“No. I like it.”

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Once they were through the high mountain pass, they started their gradual descent into the Sanretour basin and as the weather improved and the bare, granitic, snowy mountainsides gave way to a landscape studded with budding trees and shrubs, Ciaran’s condition steadily improved and by the time they reached Belhaven he had recovered enough to resume his daily walks whenever the convoy halted, to cheers and smiles from the men.

Sometimes the marks of affection were obvious — like the snowdrops Bastiaan and his friends had transplanted into a pewter goblet to brighten up his wagon — but the elf was learning to recognise how Nilfgaard more usually expressed them in the solicitude the imperial medics showed in discussing and adjusting his treatments, in the trouble the cooks took in varying his meals though the foods available were still limited, and how these meals were supplemented with treats brought by the messengers from Beauclair, intended to whet his weak appetite.

Their contingent of Alba men grew steadily as they neared Belhaven and they were met at the city gates by members of the Ducal Guard in their gleaming gilded armour and a few knights-errant invited along to make up the numbers, who were to escort them to Beauclair. A precautionary move,
Ciaran was told by the ever-smiling brigadier general, since there had once been a significant anti-Nilfgaardian resistance movement in the region.

They were also joined by the duchess’ emissary and the Nilfgaardian embassy’s chargé d’affaires, who, after obsequious bows to both the emperor and Ciaran, almost immediately shut themselves in conference with the emperor and his advisors, leaving Ciaran to be ushered away by Mererid to the rooms he was to share with the emperor, small and simple but already warmed by several fires.

The chamberlain opened up a large crate that the chargé d’affaires and his party had brought from the capital. It contained a full suit of armour in a white metal**, ornamented in gold along the plate edges and with a partial sun on the breastplate, in the style of those worn by some Alba and Impera soldiers, but leaner, with none of the expansive convex lines and heavy protrusions.

“If the young gentleman could trouble himself to try it on it would be most convenient for all concerned,” the chamberlain drawled, “The blacksmiths will only have a few days to make any necessary adjustments.”

When Ciaran assented, Mererid and a couple of attendants helped him into the mail, both parts of the cuirass, the neat pauldrons, the greaves, the vambraces and the gauntlets, then admired the effect in a tall mirror while Mererid retrieved a matching winged helmet from a smaller crate.

It was the completest set Ciaran had ever seen — even the interstitial spaces between the various pieces were filled by the close-fitting fine-mail hauberk — and there was some elven grace in the lightweight construction, the pointed sollerets*** and and the delicate, winding etchings.

“It was designed in Nilfgaard but crafted here in Toussaint,” Mererid explained as he supervised the tying of the bright scarlet laces that attached the vambraces to the cuirass, “They use a different method of gilding here.”

And more of it.

Though the suit offered a spurious amount of protection, Ciaran knew it was all just decorative, beautifully-crafted but too light and too valuable to be used in combat — the emperor himself didn’t wear as fine a suit.

As a Scoia’tael and even as part of the Vrihedd, Ciaran had never worn plate — though Iorveth had pleaded with him to consider wearing chainmail at least, the way he himself did — preferring boiled leather and often foregoing even that. Though the armour was light and allowed an astonishing amount of freedom of movement, Ciaran still felt constrained by it and this feeling was only compounded by the deadweight helmet that deprived him almost entirely of vision and hearing and that he was quite relieved to take off.

Mererid and he were still compiling a short list of alterations when the emperor joined them, pausing a few feet away to look the elf over.

“Do you like it?”

“I’ve never seen anything like it.”

The emperor moved forward and picked up the helmet from the table where it rested, turning it over in his hands to admire the workmanship while their attendants melted away to a discreet distance.

“You could not go to war in it, but it serves its purpose.”

“To be ornamental? When will I even wear it?”
“We will ride into Beauclair on horseback. As you will see, the Toussaintois enjoy pageantry. And it will please the men to see you in armour,” the emperor murmured, set the helmet down again then reached out to to touch a thick lock of Ciaran’s dark hair, “The Alba and Impera have been quietly fighting over you. They both want you for their mascot.”

“Me?”

The emperor’s mouth curved fractionally.

“The Alba argue they have the stronger claim since you were found by young aep Larsen and are a veteran of the regular army through the Vrihedd but the Impera say that as imperial concubine you are an extension of the emperor himself. And, as you know, I wear the Impera’s emblem.”

Ciaran stared up at him, wide-eyed.

“Do they really?”

“You should consider cultivating that popularity, elyennen.”

The entire convoy — Alba, Impera, Ducal Guard, knights-errant, the chargé d’affaires and his escort — left just before dawn the next morning. Mererid, Ciaran’s most senior attendant and a few other members of staff went on ahead to settle things in Beauclair and Ciaran spent most of his time in the emperor’s wagon. His illness had strengthened their relationship and though Ciaran was more conscious than ever of the emperor’s watchful gaze on him, he was also conscious that it merely stemmed from paternalistic benevolence.

The sunshine and milder weather they’d encountered approaching Belhaven continued and improved and Ciaran spent a couple of hours in the afternoon settled opposite an open door, wrapped up in blankets as he watched Toussaint go by. He was endlessly amazed by its beauty — the immaculate lines and crisp colours of the snow-capped, slate-dark mountains, the valleys between them a sweep of bright and unspoilt green, the cleanest river he’d ever seen snaking through it, and then, a day’s travel from Belhaven, a dark, tangled, mist-laden forest with a towering millennial oak rising out of its centre, and as the road they were on swerved close, Ciaran begged the emperor to halt there.

The emperor followed him out as var Cleef quietly deployed a few of his men around them.

“What is this place?”

“Caed Myrkvid. It was the refuge of bandits and druids for years but they were finally uprooted.”

To var Cleef’s alarm, Ciaran ventured further into the deep shade of the ancient alders, whose trunks structured the misty gloom like ghostly sentries, reflected into the large, dark pools of shallow water. The elf reached out to touch the bark of one of the alders, rubbing his fingertips over it as he glanced back at the emperor who stood a small distance away, feet firmly planted, hands clasped behind his back as he watched him.

“It’s… like Brokilon.”

The emperor’s eyes narrowed but he said nothing and Ciaran explored a little further. Of course, if this had really been Brokilon they would have been stopped at the edges of the wood by a line of arrows and, intangibly, Ciaran could feel the dryads’ unseen absence. And yet there was something so familiar about the carr**** that spoke to the very marrow in his bones — the rich, earthy scent of decomposing leaves, the occasional drip of water into water and the dampened silence into which rustled the sound of trees growing, carrying life from their roots to the tips of their leaves, all destined to fall.
Ciaran’s keen eyes picked out a familiar shrub and in a few long, light steps had reached it and knelt by it, causing the emperor to call out sharply.

“That is far enough.”

Ciaran glanced up as the emperor strode over and saw the brows drawn together. The powerful arms caught him up and he was already being carried away when he showed the emperor the branch he’d broken off.

“What is it?”

“It’s one of the leaves used in my infusion.”

The emperor’s pace slowed a moment.

“You are sure?”

At the elf’s nod, he glanced at var Cleef.

“Fetch the medics and healers.”

Once out of the wood, the emperor set the elf down but Ciaran barely had the time to show the medics the leaf and point out the shrub it had come from before the emperor bundled him into their wagon, dismissing their attendants in curt tones and once they were alone he turned to Ciaran, who looked askance at him.

“Should I send you back to the North?”

Ciaran stared, shocked and hurt as if he’d been slapped. The emperor had borne everything — all the missteps, the inconveniences, the anger, the petty recriminations, the impertinence — the way a rock floor in a cave bore the steady drip of water that collected above it, but now it seemed that his patience was simply a depression in the stone, slowly filling with each drop, and that this last transgression, this last unintentional transgression, had finally caused it to spill over, and Ciaran crumpled in pain at the desperate thought that he’d failed and that all the sacrifices he’d already made had been undone by one impulsive moment.

“No, please! Please don’t send me back!”

The emperor looked at him closely.

“You are sure?”

“Yes, please don’t send me back. I’m sorry I displeased you.”

The emperor pulled him close and pressed a few hard kisses against his hair.

“You did not displease me,” he drew away to look into the frightened hazel eyes, “I thought… while you were sick… that you wanted to go back.”

Ciaran looked up at him, trying to read the hard, bright eyes.

“What did I say?”

“That does not matter. Do you want to?”

Ciaran shook his head and huddled against broad chest. The emperor held him close a moment then
undid his doublet and folded Ciaran into it, still and patient as he waited for the elf’s fluttering heartbeat to slow.

“I will not send you back against your will, elyennenin. I did not mean to upset you.”

— Outskirts of Beauclair, Toussaint, early March, 1272 —

A few evenings later they were at their final camp before reaching Beauclair and after dinner the emperor sat up by the elf who’d already been tucked into his camp bed. Since the crisis outside Caed Myrkvid, the two had tacitly started to guard their time alone together and to be more open with each other in those moments.

“Do you have to work?”

“Yes. There are some issues that will have to be brought up with the Toussaintois nobility. Elyennenin, Beauclair has kept a lot of its elven heritage….”

“You’ve already told me,” Ciaran pointed out petulantly, melting into a slow blink as the emperor rubbed a thumb along the shell of his ear, “The protocols officer told me, your legal attaché told me, your aide-de-camp, your secretary, the chargé d’affaires, Morvran Voorhis, var Cleef, Bastiaan, and even Mererid have all told me so.”

“It might be upsetting for you.”

Ciaran huffed slightly.

He hadn’t needed Nilfgaard to tell him that Toussaint and its capital, in particular, had once been a kingdom of elves, that humans had used the ruins of elven palaces and dwellings as foundations for their own. The North too was littered with such places — Tretogor, Vizima, Oxenfurt, mighty Novigrad. Humans thought they understood elven architecture because someone had told them all about the aqueduct once or because they’d seen a painting of the Great Temple of the Eternal Fire in a shopwindow somewhere. But they were just a Northerner’s idea of elven architecture. And besides, it just wasn’t given to humans to understand. Not when most of them lived in huts that resembled anthills in shape and colour, were not nearly as solidly or efficiently built and could only claim the dubious distinction of being bigger.

Belhaven hadn’t been much to look at, no doubt worn into mediocrity by years of tension and conflict between Nilfgaard and the resistance movement, like a bigger, more solidly-built Flotsam — a Nilfgaardian Flotsam. Humans were humans everywhere, regardless of whether they built with wood and straw or with stone and tile.

“The Duchess is Nilfgaardian?”

“Anna Henrietta is of Nilfgaardian stock, as is a part of the nobility, but they have all lived here for generations and most Toussaintois are descended from people who were on these lands long before we arrived — they still speak the Common Tongue. However, they are the better sort of civilised Nordling.”

The emperor cupped the beautiful face in his hand, stroking his thumb over the smooth cheek as he
looked into the gold-flecked eyes.

“The Toussantois have not seen an elf in generations, they only know them by the cursed ruins and statues they left behind and by the stories told by traders from the North. They will expect you to be a barbarian and to behave like a savage. You will disappoint them. Remember, elyennen, you are not a Nordling, you are Aen Seidhe.”

The next morning, the emperor dressed in his full Impera armour, his high office marked only by the wide, black watered silk sash he wore tied about his waist and whose fringed ends were each weighted by a large sun embroidered in gold thread. Ciaran too donned his and wore the ceremonial robe Elihal had made for him like a surcoat over the armour, secured high on the waist by a wide stiff sash of black brocade patterned with golden suns. On his shoulders he wore the same fur-lined cloak that the emperor had wrapped around him that fateful night back in Dol Gwennelen, while the emperor wore a matching cloak embroidered with the Impera’s salamander emblem.

Ciaran rode beside the emperor’s destrier on a magnificent dapple grey palfrey on loan from Morvran Voorhis, and as they set off, he was struck by an image, dredged from a lost quarter of his memory, of being flanked by battalions of cavalrymen in Nilfgaardian plate, neatly ordered and marked out by fluttering vexilums.

At first they moved at pace on the road that ran along the winding river but as the valley widened and the gentle mist that caressed the grassy ground was persuaded away by the rising sun’s rays, they started to pass inhabited villages and slowed their pace to a non-threatening crawl, and a strange feeling crept up on Ciaran and sent a glittering shiver up his spine.

Everywhere they were met by friendly hails and waving hands and a welcoming smile bloomed on the healthy, pink-cheeked faces wherever they passed. Everything was a celebration of abundance and the superfluous. Under their sloped roofs with overhanging eaves, the houses were painted in rich jewel tones and their gardens marked out by flowering hedges instead of fences. A string of such contented hamlets were set like the gems of a necklace into the rolling foothills of a landscape soaked with warm light and serenity, as if the place had never known anything but sunshine and peace and happiness.

Every bend around a slope of mountainside uncovered a new vista, brought out new colours in the Sanretour, the banks of which were brightened by swaying daffodils and crocuses, and that was of such perfect clarity that Ciaran could see several feet down to the silt of the riverbed, undisturbed by the gentle current that barely put a ripple in the glassy surface. Then a rockfall gash in a mountainside revealed Mount Gorgon in the distance and Ciaran looked at the majestic slopes of that mist-shrouded peak, his heart bleeding for the murdered elves buried beneath it. No Aen Seidhe had set foot in Toussaint since the massacre during which King Divethaf and his warriors had lost their lives and Ciaran felt himself a traitor to his kind for even breathing the cold, clean air of these occupied lands.

“When Nilfgaard first arrived here, the forests had been unsustainably exploited and what was left of them was overrun with dangerous creatures, the waterways had been overfished and the locals had developed the habit of throwing everything into them — refuse, waste water, even bodies…” the chargé d’affaires told Ciaran over a quick lunch on the riverbank, “They thought everything would take care of itself, that it would stay just the way they found it. They never understood how carefully the Aen Seidhe had husbanded the resources here in their time. It took the ducal family generations to teach people to respect their environment and take pride in it. Now the forests are properly managed and Toussaint has some of the cleanest lakes and rivers on the continent.”

Throughout the meal, the elf felt the emperor’s gaze come to rest on him several times, betraying his
concern, and when they set off again, the emperor stayed close to him.

“The Seidhe Llygad,” the emperor said with a curt nod upriver, his harsh Nilfgaardian consonants giving the name a foreign sound, “Soon we will be in sight of the capital.”

Ciaran had been given a thorough account of Toussaint’s history, he’d studied its maps and seen the names still in Hen Llinge+ strewn about the wide valley, but he hadn’t — couldn’t have — anticipated that after more than half a millennium spent in human hands, it would still feel like an elven realm.

The lake was screened by a copse of trees for a moment longer and as they rounded the bend Ciaran was blinded by a golden ray of afternoon sun but as the effect faded and the capital came into view he had the breath knocked out of him.

A promontory rose from the wide, glittering lake and soaring up — flooded with sunlight, all immaculate white stone, so cut and carved and delicate it looked like a scrap of lace against the cloudless sky — was an elven palace.

Ciaran felt the weight of the emperor’s gaze on him but couldn’t tear his attention away from the sight before him.

The terracotta tile roofs were like nothing elves would use and though most of it was white stone, the stone itself was un-ornamented and plainly cut in the way humans favoured, the exquisite foil tracery on the windows and arches and balconies just a simplified, stylised adaptation of the carvings of flowers and vines so abundant in true elven architecture. And yet, the essence of it was there in the complex false-symmetries, the height of the lofty lancet arches, the stacked tiers and tall, slender spires all reaching for the heavens.

For the first time since he’d left Dol Gwennelen, Ciaran’s thoughts did not fly to Iorveth to tell him of what he saw but with all his being wished him here so he could see with his own eyes. Ciaran turned to the emperor, his heart overburdened by a million questions, but the city gates had already come into view, almost concealed by the throngs of people waiting for them.

The carrying bellow of the military brasses hovered over the black-clad column as it slowed to a stately march along the snaking road to match the deliberate drumbeat and it was answered by trumpeters posted on the city heights near flag-bearers waving enormous Nilfgaardian and Beauclairois standards in large figure-eights.

As they passed through the gates, an enthusiastic cry went up, punctuated by triumphal shouts and cries of “Glory to the Emperor!” and “Peace to the Provinces!”. And though Ducal Guards lined the roads to keep back the cheering crowds, Ciaran saw no other form of protection. Everything was wealth and abundance and order, every person well-dressed and healthy, every building well-kept, every road, every tree and shrub, the paint on every last signpost in perfect condition.

From the buildings on either side fell a shower of petals that soon transformed the road into a river of carmine and as the horses crushed them underfoot they released their sweet, cloying scent into the crisp air.

As they started the winding ascent up to the palace, they were met by a gaggle of children no older than seven, dressed in white and waving gold and crimson streamers, who ran ahead of them, laughing and screeching in delight and as Ciaran stared at them he thought to himself that this was what true peace looked like.

They passed under arch after arch until they stopped and dismounted in a square at the foot of a wide
flight of steps at the top of which stood the duchess, her ladies by her shoulders and the rest of her court and General Voorhis behind her. As he stood in that place with the walls of the white palace soaring above him, in front of those people dressed in more silk and pearls and jewels than he’d ever seen in any one place at any one time, and as he caught the glint of sunlight off the gold and jewels of the coronet set on the duchess’ rich Koviri-blonde hair, Ciaran had a sudden dizzily sense of where he was and what Nilfgaardian court life meant.

The duchess bowed her head imperiously and held out her arms, smiling.

“Your imperial majesty, my lords and ladies, welcome to Beauclair.”

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After an bewildering whirlwind of introductions, Mererid appeared and Ciaran and the Emperor carefully clanged and banged their way up to the enormous suite they were to share. Their attendants were there, ready to remove their cumbersome armour, but Ciaran couldn’t resist glancing around curiously, trying to get a feel for the lay of the land and as soon as he’d wriggled out of his armour he sauntered off to explore.

Thick carpets nearly covered the chequered marble floors of the common room, the painted walls of which were hung with tapestries depicting hunting scenes or brocades that matched the upholstery on some of the elegant furniture — deep armchairs and a sofa arranged around a low table, a couple of bookshelves, an exquisite bonheur-du-jour set at an angle in a corner by the window and a large writing desk in the corner opposite and onto which the emperor’s writing set had already been unpacked, both tucked under the open galleries marked by columns and drop tracery and that ran along either side of the vast room and led to the tall, arched windows that let so much light into the large, airy space.

Ciaran marvelled at the clarity of the glass, so fine and with so few bubbles and distortion in it that it was almost transparent.

“Magic?” he asked, turning to the emperor who glanced around at him.

“No, just science.”

Miffed by the emperor’s amused tone, Ciaran didn’t ask him about the trunks and boxes and parcels piled up on one side of the room and instead went off to investigate the rest of the suite.

Behind one door he found a spacious dressing room where some of the emperor’s attendants were unpacking trunks full of clothes into the elaborately-carved wardrobes — the Impera doublets, the quilted gambesons, the fine-woven shirts, but also richly-embroidered fur-lined jaques, brocade pourpoints and other things that more resembled what Ciaran had expected an emperor to wear. At the far end was another set of columns and intricately-carved hanging arches doubled with drapes of the same heavy brocade that hung from the large canopy bed just beyond. The emperor’s pomander was already on the side table, the map tapestry already hung on a wall and the emperor’s pearl-embroidered slippers sat by the bedside on a bearskin rug.

Vaguely intimidated, Ciaran doubled back to the main room where the emperor was still being divested of his breastplate while quietly consulting with an aide, then went straight across to the door opposite behind which he found an identical space arranged into a beautifully-appointed boudoir.
where his own creams and oils and powders had already been set up on the imposing vanity table, his various medicines and remedies clustered on a guéridon, and in the bedroom he found the book he was reading on the bedside table next to his goblet of snowdrops and a basket of treats with a welcome note in the duchess’ own hand, some other books and documents momentarily stacked on an elegant cabriole-legged console table, and his robe laid out along the foot of the bed.

In both the dressing room and the bedroom there were more wrapped parcels and packages and Ciaran surreptitiously picked up one of the smaller ones and gave it a tentative shake, hoping it might reveal its secrets.

Back in the main room, the emperor was just stepping out of his greaves, his amused gaze following the elfling as he went to investigate the final two doors — behind one of which he found sleeping quarters for their attendants, and behind the other of which Ciaran found a tiled bathroom with a large marble tub sunk into the floor. He knelt and touched the rim of the tub. As white as Pontar marble.

He heard quiet footsteps and turned to find the emperor at the door, hands clasped behind his back, a faint smile still on his lips.

“A shared suite?”

“I know,” the emperor acknowledged with the barest nod, “These small palaces are always cramped.”

It was not the answer Ciaran had expected.

The emperor unclasped his hands then held one out to Ciaran to lead him away.

“Come, elyennen, the sun is setting.”

“What are all those boxes?” Ciaran murmured as they crossed the room and the emperor took his cloak from one of his attendants and swung it about Ciaran’s shoulders.

“The things that were ordered for you. But they can wait until tomorrow.”

They stepped out onto the balcony and Ciaran couldn’t hold back a gasp at the sunset view of the gold-kissed, glittering lake before them and the beautifully-ordered royal gardens below, laid out along the lakeside almost to the ruins of an elven amphitheatre on the bank opposite, to which Ciaran’s gaze was attracted.

Ciaran felt the emperor wrap his arms around him, clasp his hands at his waist, and kiss the top of his head and he leant back into the embrace, still staggered by the view.

The gardens were too neat, too symmetrical, the city stretched out in the other direction too quaintly disordered and crowded for an elven kingdom. Green vines with spearlike leaves twined around the stone balustrade, carrying a profusion of pale, star-shaped flowers, and ran along the walls to frame the doorway, their sweet scent magnified and made almost cloying by the sun-heated stone they rested against.

Ciaran felt a strange instinctive yearning at this sense of ordered nature. It was like seeing one of their old paintings brought to vivid life.

“This is what an elven realm should be like.”

“We will help you rebuild it if you let us. We will send you our architects and engineers and it will
all be rebuilt as you want it.”

In his mind’s eye, Ciaran pictured a myriad of elven ruins raised from their rubble, tall and blinding white, peopled by elves who lived in them, safe and healthy, and he had another dizzying sense of all that they’d lost over the centuries.

“This was ours once!”

He felt another hard kiss pressed against his hair.

“You have Loc Muinne back. When we take Kaedwen you shall have Shaerrawed too.”

Ciaran’s heart stopped a moment. Then he took one of Emhyr’s hands in both of his and brought it to his lips, brushing his lips over the knuckles.

The emperor nudged his head gently to press a kiss against his temple and Ciaran twisted around in his arms and stood on his tiptoes to kiss his mouth briefly.

“It is cold, we should go inside. There are people I need to speak to tonight. Have a bath, elyennenic, warm up and rest, I will join you as soon as I can.”

Left alone in their suite, surrounded by luxury, Ciaran’s anxiety returned and he called for Mererid.

“I have nothing to wear!” he told the chamberlain, remembering, appalled, how elaborately dressed and coiffed the duchess and her ladies had been.

“The young gentleman’s measurements were sent on ahead from Dol Gwennelen and the tailors have been working ever since,” the chamberlain assured him airily, “There are several outfits for the young gentleman to try on in the morning when he’s rested.”

Ciaran was tired from having been on horseback all day and the excitement of their arrival but the memory of all the pomp and etiquette they’d been exposed to on arrival washed over him afresh and he shook his head.

“I need something to wear for tomorrow and tomorrow evening at least — I’ll try some things on now so they can be finished,” he hesitated, “Will you help me choose what’s appropriate? Please.”

So Mererid had the tailors summoned and he and Ciaran looked through a binderful of sketches until they settled on a handful of outfits to cover the elf’s most immediate needs. All of Elihal’s heavily-annotated watercolours were in the binder and Ciaran was strangely touched at seeing them again, so carefully preserved, weeks after he’d first handed them over to the chamberlain, and was even more moved when the tailors arrived and he saw the his friend’s vision vividly brought to life.

While Ciaran tried on some half a dozen outfits and waited patiently for the alterations to be measured and marked out, he and Mererid went over the schedule for the next few days, confirming and reviewing his sartorial needs. He also watched his attendants scurrying around fetching and carrying this clothes and boots and toiletries, and worried that they hadn’t been sufficiently trained to brush and dress him to Beauclairois standards.

While his bath was being prepared and his hair unwound and brushed out, Ciaran sat at his vanity table, looked at himself in the mirror closely and found himself still pale and worn from illness.

“Mererid? Where is that pearl powder? And I want that stuff you put on my hair in Vengerberg — the stuff with honey in it.”
He expected disdain and annoyance from the imperial chamberlain but after a few sharp looks, Mererid did his bidding, giving out orders and snapping at the attendants whenever they erred or seemed to dawdle.

Soon Ciaran was soaking in the tub, his skin scrubbed and his hair washed, the air warm and humid and full of the already-familiar scent of volcanic salts. The hot water flooded Ciaran’s entire being with a sense of wellbeing and lightness and he drifted away only to drift back a while later, sensing the emperor’s presence before he opened his eyes.

The emperor stood, watching him, in nothing but a small white towel wrapped around his hips, while his attendants anointed and massaged him with tepid oil.

Ciaran had felt the breadth and strength of the emperor’s body before but he’d never seen it and he stared a moment, taking in the glabrous skin that glistened in the candlelight, the broad chest and shoulders, the long legs and strong thighs. There was still plenty of muscle tone — not the hard definition of youth, but the arrogant power of an adult in his prime.

“How do you feel?” the emperor asked, holding out his arms so one of his attendants could start scraping off the oil with a small sickle.

“How do you feel?” the emperor asked, holding out his arms so one of his attendants could start scraping off the oil with a small sickle. “Much better, thank you, sire.”

Ciaran’s skin was deemed too delicate for the sickle — which amused Ciaran no end considering the broad range of Nordling blades it had been subjected to — and so instead his attendants used a lighter dry oil that they then wiped off him with warm, damp towels.

Soon the emperor was rinsed off then towelled down and Ciaran sank down to his chin into the water, drew up his knees and wrapped his arms around them as the emperor joined him in the steaming tub, dismissing their attendants.

“Leave us.”

The emperor watched him and Ciaran stared back, his gaze fixed on the emperor’s chest as he dared neither raise it higher nor let it drop lower. More than crossing the Yaruga, more than crossing the Amells, seeing Beauclair palace had knocked into the elf the realisation that he was no longer in the North. And now, as he watched the emperor sit steeping in the marble tub surrounded by dozens of flickering candles, divested of all his imperial trappings to reveal the man beneath, Ciaran had the sharp sense that this man too was unknown to him.

“Come.”

The familiar word in that familiar tone that melded together order and invitation was like a lifeline and Ciaran seized it, moving across to settle on the emperor’s lap, disconcerted at feeling shyer now that they were both near naked than he usually did when only he was and acutely aware of the emperor’s skin against his own.

But then the emperor drew him closer and the firm grip and the elusive scent carried by the vapour-filled air thawed Ciaran’s reserve and he raised his gaze to the topaz one before settling against the broad chest and burying his face against the emperor’s neck when the embrace tightened.

Emhyr cradled his concubine in his arms and dropped a vague kiss against his ear. He’d known Beauclair would be a shock to the elfling and their relationship, marked by as many reversals as advances, was not yet strong enough to give him the support and reassurance he needed. And his little elf held himself to such high standards.
He held Ciaran a moment longer then pulled him away gently.

“You look better.”

He spoke low as he brushed his thumbs over the faint flush of pink high on the elf’s cheeks. His precious little spark was upset, he could smell it and he could feel it in the secret tremor that shook the nerves of the slender body.

“Will you give me a kiss, elyennenin?”

The elf sat up straighter and Emhyr drank in the sight of the sparkling eyes, of the sudden wide smile and the creases that bracketed it, before Ciaran kissed him hard, wrapping his arms around his neck and pressing himself close.

When he pulled away, Emhyr sank his fingers into Ciaran’s damp curls and ran a thumb along his jawline then up to the corner of his mouth.

“I think I saw a dimple here,” he murmured, causing the elf to smile again, “Ah, and a matching one here on the other side.”

Their next kiss was sweeter, Ciaran’s body more pliant, and Emhyr felt the elf arch into his touch when he slipped his hands under the bathing shirt to caress his back gently, eventually letting one slide lower, between the elfling’s thighs, to stroke him the way he knew Ciaran liked.

The elf moved to wrap his arms around his neck again but got all tangled up in the sleeves of his loose bathing shirt.

“This shirt!” Ciaran complained, pulling at it, “It’s too loose and too long!”

“Take it off if you do not like it. Or have it shortened.”

“May I?” the elf chirped in surprise, “Won’t people think it strange?”

“You may do as you like, elyennen. The shirt is customary — a concubine is the emperor’s to see and touch — but you are not obligated to use it if you do not like it. Nobody will know aside from your attendants and they can certainly swallow a small eccentricity or two.”

Emhyr smiled faintly and sank his fingers into the dark, glossy curls again before slipping his hands under the shirt and pulling it off, watching the elf laugh as the wet silk stuck to his skin and caught on his elbows, then stroked his palms over the chest he’d unveiled. Ciaran’s pale flesh was dusky pink from the waterline down. One of the shreds of advice the dryads had finally deigned give the imperial medics after repeated requests was that the elf should be bathed in water as hot as he could take on his skin to ease the pain in his joints — a consideration that needed to be balanced against the risk that it might lower the elf’s naturally-low blood pressure too far.

The emperor traced the edge of his thumbnail along the stark, twining markings that ran over the slim chest, noting where the distinct lines had blurred or broken, betraying the location of scars now erased. Aside from these leafy vines, the elf’s body was studded with Conynhaela marks throughout and their careful, thoughtful placement bore testimony to how highly the dryads valued the omega. Emhyr had already found one of the dark hexadecagrams behind each long ear, another matching pair a few inches above the inside of each delicate wrist, and in the crease of the elbows. As he looked the elf over now he saw another on each hip bone and knew there were more to discover.

The beautiful elf, already so slender when they’d met, had lost weight and muscle mass from illness and inaction. Their stay in Beauclair had been extended from ten days to a fortnight — another
mountain crossing awaited them, worse than the first, and the emperor wanted Ciaran to be as strong as they could make him before they attempted it.

When the emperor shifted lower into the water, Ciaran instinctively put his hands onto the hard chest to steady himself and wondered why this simple act, which he’d carried out so many times before without a thought, suddenly felt like taking liberties.

“What is it?” the emperor asked, watching him closely.

Ciaran couldn’t bring himself to confess the truth and so mentioned something completely different.

“No hair.”

“No, we think it unsightly and unhygienic. Most Nilfgaardians do not have much to begin with and get rid of what little they do have.”

Ciaran stroked the smooth flesh timidly, waiting for a reaction, but the emperor merely watched him mildly, resting a heavy, possessive hand on the curve of his rump, and eventually the hand moved lower and Ciaran looked into the amber eyes, quiet sighs passing between his parted lips as the emperor fondled him, occasionally leaning in to kiss or bite the emperor’s mouth, gasping sharply when one of the blunt-ended fingers finally breached him and revelling in the familiar feeling of the long digit caressing him from within, moving easily in his slickness. He felt the emperor’s lips trace the markings along his collarbone then up his throat, a broken moan escaping him as the second finger breached him, before biting back a small cry as he finally came.

He drank up the emperor’s deep kiss as he recovered then started rolling his hips, pressing them against the emperor’s, and he soon felt the large hands settle on them to accompany his slow, deliberate movements. He could feel the emperor’s heat and want through the thin towel more clearly than ever before and he pulled away, eyes widening, when he felt proof positive of the emperor’s ability to perform harden between his legs.

“How can Toussaint afford not to have a standing army when they’re on the border with the North?” he asked and at the first bite, he discerned a note of Temerian whiskey — the better sort, not the
It was Anna-Henrietta’s great-grandmother’s idea to disband the army. She thought it came at too great a cost for what was, at the time, a vague threat, and that it tied up too much manpower that was needed elsewhere in the economy,” the emperor smiled, “She had the courage to argue the point with my grandfather and eventually convinced him. More than a century on, Toussaint has become a de facto demilitarised buffer zone between the North and the South, with a solid economy based on agriculture, local resources and their related industries, as well as being the most important marketplace on the inland North-South trade route. As you will see when you visit the city, every major continental bank has a branch here.”

The emperor paused to refill their glasses and Ciaran helped him to a few more choice cuts.

“On the Northern side, one can only get into Toussaint through Angren and you have seen for yourself how difficult the crossing is — adequate for trade but impractical for large troop movements. The Southern side is not much easier but it has three working passes rather than just the one on the Northern side and despite everything some infrastructure and facilitations have been put into place over the years. Our second-largest military training camp is in northeast Nazair and can be mobilised at short notice. Any invading force would find itself trapped in the Sansretour valley, soon to be outnumbered, then bottlenecked in the event of a retreat. And they would be, given that the Southern side is more porous than the Northern and we know both far better than the Nordlings do.”

Ciaran mulled over the answer while noting with satisfaction how deftly he dealt with the pheasant.

This laissez-faire attitude went contrary to everything he’d seen of Nilfgaard in the North. At the outset of the Second War, Nilfgaard had promised them an independent elven realm and yet Dol Blathanna had ended up being an allod of Aedirn and had come with so many strings attached that their queen found herself unable to lift a hand to help her Pontar cousins, which had resulted in the effective breakdown of communication and exchange between the two communities. Local Nilfgaardian commanders controlled the areas assigned to them with an iron fist, enforcing every word of every line of the many decrees transferred to them and were uncompromising in their punishment of those who contravened them. And Ciaran knew firsthand just how little freedom and independence Vernon Roche felt he had.

After dinner, he and the emperor indulged in another short moment of intimacy but soon Ciaran was being helped into bed and marvelling at the impossible comfort of the mattress, the duvet as light as a cloud and the fat down pillows. Even as his attendants fusssed over him, Ciaran felt himself slip away into sleep but shook himself awake again as they left, waiting until they were gone before hopping out of bed and over to the console table, pausing a moment to touch the exquisitely-finished marquetry surface before picking up the pamphlet the protocols officer had prepared for him on “Customs and Etiquette in Toussaint”, then settled back in his bed, and his gaze lingered a moment on the wrapped packages and boxes still piled against the wall before he turned his attention back to the pamphlet to revise its content by candlelight.

— N —

Ciaran woke up to thoughts of Iorveth filling his mind and the edge of the pamphlet resting against his nose. He tossed the pamphlet onto the bedside table, flung off his blankets, pulled up his long bed socks, slid into his slippers then tiptoed swiftly out of his room, through his dressing room, back onto the common room, beelining for the balcony and only paused, startled, when he saw the emperor still
working at the desk, in his nightshirt and a heavy, padded robe.

The emperor glanced up at him then pushed back his chair without a word and Ciaran was soon settled on his lap and in his arms, looking up at him contentedly.

“You should be sleeping, elyennenic. Why are you up?”

“I wanted to go out on the balcony to look at the stars.”

The emperor gave him an odd look then pressed a kiss onto his forehead.

“In just your slippers and a nightshirt?”

Ciaran blinked up at him. Elves’ low body temperature meant they were rarely bothered by the cold and Ciaran still hadn’t quite acquired the habit of worrying about the temperature unless he felt a chill. And he’d been so bent on his goal that he hadn’t thought to make preparations for it.

The emperor moved out from behind the desk, setting Ciaran back down on his feet then went to fetch one of his fur cloaks, bundling the elf into it before picking him up and carrying him out onto the balcony.

“The floor is cold,” he murmured, “Stand on my feet.”

And so Ciaran balanced on the emperor’s slippers carefully, leaning back into the embrace, and looked up at the sky, his heart pierced with sadness when he saw the stars were no longer in their place. They had travelled so far that he and Iorveth were no longer under the same sky.

For a while there was silence and Ciaran took in the scent of the ghostly blooms, cleaner and less potent than it had been earlier.

“You could not sleep?”

Ciaran shook his head but didn’t speak.

“You will be comfortable here, elyennenin. You should rest, recover your strength — there are only a few events that you must attend, you can be excused from most if you prefer it.”

“No, I—!” Ciaran shook his head again, trying to speak past the lump in his throat, “I don’t want people to think—.”

He stopped again, swallowed hard and when he next spoke his voice was husky and brittle.

“I wish I was stronger.”

“You are strong, elyennen, but your body is still healing. Be patient — let us take care of you.”

The emperor kissed the dark head.

“Come, you need rest.”

He carried the elf back to his room and had soon tucked him into bed. He noticed the pamphlet on the bedside table and wordlessly tidied it away into the table’s drawer.

Ciaran caught the hand that sifted through his loose curls.

“Couldn’t you stay?”
“Can you promise?”

Ciaran went through the familiar ritual of sounding his own heart but he was so shaken by the otherness of this place, so agitated at being far from home and feeling inadequate, that he couldn’t see clearly and was forced, yet again, to shake his head, baffled as to why he couldn’t just say the words. He wanted the emperor to stay, he was prepared for it.

“Does it really matter? You only sleep two hours anyway,” he said plaintively, still clinging to the large hand.

“Four, in fact. Shall I leave this here?” the emperor asked, indicating the fur cloak.

Ciaran nodded then burrowed under the cloak the emperor spread out over his blankets, inhaling the faint smell of oakmoss and musk, catching a stronger whiff when the emperor leaned in to drop a kiss onto his forehead.

“Go to sleep, elyennenin. I will see you in the morning.”

— Beauclair —

Chapter End Notes

*Lifted from Astolat’s A Year in Toussaint  
(https://archiveofourown.org/works/10941903)  
** white metal: métal blanc, a type of silver plating  
*** solleret: articulated steel shoe as part of an armour set  
**** a carr: a north European wetland, a waterlogged wooded area or marshland overgrown with trees (for those interested, the google terms you want to use are "alder
carr")
+ Hen Linge: Elder Speech, the language of the Aen Seidhe
° bonheur-du-jour: small, elegant writing table
°° drop tracery: not even sure how to explain this but try imagining two lancet arches supported by three columns, then take the middle column out. The bit of unsupported arch left in the middle is now a piece of drop tracery. I've added pictures here (https://quillsatdawn.tumblr.com/post/178112654918/drop-tracery-at-st-albans-cathedral-chapter-v)
°°° jaque: basically a gambeson, only lighter weight and less padded
°°°° pourpoint: a kind of long waistcoat, worn over the shirt and under the gambeson
°°°°° guéridon: small, circular occasional table.
Drifting into wakefulness, Ciaran stretched out, luxuriating in how much space he had to do it in, how clean and smooth the sheets felt, and made a small sound of delight at the familiar ache in his sore muscles.

The pain in his muscles was of a different kind from that in his joints and bones. It was bracing and familiar and it made Ciaran feel connected with his own body in the same way he did when the emperor brought him to completion.

Tightening his hold on the pillow he’d been hugging, he pulled it closer and pressed himself hard against it, sighing happily, then half-opened his eyes.

Piles of fat goose down pillows, wool flannel sheets that felt soft even to his sensitive skin, and rooms warmed to such a perfect degree that he barely needed the cloud-light blanket or the fur throws at the foot of the bed. Having a little bit of time and space to himself. These would have to be
his pleasures now.

Ciaran knew he could hope to eventually recover enough strength for the long, ranging walks he enjoyed but he also knew he would never again dance under the stars during a night shower as he so often had with Iorveth. The previous day’s long ride had pushed him to the limits of discomfort and endurance but being out on horseback in the crisp mountain air had given him more pure joy than anything else had since he’d woken up in Brokilon.

The room was dark save for the bright slits in the shutters and Ciaran watched some dust nothings float through the bars of light, relishing having so much space all to himself, filled with nothing but stillness and a lingering trace of the emperor’s scent.

At length his gaze came to rest on the bedside table and he opened the drawer, reached into it and pulled out the pamphlet on etiquette but just as he was sitting up to see about some light to read by, there was a knock on the door and he quickly tossed the pamphlet back onto the side table.

“My lord, your morning drink.”

“Wait!” Ciaran called out, burrowing back under the blankets.

The door opened anyway to reveal one of his attendants holding a tray and the emperor just one step behind.

“Good morning,” the emperor bade, sitting down on the edge of the bed while Ciaran sat up and the attendant set the tray down on a corner of the bedside table.

“Good morning, sire.”

Once they were alone, the emperor leant over to kiss the elf’s forehead.

“Did you sleep enough, elyennen?” he asked, reaching over without comment to slip the pamphlet back into the drawer and push the tray into a more secure position. Besides the usual infusion, the tray also held a tall porcelain pot, a tiny matching cup and saucer, and a dome-lidded bowl of hammered silver.

“Yes, thank you.”

“I thought you might like some hot chocolate.”

“Thank you,” Ciaran murmured and watched curiously as the emperor poured a tiny cup of the unctuous, dark liquid.

“Careful, it is still hot.”

Ciaran took the proffered cup and sniffed it tentatively, glancing up at the emperor who was watching him, absently stroking his thigh through the blanket.

“There is no need for you to be so anxious.”

Ciaran’s first instinct was denial but he could only manage a tiny shake of his head.

“I don’t want to make any mistakes.”

He took a small sip of the chocolate and wrinkled his nose — it was thick, bitter and even richer than he’d anticipated.
“Maybe a little sweeter,” the emperor suggested, leaning over to uncover the bowl and drop a teaspoonful of its contents into the cup and giving it a stir, “Try now.”

Ciaran took another sip. The first swallow had already allowed his palate to adjust and had warmed its way down his throat and woken his mind. Curious, he fished out one of the small unmelted pieces of fluff with his finger and tasted it, blinking in surprise at its sweetness and consistency.

“You said this would be my first test and that if I fail it there will be no role for me.”

“That remains true. Some of the other concubines are confined to the harem and only take part in the most formal occasions. However, I have plans for you and we are all satisfied that you are both able and willing to do well tonight.”

The emperor watched him then manoeuvred another tiny marshmallow onto the teaspoon and offered it to the elf who took it and placed it between his sharp, even teeth, testing its resistance before biting into then swallowing it. When he found his fingers were sticky, he sucked them clean daintily.

“As for making mistakes…” the emperor resumed, unrolling the small damp towel on the tray then holding it out for Ciaran to wipe his fingers on, “You know which mistakes you cannot make. Iorveth tried to force his way into your tent to speak with you alone and you were right to stop him from touching you. North of the border, I might have still turned a blind eye but I would not be able to here.”

At the elf’s stricken expression, the emperor softened and buried a hand in his hair and rubbed soothingly.

“The Toussaintois value good manners and friendliness. Be gracious and smile if you can. Take this opportunity to observe and listen. You are quick, elyen nenin, but you still have much to learn. You have no experience of court life. It will be as full of hidden traps and enemies as the battles you are used to but they come in different guises now and you must learn to recognise them. I know you mean to do your best and you will be forgiven missteps. I will help you and so will Morvran and the others.”

In the face of Ciaran’s continuing look of alarm, the emperor went on.

“Remember to always maintain the dignity of your position. As an imperial concubine you are an extension of the emperor himself — to insult or threaten you is to insult or threaten me. Always be polite and if in doubt, choose silence. But should anyone think they have the right to speak down to you,” the emperor paused and allowed himself a faint smile, eyes alight with admiration, “You have a sharp tongue, elyen nen — remind them they are in error.”

He leaned in and Ciaran responded to his long lingering kiss, clapping the emperor’s gambesan and clinging to it. Then the elf hid his face against the broad chest, wishing he’d accepted the offer to bring along a fellow Scoia’tael or Elihal so that he could have shown weakness to someone other than the emperor himself, and the thought left him feeling morally as well as physically diminished. He’d been a commander once, not so long ago. He’d led his elven warriors without fear and without doubt and without the need to consult anyone, but now saw himself continually in need of reassurance.

“So sweet,” the emperor murmured as he finally pulled away after a second kiss, “I have invited Morvran and a few others to breakfast, they will arrive soon. Join us when you are ready.”
“Are you sure this is appropriate?” Ciaran asked Mererid a while later, sipping his infusion as he looked himself over in the mirror. After what he’d seen of the Beauclair court dress code, it seemed to him that while he certainly looked beautiful enough, his hair and clothes were too casual for a meal with an emperor and a general.

He had been washed and changed into a fresh undershirt over which he wore a floor-length robe of stiff silvery-white brocade, a wide sash of spring green watered silk threaded through at the back and sides and tied into a bow a couple of inches above his natural waist. It’s neckline and loose three-quarter sleeves left his undershirt uncovered, softening its lines.

“A wrapper is perfectly appropriate. The general’s presence does not in itself make the occasion a formal one — the young gentleman is simply sharing an informal meal with a few favoured guests in his own quarters. It is entirely acceptable for him to appear en déshabillé,” Mererid assured him, pushing up the undershirt’s cuffs to reveal the elf’s slender wrists and forearms, then stepped back to judge the full effect, “It is also a question of practicality. Full court dress would require over an hour of preparation and by then breakfast would have become brunch.”

Ciaran studied the way his hair — only a few locks of which had been loosely twisted and pinned up — fell in loose curls and waves the length of his neck and wondered if this was one of the traps the emperor had mentioned, then realised that Mererid would never do anything to make the emperor lose face, not even before someone as close to him as General Voorhis seemed to be.

The thought took the wind out of his anxiety and when he next looked at the chamberlain he saw deep satisfaction hidden behind the impassive facade. Ciaran slipped on his diamond ring, glanced at his reflection again and found that this time the ring did not look out of place.

In the main room, the emperor was standing at the writing table with his secretary, some of his senior advisors and a couple of aides while Morvran Voorhis was seated at the bonheur-du-jour, drinking coffee and chatting across the room with them. A handful of their attendants were replenishing the breakfast spread set up on the sunny balcony or standing at attention in quiet corners of the large room.

As Ciaran stepped in, the general stood and all but the emperor bowed a moment in a unified chorus of “my lord” and the elf saw the serious expressions lighten into what he recognised as being the closest approximation to frank approval that the Nilfgaardian physiognomy seemed able to achieve.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to interrupt,” Ciaran murmured, glancing at the papers laid out on the table among delicate demitasses of coffee or chocolate, cut-crystal glasses of cloudy apple juice and plates of half-eaten pastries.

“Not at all,” the emperor dismissed, holding out a hand to invite the elf over, “We have a meeting with the council members to discuss some constitutional changes we are considering. We were just going over the details.”

“Constitutional changes?”

“We have annexed half the North, Toussaint is no longer one of the outer reaches of the empire. That changes things.”

Ciaran fought the urge to point out that this situation was hardly stable yet. The general asked him what he thought of Toussaint and conversation turned general until the emperor and his working party excused themselves.

“Have some breakfast, General Voorhis will stay with you,” the emperor leant in closer, shielding
the elf, “I will not be long and there will be a surprise for you when I return.”

Ciaran’s ears pricked up and he scrutinised the impassive face, trying to read any clues on it.

“What about these boxes? Shouldn’t I start having them unpacked?”

“Today will be a long day, they can wait until tomorrow.”

Left alone with the affable general, Ciaran couldn’t help asking him whether he knew about the surprise.

“Oh, I have been sworn to secrecy,” the general forestalled in a tone of feigned horror, “But I think you will like it. Come, have something to eat and drink.”

The balcony doors had been thrown open, letting in a flood of sunlight and a warm breeze so gentle that it didn’t stir the heavy drapes and, in the shade of a peach-coloured awning, breakfast was laid out on a few trestle tables pushed back against the long balustrade, against the stunning backdrop of the lake, the mountains behind it and the almost cloudless sky. Even this early in the year, the gardens below were dotted with flowering trees, some of their topmost branches brushing against the stone balcony to offer up their bright blossoms.

“I am very partial to these buffet breakfasts they do here in Beauclair,” the general told Ciaran as he helped him to a cup of dark tea and a crescent-shaped pastry, then poured himself another coffee, “Our working breakfasts in the City are always sit-down meals with twice as many staff as there are people around the table.”

Ciaran bit into his rolled crescent and his eyes widened at the crisp, flaky texture and the melting taste of butter.

“Delicious, are they not?” Voorhis smiled at the elf then raised his cup off its saucer in salutation, “We should bring the Beauclair breakfast back to the City with us.”

Ciaran picked at the fruit salads and found himself paralysed with indecision when faced with the choice of two types of scrambled eggs and three types of stuffed omelettes, several types of bread rolls and myriad jams, marmalades and other fruit preserves.

After he’s had a bite of the things that most caught his eye and had endorsed the lavender-infused apple juice, he and the general split a last butter crescent and Ciaran watched with interest as the general dipped his end into his coffee — in the Toussaintois manner, he was told.

They stood on the balcony companionably, drinking to the sound of cheerful chirps and the faint sound of water against the stony lake banks.

“Beautiful, is it not?” Voorhis asked, vaguely waving his coffee cup at the view, “The palace and its gardens are one of the empire’s best examples of neo-elven architecture. What do you think of them?”

Ciaran looked out at the carefully-placed bushes and nearly ordered rows of shrubs, interspersed with lancet arches. There was something of elven philosophy in the meandering paths that ran between them and the stone benches hidden way in the shade of the scattered copses and leafy, broad-spreading beeches.

“It’s still too…”

“There is still too much of the human in it,” the general agreed, nodding, “Order over Landscape**.
For a truer effect, it would have to follow a more natural plan, the hand of Man should be invisible.”

Ciaran stared at him in astonishment.

“Is that what Nilfgaard is like?”

“The City? Only in certain places on the river, and in the citadel and the enclave where our pureblood elves live, of course.”

A puff of breeze carried the sound of distant laughter and they both looked towards its source down the other side of the lake.

“The men are encamped down by the tourney grounds,” Morvran explained, nodding in its direction.

Ciaran could make out some of the soldiers, some stripped to the waist, standing on the bank, splashing each other, some entirely naked and jumping straight into the lake.

“The water must be freezing!”

“Quite cold, I suppose,” the general agreed, “Most of the rivers in the North are not considered clean enough to bathe in — and they are still far too cold at this time of year — so our soldiers have been waiting weeks for a thorough wash,” he paused, tilted his head up a little and breathed in deeply, “We love the sun and the water. We like to be warm and we like to be clean,” he opened his eyes and watched the soldiers, smiling faintly, “Days like this remind us that the Great Sun shines on all its children.”

“Even in the North?”

“Of course. Sooner or later the light of the Great Sun must reach into even the darkest corners of the continent, it is its manifest destiny.”

“What about people who don’t like sunshine?”

“Well, wherever there is light there must also be shadow.”

“But what about people who don’t like sunshine at all?”

The general tilted his head to one side and gave the elf an odd look.

“I suppose they will have to find a deep cave to live in.”

The general gave a small shrug and smiled.

“Come, let us go inside, you have been standing too long.”

Pulling out the dagger at his waist, the general paused to cut a spray of tiny, raspberry-pink, frilled flowers and brought it inside.

“That is not a military dispatch,” Ciaran remarked when Voorhis sat back at the tiny table and put the flowers down on a letter handwritten on pale robin’s egg blue paper, wondering how the general could look so at ease behind the dainty, cabriole-legged writing table covered in flowery porcelain plaques and touched up with ormolu***.

“No,” the general chuckled, then added in a lower voice, “It is for the duchess. It is customary to write a ‘morning after’ letter as an expression of appreciation and devotion. Back home it is a glorified thank you note and much importance is given to its appearance. But here… ladies expect
little short of a love epic in verse.”

He held up the letter and considered it, looking amused, then folded it up and bound the sprig of flowers to it with a length of narrow ribbon.

“Unfortunately, I am not much of a poet so I must make up for it in other ways. Will you help me choose the wax for the seal?”

Ciaran glanced at the dozen or so sticks of wax and picked out a daffodil yellow one to match the flower stamens.

“It is an exercise in taste, you see,” Voorhis explained, fetching a small oil lamp from the large writing desk, “The colour of the paper and the flower token must reflect the season or a memory of the time spent together — the flowers of a bower where a kiss was shared, or some such thing.”

He melted some of the wax onto the letter then waited for it to cool a little.

“In the City, we would not use colours this bright so early in the season.”

“You could use the other flowers, the white ones.”

“Yes, I had thought to. On paper just tinged with pink or the colour of a new leaf bud. But they love colour and bright things here and prize the content over the container anyway. Anarietta will like this.”

“Are these things important?”

“Very. A missive is an extension of oneself — a personal ambassador one sends out to make one’s case on one’s behalf, so to speak. This particular little custom helps keep the peace by reinforcing tradition and the need for civility. And besides,” the general added, a glint in his eye, “it sells a lot of paper.”

He sealed the folded note with a press of his signet ring then admired his handiwork before showing it off to Ciaran.

“Well, what do you think?”

Ciaran thought the love note looked exactly like what it was, wondered that neither the general nor the duchess worried about being compromised by it, and expressed this idea to the general in vaguer terms.

“Ah! I forget you are used to the Nordlings’ prudish ways,” Voorhis exclaimed, “The duchess and I are both unfettered, there is no harm in us seeking enjoyment together if we do so discreetly. Such appetites are quite natural and should be indulged. With moderation, of course,” the general’s eyes shone as he looked at the elf, “You do not have a book on the mating habits of Nilfgaardians?”

“I’ll tell Mererid you asked,” Ciaran assured him, unable to hide the beginnings of a grin.

A short laugh escaped Morvran Voorhis and his light-coloured eyes glowed as he observed the elf then spoke quietly.

“I am glad you are well again. We were all sorry to hear of your illness.”

Caught off-guard by this fresh token of genuine solicitude, Ciaran could only answer with a faint, timid nod.
They were soon joined by the emperor and on seeing the impassive expression Ciaran was struck afresh by the fact that he could get no sense of how successful the meeting had been or what the emperor’s mood was. As the emperor came over to stand by him, Ciaran remembered what Morvran Voorhis had said about the duchess and realised that the general and everybody else assumed that he was already doing his duty by the emperor and had a sharp sense that this was because nothing in Emhyr’s unvarying attitude led them to suppose otherwise.

“How did it go?”

“Well enough. I have another meeting soon but come, your surprise is ready.”

The three of them went out onto the balcony, skirting around the breakfast table and when Ciaran looked down into the gardens he saw one of the grooms holding the lead of the most astonishingly beautiful cremello° he had ever seen — slender and straight-necked and whose pale gold coat had a lustrous silver bloom to it.

“For me?” Ciaran breathed in disbelief, gripping the balustrade.

“Do you like him?”

“I do.”

“If you wish, you and Morvran can go riding and I will see you at lunch.”

Ciaran turned to the emperor to thank him but found himself voiceless. The emperor took his dagger and cut off a long, trailing spray of pale flowers and tucked it into the twisted strands at the crown of Ciaran’s head, from where the flowers cascaded down over his ear to his shoulder, carrying their delicate scent to him.

“Why isn’t General Voorhis billeted with the rest of the soldiers?” the elf asked Mererid a short while later as he was being dressed for his ride.

“The general is a guest at the palace in his own right,” the imperial chamberlain sniffed, tucking the flower spray into a small vase, “His father is a prince of the blood. His imperial majesty, General Voorhis and the duchess are family.”

“The general too?” Ciaran asked, his brow creasing slightly as he tried to recall the genealogical tree at the back of *The Imperial Dynasty*. “As closely related as the duchess?”

“May I remind the young gentleman that His Imperial Majesty and the general are second cousins on the spear side whereas he duchess is only his majesty’s fifth cousin,” Mererid drawled with a stern look and no hint of interrogation in his tone, “twice removed, on the distaff side only.”

Ciaran reflected somewhat resentfully that he’d never bothered with genealogical tree for good reason — Emhyr var Emreis was the emperor and who his father and uncles were didn’t change that — but when he rejoined Morvran Voorhis he couldn’t help looking at him differently.

The horse’s varnished leather harness was the same bright scarlet as the quilted blanket under the black saddle and a perfect foil for the astonishing, almost pearlescent coat.

When Ciaran took the reins from the groom, the horse, still just a long yearling, looked at him a moment then shook his small, intelligent head before nuzzling his shoulder, prompting Ciaran to rub his forehead against the horse’s, murmuring soothingly.

He could feel that quiet unity, that gentle understanding that bound elves to other living things and
felt it even more keenly when the general’s palfrey, Smeraglia, the very one he’d ridden into Beauclair, nudged his shoulder affectionately and Ciaran introduced the two horses to each other.

“You are fortunate. He has not liked many people until now,” the general smiled, again pulling out his handkerchief and flicking it over his hand before helping Ciaran up onto the horse, “A short walk for today, he can still be unpredictable.”

Once Voorhis had settled astride his own horse they started off in direction of the tourney grounds, trailing an escort.

“Was he brought here for me? I won’t be able to ride him much.”

“You can ride him while we are here in Toussaint and once we cross the Amells. As for him being here, we had brought him as a possible bribe for one of the Nordling kings or dukes, but in the end he was not needed. Some Koviri mercenaries stole him and took him as far as Gors Velen to load him on a ship but our special forces were able to recover him.”

“What is his name?” Ciaran asked as he patted the slender, upright neck and admired the preternaturally shiny coat.

“His name is an-Nayyir. His sire is the famous stallion, al-Maysan, said to be the most perfect exemplar of the Ofieri desert breed — certainly the most perfect we have in Nilfgaard. But he gets his good looks from his mother, Argamak. She was given in tribute to the emperor by one of the Zerrikanian tribes some years ago. They said they captured her from a herd somewhere in the southwest at the foot of the Fiery Mountains but more likely she was taken from somewhere in or near Haakland. She has foaled three times since but an-Nayyir is the first to have inherited her particular physical characteristics. If he turns out as we expect and reproduces well, he will raise a small fortune in stud fees, which is why he has not been gelded yet.”

“You like horses.”

“I find them to be far more honest than men,” the general inclined his head, “They have been my particular hobby for many years and the stable I have built up is well-regarded.”

“What interests you about horse-breeding?”

“I am interested in the purity of stock and the honing of certain characteristics through selective breeding but perhaps even more fascinating than that is the mixing of breeds, a far less accurate science but which can produce some spectacular results, as your an-Nayyir proves.”

“Is Smeriglia one of yours?” Ciaran asked, leaning across to pat the general’s elegant, high-tailed palfrey.

“She is. We tried cross-breeding with every gaited horse we could find to produce her!”

Ciaran’s deep respect for Nilfgaard’s horses dated back to his time in their cavalry and he listened with interest as Morvrann Voorhis regaled him with tales of sending his experts out to scour the mountains and valleys of Nazair for specimens who presented the ambling gait they desired, of having to haggle endlessly with peasants who were loathe to give up what was often their only horse, on which their livelihoods depended. The general recounted how he’d conspired with the Baroness La Valette to purchase a fine Redanian ambler — horses had been deemed of strategic importance by most states after the Second War and consequently their sale and trade had been severely restricted. He related failure after failure as the resulting offspring proved too heavy, too hot-tempered or failed to exhibit the desired gait. Then, at long last, the lucky union of a handsome
Cidarian courser from Vole and a plain but unusually good-natured stallion, a cross between a Metinnese plains horse and one of the fiery north Ofieri jennets.

“There is no better warhorse than the Nilfgaardian pureblood,” Voorhis continued, “Elegant, powerful, warmblooded, and they will take training as well as most soldiers — His Majesty’s destrier, Hastae Martiae, is such a one, of pure Nilfgaardian stock and the finest example of it. But they are not docile enough for the casual rider and they must be trained to that pleasant ambling gait at additional expense of coin and time — and some of the lighter, faster coursers we breed from them cannot be trained to it at all. Smeriglia possessed it from birth and adds to that the sweetest, most docile disposition, as you experienced yourself. Her great beauty is an added boon we had not hoped for,” he patted the long, arched neck fondly, “But what it took us to get her!”

They rode on through the verdant, sun-drenched countryside and everywhere Ciaran looked he found the same richness that had so struck him the previous day, as though the ground had been sown with gold dust and the leaf-laden shrubs and trees fed on honey. There were canopies and trellises of wooden beams rather than of branches and leaves, fountains instead of springs, pools instead of ponds — nature harnessed by man.

Soon the usual hails of “Peace to the domains!” heralded their arrival at the camp. The tents had been set up and covered the greater part of the fields beyond the tourney grounds and everywhere the soldiers were smiling and happy and the whole camp bustled like a small, well-organised town. The forges had been more permanently set up for the repair of armour and reshoeing of horses, medical tents and stands dispensing food and drink, everywhere tradesmen of every shape and colour peddled their wares and they passed several of them offering for sale those bright Nilfgaardian mirrors Ciaran so admired in various portable sizes. Ciaran knew from Bastiaan that a mirror even as small as the palm of his hand was enough to procure a week’s worth of favours from one of the camp followers who were visible, in their colourful clothes, at the edges of the camp.

A familiar silhouette caught Ciara’s eye so he directed an-Nayyir towards it, keeping a tight rein on him.

Bastiaan had just enough time to rush into his shared tent to tuck his rough-cut tunic into his trousers and pull a doublet over it then dash back out to greet Ciaran and Voorhis.

“My lord. General,” he finally acknowledged, still wide-eyed.

The three of them exchanged pleasantries while the general dismounted and went to Ciaran’s side to hand him down.

“Aep Larsen will attend the reception tonight as one of my aides. I hope this pleases you, my lord,” Voorhis told Ciaran in his easy manner before turning to the spearman, “Your outfit has been delivered to my quarters. Come early, my other aides will be there and we will have a game or two of cards and some drinks before we dress.”

While the young soldier claimed, with a shocked expression and an additional ten degrees of deference, that he couldn’t possibly and the general assured him that he really could, Ciaran studied the youth closely, looking at him for the first time.

Regular-featured, tall and broad-shouldered but with a lean, athletic build, hair the colour of a new lambskin but with ashy roots and skin like a chalk-dusted peach against which his dark velvety eyes stood out. Just beneath his left eye he had one of those inevitable beauty spots that all Nilfgaardians seemed to have. The perfect young Nilfgaardian hero.

“It will be a reception à la fourchette°°, not a sit-down dinner so you need not worry about trying to
make conversation with the ageing marchioness on your left for three hours,” the general concluded reassuringly.

“It will be a first for me too,” Ciaran noted, “We can keep each other company.”

Ciaran smiled and watched an answering grin spread on the soldier’s face. Nilfgaardians were strange creatures, he decided.

“I have never seen a truer case of hero worship,” the general teased once they were back on their horses and making their way back to the palace, “I should be jealous. After all, I am his commanding officer.”

“But why me?”

“Why not? I have not heard that you were any less heroic than anyone else. You are a veteran and a survivor, and in a way, you and he are of similar ages — why should he not see you as a role model?” the general paused, “And you should know that his father died in the First Nordling War. Perhaps that has something to do with it.”

Ciaran said nothing to this.

“I don’t see many elves in the army.”

“Nilfgaard has a very mixed population. Most Nilfgaardians have some elven blood and all pureblood Nilfgaardians, like myself, have some by definition, but for most it is not visible. As for our pureblood Aen Seidhe, we do not usually send them to war. We do not prevent it, they take part in the military service same as everyone else and they may join the army if they wish to, but we do not impose active service on them.”

“Why is that?”

“It has always been something of a tradition but the recent wars have taken their toll and so at the moment we also have some population management constraints — you may have noticed, we do not currently have many women in our ranks for similar reasons. The province of Nilfgaard has the only endemic population of Aen Seidhe in the South and we have always known they have a slower rate of renewal than the rest of the population so we do not encourage the endangerment of Aen Seidhe of reproductive age,” he paused and turned to the elf, “You have had similar problems in the North, I believe.”

Ciaran made a noncommittal sound. He wasn’t sure how he felt about this revelation. The general had touched a raw nerve — Ciaran himself was of the last generation of elves born in the North, the conflict with humans having intensified in recent years, and he was over half a century old. By now he was convinced of the emperor’s elven heritage and could believe that the general too had a few drops of elven blood in him but it was barely visible — perhaps a little in the eyes — and he might just as well have none at all, which was true for many of the Nilfgaardians he’d met, some of whom did have distinctly elven features but very few of whom seemed to have their characteristic ears. And Ciaran deeply disliked the notion that the Southern elves were either being bred out of existence or being carefully husbanded the way graziers managed their stock of cows or sheep.

“There is an old saying back home,” the general continued as they passed the stable gates, “‘If the elves of the City are lost or go away, the Sun will fall and Nilfgaard with it.’ Even those who do not believe it know that the Aen Seidhe are central to our culture.”
To Ciaran’s relief he had a few hours to himself to bathe and change into a fresh undershirt and the wrapper he’d worn earlier, then sit down by the windows left ajar, through which drifted some chatter and music from the gardens, to a late lunch while he reviewed the etiquette and guest list for the evening’s reception with Mererid and the protocols officer.

He was still plying them with questions while undergoing the final fittings for the evening’s outfit when a message arrived for him.

“Her Enlightened Ladyship wishes to enquire whether His Lordship would do Her Grace and Her Ladies the very great pleasure of joining them for afternoon tea in an hour,” a liveried page announced in a reedy voice to the vast common room peopled with aides, attendants, tailors, and apprentices, after he’d taken a dozen steps into it.

Ciaran glanced at Mererid then inclined his head.

“Of course.”

Mererid turned to the page.

“Please impress upon her Her Enlightened Ladyship that His Lordship is much obliged by Her Grace’s most generous invitation and will be delighted to wait on Her Grace and Her Ladies at the appointed hour.”

The entire room waited in silence as the page turned and with great dignity took a dozen steps back to the doors, which slowly swung closed behind him then settled with a final clank.

Ciaran looked back at Mererid in mild resignation.

“I suppose I’ll have to change again.”

He did have to change again, into a high-necked robe of willow-green shot silk that was not nearly as elaborate as he’d dreaded. Mererid agreed to accompany him so it was with the imperial chamberlain and two of his own attendants at his back that Ciaran entered the ducal suite — a long gallery of tall windows through which the sunlight streamed to then be bounced back by the mirror-lined walls opposite them.

From her seat on a circular, velvet-upholstered sofa on the far side of the room, the duchess acknowledged his presence with a queenly nod and a wave of her hand.

“Welcome, my Lord, come and sit by me.”

As all the men in the room bowed, Ciaran obediently went to sit by the duchess, who smiled at him warmly and whose slightest movement exalted the exquisite guipure+ of her flounced cape, the open motif of which showed the aqua hues of the soft silk dress beneath it.

“Damien de la Tour is the captain of my Ducal Guard,” the duchess introduced the tall, broad-shouldered, bald-headed knight whose deep blue gaze swept over Ciaran appraisingly, “We were just discussing security arrangements for the tourney and if you will bear with us a moment more, we only have a few more details to settle.”

Ciaran nodded graciously and half-listened while the duchess reviewed then signed off on the
captain’s proposals. She spoke the Common Tongue, as Embry had said, but with a slightly different pronunciation and strange rolling r’s that were a little jarring to the elf after weeks spent listening to Nilfgaardian.

The elf surreptitiously observed the company and the surroundings — not quite Northern but not quite Nilfgaardian either. Everywhere there was luxury and comfort and ease and abundance. Even in the furthest reaches of the room the gilded details of the wood panelling glinted and the varnished floors shone wherever they weren’t covered by patterned carpets, which themselves looked like the reflections of the painted ceiling from which hung a few crystal chandeliers. A nearby table bore with great fortitude the weight of the several steaming silver teapots, creamers, sugar bowls, delicate porcelain plates and cups and saucers, small pots of preserves and honeys and thickened cream, and several tiered stands loaded with a variety of finger sandwiches, pastries and sweet treats.

Ciaran had had serious reservations about the outfit Mererid had picked out for him and particularly about the train, which he’d been told was non-negotiable, but as his gaze came to rest on the pool of silk at the duchess’ feet, he was once again relieved at having trusted the chamberlain’s advice and grateful for all the guidance Elihal had given him. Gone were the stiff, jewel-encrusted bodices and heavy brocades, replaced instead by unstructured gauzes, satins or chiffon velvets, and one of the ladies even wore a sack-back dress of simple printed cotton. Ciaran knew himself to be neither under nor overdressed and what was more, he was conscious that the high neck and restrained palette and patterns gave his own robes a distinctly Nilfgaardian flair and was surprised to find that he was glad of it.

“We will discuss it again once you have had time to consider is with Master Poullain and your lieutenants,” the duchess concluded after relaying to the captain the emperor’s offer to contribute a couple of Alba battalions to the security force.

The captain bowed and took his leave.

“People come from all over the North and South for the tourney so sometimes there are political tensions and in the past we have even had clashes,” the duchess explained then held up her hands, “And while we can turn a blind eye to a certain amount of benign drunken behaviour, we cannot countenance public brawls or, worse, duels outside the arena. The tourney is one of the most important events on Toussaint’s social calendar. Everything must be perfect!”

As the duchess turned fully to him, Ciaran’s gaze was drawn to the sprig of bright magenta flowers pinned to the neckline of her dress, bringing out the bright glints in her copper-gold hair. The duchess smiled and touched the cluster of flowers woven into Ciaran’s hair.

“These are lovely. You are lovely. We had often wondered if tales of the beauty of elves are exaggerated but we can now see they are not. Now, will you have some tea?” she asked, standing and guiding him to méridiennne closer to the tea table, “We have some Twisting Dragon, which we are told you favour, but perhaps you would like to try the Lady Duchess, created by our own master blender? Yes? Vivienne, two cups, please.”

Ciaran accepted the cup of dark tea and breathed in its citrus-laden fragrance.

“You like it? Good. We will give you some to take with you.”

“Your Grace is too kind. I… I brought a gift.”

As one of his attendants came forward with the wrapped parcel, the duchess laughed and clapped her hands.
“What fun! We also have a gift for you,” she said warmly, signalling one of her ladies.

The duchess opened up her parcel and, amid exclamations of delight, pulled out one of the long elven sashes that Ciaran had brought with him, asking two of her ladies to hold it out between them so they could admire all five yards of its elaborate embroidery, depicting palaces on mountains and willow-lined lakes.

Despite Mererid’s assurance that he had plenty of suitable gifts that could be given on Ciaran’s behalf, it had occurred to the elf that there was little they could give a duchess who lived in such splendour that she did not already have and, remembering the basket of treats she’d sent to his room, that a more personal touch was needed. Mererid had not contradicted him in this.

“I would have given Your Grace something better but—,” Ciaran was stopped by the touch of the duchess’ hand on his sleeve.

“No, we are delighted and touched,” she told him solemnly, “We could not have asked for anything better.”

She smiled and withdrew her hand.

“You shall show us how to wear it after you have opened your gift.”

In answer to her gesture of invitation, Ciaran opened the wrapped box that had been placed beside him.

He uncovered a long, luxuriously dense fox fur tippet and a matching capelet and muff.

“I cannot accept these, they're too—.”

“Nonsense! We have planned a hunt and you will need something to wear!”

Ciaran opened his mouth to protest but was cut off by a page announcing General Voorhis.

“General!” the duchess exclaimed in unconcealed delight when the general stepped in, hands clasped behind his back, head held high, “Will you take a cup with us?”

“Half a cup, Your Grace,” Voorhis replied in his lilting tones, moving towards the table and taking the tiny cup that one of the attendants lining the tableside had already poured for him, “I am expected back in my quarters by my aides but I wanted to come and pay my respects.”

“Far be it from us to keep you from your bachelor’s debauches,” the duchess told him archly.

“We all have our little weaknesses,” the general admitted in amusement as he loaded a plate with a selection of pastries and sandwiches, “I see all the usual treats are on offer.”

“Ah! My dear general, that is not a question of weakness but standards! Afternoon tea without cake makes for a very dry meeting and I leave those to you men!”

“Touché, Your Grace! Only this morning Lord Ciaran and I agreed that we should adopt your Beauclair customs,” he offered them the plate of treats, “Would you care to try one of these cucumber sandwiches, my Lord? They are a particular favourite of mine, I think you will like them.”

Ciaran accepted the finger sandwich, reflecting that Nilfgaard’s paternalistic care had followed him even into a duchess’ boudoir and if he hadn’t known the general’s presence could be explained away by personal motives, he might well have believed the much fêted Alba commander had been sent to
ensure he ate his afternoon’s quota of sweetmeats and snacks.

“We were just telling Lord Ciaran about the hunt and its dress code,”

”Ah! My Lord Ciaran is an excellent rider, a worthy addition to our party.”

The desultory talk continued until the general set down his coffee cup on a nearby side table.

“Well, I must leave you to rejoin my aides for a meeting sans cake,” he sighed, making a show of his regret, “But I will see you all at the reception, where I confess I hope to partake of a wide range of refreshments.”

The door had barely closed behind him when the duchess turned back to Ciaran with an impish smile.

“Come, let us try on our new things!”

The duchess and her ladies fussed over him, praising the beauty of his face and of his hair, wrapping him up in the fur tippet, styling it this way and that, telling him what cut and colour of cloth was appropriate for the hunt.

“I only know how to tie one type of knot,” he told them when they pleaded with him to demonstrate the use of the sash, “It is very simple but I can write to my friend, Elilhal, and ask him to send instructions for others.”

The ladies begged him to do so then exclaimed in admiration and astonishment as he went through the several steps required to fold the long sash into an boxy knot that left one end trailing.

“Marvellous!” the duchess clapped her hands, eyes wide, “What fun! We must do this again some other afternoon when we have fewer claims on our time. We must all dress for the reception, but before that…”

She led the elf to a console table carrying eight lacquered boxes that her ladies opened and Ciaran couldn’t help a small sound of surprise when he saw what they contained — an extensive collection of traditional elven hair ornaments representing each of the eight savaeds++, made of silver or gold or carved bits of whalebone, turned into flowers, leaves, birds and insects and there was one particularly fine matching pair of bronze boughs from which fell a shower of tiny beaten gold leaves.

Ciaran picked up a long, pronged hairpin carrying an elaborate set of pine branches, amethyst carved flowers and a peacock made from kingfisher feathers.

The duchess took up a gold and coral peony from which dangled half a dozen slender, coral-tipped chains and smiled fondly at it.

“Once a year, we — my sister and I — would be allowed to take them out of their boxes. We love the different sounds they make,” she told him, giving the peony a little shake so that the chains suspended from it tinkled gently, “They all make different sounds.”

“We believe the sounds ward off evil,” Ciaran explained.

“Ah, so that is why,” the duchess smiled then pressed the peony into his hand.

“I cannot,” Ciaran murmured, “These are too valuable.”

“This is not a gift, it is restitution,” the duchess told Ciaran solemnly, “They were found in vaults
when our architects went to inspect the foundations before the renovation works and there are probably more in the parts we have not explored. My great-grandmother decreed that they would be gifted to the first elven delegation to return to Toussaint.”

“Thank you, Your Grace.”

Ciaran looked at the flower in his hand. The materials alone were worth a small fortune but with so few such artefacts still extant, this collection was certainly priceless. An unexpected windfall and elven custom dictated that the giver retain some benefit of the boon they bestowed.

He held the beautiful pin out to her again.

“A gift. If they are mine to keep then they are also mine to give.”

The duchess’ eyes widened but then she bowed her head and accepted.

They stood in silence a moment.

“It is a lonely life, is it not?” the duchess murmured, turning the silk flower over in her hand, “We love our ladies dearly but it is not the same. In fact — do not take this the wrong way — even an imperial concubine is not a crowned and ruling duchess,” Anna Henrietta paused then smiled at him, “You may call me Anarietta when we are in private, as my other friends do.”

“I’m Ciaran,” the elf offered, nearly stumbling over his own name, finding it foreign even to his own ears.

“Well then, Ciaran, I will see you soon.”

— N —

♩

Emhyr glanced at the slim figure beside him and took in the delicate profile with its lowered lashes and straight nose, and the long, slender neck. His beautiful elfling was usually so straight-backed and haughty but tonight he seemed bowed under the weight of his clothes, jewels, and the mass of hair piled onto his head, loaded with flowers and gleaming ornaments.

“Courage, elyennenin.”

Ciaran raised luminous eyes to him a moment then looked away, his chin set higher.

After a last cursory check of the sumptuous hall, the duchess approached, smiled when she recognised the beaten silver blooms tucked into Ciaran’s hair alongside another fresh-cut spray of the white-starred climber, then took up her place at the head of the receiving line, twitching the stiff panels of her jewel-encrusted cloth-of-gold dress into place. At her curt nod the orchestra started playing a stately piece lightened by trills.

“Everything is ready. The doors will be opened on the hour,” she told them then a slight frown creased her brow and she turned to the emperor, “Speaking of which, Your Majesty, people are coming here seeking reassurance so we hope that this is a definitive victory and that we won’t be going through all this again in four years’ time or sooner.”

Ciaran’s eyes widened fractionally and he couldn’t help glancing up at the emperor but there was no
change in the emperor’s demeanour. As there was no answer, the duchess pressed her point.

“We understand that you cannot predict when the Lodge or someone else may decide to imperil all our lives and livelihoods for petty reasons of their own but our people trust us to do our best for them, they make choices and life decisions based on our advice. We would not like to deceive them.”

“This is not the best time or place for such discussions…”

The duchess drew herself up to her full height.

“The welfare of my people is always on my mind and I believe it is always the right time to discuss their interests!”

“Your Grace…”

“My advisor’s say they have no yet received any assurances as to how long this supposed peace will hold. We need to know in order to prepare for the future. Toussaint needs stability and peace to—.”

“Anarietta…”

“Do not ‘Anarietta’ me, Emhyr—!” the duchess warned, eyes flashing, but her demeanour changed when she saw General Voorhis and his cohort of aides approach them.

“Your Grace, I wanted to bring young aep Larsen to your particular attention,” the general explained urbanely, his daffodil-yellow shirt showing through his slashed doublet of black damask as he bowed, “A most promising youth.”

Bastiaan darted a look at Ciaran but kept his composure and trotted out the expected, respectful banalities in answer to the duchess’ praise and questions.

“We confess we had been worried for you all,” the duchess continued, her gaze lingering on Voorhis, “Last time, the generals and officers seemed so optimistic when they came through Beauclair on their way North but hardly any of them returned. We are so very glad your campaign was successful this time.”

“Your Grace is too kind,” the general bowed slightly, “The fortunes of war are fickle.”

“How is the de Wett girl?” the duchess asked, turning to the emperor, “Maria, was it?”

“Mara. According to the latest reports, she is well.”

“Poor thing,” the duchess clucked sympathetically, “We remember thinking of her during her father’s trial and execution. Such a terrible thing, for a young girl to lose her father. And so far from home too! It was fortunate for her that she was already an imperial concubine before her father’s disgrace.”

They were interrupted by signals from the footmen at the door and the group broke up as they all took up their positions.

Anna-Henrietta smoothed her skirts again, secured her ceremonial sash in the colours of Toussaint back on her shoulder, then gave the emperor a side-glance.

“Try not to glare at the guests, Your Imperial Highness. It scares them.”

A moment later the doors were thrown open to let in the first of the guests.

A large proportion of the guests was the expected mix of local Nilfgaardian and Beauclairois elite,
many of whose faces were known to Ciaran since Mererid, the protocols officer and the aide seconded to him had all helped him study their profiles. The emperor’s secretary stood a foot behind them and sometimes took a quick step forward to whisper something in the emperor’s ear — a previous meeting, a particular interest, or some other tidbit of information — when a guest’s name was announced and Ciaran observed the infinitesimal ways by which the emperor acknowledged the proper degree of acquaintance.

Ciaran had read and tried to memorise the plethora of customs and protocols that governed even the minutest details of these events but even so seeing them acted out was a surreal experience. Etiquette dictated that only Nilfgaardian nobles of the first rank could address the emperor directly, others could only address him once they’d been introduced to him, others could only address him once they’d been introduced to him and been addressed by him, still others could only address him indirectly through another person of rank who could address him directly — the duchess, in this instance — and the infinite nuances trickled right down to the people who had no right at all to address the emperor and who merely bowed their very great honour at being allowed into the august presence. Similar rules determined which people were permitted to raise their gaze to the emperor and when, how close they could stand to him, the length and depth of their bows. And they all bowed and stayed bowed until they’d backed out of the emperor’s immediate vicinity — the remnants of an old tradition by which nobody could stand taller than the emperor, an unlikely occurrence even if the three of them hadn’t been standing on a dais.

Ciaran stood patiently, already weary from the hours of preparation he’d gone through, soon wishing he could readjust the long pearl-tipped pins that held up his coiled hair and that poked into his scalp, later shifting his weight from one foot to the other under his long cape while trying to maintain the outward appearance of near-perfect immobility.

He ignored the surreptitious glances at his ears and the open stares, some wary and some admiring, grateful he was not expected to do anything more than nod his acknowledgement of the introductions as the parade of nobles, diplomats, bankers, important landowners, and trade corporation representatives wearing their medallions all filed by. The appearance of a large delegation of turbaned and betasselled Ofieri who seemed perfectly at ease in their surrounding startled him but his surprise reached its paroxysm when a handful of Redanians swaggered in, followed by a clutch of surly Kaedweni. The introductions told him they were knights arrived ahead of the tourney and he suddenly understood the need for the Ducal and Impera guards that line the walls.

Unlike their men, Var Cleef and Morvran Vorhis and their aides were in attendance as guests in their own right and were in court dress but Ciaran now noticed the dirks prominently tucked into their belts and noticed too that no other guests carried anything similar and even the curved, highly ornamented, fitted leather sheaths that hung from the Ofieri’s belts were empty.

“Such a glorious victory, Your Imperial Majesty,” the guests now bleated, more cowering than congratulatory, “The Great Sun’s bounty shines upon us all.”

The emperor inclined his head fractionally in acknowledgement and murmured one of the three platitudes he was using on rotation.

This was the tail end of the procession, comprising the more minor landlords and merchants who evidently had not dared step ahead of their betters and many of them wilted in gratitude at the duchess’ gracious welcome before wilting in awe and something very near terror as they then came to stand before the emperor.

“Finally, that’s the last of them,” the duchess exclaimed in relief, glancing over the teeming, colourful hall and her bright gaze came to rest on the emperor a moment before it was once again drawn away.
by General Voorhis’ approach.

“Now we can try to enjoy ourselves,” the general remarked with smiling eyes though he remained grave in his demeanour.

“Before you run off, Your Majesty, I would like a word,” Anna-Henrietta said pointedly.

When the emperor turned to him, Ciaran thought he could see the faintest signs of resignation.

“Go on,” the emperor encouraged with a faint nod, “Enjoy yourself.”

Morvran bowed and offered the usual handkerchief-covered hand, which the elf accepted.

As they moved away, the general and the concubine could hear the beginnings of the duchess’ arguments.

“Emhyr, we do applaud this victory and your plans to finally civilise the North but we have barely recovered from the Second War. The trade routes were completely disrupted and while, yes, imperial roads will certainly help restore them and establish new ones, they will not be completed for many months yet. Also, we do not want a return of rebel groups in the mountains and forests on the Angren border and we cannot accommodate any more refugees than we already have.”

“Shouldn’t you say something?” Ciaran murmured, glancing up at the general, “You are cousins.”

“Oh certainly, we are family. But I had occasion to watch those two bicker when we came through Beauclair on our way north. Believe me, we would do better to keep out of it,” Voorhis dismissed in amusement, “Besides, I avoid such political squabbles whenever possible — a privilege of not being a crowned head.”

They soon joined var Cleef and Bastiaan who stood smiling and already holding tall glasses of wine.

“Toussaint’s famous sparkling wine,” var Cleef explained and offered the elf a glass.

Ciaran accepted the proffered drink, reflecting that the consumption of this one slim glass had certainly been approved by the entire board of imperial medics. He was relieved to be out of the spotlight and surrounded by familiar faces, even though they all towered above him.

“I hadn’t realised… about General de Wett…” he murmured, studying the bubbles in the pale gold liquid.

Ciaran had fought as part of the Centre Group, quite apart from the Verden Operations Group de Wett had commanded, so he’d never met the general but he knew him by reputation and knew that the general had also been a prince, as so many Nilfgaardian commanders had been and perhaps still were.

“It was inevitable,” Morvran Voorhis shrugged slightly, all his medals and ornaments glittering on his chest, “You were there, you know what happened — our defeat was almost entirely his fault. Young cadets like aep Larsen here will be studying the Second War as a textbook example of what not to do and the perils of disobedience for centuries.”

“But wasn’t he a prince?” Ciaran asked mildly, hiding his surprise at the glint of steel in Voorhis’ tone.

“Certainly, he was and I expect that all through the trial he thought that would save him. But he should have remembered that he was a general of the Empire first and a prince of Nilfgaard second.
No, prince or not, de Wett had to pay the price,” Voorhis continued in the same falsely nonchalant tone and his gaze wandered to var Cleef briefly, “Now we all know where we stand.”

Ciaran lifted his glass to his lips and took in the delicate scent carried up to him by the bursting bubbles as he observed General Voorhis, remembering that his father was Prince Voorhis.

The elf remembered too that his own commander, the field marshal at the head of the Centre Group, had been killed after the battle of Brenna, mistaken for someone else.

His gaze drifted to the emperor who had extricated himself from his conversation with the duchess only to find himself embroiled in the politely-worded complaints of the Toussaintois nobility who stood around him, at a distance — the emperor always kept beyond the reach of daggers.

“And the commander of the East Group, aep Dahy, he was a prince too, wasn’t he? Was he tried too?”

“No. Although he would have been,” var Cleef noted, “He managed to flee as far as Aldersberg after his forces were routed but died of poisoning shortly afterwards.”

Ciaran glanced at the emperor again and this time the bright, hard, ever watchful gaze met his. At least three of his high-ranking commanders dead — two in mysterious circumstances and one executed outright. The lives of fifty-five allied commanders could never have meant very much to a sovereign so ready to have his own prince-generals killed.

“The whole thing was ill-fated,” Morvran Voorhis concluded in consternation, glancing at the Impera captain again before turning back to Ciaran and raising his glass at him, “But those times are behind us. Let us drink to success and to the future!”

Ciaran raised his glass at the toast then took a tentative sip. His eyes widened in surprise and he fought the urge to wrinkle his nose.

“One of the region’s most celebrated exports—,” Voorhis began just as he was buttonholed by some richly-dressed merchants and he excused himself with a slight bow and as he watched the general turn away, Ciaran caught sight of the Redanian and Kaedweni knights skulking together in a far corner.

“I hadn’t expected to see Redanians or Kaedweni here,” he remarked before taking another sip and discreetly rolling the sparkling liquid over his tongue.

“They are here for the tourney,” var Cleef replied, glancing at the men in question, “That one in the crimson doublet is Sir Kordier of Gustfields. He has won the knight’s tourney every year for the last seven years except in ’69 when he was defeated by Sir Rainfarn of Attre. People have been saying that he is past his prime ever since.”

“And he’s still allowed to participate? I mean, with the war…?”

“The war is over. The Toussaint Tourney is one of the most prestigious events of the year, it transcends border disputes,” var Cleef grinned, “Besides, I am sure Kordier is anxious to confirm his title.”

“Are you interested in tourneys, my lord?” Bastiaan asked.

Ciaran returned the frank gaze of the young spearman who looked every inch the promising young aide in his severe, formal clothes. His slim, high-necked military uniform differed from var Cleef’s only in that it carried no medals, embellished only by a little gold braid.
“We do not hear much about them in the North,” Ciaran answered politely, quashing the urge to point out that the Scoia’tael had not spent the last few centuries playing at war, “But I’m looking forward to attending this one. What should I look for?”

Aep Larsen launched into an impassioned explanation of the rules of the various challenges, the strengths and weaknesses of the main contenders and the finer points of how to judge their performances, complemented by the smiling and indulgent var Cleef who also seemed a connoisseur.

However, Ciaran’s attention soon strayed from the discussion on the relative merits of the frog-mouth helm when jousting with lances. He was tired. He was wearing his weight in gold thread and stiff silk brocade and though his shoes were a perfect fit, their soles were much more unyielding than he was used to. Glancing around the great hall, he wondered how many other people were already wishing they could leave.

This, he was assured, was Nilfgaard. Or at least the closest one got to it outside Nilfgaard itself. And yet Ciaran saw little resemblance to the Nilfgaard he knew in the Ducal Guards, as resplendent in the their gold and crimson armour and odd-shaped helmets trimmed with colourful feathers as the Toussaintois nobility in their finery.

His ear was drawn to the familiar cadence of Morvran Voorhis’ voice though it was pitched lower than usual.

“His Imperial Majesty is well aware of your concerns and—.”

The general was cut off by his interlocutor, an overfed and overdressed Nilfgaardian merchant with a high nose and high colour.

“So you say but I warn you, Voorhis, we’ve had enough. Our caravan guides and drivers are sick and tired of having to crawl thorough necrophage-infested bogs and fields of rotting corpses, fearful of veteran brigands armed to the teeth — sometimes with Nilfgaardian armour and weapons — just to find new routes through the North each time they cross it to bring the wool Toussaint’s economy relies on up to Gwyngaard or to bring down South that Temerian rye you speak so highly of. The cart drivers raise their prices each time they return and soon no amount of coin will persuade them. That raid on Skellige has reignited old animosities and even with the imperial navy still patrolling the passage, our merchant navy has to carry more guns than freight! Oh, and I won’t bore you with tales of what this has done to insurance premiums—.”

“I am relieved to hear that.”

“Well then, hear this instead. Nobody is buying Toussaint wool or fine whiskey, Temerian or otherwise. The prices of such pretty luxuries have been in free fall everywhere in the empire except for Nilfgaard since the start of the war while commodity prices will soon be more than anyone can afford. Storehouses everywhere are being filled to bursting with the Ofieri grain that His Imperial Majesty has so generously offered the Aedirnians and Temerians and that he intends to feed his troops with — but it will not move from there while the expectation is that it’s value will increase.”

The merchant sighed and his heavy medallion shifted as he leant over to pat Morvran Voorhis’ shoulder paternalistically.

“Listen, you’re your father’s boy, you understand these things. You have Emhyr’s ear. Reason with him, hmm?”

“His Majesty will know of your concerns, you have my word. Now, if you will please excuse me, I promised to explain to Lord Ciaran how Toussaint’s famous sparkling wine is produced.”
The general turned back to their group and as a servant waltzed by with a tray, both he and Ciaran handed over their empty glasses and accepted fresh ones then stood together, slightly apart from var Cleef and aep Larsen who were still discussing lances and saddles with a small group of aficionados.

“Is de Wett’s daughter really an imperial concubine?”

“Mara? Oh yes. Around the time of her father’s trial there was talk of her having to leave the harem but my sister put in a word for her — it was the best thing for Mara, it has shielded her from the worst of the disgrace. And they have been best friends since childhood, Klaervy would have been lonely in the harem without her.”

“Your sister… is an imperial concubine?”

“You did not know?” the general queried in mild surprise, raising his glass to aep Larsen as the boy rejoined them, “Yes, Klaervy was the first imperial concubine.”

“Is she as beautiful as they say, general?” aep Larson asked, “I heard she’s the most beautiful woman alive.”

The general chuckled under his breath.

“Of course I am partial but yes, she is very lovely.”

“But Lord Ciaran too is very beautiful,” a portly merchant boomed as he and his clique joined their group, “And beautifully-dressed as well.”

Throughout the polite chatter, Ciaran felt the newcomer’s gaze sweep over over him discreetly, appraising and valuing every last item he wore and lingering covetously on his sash, on the antique ornaments in his hair and at his throat where the collar of his fine-woven black undershirt was just visible.

“Once the new imperial roads are established and secured, we shall have to set up new trade links with your fellow Scoia’tael and the other Aen Seidhe of the North. Perhaps you could recommend some of the finer craftsmen?” the man continued nonchalantly as his companions drew Voorhis away, “The modern stuff produced in Nilfgaard is very good — top notch, the very best quality — but there is always a market for the traditional and we expect demand for that sort of thing will increase.”

In and among the several society ladies who came to look at the noble savage and judge his clothes and jewels and manner, several other such traders came over to discuss similar topics.

Ciaran knew he did not disappoint. As the emperor had once pointed out, he was the very type of the sylvan elf they all expected and even in the difficult circumstances and restricted timeframe, Nilfgaard had had the means to dress him as befitted an imperial concubine. One of Elihal’s most regal imaginings had been brought to life in the high-necked, streamlined cape of heavy black silk encrusted with seed pearls and goldwork at the collar and shoulders, the stiff front folds of which hung down and were tucked into one of the narrower of the elven sashes, framing the brocaded front panel of the bodice Ciaran had been sewn into so tightly he could barely breath or bend his spine. And the admiration was unfeigned. Each piece had been crafted from the finest materials available in the duchy — and consequently of the continent — and though there was a touch of the elven in the simplicity of the cuts, the sash and the slim-fitting trousers, Ciaran knew the whole effect was markedly Nilfgaardian against the Beauclairois attendance, which favoured a bolder use of colour and gold.
Ciaran eventually managed to liberate himself with a few of the sort of platitudes and vague assurances he’d heard the emperor and Morvran Voorhis pronounce, wishing Voorhis were on hand to advise him or even give him a sign but the general — or rather, the trade corporation’s representative — was often deep in conversations he didn’t seem to want to have and so Ciaran made a mental note to ask him how he should respond in future.

Ciaran had long since admired the general’s social graces but just at the moment Voorhis seemed to have intentionally dimmed his strange charm. Without it he had become haughty, dignified, and distant, as tall as any Nilfgaardian and broader than many.

Sweeping the room, Ciaran saw the emperor standing, tall and darkly magnetic even at a distance, amid a coterie of what had to be the most beautiful noblewomen of Toussaint, each wearing a small fortune in silks and jewels. And there, still in their corner, the Redanians and Kaedweni continued to drink together in a strange alliance against the empire and against himself personally, if their poisonous looks were anything to go by.

Bastiaan sidled closer, leaving var Cleef in the company of Damien de la Tour, and followed Ciaran’s gaze.

“We were just discussing them in General Voorhis’ quarters before coming,” the young soldier told him quietly, going on to explain that the Redanian knight in question had lived and trained in Cintra for years and how the Nilfgaardian embassies in the North had spent the time since the ceasefire arranging, facilitating and even encouraging participation — assuring would-be contestants that they guaranteed their safety, delivering travel permits and so on.

“We want it to be a symbol of continental unity,” the young spearman concluded, clearly repeating verbatim something he’d heard, then smiled in shy excitement, “Whenever the Tourney is on the Academy instructors give us the afternoons off so we can go to the parks and listen to the chroniclers read out accounts of the day’s matches. In the evenings, in the artist’s quarter on the Left Bank, they re-enact the best matches of the day and at the end of the tourney, all the victories of Nilfgaardian knights are performed in the City colosseum, “ he continued, his gaze wandering to the Northern knights who had stationed themselves near a punch bowl, awe infusing his voice, “I have six prints of Sir Kordier — the ‘69 one is my favourite, I keep it on the wall of my room at the Academy. I always hoped the army would give me the chance to travel but I never thought… that I’d ever get to watch the tourney in person or see any of the things I’ve seen. I’m so glad I did sign up,” he finished fervently before stopping short and turning back to Ciaran, “I hope my mother remembers to buy me this year’s prints for my collection.”

“Perhaps you could write to remind her.”

“A letter will take a week to reach her, it might be too late.”

“I’m sure General Voorhis or Brigadier var Cleef could get an express letter to her. I could ask for you.”

“No, I couldn’t—,” Bastiaan stammered, looking aghast, then considered the offer, “Would you?”

“Of course, it’s nothing,” Ciaran assured him with a smile and watched the timid, answering grin.

“I… I have another favour to ask. A few friends and I want to enter the tourney in a fight against the Shaelmaar… We thought— We’d hoped to wear your colours and carry your favour.”

“Do I have colours?” Ciaran asked in surprise then shook his head slightly, setting his hair ornaments tinkling, “I am not sure it is appropriate. I would have to ask.”
Bastiaan nodded and Ciaran tried to draw him into conversation again to soften the bow.

“Tell me, is the Second War truly considered a complete failure by Nilfgaard?”

“Not all of it. The plan itself, we think, was sound and certain battalions were amazing — like the Vrihedd,” he added, shy awe creeping back into his voice, “But the Battle of Brenna and what led to it… They are considered consummate failures. And so many senior officers were lost one way or the other. Disappeared, surrendered, died, poisoned, beheaded, survived,”+++ he recited conscientiously, “That’s how we learn it at the Academy, although just now I can’t remember who survived. General Voorhis and Brigadier var Cleef will know.”

The boy lapsed back into talk of the hastiludes but just as Morvran Voorhis rejoined them, he was called away.

“Are you looking forward to the tourney as well, general?”

“I always enjoy watching horses though I prefer racing and hunting.”

“And does your sister share your passion?”

“Oh, Klaervy has a keen eye for studs,” the general answered, his eyes lighting up, “But, between us, she prefers the two-legged variety.”

“Oh…!”

“Indeed,” Morvran said in answer to the elf’s look of shock, “A passion she cannot freely indulge in her position. Although she and the emperor have always seemed happy together. Speaking of whom….”

Ciaran looked over his shoulder to see the emperor approach and as Morvran Voorhis stepped away to give them some privacy, he belatedly realised Voorhis, var Cleef and aep Larsen had been relaying each other by his side the whole evening.

A servant with a tray paused by them and Ciaran accepted another of the cucumber sandwiches he’d so enjoyed at the duchess’ tea.

“Cucumbers in March,” Ciaran murmured then lifted his gaze to the emperor, “Magic?”

“Science. They are grown in the Royal Conservatory for the ducal table.”

Ciaran considered this as he took a dainty bite and absently making a mental note to ask the imperial kitchens to make his with a little less dill.

“Are you tired?”

Ciaran was tired. He’d forgotten it in the excitement of the reception but now that the emperor asked he realised he was utterly wrung out.

“I’m fine,” he murmured, remembering that the emperor never stayed more than three hours at any event and that they’d be leaving soon enough.

“Very well. Just a little longer.”

As soon as the emperor left him, aep Larsen returned to Ciaran’s side with a fresh gossip about the upcoming tourney and festivities and while the elf half-listened and gave every sign of attending to the conversation, his attention and keen hearing were again drawn to Morvran Voorhis, who this
time had been waylaid by some minor Toussaintois merchants who had been patiently waiting their turn with him all evening.

“The Novigradi banks have rejected our letters of credit and refuse to exchange our florens,” they were telling him, pleading and apologetic, “We do not large reserves as some of the bigger companies do, we will not last long without credit.”

“I am sure this is just a temporary misunderstanding and things will soon return to normal. In the meantime, you know most of our large financial institutions have branches in the North — a couple have already opened for business in Gwyngaard. Go to them for the time being, they will help you,” Morvran suggested, turning to the dry, beak-nosed Nilfgaardian standing by him, “Is that not so, my Lord?”

“Certainly.”

“Your excellencies are too kind,” the merchants assured them, melting away in gratitude.

“’Excellencies’?” the banker sniffed.

“They do not know any better,” Voorhis dismissed.

“No… Listen, Voorhis, far be it from me to create a panic but our reserves will not last forever either. Aedirnia will soon start trading but Temeria may not need to buy florens for another year yet. I understand the emperor’s reservations about forcing the northern provinces to change currency before their economies have settled but if we do not stop haemorrhaging crowns we will soon have to restrict our services to those industries we consider essential. Of course we want to help finance as many enterprises as possible but these small outfits cannot bear even the smallest reversal — one shipment lost means bankruptcy. Are we really expected to take such frivolous chances? No, we cannot. It would be unconscionable for us to risk in such an unconsidered way the coin of those who trust us with their savings.”

“We are not asking you to take unconsidered risks, merely to—.”

“Please. The situation in Novidgrad is still so volatile we could lose everything we ever invested there down to the last stone laid of the last wall erected of latest bank whose construction had to be put on hold — to be inaugurated in three months’ time and work on which started just six months before the start of a war we knew nothing about. Your father, the emperor, and Shilard have all been leaning on us bigger banks to set up in Gwyngaard. And since we do understand the value of a backup should things really sour in Novigrad we have dipped our toes but we will not invest more while there is a threat of further upheaval. You cannot make us. We are not pleased, Voorhis, and in making the emperor understand this you would be doing him a great kindness.”

As Morvran Voorhis assured him that he would certainly endeavour to do so, Ciaran’s full attention reverted to Bastiaan and he noticed a very large, surly, and very drunk Redanian behind him and before he could act or speak, the Redanian had jostled the young cadet roughly.

“Hey!” the Redanian grunted then slurred, “You made me spill my drink.”

Bastiaan turned to him and when he spoke, Ciaran heard in him the steely inflexibility he associated with Nilfgaardian soldiers.

“Apologies. Would you like another?”

“Fetch it.”
By now several people had noticed the commotion and Bastiaan signalled one of the drinks-bearing servants but when the tray arrived, the knight shoved it away, nearly toppling it.

“I said ‘fetch it’.”

Ciaran wanted to intervene but wasn’t sure how to and whether he should at all and before he could decide, the Duchess herself stepped in.

“Gentlemen! We are all friends here,” she turned first to the Redanian then to Bastiaan, “This small mishap can be repaired for I am sure the noble knight will not refuse a drink offered in the spirit of conciliation.”

Bastiaan bowed slightly, took a glass from the tray and offered it to the Redanian, who, after a moment’s hesitation, accepted it.

“There! Let us all go and enjoy the rest of the evening.”

Ciaran watched var Cleef pat Bastiaan’s shoulder as he led him away and reached out to touch the boy’s arm gently.

“A mixed team — Alba and Impera.”

Bastiaan blinked at him in surprise then grinned in delight and as he and var Cleef walked on, Ciaran sensed the emperor’s presence by him.

“We are leaving.”

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When the heavy brocade outer robe was lifted from his shoulders, the young elf felt instantly lighter but as his attendants started to unwind and unburden his elaborately coiled and braided hair, Ciaran looked at himself in the mirror and willed himself to look less tired than he felt.

He was exhausted, drained down to the very last vital spark but he could not put out of his mind all the things he’d heard that evening and all the questions they raised. He didn’t think he’d made any serious missteps but Beauclair’s richly-dressed court and the discovery that Emhyr’s concubines were the daughters and sisters of princes and generals had knocked his confidence and shown him how much more he had to achieve. He now took a hard look at himself, trying to reassure himself that he was beautiful enough, good enough for the emperor of Nilfgaard.

A dusting of gently scented powder blurred the worst of what remained of the ravages left behind by his illness and the strain of the journey, and lent a little colour to his high cheekbones. Beneath the heavy coils of hair on either side of his head and the flowers and pins that crowned them, his face look small, exquisitely-drawn and regular. The inner and outer corners of his sooty eyes had been dabbed with gold after the lids had been dusted with a warm plum-grey and Ciaran remembered how the emperor’s eyes had glowed in admiration when he’d first seen him all dressed and ready.

But perhaps even that was not enough and Ciaran resolved to do his utmost to find out whether he really had reached the limit of the emperor’s desire.

He tried to remember what he knew and what he’d heard about human lusts and gave orders for a
bath to be drawn and for the sheerest of his nightshirts and the most luxurious of his dressing robes to be brought for him to change into. His markings had been restored with a little ink to repair the breaks in the lines and they now showed starkly beneath the veil-thin black undershirt embroidered over with tiny suns, most in black, some in gold.

Artifice, all of it, Ciaran reflected wearily, rubbing cream into his hands and instinctively looking for the long crack in the nail of his left index he’d had for years and that was no longer there. His nails were now preternaturally perfect. The half-moon at the base of each one had been filled in with gold to create a nascent sun and Ciaran reflected that Nilfgaard had probably developed infinite ways of depicting the Great Sun and that he’d eventually become privy to them all.

He’d just changed when the emperor stepped in, also in a nightshirt and robe, just as Ciaran’s evening tea tray was brought in.

“You were perfect,” he said quietly, settling into his armchair.

“Thank you, sire,” Ciaran murmured, inclining his head fractionally, then sipped his infusion and studied the emperor’s reflection in the mirror as his attendants continued to unwind his complicated undo, finalising his strategy.

When his attendants offered to wipe his face of colour he shook his head.

“I’ll do the rest myself. Leave us.”

He pretended not to notice the predatory glint in the amber eyes and instead made a show of removing a few more ornaments with studied grace, leaving just a couple of the long pearl-tipped needles that held up the final coils of his dark, glossy hair. Mererid seemed able to grow hair the way dryads grew plants and Ciaran’s loose, lustrous curls had grown to well past the middle of his back and he was well aware they were a particular weakness of the emperor’s.

From Emhyr’s relaxed demeanour and now open admiration, Ciaran had a real sense that the emperor was pleased with his performance and it gave him an extra jolt of confidence as he got to his feet and made his way over to the emperor, putting one foot in front of the other, slinking and swaying as he’d seen human females do. When he was just a step or two away, he unbelted his robe and started to slip it from his shoulders.

Only he was too tired to manage the walk that was new to him, the hem of the nightdress he had to keep kicking away from his heels, and the drape of the robe while also looking into the emperor’s eyes with intention. And so when, instead of dropping elegantly to the floor, the robe caught at his shoulders, he tripped in its folds and landed in a heap on the emperor’s lap.

He caught the lapels of the emperor’s robes to steady himself and bit his lip to fight back tears of frustration but when the emperor tipped his head up they welled up in his eyes then rolled down his cheeks.

Emhyr cupped the beautiful face and kissed away the tears gently, and as he cradled him he felt his inflexible elfling become pliant in his arms.

“I’m sorry, I did it wrong. I ruined it.”

“You did not, elyenenic,” the emperor soothed, “If that sort of thing were to my taste, nothing could have ruined it.”

“What do you like?” Ciaran finally hiccuped, looking up at him with tremulous eyes.
“I like your hair,” Emhyr murmured, brushing away some strands that had come loose in the tumble, “I like your eyes and seeing my reflection in them. I like your own natural way of moving.”

He paused and slipped a hand under Ciaran’s robe, onto his shoulder, relishing the contours of the bone and flesh against his fingers and palm though the thin shirt.

“I enjoy undressing you myself,” he finished before slowly and deliberately pushing the fabric free with his thumb, uncovering the slim, barely veiled shoulder, contemplating it covetously before leaning in to press a warm kiss onto it.

Ciaran watched him, still hiccuping gently, wallowing in his scent and warmth and touch.

“You should rest.”

“I had a bath drawn for us,” Ciaran suggested hesitantly, then pressed his case in the face of the emperor’s silence, “Please? Just a quick one?”

Emhyr looked into the pleading eyes.

The elfling was tired but he was also upset and if he went to bed in this state he would only spend the night fretting.

“Very well.”

Soon they were in the tub, soaking contentedly, the elf back in his emperor’s arms.

“Did I really do well tonight? I wasn’t sure what to do about that Redanian.”

“Yes, you were perfect.”

“Would you tell me if I hadn’t done well?” Ciaran challenged, anxious that this was just another instance of the emperor glossing over his failings.

“Yes.”

Ciaran worried his lip a moment but remembered Elihal’s words regarding clear answers.

“About Bastiaan… He didn’t do anything wrong, they were just trying to provoke him. And he was just a proxy, it’s us they resent — you and me.”

“I know. You were right to do nothing, it is no longer your place. We have the Impera for that. Bastiaan understood his role perfectly. You were never in real danger, even drunk those Redanians knew what lines not to cross.”

Ciaran nodded.

He’d been surprised at the young spearman. Bastiaan always seemed so carefree, even naive. Ciaran hadn’t expected such a display of aplomb and determination but then the boy had Morvran Voorhis and var Cleef to model his behaviour on.

The emperor leant back to settle more comfortably in the tub and, looking at him closely, Ciaran noticed that his mask had worn a little thin and that behind it Emhyr too looked weary.

“You hated it,” he chirped in surprise, “The reception.”

Emhyr made a dismissive gesture then reached out and started to rub Ciaran’s scalp, behind his ear.
They are wearisome things."

Earlier in the evening as he’d looked about the Great Hall filled with plentiful food and drink and the cream of the Toussaintois elite, Ciaran had had the same sharp sense he’d had in Vizima that he was where everybody wanted to be. No doubt the great lords attended such things as a matter of course but the small fry — the minor merchants, the knights, the artists who had lined the walls with sketchbooks trying to take down the guests’ likenesses — had likely had to haggle and beg for their invitations then spent days or weeks fretting over what they would say and wear and do once there.

But for the emperor, the duchess and the others who’d played host, it had been more chore than pleasure and Ciaran well remembered the demeanour Morvran Voorhis had taken on, almost as haughty and distant as it had been that night in Vengerberg. Emhyr was likely as tired of Imperial this and thats as Ciaran himself already was and even wearier of being congratulated on his “splendid victory” and “glorious reign” by people who did not mean what they said.

The duchess was right. It was a lonely life.

As Emhyr trailed his fingers idly down his spine, Ciaran had a sudden vision of Anna-Henrietta and Morvran Voorhis, who had spent the evening apart, alone somewhere quiet, laughing ruefully over their aching feet and the evening’s most preposterous doublets.

“Emhyr, does Morvran Voorhis like me?”

“Morvran was predisposed to like you. He is a traditionalist — also a romantic — and his philosophy takes its roots in Nilfgaard’s elven culture. For him, bringing a pureblood Aen Seidhe, an omega, to Nilfgaard and finally creating a link between the Aen Seidhe of the North and those of the South is profoundly symbolic,” Emhyr explained, playing with the damp, curling tendrils that now framed Ciaran’s face, “He is a good friend to have and would make a powerful ally. You could not ask for a better guide to Nilfgaard’s society and its court. Only beware — Morvran has his own interests and he can be dogmatic in his ideals.”

Ciaran mulled this over, blinking contentedly as the emperor dunked a fat sea sponge into the steaming water then wrung it out over his back.

“And Brigadier var Cleef?”

“Evrard is also predisposed to like you. Nilfgaard looks after its own and to him you are first and foremost one of our war veterans. He has always been bitter about the terms of the Peace of Cintra. Taking you back to Nilfgaard where you will be made comfortable and cared for, he sees that as the first step in redressing a historic wrong.”

“Can he make trouble for me?” Ciaran asked, remembering that the imperial couriers were under the Impera’s authority and that even if var Cleef was not himself the person who read his letters, he was the one that person reported to.

“Certainly. His loyalty is to me and if he thought you or your actions threatened me he would be implacable. But so long as you are seen to do your duty by me he will be an ally.”

Ciaran nodded then realised he had stiffened.

Emhyr’s cool tones betrayed nothing but they were skirting dangerous territory. Huddling closer, he buried his face against the emperor’s throat and when he felt lips pressed against his temple he quivered. He could feel Emhyr’s determination not to fight resonate completely with his own and for a moment their hearts throbbed as one with the common desire to simply be happy and comfortable
together. Another tremor shook him and Ciaran was overwhelmed by the need to feel even more closely bound with Emhyr.

“Emhyr?”

The emperor cupped his face and kissed him deeply, burying strong fingers in his hair then wrapping one arm around him to crush him to him.

Ciaran responded eagerly, his own long fingers tangled in Emhyr’s dark hair as he deepened the kiss hungrily, chasing the familiar taste on the nimble tongue, pressing his hips against the emperor’s.

He drew away to look into the amber eyes, his own bright and beseeching, but the emperor touched his chin gently.

“Not tonight. You have had a long day, you need rest,” Emhyr murmured and the bond between them started to cool and fall away.

“Tomorrow?” Ciaran pleaded before he realised what he was doing, trying to hold onto the moment.

The emperor’s expression as he stroked his thumb over his cheek was unreadable and after an unbearable second had crawled by, Ciaran crumpled back into his arms.

“Couldn’t you stay tonight?”

But they both knew the emperor could not, not when Cintra still hung between them like a fog in the air.

When the emperor next spoke, his words were barely more than a thrum.

“Perhaps tomorrow.”
Example of Toussaintois poetry

Chapter End Notes

* en déshabillé: in a state of casual dress
** A Little Chaos (2014)
*** ormolu: gold-coloured alloy (usually quite a bright gold colour)
° cremello: broadly, a cream-coloured horse
°° à la fourchette: a light meal, in this case a reception with cocktail party type refreshments
°°° A play on the saying “if the Tower of London ravens are lost or fly away, the Crown will fall and Britain with it”
+ guipure: type of lace
++ savaed: one of the eight parts of the elven calendar
+++ A play on the mnemonic used to remember the fates of Henry the VIII’s six wives:
“Divorced, beheaded, died, divorced, beheaded, survived.”
“Such a promise is nonsensical to the Aen Seidhe. We should not ask it of him.”

Mererid stopped mid-stride and stared, nearly dropping the shirt he was holding out to the emperor.

“His Imperial Majesty is surely jesting,” he suggested in open disapproval.

They were at the emperor’s petit lever[1] — not the full-blown protocolary and courtly staging they went through at the palace and that occasionally so tried the imperial patience, but the stripped down version that they had finessed for when the emperor traveled.

“Even if he were to promise, it would be entirely meaningless,” the emperor murmured, pulling on the shirt and buttoning it up.

Mererid did not contest this.

Nordlings called elves fickle but Nilfgaardians understood that the truth was more subtle, that elves could commit to actions but saw no virtue in unchanging emotions in the face of changing circumstances — that they found such behaviour irrational at best, dishonest at worst, and simply did not know how to impose it on themselves. They were fully committed right up until the moment when they weren’t.
“The promise might be meaningless but the spell would still work.”

“The spell could kill him in half an hour.”

“He could kill you in half an hour,” Mererid hissed, forgetting himself.

“He means to use me, not kill me.”

“Perhaps, on the whole, but that can change in a moment,” Mererid said, after glancing around to check the other attendants were still out of earshot, “He resents the necessity of cooperating with us, he has not forgiven what happened after Brenna, and he does not like humans. He is not happy to be here.”

“He is pining. He misses his kind,” the emperor murmured, checking the fall of his shirt and adjusting his collar, “Aen Seidhe cannot live in splendid isolation, even less so than the elves of Nilfgaard,” he paused, “We have taken him away from all of that and given him nothing in return.”

Mererid was silent.

In Nilfgaard, elves and humans had mingled for centuries. Nobody would boast of not having elven blood and the exact amount was immaterial and near impossible to determine for most, making the Nordling’s distinctions between half-elves, quadroons and so on irrelevant. The City had been founded as a mixed society and, broadly, had evolved as one.

Despite this, it had always been necessary to maintain an enclave where their pureblood elves could live entirely according to their own traditions, engaging with the rest of the population only as far as they were comfortable. One of the many concerns they’d had in selecting a pureblood elf as a concubine was the very real risk that he would not be able to adapt.

“You have seen how much effort and discipline he has put into bending himself — without complaint — to our ways,” the emperor said, “He is distressed at not being able to oblige me in this,” the emperor paused, letting the words sink in, “And I have seen him angry. He is cold-blooded, he has never lost his temper. The seal is unnecessary.”

“If he can hold onto his temper then he has nothing to fear from the seal spell.”

“Even without the seal spell, all the other security protocols will still be in place.”

Mererid fell silent as an attendant approached holding a fitted doublet of raven’s wing silk embroidered over with black pearls from the underwater mountain range just south of the Sedna Abyss. The chamberlain practically ripped the doublet from the attendant’s hands before giving him a curt, impatient nod of dismissal.

“And does Brigadier-General var Cleef know you are considering this?” the chamberlain asked slyly once they were alone again, helping the emperor into the doublet.

The emperor glanced at him in irritation.

Evrard var Cleef did not owe his promotion to seniority or to politics or to family connections, he had been hand-picked by the emperor himself. He was a reasonable man in general but uncompromising when it came to the emperor’s security. Even if he had not been, the emperor could not decently ask the head of his personal guard, who was personally responsible for his life and safety, to consider waiving a guarantee that was required of all the other concubines and that was designed to protect the emperor’s person while he was at his most vulnerable.
The young elf wasn’t just an imperial concubine, he was also a trained killer. Nilfgaard itself had had a hand in his training, and everyone knew how impulsive elves could be. The Impera captain would never — could never – agree to such wanton risk-taking nor should he be asked to.

“How is Lord Ciaran?” the emperor asked as his attendants approached to finish dressing him then listened in silence as Mererid recounted the muted reports from the imperial medics.

The emperor’s comments about the elf’s emotional distress hadn’t been idle. In elves, the physical and the psychological went hand in hand. Elves did not fade away so much because their bodies broke down but because something at the core of their beings and identity became eroded, because they lost their sense of self and of their place in the world, becoming disunited with the ebb and flow of the universe. Food and warmth would not be enough to counter the strain of the elf’s mental oppression and his sense that he did not belong.

“And how are his studies going?”

“Very well,” Mererid conceded, “All his tutors agree he is a fast learner and never needs to be told anything more than once. He is quiet, it is sometimes difficult to judge what he thinks and understands — or whether he is even really listening — but now that he has started to act and ask questions it is clear that—.”

Morvran Voorhis was announced and they both turned and glanced up, exchanging the usual greetings as the general joined them.

“We were just discussing Lord Ciaran,” the emperor murmured, tugging his shirt cuffs clear of the doublet’s sleeves, “His tutors are pleased with his progress.”

“I do not doubt it. I have never known anyone to absorb so much of what he reads and sees,” the general concurred, “More like a sponge than an elf. And he is learning to accept help and ask for advice so I expect he will begin to progress even more quickly. We chose well. The duchess is completely taken with him and begged me to bring him this.”

The general pulled out a pale pink envelope from his doublet.

“And I have a first selection of sketches, Your Majesty.”

He motioned one of his aides who stepped forward and laid out two dozen or so sketches on a nearby table and the three of them looked them over.

There were a couple of the emperor towering over his concubine as they’d stood together in the receiving line, a vividly beautiful one of the elf and the duchess smiling with their heads bent to each other as they spoke, and several of the elf standing alone from various angles that showed off the elegant sweep of his clothes, always straight-backed and with his delicate head held high.

“Lord Ciaran was much admired. His clothes and manner were impeccable, of course, but I know many people were astonished by how beautiful and poised he is. Imagine,” the general paused thoughtfully, “Imagine seeing an elf for the first time.”

Elves were commonplace in Nilfgaard but because pureblood elves did not leave the elven enclave until they were deemed to have reached full maturity, even Nilfgaardians were unused to seeing elves as young as Ciaran was. And the former Scoia’tel’s long convalescence had left him looking so delicate and ethereal that only his magnificent eyes and masses of sable-dark hair anchored him to reality.

“Many more will be seeing an elf for the first time as we go south. Toussaint is not the only province
where elves are rare.”

“Some of these are very good. They will help establish his image in advance,” Mererid noted, still sifting through the sketches, “We should have insisted he bring his tailor. His wardrobe is better than what we had planned for him.”

“I agree. I heard no end of compliments on his appearance last night and nine people at least asked me where his clothes were made. He was quite the success,” Morvran said, bowing slightly as he handed the emperor a button hook, “He has a subtle mind — his clothes prove that he gave careful thought to what it would mean to become an imperial concubine of Nilfgaard.”

“He has a subtle mind,” the emperor agreed, methodically doing up his doublet, “But he is also strong-willed. He has shown that he will compromise but that he will not give up his identity as Aen Seidhe. That suits our purpose but we must discover if there are other issues he is prepared to be stubborn about.”

“He may already have an idea of what his limits are,” the general remarked, “We sent the Scoia’tael a great deal of information for the candidates, yes?”

“An inordinate amount,” Mererid nodded, “To discourage the other candidates and to prepare Lord Ciaran as much as possible. From what we know of him now, it seems likely that he read most — if not all — of it and has now had time to digest it.”

Morvran Voorhis held out the small cushion on which the emperor’s rings rested — his other token contribution to the grand affair of dressing the emperor.

“Then some careful questioning is in order. Lord Ciaran has a cautious nature, he is guarded in the way elves are, and it appears he is quickly learning the fine art of speaking little while saying nothing at all. That plays in our favour — it is already difficult to draw him into error — but we will not get any real insight if he keeps his guard up with us.”

“Fortunately, he is also curious,” the emperor noted, slipping on his various rings, “he likes to understand things. We can use this but we must also satisfy his curiosity so he does not seek to do so elsewhere. And he may have a good memory, but he learns best by observation and making connections himself. We will contrive to give him controlled opportunities to do so.”

They had just selected half a dozen of the best sketches for publication when an attendant stepped in to inform them that Lord Ciaran was awake.

“Show him these before they are sent to the printers,” the emperor directed the chamberlain, nodding at the sketches, “And Mererid…”

The chamberlain stepped closer and bent his head to the emperor who lowered his voice.

“Tell his dressers not to lace him into his clothes so tightly. I found seam marks on him yesterday.”

The imperial chamberlain bowed, gathered up the sketches and the letter from the duchess then excused himself.

Ciaran was already at his dressing table, drinking the last of his infusion and studying the genealogical tree at the back of *The Imperial Dynasty* when the chamberlain stepped in.

“From the duchess.”

The elf opened the letter, perused it then slipped it back into its envelope and handed that off to one
of his attendants.

“Leave it on the small desk.”

“And the emperor desired you to see these,” the chamberlain continued and the young elf’s ears perked up slightly as he looked over the sketches.

“Is this really what I looked like?”

“Yes. These will be sent to printing presses all over the empire. They will be the first images people see of you.”

Ciaran’s gaze dropped back to the sketches.

By now he had spent months thinking about and crafting his image and identity as an imperial concubine but this was the first tangible result of his efforts. Elihal would have been so proud.

“May I have a copy of some of these?”

“Naturally. I will have them brought as soon as they are available.”

Ciaran hesitated a moment then his gaze dropped back to his open book.

He had spent the first half-hour of his day studying the extended genealogical tree where he had found Klaervy Voorhis just where she had always been, beside her brother, Morvran Voorhis, and beneath their mother, Kerydwen, and their father, Prince Tacitus Voorhis.

He had even found Mara de Wett hanging from a distant branch with her father and wondered in frustration how many more times he would have to look at this tree and wonder what he was not seeing.

He had studied it before without noticing that Morvran Voorhis had a sister and without noticing that the general and the emperor shared a dynastic great-grandfather. He had read the pamphlet on The Imperial Harem and understood that imperial concubines were not the expensive, exclusive whores the average Northerner supposed them to be but he hadn’t fully appreciated — probably still didn’t — their true status. He had recognised the name De Wett without realising whose daughter Mara was and the names Voorhis and var Attre hadn’t meant anything to him at all at the time.

Resigned, he wondered what else he was missing.

“Has the young gentleman settled on an outfit?”

Ciaran thought about this a moment. They were expected to brunch at the Nilfgaardian embassy in Beauclair and he mentally reviewed the designs of Elihal’s that had been completed, searching for one that would suit the semi-formal daytime occupation he understood brunch to be. He finally decided on one of the simpler designs — a silk robe lined with fine wool, with a plunging swan-neck trimmed with fur and whose wide fringed sash tied in a bow at the back over a stiff cestus belt whose bottom edge skimmed his hips, worn over dark woollen hose and slit down sides up to the waist so the silhouette was clean while allowing for plenty of movement, as did the wide sleeves.

“Perhaps the purple silk?” he suggested, watching for the chamberlain’s reaction, “The one with the cloth-of-gold sash and a sun on each sleeve?”

Mererid nodded his approval and went to give his orders.
Ciaran flipped through to the picture of himself standing with the duchess then glanced up when the chamberlain returned.

“Do the other concubines do this too? Attend events, have prints?”

“It depends,” Mererid answered, frowning slightly as he looked the jacket over for creases then gave a curt nod, “There are some formal events that all the concubines attend as part of the imperial household but most are not compulsory. Some of the concubines attend only the bare minimum of events and hardly ever leave the palace complex at all.”

“Out of their choice or the emperor’s?” Ciaran murmured nonchalantly, picking up his hairbrush and starting on the ends of his hair.

“It depends. Some because of the former, some because of the latter, and some for both reasons. It is not a necessary aspect of being an imperial concubine.”

No, Ciaran reflected as his attendants wove his hair into an elaborate braid, they were all maintaining the fiction that the emperor’s concubines were there to give him heirs.

Once dressed, Ciaran went out into the common room to join the emperor and general who were having coffee out on the balcony, his gaze lingering on the boxes that still lined the walls, and as he passed the bonheur-du-jour he noticed a primrose yellow envelope next to his rose-pale one and saw from the superscription that it was for the duchess. No surprises there.

In the North such things were kept away from prying eyes but it now occurred to the elf that in Nilfgaard anything not expressly forbidden was likely compulsory[2] and consequently fit to be said and done openly in the light of day.

“By the way, Morvran, anything to report from last night?”

“Nothing of consequence, sire. More coffee?”

Ciaran raised his head, shaken from his musings by muffled voices, and Morvran Voorhis’ shadow darkened the door onto the balcony as the general crossed over to top up his and the emperor’s coffee cups.

When Ciaran appeared in the doorway both men turned to him and he saw their eyes glow in approval. The silk he wore was dyed a vivid shade of plum he’d never seen in fabric before but knew Elihal would have approved of and that did wonders for his complexion.

“Come,” the emperor invited after var Cleef and their various aides and equerries had joined them and they’d all finished their coffees and hot chocolates, “There is something I wish to show you before we leave for the embassy.”

When they arrived at the Royal Conservatory — to the surprise of gardeners who’d been given no advance warning of the very great honour they were to be paid — Ciaran’s eyes widened in stupefaction at the high, vaulted ceiling — a glass and iron roof placed over a vast, light-flooded walled garden, the clouds trailing in the sky visible above through the many clear panes and reflected in the small pond in the centre of the garden.

“Go on,” the emperor bade once their Impera guards had dispersed, fanning out and positioning themselves throughout the conservatory.

The elf did not wait to be asked twice and was soon sauntering down one of the alleys lined with neatly-trimmed orange and lemon trees in footed pots that separated the garden out into distinct
quarters — three filled with fruit trees and vegetable patches, the last bursting with ornamental plants and flowers — making straight for the pond by which he paused a long while before kneeling down by it, looking into its depths.

Emhyr’s gaze followed him, admiring the way his elfling moved, ducking under fronds and brushing past lavender bushes as he stalked off to the large old well pump hidden away in a corner, always as light-footed as if he were walking on his toes and with his weight carried high in his slender body, leggy as a fawn and with the same delicate, deliberate gait. One of the gardeners operated the pump and the elf sniffed the water delicately then tasted it before any of the Imperas, frozen in mute horror, could intervene.

The emperor and the general both stood, each with his hands locked behind his back, watching and listening to the shreds of conversation that drifted back to them on the balmy air as Ciaran continued his tour and asked the gardeners countless questions about the conservatory’s construction, the plants they could grow it in and their care.

“Apologies for the disturbance,” Morvran Voorhis bowed his head as the head gardener rejoined them, wiping his hands on his apron, “Lord Ciaran greatly appreciated yesterday’s cucumbers and was curious to see where they had come from.”

“No trouble at all, general,” the old gardener replied as they watched Ciaran kneel to say a few fond words to the next crop of cucumbers, “His Lordship understands a great deal about horticulture. He immediately noticed the water but I suppose that comes from his being an elf.”

“The water?”

“The water in the pond. It’s the same water we use for the plants. It doesn’t come from the Sansretour, it comes from the well. It’s still in the pond but when we draw it out of the well it has bubbles in it — like the famous wine does.”

“An artesian well?”

“Aye. The elves sunk it. This was one of their gardens,” the head gardener confirmed, never taking his gaze off the elf as he continued to explore and ply his followers with questions.

“Is the water important?”

“The plants prefer it. We don’t know why but we have experimented with river water, rain water and with the well water. Plants grow about three times faster on the well water. His Lordship sensed there was something special about it.”

“Lord Ciaran spent time with the dryads of Brokilon. He learned a great deal from them.”

“Oh, aye,” the gardener nodded gravely, evidently having no clear idea what a dryad was, his gaze still trained on Ciaran, “He would make a fine gardener.”

Ciaran soon reappeared, bright-eyed and still immaculate, and the quiet old gardener unconsciously wiped his hands on his apron again.

“To the pleasure of seeing you again, my lord,” the Toussaintois bowed, “Please visit whenever you like.”

— N —
The Nilfgaardian Embassy in Beauclair was almost as solidly Nilfgaardian as the one in Gwyngaard and dominated the city square of which it and its gardens made up an entire side. And yet, the way its stark lines, solid proportions and sober colours stood out against the bright surrounding buildings only highlighted how distinct Toussaint’s architecture and aesthetic appeal was.

Brunch, Ciaran had been reliably informed by Morvran Voorhis, was a Toussaintois custom — evolved out of the need to accommodate the later waking times of attendees the day after balls and other late-night revelries — and one that had become increasingly popular in certain circles of Nilfgaardian society since the Second War.

This one was served in an airy reception room at the centre of which stood a large round banquet table loaded with vases of flowers, glasses of wine, and dishes of appetisers. Arranged in a wide circle around the table were a number of tall, hard-cushioned, scroll-armed couches and after helping themselves to refreshments and mingling, the attendance broke up and drifted towards these in pairs or small groups.

“Brunch is on the low end of formal,” Morvran Voorhis told the elf confidentially as they were shown to their respective couches, just a few places away from each other, “So we should be spared most of the sermonising.”

To Ciaran’s surprise, the servants filed in carrying tripods, whose legs figured bowed sheafs of wheat, and set them up by each couch, some centred and some to one side of the couches. Then they filed in in pairs, carrying large marble trays that they placed on the tripods, turning them into tables.

Voorhis was right and Ciaran dutifully sat through the round of brief congratulatory speeches and even briefer congratulatory toasts. As the servants started discreetly clearing the banquet table, the conversation became general and by the time the servants began filing in with the dishes for the next course, which they presented to each guest so they could help themselves, the company had exhausted its stock of platitudes on the war and talk had drifted to the upcoming tourney.

At the table on Ciaran’s left sat a high-browed, sallow-skinned aristocrat, a marquis who had been briefly introduced to Ciaran at the reception but to whom he had not spoken and who seemed less interested in the hastiludes than he was in Ciaran’s clothes and his long ears, which he surreptitiously glanced at a few times, and who, after helping himself to more of the potato and asparagus velouté as it was being carried away to make space for the next course, eventually recalled himself to Ciaran’s memory.

He was the scion of an ancient Nilfgaardian family, his branch of which had established itself in the beautiful duchy some five generations ago when the region was still underdeveloped and full of opportunities. His family had bought a large vineyard that now produced one of the region’s most successful wines and had had a seat on the Ducal High Council for three generations, a seat he now occupied as High Commissioner for the North while he dabbled in trade on the side.

“This war must have made your job harder,” Ciaran observed, determined to keep his cool as he plied his skills with knife and fork, fervently grateful at the way the meat fell off the bone of the braised rabbit he’d helped himself to.

After the dishes were presented to the guests, they were all deposited on the banquet table — in the true Nilfgaardian style, with several main dishes surrounded by a number of sides from which additional helpings could be served. The selection was such that for the first time Ciaran was not served any specially-made dishes and chose what he pleased from the common offering, though the mage-medic standing at his shoulder discreetly advised him on what he could eat.
“Making arrangements for those Northern knights certainly took some doing,” the marquis agreed, arching an eyebrow, “Anyone would think they were doing us a favour.

“I’m still surprised King Radovid allowed it.”

“I cannot imagine Radovid concerned himself with the matter at all. We mostly deal with his administration and I can tell you they are not all pleased with the situation as it is. Not everyone is as complacent as the Novigradis seem to be about constantly breathing in the stench of burning flesh and rotting corpses,” he paused a moment to take a sip of his wine, his gaze drawn again to the flash of Ciaran’s ring, “Hardly surprising that some Temerians, at least, are starting to prefer the light of the Great Sun to that of the Eternal Flame. You know he is still occupying Oxenfurt? Almost the entirety of the North’s intelligentsia is wandering the four kingdoms with no notion of when they will be allowed to return. In fact — this will interest you — the Academy’s archeology department-in-exile has asked if they can send a team to study the Termes elven ruins and try to locate a passage into its underground chambers.”

“I’d heard most elven ruins in Toussaint are cursed,” Ciaran noted cautiously, disguising his utter horror at the outrage of Northern hands and feet defiling the place where one of his people’s last kings was rumoured to be buried.

The marquis made a sound that coming from someone less refined would have been termed a snort.

“That is correct and the palace at Termes most certainly is. It is under a curse that has been maturing for half a millennium, as I informed them. But these modern types never believe in things like curses.”

“Do you?”

“Certainly. Elven curses are a fact and here in Toussaint they are a reality. Some Toussaintois do it but no Nilfgaardian in his right mind would go fumbling around a cursed ruin, much less live in an elven dwelling or on cursed land — begging your pardon, my Lord, but the curses here are still many and powerful. So powerful that even our Aen Seidhe could not remove them. Not that any of them are any more inclined to set foot here than the Scoia’tael or their Dol Blathanna cousins are, kept away by the same great anger that powers the curses. Justified anger too.”

“Justified but you would still have the curses lifted if you could?”

“Certainly,” the marquis agreed, his gaze lingering on the collar of Ciaran’s black undershirt, the fabric thin as a veil and almost invisible except where it creased, “And after all, why not? All of this happened before our time — Nilfgaard’s, that is, before we took Toussaint from the North. They symbolise the resentment between elves and humans. How can the rift be mended while they remain?”

The marquis was drawn away into conversation by someone a few seats away and after some small talk with his other neighbour, Ciaran let his attention wander.

Emhyr was listening to his long-winded neighbour, his boredom just disguised behind a thin veneer of forbearance, and a corner of his mouth curled into a faint, sardonic smile when he felt Ciaran’s gaze on him and met it.

The drink and good food had loosened the reserve of the usually severe and sombre Nilfgaardians and conversation seemed to flow easily between them. Some people sat squarely before their table, others to one side of it, some of the women contrived to eat neatly with knife and fork while reclining on their seats with an elbow propped on an armrest, and it was not uncommon for people to go and
The openness of the seating arrangement allowed for various levels of interaction and after following the contributions to the common conversation, launched from all sides of the room to meet somewhere over the banquet table, Ciaran listened in on the more desultory talk conducted in groups of two or three near neighbours and noted in amusement the way Morvran Voorhis’ gaze left and returned lightly, like an exhausted butterfly fluttering back onto the flower it had just left, to the ripe and advantageously displayed bosom of the young countess on his left, whose elderly husband’s reedy voice carried across the room above the clink of crystal and fine porcelain and desultory chatter.

“If you will permit my saying, sire, we are all delighted by your visit and the entente that has sprung up. We, Nilfgaardians of Toussaint, have always been the stalwarts of the empire, defending its values and ensuring the darkness does not encroach on the beacon of the City’s light which is Beauclair. It is such a relief to see that our efforts are appreciated and may soon be rewarded.”

Ciaran caught a small, quick reaction in his neighbour. The marquis raised his head and flashed an adversarial look at the count.

“You approve of the reward, marquis?”

“Certainly. Some of us have been lobbying for a Toussaintois senator for years. Absurd that a region as wealthy and influential as this one should not have direct representation! We are as Nilfgaardian as anyone in the City, our voices and our concerns should be heard.”

“How are Senators chosen?” Ciaran asked, glancing at the count.

The marquis picked up his small bowl of salad, set it down on the edge of Ciaran’s table and came to perch on his couch.

“In different ways,” the marquis murmured, following Ciaran’s gaze, “Some are elected, some are nominated by the emperor, and the members of the Imperial High Council customarily become members when they retire. The emperor has yet to inform us how many senators Toussaint will be allowed and how they are to be selected.”

The marquis turned to Ciaran, smiling faintly.

“How agreeable it is, speaking with you, My Lord. May I ask what opportunities you see for your native Dol Gwennelen?”

“How kind of you to say so, marquis. Unfortunately, it seems likely that our reconstruction efforts may take a long time. Dol Gwennelen lacks for almost everything — we must build infrastructures, and administration, homes, coax the soil to yield enough to sustain us…”

They spent the cheese course in a quiet discussion in broad terms of the Scoia’tael’s struggle, a more pragmatic one about Dol Gwennelen’s most urgent needs, then fell into a near-philosophical, somewhat wistful discussion of elven civilisation. The marquis’ ideas had little bearing with the reality of modern elven culture but Ciaran was nonetheless impressed by the marquis’ easy knowledge and recognised in it the basic truths of their past, their habits and schools of thought.

“Certainly, certainly. You can afford to do things to the very highest standard. That is the very reason people are so willing to pay a premium for anything of elven make. And of course, reconstruction must be your priority.”

The marquis paused and smiled at Ciaran. A real smile that reached his eyes and crinkled their
“What a delight it has been, speaking with you, my Lord. It occurs to me that perhaps your understanding of the North gives you a particular insight into the concerns of Toussaint.”

“It does seem to me that more peace, stability and prosperity in the North would benefit Toussaint.”

“Indeed, and in light of this new budding friendship, perhaps I may be so bold as to ask what opportunities you see for trade with the Aen Seidhe. Quality elven goods are prized all over the empire and nowhere more than in Toussaint, whose elven roots we are all so proud of.”

Ciaran, who had had a word with Morvran Voorhis and felt confident enough to attempt a tiny manipulation, inclined his head graciously.

“Fine craft will be rare while there are more pressing things to put effort into and what is produced will likely be for our own use. But I’m sure something can be arranged. Any friend of the emperor’s is a friend of the Aen Seidhe.”

They were being offered coffee, tea, lemon ices, fruit and other post-prandial refreshments and as Ciaran’s gaze surveyed the room he suddenly saw past the surfeit of furniture and dishes to a circle of people coming together to share food, drink, ideas and company. And it reminded him of the abandoned elven traditions that their elders sometimes spoke of wistfully, of kneeling on the ground in a circle, each with his own tray table of food, with nothing between them to stop the flow of talk and feeling. The delicately-carved tray tables had long gone but vestiges of the custom’s essence still persisted among the Scoia’tael in the way they still came together for mealtimes, in pairs and small groups. They still sat on the ground, still in a circle, usually around a fire, and still ate from a common pool of food.

From that too Ciaran had sometimes been excluded by his dietary needs.

He suddenly understood that he had not been served any specially-prepared dishes not just because it wasn’t necessary but also because having him eat from the common table was a way of including him. He also had the clear sense that few things would be more frowned upon than to raise a contentious issue and bring discord into such a gathering.

“Absolutely,” Morvran Voorhis later confirmed when Ciaran put the idea to him, “There are occasions and fora for discussing our differences — and like most societies we have many — but the sharing of bread and salt, they remind us of what brings us together. They remind us of the earth, of which we are all born and on which we all rely for our survival as living beings — elves or humans.”

After brunch, the emperor and his aides had stayed behind for a work session and after the inevitable formal niceties were performed, the general had offered to take Ciaran on a tour of the Hauteville district, discreetly escorted by Impera and Alba soldiers.

Now they were meandering along Toussaint’s streets, paved in the way Ciaran had come to associate with Nilfgaard but winding and weaving between colourful, sun-washed, scroll-roofed buildings and around statues in the elven style in tiny circular courtyards framed and punctuated by carefully-tended trees and flowering shrubs. The Duchy’s knights-errant wandered the streets with their brightly-caparisoned steeds, resplendent in their gilded armours, each one unique and further personalised with feathers tucked into helmets or sashes around waists.

Well-fed, well-dressed, entrepreneurial children called out to them cheerfully, hawking their services as bootblacks, fully-equipped with chairs and shoe-shining kits and Ciaran couldn’t help thinking that the paved streets, untouched by even the thought of a puddle, likely did not help to keep them in corners.
business. As they watched, a couple of knights, barely soiled by traces of peri-urban mud and wearing that expansive look of people just coming off duty, accepted the offered services.

A peacock strutted across their path, pausing to caw at them self-importantly, as they wandered from square to square through up-market residential areas where the streets were large and airy and blued by the lengthening shadows and even the stone-carved balconies, gates and balustrades were so open that they seemed made more to decorate rather than to separate. Here in the wealthy quarter, many of the large mansions showed their elven roots, structures whose original bones had been left intact but with most of the nature around them removed, their grounds shrunk, and the better sort of human dwellings packed into the freed space. The gardens and terraces here boasted not copies but real elven statues that had survived the ages and as they strolled by, Ciaran could feel the hairs on his sensitised skin prickle at the dry crackle in the air, like before a lightning strike, left by the vicious curses that hung like a heavy poison over parts of the city.

The marquis had been right, no Aen Seidhe could live here while the curses persisted.

They turned into Knights Dormant Square where the marketplace teemed with stalls laden with goods from all over the continent and beyond. Aedirnian pears sat beside pink prickly plums from who knew where and plump, ripe tomatoes several months out of season. Others were piled high with colourful, veil-thin Ofieri silks or elaborately-worked pewter tankards or teas and spices heaped into hills and that spilt their strange, warm scents into the crisp air. The shops that lined the streets were filled with sculptures, fine furniture, flowers in pots and flowers in vases, delicacies in tiny jars and bottles topped with neat little squares of patterned fabric and tied with bows, and many of them also displayed their wares on little table and stands outside the storefronts, seemingly unconcerned about theft.

“They have everything here!”

“Nearly,” Morvran Voorhis conceded as they stepped into a bookshop, “After Nilfgaard itself, Beauclair is the empire’s largest trading platform, rivalling Novigrad. Do not buy anything from overseas here, however, the prices are at least three times what they are in Nilfgaard.”

Ciaran wasn’t in the market to buy anything. His meagre savings amounted to the handful of crowns, ducats, orens and groats he’d managed to scrape together over the past months and he didn’t even have those with him. All he had was the floren he always carried.

He stopped short before a shop window in which were displayed lengths of satin painted with bold, fluid ink designs.

“Elven, of course,” Morvran Voorhis noted, “Very modern. Production is tightly controlled by the City’s Aen Seidhe and very little of it is exported outside the home provinces — none of it of the highest quality.”

They continued on their way, stopping before a bookshop before stepping in when Ciaran expressed an interest.

His eyes were drawn to the glimmer of gilt lettering on heavy, black leather-bound books visible through the gloom at the back of the bookshop, proclaiming their weighty topics: the Ducal Chronicles, the Rules and Stipulations of Banking — all thirty volumes and their five additional volumes of codicils.

The front of the shop was bright with lighter literature — boxed sets of Tales and Fables (seven volumes), Guides to the Vineyards of Toussaint (five volumes and a foldout map), Sir Gottfried and the Chessboard Knight (unabridged, three volumes) — all exquisitely-bound in dyed suedes or
He also looked through a carefully ordered selection of pamphlets that appeared to be single chapters of adventure or romance stories.

“Many popular novels are serialised,” Voorhis said in answer to Ciaran’s query, “Chapters are released weekly, fortnightly, monthly. People collect them and once they are complete they can be brought in to be bound into proper books, although many people bind them themselves — see the holes through the page folds? — and the first page of the first chapter is designed to be the cover. Look” he showed Ciaran a colour-printed picture of duelling knights, smiling fondly, “I used to bind my own adventure books when I was a boy.”

Ciaran too had bound his own books from carefully hoarded bits of paper and scavenged vellum scraped clean.

“Couldn’t you have had them do it here?”

“Certainly but they were precious to me,” Morvran Voorhis answered, still looking through the selection, “I liked doing it myself.”

The general wandered off to look through a box of woodblock prints, leaving Ciaran to flip through the latest bodice rippers and the occasional eyebrow-raising, garishly-coloured cover.

“Ah, here is Klaervy,” Voorhis murmured as he pulled out a print labelled ‘Temperance’ and handed it to Ciaran.

Ciaran studied the portrait of the elegant blonde whose classically-beautiful face and shoulders were framed by the stiff lace collar that stood up from the edge of her scarlet bodice’s wide-cut collar.

“That must be a popular print.”

“I believe so. But already a few years old,” the general agreed, flipping through several other prints of his sister in various outfits and poses, “All the newest prints have gone. Ah, and here is Mara. And Arabella. None of var Attre’s girl but I suppose it is too soon.”

Ciaran looked over at the pictures of a pretty but commonplace brunette in a fur-trimmed collar and a lovely, simply-dressed young blonde.

He looked again at the print the general had handed him, admiring again the quality of the woodblock print, full of finely-chiselled, expressive lines and subtle colours that stood out on the thick paper.

They were beautiful but Ciaran wondered at them being on display like this, not a yard from a bargain bin overflowing with cheap prints of handsome bards playing for pretty barmaids in suggestive poses and scenes from the great knightly epics. He supposed there was some rule against depictions of the imperial concubines being marked down and wondered whether his own prints too were destined to languish like this in a perennial commercial limbo.

“Are there no pictures of the emperor?”

“Oh no, His Majesty’s likeness is never rendered. Nilfgaardian art is more representative than strictly figurative. We prefer to depict ideas and virtues — you know, ‘Strength’, ‘Valor’, that sort of thing.”

Ciaran stared, instinctively pulled his floren out of his pocket and stared at it.
“But this is Emhyr! I recognised him from this coin!”

“That is a personification of the Great Sun,” Morvran Voorhis explained smoothly, “The imperial concubines too represent ‘Temperance’, ‘Duty’, and so on — Klaervy is often used as a model for ‘Beauty’ — although I daresay their prints are mostly popular for the dresses and jewellery and such. The Beauclairois are always anxious to copy the latest fashions from the City.”

Ciaran blinked at him, uncomprehending, his gaze going from Morvran to the coin then back again.

“But what if he di—?” Ciaran stopped short, the flat look Morvran Voorhis gave him reminding him that to even contemplate the emperor’s demise was blasphemy against the Great Sun and treason against the Empire, “What if he stopped being the emperor?”

“If His Majesty abdicated, new coins would be minted, the Treasury and banks would start to hold back the old coins and put the new ones into circulation. All the old coins would be replaced within half a year.”

“Isn’t that a lot of trouble?”

“Oh no, we do it periodically as a matter of course to keep the forgers on their toes. Besides, people love a freshly-minted coin still warm from the press, they line up at the banks to turn their old ones in.”

The spring days were still short and the two stepped out of the bookshop just in time to see the streetlights being lit in the gathering dark.

They were ambling towards the well-sprung carriage that had taken them to the embassy and that was waiting to take them back to the palace when they passed an art dealer and Ciaran stopped short before the large, framed oil painting of Beauclair palace displayed in its window.

“Do you like it?”

“I… I wish I could send it to Iorveth,” Ciaran stammered truthfully, not having a prepared answer ready, “I want him to see…”

“That should not present any difficulties. If the canvas is taken off the frame it can be rolled up for easy transport. I will arrange for it to be sent to the palace.”

Ciaran stood, still staring at the painting until it was taken out of the shop window, wishing he could travel back with it, back to Iorveth.

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When Ciaran returned to the imperial suite he found the emperor already at the large desk in the corner, at work as always.

“Did you enjoy your walk?” the emperor asked, looking up from his papers.

“I did, thank you, sire.”

Ciaran hung back and at seeing the restless, melancholy demeanour, the emperor put down his quill, then pushed back his chair as he nodded curtly at the attendants and Impera guards posted about the
“Leave us.”

Ciaran went and settled in the emperor’s arms, huddling against the broad chest, miserably grateful that the emperor never questioned his unhappiness. He felt the brush of lips against his hair then against his neck as Emhyr scented him, for all the world like an alpha. Humans could smell arousal on elves and Ciaran knew that Emhyr could not only smell his but was also jealous of it — it was why he always wiped him down himself after play and opened the windows to clear the air before anyone else came in — but the elf now wondered if the monarch’s elven blood allowed him to discern subtler scents too.

One of the large hands burrowed with difficulty under Ciaran’s tailored clothes and finally came to rest in the small of his back.

“You have done very well, elyennen. There are no official engagements tomorrow, you may have the day to yourself.”

“And you?” Ciaran chirped, tilting his head up. He wanted hugs and kisses and despite his many faults, the emperor usually obliged him in these things.

“I have things to attend to tomorrow but I have the rest of today free,” the emperor paused to place a few soft kisses on his mouth, “I thought we could have a quiet dinner and you could employ your time until then by seeing to all these boxes.”

Ciaran’s ears perked up and he twisted around in the emperor’s lap to look at the many crates and boxes that still littered their sitting room.

“May I?”

“Of course,” the emperor murmured, catching the tip of one twitching ear between his teeth momentarily, “Go and change into something more comfortable and gather your attendants, you will need their help.”

It took Ciaran’s attendants the better part of an hour to carefully snip him out of his jacket’s bodice, help him out of the rest of his clothes, unwind the coils of hair piled onto his small head and secure it all back up in a thick braid. By the time he’d changed into a fresh undershirt and his brocade robe and returned to the common room, Mererid had had afternoon tea laid out on a low table and both the full length mirrors had been brought in and set up by the tall window doors.

The emperor was back at work, a tall pot of coffee and a tiny cup arranged on a silver tray in the corner of his desk, and he glanced up, his gaze lingering on the beautiful young elfling.

“How should I start with?” Ciaran asked Mererid nonchalantly, settling in one of the deep armchairs so typical of Beauclair and pouring himself a cup of his infusion.

“Perhaps one of the small ones?” the chamberlain suggested, nodding curtly at an attendant.

Ciaran sipped his infusion but his gaze followed the package as it was picked up, carried across the room and set down by him on the table. He continued to force himself to poise as he unwrapped the box then opened it, revealing a silver toiletry set in the elven style, all organic twining shapes. He lifted the hairbrush out and looked it over, tracing the long lines of the vines and leaves with his fingernail.
“Do you like it?”

Ciaran glanced at the emperor and nodded shyly. He replaced the brush and took out the comb, turning it over in his hands before running it through the thick locks of hair that had been left loose.

He hadn’t needed new brushes. The ones he’d brought with him were plain but they were serviceable and Ciaran felt a pang of shame, realising Nilfgaard had felt compelled to provide the trousseau the Scoia’tael hadn’t had the means to equip him with. Ciaran aep Easnillien might use a wooden hairbrush but no imperial concubine of Nilfgaard could.

The next box he unwrapped was a case specially tailored to hold a triptych mirror not unlike the emperor’s but with panes shaped like lancet arches, backed with jet-black guilloché enamel and whose bevelled edges were delicately etched with trailing willow branches, waterlilies and fat, veil-finned goldfish.

“Where did you find these?”

“We sent for them. They were made in the elven enclave in Nilfgaard.”

Ciaran had known there was an elven enclave in Nilfgaard where the pureblood elves lived but he’d known it in the abstract way he knew there were dragons in Zerrikania twice the size of even the largest of those in the North and that it was never winter in Ofier.

Seeing his own reflection in the mirror, his long ears and symmetrical features, so much an elf, the existence of other elves, elves he did not know, Nilfgaardian elves, suddenly seemed so real that Ciaran pressed his fingertips to the mirror’s surface, as if he might reach through it to touch them.

The next box was all Nilfgaard. It contained a handful enormous and elaborately-worked lace collars and several chiffon and organza ones, embroidered in gold or silver thread, or sewn with pearls or glass beads, or simply with thread worked into flowers, suns or stars.

Then came the great carved chests that Ciaran unpacked near the mirrors and that contained entire bolts of fabrics. As he pulled them out, Ciaran studied them closely for type and quality with Mererid’s guidance and held the ones that most caught his eye up against himself before the mirrors to judge the effect, the colour and drape, taking mental notes as to which of Elihal’s designs they might suit.

There were twills worked from start to finish in Toussaint with Toussaint wool, the finest organdy known to Nilfgaard, also produced in Toussaint from the finest North Ofieri cotton. Bolts of patterned damasks and brocades so heavy with gold and silverwork it took three attendants to hold them up for viewing, and bolts of silk satin that gleamed and glowed in the light. Ciaran couldn’t help a gasp when he discovered some had been embellished in places with the same type of ink designs he’d so admired earlier, running his hand over the design of magnolia blooms on the branch on a large swath of white satin, the top half a wash of the palest pink and the bottom hem dipped in bud green.

There were yards and yards of crisp organza, satin and cotton batistes, muslins, striped voiles and a white linen lawn so fine Ciaran could see the purple veins in his wrists through it, silks of every weave and weight in black and white and greens and golds and every colour Ciaran had told Mererid he wanted to wear, including a stiff, glossy taffeta that had been smuggled out of Haakland, and finally, stored in brass-bound ebony chest and protected by sheets of translucent mulberry paper, were several lengths of that gossamer fabric his undershirts and nightclothes were made of.

Elihal had once taken apart a food-stained ruff during one of his lessons on clothing construction,
freeing some four yards of the finest cambric from several hundreds of minutely-constructed cartridge pleats from the characteristic figure-eight folds. Ciaran understood how much material the complicated constructions Nilfgaardians favoured would consume and how much of it was wasted to line up patterned fabrics into the symmetry they found so pleasing. The inordinate amounts of fabric he was being given was simply the bare minimum Nilfgaard thought was necessary for him to maintain the dignity of his rank as an imperial concubine.

He’d expected the boxes to contain things of this sort but even so he couldn’t quell the gratitude that burned through him at seeing himself more lavishly and generously provided for than he'd expected. Elihal had taught him to appreciate quality and Ciaran couldn’t help a shiver of pleasure as he ran the fabrics between the pads of his sensitive fingers and watched the play of colour on lush silks and brocades.

“Do you like it?” he asked the emperor brightly, a length of rich mustard shantung slung over his shoulder.

The emperor had long since abandoned his papers in favour of sitting back in his chair and sipping his coffee as he watched the elf’s reactions.

“Very much,” he answered with a slow nod.

He poured himself another cup of coffee, carried it over to the low table, settled onto the sofa there then helped himself to a smoked salmon sandwich before leaning back comfortably to more fully enjoy his elfling’s childlike joy.

Ciaran was happily ripping the wrapping off some large trunks and making small sounds of delight when he opened them up and found the insides arranged like little wardrobes, complete with drawers and hanging space.

Kneeling on the carpets and pillows that had been piled up near the mirrors for him and to which had been added some newly-unpacked cloaks, pillows and throws, Ciaran went through several more packages, trying on more clothing that had been pre-made for him, marking some for alterations.

“Are these really necessary?” Ciaran asked as he looked through piles of warm weather clothes, “We’re carrying so much already.”

“You may need them sooner than you think. And we will not find the same quality for some time after we leave Toussaint.”

And so Ciaran continued, sorting through them with Mererid and happily directing his attendants as to which should be kept ready and which stored away for future use, pausing only to try on a few of the lightweight tunics, his brocade robe lying discarded on the back of a nearby chair.

He smiled at himself in the mirror as he turned this way and that, rejoicing in the liberty of movement the tunic afforded him, one of simple linen, cut in the elven style, clearly meant for comfort and travel rather than representation. This was not for the imperial concubine and yet, in its own way, it was of as high quality as the most formal of his ceremonial robes.

He discovered another small and slim version of the Impera doublet and hose, identical to the one he wore to go riding, and two riding habits, one in hunter green, the other in rust. He counted, disbelieving, the seventeen tiny pleats at the back of the gathered sleeves of a linen chemise then pulled it on and marvelled at the drape.

“Come,” the emperor murmured, and Ciaran went over and held out his arms, ostensibly so the
emperor could admire the sleeves but also conscious that the sleeves’ volumes and neat cuffs showed off his delicate wrists to great advantage, smiling shyly at the patent approval that glowed in the amber eyes.

The young elf felt a sudden twinge of shame at realising that in his excitement he’d dropped his mask of reserve but then the emperor took his hands in his, turned them palms up, then nudged the tiny button at each cuff with his thumbs and Ciaran remembered that he could take his cue from the emperor and that their attendants and Impera guards too should be persuaded of their good relations.

“Beautiful,” the emperor murmured, his thumb slipping between the edges of the cuff placket to rub Ciaran’s skin gently, “Go on.”

So Ciaran went back to his parcels and made small sounds of awe and delight as he unwrapped strings of seed pearls and long ribbons to wind in his hair, half a dozen long silver hairpins shaped like arrows that he brought over to the emperor so he could tuck them into his hair.

He was happy and couldn’t help sharing his happiness with the emperor, whose gaze he felt always on him, sensing too the deep, almost sensual pleasure Emhyr derived from watching him.

“It’s so soft,” Ciaran breathed in awe then skittered over to the emperor and knelt to show him the Blue Mountain fox tippet he’d just unwrapped and into the luxurious fur of which his fingers sank and disappeared as into deep snow. The emperor took one end and ran the black tip along one of the long ears, smiling when the elf shivered slightly.

The amber eyes watched him lazily, burning warm, and Ciaran looked into them from behind lowered lashes, almost overwhelmed by the desire to curl up in the emperor’s arms again, reminding himself that their attendants and guards were still present.

“You can continue tomorrow if you are tired.”

Ciaran bit his lip, ears pricked up, and looked at the remaining boxes and parcels, the largest of which already stood in the middle of the room, waiting to be opened.

“Go on, elyenner,” the emperor murmured, his voice pitched low so he wouldn’t be overheard.

Ciaran went straight to the large crate, cut the ropes that bound it with the scissors provided him and the sides fell open to reveal an exquisite little rosewood bonheur-du-jour, lacquered in black and painted with gold diamonds in imitation of the Nilfgaardian standard. The young elf knelt and bent and crouched and strained to look at the writing desk — the claw-footed, detachable legs, the gilt gallery that ran along the top of it, the brass scrollwork. He unlocked the hinged front and lowered it then touched his fingertips along the leather writing surface built into it and opened each of the three inner drawers, already planning what he would keep in them.

When he finally tore himself away, he went back to the emperor and knelt by him.

“Thank you.”

Barely a whisper.

“It should all have been yours from the moment I chose you but there was no time and no way to have it safely brought North.”

“I don’t mind. I… I’m sorry we could not provide more.”

“You have the same entitlements as any other of my concubines,” the emperor said gravely then
nodded at his chamberlain, “There are some other things you need.”

He stood and helped his elfling back into his heavy robe and tied the wide bow to fasten it shut while Ciaran’s attendants arranged his new mirror on his new writing table.

A pair of imperial mages filed in and Ciaran watched, astounded, as they lifted the protective spell woven into the walls to allow in a slender, distinguished man followed by two neat assistants and two burly ones carrying large cases under such heavy enchantments that they could be felt from across the room.

Ciaran stood by the emperor, motionless, his face a mask, as the court jeweller introduced himself with a bow and a few flourishes then set about laying out his wealth of gold and silver and gemstones.

Ciaran sat, grave and straight-backed, at his desk as he was presented with a selection of diamond starbursts, holding them up against himself, one by one, until he found one he liked and met the emperor’s gaze in the mirror to judge his opinion. In this manner they chose between themselves several pins, brooches, fibulas, necklaces, a lariat of jasmine flowers carved out of whalebone, as well as a diamond aigrette figuring two ears of wheat tied with a bow, a rope of pearls and a rope of diamonds.

The offering had, Ciaran realised, been preselected for him with some settings in Nilfgaard’s formal, classical style full of symmetry and strict proportions, and the more organic elven style, and all the stones were in the colours he favoured in his clothing — Nilfgaard’s seal of approval.

Then came the commissioned pieces, housed in their own cases, selected by the emperor himself.

Ciaran hardly dared to touch the boxful of little golden suns that could be threaded onto ribbons or chains or hairpins, the fine silver and gold chain caul[3] dripping with teardrop pearls, the laurel wreath circlet made of gold and jet berries, or the two circlets, of obvious elven make and one of which was set with rounded triangular-cut diamonds.

Then came the two full parures that he didn’t dare touch at all and that the emperor himself helped him with. One was of large, diamond-flanked chrysoberyls[4] whose colours varied from deep ocean green to raspberry, so beautiful that Ciaran forgot to breathe for a couple of beats as Emhyr lifted the necklace out, clasped it around his neck and it settled over his collarbones. The other was a cascade of diamonds arranged into tiered wreaths hung from bows and that could be disassembled into brooches, hair ornaments, and simpler necklaces, or adapted into a tiara.

These, Ciaran decided as the master jeweller demonstrated the conversion for them, were for the imperial concubine and as the emperor carefully settled the tiara onto his head, Ciaran tilted his chin up imperceptibly and met the cool amber gaze in the mirror.

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Neither of them changed before sitting down to an early meal lit by candles flickering in their silver holders. A bottle of a full-bodied red wine stood by the emperor’s glass while a slender bottle of delicate rosé clinked among the ice cubes in a wine bucket by Ciaran’s elbow.

This meal too was in the Nilgaardian style and they sat at an angle from each other at the round table, flowers and food arranged opposite them, where a third person would have been seated.
An attendant helped them both to some consommé and as he surveyed the offering, Ciaran noticed that they’d been served more elaborate versions of their favourite dishes and concluded the emperor must have given specific orders. He glanced shyly at the emperor who was watching him from beneath lowered lids and realised he should have been the one to select the menu. Now that he was no longer confined to a wagon and travel clothes he would have to pay more attention to what the emperor liked to eat and drink, what he liked him to wear and how he liked him to behave.

“Did you enjoy the conservatory?” the emperor asked while the last of the warm dishes were brought to the table.

“I did, thank you for taking me.”

“You gave poor Evrard a shock when you tried the well water.”

“I’m sorry. I forgot,” Ciaran chirped. He had realised his misstep the minute he’d seen the horrified faces of the two Impera guards nearest to him, “Do you have a conservatory at the palace?”

“The weather in Nilfgaard is warm enough that it is unnecessary and we buy many agricultural products from the surrounding provinces and Ofier.”

Ciaran carefully stuck the tines of his delicate silver fork into a stalk of white asparagus spotted with balsamic vinegar and remembered the tiny pictures of coconut trees over Venendal on his map of the empire.

He knew that the City was placed at the mouth of a river but that was hardly enough to paint a mental picture of the capital and he was curious, desperately curious, about Nilfgaard’s climate, its plants and animals, its terrain. The taste of his questions exploded in his mouth but when he glanced up at the emperor his mind shied away from asking them.

“Any friend of the emperor’s is a friend of the Aen Seidhe?” the emperor murmured, an eyebrow just barely raised, once they were alone.

“Was I wrong to say that? I didn’t want all this coin people are going to make off the Aen Seidhe going into the wrong pockets.”

“No, it was a nice touch,” the emperor murmured, giving him a long look, “The marquis was impressed with you. He allowed himself to be so carried away by enthusiasm that by the end of the afternoon he had floated the idea of throwing a fundraiser for Dol Gwennelen before we leave, saying what a great honour it would be if you condescended to attend.”

Ciaran considered as he helped the emperor then himself to a quail in a tiny puff pastry basket.

“Too great an honour?”

“Perhaps just great enough.”

“Would it be appropriate for me to accept? How would I even go about it?”

“As you do not yet have your own secretariat, the invitation would be passed on to you by mine. That will imply that your attendance has met with my approval and you may accept it in your own name,” Emhyr paused to watch Ciaran eat, smiling faintly at his neat, almost fastidious manners, “In future you might be allowed to attend such functions on your own but if this fundraiser does materialise I will accompany you, it is appropriate under Toussaint’s more permissive social mores and in light of the recent war. I expect Anna Henrietta too will contrive to make an appearance.”
Ciaran raised an eyebrow at this.

To extend a formal invitation to the emperor was a breach of etiquette as it implied he might otherwise not be welcome. The imperial secretariats were merely informed of any social event and the emperor attend as he saw fit. In Toussaint, the same rule applied to the duchess.

Getting the emperor of Nilgaard to attend a provincial fundraiser for a tiny new protectorate so poor it had been exempted from taxes would be the social coup of the decade.

“That *would* be a very great honour,” Ciaran remarked a little iricantly, “Two sovereigns attending a provincial fundraiser for a tiny new protectorate so poor it cannot afford taxes. And all for the price of one concubine.”

“An *imperial* concubine,” Emhyr murmured, “And it is not just frivolity on Anarietta’s part. Having an Aen Seidhe back in Toussaint means a great deal to her, to all of Toussaint.”

“My presence here is not meant as exoneration,” Ciaran said frostily.

“No,” the emperor concurred mildly before continuing on a conversational note, helping Ciaran to more of the small white river fish poached in milk and still warm in their chafing-dish. “The Toussaintois are very generous and the marquis is a persuasive man, very well connected. Perhaps you could give Iorveth advance notice that he may receive substantial funds.”

This was it. This was the condition.

Iorveth would *hate* accepting coin and assistance. The Scoia’tael had always worked and fought for everything they needed and believed in but now everything had come undone, now everything felt like charity. And what Iorveth would loathe even more than accepting charity from humans would be showing gratitude for it.

Ciaran’s job now would be to make Iorveth and the others swallow it all.

And he would have to do it.

Elves lived such long lives, they didn’t have the same timescales as humans did, they were bred to the notion that if things were worth being done then they should be done well, even if it took longer — that was how their great palaces had been built, stone after perfect stone. But, to his irritation, Ciaran could already see how incompatible this way of life was within the current world order. The rest of the continent would not wait for them and Nilfgaard would not fund or even countenance a delay that to human eyes would pass as self-indulgence.

“I’ll write to him and tell him I arranged it.”

It was not what Iorveth expected of him but Ciaran knew how to handle Iorveth. He had always known, it was part of what had made them so strong together.

He would have to learn to manage Nilfgaard and its emperor too.

“What will you do tomorrow?”

“I promised Anarietta I would listen to doleances with her. One morning a week she sits in open session and anyone who has a grievance may come and air it, they merely have to wait in line.”

“That sounds…”
“Dull. But Anarietta says it makes her feel close to her people and thinks I should institute something similar. I have meetings planned throughout the rest of the day — with your marquis, amongst others — and I will be dining with the officers.”

After dinner, Ciaran went to prepare for their bath while the emperor sat down with his personal secretary to go through a fresh crop of messages and he was sitting at his vanity table in his nightshirt and robe, having already gone through his evening beauty routine and now sipping his infusion.

The emperor too had changed into a robe and Ciaran saw the familiar glow of contentment in the emperor’s tawny eyes as he settled to watch an attendant start to undo his elaborate braid.

“You may go,” Ciaran dismissed and picked up his new hairbrush to brush through the newly-released tresses.

Their attendants had barely filed out before the emperor moved out of his armchair and gently took the brush from the surprised elf’s hand.

Emhyr sank his hands into the cool, heavy lengths then let them slide between his fingers before brushing them carefully, watching how the boar bristles smoothed the curling strands into a sheet of silk.

He’d watched his young concubine’s attendants do this several times and now imitated them, starting with the ends and slowly working his way up and watched his beautiful elfling close his eyes and shiver as the bristles passed lightly over his sensitive scalp.

Emhyr laid the brush back down then carded the long, soft tresses with his fingers before leaning over to press a long, deliberate kiss onto the top of Ciaran’s head, meeting the hazel gaze in the mirror as he did so.

“I have something for you,” he said, pulling a tiny case from his robe’s pocket.

“I don’t need anything else,” the elf told him, twisting in his seat to look up at him.

The golden gaze dropped to the small box held out to him but didn’t take it so Emhyr opened it for him.

“Go on,” he bade as his elfling stared at the ring nestled within, eyes widening, and when Ciaran still didn’t move, he took the ring out and held it out to him, “Give me your hand.”

Ciaran obeyed and Emhyr placed the ring on a slender finger, bending to kiss the knuckle just above it.

“You will be able to keep this one on, it will fit under most of your gloves. I should have thought of it sooner.”

The elf was staring, astonished, at the ring that looked like a simple band fashioned out of ice, the inside and outside smoothed but still rough-hewn along the edges.

“Elven make,” Emhyr murmured, folding his hand under Ciaran’s and moving it slightly to admire the play of candlelight off the many facets, “It arrived today by portal from the City.”

“A diamond?”

“Yes. A beautiful colour but with a large, visible flaw in the centre. So it was hollowed.”
“Thank you,” Ciaran murmured, looking up at him with large eyes and Emhyr couldn’t resist leaning in to kiss him slowly, slipping his hands under the elf’s robe and slowly pushing it off.

He watched as Ciaran pinned his hair up, slender arms visible through the thin bathing shirt, then handed him into the tub before removing his own robe and joining him.

“Come,” he said quietly to the young elf who was sunk to his chin in the water, watching him.

A moment later Ciaran was in his arms and Emhyr kissed a pale shoulder through the wet fabric, moved along to the delicate collarbone bared by the shirt’s loose opening and followed it up to the long throat. He cupped the delicate face, looking it over, then sank his fingers into the dark hair and gently stroked the delicate head, then held it still as he plundered the willing mouth, savouring the cool heat of elven magic that lingered on his tongue.

Pulling away, he saw the usually solemn, still features had softened into a smile.

A forced smile beneath a gaze that wouldn’t meet his.

That Ciaran was putting on a brave front only brought to bear the fact that he was afraid. Not afraid that he couldn’t please him or that Emhyr would hurt him — those fears had faded, Emhyr sensed — but afraid of something neither of them could control. Afraid he would remember.

It would be better for them if they could get through this. Sex was as natural to elves as breathing and sleeping and Ciaran was still an elf. Their nearness had already helped them, relieving some of the tension in a relationship that was still sometimes fraught.

But if they were going to try then it had to be tonight. They had danced around the issue long enough and all the while Ciaran had only grown more anxious. And Emhyr sensed that he would be able to perform tonight and could not know for sure when he would again. Their window of opportunity was closing rapidly and once it did they would be trapped in this semi-platonic relationship.

But Emhyr could smell the thread of acrid fear and feel the rigidity in the muscles trying to hide their trembling and looking down at his elfling Emhyr didn’t have the heart to force him, not when he’d already endured so much.

A tear dropped onto Ciaran’s cheek and Emhyr brushed it away, then kissed Ciaran’s forehead and pulled him onto his shoulder, holding him as tightly as he dared. The tension in Ciaran’s body leached out of him as he melted into tears.

“I’m sorry.”

“We will find another way,” Emhyr murmured, his hold tightening to both protect the slim body and stop the tremors that shook it.

He had done all he could to manage Ciaran’s failing and inconstant memory. He’d had the inside of his wagon covered in tapestries and rugs so the wooden sides wouldn’t remind him of the prison-barge, he’d ensured Ciaran was never trapped or confined anywhere dark or small if it could be helped and had given orders for him to be made as comfortable as possible so he might learn to forget the consequences of some of the things done to him. But he’d also long made his peace with the idea that it might not be enough, that this might be beyond even his powers, and he’d long accepted the idea of forever putting an end to their intimacies if they ever did trigger any traumatic memories.

Ciaran was still clinging to him but the tears had stopped and the hard shudders were subsiding.
Emhyr buried his nose in the dark curls — there was still distress but the fear had gone.

Ciaran had noticed the intentionality that had underwritten their afternoon together and the meal they’d shared, he understood, but Emhyr wondered if this attempt at seduction had been a mistake. Ciaran was not sensitive to this sort of thing, never had been and probably never would be. Perhaps his attempt to reassure the elf had only burdened him with a greater sense of dread and responsibility.

They would have to find another way.

Fortunately, the elf was keenly intelligent and they understood each other. They could still become allies if they continued to get along.

Emhyr reached out for the robe he’d slung over his chair and tugged it to the ground. He retrieved the enchanted stone in it and touched it.

“Tea in Lord Ciaran’s room.”

“Immediately, sire,” Mererid’s voice spoke from within the stone.

Ciaran’s grip on him tightened and Emhyr gently kissed his forehead again.

“Come, we will have some tea before bed.”

He helped the elfling out of the sunken tub then they dried off and he pulled his shirt and robe back on before helping Ciaran into the fresh nightshirt left out for him.

And because Ciaran still didn’t look himself and seemed reticent about leaving the bathroom, Emhyr bundled him up into his robe then picked him up so Ciaran could hide his face against his neck again. He carried the elf off past a handful of their attendants to his bedroom, settling them both on the bed, Ciaran tucked up against him as he so often had been in the wagon.

For a while they sat tangled up together, Ciaran still hiccuping occasionally, Emhyr stroking his back and kissing his hair, as they quietly mourned what could have been.

When the elfling had calmed down, Emhyr poured out two cups of tea, dumped a teaspoonful of sugar in Ciaran’s and stirred it.

“Anarietta has sent more treats,” he observed, eyeing the basket by the tea things that had been laid out for them on the bedside table.

“She sends one every day,” Ciaran sniffled, still tremulous.

“She likes you. She told Morvran so.”

“Really?” Ciaran sat up to accept a cup.

“Yes. So does your marquis.”

“He’s not my marquis.”

“He may think he is.”

Ciaran sniffed then took a long, steadying sip of hot tea then handed Emhyr back the saucer and wrapped his hands around the cup.

“Are you really going to make him a senator?”
“Perhaps. There are worse candidates.”

“He’s a marquis.”

“It is only a Toussaintois land title, bought as a package deal along with their vineyard decades ago. Still, he is technically a Nilfgaardian citizen, he believes himself to be Nilfgaardian and he is an expert on the North. He would make a useful ally.”

“One ally eternally grateful to you too, if you attend his little party,” Ciaran noted a little acidly, “Is that why I was seated next to him?”

“We wanted to see how he would react to the bait,” Emhyr murmured, pausing to breathe in the tea’s scent, “He seems quite malleable and predictable. You could ask around after him.”

Ciaran gave the emperor a long look over the rim of his cup.

“Discreetly? Just so he knows he’s being vetted?”

“It will do no harm for him to think so. And if he is chosen, he may think he owes you something.”

“And if he is not — well, the decision was never in my hands, was it?”

Emhyr inclined his head and sipped his own tea.

Ciaran watched him a moment, his mind returning to some questions that had lingered in his mind all afternoon.

“What do senators do?”

“The Senate votes on major legislation regarding the constitution, the civil administration, the budget and certain Treasury disbursement, and specific points of foreign policy. It also advises the judiciary on points of law within its areas of competence.”

Ciaran bit his lip a moment and made a mental note to borrow some books on politics and constitutional theory from the emperor’s library so that he could puzzle out what all those words really meant when used in that particular order.

“How many Senators will Toussaint have?”

“That has not been decided yet, we have just begun negotiations and this will have to be decided in the wider context of the creation of Senators in other territories as well. It will require a change in the constitution and is something that affects the global balance of power in the empire.”

Ciaran frowned.

“But any change to the constitution must be agreed by the Senate. Why would existing Senators vote to dilute their own power?”

The emperor gave him a long, appraising look.

“They might not. In fact, we expect resistance to the idea.”

“And you don’t have to do it,” Ciaran said slowly, his frown deepening as he tried to puzzle through it, “Because the marquis said they’ve been lobbying for representation for years.”

“No. The provinces are not legally entitled to direct representation under the current constitution.”
Ciaran returned the emperor’s steady gaze, sensing there was more to this than met the eye, once again chasing a fleeting insight. “And you wouldn’t start a fight you might not win without good reason,” he carefully picked out the path of his thoughts, “So you must really want to do it... Why do you need them?”

He saw the a flare of intense satisfaction light up the amber eyes and the emperor studied him a moment longer before pouring them both more tea. “Morvran would tell you that as the sun’s rays reach further they must naturally cover more ground,” the emperor answered with a faint, sardonic smile, “The addition of Temeria, Aedirnia and Dol Gwennelen, the empire risks becoming overstretched. The ducal house is a branch of the imperial one and Toussaint has always remained solidly loyal to Nilfgaard. Placed where it is, at the northern border, it has helped stabilise the empire — the Imperial Navy patrols the coast and the inland provinces are caught between Nilfgaard, Toussaint and the Tir Torchair. But instability in the North threatens Toussaint’s prosperity and might revive rebellions in Cintra and some of the cisamelline provinces.”

“But you left troops in the North.”

“Effective territorial control is not just a question of soldiers and weapons, elyennen, it also requires local government and civil administration, a justice system that works and is clear, and that is seen to work and be clear.”

“And senators.”

“And local governors who have a vested interest in their territories remaining part of the empire, in peace and in the empire’s smooth and efficient functioning.”

Ciaran found himself looking into Emhyr’s tawny eyes, gratified by his unconcealed admiration and low, caressing tones, and suddenly realised he was not afraid.

Emhyr caught the thought in flight.

While he took the cup from Ciaran’s hand and placed both it and his own back on the tea tray, Ciaran slipped off his robe and wriggled out of his nightshirt then lay down on the bed, looking up expectantly at Emhyr who was kneeling on the bed by him, wearing an odd expression. The emperor slid a hand under the elf and gently lifted his hips to tuck one of the many pillows under them then leant over to mouth a long ear hotly, lifting the mass of dark hair and moving it aside so he could kiss behind the ear then along to the slender nape.

Ciaran shivered, leaning back into him, falling back into the easy, familiar pleasure of the familiar hands and familiar mouth of the emperor whose scent spoke to him of warmth and safety.

Soon Emhyr was kissing his way down his back, his mouth trailing over his skin before pressing, warm, over every third vertebrae, slow and unhurried, his hands sliding down his sides gently, the fingertips running over his ribcage, his sides, skimming his stomach, while the thumb pads trailed along his back until they came to rest in the dimples on either side of his spine. The warm mouth lingered in the small of his back then moved lower, nestling into the tiny hollow below it and Ciaran kicked up one foot and nearly bit his tongue, gasping softly, when he felt the deliberate swipe of Emhyr’s.

His eyes widened and he gripped the sheets, his whole body tensing, when he felt the emperor part his cheeks and bury his nose between them, breathing in then out and Ciaran shivered again,
quivering in anticipation and then Emhyr’s mouth was on him, then his tongue, and Ciaran let out a
gasp at the bolt of melting heat that ran through him.

After that Emhyr only kissed harder, lapped more insistently and sucked lovingly on his sweet little
pouch and the inside of his thighs where some of his slickness had spread and Ciaran was hit by
another wave.

The emperor ran his hands up his back slowly and placed another wet kiss into the small of his back
as he ran them down again, rubbing his fingertip over his wetness before easing it in. Ciaran gasped
and gritted his teeth but when the second finger was buried in deep he came, hips bucking, and again
with the third.

Emhyr nuzzled Ciaran’s hair as he lay there gasping and Ciaran heard the rustle of clothes as Emhyr
shrugged off his robe and prepared himself. The elf propped himself back up on his elbows as soon
as he was able, bracing himself weakly. Emhyr pressed himself against his cleft in forewarning and
Ciaran’s eyes widened at his girth, his anxiety returning. He felt large, even for a human — though
Ciaran wasn’t sure he could trust his memory and he reminded himself that elves were known to
consort with incubi, also known for being powerfully endowed. But Ciaran himself had never been
with an incubus and he gripped the sheets again and forced himself to relax as Emhyr carefully
easing himself between his cheeks, rubbing the head of his erection into his slickness.

Ciaran couldn’t quite remember but his body did and as Emhyr pressed down and in it opened up for
him and the elf sank onto the bed in limp relief and lay there, his cheek pressed against the sheets
and breathing shallow as he focussed on the pleasure-pain of being stretched then his body pulled Emhyr
in and his whole being tightened in white-hot release.

The emperor let him adjust a moment, caressing his back soothingly then began to move, carefully at
first then more confidently and he soon hit a spot that sent a chill of white-hot flame up Ciaran’s
spine and caused his body to spasm gently. From then Emhyr just thrust regularly, unerringly hitting
his target, fanning the flame until Ciaran’s taut body flared up and sparked.

Boneless and dazed and shuddering through the aftermath, Ciaran blinked slowly and made a soft
enquiring sound as Emhyr continued to roll his hips, inching deeper into him and Ciaran’s mind was
soon blank but for the sensations of being not just taken deep but coaxed open. He breathed in
sharply as Emhyr finally seated himself full inside him and a moment later Emhyr’s warm body
covered his and his hot, insistent mouth was soon pressed against his neck, his temple, his ear and the
emperor muttered something in High Nilfgaardian that dripped with raw gratification and of which
Ciaran only made out his nickname. His relief at this patent sign of approval was such that he pressed
a heated kiss onto the forearm Emhyr had wrapped around him. He pillowed his head on on it and
breathed in Emhyr’s smell while the emperor continued to nuzzle him and to rock his hips just
enough for Ciaran to feel his presence inside him.

Eventually Emhyr straightened and when he started to pull back Ciaran had to bite down a cry at the
unbearable friction and came again, brief and bright like a match being lit, and he heard Emhyr snarl
above him. Emhyr moved again, gingerly, carefully, then pushed in again, only able to do so because
by now Ciaran was so wet. The elf came again after just a few thrusts, hanging his head, exhaustion
by his many climaxes and by the strain of trying to hold back for Emhyr, and yet when Emhyr bit
back another snarl and went rigid above him before flooding him with the copious amount of seed
humans were infamous for expending, heavily laced with that elusive elven essence, Ciaran peaked
yet again.

Breathing fast, Emhyr looked down at his extenuated elfling then carefully rolled him onto his back
before lowering himself onto him, leaning heavily on his forearms then burying his hands in the
damp hair, gripping the delicate head as he slowly sucked the sweat from the glistening skin and plundered the soft mouth. He felt one of the slim hands grip his arm and met the golden eyes in time to watch Ciaran flicker out into sleep.

Emhyr nuzzled the dark hair, unable to quell or even control the many wants that still washed over him in cold and hot waves.

After a few minutes and with his being still brimming with his concubine’s scent, he went to fetch a washbasin, returning to wipe down his ruined elf before cleaning himself off and getting them both under the blankets, settling Ciaran as closely against him as he could.

It was like this, curled up and with his forehead pressed against Emhyr’s side, that Ciaran hazily woke some time later.

“Did I hurt you?” the low, clipped voice asked him.

Ciaran shook his head and half-stretched, straightening his legs and throwing an arm over Emhyr’s chest.

He pillowed his head on Emhyr’s arm, made another attempt at opening his eyes and this time Emhyr’s face came into focus as did the glowing panther eyes that told him all he needed to know.

Ciaran smiled shyly and couldn’t hold back a soft laugh when Emhyr stretched out on top of him, an forearm on either side of his head. The elf toyed with the collar of the emperor’s nightshirt and pulled up his knees, making himself comfortable, while the emperor planted kisses up along his shoulder and the side of his neck, pausing at a long ear before crossing over to claim Ciaran’s mouth, pushing his tongue into it as he pressed his hips against Ciaran’s, the taste he found there the softer, milder echo of the tart honey-apple sweetness of Ciaran’s pleasure.

“Emhyr…?” Ciaran whispered into the emperor’s skin, reluctant to tell him he couldn’t take the same again.

“I will not,” Emhyr reassured him, catching his meaning.

He continued to grind rhythmically as he kissed the elf, often pausing to tilt the small chin up so he could look into the hazel eyes, soaking up every sound, every glazed look, every spasm and every hidden tremor. Then he reached down between them and took them both in his large hand and watched Ciaran tauten, quicken, then suddenly come undone, basking in his pleasure even as the elf drifted into sleep.

When Ciaran woke again, he was clean, Emhyr was gone and there was an extra throw laid over the blankets.
Chapter End Notes

[1] *petit lever: dressing ceremony during which high-ranking nobles attend the emperor
[2] “Everything which is not forbidden is compulsory.” : a play on a definition of totalitarianism (for an a short and interesting discussion of similar phrasings: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Everything_which_is_not_forbidden_is_allowed)
[3] caul: hairnet (but, like, medieval, fancier and sexier)
[4] Specifically alexandrite
Chapter Summary

In which Ciaran finds his place in the chain of command.

Chapter Notes

Sorry the chapter's late, I have family over *and* I managed to catch some kind of nasty bug. Anyway, hope you enjoy it! <3

Note on the Conjunction of the Spheres:
For those new to the Witcher universe, the Conjunction of the Spheres was a cataclysmic even that happened about 1500 years before the events of the games/books. It is at this point that monsters such as ghous and necrophages, and humans entered the world already inhabited by the elder races and possibly the creatures now classed as relicts. It also brought the force that sorceresses and mages now use to power their magic.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

THE NEW BRIGADE

— Beauclair, Toussaint, early March, 1272 —

“Is this the right length, my lord?”

Shaken from his work finally committing to paper his notes and thoughts on all the things he’d read and heard and learnt over the past few weeks, Ciaran glanced at the nightshirt one of the attendants was holding up, its hem pinned up a good few inches.

Ciaran stood and allowed the shirt to be held against him.

“That’s fine.”

Returning to his new writing desk, he paused by the dressing room’s large windows to look out at the happy, sun-drenched scenery, yearning to go outside.

The young elf had woken late to a pleasant lethargy in his body that anchored down a light-
headedness of spirit. Any doubts he might have had about the emperor’s desire for him had been blown away and when he’d been brought breakfast by attendants who were under the impression he would be spending the day in bed, Ciaran had made it clear that he would not be, had sent for the tailors, asked for paper and ink and quill, and then had set about demolishing said breakfast while planning his day with a renewed sense of purpose.

He had surveyed his dressing room where everything was luxury and ease and reflected that this was how all elves should live. But he was also aware that all of this — the clothes, the jewels, the attendants — were not for the elf, but for the imperial concubine and he finally saw them for what they truly were, tools that would need breaking in and sharpening.

He had unwrapped the last of the parcels, uncovering, among other things, a desk set, a case holding a fine porcelain tea and hot chocolate set embellished with hand-painted touches of gold, and a separate teacup and teapot carved out of rock crystal for his Brokilon infusion. Only this time he’d felt the part and throughout the morning had caught himself wondering why Mererid and the others still behaved the way they always did and had to remind himself that in fact nothing outside of himself had changed.

Emhyr liked him and now everything felt different.

Emboldened, he’d chosen which aides he wanted to be briefed by and on what, what he wanted to have for lunch. He’d asked to have his nightshirts shortened to just below the knee and given orders to have any new ones made looser and with wider necklines. Two of his attendants were at a nearby table doing just that, while the other two were further away, practicing dressing each other under Mererid’s supervision.

Their grace period too had come to an end and Mererid, strict as a drill sergeant, was bringing them up to Nilfgaardian standards of service and appearance and they were undergoing the process — laborious to most Northerners — of learning Nilfgaardian. They were now dressed as befitted their station and the Beauclairois court, liveried in black and white, and looked so squeaky clean Ciaran had visions of them being thrown into the near-freezing river, soaped and scrubbed raw.

They’d also been taught to handle the superfine, slippery fabric many of his undergarments were made of and Ciaran watched the nearest attendant hold a pair of scissors over a candle flame until it glowed red before cutting through the gossamer fabric, rolling the edges into hems while it was still warm then heating the tip of a needle to put stitches in to hold it.

Looking away, Ciaran’s gaze went to the fresh prints of himself that lay next to the desk set and from there on to the painting he’d picked out for Iorveth. It had been been delivered the evening before and had been rolled up and wrapped and was now propped up against the wall. Emhyr had seen it and mentioned that the Royal Archives in Beauclair and the Imperial Library in the City held various copies of the plans of the palace and that copies could be sent north if Iorveth and the others were interested in seeing them.

Ciaran glanced down at the laconic note he’d received from Iorveth. Banalities, for the most part. Iorveth hoped he was well and that his stay in Vengerberg had not been too eventful — evidently he’d heard something.

Ciaran knew its brevity was due partly to Iorveth being unused to writing letters and largely to the fact that Iorveth knew their mail would be read and had evidently not devised a way of saying things without saying them any more than Ciaran had.

Ciaran knew these things. He’d expected them. It still hurt. Even this fragile link with Iorveth seemed to be crumbling away.
He would have to send a letter with the painting regardless, he just wasn’t sure what to say. He missed Iorveth. He wanted to tell him about all he’d seen but he knew his words would be read and was keenly aware that aside from confirming Vengerberg he had no information of any real usefulness to share with his friend. He had no sense of having wrenched secrets out of anyone or that things were not as they seemed. The Nilfgaardian attitude towards Dol Gwennelen — particularly their desire to profit off trade with them — seemed straightforward and their understanding of elves was too thorough to be feigned.

And he couldn’t be sure Iorveth would still trust his letters, knowing he was not free to write the plain truth in them.

Ciaran drew a few sheets of paper from the drawer of the desk set Emhyr had given him, his gaze lingering on it. A miniature garden of alabaster and precious stones, complete with a clock housed in a detachable elven folly flanked by two tiny stone lanterns fitted with oil lamps.

It was exquisite and so evidently elven in make Ciaran could practically smell emotional blackmail on it and felt old resentments returning. He took a breath as he ran a hand over the sheet, smoothing it, relishing the quality of the paper and trying to quell his reluctance to mar it.

He lifted the jade-carved shrubbery on one of the two urns and dipped his quill in the ink within then paused before starting to write, slowly, carefully, mindful of the fact that Nilfgaardians judged handwriting and determined to get as much practice as he could.

After getting the opening banalities down, he paused to think, touching a nail tip to the pearl-strewn canopies of the little trees, watching the emeralds glitter as they trembled on branches of twisted gold and silver wire.

This was probably what Toussaint actually looked like in the summer, he thought idly before turning back to the letter.

He wrote about the journey, the scenery, the sights, glossed over the mountain pass and focussed on every positive thing he could think of and that could be read by Emhyr, var Cleef or whoever was in charge of vetting his letters. He delighted in how smoothly the tip of his quill moved over the paper’s satin finish and at how crisp the ink looked against the snowy sheet and word after word, line after line his enthusiasm grew and bled into what he wrote as he described the palace, the lake, the conservatory, the cucumbers.

With a start, Ciaran realised that he had written several pages and paused.

They looked cramped and when he pulled out the duchess’ letter to him to compare his frown deepened.

He had started off well but then enthusiasm had carried off his quill and lapsed into his old habit of writing small and close, to conserve paper.

Iorveth had often laughed at how jealously Ciaran husbanded the paper stocks, handing it out in strips and scraps.

But then Iorveth had been raised at a time when they hadn’t had to rely entirely on books for knowledge, at a time when the elder still sat down with the younger to pass on what they knew, told them about their history and customs, their myths and their notions of utopia — something they no longer did, not because they did not want to but because there wasn’t time. They were fighting for their survival and their life expectancy had collapsed from centuries to decades. And besides, young and old had been segregated, the Scoia’tael kept apart from the Dol Blathanna elders. Iorveth was
only old by Scoia’tael standards. To the Dol Blathanna elves he was still in his first age of adulthood.

When Ciaran had been a very young elf, eager to help with the war effort but too young for active duty, Iorveth would assign him books to read while he was away on missions. Books usually on politics or military strategy that Iorveth himself did not have the patience to read, plundered from enemy camps or pilfered from the stalls of village merchants, the high points of which Ciaran would regurgitate for him on his return.

Ciaran had venerated books and paper ever since.

At the nearby table, an attendant was heating up the scissors and as she snipped off a corner of fabric it glided off the tabletop and fluttered to the ground, landing by Ciaran’s feet.

He knelt and picked it up amid the flustered protests of the attendant and looked at it a moment.

“What is this?”

“The Imperial Chamberlain calls is ranyatelle,” the attendant blurted out helplessly, already kneeling by him holding up a small dish for him to deposit the scrap into, “But I’d never heard of it.”

Ciaran rubbed the slinky fabric between his fingers, thin and close-woven as an onion skin and with the same silky sheen. He had spent weeks trying to determine what it was and had only concluded that it was not batiste, organza or organdy. That the Nilfgaardian’s called it ranyatelle helped him not a jot.

He realised the attendant was still waiting, on her knees and trembling, still mortified and terrified at having troubled him. It was one of the Aedirnians, the female one, whose wrist he’d broken. He couldn’t remember her name, only that it was suitably plain.

“I’d like to keep this piece to send to a friend.”

“Oh!” the attendant chirped in surprise then paused thoughtfully, “There are some bigger pieces or I could cut you a new piece.”

When Ciaran nodded, she stood, rummaged through the various cast-offs then placed a small selection on a tray before offering them to Ciaran, who considered them a moment before choosing one.

“I could hem it for you, if you would like.”

“Thank you,” Ciaran hesitated, looking at the young, plump-cheeked face that was just starting to melt into a heart shape, framed by mousy waves and into the centre of which all the features were concentrated, “Jayne, isn’t it?”

The button-eyes crinkled into half-moons and the small bow mouth quirked into a smile.

“Yes, my lord, I’ll do it right away.”

As Ciaran placed the scraps onto the tray, his ring glinted in the light and he studied it a moment.

“Can you draw or paint?”

“No, my lord, forgive me. But Ludivine can draw and paint.”

Ludivine, the Cintran, was the daughter of a minor aristocrat and as Lady Ludivine had received the education common to those of her station up until the moment she and her father had had to flee
north after a failed — and frankly ill-conceived — coup against Nilfgaard, only to be captured in Temeria.

They were a mixed bunch, Ciaran reflected after he’d asked the Cintran for a watercolour sketch of his ring. The two Aedirnians had been bred up to service almost from birth and both knew their business but while the Cintran could decently embroider, she hadn’t even known how to properly sew on a button when they’d first left Verden. As for the Skelligan, she did only what she was told to do and even then with as much mute resistance as she thought she could get away with.

And yet, Emhyr was right, they were his brigade now.

As a commander his role had been to plan campaigns, keep his troops disciplined and motivated, and to keep the younger elves in line. But they’d been volunteer soldiers trained to little else and they had all know, always remembered, what they were fighting for, they just needed the occasional reminder and words of encouragement. But this new brigade of his, this motley crew of humans… they had no particular wish to serve Nilfgaard or him. The two Aedirnians had worked in the same castle for years but that aside they were all strangers to each other, bound together only by the fact that they were all here against their will, enslaved.

And humans were so dissipated. So few of them succeeded in dedicating their short lives to the pursuit of just one object and Ciaran reflected darkly that Roche, in that respect, was exceptional.

Ciaran had spent countless hours spying on the Blue Stripes and other special units of humans sent out to annihilate his kind and he cast his mind back, trying to remember how Vernon Roche and other commanders had kept up their men’s motivation and loyalty but decided he understood little of it other than that it involved a great deal of drinking, noise and card games.

This was probably all there was to it, he’d all but convinced himself by lunchtime.

He’d told Mererid he wanted to practice his table manners so the chamberlain stood by while the elf ate from the fifteen or so small dishes that had been brought for him, correcting, informing and demonstrating as Ciaran tried to navigate the myriad pieces of cutlery and rules of form.

“One cuts the asparagus with one’s fork and at less formal dinners it is acceptable to pick up the stalk with one’s hand — but I would strongly recommend the young gentleman refrain from doing so while in Toussaint. They heavily favour the use of cutlery for everything here.”

“Mererid,” Ciaran said, carefully spearing a stalk, “since the emperor will be eating out tonight, I thought… I thought we could do something special. I would like to treat my attendants.”

“What did the young gentleman have in mind?”

“Perhaps we could eat together? Something informal, like breakfast or brunch? And maybe a few games of cards? We haven’t played since we arrived in Toussaint.”

He waited, expecting the chamberlain to veto the idea but instead Mererid observed him a moment then gave a nod.

“The young gentleman cannot possibly eat the same meal as his servants but perhaps something can be arranged.”

So buoyed did he feel by Mererid’s validation of his plan that when he went out onto the balcony after lunch and took in the sun-drenched landscape he decided, despite the lingering soreness in his body, to allow himself a break and had word sent to Bastiaan and the stables that he would be going for a ride.
By the time he’d changed into his Impera doublet and hose, the young spearman was waiting for him, standing by his own horse and an-Nayyir.

Just like Morvran Voorhis before him, Bastiaan refused to move at anything faster than a steady plod and chattered happily as they made their slow way along the lake to the camp. The young soldier was still so excited about the reception and what he’d heard there that he gave Ciaran a blow-by-blow retelling of the evening quite as if the elf hadn’t been there before updating him on the arrangements he was making for the tourney. He had already put together and registered a mixed team of Alba and Impera to face a shaelmaar. They were ready to go into an afternoon training session, having spent all of dinner, most of their evening and the morning discussing their strategy, of which he gave Ciaran a detailed account.

“It’s hearing is phenomenal, it can use sound to see but actually it’s almost blind and so all I have to do to disappear — if he gets too close — is stand my ground. Even if it does the sound wave thing, I just have to hold my nerve while the others draw him away,” the Alba spearman concluded, then laughed gaily, “that’s the theory anyway. Oh, and those are the cages.”

“But where are the shaelmaars?” Ciaran asked in surprise as they rode past the enormous empty holding pens by the arena.

“They won’t be brought here until after the opening ceremony. That thing the Skelligans do drives them mad.”

The youth suddenly turned to Ciaran, wearing the look of a person just realising he’s picked up a stick by the wrong end.

“Have you ever seen a shaelmaar?”

“No, in the North many ancient species were wiped out by post-Conjunction creatures,” Ciaran explained, trying not to sound too pointed, and the barb missed its mark entirely.

“Ah, I see. Well, a shaelmaar is like… an armoured hedgehog. It rolls up into a defensive position and its shell plates are like rock — you have to get it to open up to get to its soft spot. That’s why we have to— Oh, there they are.”

The boy had put together an eclectic team — most of the members were about his age or a little older though there were also a couple of dented veterans who looked like they’d been hit by a shaelmaar before.

Some were at archery practice and they offered up a bow and arrow to Ciaran who declined the former but accepted the latter, turning it over in his hands. It was one of the lightweight metal arrows they used to send messages between ships or from one end of the camp to the other. Forged all of a piece and finely balanced.

Ciaran hadn’t fired an arrow in months and suddenly longed to do so, but he could feel the stiffness in his hands and his pride wouldn’t let him attempt a failure.

They had taken the liberty of preparing a banner, dovetailed and patterned with black and white shields and charged with a large silver star, and now tentatively showed it to Ciaran, watching his expression closely to see if he liked it.

“Where did you get these?” he asked Bastiaan in growing astonishment.

The boy had shown him a handful of long strips of linen hot-stamped with silver stars and demonstrated how they intended to fasten them to their helmets and weapons as favours.
“The blacksmiths made them for us. It’s the same technique they use to make our signal flags and replacement standards.”

“Could I have some?”

“Take them all,” Bastiaan grinned, delighted, “We’ll run down to the forges and get some more.”

— N —

Ciaran returned to the suite to find he’d received a basket of treats from the Conservatory — two varieties of strawberries, white raspberries and red ones, three types of gooseberries and a pot of rose petal jam. In with it was also a card in the head gardner’s own deliberate hand, offering to send anything else he might like and reminding him that he was always welcome.

Ciaran undressed then nibbled a couple of raspberries while his bath was being drawn. As he sank into the water, he decided that he would go back to the Conservatory — more than once if he could find the time. The hothouse’s warm, balmy atmosphere was perfect for him and Ciaran wanted to know if the gardeners had given any serious consideration to his idea of installing hives of honeybees or bumblebees.

Emhyr had not lied, the Conservatory did not owe its success to magic and Ciaran fully understood on what principles its functioning relied. The dryads too grew things under glass although they used jars and broken demijohns they had either scavenged or stolen. They had taught him how to use them to hasten the growth of seedlings, to protect tender saplings in the winter, and even grow some of their rarest and most precious plants throughout the year.

The dryads had their own ways of helping their trees thrive, which was fortunate because they could never possibly build a structure large enough to house a tree, would likely never want to. Ways that relied on their own inherent affinities with plants and ancient practice and that Nilfgaard could not hope to replicate as a system. But Nilfgaard had found its own way and Ciaran couldn’t help being surprised that it had not only employed the same basic techniques as the dryads but made such an advanced use of it, adapting it to their considerable means. The Conservatory housed not just a vegetable patch and some flowering shrubs but also fruit trees, a complete herb garden and even a selection of medicinal plants.

As he wrung out a spongeful of steaming water over his shoulders, Ciaran thought dreamily of the possibilities such a hothouse offered and of recreating one on a much smaller scale in Nilfgaard. The imperial medics had taken a cutting of the shrub in Caed Myrkvaid and Ciaran now wondered if it might be possible to grow the other plants in controlled conditions too.

He was torn from visions of an enormous glasshouse bursting with luxuriant plants of every shape and size and hue by the appearance of Mererid, looking genteelly harried, followed by his attendants.

“The duchess is about to surprise the young gentleman by bringing afternoon tea here. She and her ladies will arrive at any moment.”

“How do you know?” Ciaran asked, stepping out of the bath and allowing himself to be enveloped in a large, fluffy towel.

“The servants know everything,” Mererid replied grimly, already wearing his battle face, “I am sorry to rush the young gentleman but we cannot give the impression of being inconvenienced. A monarch
must feel welcome everywhere.”

Ciaran had barely been dried and changed into a dry undershirt and robe when there was a knock at the door, soon followed by the duchess’ musical tones.

Ciaran went to the sitting room to greet her, his features carefully schooled into a look of surprised and tentative delight.

“Oh! Were you resting, my Lord?” the duchess exclaimed, contrite and concerned.

“Not at all, your Grace. I went riding after lunch and bathed when I returned.”

“I see,” she smiled, relieved, and her train swept behind her as she moved forward to take his arm, “We did not mean to inconvenience you. We thought it would be delightful to have afternoon tea together again.”

“I’m only sorry I’m not more appropriately dressed.”

“Oh, there is no need for any of that between us,” the duchess dismissed gaily, slipping out of her frilly, ivory satin coat and discarding it onto the back of a nearby chair, “And how delightful you look! All that hair! Do not let us stop you. Come, we will drink and eat and chat while you dress.”

The duchess had been followed in by a suite of musicians who wordlessly set up in the common room while the retinue of servants carrying or rolling in the tea things filed into Ciaran’s dressing room behind him and the duchess and began to set up there.

“The Conservatory has been sending treats!” the duchess smiled approvingly as the first strains of music and the scent of freshly-baked goods wafted to them.

“They just arrived. We can have some now,” Ciaran offered, “I hope it is not improper…”

“Oh no! They were quite right to send you a hamper,” the duchess helped herself to a strawberry, “We Toussaintois pride ourselves on our hospitality.”

She and her ladies were all smiles and compliments as they admired the emperor’s many gifts to him, which his attendants were still organising into piles and preparing to pack away into weather or location-specific trunks.

“These are marvellous,” the duchess remarked as they looked through his collection, handling first an exquisite scrap of lace then a gauze one whose scalloped hem dripped with gems before running a hand over the topmost layer of the mystery fabric, “But you will not need these veils while you are in Toussaint. We do not hide our faces here. Ah, you have received more ranyatelle.”

“Would you like some?”

“His Majesty gave us a few yards. Not as much as this but of course your need is greater than ours,” she smiled, still fingering the fabric, “We do love it. There is nothing more pleasant to wear against one’s skin, is there?”

Ciaran acquiesced with a nod, itching to ask the duchess what the fabric was but was reluctant to expose his own ignorance.

She and her ladies continued to fuss over him and his clothes, holding the various fabrics against themselves and Ciaran, laughing and gasping in delight, asking and advising him on what designs to use them for. Ciaran smiled and nodded but noticed that though the duchess was all smiles and
flippant compliments, her keen gaze up both his garments and his attendants.

They were looking through some of his warm weather clothes when Anna Henrietta casually asked if he had all his outfits for the tourney planned.

“I have a few in mind,” Ciaran answered, vaguely surprised, “Is it that important?”

“It is the social event of the year!”

The servants had finished setting up the feast-like tea so Ciaran and the duchess retired to his dressing table to have their tea and cake and she cooed over Ciaran’s new toiletry set. Mererid continued to answer the steady drip of the ladies’ questions regarding Ciaran’s trousseau.

“Emhyr is treating you well at least,” Anna-Henrietta approved, admiring the design on the hairbrush, “You know, the prints from the reception have been much admired and we have no doubt the ones from the tourney will be as well, if not more so.”

The duchess went on to explain that the tourney was a celebration of talent and hard work, of the role of the martial arts in peacetime, that it was the best opportunity the year to widely see and be seen, that people consequently wore their very best, that those who were to attend the banquet at the palace that closed every day of tourney did so without changing.

“It is the only occasion on which we dispense with that particular rule of etiquette,” she concluded, “It is an old custom that comes from the battlefield, officers not being expected to change for dinner. For a while, Nilfgaardian officers and soldiers were allowed to grow out their beards in wartime, but that custom has been dropped.”

The duchess signalled for more tea and Ludivine glided over to them, carrying a teapot.

“We heard your menfolk are away and would have invited you to dinner but we have a longstanding dinner engagement — the finance people, very dull, we would have much preferred to dine with you.”

“You are very kind, Your Grace. How was your doleance session?”

“Dull,” the duchess sighed as she watched Ludivine refill their cups, “It is always the same. A new nest of horrible creatures somewhere, someone throwing what they should not into the Sansretour to avoid paying the tax, sheep lost to wolves, accusations of abuse of power against some minor official, the usual arguments between neighbours over whose responsibility it is to trim the hedges… But we were able to do something for some people.”

“Is it necessary for you to decide these things personally?”

“No and of course these people may go directly to the ministries and offices responsible but as my grandmother used to say ‘it costs nothing to show an interest’ and that the powerful can afford to show kindness. Emhyr thinks it is a waste of time but really, the least we can do is listen.”

“Some problems have no easy solutions,” Ciaran murmured, “Listening creates the illusion of hope where there is none.”

“That is just how we feel,” the duchess gave a regal nod, paused to take a leisurely sip of tea then gave a typically Toussaintois little shrug, “And General Voorhis agrees. When we recounted it all to him he said he would much rather listen to the concerns of a shepherd whose livelihood is truly threatened by a wolf killing his flock than sit at dinner and be forced to listen to merchants earning more coin than they can spend petitioning for this or that law to be made or unmade so they can
make an additional half percent profit. And we can do something about wolves and lambs — we can send out knights and we set up a fund to compensate such losses years ago. It is pleasing to be able to resolve such problems so neatly.”

The duchess set her teacup back onto its saucer, her sharp gaze again straying to Ciaran’s assistants, lingering on Ludivine.

Mererid had used a pared down version of one of Elihal’s simpler designs as a model for their uniforms — the usual blend of Nilfgaardian and Aen Seidhe, their own origins and identities suppressed even more than Ciaran’s own.

They looked neat as commonplace humans could be made to look but Ciaran had no doubt that the duchess could easily pick out their failings and worried that these might be reflected in his own appearance. Anna Henrietta herself looked impeccable as always in a fine wool dress patterned with tiny flowers.

“We are told you are to have more attendants at the palace,” the duchess finally said, leaning in.

“Yes, His Majesty has granted me four more attendants.”

“But are the four you have sufficient for now? They look… rudimentary. We shall lend you two of ours until you reach the capital. We have so many and we know what it is like when one travels.”

“Your Grace is too kind,” Ciaran managed, blindsided by the offer and shooting a look at Mererid who was still busy showing off different kinds of cottons, “The Imperial Chamberlain is training these—.”

“Oh Mererid! Undoubtedly he is doing his best but what does he understand of the needs of a concubine? Perhaps one of my ladies would go with you to manage them for you. Vivienne could go. We can spare her until you reach the capital.”

“Really, Your Grace is too generous,” Ciaran said in mild alarm at the prospect of having to refuse in clear terms, “But I cannot deprive Your Grace of one of her ladies and I am quite satisfied—”

“Are you happy with these?” Anna Henrietta asked, looking at him closely before turning her attention to the attendants in question, “They are extraordinary creatures. You may not be able to do much with the redhead, she seems very headstrong and independent.”

Synnøve certainly was headstrong and independent but she was also quick to learn and fearless and she was secretly Ciaran’s favourite — or, at least, the one he found least intolerable.

“She’s improving,” Ciaran answered mildly, “And I like her looks.”

“She has cleaned up very nicely,” the duchess allowed, unconsciously touching her own hair, which was only a or two shade blonder than the Skelligan’s.

Under layers of grime and snarled hair, Synnøve had proved to be a great beauty in the first bloom of youth, long-limbed and high-breasted, and she wore her uniform with a great deal more natural elegance than poor Jayne did.

“That one, the brunette who holds her head like a swan. She might make a lady-in-waiting. She is the Cintran?”

Ciaran confirmed Ludivine’s past and, as he continued to answer the duchess’ questions, was relieved to find that she distracted herself from her offer as they lapsed into gossip and a whispered
discussion of each of his attendants, which ended in Ciaran’s sighed admission that the boy, the other Aedirnian, had become pretty useless ever since Synnøve had told him that all male attendants were emasculated before they could start service in the harem but that Jayne had become less nervous now that Ludivine had taken her under her wing.

“The Cintran should have some idea of what standards you should keep, at least,” the duchess reassured him, patting his hand then standing, “But come, have you chosen something special to wear for the opening of the Tourney tomorrow?”

“Is there a dress code?”

“There is always a dress code,” Anna-Henrietta informed him, going over to the formal warm-weather clothes still hanging on a rack, “It is not sufficient to act the part. Vivienne, hold this, please.”

She paused, waiting for Vivienne to step away to judge the full effect of the moss-green wool ensemble.

“My grandmother always said that if you look the part you start to feel the part. And people can always tell when you don’t feel the part.”

She shook her head and her lady-in-waiting exchanged the outfit for the next one on the rack.

“Even with the doleans sessions, the people do not really know me. They know me only from the gossip that filters down through the ranks of the aristocracy — the Lord tells his head vintner who tells his wife who tells her maid and soon everyone thinks they know me. They only see me in prints and during formal appearances and ceremonies.”

She signalled her lady-in-waiting to pick up another of the outfits, night-dark with contrasting details and piping in bright mustard.

“Emhyr is an emperor and a man. He can afford to wear whatever he likes and everyone will still respect him. But there are people, even in Toussaint, even in Beauclair, who do not think a woman can rule, especially not alone.”

She gave a curt nod then turned to Ciaran.

“Sometimes appearances are the only chance we have to make an impression. An impression we can control.”

—N—

Emhyr returned late from dinner and drinks with his officers, went over the following day’s schedule with his secretary, then went to Ciaran’s rooms.

He hadn’t seen his concubine since their intimacies the night before and though he’d received regular reports on his activities throughout the day, he was anxious to see for himself that all was well with his little elfling.

He found Ciaran still awake, sitting cross-legged and straight-backed on his bed, studying the selection of papers, books and notebooks fanned out before him. The elf looked up at him, solemn as
a child wearing his feast day best, though he was, in fact, only wearing a very thin and now rather short nightshirt.

“I saw the light under your door,” Emhyr said, sitting on the edge of the bed near the elf and gathering all his books and papers and stacking them on the bedside table, “I thought perhaps you had fallen asleep with the candles burning.”

“I was just…”

Emhyr uncrossed Ciaran’s legs, pulled off his bed socks, cupped a slender foot in his hands and pressed a slow, warm kiss into its arch.

“I didn’t hear you arrive. I would have come out…”

Emhyr took hold of the slim ankles and pulled gently, tipping the elf back onto the bed, drawing up one leg on either side of himself, causing Ciaran’s shirt hem to ride up, revealing his long, lean thighs, stopping only when he felt the firm little rump pressed against his hip.

“You should be sleeping,” he murmured, pressing kisses onto the inner side of Ciaran’s knee.

“I was about to,” Ciaran defended mildly, watching him from beneath lowered lashes.

Emhyr looked down at his concubine, saw him reach out to touch his robe and felt the tug on it. He could feel the gentle push of a knee against the small of his back.

He leant over to kiss the elf lightly, repeatedly, teasing him.

“You were supposed to rest today.”

“I did rest.” Ciaran retorted in between kisses, “I just slept and ate and took an-Nayyir for a walk and had tea with the duchess.”

Emhyr could taste real hunger on Ciaran but also a certain reserve and the leg now thrown over his lap pressed against him as Ciaran discreetly tried to make out his level of arousal.

The recuperation powers of elves were legendary but Ciaran was damaged. He still had an elf’s taste for pleasure but no longer the same capacity for it and Emhyr knew he had tired him out the night before and that Ciaran was probably apprehensive of having to service him again when his body had not fully recovered.

He leant over, resting his forearms on either side of Ciaran’s head, careful not to trap any of the long hair beneath them, then looked down into the hazel eyes a moment before kissing him again and again, more deeply, kissing and biting the soft mouth.

Emhyr felt Ciaran’s thumbs brush over his temples and his slender fingers tangle into his hair. His elfling’s physical condition and his energy levels were things they could easily manage, however, and they barely seemed like problems at all after the relief Emhyr knew they had both felt at the strong chemistry between them and the fact that sex hadn’t triggered any of Ciaran’s traumatic memories.

“How was your day, elyennenin?”

“It was good,” Ciaran replied huskily, rubbing his nose against Emhyr’s, “I… I wrote to Iorveth…”

Emhyr buried his fingers in the dark hair and rubbed Ciaran’s skull while the elf recounted his day
quietly, of Bastiaan and his team, of the time spent with his attendants and how they’d eaten and played cards and sat down together to tie the stamped ribbons into bows to pin to their uniforms.

“And the duchess and her ladies helped me choose some outfits for the tourney,” Ciaran finished then kissed him, “how was your day? The duchess said the doleance session was dull.”

“It was,” Emhyr confirmed dryly, twisting around a little to settle more comfortably, “I understand why she does it and it has worked very well here. But the City alone has a population fifty times that of all Toussaint. I could not hear even a quarter of my subjects’ grievances even if I did nothing else with my time.”

“And dinner?”

“Much better. They are still pleased with their victory and the prospect of a Triumph when we reach the City,” Emhyr said, leaning in to press his lips into the hollow at the base of the long neck.

“Maybe next time I can have dinner with your officers and you can have tea with the duchess and her ladies.”

Ciaran felt Emhyr muffle a short laugh against his throat.

“It was strange, not seeing you all day,” Ciaran said thoughtfully, half-closing his eyes in pleasure as Emhyr nudged his ear then kissed him just behind it.

“I have the use of a room downstairs for work and meetings. You may come to see me there whenever you wish.”

“Really? Won’t I disturb you?”

“That is the privilege of concubines,” Emhyr murmured, moving back to press a kiss onto the pale forehead, “influence, access to the emperor and his favour — these are your currency now, spend them wisely.”

Pulling away, he looked down at Ciaran who was still idly toying with his hair and the emperor had the gratifying sense that his little elfling had missed him.

Ciaran had missed Emhyr.

They had not spent so much time apart since before Vengerberg and as he stroked a thumb over the iron at Emhyr’s temple, Ciaran could see that the emperor too was weary from his day spent keeping up appearances.

“You should sleep.”

“I’m not tired yet,” Ciaran murmured, his legs unconsciously tightening around Emhyr.

Emhyr looked at him a moment then leant over, opened the bottom bedside table’s second drawer and retrieved three wrapped parcels from it.

“How long have those been there?” Ciaran asked in astonishment, sitting up.

“As long as everything else,” Emhyr answered, piling the parcels in the elf’s lap, “open them.”

“You have to stop!” Ciaran protested weakly, “I don’t need so many things and we are carrying too much! Where are we even going to put these?”
“I have an idea,” the emperor smirked faintly and when he unwrapped the first gift, Ciaran understood why.

He had seen sex toys before, notably in a seedy brothel whose dubious reputation made it stand out even in the most disreputable and seedy neighbourhood of Novigrad, where he and a couple of fellow Scoia’tael had been hiding out while on a mission running weapons out of the city-state.

But these were beautiful. The first was of glass as black as jet with golden swirls that brought out the ridges and the well-defined head. Ciaran could barely credit that even his pleasure had been so lavishly provided for with something of such exquisite craftsmanship.

“For me?” he murmured in awe as he handled it and Emhyr nodded, watching him with glowing eyes.

The second was a flared bulb made from carved and polished jade to look like a fat waterlily bud with a little gold sunburst etched and gilded into the small flat-ended handle, while the last, perfectly clear and instantly Ciaran’s favourite, had two rounded lobes, a larger and a smaller, like an enormous drop of water falling through the air, miraculously plucked out of time.

“Do you like them?” Emhyr asked, reaching out to stroke a finger along a delicate ear.

“Yes, thank you. Can we try them?”

“We can try one.”

Ciaran held the water drop out to the emperor tentatively and couldn’t help a pleased smile when Emhyr took it. He watched Emhyr tidy the other two toys back into the drawer then lean back over him, looking into his eyes as they shared a few more kisses and Ciaran felt a hand slip down between his legs to stroke him and he caught Emhyr’s lazy smile when he found him wet.

A few more kisses while the emperor fingered him then the strong hands turned Ciaran over carefully and tucked a pillow under his hips. Ciaran looked back at Emhyr, smiling contentedly, as the emperor slowly ran his hands up over his thighs then his back, pulling up his nightshirt before finally pulling it off him. Ciaran grabbed another pillow and hugged it, bracing himself then yelped in surprise when he felt Emhyr’s mouth on him.

He bit his lip and arched his back, delighting in the feel of Emhyr’s demanding mouth and tongue, his body tautening until he felt a flood of heat through it, and he couldn’t help a gasp when he felt Emhyr’s fingers breach him, feeling and moving in and out of him until his thighs were slick with his own wetness. Then he felt the warmed stone against him and tried to prepare himself, forcing himself to relax, but trembled helplessly as Emhyr carefully, deliberately eased it into him. A final nudge and Ciaran gasped softly as his body drew it in.

The weight was still settling inside him when Emhyr pulled his hips up a little then pressed his hands flat against his sweet-slicked thighs, pushing them together and Ciaran’s eyes widened in surprise when he felt the emperor’s hot girth pushed in between them, then out again.

Ciaran hung his head and held still as Emhyr moved as if within him, gasped again when the hard head hit the sensitive spot behind his balls then raked them gently, brushing along the underside of his own erection, rubbing it as Emhyr fell into his rhythm.

As Emhyr pushed deep and as his body settled flush against Ciaran’s it knocked the handle of the plug inside him, shifting it, every thrust like a blow against flint, sparking, flaring, fizzling out further along his spine each time until he came abaze, shuddering and biting his lip at the effort of holding
back for Emhyr, of keeping his thighs tightly pressed together for him.

“Let go, elyennen,” the deep, caressing words breathed into his ear, “I will make you come again.”

The hot mouth pressed against the lobe, then the swipe of Emhyr’s tongue and Ciaran bit back a cry as he came.

Emhyr let him settle onto the pillows, still thrusting, slow and steady, mouthing at his neck, his ears, his shoulders, building the pace up again by increments until Ciaran instinctively clamped his thighs together and gripped the sheets for balance when moments later they crested together.

While he lay spent, Ciaran could hear Emhyr pouring water into the washbasin and after he’d cleaned himself up the emperor came over to ease the toy out of his elfling carefully, press his lips into the small of his back and wipe him down, tossed the soiled pillow onto the floor then put away the basin. He then lay down by Ciaran and pulled him close.

“Do your subjects know their emperor is such a sybarite?” Ciaran yawned, curling up on Emhyr’s chest contentedly.

“Strictly need to know,” Emhyr replied, “You are very generous to indulge me. In the City, the burden of my appetites is shouldered by several concubines.”

Ciaran’s ears twitched at the faintly sardonic tone but was instantly soothed by the large hand that started to caress his hair, shifting its heavy strands, combing through them idly.

“Couldn’t you have taken a Temerian concubine as well?” he asked, giving voice to a question that had bothered him for months.

“The situation in Temeria is still volatile and Temerians are touchy, I did not think it necessary to aggravate them. Besides, the logical choice is Anaïs and she is too young. In a year or so, I will offer to have her educated in Nilfgaard, to train her to the business of governance.”

Another hostage, Ciaran reflected, and this one was not yet ten years old. A hostage Emhyr could fashion into a puppet queen even more closely tied to Nilfgaard than the one he’d installed on the throne of Dol Blathanna and who King Demavend had demoted to duchess.

“Is she really Foltest’s daughter?”

“Her own mother might not know the answer to that, but most Temerians want to believe it. She is better than the alternative and that is enough for my purposes.”

This was true, Ciaran knew. The Temerians had been very attached to their dead king. Foltest’s line was not quite extinguished but the only other person with a stronger claim to his throne was Adda the Mad, Foltest’s daughter by his own sister. Anaïs might be illegitimate and underage but she was still an infinitely more appealing prospect.

“To make her queen? Or to keep your Triumvirate in line?” Ciaran asked lazily, closing his eyes as Emhyr’s free hand stroked its way up and down his back the way he liked, “And why a Triumvirate? Why not just a puppet regent?”

“Despite what you all seem to think, I have better things to do with my time than pulling strings in Temeria and listening to stories about a lost goat,” Emhyr remarked mildly, “too much power in the hands of one man either tempts him to misuse it or makes him the target of others who would like some of it.”
Ciarán’s eyes opened into narrow slits as he shot Emhyr a vaguely resentful look.

“Anna-Henrietta said it was a sheep. And you are pulling strings. And what if the three of them disagree about what to do?”

“The Triumvirate will soon learn that it must work as one or fall apart and their country with it. I expect that once they understand that the sole source of their legitimacy and strength comes from Anaïs’ claim they will defend it zealously. Besides,” Emhyr murmured, splaying his hand over the small of Ciaran’s back, “there was no adequate candidate. All the qualities that made John Natalis an able commander make him a middling politician. Anaïs will not be ready to rule for another decade, Natalis would not have lasted that long. Her great-uncle seems sincere in his desire to protect and further her claim but perhaps he only hopes to reign through her. And he is of noble blood himself, he may one day decide he has as good a claim as Anaïs, if not better.”

“And Roche?”

To the Scoia’tael, Vernon Roche was a genocidal brute, but Ciaran had no doubt that to his fellow Temerians this gave him solid credentials as a patriot.

“Vernon Roche has many of the requisite qualities but most of the nobility barely countenance him as it is. If the triumvirs pool their abilities and work together they might make a success of this. And after a few years, the Temerians may discover they prefer being ruled by a Triumvirate of equals. But if they insist on being ruled by one person rather than three, I will give them back their bastard queen.”

“And if she doesn’t cooperate?”

“Then she will lose her throne.”

“But won’t that just start a revolt?” Ciaran asked, raising his head and propping himself up on his forearms, “Won’t royalists like Roche continue to fight for her claim? Won’t it just reignite resentment against Nilfgaard?”

“Nilfgaard would not take it from her. Her own people would. I have a letter written by her elder brother, Aryan, in which he states that he fathered her. That not only makes her the product of incest but also takes her out of the line of succession. Copies of the letter might find their way into the wrong hands.”

Ciaran stared.

“Does Roche know?”

“He has seen it.”

“But is it true?”

“That hardly matters. The letter is in Aryan’s hand, Roche himself recognised it and so would many others. And Aryan is no longer alive to contradict it.”

The low-born Vernon Roche had been been personally loyal to King Foltest who had trusted him and raised him up and Ciaran knew from Geralt that the Blue Stripes commander had sworn to protect the child his king had loved and treated as his own, with his life if necessary.

And suddenly he started to see by what means Emhyr had positioned his Temerian pawns.
“How many more such secrets do you hold?”

Emhyr gave him a long look, heavy and possessive.

“My agents have had some success, and we collected a great deal of valuable information in Vengerberg. There should be enough to hold Aedirnia too — most of the North, if the right pressures are applied, since several testimonies implicated high-ranking Kaedwenis.”

“Is that why you had all those meetings? You were interrogating them?”

“That would have not have fostered trust and we need the living to cooperate with us. No, we obtained the information from the others.”

The others.

Ciaran’s nose wrinkled in contempt at the thought that the Aedirnian lords, who had already betrayed their country by allying themselves with Kaedwen, had further betrayed their countrymen by spilling their secrets to save their own skins.

“Torture? They gave in to torture knowing they were already condemned?”

“Men lie under torture. We discovered a more reliable method years ago.”

Ciaran could attest to the truth of the first statement. He and Iorveth had often remarked that information sourced in that way was so unreliable it was barely worth the trouble it took to extract. However, they had not found a better alternative and Ciaran’s curiosity hung so heavy in the air that the emperor finally took pity on him.

“Men lie under torture even when they know they will not survive it. But a guilty conscience is a heavy burden and many ghosts, in the first shock of death, can be convinced to relieve themselves of it,” Emhyr explained carelessly, “the more unexpected the death, the more likely the confession. Our necromancers have become skilled interrogators.”

Ciaran stared.

Early on in his life as a Scoia’tael, when he’d been one of Iorveth’s scouts, he had overheard a milkmaid complain of the repeated thefts of butter and bottles of milk and, sure enough, Iorveth and his Squirrels had found a band of Kaedweni bandits within a mile radius of the farm.

Ciaran had been a spy for decades, he understood secrets.

He knew they came in all shapes and sizes — some were tiny, spawned by bigger ones; some hid in plain sight; some hovered in the air, known by many but unspoken. He knew that some had to be wrested from their keepers through scheming and violence while others, just as precious, fell from careless lips that knew not what they unwittingly revealed.

He knew that they had to be carefully husbanded like any other precious resource. Some had a short lifespan and had to be used quickly or not at all and he had learnt that almost any scrap of information, properly leveraged, could be used to effect, that even the smallest ones could be spent immediately to protect larger ones and could light the fuse of a whole chain of events or even an explosion. Others took years and years to mature and others yet only reached their full potential by never being revealed at all. He had learned to create secrets from secrets by putting two or more of them together and studying the shape of the spaces between them, inferring what more they hid.

But he also never spoke a thing without remembering how he knew it because he knew so well that
some secrets were not secrets at all. They were misinformation intended to poison the well from which the enemy drank or a slow-acting venom what would single out the carrier once he started showing the symptoms then kill him, long after the bite.

Roche was right, Emhyr did expect him to spy. And no doubt Emhyr had told him all this for a reason. But Ciaran would be not fool enough to commit such information to paper, even in code, nor to do so without knowing whether it was true and who else knew.

Emhyr’s eyes on him were bright and hard and, still thunderstruck, Ciaran voiced his thoughts unconsciously.

“You are a viper.”

Emhyr pulled him down and flicked his tongue over Ciaran’s lips before kissing him, slow and unhurried, then dropped back to look up at him again, eyes ablaze.

“Careful you do not get eaten whole, little Squirrel.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading and hope you're all enjoying this holiday season! <3
The Tourney

Chapter Summary

In which Ciaran attends the Toussaint Tourney.

Chapter Notes

Surprise extra release for the holiday season!
Almost nothing happens, this is completely self-indulgent :D

Enjoy! <3 <3 <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

THE NEW BRIGADE

— Beauclair, Toussaint, early March, 1272 —

The tourney’s festive spirit was as warm and pervasive as the sunlight that woke the happy little duchy — its outlying villages and fields, the glittering lake and the winding roads, bringing colour back to the flowering shrubs, chasing away the shadows that pooled at the edges of the palace’s walls and driving the darkness from beneath its lofty arches to finally shine a few rays into the reception room where Beauclair’s court laughed and joked light-heartedly around the buffet breakfast tables, dressed up in its finery in preparation for the opening ceremony.

The walls had been hung with the flags of all the participating states and provinces and even the houses of individual participants and beneath them political rivals came together to discuss the merits and chances of their common champion, everyone — from the duchess herself to the boy replenishing the warming tray of cheese omelettes — was wearing scarves or handkerchiefs or sashes in the colours of the livery of said champions.

All affairs of state seemed to have been suspended and even the Nilfgaardian officers had traded their severe, high-collared uniforms for fine shirts and doublets and swanned around holding glasses of apple juice with lavender stalks as stirrers.

As the royal carriage rolled through the city, Ciaran could see that everybody else was in their feast day best too — men had stuck long feathers in their hats, women had on their best furs and children
wore bright ribbons that streamed behind them as they dashed about.

The fairground atmosphere only increased as they neared the tourney grounds above which fluttered countless banners, proclaiming the nations and regions of all those who participated — banners quartered with Nilfgaardian suns, black and gold chequers and the flags of every region in the empire, of course, but also the lilies of Temeria and the crowned Redanian eagle on its field of crimson, long Ofieri pennants in caerulean and gold, the gonfalons of Kovir and Povis, and even the quarter-circle flags of a few clans from the Skelligan isles.

“The whole world is here!” Ciaran breathed as Morvran Voorhis helped him out of the carriage and they made their way to the royal enclosure.

“Not quite. Only those states we have formal relations with are invited,” Morvran Voorhis specified as he saw Ciaran to his seat on the emperor’s right, “So you will find no Zangvebari, nor anyone from Barca or Hannu. Zerrikanians compete as independents and for the last decade or so Haakland has declined to attend.”

The general went to take his own seat on the other end of the raised dais on which their armchairs had been set up and into which the emperor and the duchess had already settled, serene and regal.

Musicians played while city officials went around the arena, distributing bread and fat wineskins to a public as varied as the tourney’s participants. They were followed by salespeople with baskets full of dried sausages, cheeses, and the little jellied pies and rolls Ciaran had come to associate with travelling. Others had trays hanging from their necks, filled with tiny folded packets of nuts and candied fruit, bright toffee apples, and what looked like tiny pink clouds on sticks. In a din of shouted requests and good-natured hollers, coin was passed forward then treats were passed back and somehow, in the end, everybody got what they wanted.

After the hawkers and pedlars came the street entertainers, all crammed together so that they performed simultaneously and almost one on top of the other — jugglers created hoops and obstacles for the acrobats to leap and skip through, small dancing bears wearing ruffs and striped hats wriggled and shuffled to the sound of a merry quartet and ignored the nearby Ofieri snake-charmer who sat playing his flute to the viper in his basket and the one wrapped around his turban, the falconer who toured the arena while his magnificent birds ducked and dived to avoid the flames of the fire-breathers that stood out against a pyramid of dwarves, the topmost one of which was swallowing a sword nearly as long as he was short.

Behind the serene front presented by the sovereigns and their guests on the dais, the royal enclosure bustled with activities. Attendants came and went incessantly as they showed guests to their armless chairs, brought fresh drinks, refilled the warming trays on the tables that lined the back of the enclosure, and cleared the dirty dishes. Guests moved around, mingling and circulating, and the people in the expensive seats came over in turns to pay their respects.

Morvran Voorhis often sat with Ciaran, to discuss the attendance and the horses and to leave his seat free for those who wanted a word with the duchess. He was with Ciaran when a score of ducal guards and Impera cavalrymen, their mounts respectively caparisoned and plumed in dancing scarlets and blacks, performed an intricate choreography based on marching orders and ordinary manoeuvres, wheeling and circling, crossing and pacing in controlled steps into figures brought out by their colours.

“It was beautiful. The hawker and pedlar’s capers came the street entertainers, all crammed together so that they performed simultaneously and almost one on top of the other — jugglers created hoops and obstacles for the acrobats to leap and skip through, small dancing bears wearing ruffs and striped hats wriggled and shuffled to the sound of a merry quartet and ignored the nearby Ofieri snake-charmer who sat playing his flute to the viper in his basket and the one wrapped around his turban, the falconer who toured the arena while his magnificent birds ducked and dived to avoid the flames of the fire-breathers that stood out against a pyramid of dwarves, the topmost one of which was swallowing a sword nearly as long as he was short.
The Scoia’tael were guerrilla fighters in fact and at heart and while they trained like all soldiers did, they largely tended to mêlée and their modus operandi relied on quick, covert strikes rather than large troop movements. But there was harmony in these coordinated movements and the underlying plan they revealed and Ciaran had been sensitive to it since his days as a Vrihedd cavalryman.

A company of knights errants and a couple of the duchess’ ladies playing damsels in distress reenacted a famous scene from one of the duchy’s most beloved epic cycles to the uproarious delight of the crowd. The air cooled as the shadows lengthened and Jayne brought Ciaran a soft wool throw and tucked it in around him, sweeping its folds under his feet before settling them back on his footstool and Ciaran himself pulled up his cloak’s fur collar to keep the back of his neck warm.

He caught sight of Bastiaan laughing and sharing a pitcher of mulled wine with one of Voorhis’ aides in the officers’ enclosure and watched him sit up quickly when the trumpets sounded and previous years’ champions entered the ring at the head of their national delegations, carrying their standards and lavishly liveried, to the flourish of brasses, winds and drums.

Silks, furs and feathers, blacked and gilded plate, winged helmets and horned ones, magnificent steeds, falchions, broadswords, curved Ofieri scimitars, morning stars sparkling at the end of long shafts, banners and surcoats quartered and blazoned, all paraded by around the large unlit pyre in the centre of the arena and Ciaran swallowed a heartbeat of nostalgia at the familiar, elegant silhouettes of the lethal horseman’s picks* favoured by the Nauzicaa brigade outlined against the sun already hanging low in the sky.

As each new delegation came out, the audience waved their flags more frantically and cheered and though people clearly cheered harder and longer for those they supported and though that group of Redanians and Kaedweni sat, surly and silent, like a great big boulder in a babbling brook, Ciaran could discern little malice or aggression in the air.

Another blare of trumpets and the music, noise and cheering died down as the duchess stood, radiant in a gem-encrusted dress of cloth of gold and her most formal ducal crown, and looked down on the assembly, all gilded by sunset rays.

“My lords and ladies,” the duchess began, straight and regal and deliberate, “knights and gentlemen, friends old and new, from wherever you may hail you are welcome here,” she inclined her head amid a burst of cheers then resumed, “In times of great turmoil and change we risk losing our bearings, of being swept so far away by the currents that our old lives fall out of sight and old dreams and old desires lose all meaning.”

Lost in thought, Ciaran was staring at his hands, folded in his lap, and startled when the emperor reached down to take one, placed it on his thigh then covered it with one of his own. Ciaran stared at the emperor’s stone-cut profile a moment then turned his attention back to the duchess.

“It is in times like these that we must cling to our customs and traditions, and use familiar rites and rituals to make our way back to ourselves — to every evening stop to breathe deep and light a candle, to remind ourselves of who we are and what we wish for,” the duchess paused again as a murmur ran through the crowd, “This has been a difficult year — for some even more so than for others. The actions of a few endangered the lives and livelihoods of many, a reminder that our actions have consequences, sometimes wider than what we intend. But the worst is behind us and we must look forward now to a destination that has never changed, for any of us. Peace. Peace for North and South, peace for these lands and those across the seas. Peace for our friends and our families, peace for ourselves and those who will come after us. We are all different peoples and we will always have our differences but in this one burning desire we must always be united. Let these games be a reminder of this, lest we ever forget.”
Ciaran’s hand went cold when Emhyr stood and joined the duchess.

“And now,” the duchess continued, holding out her arms, “Let the games begin!”

When she and the emperor clapped twice, a breath of wind seemed to swirl around the arena and the high torches along its outer perimeter all lit up in turn and there was a collective gasp from the crowd when the central pyre burst into flame.

Yellow flames, Ciaran noted, the same they used for their fireworks, perhaps a variant of the green Zerrikanian fire they loaded into their scorpions.

The music started up again the arena was soon filled with swirling dancers holding batons from the end of which fluttered long streamers in the colours of the various nations and regions.

“That was a beautiful speech, Your Grace.”

“Do you think so?” the duchess asked brightly as she dropped into the chair that had been pulled up for her next to him, “We are so glad you liked it and we will be sure to tell our speech-writers. The part with the candle was very pretty, was it not? General Voorhis suggested it. Have you tried the Mortblanc**?”

She paused a moment to signal one of her ladies.

“We are starving!” the duchess confessed as they were brought plates of the sweet chestnut and whipped cream dessert, “We did not dare eat anything before the speech — even at a distance one loses all dignity if one has chocolate stuck to one’s teeth, no matter how good the speech.”

They each took a bite of their dessert and paused to observe the dancing and as it came to an end and soldiers quickly set up for the next event, General Voorhis appeared and bowed.

“Your Grace, the Ofieri ambassador…”

“Of course,” the duchess quelled a sigh and stood, “How terrible to always be so busy. Do enjoy yourselves, we will see you anon.”

The general’s amused gaze met Ciaran’s as he settled onto the chair the duchess had vacated.

“Desert jennets,” he nodded at the Ofieri cavalrymen taking up their places, “Nimble and fearless. Perfect for their fire-jousting.”

The Ofieri were not holding lances but flaming staffs and a number of balloon-topped poles had been set up in a line between them.

“Each must try to light the most flares and of course there are an odd number,” Morvran Voorhis explained.

A shout and the two cavaliers tilted at each other, smashing their staff tips through the balloons that exploded into balls of fire, almost enveloping them.

“The key is to maintain control over one’s mount and one’s nerves through the heat and the noise,” Voorhis continued as the flares went up — one, two, three on each side, the cavaliers moving ever closer to each other, “And the battle of wills over the final one. One of them must give way or their staffs will knock together and they both lose. And they might get knocked off the horse into the fire, it has happened.”
Only three flares between them and Ciaran watched closely as they closed in on the final one, their ululations streaming behind them as they made the final mad dash, so fast and close it was impossible to see which one of them would reach the final marker first.

A cry went up from the crowd as one of the staffs dropped, breaking through the pole while the other burst through the final balloon.

Cheers and as the fire jousts came to an end, even the blasé general went back to his seat ahead of the Skelligan war dances. Ciaran met the emperor’s gaze a moment then put his hand back on the hard thigh, soothed by warmth and weight of the one Emhyr replaced over it.

He was watching the preparations with interest when a fresh pot of his infusion arrived at his elbow. It was Synnøve and she barely glanced at him before fixing her gaze on the warriors setting up additional pyres on five large, raised iron grates and rolling in enormous war drums.

It was mostly for her sake that Ciaran had arranged for his attendants to accompany him. He had half an idea that Synnøve would contrive to escape with her countrymen at the end of the week and he also had half a mind to let her.

To Ciaran’s surprise, Ducal Guards and Alba soldiers filed into the arena at pace, soon lining the walls, and he looked askance up at the emperor who glanced down at him.

“A precaution.”

“To protect us from them?”

“To protect them from each other. The clans of the Skellige Isles were at war with each other for centuries before they came into conflict with anyone from the continent.”

Meanwhile, the sun was setting and in the liminal moment when the it dropped out of sight, a cry went up from the centre of the arena where a figure was prowling around the lit pyre, motioning and beckoning the dark figures that were clustered around the unlit ones, shadowy and restless in the growing darkness. She harangued them, wound them up and challenged them and was answered by shouts, caws and growls, snarls and howls.

“Who is she?”

“She represents the Great Mother. She is reminding the clan warriors of their pledge to defend their sacred isles against foreign invaders,” Emhyr paused and Ciaran caught the gleam of a smile in his eyes, “Such as Nilfgaard.”

The noise died down and the central figure lit her staff from the central pyre then started to dance around it, crying out to the heavens, clearly invoking their gods, then, as the last sliver of the sun disappeared behind a mountain, she pointed to one of clans and its pyre came to life, lighting up the clansmen and the enormous drum behind them.

The deliberate, almost rolling, drumbeat punctuated the strangely flat, pervasive chanting that vibrated through the air, low and guttural.

“The sound is produced in the throat,” Emhyr explained in answer to Ciaran’s query, “This is a ritual chant they perform on the eve of battle. According to Skelligan legends, sailors used the technique to free their ships when they became trapped in ice.”

They were not trapped now but rather defiant and though he could not make out the words being sung, it was plain to Ciaran that they were calling down the strength of their gods to face an unseen
The central figure shrieked and pointed again and the next pyre lit up and the next drum picked up as the previous one fell silent, as seamlessly as if they’d been played by the same drummer. This time the enemy was seen and the first clan gesticulated silently in answer to the sung provocations of the second and when its turn came, the third clan faced off against the first two.

By now the performers were close enough to the royal enclosure that the surface of Ciaran’s tea rippled from the vibrations in the air. The drumbeat and unvarying pitch and cadence of the chanting were absolutely unvaried but there were variations between the clans in the performance. The warriors of the first clan had simply stood in a circle around their pyre, grim and stoic, while in another clan they danced around the fire, facing first this way then that way as they hit their swords or shields against those of their neighbours in time with the drumming, and the performers of the final clan took small shuffling steps as they used their weapons to beat out complicated harmonies on their shields.

Ciaran glanced at Synnøve, whose immobile face was lit by the flickering light of the many pyres. When the final clan finished their cycle, the first one started again and to Ciaran’s surprise the soldiers that lined the arena’s walls began to bang their long shields against the ground in time with the drumbeats. He thought they would merely go another round but this time the first clan did not stop chanting when the second one started. The audience too began to stamp and clap and by the time the third clan joined in, Ciaran’s empty glass cider mug threatened to vibrate off the table.

Howls, caws, whoops and the ululations of the Ofieri came together in a cosmic cacophony, a sound that didn’t travel through the air in waves but permeated it, setting every atom and fibre vibrating.

Ciaran stood and started to clap, soon followed by General Voorhis and eventually the duchess as well, until finally the emperor himself stood to join in for the final three beats. The drumming and chanting abruptly stopped as the whole arena burst into applause and cheers.

As he watched them, unified and defiant, and as the fever pitch of emotion fell, Ciaran felt a pang of pity and the deep-seated certainly that they were alone in the world, that whatever gods the Skelligers believed in could not exist because no god, no matter how apathetic, could have failed to respond to such a display.

A few low whistles from the lake and the sky above it erupted into a cluster of enormous sunbursts, the same fireworks displayed in Vizima.

Glancing up at Emhyr, Ciaran found the emperor’s calm face suffused with light and grim satisfaction, and following his gaze he saw the entire arena and everyone within it bathed in the golden light of those artificial suns.

— N —

As the tourney went on and though obsessive observations on the snow line continued every morning, the sense of enthusiasm and the weather grew ever warmer until it felt like early summer rather than early spring.

To his own surprise, the elf was quickly caught up in the excitement of the hastiludes so completely that when the imperial medics recommended he take a day’s rest he pleaded with the emperor to be
allowed to attend the tourney.

Attendance was hardly an onerous charge. The first skirmishes started mid-morning but not even the duchess herself was expected until at least noon when the more prestigious events started. The days ended with great feasts that went on late into the night and began again in the morning at lavish brunches that were as much social and diplomatic events as the tourney itself and that lasted into the early afternoon when finally even the most gluttonous and least inclined to the games finally left the palace.

The emperor was the first to leave the feasts and didn’t turn up to the brunches until the last decent moment and only stayed half an hour or so before leaving. Therefore Ciaran, who was never seen at either without him, had plenty of time to spend time alone with the emperor, to rest, and to study. The food, the fresh air, the comforts of the palace gradually washed away the pains and hardships of the journey and as he recovered some strength, Ciaran redoubled his efforts at study.

In the evening, he told Mererid which topics he wanted to be briefed on the following morning and by which aides, then spent part of the night and morning revising and preparing notes and questions, making a special note of questions he thought would be better put to Emhyr himself.

The emperor worked over breakfast, going through his despatch box, reading and signing papers, passing on anything of interest to Morvran Voorhis, who always joined them, and passing anything concerning the North to Ciaran.

These despatches from the various post commanders and local representatives made for dry and sometimes grim reading. Iorveth, Roche and their other allies were sticking to the terms of the treaties but there were still teething pains. The Triumvirate was still putting down isolated revolts and rebellions — fomented, it was suspected, by Novigradi agents spreading the Eternal Fire’s propaganda — while in Dol Gwennelen the elven leadership struggled to agree a form of government that was representative of all its classes and races of citizens while every day scores of humans who had lived on the land for generations but could not adapt to the idea of sharing it with elves were moved to Aedirnia and replaced with more broad-minded Aedimians attracted by the rich lands there and by Nilfgaardian settlers, many of them veterans at the end of their service who were assisted in purchasing good plots of land under the treaty.

“I do not understand them,” Morvran Voorhis sighed heavily as he folded up yet another despatch concerning these forced relocations, “How can they fail to see the big picture? Or have they forgotten that Radovid and Kaedwen are just across the river, waiting to take advantage of any weakness?”

“Aedimians and Kaedweini have been intermarrying for years,” Ciaran murmured, refilling the general and the emperor’s coffee cups, “Most people have family on both sides of the Pontar. That is more important to them than which king they pay their taxes to. And many would prefer to pay taxes and live among their kin than to live among elves, even if it means being exempt from taxes.”

“That is just what I mean,” the general all but snorted, “Irrational.”

“From your father, Morvran,” the emperor handed the general a long letter he’d just finished reading.

“All is well in the City. Preparations for the Triumph have already begun,” the general murmured as he skimmed the missive.

“I have already told him you will be immediately behind me.”

“Your Majesty is too generous.”
Emhyr’s secretary appeared with a messenger and the emperor moved away to his writing desk with them to attend to a small matter of urgency.

“His Majesty is tireless in his service to the eternal empire,” Morvran Voorhis murmured admiringly, his gaze following Emhyr before going to Ciaran, “The perfect Nilfgaardian — disciplined in mind and body and even in his passions. We are most fortunate to know his reign.”

“But how can you know that his passions are reasonable and moderated?” Ciaran asked, deadpan, carefully drizzling acacia honey onto a piece of buttered toast.

“You would not be so bright-eyed and bushy-tailed if they were not,” the general rejoined, eyes sparkling in mirth at Ciaran’s quick look of indignation.

The elf also fell into the habit of riding an-Nayyir alongside the ducal carriage with the general and his beloved Smeriglia. Between the city gates and the tourney grounds lay some of the most beautiful open countryside he had ever seen, meadows and pastures rolled out onto gentle hills studded with sheep or low-horned cattle, white-muzzled and doe-eyed, all hemmed in by blowsy hedgerows and large centennial trees — ancient chestnuts and cedars, yews and ash trees that cast enormous shadows acres across.

He and the general often veered off through the camp so the general could see and be seen by his troops and Ciaran usually stopped by Bastiaan’s tent to be updated on the team’s training, to dissect the previous day’s matches and make conjectures about the upcoming ones.

“What is that?” Ciaran asked one day when he noticed a bandage on Bastiaan’s forearm.

“Just a scratch, my lord. A pack of barghests appeared near one of the bridges so we volunteered to take care of it.”

“Show me,” Ciaran ordered then gently felt around the exposed wound, “This is a bite.”

“Yes, the pressure of it nearly broke skin but the teeth themselves didn’t get through my bracer.”

“Fangs,” Ciaran murmured, “And the medics have given you what you need?”

“Yes, my lord.”

Ciaran examined the injury again then applied some of the salve, dissatisfied. The bone was sound and because there had been no direct contact with the beast itself there was no poison or anything else to deal with. Still, Ciaran knew of a method that would have cut the healing time dramatically but he had neither the ingredients nor the facilities necessary.

“You shouldn’t take such risks before your fight with the Shaelmaar,” Ciaran frowned as he picked up a fresh length of linen to bandage the wound, waving away Bastiaan’s objections with a lazy flick of his wrist.

“We thought it would be good training. We’ve dealt with them before, near Vizima.”

The boy paused to admire Ciaran’s neat handiwork then his face took on a gently puzzled expression.

“Can’t seem to get rid of them though. No matter how many of them we cut down.”

“Hellhounds are not wolves and spectres are not rabbits,” Ciaran admonished, securing the bandage so tightly Bastiaan briefly creased into a wry wince, “They don’t exist for your sport and they don’t
multiply by breeding. They’re born of something else, of ill will and blood spilt, and until the root cause of their existence is addressed they will continue to appear.”

“That’s true, my lord,” Bastiaan acknowledged good-naturedly, “but it’s not just the barghests. We cleared out a nest of drowners further downriver when we arrived and the other day we noticed that they’ve come back. We don’t understand why we can’t durably eradicate monsters from Toussaint the way we have in most of the empire, especially when it’s so civilised.”

They went out to where most of the rest of the team was at target practice and were hailed by Morvran Voorhis who was just dismounting.

“Still training, I see. No permanent damage, aep Larsen?”

“None at all, general,” Bastiaan grinned, “But I’ve been told to leave off archery practice for a couple of days. Would you like to try, my lord?” Bastiaan offered again and this time, after a moment’s consideration, Ciaran gave in to temptation and accepted.

The bows too were beautifully balanced and though they were not absolutely in the elven style an elven mind had clearly had a hand in their design and Ciaran forgot himself in the pleasure of handling the one he was lent, of feeling the tautness of the bowstring, of feeling his heartbeat and breathing slow almost to stillness as he took aim. But his reflexes, his keen eye and even the long habit of the act burnt deep into his nerves and muscles, were foiled by the new stiffness in his fingers as he released the arrow, causing his bow to wobble and his arrow to land wide of the mark.

“Sheyss,” he muttered under his breath as he lowered the bow and stretching his cramped fingers, lapsing into Nilfgaardian for the first time.

Searing shame was followed by a drenching of cold dread as he realised what he’d said and noticed that dead silence had fallen around him.

When he finally dared raise his gaze, he found Morvran Voorhis fighting back a smile while the other soldiers were grinning broadly.

“Please don’t tell anyone,” Ciaran finally managed in a small voice, mortified.

“It will stay between us,” Morvran Voorhis promised him.

When Ciaran left the royal enclosure for a short walk to stretch his legs later that afternoon it became clear to him from the broad grins of the soldiers who elbowed each other when they saw him that by “us” Voorhis had actually meant just the entire Nilfgaardian army.

He made his disgruntled way back to the royal enclosure and noted with deep satisfaction how disciplined the Impera guarding it were and how they withstood, stony-faced, the puns and improbable rhymes the tourney herald’s warbling announcements were stuffed full of, then made his way back to the far side, to his seat by the emperor’s side, walking past the full catering offer.

The food was always excellent and varied and only slightly simpler than what was served at the nightly feasts they attended when the games ended just after dusk — usually with a flourish. And yet every day Ciaran eyed the colourful treats and sweetmeats sold in the arena covetously, never daring to ask for them since he felt certain fairground food was below an imperial concubine’s dignity.

As ever-present as the food was the politics. High Politics, sometimes, but usually the lowly politics of pressure groups and traded interests. Every nation of the continent and beyond was represented by ambassadors and other visiting dignitaries who all took turns paying homage to the emperor, congratulating him on his great victory and on his beautiful new concubine before congratulating
Ciaran on his new position.

From this new vantage-point, Ciaran took a different view of things stood. The reasons for the Aen Seidhe’s long-standing refusal to come to Toussaint were founded and serious and not ones that Ciaran felt should be thrown out simply for the sake of attending games but he saw more clearly than ever what their self-imposed isolation cost them. Even absent, the elves of the South and their interests were represented by Nilfgaard but nobody spoke for the elves of the North, not even the dwarf gem traders from Mahakam who came to thank the emperor for the protections given to non-humans by the empire’s non-discrimination laws and some stone rights they’d been ceded as reward for their cooperation during the war.

And it was not just because the Scoia’tael had never had a state of their own until now or because the elves of Dol Blathanna had found the trip too wearing and hazardous but because this was Toussaint. Once Dol Gwennelen found its feet, it too would send out ambassadors of their own to all the nations around them — but not here, not to Toussaint. Ciaran alone represented them here.

A wave of anxiety washed over Ciaran and he pulled off his glove and put his hand on the emperor’s thigh, noting that though he was deep in conversation with the duchess, Emhyr automatically covered it with his.

Sex had made things a lot easier, Ciaran reflected. They never talked about it but Ciaran knew Emhyr enjoyed their play. Ciaran too enjoyed it and knew Emhyr knew he did and this open unspoken secret bound them together in a game of feints, both finding it easier to pretend that they were merely doing what was expected.

But the the intimacy went far beyond mere shared pleasure. There had been a shared assumption that the trauma of Flotsam had sunk to the bottom of the pool of Ciaran’s memory and the shared fear that too much agitation might bring it to the surface. Even days after, Ciaran was still soaked in cold relief that it had not. The memories had not merely sunk out of sight. They were gone, washed away by successive waves of trauma and healing.

But along with the bad had gone some of the good. Ciaran’s mind was full of empty memories — boxes labelled with dates and places, people and events but with none of the emotions they should have held, like milestones in someone else’s existence. And though the elf had spent many a sleepless night hoping he would not remember, he still mourned the lost pieces of his life.

Ciaran glanced up as the emperor’s gaze came to rest on him a moment, the amber eyes glowing in the falling light, and his eyes half-closed as Emhyr’s thumb stroked over his hand caressingly and the tips of his fingers slipped in between Ciaran’s.

Ciaran didn’t know wether the emperor suspected how he felt or perhaps simply didn’t care but in any case Emhyr never pried or asked questions when Ciaran gave signs of needing contact and warmth, he merely provided, in the same way he provided food and shelter, as a matter of course.

“I am not sure I can face another feast,” Morvran Voorhis remarked to Ciaran and var Cleef as they rode alongside the royal carriage on the way back to the palace, “The food here is excellent but too rich for every day eating.”

“Not disciplined and moderated enough for the Nilgaardian palate?” Ciaran suggested and was met by a small laugh.

“But for that of an Aen Seidhe, I would have thought,” the general rejoined, “Ah, but here is something we can enjoy without moderation.”
The field they were passing by had been turned into an open-air ballroom and as Ciaran and var Cleef slowed their mounts to watch the dancing couples whirl by, Morvran Voorhis urged his on, hailed the carriage then dismounted to hand the duchess out.

“Is this the done thing?” Ciaran asked var Cleef in astonishment as the music died down and the crowd parted to allow Voorhis to escort the duchess to the centre of the field.

“If General Voorhis does it then it is the done thing,” the brigadier replied with his usual smile.

“Would you like to dance?” the emperor asked the elf after he’d helped him dismount.

“I don’t know these dances.”

And so they stood and watched the duchess nodded to the musicians and she and the general began to dance and one by one the other couples resumed their dancing and soon the field was a forest of twirling brocades and patterned wools.

The laughter, the music, the lantern-strewn trees that lined the clearing reminded Ciaran of the similar clearing where he’d stood when the emperor had chosen him.

“You are cold. We can go.”

“No… I’d like to stay a while. Please.”

So they stayed. The emperor took a throw blanket from carriage and wrapped it around Ciaran’s slender shoulders and they stayed and watched the quick-moving feet, the smiling faces, the ribbons and jewels, and the rush of life spin by them.

“You should dance too!” the duchess told Ciaran when she returned, pink-cheeked and happy, General Voorhis in tow.

“I don’t know how to dance,” Ciaran explained again.

“But you could still play truant, my lord.”

“What do you have in mind, general?” the duchess demanded, smiling impishly up at him.

“The Mandragora.”

“Oh!” the duchess clapped her hands together, “Yes! We are certain Lord Ciaran will enjoy it! But first, I must change.”

Soon enough Ciaran was back at his vanity table while Jayne put the finishing touches to his hair and Mererid brought him a selection of veils.

“The duchess said I wouldn’t need a veil in Toussaint.”

“The Mandragora is the exception,” Mererid insisted, holding up a square of fine gauze then a piece of organza up against Ciaran’s face before finally settling on a length of stiffened black sinamay*** that he bent around Ciaran’s head so that it came down over the elf’s forehead and eyes, folded its ends into a rabbit-eared knot and secured it with a few pins, “The emperor of Nilfgaard and an imperial concubine cannot be seen at the Mandragora.”

Ciaran, who could see through the wide mesh as clearly as if he weren’t wearing it, could make no sense of this remark and intimated as much to the chamberlain.
“By social convention the veiling of one’s eyes grants one anonymity,” the chamberlain explained breezily, “By wearing this veil, the young gentleman signals that he does not wish to be recognised and becomes just another face in the crowd.”

Ciaran stared at himself in the mirror. The veil was nominal at best but even if one gave it all the symbolic weight Mererid credited it with, it hardly solved all the problems.

“I’m the only elf in all of Toussaint.”

“That makes no difference,” Mererid dismissed, tucking the sinamay more neatly behind the long ears, “The principle remains the same.”

“Is it really possible?” Ciaran asked the emperor moments later, having recounted his conversation with the chamberlain.

“Anything can become possible by social convention,” Emhyr murmured and as Ciaran watched him put on on his own half-mask, black with a golden sun on the forehead, he decided he still had lot to learn and that some of it he might never understand.

They were joined in the carriage by the duchess, wearing an exquisite piece of lace over her eyes, Morvran Voorhis in a lion’s face mask, and Bastiaan, whom the general had brought with him, wore a black velvet domino.

The general had somehow managed to procure a programme of the evening’s entertainment and Ciaran and Bastiaan pored over it. Musicians, magicians, but no clue as to why the exclusivity and the secrecy.

They disembarked before a small gate manned by a guard who waved them through, already briefed, evidently, by the emperor’s and general’s aides.

Ciaran paused at the top of the stairs, eyes widening, to take in the large courtyard with its wide drop view of the lake beyond, transformed into a fairground with stalls, and performers and lights and colours everywhere.

“Go on, enjoy yourselves.”

Bastiaan hesitated but Ciaran did not wait to be told again and disappeared into the crowd with the young soldier.

There was magic everywhere, more magic than he’d ever seen in one place at one time. There was the easy, commonplace magic of the mimes who created walls and stools and ropes out of thin air, the heavy magic of the rich architecture and the wealth that had achieved it and that had paid for the gems glittering along the hems of the girls flying by on swings having from the eaves, the perpetual magic of the laughter and bursting, unfettered joy that filled the air.

Someone touched the head of a fountain statue and out of the curling ram’s horn it held poured out a cascade of tiny glittering fish and soon the water in the large fountain thrashed and frothed as the fish turned into sharks and dolphins and mermaids with long hair and veil-like fins.

“Nereids,” Bastiaan grinned just as a couple of youths ran by, screeching with laughter, just pausing to throw a couple of huge handfuls of rose petals over them before dashing off.

Ciaran and Bastiaan looked at each other, grinning, as the petals that lay at their feet and clung to their clothes opened and closed their wings then took flight, spreading a cloud of their sweet scent and trailing magic dust as they fluttered about them.
This was how Nifgaard used magic. They no longer relied on it to win their wars or power their most spectacular technologies. It had been relegated to mere entertainment and spectacle, as a cheaper and superior form of glitter.

There was magic in the mask too.

People never went quite as far as to touch him but they did, paradoxically, meet his gaze and they called out to him without waiting to be spoken to. They looked into his eyes and smiled, they laughed with him, they offered him things, encouraged him to dance with them and drew him into their games. They shared everything and Ciaran drank it all in, stalking this way and that with Bastiaan at his heels, trying to soak it all up.

They were not the only ones making the most of their freedom. Couples and trios and small groups disappeared into darkened archways and hidden rooms from which they did not quickly reemerge. Artists painted portraits of revellers posing in nothing but their masks, hidden away in out of the way corners.

“We should head back, my Lord,” Bastiaan murmured, lapsing back into the formal address despite Ciaran’s repeated reminders that it undermined his disguise, “I promised General Voorhis I’d be back at camp before one.”

They found the emperor and his aides on a high terrace from which he had surveyed the party all evening.

“Are you ready to go?”

Ciaran turned and nodded up at the emperor.

“What about the duchess and General Voorhis?”

“They left an hour ago.”

And so the emperor and his happy young concubine found themselves alone in the royal carriage that trundled them back to the palace.

“Emhyr? Why doesn’t Anna-Henrietta just marry Morvran Voorhis?”

“Their characters may not be compatible enough for that. Also, the Voorhises are nobles of the first rank and Morvran himself is a prince of the blood as well as a general. But Anarietta is the sovereign here, Morvran would only be her consort. It would be as difficult for her to have a consort of higher rank and of closer lineage to the imperial house of Nilfgaard than hers as it would be for him to give up all occupation and most of his influence in the City to play a supporting role for a duchess in a distant province.”

“And they don’t love each other.”

“No. They are very fond of each other and enjoy each other’s company. But they do not like each other enough for that.”

They looked at each other across the length of the carriage. Then Emhyr moved forward and placed his hands on Ciaran’s knees, feeling them through the robes a moment before starting to pull the fine wool folds up slowly, revealing ankles, calves and finally knees.

After soaking up the sight of them, Emhyr raised his gaze to Ciaran’s and held it as he very deliberately slid his hands beneath the piled up hem, relishing the perfect fit of the of the delicate
bones against the palms of his hands, fingertips slipping into the fold behind, exploring the hollow there until he hooked and tugged, pulling the elf nearly off his bench, arranging the slender legs on either side of his own.

Ciarán’s lips parted and he waited, tremulous.

Emhyr inched upwards, hands flattened over the taut flesh, thumbs running lightly along the insides of the long thighs, barely brushing the smooth skin, long fingers curling around to stroke along the undersides.

Ciarán closed his eyes and breathed deep and slow as the carriage rumbled on and Emhyr’s hands moved higher.

Within the hour, Ciarán was propped up against the mountain of pillows on his bed, his knees pulled up, feet firmly planted on the emperor’s lower back and he could feel, beneath his soles, the hard clench of Emhyr’s muscles as he rolled his hips, in small, controlled waves.

Emhyr was just toying with him, thrusting in and out of him deliberately without hitting any of the sensitive spots yet, Ciarán decided a little resentfully as he felt the thick shaft, swollen hard with all that absurdly hot blood, move idly inside him, filling and stretching him.

Biting his bottom lip, Ciarán looked up at Emhyr and willed his body to tighten around him, watching in satisfaction as Emhyr bared his teeth.

The young elf had just managed to brace himself against the headboard when the emperor began to thrust deeper and finally hitting the spot that sent burning sparks flying up Ciarán’s spine to explode behind his eyes.

Emhyr bit his mouth, pulled his legs up higher and snapped his hips harder until Ciarán shuddered and gripped him then felt the hot flood of the emperor’s release inside him.

He lay, exhausted and content, under the searing heat of Emhyr’s devouring kisses then woke, a while later, clean and rested.

Even in the low light, Ciarán could make out the lines of the high forehead, the aquiline nose and closed eyes, wondered if these latter had that predatory look even in sleep then had to quell a sudden mad urge to lift the lids to check.

“You’re not supposed to sleep around me,” he reminded the supine figure instead.

“I am merely resting my eyes.”

Ciarán bit back the giggle bubbling inside him and pressed a few kisses against the corner of Emhyr’s mouth.

“I could be plotting to kill you.”

Emhyr’s hand came to rest in the small of his back and started to scratch it gently.

“Are you?”

Ciarán considered.

“No.”

“Good” Emhyr murmured and patted Ciarán’s rump affectionately.
Ciaran curled up on Emhyr’s chest, his brows drawn together and a hand in front of his mouth, trying to remember when he had last considered active ways of killing the emperor. It had been one of the concerns foremost in this mind on leaving Dol Gwennelen but somehow during their journey to Toussaint it had ceased to be so and the threat of immediate execution or betrayal, both personal and to Dol Gwennelen, now seemed very remote. And this despite the previous evening’s discussions.

He felt a heavy hand start to sift through his hair.

Nilfgaardians were still the better sort of human — clean, quiet and Emhyr was especially clean and especially quiet and even had some elven blood to temper the more regrettable aspects of his character. It would be a shame to kill him, even if he was a randy old goat, Ciaran thought crossly then pressed a kiss against Emhyr’s pectoral because he didn’t really mean it.

Emhyr’s hand continued to shift through his hair and Ciaran yawned, curled up more securely on top of Emhyr and allowed himself to drift off into sleep.

— N —

“Not too tired?” Ciaran asked Bastiaan the next morning when he and Synnøve arrived at the young soldier’s tent.

“Not at all, my Lord,” the boy grinned and chattered companionably as they went to the training area.

When pressed, Ciaran accepted a bow and arrow but this time remembered to loosen the muscles and tendons in his hands before taking aim and letting go, and he felt a melting sense of satisfaction when he hit the bullseye with ease.

He was so carried away with happiness that the soldiers were even able to convince him to demonstrate the horseback archery the Scoia’tael were so famous for.

Ciaran pulled on an archery glove and had a quiet talk with an-Nayyir while Bastiaan and his teammates set up the targets.

Soon the elf was riding along, knees and legs tight at his horse’s flanks, time slowing all around him as he focussed on the target ahead, his whole being flooded with contentment as he drew the bow with great deliberation, his hand passing in an arc over his head to behind his ear, slowing the in and out of his breathing, slowing every successive beat of his heart, until time stopped entirely in that perfect moment of weightlessness at the height of the rise. And he let go.

The targets had been set up at a small distance from the path and with plenty of space between them and Ciaran hit the successive targets with ease, to the cheers and applause of the crowd of soldiers that had gathered to watch.

Ciaran handed an-Nayyir off to the groom on the firm understanding the young stallion be fed some oats when they were back at the stables, then Bastiaan escorted him and Synnøve as they went for a wander through the tourney camp grounds.

Each nation had its own designated area for tents and stands and all of them also used the space to showcase aspects of their culture. One could buy one of Cintra’s famous blue tiles or a coloured
quartz paperweight from Kovir just a few strides from where the Ofieri had ornately-patterned carpets strewn out beneath a colourful canopy and they served tea in their traditional fashion, pouring it out of long-spouted teapots from up high into slender classes stamped with gold motifs. Nearby a group of Skelligans were tuning their instruments.

“Looks interesting,” said Ciaran, who had asked Synnøve to accompany them intentionally, “Shall we go look?”

As they approached, one of the young men called out to Synnøve who returned his greeting.

“Do you know him?”

“He’s my cousin.”

Ciaran’s gaze flicked over the boy who met it flatly then it shifted to the girls laughing and trying out the bells tied to their ankles.

“What are they going to play?”

Synnøve exchanged a few more words with the taciturn youth.

“An old ballad. It’s about a whaler who comes back to find his wife has died. He wants to go back out to sea and put it behind him but he’s chained to the land, where he last saw her. He goes from shore to shore, trying to forget her and reminding himself that she is gone and that nothing of her remains. But he hears her voice in the sound of the wind and the sea and the stars so he continues to wander, earthbound. We use it as a courting song.”

The women were forming a circle while the men tuned their instruments and Ciaran glanced at Synnøve.

“You know it?”

Synnøve gave a nod.

“Go on,” Ciaran murmured.

Synnøve shrugged off her coat and handed it to Bastiaan who took it automatically, looking a little surprised at himself.

A few words and Synnøve’s cousin threw her a string of bells and once she’d been welcomed into the circle of women, she tied it around her ankle then got into position.

Ciaran noted that even among her own people the youthful Synnøve stood out for her beauty, which was further enhanced by the overall neatness of her appearance and the flattering cut of her clean, expensive attendant’s robes.

The music started, slow and steady, then one of the men started to chant, clearly lamenting his fate, patient and resigned, while the women raised their arms and swayed like the wind through the grass, like long weeds moved by the tide. They answered the man’s words but distant and indifferent and the stars. As the verse started again, they moved their feet, adding the twinkle of these stars to the music and rhythm, and at the next round the started to move in a round in their circle in half-steps, still swaying, leaning to one side then the other, bending elegantly at the waist, and Synnøve’s skirts fanned out with each move.

At the end of the verse the music stopped and Ciaran had just enough time to regret it before the
singing started again, all the men joining in, singing higher and all the despair of a thousand broken lifetimes and this time the women’s answer interwoven with it sounded compassionate.

It lasted less than a minute then lapsed back into the thrumming monotone to die away, leaving just an ache of loneliness in the air.

Synnøve went to return the bells and exchanged a few more words with her cousin, the tenor of which Ciaran could just make out from this distance and his crude understanding of their Skelligan dialect.

“Should we be letting them talk like that, my Lord? They might…”

“They will not help her,” Ciaran murmured, “She allowed herself to be captured and enslaved by the enemy. She has shamed her family.”

Bastian blinked at this but handed Synnøve back her coat wordlessly when she returned to them.

“I hadn’t realised you could be so graceful,” Ciaran remarked nonchalantly.

Synnøve held his gaze a moment then took her robe back from Bastiaan and slipped it on.

Later that evening, after the feast, Ciaran sat at his vanity table and watched her comb out his hair.

“And how is your Nilfgaardian?”

She gave one of the noncommittal shrugs that Toussaintois used to great effect and that could be made to mean “yes”, “no” and everything in between.

“Better than people think?”

This time she met his gaze in the mirror and held it a long moment.

“It will be a useful skill wherever you end up.”

“Where could I end up?”

“Difficult to say. The imperial chamberlain or the Keeper of the Imperial Harem will have the final say on whether any of you are fit to stay on at the palace. If you are not you will be sold into private service. Anything could happen.”

Synnøve considered silently, her closed expression giving nothing away.

“And if I wanted to stay and work for wages?”

Ciaran picked up the other comb and ran it though the ends of a thick lock of hair resting on his shoulder.

“You would have to be freed first. Loyalty can’t be bought but for wages I would expect a high level of service.”

She met his gaze again and said nothing.

“We’ll see how things go,” Ciaran concluded but he noticed that when she’d finished with his hair she readjusted the cuffs of his nightshirt so a few inches hung out of the brocade robe’s sleeves without having to be asked.
After thanking her, he went through to the far side of the room where Emhyr was sitting by the fireplace, a drink at his elbow, his attention divided between watching Ciaran and reading the papers he set down when Ciaran curled up on the couch beside him.

“Evrard says the talk at the barracks is still of your marksmanship.”

Ciaran blinked up at him, belatedly realising that an imperial concubine should probably not be the talk of the barracks and particularly not for their talents in the martial arts.

“I’m sorry. I forgot.”

“There is no need to apologise. Archery is a noble pursuit in the City, several other concubines practice it. And perhaps the occasional reminder that you have such skills is not without merit. You made the right decision, as you did when you told young aep Larsen to make up a mixed team. You are more popular than ever. With both the Impera and the Alba.”

“But they don’t know me,” Ciaran said, trying to convey to Emhyr that it was an illusion, that the men didn’t know him, not really, not the way his own Scoia’tael soldiers had known him, “They just like the idea of me.”

“You have given them a nice idea of yourself.”

Ciaran huffed and threw an arm over Emhyr’s chest, caught the sleeve on a button and when he slipped it free he noticed again that the gossamer fabric hadn’t snagged or even loosened.

“Emhyr, what is this fabric?”

“Ranyatelle.”

“Yes, but what is it?”

“A type of muslin,” Emhyr answered idly, running a caressing thumb along a long ear, “The thread is spun from Zerrikhanian spotted spider silk, woven into muslin in the Danijam province of Ofier’s Eastern quarter. The thread is very strong and the fine weave will withstand most blades.”

“Really?” Ciaran felt the material again, eyes narrowing suspiciously.

Emhyr drew the dagger tucked into his belt, turned Ciaran’s arm over, pushed up the sleeve of his outer robe and ran the edge of the blade over the cloth.

Ciaran felt the cold steel over his forearm then examined the fabric minutely while Emhyr put his dagger away. It was intact.

“Does everyone in Nilfgaard wear it?”

“No. It is only produced for the emperor of Nilfgaard.”

The emperor absorbed the elf’s look of shock placidly and rubbed his fingers beneath the loose knot of glossy hair resting against the long nape.

“What do you know of Ofier, elyennen?”

Ciaran thought this rather an unfair question. His lessons had not extended beyond the boundaries of the continent and consequently he knew nothing of Ofier beyond its geographical location and what he’d gleaned from his studies of Nilfgaard’s foreign and commercial policies.
“Ofier lies to the south of Nilfgaard, on the other side of the Strait of Belone and Muire Eol, the Sea of Winds, and the two nations have shared stewardship of what are commonly known as the Friendship Isles,” he recited pointedly, determined to make the most of what he did know, “The Tetrarchy is divided into four Quarters — the Northern, the Eastern, the Southern and the Western — whose leaders rule as the Crown of Four Points. Ofier is Nilfgaard’s largest trading partner.”

The emperor shifted into a more comfortable position, pulled Ciaran onto his chest then burrowed his other hand under the elf’s heavy brocade robe to stroke his back through the gossamer nightshirt.

“Two hundred years ago, Ofier had the finest textile industry in the known world, the crown jewel of which was their Danijam province in the south of the Eastern Quarter that possessed a favourable climate, close proximity to sources of high quality cotton and the skilled weavers trained in a technique they had learnt from the maengu — water spirits who live in their high mountain lakes and rivers — and handed down in families over centuries. They traded with Nilfgaard but also with Hannu, Barca, Haakland and even with parts of Zangvebar even though their two nations have been in conflict on and off since times immemorial. The Ofieri’s system of centralised government and their militias were largely successful in holding off attacks until one Zangvebari chieftain managed to federate a handful of clans and led an incursion into Danijam for the express purpose of taking over its textile industry and so cripple the tetrarchy’s economy. They smashed the looms, put the older weavers to the sword and cut off the thumbs of the younger ones. Those who could do so fled and within the first eighteen months of occupation three quarters of the population had dispersed. The Zangvebari knew they could not hold the region indefinitely — the geography makes it almost impossible — so they drove out the people, burnt down the buildings and depleted the crops in the fields, creating a barren buffer zone where they set up their rear bases, from which they launched incursions even deeper into the Eastern quarter, funded by the controlled sale of the stocks of textiles they had found in the warehouses when they arrived and that they hoarded to drive up the prices.”

Emhyr paused to take a sip of whiskey and to wind a finger into a tendril of hair that had come loose, soaking up his elfling’s look of rapt attention.

“They held onto Danijam for almost a decade. Three of the tetrarchies border Zangvebari territory and while the Northern tetrarch did send coin and soldiers to the East, the other two tetrarchies were too fearful for the security of their own borders to channel resources away from them. But eventually they came together and negotiated, then signed a wide-ranging cooperation treaty with Nilfgaard — with my great-grandfather. Within two years our allied forces had driven the Zangvebari back across their old borders and beyond. By then the industry had been completely destroyed, the region devastated. But people returned to Danijam or were resettled there, the few master craftsmen who had survived were able to recreate the specialised looms, the maengu who had gone into hiding and had not been seen for years reappeared and again taught the people their art. The industry has recovered.”

“So why don’t they produce more ranyatelle? There must be a market for it.”

“Collecting the silk is difficult and dangerous. It must be carded and spun into thread while fresh or it becomes too brittle to handle. It is delicate, it must be packed in damp cotton for shipment to Ofier and only the maengu themselves, with their centuries of experience, know how to treat the thread and weave it and even then they can only do so because they weave it by night when the ambient humidity is higher, sitting on enormous lotus leaves in their mountain lakes. The maengu sing while they work to stabilise the thread and it is said you can hear their songs in the cloth,” Emhyr murmured, rubbing a fold of Ciaran’s sleeve between his fingers so that it rustled softly, “Only a few bolts are made each year.”

“Just for you?” Ciaran said after a moment’s pause.
“For the emperor of Nilfgaard.”

“Tribute? To remind the Ofieri of what they owe Nilfgaard?”

“A symbol of friendship and of an alliance that has grown stronger with time.”

Ciaran returned the emperor’s long look from beneath lowered lashes but closed his eyes and rubbed his cheek against the hand that stroked it.

“All relationships require effort to be maintained,” Emhyr continued, “A relationship that does not change is one that is not growing. But this dynamism comes at the cost of instability. Traditions reinforce these bonds and are one of the means by which we ensure this instability does not become destructive. The maengu are like elves, they live long lives and they remember. They have always lived in peace with their human neighbours and suffered at seeing their friends and their homeland destroyed by invading barbarians. They value the peace and prosperity brought by the alliance with Nilfgaard. Ofier and Nilfgaard have withstood together the many changes the decades have brought. We have watched Haakland withdraw in on itself and adopt a policy of inward-looking expansion, we have seen the regularly-recurring conflicts between Hannu and Barca, and the gradual normalisation of relations between Ofier and the territories along its southern borders. Our relationship with Ofier is underpinned by our interests there — by the grain, textiles and other things we buy from them, of course, but also by our embassies, our banks, our insurance houses, our dockland and inland warehouses, the roads we helped build, the Nilfgaardian tradesmen who source what we import and even more so by the tradesmen from all over the empire who have set up their workshops to produce there, often for export back into the empire. Ofieri investment in the North will underwrite peace there too because they will have a vested interest in guarding them against attack.”

Ciaran stared, overwhelmed.

“The White Oliphant…”

“The North is not a white oliphant. It is not a trophy and our interest in it is not idle.”

Ciaran stared up at the emperor and suddenly saw beyond the impassive facade to the patience and the weariness beneath and moved up to kiss Emhyr.

The fingers in his hair tightened their hold as the emperor deepened the kiss, as did the arm around him and Ciaran made small sound of surprise and delight when Emhyr stood and carried him to his bed.

The elfling pushed the emperor against the pillows and smiled down at him shyly, soaking up the naked admiration in the tigerish eyes until the emperor pulled him down for a slow, deliberate kiss and slid a thigh between his legs.

Ciaran liked kissing Emhyr. Emhyr was good at it. Likely his skills were so developed in this because of his limitations when it came to other forms of intimacy, the way the loss of one sense sometimes led to a compensating development of the others.

The emperor rolled them over, settling his thigh higher and more securely between the elf’s, prompting a bubble of laughter from this latter.

Whatever the reason, Emhyr had become a master in the use of his fingers, his mouth and his tongue and Ciaran lost himself in the feel of these as they explored and touched, moved along the secret lines of his body and brushed over fluttering nerves.
It was not the first time that they had indulged like this and Ciaran sighed happily as Emhyr mouthe
his way along his slender neck, his lips hot and mobile against the exquisitely sensitive skin behind
his ears before the rough tongue raked its way the length of them, the questing tip seeking out the
folds of the delicate shell.

Ciaran’s slender thighs tightened around Emhyr’s, relishing a long, warm kiss against his temple and
when he sighed again Emhyr covered his mouth with his, pushing his tongue in deep as he probed
deliberately, rhythmically, until he felt a hard spasm through the thighs wrapped around his.

Ciaran opened his eyes slowly and met Emhyr’s gaze, still melting and tremulous, quivering in
anticipation of a fuller possession.

“You should sleep.”

“Already?” Ciaran asked, taken aback.

“It has been two hours.”

Ciaran followed the emperor’s gaze then glared at the exquisite temple clock on his bedside table as
if its telling the time was a personal affront.

The emperor looked down at his beautiful elfling. Ciaran’s hold on him had instinctively tightened
and that did not bode well for a quick and tidy retreat, but as he watched, Ciaran’s brow cleared and
his expression lightened.

“Emhyr?”

“What is it?” the emperor asked, trying to keep the suspicion out of his voice at the nonchalant tone
and vaguely hoping that whatever request was to follow could be easily resolved with coin.

“Could Bastiaan be transferred to the Impera, to my security detail?”

“There is no impediment. Evrard and Movran have discussed the possibility,” Emhyr paused to press
another lingering kiss against a fragile temple, “I can give the order but it would be better coming
from you.”

Ciaran considered this, his hold on Emhyr loosening, then he nodded and after a few more kisses and
caresses, Emhyr slipped away to return to his work.

— N —

The elfling woke the next morning feeling disastrously weak for the first time since they’d reached
the palace. The medics and their tonics were sent for and the emperor himself came to look Ciaran
over and suggest he take the day off to rest.

“I can’t. Bastiaan’s fight is today, I have to be there!”

The young elf became to agitated that the imperial medics decided the remedy was worse than the
evil and it was agreed that he would spend a few hours longer in bed to get as much rest as possible
before sallying forth in the afternoon in time to watch and support his team’s performance.

Once the emperor had left, having been tasked to tell Bastiaan in person about what had happened,
Ciaran had Ludivine write notes for Morvran Voorhis and Evrard var Cleef asking them to tell Bastiaan what had happened in case the emperor forgot.

Then he slept soundly for a couple of hours by the end of which the potions had started to take effect and when he woke he dressed with particular care, then sat quietly, drinking tea, while his attendants dressed his hair, weaving into it some of the star-stamped ribbons and adding as a final touch a pair of long curve-ended hairpins strung with tiny ivory bells shaped like snowdrops.

Ciaran endured the carriage ride and though the weather was fine, the ache in his bones told him the weather was changing, which possibly also accounted for the heaviness behind his eyes and why he could barely tolerate the bright light.

When he stopped to wish Bastiaan and the team luck on the way to the royal lodge he was greatly fussed over and told they had received all three of his messages. Emhyr watched him make his way to his seat, immediately took his hand once he was seated, tugged the glove off it and placed it on his thigh.

“How are you?”

“I’ll be fine, Your Majesty. I was just a little tired,” Ciaran murmured as Emhyr leant over to adjust his furs, his fingers lingering at Ciaran’s chin.

They were joined by General Voorhis, who immediately enquired after Ciaran’s health.

“Just an excuse to have a lie-in, general,” Ciaran smiled faintly, turning his attention to the ongoing shaelmaar fight.

He had seen the towering shaelmaars in their holding pens but this one was even more intimidating now as it crashed about the arena, boulder-like its sheer rock-hard mass and relentlessness. They were bred and trained to this, Ciaran knew from Bastiaan, and the very best ones came from Ebbing. This one had been sent up to Toussaint for the tourney.

Despite his woolly-headedness and half-blinded by the disturbance of the light, Ciaran tried to focus on the deadly trial unfolding below. His keen hearing allowed him to make out clearly the curious high-pitched sound the shaelmaar occasionally threw out and the way it kept its head close to the ground, alert to every vibration.

The current fight was a qualifying round in the main ranked competition and the disparate team facing the shaelmaar was made up of the five competitors still in the running, each fighting with his weapon of choice.

“What is that weapon? The one that looks like two morning star balls chained together.”

“That is a falling meteor,” Morvran Voorhis answer, signalling one of his aides, “Those that have three or more balls we call meteor showers. They are a traditional weapon in Nilfgaard but the morning star is standard in the army. This is the variety we use for training,” he explained when the aide brought them an exemplar whose balls were fluted rather than spiked, “They can be used both offensively and defensively.”

Ciaran watched the knight in the ring make good use of his falling meteor, swinging it around a few times before shooting it at the shaelmaar, hitting an armoured shoulder, seeming ineffectually. Enraged, the beast charged but spun and changed tack when it heard the sound of sword against plate, catching another contestant unawares in a bruising crush against the arena walls.

He was carried off and the remaining contestants just about held their own against the beast that kept
rolling at the various individuals, thundering towards them at great speed. Ciaran was only
moderately reassured by the knowledge that Bastiaan and his team had a planned strategy they’d
spent days practicing and refining. He knew they would forgo parts of their plate armour to keep
themselves light on their feet.

The shaemaar let out a screech of rage and frustration as the falling meteor’s chain wrapped itself
around one of its legs, the sheer force knocking it out from under it, bringing the shaemaar crashing
to the ground. The sound moved like a physical wave through the air and the next howl knocked the
air out of Ciaran’s lungs. Breathless and dizzy, he felt himself sway in desperate kinship with the
hounded relict — an ancient pre-Conjunction creature who had known this world before humans had
landed on it, as the elves had, and would now be extinct like so many other species were, like elves
risked becoming, if they weren’t being bred and used as playthings for the amusement of their human
masters.

When the shaemaar was pinned to the ground, Ciaran braced himself for its death but he still
startled at the death blow that swiftly followed the death sentence.

He noticed the emperor turn to him and realised his hand had tightened into a fist under Emhyr’s and
he opened it out again, saddened and soothed when Emhyr started to stroke his thumb over it.

Ciaran sat up, setting his hair ornaments tinkling, as Bastiaan and his team file into the arena, looking
tall and unusually streamlined. They’d kept their winged helmets and chest armour and though
they’d kept the high bevoirs, the pauldrons had been removed and the plate gauntlets and articulated
greaves had been replaced with shiny black boiled leather arm guards and shin guards over their
cuissardes.

After returning Bastiaan’s wave, Ciaran glanced at Emhyr, unable to quell a flare of anxiety, then
mastered himself, turning back and watching, still and silent, as the match got underway.

They used their arrows as misdirection, firing them at the edges of the arena so the shaemaar would
go careening into the walls, allowing them to land a few blows while it was stunned, or using them
to draw the creature away if it began to chase one of them in earnest.

Bastiaan led the dance as they pirouetted around the shaemaar, misdirecting it with arrows fired into
the arena’s walls before coming in to land a few blows, wearing the creature down.

A flashing light from the benches opposite worsened his headache but nonetheless Ciaran watched
anxiously, groaning at the risks Bastiaan sometimes took to land an extra blow.

“How many more times do you think he’ll feel the need to risk his life to prove himself?” Ciaran
asked Morvran Voorhis a little plaintively, as Bastiaan duck-rolled out of the way yet again.

“I do not understand why he feels the need to do it at all. He is already returning to a triumphant
welcome.”

Ciaran considered this.

“Perhaps he wants to be celebrated for something more heroic than pulling a half-dead elf from a pile
of bodies.”

“We do not ask our soldiers to be heroic, merely to do their duty.”

A gasp from the crowd at yet another near-miss and when Bastiaan and the others took up their
positions again, Ciaran noticed the light again, saw its projection dancing over Bastiaan’s chestplate
and frowned.
A mirror, he realised, but before he could formulate any further thought, the saw the dancing light travel upwards and Bastiaan, blinded, stumbled and tripped.

The shaelmaar wheeled about and went straight for him.

Ciaran jumped to his feet, all his ornaments tinkling, and the shaelmaar stopped dead in its tracks to sniff the air.

Bastiaan quickly recovered and Ciaran was still on his feet when, a few manoeuvres later, the boy stood over the vanquished shealmaar.

It had never really recovered from the distraction, Ciaran thought compassionately, and he couldn’t help throwing Emhyr an anguished look at the unbearable thought that the magnificent creature would now be put to death because of him.

The duchess caught the look, smiled at the crowds and with a wave of her hand, spared the beast.

Ciaran glanced down at Bastiaan and was relieved to see the boy smiling in pleasure. His victory was still complete.

“‘It was the Redanian!’” Ciaran finally exploded much, much later once he and the emperor were finally alone in their suite, having kept his feeling bottled up during the rest of the tourney, the long ride back to the palace, and the interminable banquet throughout which he’d watch Emhyr hold whispered conversations with his aides of which he was not kept appraised.

“I know, elyennen.”

“And? What did you do about it?” Ciaran demanded, watching in disbelief as Emhyr nonchalantly went to pour them both drinks.

“That has not been decided yet,” Emhyr murmured, returning with their drinks and settling onto the couch, “What we will not do is start a major diplomatic incident over something that can be explained away as an accident and that only you and a couple of my aides witnessed.”

He held out a glass of wine to Ciaran who stared at him in speechless outrage.

“He didn’t attack Bastiaan by mistake! It was an attack against me! Against you!”

Emhyr gave him a long look, taking in the flashing eyes and the spots of colour on the high cheeks.

“Come here.”

Ciaran wavered but then settled on Emhyr’s lap and let him wrap a blanket around him.

“I can’t believe you’re not doing anything!” he said plaintively as the emperor kissed his hair, “He was targeting us!”

“And he will pay, elyennen,” Emhyr explained patiently, “He will be accused of cheating in the tourney, if he wins it he will lose his title to a technicality, his sponsors and his trainer will drop him. His father is a wealthy landowner, his crops will fail, the men who work his land will turn against him, he will lose everything,” he continued, voice cooling to ice, “And they and everyone who knew of this plot will know the reason why. From tomorrow mirrors will be banned and anyone who brings one will be unburdened of it. And by the time planning starts for the next tourney, bringing a mirror into the arena grounds will be a criminal offence. But for now we must do nothing to upset the balance of peace.”
Ciaran was almost mollified and let Emhyr kiss him then they both turned when General Voorhis and Bastiaan were announced.

“I thought you would like to see for yourself that young aep Larsen is still in fighting form. And His Majesty thought you might like to try some of the fairground sweets,” Morvran explained as two attendants came forward with enormous baskets full of treats, “Your Majesty, I had a message from my father…”

He went to join the emperor by the desk while Ciaran went to the coffee table, motioning Bastiaan to make himself comfortable.

“My Lord, I wanted to thank you for—,” Bastiaan started but Ciaran made a dismissive gesture.

“Broken?” he asked, looking pointedly at the boy’s arm, his brow thunderous, and Bastiaan nodded timidly.

“A clean break though, the medics say it should heal quickly. We were prepared for a few broken bones anyway.”

Ciaran touched the arm gently, his sensitive fingertips feeling through to the bone.

It was the same arm that had been damaged by the bargheest but the medics were right, it would leave no lasting damage.

After one last long, stern look at the cavalryman, Ciaran turned his attention to the two baskets and was soon unpacking them happily with Bastiaan’s one-handed help. They were brought tea and a tablecloth and soon their little corner by the fireplace had the air of a picnic.

“What happened, exactly?” Ciaran asked nonchalantly as he offered Bastiaan a salted-caramel-covered nut, “It’s not like you to be clumsy.”

Bastiaan shrugged and declined an offer of colourful jellies.

“A reflection off something — maybe a bit of armour or someone’s glasses,” he shrugged, “I should have been more careful.”

They chattered over their treats, reverting back to the usual tourney gossip and analysis as they tried a little of everything. After inviting Bastiaan to sit with him in the royal enclosure for the closing ceremony, Ciaran offered him his choice of the sweets.

“I’ll have a toffee-apple,” Bastiaan accepted shyly, his strong teeth soon breaking through the shiny red coating.

Ciaran helped himself to one of the broken, glass-like shards and put it between his teeth experimentally.

For himself he’d chosen one of the pink sugar clouds, fascinated by how the fluff packed between his fingers and melted on his tongue. He was still working his way through it when the general stood to leave, taking the young spearman with him.

“My fingers are all sticky,” Ciaran informed Emhyr as they settled back on their couch and Ciaran wordlessly offered the emperor a bite of sugar cloud.

“So is your mouth,” Emhyr pointed out, leaning in to flick his tongue over a few sugar crystals at the corner of Ciaran’s mouth.
They sat together quietly as Ciaran finished off his spun sugar then held out each of his fingers in turn for Emhyr to suck clean, the elf watching him from beneath lowered lashes.

There would be no sex. Emhyr wouldn’t risk it because he’d been so weak that morning, but Ciaran thought he’d probably played his cards well enough to have won himself a few kisses and cuddles.

“Shall we go to bed?” Emhyr murmured, brushing back a curl.

Ciaran shrugged, flicking the tip of his tongue over his top lip to catch the last grains of sugar.

“As you wish, Your Majesty.”
from the *Grand Armorial de la Toison d'Or* and other tourney records

Chapter End Notes

*the horseman’s pick: a type of war hammer with a spike, usually curved, protruding from the back of the hammer.

**Mortblanc: a Toussaintois dessert named after one of the tallest peaks in the duchy, the Mortblanc. This is a pun on the real life Mont Blanc dessert named after the Mont Blanc, the highest mountain in the Alps. “Mont Blanc” is French for “white mountain” while “Mort blanc” (actually “mort blanche”) is “white death”. There are a lot of puns here…

***sinamay: a millinery material, often used for fascinators.
| The Snow

Chapter Summary

In which Emhyr and Ciaran and the rest of the court are snowed in.

Chapter Notes

New year and finally a new chapter!

Friendly reminder that I've thrown some of the canon world-building re: Toussaint and Ofier in the bin <3

THE SNOW

— Beauclair, Toussaint, mid-March, 1272 —
The weather did change, as Ciaran’s dip in health had forewarned.

By the morning after the tourney’s closing ceremony, the snow line had almost touched the plains and Ciaran spent most of the morning watching the wind shake the leaves of the birches outside their windows, enduring the forced rest thought necessary for him to recover from what the more volatile of the imperial medics referred to as a minor relapse, then spent most of the afternoon watching the steady fall of snow that by evening had blanketed the gardens, the roads and the rolling hills, softening their lines and their colours.

The following morning they woke up to snow so deep Anna-Henrietta had to cancel the following day’s doleance session because access to the palace had become almost impossible.

The slower pace gave Ciaran time to continue reviewing his domestic arrangements and grapple back some independence. He now applied his own creams, sometimes washed his own hair and occasionally even dismissed his attendants entirely while he bathed. He’d taken the time to teach them how to lay out his tea things and now took great comfort in occasionally preparing his own tea.

Emhyr was still kept busy.

There were enough great lords, attachés and advisors shut up in the palace with them to keep the wheels of politics turning and Emhyr spent several hours in the reception room he’d been lent, meeting with them, and this on top of the hours spent in their suite, at his desk, working with his secretary or being briefed by his aides and this evening they’d planned to have dinner in their suite together so the great emperor could get out of attending one of the long dinners the Toussaint court was so fond of and at which he was bored by the chatter of everyone else.

Ciaran looked up when Emhyr stepped in, tucked away under blankets and furs on the couch by the fire, a glass of cold rosé in his hand.
“Would you like a drink?” he offered, sitting up as his sense of elven hospitality swelled, “Dinner will be ready shortly.”

“Stay, I will help myself.”

Ciaran tucked up his knees to make space for Emhyr when he returned with his customary glass of whiskey. The emperor sat down and pulled the long legs over his lap.

“What have you been studying?” he asked, glancing over the large book on the flora of Toussaint and scattered papers on the coffee table.

“The head gardener sent up the book. The plant we found in Caed Myrkvid is in it. I was just taking some notes.”

“There is no need to take extensive notes. You will find a copy of it in the Imperial Library.”

“How do you know?”

“All major works — and many useless ones — are copied and filed in the Imperial Library. We should,” he reached out and turned to the flyleaf, “have the original. See?”

Ciaran swung his legs off the couch to sit up and look at the small reference at the bottom of the page stating when the book had been copied from the original now in the Imperial Library.

“And you may work at my writing table if you need more space. It will be more comfortable than this.”

“Thank you,” Ciaran said shyly as he felt a kiss against his ear.

Dinner was quiet and light and simpler than what they’d spent the last week eating. It was the first time Ciaran had tried his hand at planning it and he’d spent the last two days thinking about the menu. They were both, he knew, weary of banqueting and he’d taken inspiration what he remembered Emhyr favouring during their past meals together, from the embassy luncheon, and had even managed to convince Mererid to name one or two dishes.

“I hoped you might indulge me in a game of shah,” Emhyr murmured as they finished up, “and some tea.”

Ciaran nodded and when he’d finished setting up the shah board, Emhyr sat back to watch him.

Sometimes he could feel his little elfling almost vibrate with nervous energy and even then he was so beautiful and thoughtlessly elegant. But now he also seemed to radiate that endless calm so particular to elves and that seemed to take them and those around them out of time itself.

Ciaran had said he did not often play shah but the emperor soon came to suspect that the elf had swallowed one or two books on the game’s rules and strategies.

“What is this?” Emhyr asked when he took his first soothing sip and felt its warmth spread through his veins.

“Chamomile, lavender, valerian root, raspberry leaf, and that flower whose scent you wear, the white one, jasmine. I had to ask the medics for it all. It’s supposed to be relaxing,” Ciaran murmured, considering his next move dispassionately, “I thought you’d like the jasmine.”

“I do. Is this what you made Morvran this afternoon?”
“He was only escaping yet another afternoon tea. He said he couldn’t face another cream tart so we had some of the Lady Duchess and cucumber sandwiches.”

“Do you not tire of those?”

“No. We had them made with cheese this time.”

Ciaran studied one of his alabaster-carved infantrymen. The pieces were different from those in the North. The king was an emperor whose crown was cut to match the one Emhyr wore on formal occasions, their horses and infantry were winged like the Alba and Impera helmets, and instead of chariots they had what Ciaran assumed to be oliphants.

“I don’t understand why humans play this. It’s neither useful nor enjoyable.”

“Shah is like war. It encourages planning and strategic thinking. Officers often use shah pieces on maps to track the positions of battalions and play out their strategies.”

Ciaran shrugged slightly.

By “war” Emhyr evidently meant the formalised battles human kings played at from behind three lined battalions of soldiers, rather than the continuous, drawn-out, hand-to-hand struggle for survival the Scoia’tael’s independent commando units were engaged in. Shah was as unlikely to bring the elves victory as pieces of paper were to bring lasting peace. Only blood could buy those.

“Shouldn’t you play against Morvran Voorhis then?”

“I often do. We played whenever we could while we were together in the North.”

Ciaran hummed, half his mind on the jet cavalryman he suspected would become a threat to his king in a few turns if he let it, the other half on what Morvran Voorhis had told him over tea about the battle for Danijam. The general had explained at length and in impassioned detail how the tactics used there had become the foundation of Nilfgaardian military strategy, how that victory had taught them that discipline and close drilling could make a little preparation go a long way.

“Is he really a great strategist? The men say so.”

“He graduated top of his year group at the Academy.”

“Was his father a general too?”

“Prince Voorhis is a glorified merchant who should not be made to handle anything more complicated than a steak knife. But his son is something else entirely. Morvran has advised the High Council for years, I can vouch for his talents.”

“Not like de Wett then?”

“Hopefully not.”

Ciaran made a sound of surprise when Emhyr took one of his pieces.

“The queen can only move one square!”

“The advisor may move an unlimited number of squares in any direction and it does not usually pay to play it early in the game,” Emhyr explained, watching the frown form on Ciaran’s brow, “Shall we start again?”
Ciaran gave him a long look.

The previous night he had gone to bed alone and though his sheets had been pre-heated by no fewer than three bedpans it had taken him under five minutes to decide that Emhyr was the superior bedwarmer — a consideration that the falling temperatures made even more pressing. Ciaran was determined to entice the emperor into his bed and decided that humouring him would improve his chances.

He gave a nod.

He poured them more tea while Emhyr reset the board, then they started to play again.

It had become plain to Emhyr that his elfling hadn’t just swallowed a few books on *shah* but also partially digested them. He did not seem to favour any particular style but rather combined orthodox patterns of play into an unorthodox strategy, and though he seemed indifferent to defeat, he did play to win. Playing opposite him was a refreshing challenge.

Emhyr saw Ciaran raise his cavalryman to take his king and covered his hand to stop him.

“That is the Northern variation. In the South, we do not take the King, we force him to surrender.”

— N —

Elves were messy sleepers, Emhyr was reminded an hour later as he stared up at the silk-covered button at the centre of the canopy over Ciaran’s bed and Ciaran rolled over yet again and pressed a slowly twitching foot against Emhyr’s calf.

Emhyr had known this since his youth spent in the North but it was one of the many facts that had drifted to the back of his mind and threatened to drop entirely. Now it was at the very forefront of his thoughts that elves, with their need for affection and contact and their energy-efficient bodies, were constantly shifting and readjusting to cool off or share more warmth with the next body, keeping themselves at the optimum temperature.

Ciaran, who was now so delicate and even more finely-tuned, never seemed to stay still for more than five minutes together.

The medics had given the elf the all-clear so he’d be free to leave the suite on the morrow but that did not solve the wider problem. The snow had not only blocked access to the palace, it had made traversing the mountain passes impracticable. There were other ways through but even so, the snow complicated things. They should go now, while the cold held and the risk of avalanches wasn’t as great. Once the snow started moving they would have to wait until the end of the thaw — as long as a month — and that was out of the question. Even if they moved out of Beauclair itself, the presence of some 20’000 men would drain the small duchy, whose winter reserves would already be low, whose spring harvests had not come in and whose trade routes were not yet fully operational.

And yet… Ciaran’s health had improved but he wasn’t strong enough to be risked in the cold of the South Amells where the name of every peak and every pass spoke of death.

Ciaran was to become just a small cog in the huge machinery of state that was Nilfgaard but in order to become so he had to survive. This one consideration — this survival — so disproportionately influenced ponderous, interconnected decisions concerning matters of state that in moments like these...
it seemed like this one young elf was the centre of the empire.

A small movement as Ciaran stretched his arms then hugged his pillow closer.

Emhyr slipped out of bed, careful not to disturb his elfling, then went around to his side of the bed, kneeling to look at the sleeping face then kiss the dark hair, and pulled the blankets up over an exposed shoulder. A slender socked foot immediately slipped out from beneath the sheets.

— N —

“Where can I find Brigadier var Cleef?” Ciaran asked Mererid as Jayne put the finishing touches on his hair.

“The brigadier should be in the Great Gallery with His Majesty and General Voorhis.”

So Ciaran made his way downstairs, trailing silk, two attendants and the powdery scent of orris then stepped into the airy gallery to the sight of two fencers lungeing at each other while General Voorhis and a handful of attendants looked on.

They were barely distinguishable, Emhyr and var Cleef. They were both tall and fast but Ciaran knew Emhyr well and could make out that var Cleef was narrower in the waist and hips, and had a fuller swell of muscle in his upper body, his biceps, thighs and calves. He also had the lightness and sharpness of movement particular to those who, like elves, had very close control over their own bodies. A last minute twist at the end of a lunge eventually allowed him to land the victorious blow to a smattering of applause.

“Well done, Evrard,” Emhyr murmured, smiling as he pulled off his mask then held out his hand to the head of his guard.

“Your Majesty,” var Cleef grinned and gave a curt nod.

Ciaran took one of the damp towels on a nearby tray and went over to Emhyr, reaching up to dab away the beads of sweat on the high forehead.

“Water, Your Majesty?” he offered then motioned one of the attendants over at the answering nod from the emperor.

“Were you looking for me?”

“The Brigadier, actually. I wanted to discuss Bastiaan with him.”

Emhyr nodded and Ciaran watched the long swallow of water travel down his throat.

“It is a new habit,” Morvran Voorhis explained while the two of them wandered the palace halls to give var Cleef time to wash and dress, “We all train, of course, but not daily. It was His Majesty’s idea that we train together. A new tradition for when we are on campaign. I suppose we will go back to our old ways once we return to the palace. I usually go riding in the mornings, var Cleef swims or trains with his officers.”

“Swims? For… exercise?”

“And for pleasure. Many people in the City do.”
They paused before one of the palace’s great frescoes that depicted a fiery unicorn surrounded by plagued wraiths and fearsome fanged beasts, snake-bodied and dragon-winged.

“What are these?”

“The unicorn is found in Nilfgaard too, it is a common mythological beast in the lore of our southern elves. As for these others… Nobody really knows,” the general admitted, his gaze sweeping the wall, “These were painted by the elves, long before any of us arrived here. Peter Faramond, the architect, found what was left of them during the exploration trips and building works. Those that could be saved were restored, the others reproduced. Some, like this one, were still in very good condition, they had only been covered over. But there was nothing left to explain what they represent. Ancient beasts that once roamed here before men came to these lands, demons from their folklore — who can know?”

Their entourage hung back as they wandered on around a gentle bend at the end of the hall towards an out-of-the-way window that framed a dramatic view of a nearby mountain, blinding and craggy against the iron sky.

Ciaran’s heart ached at the strange familiarity of the place.

The style of the frescoes, the palace’s volumes planted with columns, the way the light played throughout it, all of these hidden gems in tucked-away nooks. It was like coming home, but to a place he’d never known and in which he was only a guest.

“It is very elven,” Morvran Voorhis agreed when Ciaran made a vague comment about the architecture, “My father always jokes that Beauclair is the perfect place for conspiracies — a palace full of quiet little corners to hide secrets in, tucked away in a sleepy duchy. It is quite wondrous how one can choose to be seen or not, both to great advantage. Most Nilfgaardians who have been here would agree this it is the most romantic place in the empire.”

“I can’t imagine General de Wett plucking a lute and serenading someone at their balcony,” Ciaran murmured, his mind still dreaming up white palaces overlooking the Pontar. Coming to his senses, he glanced at Voorhis, expecting him to brush away the remark by pointing out that even he had never done such a thing.

But the general weighed up the statement carefully then agreed in a tone of great finality.

“No.”

They turned at the sounds of a slight commotion and were soon walking along a light-filled gallery with the Ofieri liaisons officer, who bowed deeply, wearing a smile in his eyes, and excused himself after Ciaran graciously granted him the audience he’d come to beg for to pass on a message from His Excellency, the East Ofier Ambassador to Toussaint.

“I had not expected to see so many Ofieri here in Toussaint,” Ciaran remarked as they resumed their walk and he wondered how Morvran would report back on the encounter to Emhyr.

“They find it unbearably cold here — even more than we do, especially in the winter. But the Ofieri are great merchants and great explorers, they see opportunity everywhere and in everything and are willing to come away as far as Toussaint.”

“It is far away for them but also for you. I understand Toussaint is one of the empire’s oldest provinces and yet it is so far from Nilfgaard itself. I’m not clear on how it came to be Nilfgaardian.”

“Ah, officially it was by marriage but between us, it was sold. The last of their kings inherited all his
father’s debts and worked industriously to add his own to them. He owed enormous sums, far more than the kingdom was likely to produce over two generations, to both Nilfgaard and Kovir and Poviss — this was not very long after Kovir and Poviss had discovered its mineral deposits so it was wealthy but still needed the loans repaid to invest in its new industries. Nilfgaard offered him the hand in marriage of a duchess of one of the cadet branches of the imperial family and the king accepted, on the understanding that Nilfgaard would write off its part of the debt and repay what was owed to Kovir. He managed to father a child, the first of the Toussaint-born duchesses, he was given an allowance and permitted to drink himself into an early grave. The kingdom became a duchy and it is now customary for the rulers here to be known by their Nilfgaardian title.”

“I can’t decide if that was a cheap conquest or an expensive one.”

“A cheap one, certainly. Not a drop of blood spilled and one of the soundest investments we ever made. We sent enterprising settlers and advisors and the economy had started to turn around before the old king was dead in his grave. After just five years Toussaint had become a net fiscal contributor. There was nothing wrong with Toussaint, you see. On the contrary, it has natural resources and though we find the climate a bit harsh it is not, in fact, any worse than that of many places in the North, and it is strategically-placed. It had only been mismanaged for generations.”

They continued to chatter idly until they’d looped back to the brigadier’s quarters and Morvran Voorhis excused himself with a gracious nod that felt like a bow.

As usually happened, all the doors were opened for Ciaran without comment but he was startled when, sweeping the rooms for sign of the brigadier, he nearly ran into Evrard var Cleef just stepping out of his bathroom, drying his hair and wearing a towel wrapped around his hips.

“Oh, I’m sorry!” Ciaran chirped, transfixed by the black sun and band tattooed onto the left bicep, “I didn’t realise-!”

“No harm done, my Lord, if you will forgive my state of undress,” var Cleef smiled, slinging his hand towel around his neck and raking back his water-darkened hair, “I was delayed, Captain de la Tour had some urgent business that warranted my attention.”

The towel drew Ciaran’s attention to a set of scars that went from the brigadier’s shoulder down over the top of the left pectoral. The rake of a morning star.

“I have one of those too…” Ciaran murmured, his hand going to his flank.

Then a part of his brain spoke up and reminded him that the scar was gone and for a moment, while he stood there with his palm pressed against his side, the two realities co-existed, splintering his mind as he blinked a few times to clear his vision, until one of them slowly crumbled and collapsed.

Var Cleef was watching him closely, the green gleam deep in his cerulean eyes brighter than ever.

“My Lord? Perhaps you’d like to sit down and have a cup of sweet tea while you wait?” var Cleef offered affably, projecting his voice with intent towards his nearby aides.

Ciaran automatically accepted the armchair then the cup of tea he was offered and sipped distractedly while var Cleef disappeared into his dressing room.

“You do not mind if I dress while we speak, my Lord?”

“I… No, of course not, brigadier. I’m only sorry to have troubled.”

“No trouble at all, my Lord, but you have only to send word, it will always be my pleasure to wait
up on you. Now, how may I help you, my Lord?"

“It’s about Bastiaan…” Ciaran murmured, trying to collect his thoughts, “I’d hoped he could be transferred to the Impera…”

“To your security detail?”

“If and when you deemed him fit, of course. General Voorhis says he has no objections.”

“General Voorhis wouldn’t oppose it, no. He’s convinced the two of you are destined in some way. Not sure I don’t believe it myself. In any case, I have no objection to aep Larsen joining the Impera.”

“You’re sure? I don’t want to impose…”

“No imposition, My Lord,” var Cleef reappeared, doing up the last buttons on the slim-fitting doublet officers wore when not in armour, “I like the boy and he rates the Impera above even the Alba. He will do well. It will be my pleasure to have him.”

The smiling brigadier and a couple of his aides escorted Ciaran to the emperor’s workroom, where the private secretary arranged for them to go in without delay.

“Lord Ciaran has expressed a wish that Bastiaan aep Larsen be transferred from the Alba to the Impera. General Voorhis and I see no objection to it.”

The emperor, slumped sideways in his chair before the enormous writing table as was his custom, held his captain’s gaze a moment, then the cool eyes came to rest on Ciaran.

He nodded.

“Very well. Thank you, brigadier.”

— N —

Studying his attendants in his vanity’s mirror, Ciaran heaved an internal sigh and decided it was probably time for another pep talk to the troops. The addition of two of the Duchess’ attendants to their little retinue had sparked a deal of esprit de corps in the original four and some sense of inferiority, resulting in a slight hostility towards the outsiders and a tendency towards despondency.

Ciaran’s thoughts on whether encouragement or punishment would be more likely to have the desired results were interrupted by Emhyr’s entrance.

“A letter from your tailor.”

“Oh? New designs?” Ciaran asked as he broke the seal on the envelope and Emhyr, already dressed for dinner, settled into his usual armchair.

“Yes.”

“Do you or var Cleef have any preferences?”

“I have not seen them. Evrard likes the green one.”
Ciaran opened the envelope and glanced over the watercolours. The green design was the simplest.

He put down the papers and went back to lining his eyes with a stick of soft charcoal the way Elihal and Morvran Voorhis did.

Over the course of the tourney he’d realised that all Nilfgaard seemed to expect of him in public was to be as decorative as possible and to say nothing of too much consequence, with silence always being a respectable option. He had also discovered that caring about his appearance was first nature to him and that Emhyr liked him to line his eyes. The former should have come as no surprise since Nilfgaardians, and consequently the Toussaintois, merely shared the elven belief that dressing beautifully — and being beautiful, if one could at all manage it — was a basic courtesy.

After slipping his robe off his shoulders, Ciaran reached into a small lacquered box, pulled out a lariat necklace and held it out.

“Could you help me?”

In the mirror, he watched the glow in Emhyr’s eyes as the emperor stood, took the necklace and carefully manoeuvred it over his elaborately-coiled hair.

Ciaran watched in satisfaction, always meeting the bright gaze in the mirror.

The necklace reached almost to his navel, he could easily have put it on himself, but he’d also learned that there was no need to be coy. Coyness did nothing for Emhyr.

Adjusting the necklace until the large baroque pearl rested just beneath the hollow between his collarbones, he let the superfluous lengths of thin chain slither down his back.

“Put a knot in it, please?”

Emhyr obeyed, the backs of his fingers lingering caressingly over Ciaran’s nape and when he’d finished he gently tipped the delicate head to one side and pressed a few warm, slow kisses along the exposed neck, his thumb tracing the marking on the back of it.

Ciaran watched in satisfaction from behind lowered lashes then closed his eyes when he felt the rake of teeth along the back of his neck.

Then he opened his eyes, called for his attendants and let the dressing robe fall away entirely so they could wrap him into a wraparound jacket of fine wool with a bulky shawl collar that hid the necklace both front and back.

He took one last critical look in the mirror then turned to the emperor.

“Shall we go?”

Emhyr smiled faintly, gave a grave nod then they went down to dinner.

Between lunches, teas, recitals, dinners, plays, dances, poetry readings and even puppet shows, there was always something going on at the palace to keep those trapped inside it amused.

Tonight’s dinner was to be followed by a concert.

“General Voorhis has no soul for poetry but he does have a good ear for music,” the Duchess confided, patting Ciaran’s hand as they all ambled from the dining hall over to the palace’s small but
spectacular indoor theatre, “he has an interest in paintings but his tastes run to the…. militaristic. I think he would hang a copy of The Charge of the Nauzicaa Brigade in every room if he could.”

They each took their respective seats on either side of the emperor, Morvran Voorhis at the Duchess’ side, and as the crimson curtains were drawn and the lights were dimmed to indicate the spectacle would soon begin, the hubbub died down.

In the darkness, one of Ciaran’s slender hands came to rest on the emperor’s thigh and was soon covered by a larger, warm one.

The theatre was an architectural gem, even more obviously in the elven style than the rest of the palace, and the music seemed to flow around the robed and crowned plasterwork muses to fill the hall’s every last cranny.

The music itself was not unpleasant but relied heavily on the easy harmonies so characteristic of what humans preferred and though the singing that accompanied it was too full of emotion, Ciaran still found himself moved by the purity of sound and modulations achieved by the singers. They sang and warbled with smiles on their faces as if what they achieved was nothing at all and Ciaran could see the virtuosity.

Carried away, he unconsciously gripped Emhyr’s hand.

Emhyr was less entertained by the spectacle than he was by the elfling’s reaction to it, he caught the significant looks Ciaran sent his way at the more implausible plot developments, watched his little elf thrill with the strings and the sopranos, the vague thought flitting through his mind that if Ciaran could still feel, if he could still be made to feel bound to life, it might stop him from fading.

When the concert was over, however, he noticed the elfling lean on the insides of his wrists to leverage himself out of the very comfortable, backwards-slanted armchair. Still weak with what the mage-medics explained was “a tendency of his life-force to ebb away”.

Now that the formal part of the evening had ended, the crowd broke up and people drifted off to different parts of the palace and Ciaran ended up in an armchair by the emperor while Morvran Voorhis and others played cards.

“You may play, if you like,” Emhyr told Ciaran between one whispered conversation and the next.

This informal setting provided the opportunity for courtiers to drop an informal word or two into the emperor’s ear and people stood in twittering groups by windows or played cards or looked on as others played cards as they waited their turn.

“No, thank you. I don’t know the rules. But I might watch.”

He stood, almost more to stretch his limbs than anything else, then wandered over to the nearest card table.

The elf had no eye for reading cards but he’d developed some skill at reading humans. His complete ignorance of the rules of the game, however, permitted him to see only more clearly that Morvran Voorhis and Evrard var Cleef were quietly but surely haemorrhaging coin to the advantage of their subordinates.

As game followed game, idle onlookers melted away, as did those who’d had their audience with the emperor, until eventually there remained only the emperor, his officers, a handful of close aides, and a smattering of yawning court attendants there to keep glasses topped up and the chandeliers lit.
When Emhyr was finally alone again, Ciaran wandered back to him and sat down.

“My Lords, we are keeping these gentlemen waiting,” Morvran Voorhis finally said, “Shall we make this the last game?”

A murmur of assent then Emhyr turned to Ciaran.

“You are tired?”

“No.”

“I thought the officers might continue at their leisure in our quarters.”

Ciaran nodded. It was what they had done on crossing the Yaruga and a few other times along the journey here.

“May I be excused now so I can change and warn Mererid?”

A corner of Emhyr’s mouth curled into a faint half-smile, which was followed by a nod.

“How many will there be?”

“A dozen? Maybe a few more?”

Mererid took the news with his usual grim fortitude and immediately issued orders for more bottles, more glasses, more small bowls of mixed nuts, and all the other things they’d need, while Ciaran went off to let down part of the complicated updo that had been making his neck ache for the past hour.

When he went back into the common room, his sense of elven hospitality reasserted itself once again and he offered to oversee the artful placement of the occasional chairs Mererid had had brought in so they would not look conspicuously superfluous to the room. The card table, borrowed from Morvran Voorhis’ suite, was being unfolded and set up.

Just in time too for they could hear voices in the corridor and a moment later the doors opened.

“They didn’t mind not having them when nobody else did. But now they fight tooth and nail for the smallest additional privilege.”

“Just so long as they don’t band together and decide on a common package of benefits.”

“But they won’t. They know there won’t be enough seats at the table for all of them. They will try to undercut each other’s offers.”

“By as little as possible…”

The officers and advisors filed into the room, still chatting companionably, the emperor at their head, flowing around the room as some headed for the drinks table and others to the cards one. Pairs were made up and the game was underway before all the drinks had even been poured. Most of the attendants had melted away but Mererid stayed and quietly circulated, offering the guests refreshments and cigars.

“Ah well, they’ll have to take what they’re offered. They’ve been asking for more representation for decades, they can hardly refuse now. Especially not knowing that other provinces will accept. They’d make themselves a laughing-stock.”
“Oh, and they know that Toussaint has been offered better terms than anyone else will.”

Ciaran had just settled by Emhyr on the couch and was about to offer him a drink when var Cleef arrived with two fingers of the emperor’s usual drink in a lowball glass.

“Would you like anything, my Lord?”

“No, thank you, Brigadier. I’ll make some tea soon.”

Var Cleef stood at the emperor’s back and the three of them turned their attention back to the general conversation.

“We should start as we mean to go on. Senators chosen from the people by the people.”

“The Senate will not stand for it. Not yet. These things must be done incrementally.”

“Evolution before revolution?”

“Precisely!”

“The threat of a ‘People’s Senate’ might be just the encouragement the Senate needs to accept enlargement.”

“The threat would have to at least appear real and the idea barely stands on its own merits. It might work for the home provinces, but the Great Sun knows what the Temerians and Aedirnians would vote for.”

“Don’t you mean ‘who’?”

A murmur of laughter.

“Do I? And once they are in, there will be no way to get rid of them. People last forever in the Senate.”

“That is the true problem,” sighed Morvran Voorhis, picking up a trick, “The reins of power are always in the hands of the same few — present company excepted, of course, Your Majesty.”

More laughter.

Emhyr raised his glass to them, smiling.

“Begging your pardon, General, but the Guilds are the problem. The idea of a constitutional monarchy is not terrible in principle — begging your pardon, Your Majesty — but if it only means giving more power, more formal power, to those who already have power and influence then control will simply continue to accumulate in the same places. For an even distribution, those at the top should always seek to empower those at the bottom.”

Ciaran quietly set about making some tea and Mererid served dainty cups of it to anyone who wanted it. People moved about the room idly, helping themselves to more drinks or walnuts or cigars. Partnerships were broken up and remade, the cards collected, shuffled and dealt.

Ciaran curled up by Emhyr again, trying to look inconspicuous as he followed the conversation’s meanders. Astonished that he was allowed to stay, that people so freely expressed their opinions before him, before the emperor himself.

Ciaran glanced at the emperor but he was comfortably slouched into his corner of the sofa and his
impassive expression seemed, if anything, milder than usual as he sipped his drink and listened. As Ciaran looked away again, he felt a hand slip down the back of his shawl collar and idle fingers toyed with the knot in the necklace a moment.

“Extending citizenship solves the problem of differentiated rights. If we extend full citizenship rights to the home provinces, they fall under existing laws that already allow for senators elected by the people. That way, we avoid a situation where certain territories are arbitrarily entitled to have popularly-elected senators and some do not.”

“Extending citizenship presents its own problems. There is opposition to it in the senate, opposition in the highest ranks of society, and, frankly, in the lowest. There will likely even be opposition from non-citizen residents in the City, some of them born and bred there over a generation or two. Why should Maechtians be given citizenship before them?”

“These concerns can and must be addressed. But citizenship must be extended.”

“The senate will never stand for it-!”

“Most of the senate has interests all over the empire, they can be made to understand…”

“Besides, it will create more incentive for the other provinces to keep themselves aligned and in good terms.”

Ciaran sat quietly and soaked it all up. He committed to memory everything he did understand and made note of what he did not, he connected the opinions with those who had spoken them, and was particularly struck by the fact that var Cleef did not voice one at all.

— N —

Ciaran surveyed the writing table in satisfaction, picked up his tea cup and took a long sip while he looked out of the window, his socked toes curling into the bearskin rug.

For a while, he watched the furious flurries of powdery flakes against the wet cotton wool sky. He was still not quite over the novelty and luxury of being able to watch the snow fall like a spectacle, framed by the gilt of the windows, while he himself was perfectly warm and sheltered.

Then, setting down his teacup, the elf returned his attention to the desk.

He was rearranging his tea casket. He had emptied it and planned to refill it while making a comprehensive list of what it held.

Everybody referred to it as his tea casket but it could only claim to be so by virtue of being lockable and containing some tea. In every other respect it was a portable apothecary chest. Three rows of glass phials lined each of the two doors and there were another two inside, arranged over a number of drawers of different sizes.

It had arrived in Ciaran’s rooms just a day or two after he’d begun to brew his own teas again but it had not escaped Ciaran’s notice that between it and his various medical casks, he could prepare more than simple infusions. Such a gift would have required the approval of the entire board of medics they had with them and Ciaran understood he was being allowed more freedom to manage his own health and study remedies.
Familiar leaves and flowers that he could readily recognise and had long known the use of. But there were also a few phials of things new to him or that he had not known a use for. Many were specific to the region and had come from the Ducal Conservatory.

**Echinacea. The root used to soothe the throat. The spiny flowerheads infused to strengthen the lungs.**

One phial contained a light green distillation of herbs prepared as an elixir by some hermit followers of Lebioda. Its presence among the selection was the surest indication of its study purposes because Ciaran had only been allowed it on the strict understanding that he was never to drink it, lest it interfere with his current regime of medication. Ciaran lifted the glass lid and sniffed it cautiously, eyes widening at the complexity of scents, over which floated the scent of another of the Sansretour valley’s endemic plants.

**White genepi. Similar properties to wormwood. Not to be confused with the rarer variant, black genepi.**

Ciaran carefully put both the black and white varieties away then moved onto what came from south of the Amells. He started with a familiar favourite, a little jar of white petals that had dried to yellowed curls, and unstopped it, breathing deep and smiling. Bottled sunshine.

**Orange blossoms. Soothe anxieties and ease sleep. Stimulates the appetite and eases digestion.**

The flowers and their oils were used in some of the remedies the medics concocted for him and in several of his creams and powders.

**Jasmine. Emhyr’s scent.**

Tiny white flowers. One segment of the emperor’s pomander was always filled with them. Another with dried citrus peels in yellow, orange and green.

These too had been provided, along with the cardamom also to be found in the imperial pomander and which came from even further afield, from the empire’s trading partners.

Ciaran wondered if they could be successfully combined into an infusion and whether Emhyr would like it.

Emhyr seemed to like his teas but he perhaps enjoyed watching him prepare them even more. He was a good audience, Ciaran allowed — still, quiet, and inconspicuous.

It was a talent and it was certainly better to have one than none at all but during the long, dark hours, an insidious voice Ciaran couldn’t quite ignore sometimes suggested that this was not enough. Back when the idea of a concubine had first been floated, he vaguely imagined someone who sat around looking beautiful and plucking at an instrument. Ciaran could play one but he hadn’t done so in a while and besides, he wasn’t sure the ocarina would stand up to the harps and harpsichords whose music seemed so readily available in Beauclair and likely in Nilfgaard too.

Ciaran’s mind skittered over to the smashed pottery fragments still in the leather pouch that had held them when they’d been more than the sum of their parts. The pouch and its contents were still in one of his original trunks.

His mind skittered away, back to the safety of his studies.
Star anise.

First seen at that feast in Oxenfurt when he’d first met Emhyr. On being interrogated, the medics had told him it was helpful to the respiratory and digestive systems, and Emhyr had told him he would find more information in the Imperial Library.

The star anise had been brought by the Ofieri envoy who had also brought dried rose buds, a couple of varieties of Twisting Dragon, and a couple of tightly rolled sticks of cinnamon bark, and who had explained, quite conversationally, where the various offerings had come from and that it was from the Ofieri that the Nilfgaardians had leaned of the remedial properties of incense smoke.

There had also been an exquisitely carved sandalwood folding fan that the envoy had smilingly assured him he would need south of the Sylte river, if not sooner. But that was only expensive misdirection.

Ciaran had taken careful note of what the envoy had said and of the fact that he had brought the dried leaves and fruits and flowers in quantities that fit perfectly in the chest’s empty phials. Except the cinnamon sticks, but those fit comfortably in the bottom its bottom drawer.

It was either incredible coincidence or the Ofieri were incredibly well informed about what went on in the imperial suite.

“Do the Ofieri have good spies?” Ciaran later asked Emhyr while they steeped together in the tub.

“They do. Why do you ask?”

“They seem to know a lot about me.”

“That is good diplomacy. The character and pursuits of an imperial concubine are naturally of interest to them.”

Ciaran’s eyes narrowed slightly.

“They know the size of the phials in my tea casket.”

“Just as they know, in slightly more detail than is public knowledge, that you were injured in the war, that you like horses without quite having Morvran’s passion for them, and which colours you favour and which foods you must avoid. Just as we intended. We, on our side, know the content of the letter the envoy sent to his principles, in which he says their gifts were well received and well reciprocated and that rumour has not done your many qualities justice. Just as they intended.”

Ciaran stared at him.

He — and the Scoia’tael as a whole, as far as he knew — had only ever spied on enemies. It had never occurred to him to spy on allies but it occurred to him now that if they’d been spying on Nilfgaard during the second war then their many betrayals might have come as less of a surprise.

“And I’m worth spying on because I’m close to you?”

“Because one can never have too many friends at the palace or too many ways into it. Tell me, did you like the envoy?”

“I did,” Ciaran admitted after a moment’s consideration, “He… was very polite. Do you know if he is representative of his people?”
“The Ofieri do pride themselves on being polite, as Nilfgaardians do.”

“Do they… Do they have elves in Ofier?”

“Well, you know how it is with the Aen Seidhe, they have their own elder races, *djinns*, who claim to have existed since the world was made, long before magic, humans, elves, or even gnomes.”

“And they live together in peace?”

“They have never been at war.”

Ciaran pondered this while Emhyr nipped the shell of his ear gently then turned to him for a kiss.

These days they had sex under the covers. Even with the curtains drawn and the fires going there was a chill in the air that neither of them liked and their happy tumbles were as good a way of getting warm as any.

Emhyr broke the kiss and Ciaran relaxed as he felt him nuzzle his neck and idly stroke his way down his back.

Sometimes Emhyr performed as fully as anyone could wish, but other times, despite Emhyr’s clear want and all of Ciaran’s discreet efforts, nothing stirred. Emhyr’s desire never seemed to wane and so Ciaran had concluded that Dandelion had been at least partially right and that there was some physical impediment there, particularly since he’d quickly understood that despite his Nilfgaardian lack of reserve, Emhyr did not like to be touched or even looked at there. It was why he usually kept his nightshirt, and sometimes his robe, on.

They had never discussed it and Ciaran, keenly aware of his own vast inexperience in these matters, had felt anxious over these limitations that he had no notion how to manage. But he had begun to see that the emperor himself did know how to manage them, that he understood his own needs and his own pleasure and knew how to satisfy them. Emhyr was demanding but never violent and the satisfaction he took in Ciaran’s pleasure was tangible and Ciaran was learning to let him lead in the bedroom, to let the large hands caress and tease him, to let them turn him this way and that and to hold him, and to trust that he would not be hurt by them.

Ciaran’s ears perked up, his eyes narrowed, and he wrapped his arms about Emhyr’s neck possessively, sending a series of waves running across the tub as he tugged himself against Emhyr’s chest and glared at the door.

“Your Majesty, General Voorhis thought you should see this.”

A folded message slid beneath the door and Ciaran got out of the tub, picked it up and brought it back to Emhyr, looking baleful.

The emperor looked over the paper then told his secretary to ask the general, the brigadier, and a small selection of his advisors and aides to please join them for drinks in half an hour.

“It is important,” Emhyr explained to Ciaran, by way of apology.

Ciaran nodded, accepted a kiss on his forehead then looked away politely as Emhyr got out of the tub.

When he was alone, he unfolded the note and read it. Three day old news about a fire in one of what he assumed to be the capital’s neighbourhoods. Two buildings destroyed, no dead.
It did not sound urgent — or even important, frankly, if one tried to see things from the point of view of an emperor still embroiled in the fallout from an intercontinental war — and yet it must have been, for Emhyr to have reacted as he did. Ciaran tucked the note into the back of one of his notebooks, the incident and its few particulars still rolling around his mind some time later as he lay in bed then fell asleep, lulled by the muted sounds of conversation from the common room, waiting for Emhyr.

He woke some hours later, the tips of his ears and nose chilled, to stillness and quiet.

He’d missed Emhyr.

Whether he woke or slept, the emperor always came to bid him goodnight. Usually, Ciaran could tell because Emhyr’s scent lingered in the air but he’d just been given a large new bolster pillow into which had been tucked a couple of sachets of the emperor’s personal scent and the whole bed was now soaked in it.

Ciaran’s gaze dropped to the inside of his wrist where he could almost still feel the pressure of Emhyr’s thumb. It was what he’d taken to doing, instead of asking Ciaran and forcing him to respond in words to whether he could promise not to attempt to kill him. He would just brush his thumb over the blue-purple star left by the Conynhaela vine and see if Ciaran nodded. Which he still had not done.

Ciaran closed his eyes, snuggled, then in the quiet thought he could still taste the emperor’s goodnight and wondered which form of his name he’d used this night.


The first term was common to both Hen Llinge and Nilfgaardian, the suffix on the second turned it into a Nilfgaardian diminutive, but the third…

Ciaran stifled a yawn into the new bolster cushion and threw a leg over it.

The third he had found in his lexicon of high Nilfgaardian. It existed in Hen Llinge too but he doubted any elf outside Dol Blathanna remembered it. Not many young elves had read as many dusty old books as he had — not many had learned how to decipher their script — and even in those books the term had sounded archaic.

Ciaran yawned again, more widely, then rolled over, taking the pillow with him.

He stillled, slowing his heart rate, and listened. He could just make out Emhyr’s voice occasionally and the secretary’s answers.

The elf whole body tensed with the impulse to be near the emperor.

Ciaran bit his lip. He could listen more closely.

The elf hesitated, his mind shying from it. It would be so invasive. It would show weakness.

But Emhyr would never know he’d done it, another part of him reasoned, he’d need senses as exquisitely tuned as an elf’s to feel the change in the atmosphere brought about by a few extra particles of intention and attention in the air around him.

Ciaran closed his eyes and sent his senses skimming down the length of the room, through the gap under the door, past the empty hollows of the gallery, and across the darkened common room to the table at which Emhyr was working, and all at once he could hear and feel and smell the steady throb of Emhyr’s existence as it travelled back back to him.
Ciaran smiled and fell back into sleep.

In the common room, Emhyr sat up a little straighter and idly rubbed the back of his neck to soothe the prickle he’d felt there.

— N —

“The emperor has a migraine and cannot be disturbed.”

Ciaran stared at Mererid. Usually doors were flung open for him everywhere he went and he’d certainly never been barred from seeing the emperor.

“Let him in, Mererid,” came a muffled voice.

Ciaran and Mererid exchanged a look then the elf cautiously opened the door as little as he could and slipped in.

“Emhyr?” he whispered.

“Come, elyennen.”

There was only one lamp, dimmed by swathes of black fabric, but it shed more than enough light for an elf to navigate by and Ciaran moved like a shadow to Emhyr’s side.

“I didn’t mean to disturb you,” the elfling said contritely, taking in the concentrated frown of pain on the emperor’s forehead.

“You did not. Come.”

Emhyr’s arm moved to make space for him and Ciaran was soon stretched out beside him. Anxious. Until this moment, Emhyr had never shown even the first hint of a vulnerability.

“Should I be quiet?”

“There is no need. Your voice does not disturb me. Just put out the lamp.”

Ciaran did as he was asked and curled back up by Emhyr, the strong arm around him pressing him close.

“Is it really a migraine?”

“Yes. I have them occasionally. It will pass in its own time.”

“But can’t your medics do something? They grew back my fingernails and made it so I could survive without half my stomach, but they can’t get rid of a headache?”

“The migraines have the same root cause as my back pain, I have had them many times before. Over the years we have tried every reasonable remedy and the medication relieves a good part of the pain. But the imperial medics have done what they can for me now. The rest just requires patience.”

Ciaran pressed a kiss onto Emhyr’s chest but hesitated to lay his head down on it.
When Emhyr had heard about his appointment with the Ofieri attaché, he’d not only ensured he was thoroughly briefed by the usual brace of aides but had also let him look through his own files on Ofier. Ciaran had spent a couple of hours at the large writing desk with his feet buried in the bearskin rug, sifting through maps, diagrams detailing recent inventions and technological advances, personal profiles of important figures, skimming over reports, trade profiles of the various regions, and a thousand other bits of information that he hadn’t ended up using because he and the attaché had not ventured beyond an exchange of gifts and good will and small talk. For hours Ciaran had worked, feeling like the emperor of half a continent, and by the end he’d had a splitting headache.

But this didn’t feel like that sort of migraine. It felt serious.

“Should I go?”

“I would prefer you to stay.”

Ciaran felt strong, blunt fingers card his hair and he stretched a possessive arm over Emhyr’s chest and hugged him closer. He stared out into the dark, trying to stay very still and very quiet and eventually Emhyr’s steady breathing and heartbeat lulled him into sleep.

Meanwhile, Emhyr had felt his breathing and heartbeat slow to match the elf’s and he too drifted into repose, if not actual sleep.

His elfling had been anxious but as Ciaran relaxed in sleep his scent changed and sweetened like that of a ripening apricot until it burst and filled the air like a sun shower of honeysuckle dew.

Emhyr turned his head towards Ciaran and took a few deep breaths.

This was what omegas were famous for and why they were fought over. A man would give his life up thrice over for just a lingering waft of this.

Even when he was dead people would remember that Ciaran had been his. The elves would remember.

Ciaran was his. Eternally his.
Fresco in Beauclair Palace (concept art)
Chapter Summary

In which Ciaran experiences Toussaint.

Chapter Notes

Happy Valentine's Day and happy International Fanworks Day, everyone!

Feels like an age since I posted a chapter somehow but here it is :D

A huge thank you and much love for the comments and kudos, they always make my day <3 And before I forget yet again, a massive thank you to sofestpunk for beta-reading <3 ilu <3

TRIGGER WARNINGS:
- There is a fox hunt at the beginning of this chapter. It is not, I think, very graphic, but you can skip it by scrolling down to the [END HUNT] marker.
- The hunt scene is followed by an injury to a horse, so if you want to skip that, scroll down to [END INJURY].

(I am now slightly wondering what I was thinking but there it is...)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

THE HUNT

— Beauclair, Toussaint, mid-March, 1272 —
“Even if you only mean to follow, your horse is too hot-blooded for fox hunting,” Morvran argued as he helped himself to another croissant, “Take one of mine, they are tried and tested war horses, they will not baulk at a hunt. Or take Smeriglia, the terrain here is easy, she should do nicely and she knows you.”

So it was on the general’s lovely palfrey, dressed in a rich chocolate herringbone tweed shot through with pale lichen-blue and wrapped in fox furs, that Ciaran rode out a short time later, into a courtyard where dozens of hounds milled around between the legs of the hunters and their riders, to whom uniformed servants bearing large trays were offering up a selection of alcoholic beverages and hot drinks in neat silver mugs.

“Will you ride with them?” Ciaran asked as he brought his mount to a stop by Emhyr’s bay hunter, touching his hatpin to check his pheasant-feathered little tricorne was secure.

They both watched Anna-Henrietta and Morvran Voorhis, who were sharing a joke with the Master of the Hunt, a minor Toussaint noble.

“Not with the main pack, I will follow. I have promised time to people. But you need not stay behind with me, elyennen. Go and enjoy yourself.”

Ciaran nodded then exchanged a greeting and a few words with the always crisp var Cleef as he joined them, looking more sleekly handsome than ever in his hunting clothes.

“When we were younger, Anarietta used to come down to Nilfgaard for the hunts. Most of her stock of hounds originated in the Voorhis kennels — gifts from my father,” Morvran Voorhis explained as his and Ciaran’s horses fell into step, “Now Her Grace is the keenest of participants and Toussaint
has some of the best hunts in the empire. Perfect country for it, of course, and it would always have been necessary to cull the populations of deer, boars, rabbits and so on.”

They joined the duchess’ group, which had come to a halt as they all waited and watched the huntsmen cast the hounds into the surrounding bushes to flush out a fox.

A streak of burnt umber shot across the fields and they were off.

At first, Ciaran enjoyed the chase. After days of blurred white hiatus, it was glorious to be outside in the sharp, clean air again, back into a world full of colour. The blue-tinged mountains, the mossy valley, the hunters in their crisp attire, mounted on their gleaming horses, the hounds, the brasses, the vivid, hopeful tints of the budding trees.

Ciaran urged his horse on, enjoying himself and keeping up easily as they thundered over meadows and hedgerows, trailing after their quarry. He could have tracked and trailed that fox himself, he could read the horses and hounds, but he had no inclination to. He was happy.

They neared the wooded area where the fox had finally sought shelter and Ciaran stayed with them a while as they stalked between the trees, enjoying the shade and the smells of the forest. But he caught a few significant looks from Morvran Voorhis and heard the muted messages from his body telling him that he risked overextending himself.

A horn sounded.

The fox had gone to ground and Ciaran’s interest withered. He turned and went to the edge of the wood to see how far behind the emperor was, then urging his horse into a walk to meet him.

“You’re not enjoying it,” Ciaran murmured to Emhyr as they continued on to join the others.

“I do not enjoy blood sports.”

“So why come at all?”

“Hunting is a popular occupation among the nobility throughout the empire. The emperor must be seen to participate.”

Someone arrived to claim the emperor’s attention and Ciaran wandered off, his pleasure turning to distaste as he heard the whining, urgent sounds of the hounds still trying to get at the fox.

This was pointless.

The chase had been exhilarating. That had been a game between the fox and the hounds and they’d just ridden along to watch it play out. But this was pointless. The fox was trapped in the burrow. It had lost. None of them would eat it, not even the well-kept hounds. Killing it now was just wasteful. And terrifying it like this before killing it was just cruel. Not hunger, not a warning, not revenge, not even bonding the way people did when they went through something terrible together. No, just the thoughtless cruelty of children who tore the wings off butterflies before feeding them to a toad.

*The winds of war swell on blood,*

*Flooding the rites of ancient innocence.*

The words of an old poem whispered to him by a lick of breeze.

*Looking glass images without heart or mind*
Haunt the worlds in the name of those,
Who have preserved blood from blood,
And feed on unrestrained lust.

Ciaran felt a chill at the urgent, desperate whisperings of the fox, that he could make out beneath the howls of the hounds. Its hopeless heartbeat. He felt the brush of fox fur against his skin.

Ciaran had spent so much of his life being chased or chasing, sometimes hunter, sometimes hunted.

The one who had trapped then killed his unit had been a hunter they had not expected, one who had treated them as fellow hunters right up until the moment they became his prey. A monster-slayer turned kingslayer turned elf-slayer. Turned against the very elves he’d sought an alliance with. Betrayed again and slaughtered.

Ciaran watched, unseeing, as the hounds dug, caught up in his own memories of hands scrabbling for weapons with which to fend off the blades Letho wielded with unnatural skill.

All of them dead now, as if the unit had never existed. All but Ciaran, who wondered why he’d survived. Survived to become the plaything of humans who had hurt him and hurt him again, even when they had already killed him. They had continued to toy with him, with his nerves and his mind and his pain, torturing him beyond death while they waited for his body to realise it had lost, that it was already dead. Then they had dumped him like garbage.

Bastiaan had been the one to see beyond that and Ciaran was hit by the desperate need to see the young soldier, to look into the eyes that had seen him, despairing at not having asked to have him near. And Emhyr could not be disturbed.

Now the warm, cloying scent of blood seemed to saturate the air. Just as there had been in the cave where his unit had died and in that barge where he himself had died. Fox blood, his blood, Iorveth’s blood. Ichaer.

Ciaran watched blankly as a couple of huntsmen brought the ruined carcass to the Master of the Hunt and the duchess. Morvran Voorhis, who was with them, motioned Ciaran over, smiling.

Unthinking, Ciaran urged his horse forward, trying to escape the dread feeling of being alone and that he himself was just a ghost. The duchess smiled and nodded at him, then she and her party peeled away to return to the palace for refreshments. Morvran Voorhis stayed behind and reached out to pat his mare.

“We got him, My Lord,” the Master announced the obvious jovially, “Would you like to see it? Ah! This must be your first hunt, let us do something special.”

Ciaran watched, transfixed, as the Master wet his thumb with blood, his heart fluttered in panic as he watched the blood-slicked thumbpad loomed nearer then stopped at the wet press against his forehead.

Trapped in horror, he hung in time. Then the cold brand of the blood on his skin brought his mind crashing back, scorching every nerve and fibre in him until they shrieked, stricken.

[END HUNT]

Smeriglia reared then bolted straight into the path of an enormous branch felled by the recent snows.
Too near, Ciaran saw through the confusion. She wouldn’t have the space to take the jump.

But the valiant mare tried and Ciaran heard the dry snap as Smeriglia landed. Then he had his own bones to worry about as he flung himself off so he wouldn’t be caught under the mare when she inevitably came down.

Morvran jumped from his horse, fell to his knees by Ciaran and held out a hand to help him up, exclaiming when he saw the grazed and bruised upper arm and shoulder revealed by the torn sleeve.

“You are injured!”

Ciaran shook his head and made an impatient, dismissive gesture.

“It’s nothing. But Smeriglia…!”

The general turned to his whining, struggling mare and though his mouth curved into a smile, he wore an expression of the acutest pain as he reached out to stroke the heaving flank, letting his hand slide over the haunch down to the broken leg.

“Oh, my darling. My ray of light. There. Do not worry, you will not suffer long, my sweet one.”

But when he saw Morvran reach for his dagger, Ciaran threw himself forward and covered the horse’s body with his own, scrabbling to feel the injured leg. A clean break.

“No! I can heal her! Please! I can mend it!”

Morvran hesitated, lost and stricken, so Ciaran look up at Emhyr.

“Please?”

“Have you done it before?”

“I…” Ciaran glanced at the horse, “Not on a horse, on a fawn. Once. But I can do it.”

Emhyr’s gaze held his gaze then shifted to Morvran a moment before turning back to Ciaran.

“What is the risk to you?”

“Nothing. It just takes time and effort and if I fail then I fail. But it won’t hurt me.”

Emhyr gave a slow nod then turned to his equerries.

“Fetch the medics and anything that is required.”

As Emhyr remounted his destrier, Morvran got to his feet and bowed his head, having recovered some of his sang froid.

“Thank you, sire. I will stay and watch over the imperial concubine.”

Emhyr nodded then wheeled his horse about and rode away.

“Quickly, tranquillisers and a fly mask or a piece of cloth.”

Ciaran pressed his face to the mare’s and forced himself to calm until his tears dried and the horse lay still. Then he sat up to consult with the specialist medics and look through their resources.

The court of Beauclair took excellent care of its horses and Ciaran found an abundance of all the
tonics, ointments, splints and bandages he could have possibly wanted — they even had knitbone. Of course, ideally, he would have used some of the Conynhaela vine but even without it, he could rely on the techniques the dryads had taught him.

“We should not have asked that of his majesty,” Morvran Voorhis said in stilted tones, “We should not have put him into such a position…”

“I need you to keep her still.”

Morvran Voorhis helped keep the mare steady but turned away as the elf painstakingly felt the forelimb. Ciaran gripped the bone on either side of the break and wished himself stronger as he applied every last ounce of strength he could control to reset the bone, straining his hearing, his sense of touch and some other hidden instinct to gauge how precisely he’d succeeded, breaking into sweat at the effort. Every measure and remedy he could think of, then bandages thickly smeared with ointment and wrapped tightly, then more soaked and wadded bandages as padding beneath the splints, themselves secured with flat cord.

Reassured the work had been well done, Ciaran thanked the medics, stablehands and others who had helped then lay back down in the mud and once again laid his head against the now masked forehead, splayed his hand over the warm neck, and murmuring promises in his own tongue that all would be well.

A shiver ran through him at the thought that he might have overextended himself and only given Morvran Voorhis a hope that would be dashed but pushed the doubt away and cleared his mind so completely of everything but his belief in the mare’s recovery that he didn’t notice the blanket Voorhis covered him with, falling into a trance-like state.

[END INJURY]

For an hour, the horse and the elf lay still as if sleeping, then another hour. Darkness and temperature began to fall. The occasional gust of wind carried the sounds of music and laughter from the entertainment that had been arranged to follow the hunt. The Duchess had invited the Mandragora’s musicians because Ciaran had mentioned enjoying their songs.

The medics and stablehands and Morvran Voorhis watched. They could easily make out the steady rise and fall of the mare’s pale flank but they could not discern any movement in the elf. As sunlight was replaced by cool shadows, the imperial concubine’s face took on a pallor that sent trickles of ice sliding down the spines of the onlookers.

Nilfgaard had many rules and conventions when it came to its imperial concubines. There were certain rules for body slaves, and certain others for fellow concubines and other high-ranking ladies, like the Duchess. There were strict rules against touching a concubine without their consent, even stricter ones against doing so without their knowledge, and very severe ones against any touching done outside the presence of a chaperone.

The general understanding that these rules could be dispensed with in an emergency, however, was mere convention.

And in truth it was not convention or even the rules that kept the observers rooted where they stood or knelt but a deeper dread and a punishment for a graver wrongdoing.

Finally Morvran stumbled forward, manoeuvring the blanket more securely around the slender elf, then held the bundled form close.
“Fetch His Majesty!”

The emperor arrived by carriage so soon after this order was given that it was clear he’d already been on his way.

He gathered up his elfling and carried him away to the sound of General Voorhis giving orders.

“The break is set but still weak,” Ciaran murmured vaguely as Emhyr manoeuvred them both into the carriage, “Tell them. She can stand but the leg mustn’t take a blow. She wants food and to be kept warm.”

“She will be cared for, elyennen. What do you need?”

“I’m fine. Just need sleep.”

Ciaran tried twice to force his eyes open then gave up and instead breathed in Emhyr’s reassuring scent, listening idly to the quiet words the emperor shared with his general at the window before the carriage rolled off. He was soon asleep and did not wake when Emhyr lifted him out of the carriage, carried him into the palace and up to their suite. He did not stir as the imperial medics examined him then confirmed to the emperor that all he needed was rest and time to replenish his mental reserves.

After observing Ciaran’s steady, easy breathing for a while, Emhyr went back downstairs to rejoin the festivities and give the anxious Duchess an update on the elfling’s condition.

Ciaran drifted out of sleep some time later to the muffled strains of the Mandragora’s music from outside and the awareness of a presence in his bedroom. He stretched slightly, slipping his arms under his pillow to hug it and bury a yawn into it.

“Emhyr?”

He felt the bed dip and turned his head to meet the kiss that started at his ear and ended at his temple then took one of the emperor’s hands and brought it to his lips.

“How do you feel, elyennenic?”

“Fine. I just needed rest.”

He pressed another warm, wet, open-mouthed kiss onto the back of Emhyr’s hand and felt another kiss against his hair.

“I don’t have much time. I have to go back or I’ll be missed.”

Ciaran smirked in the darkness as the blankets were tugged off him. Warm hands cupped his foot as a kiss was pressed into the arch then they curled about his ankles, dragging him until he was bent over the side of the bed. Familiar hands ran up his legs to part his cheeks then familiar lips and a familiar tongue between them, so hot, hard and demanding that in bare minutes Ciaran felt a flood of heat through his core, followed by another smaller one as Emhyr redoubled his efforts. He fist the sheets and moaned softly as the emperor eased one finger, then another, into him, gently, slowly, stroking and stretching him.

Then Emhyr pulled him up bodily so that the elf was on all fours and Ciaran shivered, bracing himself in anticipation, as he heard the emperor fumbling with his clothes. Soon enough he felt the pressure of Emhyr’s heat, steady but insistent, and relished it, eager, and once Emhyr was inside him Ciaran pushed back, moving his hips, impatient for Emhyr to find the spot that would make him come alive, sinking down onto the bed when he did, his burning cheeks pressed against the cool
sheets, while Emhyr held his hips tightly and continued to thrust.

He pushed himself back up, gripping the sheets and digging the heels of his hands into the mattress, as he felt Emhyr wrap his arm around him to hold him close and snapped his hips harder, taking him deeper. Ciaran hung his head, trying to hold back as every last fibre in him shuddering for release until the pressure of Emhyr’s fingertips became almost unbearable and Emhyr came inside him and, with a strangled cry, Ciaran let go.

Ciaran collapsed onto the bed, gasping for breath, swallowing a happy mewl when he felt Emhyr’s warmth on top of him and and the urgent, searing, open-mouthed kisses Emhyr pressed onto his mouth, his cheekbones, his temples, his ears, the shadow beneath his bottom lip. A moment later, one of the hands buried in his hair twisted free and snaked downwards, skimming over his skin to finally grip him.

“Emhyr! Emhyr, I can’t!”

But apparently he could. With his legs slung over Emhyr’s shoulders and his hands fisted in his hair, buried deep in Emhyr’s hot mouth and with two long, blunt fingers inside him, stroking and pressing.

In the next kiss, Ciaran felt the glittering coolness of his own magic on Emhyr’s lips and his tongue and relished it while Emhyr went off to tidy himself up. He’d already half fallen asleep when the emperor returned to wipe him down quickly then tuck him back into bed.

“I have to go back.”

The fingers that brushed back Ciaran’s hair were clean and smelled of soap, but the mouth that kissed his again still tingled with elven magic.

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“I can never repay you,” Morvran finished after he’d recounted what the stablehands had told him about how his mare had spent the night and his own visit to her that morning, “I am infinitely grateful both to your self, My Lord, and to His Majesty for allowing it. Though I should say again that we must never again trespass on His Majesty’s good will by placing him before such an impossible choice. His first duty is to his concubine, to your health and wellbeing.”

Ciaran patted the neck of the horse he was riding, a steady and well-mannered chestnut.

“It all turned out well…”

They were riding together alongside the royal carriage as it rolled along at procession speed towards the marquis’ chateau where they would stay for two nights to attend the fund-raiser the marquis had miraculously put together.

The snow line had climbed up to a very scenic third of the way up the mountain and, far below it, they were moving through somnolent hills, studded with sleepy hamlets and sleepier sheep, all bright and sharp under the midday sun that once again filled the air with its nectar warmth.

Hard to believe that all of this had been covered in snow only days ago and that the horror of the hunt had taken place just the previous day.
“General… What will happen to the Master of the Hunt?”

“He must lose the offending hand. How a Toussaintois, of all people, could have not realised… But fortunately for him, it was the non-dominant hand.”

“Must he lose the hand?” Ciaran asked Emhyr later when they were alone together in the carriage, “He didn’t mean any harm.”

“Perhaps not but that is no defence and he did cause much harm,” Emhyr turned away from a blueprint with the stamp of the Imperial Patent Office in the corner that he’d been studying to drop a kiss onto the dark head resting against his shoulder, “You could have been seriously injured. Even if the horse had not bolted, the Master should have known not to touch an imperial concubine in that manner, he should never have soiled you with blood.”

“But can’t you do something? Pardon him?”

“I could, the sentence has not been pronounced yet. But it would put Anarietta in a difficult position. And it might undermine the status of imperial concubines,” Emhyr paused and lowered the plans, “It would undermine your personal status if people think I am disregarding the incident because you are Aen Seidhe.”

Ciaran looked into the citrine eyes and remembered Vengerberg.

“Still…”

“The rules are clear, elyenmen, and as Master of the Hunt he should have known them better than most. People heard what had happened immediately afterwards from officers and nobles who witnessed it, and from Morvran when he joined us. Evrard would have taken off both hands within the hour. Anarietta is still furious at the breach of etiquette and the injury to you. You were injured, elyenmen. Not seriously, but that was only fortune’s favour. And nobody has managed to conjure up a reason why the Master should not lose the hand.”

Emhyr reached out a hand to gently touch Ciaran’s bandaged shoulder then cupped his cheek.

“I just… don’t want to be remembered as a disruptive presence.”

“You will not. The punishment has not been carried out and will not be for a day or two yet. The fact that the wrong that it rights took place at the hunt will become anecdotal. A cautionary tale about breaches of etiquette and a reminder of how the empire regards its imperial concubines. What people will remember is that the hunt was a success, that it was followed by the boldest entertainment seen at the palace for many years, and that sometime in between, the emperor’s new elven concubine healed the broken leg of General Morvran Voorhis’ favourite, and priceless, mare. It is the better anecdote.”

Ciaran leaned into the caress and planted a kiss into Emhyr’s palm then realised this was why they’d left a day early, so that they — he — would be spared all this unpleasantness.

The carriage was well sprung and moved along the well-laid roads at a stately pace. This was far more comfortable travelling than they were used to and Ciaran was nearly lulled to sleep, curled up against Emhyr, watching out of the window as they continued northwards over bridges and past hamlets.

He was well. The physical weakness had faded away but he still had a little of the pleasant light-headedness he’d woken with. The medics had fussed over him before their departure but hadn’t found anything wrong with him, everyone else coddled him like a tender victim or treated him like a
hero.

Victim and hero.

A potent combination in the minds of the soldiers that surrounded them and who followed Ciaran around whenever he went scavenging for interesting plants during their stops, offering to retrieve samples for him from places that were too dirty or out of reach somehow.

There was still the occasional awkwardness with them but it was never, Ciaran realised, because he was an elf but because they constantly wavered, unsure whether to treat him like a concubine or a fellow soldier. It was getting better though. Somebody — probably Bastiaan — had consulted someone — probably Morvran Voorhis — about what the protocol was and had apparently been advised to treat Ciaran like a concubine but let him behave like a soldier.

In the early afternoon they stopped in one of the larger villages and walked through the streets lined with its inhabitants and and those from the next villages over in every direction. They visited an reputed textile workshop and were given a demonstration of a new wool-carding machine by its inventor, whom the emperor praised for his efforts after having asked a few intelligent questions about the machine. They were shown samples of fabrics produced with the resulting threads and Ciaran made of point of remarking to the emperor that it was very fine. He noted in satisfaction that as they were leaving, a couple of the emperor’s aides pulled Synnøve over to pick out a few bolts of fabric.

They stopped at a tavern attached to a farm for lunch and sampled a selection of the local breads, cheeses and cured meats, washed down with some robust red wine. After lunch, they looked in on a lecture the emperor’s advisor on agricultural affairs was giving in an enormous barn to a gathering of farmers on the characteristics and advantages presented by certain hardy Temerian cattle breeds, particularly one of dairy cow.

Then they continued on their way and as the day began to wane, they reached the large stone gateway to the marquis’ sprawling property, overhung by the de la Faisanderie crest, and continued along the gravel path up to the chateau, already lit from floor to ceiling from within and without.

“Your Majesty, My Lords,” the marquis beamed, “You are very welcome. Please, you must be tired.”

They were led by their host and hostess up a winding staircase then through carpeted halls of dark wood panelling to a large solar suite where they were left to freshen up and change for dinner.

“Are these the family rooms?” Ciaran asked, looking around.

“I understand this to be the guest wing. It was a family wing while the marquis’ parents lived.”

Even compared to their suite at the palace, it was a large space, and even more surprising in a private home. Morvran Voorhis and var Cleef were sharing quarters with their aides, and some of the regulars were bunking together in the outhouses*. Ciaran had a sudden sense of the burden and cost of hosting the emperor and his retinue for even just two nights.

“And after all this, he’s still dying to be asked a favour…”

“You could do worse than indulge him. Just a small favour.”

“Just a small personal favour so that he’ll understand how much I appreciate the huge favour he’s doing the Pontar elves?”
Emhyr’s amber eyes gleamed.

Dinner was jovial and as near to a family meal as a dinner for ten — of which one was an emperor — could be. The marquis knew well the cumulative weariness one felt after a day’s carriage travel and he understood the charms of country hospitality. The fare was simpler than at the palace but all delicious, much of it produced on the estate itself or from neighbouring villages and farms. The pièce de résistance — pot roast pheasant with pearl barley and mushrooms — was so good that Ciaran asked for a small second helping, to the marquis’ everlasting delight.

Ciaran had been advised to get as much rest as possible in preparation for the long day to follow, so after dinner, Emhyr tucked him into bed before going back out for post-prandial drinks.

But Ciaran wasn’t really tired and after a couple of hours spent falling in and out of light sleep, he opened his eyes, found Emhyr’s bed still empty, and went looking for him.

Emhyr was in the sitting room at the other end of their corridor but he was not alone and Ciaran paused, focussed and listened in.

“The position must be meaningful, it must give us effective representation. It takes over a week of hard riding to get from Toussaint to Nilfgaard. Our livelihoods are here, the people and the interests we represent are here. Where will we be if went spend a fortnight out of every month traveling? And yet, what good are senators if they are uninformed and don’t vote?”

“We intend to hold a legislative session. Two—three months at most, from spring until the summer rains. The budgets and other large pieces of legislation will be debated and voted on then.”

“With an allowance for accommodation and travel?”

“We are happy to assist with the logistics of both but becoming senator is an act of public service, there can be no question of payment or even allowances.”

A silence.

“No last-minute changes or emergency votes in the middle of the night when we’ve gone back to the provinces?”

“We cannot guarantee that and an emergency would be no time for us to be held back by procedural niceties. However, we are looking at options and are open to discussions. We could conceivably have a proxy system in which provincial senators delegate their votes to another trusted senator of their choice who would vote on their behalf. Portal travel has been suggested. That seems excessive but perhaps we could look at megascope communications. We would stress that these would be used only in true emergencies. We are not going through the trouble of creating this system just for the sake of undermining it at the first opportunity.”

Ciaran opened a nearby door quietly then closed it noisily. The sitting room fell silent and he made his way to it.

Despite the tenor of the discussion, the atmosphere was relaxed, most people settled in armchairs with their drinks, others standing by the fire.

“I hope I’m not interrupting. I couldn’t sleep.”

“Of course not, My Lord,” the marquis bounced out of his seat while the others stood more sedately, “Can I offer you a refreshment? A pot of tea?”
Ciaran’s gaze had gone to the book on the side table at the marquis’ elbow and he picked it up.

*Why We Stare At Elves.*

Var Cleef coughed discreetly and Morvran Voorhis smiled into his cognac as Ciaran’s gaze went to the reddening marquis.

“Ah, that is… Well, it makes some valid points. Really quite interesting. Almost a scholarly work, in some respects…”

Ciaran put the book back down and let his gaze wander about the room, picking out the elven art and artefacts on display. An inkwell on the small writing desk of modern make but with the characteristic cabriole leg and acanthus leaf feet so common at the palace, a framed fragment of ancient fabric, and in pride of place, a perfectly preserved bronze statuette that had to be priceless. He had noticed such trinkets and artwork in all the parts of the chateau they’d been in.

Ciaran went over to study the scrap of textile.

“A fine collection, My Lord.”

“Oh, I…” the marquis started, still flustered, then went to join Ciaran, composing himself, “Thank you, My Lord. It has been the work of many years.”

“A considerable investment of time, coin and effort, I imagine.”

The marquis bowed slightly in acquiescence.

“Toussaint’s soil is sown with potsherds and fragments of its past. The better preserved statues found a place in people’s gardens but the rest was not considered of much account until… very recently. Even in Toussaint such things have been rare.”

“So, you have an eye for opportunity. And you consider it has been worthwhile?”

The marquis stared at the fabric, a look of resolve coming over his face.

“Certainly worthwhile, yes. Undoubtedly.”

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The following morning, Ciaran and Emhyr took turns listening to the marquis and his various overseers as they explained in fulsome detail the estate’s many workings as they trekked to various parts of it. It was not just a vineyard but also a working farm.

It was currently Emhyr’s turn and he walked over to take a close and serious look at a large grape-treading vat — the very same type that had been installed as the bathtub in the suite he and his concubine were sharing.

Ciaran, meanwhile, stalked back to Morvran Voorhis, who was deep in pleasant conversation with the Impera’s brigadier. When they noticed Ciaran, var Cleef’s gaze flickered to the emperor and he excused himself with a smile.

“How I honour that man,” Voorhis murmured as they watched var Cleef stride off to rejoin his
emperor, “The more I come to know him, the more I cherish him. One knows where one stands with him. *Order, Discipline, Duty, the Emperor,*” the general glanced at Ciaran, “We were at the Academy at the same time, you know, but only for a year. I was still finding my way around when he graduated with full honours. That did not mean as much as it does now and his family is only minor nobility. Still, His Majesty noticed him, made him his *maecenee* and aide-de-camp, and by the Second War, he was a captain in the Alba.”

Ciaran knew from Bastiaan that most people graduated from the Academy after five years and was mildly surprised to discover there was such an age difference between two men he’d vaguely assumed to be the same age. Then again, most elves were bad at judging human ages and Nilfgaardians, with their precise grooming habits and hardwearing agelessness, were the most baffling of all.

“Our paths crossed, of course, but this is our first time cooperating closely together. I was still at the Academy when he was at the palace as the His Majesty’s aide, then he went on to the army barracks as a trainer and commander while I became a military advisor to the Imperial High Council. After the Second War, he was promoted to the head of the Impera and I to the Alba… But we will both be at the palace when we return and we will make time to see each other.”

“His Majesty trusts him.”

“Deeply. His Majesty became the brigadier’s *maecenor* when he graduated from the academy.”

“*Maecenor*?”

“The bonds of *maecenate* are a form of patronage or mentorship. For all his qualities and competence, it is unlikely that the brigadier would have made it to his current position — and certainly not as quickly — without His Majesty’s longstanding support.”

“The brigadier did not… voice an opinion about the issues discussed the other night. At cards.”

“There is no need. We all know where he stands, particularly on the citizenship issue. His wife is an Ebbinger, from Venendal. His two children are also Ebbingers. They cannot be Nilfgaardian citizens under current laws because they were not born in Nilfgaard proper and because their mother is not Nilfgaardian. Var Cleef knew all this when he married, naturally, but one assumes he would be glad to see his family have the same rights he does. Under current plans, citizenship would be first extended to the home provinces but it will — how would they say it in the North? — set the ball rolling.”

The home provinces, referred to as Tier One provinces in administrative jargon, were those immediately adjacent to Nilfgaard, those that had been part of the empire the longest and with which it had had the most developed relations even before conquest, such as Gemmera and Etolia.

“Ebbing is not a home province. And it is an autonomous vassal state.”

“True,” the general beamed at the elf, “But being in such closer proximity to what will effectively be Nilfgaard might lead people to weigh real advantages against the fiction of autonomy differently. In places like Maecht and south Ebbing, there will be pressure from within to secure greater advantages. The changes we make now are preparation for a smooth transition in the future.”

“But will it happen soon enough for the brigadier and his family?”

“Oh, most likely. It seems a momentous change now because it has never been done, but once the principle is established…”
Ciaran considered this a moment. He had always been aware that there were various degrees of “Nilfgaardianness” within the empire — Dol Gwennelen and Temeria had different statuses, just as Dol Blathanna and Angren had at the time of the second war, and everyone understood Gwyngaard to be as much of Nilfgaard as Novigrad was of Redania. But it had always seemed to him a distant, political thing, the semantic wrangling of monarchs and chieftains, with little bearing on the lives of the actual populations.

“I hadn’t known the brigadier was married.”

“Oh, it is a famous story! Some six years ago, var Cleef was sent off to Venendal to run a two-week training camp to talent scout for the Alba and Impera and the officer track. The training grounds there run alongside the lands of one of Venendal’s wealthiest landowners. The first afternoon, the daughter of the house came by with a string of servants carrying fresh lemonade for everyone. And that was that. Var Cleef came back to the capital an engaged man.”

Ciaran stared. This sounded utterly unlike the level-headed captain he knew. Morvran Voorhis was enjoying his surprise.

“The parents on either side had reservations and thought their child could do better — probably a good indication that they were well-matched after all. But as Evrard is only the third son he had no expectations on the side of his own family so they had no real leverage. As for Vanina’s parents… Well, it is hard to argue for long that the emperor’s maecenee does not have a promising future ahead of him. They were married within the month, it was the talk of the barracks. The first son arrived within the year and they have since had another. They are, by all accounts, very happy. Both sets of parents too.”

As they neared the top of the climb where the emperor, the marquis and the brigadier were waiting, Ciaran looked into the handsome face, the frank eyes and easy smile, and reflected that they revealed very little.

“I thought you might like to see the ruins of Arthach palace, My Lord,” the marquis explained, offering the elf a telescope, “You can just make them out across there river, in the marshlands.”

Ciaran trained his gaze over the elven lines and fallen arches of the distant ruins and listened as the marquis explained that the summer palace had long ago been damaged in the floods caused by a Toussaint duke’s attempts to manage the Sansretour’s waters, which had also created the swamp that now surrounded the ruins.

Ciaran returned the telescope to the marquis gravely and thanked him, catching Emhyr’s eye a moment as they went to gather around one of the estate’s vintners and listen to his explanations on how they’d developed and produced the estate’s latest variety of wine.

“It is labour intensive, of course, but picking the grapes when they are frozen on the wine brings out a different sweetness in them.”

The yield was low but the flavour obtained was unique and a bottle of the previous year’s vintage was opened for them to sample. Ciaran’s eyes widened at the sweet, crisp flavour and the marquis smiled in delight.

Ciaran’s gaze met Emhyr’s and he could almost hear the low, amused voice in his head.

Well, here is the favour.
The fundraiser was an unmitigated success.

Anna-Henrietta had come up from Beauclair that morning with half her court and they and the Nilfgaardians strutted around the delightful, open-air venue in their best clothes like peacocks on parade, to the delight of the minor nobility and wealthy merchants in attendance.

The duchess complimented Ciaran on his mustard wool coat trimmed in black fur and piping, and whose shoulders and hems dripped with embroidered flowers and birds on branches. Ciaran knew it created a pleasing symmetry with Emhyr’s outfit and those of his officers in their slim black uniforms and gold braid.

There were more wines than Ciaran had ever imagined could exist. Wines from all over the empire but countless ones from Toussaint — earthy reds, delicate whites, and everything in between. Ciaran was offered glass after glass of them, which he sniffed before taking a cautious sip that he rolled around his mouth before spitting out, just as he’d been taught. Even so, after the third his taste buds had been deadened, after the fifth he started getting pointed looks from the two medics who had accompanied them, after seven he started to feel light-headed and after that he simply told anyone who asked that his favourites were the rosé with the bubbles in it and the marquis’ sweet icewine.

“Why do people smile when I tell them that?” Ciaran asked Emhyr, referring to the fond smile with which his answer was usually met.

“You have the palate of a child. It will mature with experience.”

Emhyr, it turned out, had a palate to rival that of the ducal sommelier, and he and Benoit ended up in an impromptu, friendly challenge in which both men were given a number of new wines to identify. Both men swirled their wines and sniffed them, observed the wine in the glass then took a sip, considered it, then spat it out discreetly.

“Upriver from Beauclair,” the sommelier fired the first shot.

“East bank of the Sanretour,” the emperor followed, then upped the stakes, “Facing due west, left long on the vine. One can taste the sweetness of long afternoons in it.”

They went three rounds in this manner, both praising the wine, more complementing each other than competing, and at the third wine, the emperor bowed out, claiming he could add no more specifics to those provided by the sommelier.

They face each other and bowed — one rather more deeply than the other — to great applause and the three wines in question were immediately in great demand.

As the event wound up, the elf and the marquis took to the dais, the emperor and the duchess behind them, and after the marquis had announced how much the proceeds had amounted to, Ciaran made a short thank you speech, assuring the attendance of the gratitude of the Northern elves for this boon and remarking on how fitting it was that it should be the fruit of the Toussaintois’ remarkable stewardship of the land.

By the time he went to bed that evening, already dreaming of their suite back at the palace, even Mererid had congratulated him on his speech.
They were back at the palace and everything felt familiar again.

The specific birdsongs that drifted in from outside told Ciaran he’d woken later than usual even before he opened his eyes and saw the quality of the light that filtered through the slatted shutters.

Emhyr had evidently given orders to let him sleep.

Ciaran closed his eyes again, relishing a slight light-headedness, then swung himself out of bed, taking the elaborate robe at the end of his bed and pulling it on as he went.

The emperor, a footman informed him, was in his dressing room and Ciaran yawned, stretching his arms high above his head happily, as he sailed through the doors flung open for him, straight into a roomful of Emhyr’s aides and advisors, who all turned to look at him in mild surprise.

Emhyr glanced at him, still being helped into his formal shirt.

“Good morning, My Lord,” Morvran bade, his voice full of a smile that seemed to speak for the rest of the attendance.

“Good morning, Your Majesty, gentlemen,” Ciaran said at length, nonplussed.

Emhyr adjusted his collar and the fall of the shirt.

“Gentlemen, a moment.”

Morvran Voorhis and Evrard var Cleef led the procession, hiding their grins at the sight of Ciaran’s bare feet as they filed out, and the attendants brought up the rear.

“Good morning,” Emhyr murmured, amused, as the elfling sought refuge on the imperial bed, wrapping his arms around his raised knees.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t realise…”

“We all had a long day yesterday, we agreed to a later start today,” Emhyr dismissed, doing up the buttons on his shirt.

Ciaran could feel Emhyr’s gaze raking him. He hadn’t bothered to look himself over in a mirror before coming, he had no notion how he looked. He might look a wreck. Probably not, though, if the gleam in the amber eyes was anything to go by.

“You could help me dress since you scared everyone away.”

Ciaran bit his lip to hide a smile as he swung his legs over the side of the bed then tucked his feet into Emhyr’s pearl-encrusted slippers.

Emhyr smiled as his concubine flapped and flopped over to him then went onto his toes for a kiss. The emperor leaned over to bite the soft mouth, his hands slipped into the heavy silk robe Ciaran hadn’t bothered to tie closed, his hands played over the thin chemise to feel the taut flesh beneath, and he folded the slender elf in against his larger body, lifting him clear off his feet for a moment. One of the slippers fell to the ground.

“You smell nice.”
“It’s all the powders and creams,” Ciaran murmured, though he knew it was not.

Mererid and he did take care to use scents the emperor favoured but as he felt Emhyr’s warm breath behind his ear, he was certain that Emhyr was not referring to those.

“I thought we should have a quiet day. A picnic in the ducal gardens.”

“Could we go to the amphitheatre?”

“It is haunted, ELYENNEN, and unsafe, it has been in disrepair for decades.”

Emhyr held the dark, solemn gaze for as long as he could.

“We will go to the far end of the garden, so you can see it.”

Ciaran’s smile was blinding. The elf was more hindrance than help as he danced around the emperor in the oversized slippers, occasionally stealing a kiss and offering him things he didn’t need.

“Send the others back in,” Emhyr said when Ciaran handed him a shoe horn instead of a button hook, “And be ready by ten. Dress warmly, ELYENNENIN.”

A last hard kiss then Ciaran shuffled off in the slippers, smug and smiling.

The pearl-embroidered slippers were still sitting next to the smaller shearling ones on Ciaran’s sheepskin descente de lit** when the elf was walking out into the gardens with General Voorhis, a few hours later.

“If we are very fortunate, we shall have fresh fish for dinner. The brigadier has suggested we try our hand at fishing this afternoon. We thought it might be a nice treat for the officers, to help them unwind.”

“Do you fish, General?”

“I have never tried it. Strange, in a way. It is a common pastime in the City. But most of the fish in my home were either bought sea fish or fish from the warren moat*** and one does not need a hook and line for that, just a net.”

A marquee had been set up for them right at the end of the ducal gardens and the party proceeded towards it like a spray of pastel flowers. Var Cleef and Bastiaan swayed together like a pair of lupins in duck-egg blue and dove grey respectively and just a few steps behind them, the lilac-tinted duchess was having an animated tête-à-tête with the emperor, who looked especially dashing in oyster silk with black piping. Emhyr’s hands were clasped behind his back, one of them opening and closing slowly.

“That is the signal,” the general confided in a stage whisper, “We should save His Majesty.”

They lengthened their strides and soon caught up to the two monarchs.

“Your Grace, if you can spare a little time after lunch, perhaps we could teach Lord Ciaran to play croquet?”

The duchess thought it an excellent idea and, somehow, the conversation evolved in such a way that the general and the emperor ended up walking ahead, debating the respective merits of ash and hickory mallets, while Ciaran and the duchess fell behind.

“Is the amphitheatre really haunted, Your Grace?”
“So they say. We have never seen evidence of it, of course, but others claim so people keep away, as a precaution.”

“But someone did die there?”

“Oh, Elsa de Longpré? Yes, she certainly died there. Poor Elsa. A tragic story, but a true one, the entire audience witnessed it. Poison in the wine. Nobody realised until it was far, far too late because, of course, her character is supposed to die in just such a way.”

“Someone killed her?”

“Someone must have. And she had said, many times and to different people she worked with, that someone was trying to kill her. They did look into it but found no evidence, even though she insisted. By then, however, she had started to sound a little mad. She claimed... that an elven actress was trying to kill her,” the duchess explained with a commiserating shake of his head, “Nobody ever found out what really happened and then people started to say there was an atmosphere at the amphitheatre so it was abandoned. Over the years it has fallen into such disrepair that we could not use it even if we wanted to. Such a shame. It is the perfect location for a theatre. Such a view it must have of the lake and the palace! Especially at sunset when the palace is all golds and pinks!”

A playful breeze ruffled the diaphanous drapes that made up the marquee’s nominal walls and between them they sat on cushioned chairs at a table overflowing with flowers, eating with silver off fine china and drinking out of crystal and Ciaran wondered in what way this was supposed to be a picnic.

After lunch, they set up several games of croquet and Ciaran found himself paired with Bastiaan, the other novice, against the general and the duchess, to stack the beginner’s luck on one side against experience. They won — and this despite Bastiaan’s dilemma of delicacy, which told him that they should lose to the duchess — but Ciaran wasn’t sure whether it was because Morvran and Anarietta had contrived to let them win or because this was just the sort of game of precision that elves excelled at.

The duchess and her ladies left and the emperor’s party moved further down the lake to a part of it rumoured to provide good fishing. Blankets were laid down and refreshments were served, then var Cleef offered to teach Morvran Voorhis to fish, and they and some of their aides wandered off.

Ciaran and Emhyr watched as Morvran Voorhis cast his line straight onto the rushes that lined the bank to a burst of laughter and var Cleef, to even greater mirth, threw off his boots, rolled up his trousers, and waded into the gelid water to free the line. Back on shore, the brigadier demonstrated for the general whose second attempt was successful.

“They get along well.”

“So it seems. I had hoped they would learn to appreciate each other more during this campaign.”

Ciaran settled more comfortably against Emhyr.

“If var Cleef was an officer of the Alba division during the Second War, why didn’t you promote him to its head and give Morvran Voorhis the Impera? Didn’t Voorhis mind var Cleef being promoted over him?”

“What makes you think he was?”

“Bastiaan said the Impera is the more prestigious division.”
“Did he? The Alba and the Impera are equally prestigious but in different ways. The Impera guards the emperor whereas the Alba is considered by many to be the finest division in the imperial army. It is exclusively made up of Nilfgaardians and many of its officers, like Morvran, come from wealthy families who can afford to equip and keep their officers and soldiers better than they would on pay from the Exchequer alone. And besides, Morvran is family — a position as the head of my bodyguard, no matter how prestigious, would not have been appropriate for him, whereas it was Evrard’s life ambition. As it might be for your Bastiaan.”

Ciaran considered this a moment, fingering the hem of the emperor’s doublet absently.

They both looked up at the messenger coming towards them bearing despatches.

“I’m going to collect some flowers,” Ciaran told Emhyr, grabbing a silver serving spoon and the empty cheesecloth bag a fruitcake had come in, barely waiting for the emperor’s nod before sauntering off.

A distant mist of tremulous scarlet blossoms had caught his eye but it was almost at the foot of the amphitheatre’s outer ruins so Ciaran picked his way over slowly, pausing to look at several plants and to collect a handsome fern and a small wild orchid, in the hope that anyone who’d been told to watch him would lose interest.

He’d felt a pull to the ancient amphitheatre ever since he’d set eyes on it, every mote of his being yearning to touch the pale stone carved by elven hands into the arches and towers that those of the palace had been copied off.

Eventually he neared the flowers and a small frown formed on his brow as his impression was confirmed.

Spider lilies. Similar to nerines but rarer, since, according to elven lore, they only grew where the elven blood to which they owed their vivid colour had been spilled, to guide the spirits of the dead. Once upon a time they had also been planted around their crypts but the elves of the Pontar, and most of those of the North, had not had the luxury of crypts for centuries and had lost the art of propagating the flowers for nearly as long. Perhaps the elves of Dol Blathanna still possessed the knowledge but even so, these blooms were out of place. And out of season. They usually flowered in the autumn and ought, in any case, to have been destroyed by the snow.

Ciaran knelt and carefully dug a few of the plants out of mobile soil, taking care not to damage the bulbs and packing them away in the cheesecloth bag. There was a white one in among the red ones and after a moment’s hesitation, Ciaran dug that one up too, pausing to study the powdery dusting of gold at the end of the long pistils.

It was also said that the pollen held the memories of the dead and after another moment’s thought, Ciaran blew and looked.

A wisp of thunderstorm rose and grew and out of it blew a wraith with long dark hair and wearing the tattered remains of what had been an expensively-tailored dress.

“Did she send you? Did she send you to kill me?” she demanded of Ciaran in a hollow howl over the sounds of swords being drawn.

Ciaran, still on his knees and dwarfed by the hovering phantom, didn’t risk himself turning to look but his keen hearing provided the mental image of var Cleef and his small contingent of Imperas fanned out in a half-circle around him. This was closely followed by the thought that their steel swords would not be much use against a wraith, and that Emhyr would not be pleased.
“She did, didn’t she? Tell me!”

Just as Ciaran was about to respond, the wraith wailed and was blown away by a twister of mist.

Ciaran watched the idly swirling mist warily, slowly getting to his feet and taking a few steps back.

“Keep going, My Lord,” came var Cleef’s calm voice.

A face began to appear in the mist, melancholy and beautiful, a long throat, shoulders. The large, shard-like eyes looked straight into Ciaran’s and he stopped. All around the mist thickened and spread until even his peripheral vision was clouded by thick fog shot through by the crackles of ice-blue lightning.

“Elsa?”

“That was her, the silly thing,” the figure nodded at the flower he still held then bowed its head regally, “I am Annika.”

“Did you kill her? Elsa?”

“Me? I died hundreds of years before she was even born. How could I have? Oh, I may have made some suggestions but… I didn’t do anything. How could I have?” the spectre sighed playfully, gradually taking shape and stepping down from her window of fog onto the ground, barefoot, the skirts of her simple elven robe swinging, “She came here often, you know, in the dead of night, for inspiration on how to play my role. She would spend hours here talking to herself. For weeks she had asked everyone she knew if they’d ever seen someone die of poison, she bemoaned the fact she’d never witnessed such a death and hoped that she might do so before the piece opened. She’d even bought a vial of poison…"

The spectre moved around the ruins, sometimes appearing to touch the stone walls, sometimes wafting through them, her gaze always on Ciaran, fixed and fey.

“She came the night before the premiere. She wanted her performance to be ‘more real than life’ and despaired because she knew she could not achieve the perfection she aspired to. Humans, they have so little imagination, it has so little power. So I told her. Really, the solution was so simple. And really, I think it must have already occurred to her, somewhere in that silly little mind of hers, because she’d brought the poison with her… The poison went in the bottle, the bottle went backstage where it belonged, and the next day she drank from it, confident, triumphant. She breathed her last to a standing ovation.”

The lovely mouth curved into an impish smile that never reached her eyes.

“I have to admit. She was perfect. Glorious. More real than life. You should have seen it.”

And now the gaze softened and became liquid and when the apparition spoke again it was with a voice warm with yearning, so drawn to him that she took a few quick steps forward and Ciaran instinctively took a few steps back.

“Are you here to free me? To save us?”

“Who from? Elsa?”

“Oh, I don’t think she’ll be back. You probably blew away what little was left of her. Thank you for that, she was always moaning and groaning and complaining. She was scaring away the visitors.”
For the first time, the unseeing gaze swung to those who stood behind Ciaran and now he took a chance and looked. They were all there. Emhyr, Bastiaan, Morvran Voorhis, var Cleef, and the others, shrouded in the unnatural mist, tendrils of it starting to twine around their limbs and necks.

“To free us from them. From all these humans. They are everywhere. They have been everywhere for centuries! They killed us — killed me! Killed every last one of us and now they’re forever here, trampling us underfoot, breathing the air they stole from us, filling time and space with their useless existences so that even the echoes of ours become fainter!”

Ciaran felt a prickle along the back of his neck as the blind, piercing gaze drifted back to him.

“They have hurt you too.”

“No,” Ciaran said quickly.

“They nearly killed you. You. I can see it.”

“Yes, but it was not these! It was others. The same kind that killed you and who damned themselves to eternal dishonour by betraying our king then killing him. They live and they die and leave nothing behind because they have no souls. These are different. Look, they have rebuilt our palace.”

“Only so they can live in it themselves! All humans are the same. And there are so many of them. They breed like vermin. These will soon be replaced. Look, there’s just a baker’s dozen of them. They won’t be missed.”

The spectre took a few steps forward and Ciaran quickly went to stand before Emhyr, keenly aware that the swords that bristled around them were no protection.

“You can’t kill them!”

“Oh, but I could try… I’m much stronger than I was.”

“You mustn’t! They saved me! I wouldn’t be alive if they hadn’t saved me! I have a debt of honour to repay! If you want to kill them you’ll have to kill me first!”

The spirit wavered.

“A debt of honour? To humans?”

“I would have died if it wasn’t for them,” Ciaran pressed his point, “In a worse place than this. I was left for dead in a pile of rotting corpses sinking into the mud in a stinking human city.”

He indicated Bastiaan, who was watching, coiled and ready.

“He found me and dug me out with his own hands. They healed me and gave me medicine, they have kept me alive. If you can see that I was hurt then you must know that I was saved.”

“A debt of honour…”

“It must be paid. Or we are no better than them.”

The mist began to recede, allowing the sun’s warmth to slowly filter through.

“Very well. I can see you will not help us,” the ghost sighed mournfully then continued, resentful, “Take your humans then. But if you will not help us, we must help ourselves.”
Some wisps still hung in the air when Emhyr scooped Ciaran up and strode away, var Cleef and his soldiers in close formation around them. When they reached the picnic blankets, Emhyr set him down, gripped the delicate head and looked into Ciaran’s eyes a moment.

Then, mastering himself, the emperor turned to his aides and officers.

“Speaking of this incident will be considered treason.”

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Chapter End Notes

* an outhouse: in this instance, a separate building, such as a barn. Not an outdoor toilet.
** a descente de lit: a bedside rug
*** a warren moat: a moat around a small island where rabbits and chickens are raised for food
Chapter Summary

In which we leave Toussaint.

Chapter Notes

Welcome or welcome back! Thank you for the lovely (and frankly hilarious) comments!
<3 <3 <3

THE DEPARTED

— Beauclair, Toussaint, late March, 1272 —

As Ciaran was being dressed in his comfortable woollen travel clothes, his gaze roved over the suite that had been his home for weeks. He’d been relieved, after the trip to the château, to return to this shared suite and now found himself swallowing down anxiety at the thought of leaving it.
It already looked different. All his clothes and medicines, books and papers, had been packed away. The case into which his triptych vanity mirror would be folded into lay open and ready on a nearby console table, and there was only an empty space where his little writing desk had stood, it having been taken apart for transfer to his wagon. Even the little goblet of snowdrops had been spirited away.

The large writing table had been swept clean of Emhyr’s blotter, his imperial seal, his inkwells, and the rest of his desk set. Ciaran’s cases of tea things had gone from the small table by the fireplace and the bustle that usually filled the suite with a hum of life like that of insects in a forest had now died down to the empty echoes of a few lost whispers and the occasional jarring sound of a case being snapped shut or the scrape of furniture on the floor.

A last lingering look then Ciaran came away and made his way down the winding staircase leading to the great hall, currently filled with trunks and boxes and cases to be loaded onto the baggage carts. His, Emhyr’s, Morvran’s, var Cleef’s, their brass labels gleaming and each one tagged with the the various destinations they would transit through — the black knight on crimson of Toussaint, a blue rose on marigold for Nazair, and Ciaran remembered watching white tags bearing the Ebbinger blue on white rivers being affixed to his trunks of warm weather clothes. Those had been sent ahead long ago, as had everything bound straight for Nilfgaard, including the owl, whose cage had been more warmly covered, and a couple of wagonfuls of books they’d picked up from somewhere on their way through Angren.

Shaking himself, Ciaran continued on his way, lengthening his step as he made his way to the stables, the stablehands having promised him they’d let him see an-Nayyir and Smeriglia before they were prepared for the journey.

Both horses welcomed him noisily and Ciaran felt his heart tighten, grateful that they would staying with them until they reached the capital. The break was healing quickly and though it was still in splints this was less for support than to prevent any knocks to the bone during transit, and Ciaran knew Morvran Voorhis did not propose to risk Smeriglia on the mountain paths.

Anna-Henrietta was smiling at him from the doorway when he returned and over breakfast they chatted and gossiped entirely as if this was a day like any other.

It was only when the duchess escorted the Nilfgaardian imperial party to where the coaches were waiting that she took Ciaran’s arm and drew him aside.

“We were so delighted to have you here and we so look forward to seeing you again. We so hope you will come back to Toussaint and encourage your friends to visit us.”

“I hope so,” Ciaran found himself saying, “You have been so kind, Your Grace.”

Though he’d spent the morning steeling himself for the departure, Ciaran still balked at the dark, hulking wagons, took an instinctive step back away from them, bumping straight into Emhyr who had come up behind him.

“You may stay with me.”

Ciaran looked up Emhyr then back at the wagons, shuddering at the dread thought of being trapped in them again after the freedom he’d had in Beauclair. But he mastered himself and after a final wave at the duchess, her ladies, and the rest of the people assembled to see them off, he followed Emhyr into his wagon.

The young elf quickly regained his usual seat behind the curtain, wedging himself between the
emperor and the barred window beyond which the bright countryside wobbled dimly, stifling a few miserable sniffles that were always answered by a caress or a kiss against his hair or an ear.

The affection, the blankets and furs he’d been wrapped in, the carefully-brewed infusion he’d been brought all heightened the sense of unworthiness that had been growing in him since the events at the amphitheatre. Emhyr had followed his own interdiction to the letter and had not spoken even a single word of reproach. Ciaran knew he deserved a reprimand. He’d wilfully gone against the emperor’s wishes and put himself and others at risk.

Morvran Voorhis had been more tactfully solicitous than ever, the grave-faced and fatalistic medics had conducted a full examination of him followed by grim whispers. Throughout the following day, var Cleef’s smile had had a stony quality to it. Days later, Bastiaan could still barely stand to look at him.

And yet, if anything, they treated him more gently than they had before.

Briefing followed briefing and, whenever they stopped, the crop of advisors and aides giving them changed while Ciaran stayed huddled in his corner, hidden behind the curtain, growing quietly more miserable so that by the time he and the emperor were left alone for their dinner, he had no appetite at all.

He forced himself to pick at his food so he wouldn’t call attention to himself and served the emperor, slavishly, as he had all those weeks ago when they’d still been travelling through Aedirn and Lyria.

“You are not hungry?”

“No, thank you, Your Majesty.”

He froze, dreading that at the first hard word he would shatter.

“Come, elyennenic.”

Ciaran obeyed, trembling as he was cradled close to the broad chest and he felt Emhyr’s warm mouth pressed against his forehead.

“We will be in Nilfgaard soon. You will get better.”

And Ciaran melted into tears of relief and grief at the implication that Emhyr knew, that they all knew. This was why Emhyr had not been angry. This was why there had been no chastisements. They knew he’d been punished enough. They knew, as well as he did, what the encounter with the spectre meant. Death’s hold on him was so strong that not only could he hear the voices of the departed as clearly as that of the living, but he could draw death so close to the living that even they could hear and see the dead.

Despite all the rest and care, despite the impression he and everybody else had had that he was getting stronger, he was still fading and fading quickly.

“You will get stronger, elyennen. It will just take more time than we thought,” Emhyr murmured, burying his hand in Ciaran’s hair and kissing away his tears.

“She was so strong!” Ciaran hiccuped then explained how easily the spectre’s catastrophic hatred could have turned its mist to poison, leaving them for someone to find, dead where they lay without a mark on them.

“This is why you can’t rid Toussaint of barghests and other monsters. The land is cursed, but not
with magic. Not… the magic of mages.”

He tried to convey to Emhyr that elves were made as much of spirit as of the physical, that this spirit was immortal. That whenever elves did things with intention they left behind shreds of this spirit, of their will, but that for all this it still remained whole and took on its own existence, usually thriving because it gorged on what it wanted unfettered by conscience or control. The wish of all the hundreds, the thousands, the tens of thousands of elves that had died unavenged here over the centuries had become a hunger to see their persecutors and torturers and executioners die. The thirst of their hatred and fury had soaked into the very soil as their blood had. It relished every accidental drowning, every stabbing in the dark, every child led astray and lost in the pursuit of butterflies. It could no longer distinguished between the innocent and the guilty, no longer cared, because there were no elves left in Toussaint and they were the only ones that mattered.

“Thank you for telling me this. I will consult with our Elders when we return to the capital.”

“It’s not—!” Ciaran started urgently then stopped.

It was not something that would be solved by sitting around a table to dream up a strategy and then sending soldiers. It could, once upon a time, have been contained and eventually appeased but not anymore. It was hundreds of years too late for that.

The memory of Cintra rose up in his mind like a wraith.

Perhaps it was too late for the North too. The ground there too had been sown with bones and watered with the blood of elves, then fed with the resentment born of betrayal after betrayal after betrayal.

“I understand,” Emhyr said deliberately, “Do not worry yourself over this, elyennenin.”

Ciaran clung and sniffled and looked up at Emhyr, at the iron temples and impassive expression.

He wanted Emhyr to understand, to really understand. But he was keenly aware that though he had disobeyed the emperor and put them all in danger at the amphitheatre, Emhyr had been lenient with him and Ciaran did not want to throw Cintra in his face now.

There would be plenty of time to explain it once they reached the capital, Ciaran reasoned, and there was nothing Emhyr could do about it anyway. Just the fact that Emhyr now knew of the problem and would give it due consideration was calming.

Ciaran stayed until, soothed by the kisses and caresses, he fell asleep and did not wake when he was carried back to his wagon.

The elf awoke with raised spirits and took more steps to right his wrong. When the columns paused mid-morning, he apologised very solemnly to var Cleef then sought out Bastiaan, smiled to show him he was well then took him off to hunt for interesting plants the way they used to.

He spent the rest of the day in Emhyr’s wagon, listening in on the empire’s business while he laid out the newest additions to his collection all over the floor, pressing the leaves and stems and flowers between sheets of paper into into the fattening notebook he’d dedicated to this occupation and making precise notes about them.

After one of their halts, Ciaran found himself alone with the emperor and watched him speculatively, breaking into a smile when the amber gaze flitted to him, then flared. A moment later, Ciaran was settled in Emhyr’s arms again, this time eagerly returning every heated kiss, and he nipped Emhyr’s lip in surprise when he felt his want. Emhyr hadn’t bedded him since that day at the amphitheatre and
Ciaran realised how desperately he’d missed their nearness.

“Please?” he breathed.

“Elyennen, this is not the place—.”

“Please, Emhyr?”

He kissed Emhyr’s throat, moving up along it to bite his chin lightly, squirming discreetly in the imperial lap.

“Very well. Just this once,” Emhyr conceded thickly.

Not long after, Ciaran bit back a moan as the hands that gripped his firm, round cheeks lowered him onto Emhyr’s blood-stiffened heat. A rough bump in the road and Ciaran yelped as he hit his head against the ceiling and nearly bit his tongue.

“This is why I have never had you like this during travel,” Emhyr said, not quite able to hide a grin as he stroked the dark hair soothingly, and Ciaran dissolved into giggles, bracing himself against the ceiling.

The next jarring bump followed immediately after and Ciaran gasped and gritted his teeth as it drove Emhyr deep into him. Emhyr pulled him close and kissed him hard as he rolled his hips up into him, slow and steady, seeing so thoroughly to Ciaran’s needs that the elfling fell asleep in his arms almost as soon as he’d come.

— N —

Ciaran’s good mood lasted while they crossed the lowlands to the foot of the South Amells. He usually rode alongside the caravan for an hour or two every day with Bastiaan, Morvran Voorhis having gone on ahead to lead the column, and together they chatted and stopped along the way to collect any plants of interest.

But after just one day’s climb, Ciaran woke the next morning to a terrain that was already changing. The trees and bushes were fewer and further between, with bare, thorny branches that either hadn’t budded or had leaves than were smaller, hardier, duller than what they’d seen in the valley. As they slowly trudged higher, even the grass started to fade away.

“You must stay in the wagons, My Lord,” var Cleef finally decreed, trying to sound apologetic, “The road winds and becomes narrow, the wagon and cart-drivers will need more room for manoeuvre. It will no longer be safe for you to ride alongside them.”

Even if var Cleef had not put his foot down, the medics would have. The wind, channeled onto the path by the high rock walls on either side of it, blew the cold off the top of the snow higher up and carried it down to them, whispering past the windows and the tiny cracks between the tarred boards, trying to get in. Ciaran was not allowed out unless he was so wrapped up that only his eyes showed.

His wagon now felt like the inside of one of his slippers, the floor covered inches deep with even more sheepskins than before, barely an inch of the wagon itself visible anywhere. His wealth of pillows had been been added to and included the large bolster pillow, the scented sachets inside of which had been replaced with fresh ones.
Ciaran continued to catalogue his plants and read his books, and he’d taken up his lessons again, some of which Bastiaan was permitted to attend when his duties allowed,

Ciaran was being spoiled and coddled like a precious but breakable thing and, though he did his best to distract himself, he found it hard to forget why. He tried to fool himself into believing he did not intentionally avoid looking out of the windows that no longer showed patchy green but lifeless grey.

Even the streams, once so plentiful, became scarcer and more difficult to access, and they often resorted to melting snow for water. Far below in the gorge, the Sansretour’s dark waters rushed on.

They finally reached a high plateau and as their camp was being set up, Ciaran sauntered over to the edge where the restraining walls had been built up into a balustrade and looked at the duchy laid out before them. Mount Gorgon’s dark outline towered above them in the middle distance and Ciaran’s gaze flickered from shadow to ledge, searching for any sign of Tir ná Béa Arainne, resting-place of the bones of the last of Toussaint’s elves. But of course he could not find any and his attention drifted to the lake set like a gem in the duchy’s rolling emerald hills. The Seidhe Llygad, the Eye of the Mountain. With Mount Gorgon’s long, sharp shadow pointing straight at it, there was no need to wonder which mountain’s it was.

The plateau was a staging-ground, Ciaran learnt the next day, when he watched battalions leave one by one, every few hours.

“The emperor has backache,” Ciaran was told when he sought out Emhyr.

“Let him in, Mererid.”

Emhyr could have been sleeping, he was laid out on his camp bed, straight and unmoving as a log, but when he moved his arm to make space for Ciaran, his face creased in pain.

“Is it because of me?” Ciaran asked, anxious and penitent, curling up near him carefully, “Is it because we….?”

A snort of laughter escaped the emperor at this and he lightly brushed the backs of his fingers over Ciaran’s calf.

“No. Not because of that. It happens, like the headaches. It will pass.”

By late afternoon it had passed and Ciaran was back in the imperial tent.

“Does the path get narrower higher up?” he later asked as he watched, from between the flaps of Emhyr’s tent, the last group of the day leave.

“It does. But there is too much snow to cross over the mountains and the snow is not stable. We will use the tunnels.”

“Tunnels? Through the mountains?”

“Shaelmaar tunnels.”

“Shaelmaar tunnels?” Ciaran let the flaps fall back as he turned back to the emperor, who was standing at his writing table, studying a map, “But that’s…!”

“There are few shaelmaars left in these mountains and we keep this pass free of them to protect our use of the tunnels. There is no danger.”
“Are you sure?” Ciaran asked, going to Emhyr and pressing himself against him, “Emhyr, I don’t want to go into a tunnel. Couldn’t we go by road over the mountain? I’m stronger now, I…”

Emhyr buried a hand in the dark hair and tilted Ciaran face up to him.

“The pass is not safe, elyennen, it is too high up in the mountain. We have had several reports of avalanches. It is too great a risk. The tunnels are our only option.”

Ciaran looked away, his chest tight.

“I’m going to get some air.”

“Very well,” Emhyr kissed the pale forehead, “We still have a distance to travel before reaching the tunnels. Get as much rest as you can, elynnenin.”

Ciaran nodded then went out and the cold, crisp air stung his lungs as he breathed in deep, releasing a puff of cloud whenever he breathed out.

He walked back to the balustrade to watch the sun set over Toussaint, unable to master a sudden sense of oppression. As he looked out at the rosy-hued duchy and its dancing lake of liquid gold, he was overwhelmed by a reluctance to leave and the certainty that he was seeing Toussaint for the last time. In that moment, he wanted, more than anything else, to stay.

The sun inched ever lower and for a moment Ciaran’s heart constricted as the whole lake gleamed like fire before fading to shadowy ink. He turned away and went straight back to the emperor’s tent, clutching the lucky florin in his pocket.

But the mountain had seen him.

— N —

It started during the night.

You’re leaving us!

Ciaran’s eyes opened wide when he heard the plaintive whisper rustle past outside the tent.

Going away!

For the next two hours until sunrise, he strained to hear, stilling the beats of his heart, trying to convince himself that these were just imaginings and not really voices on the wind.

The imperial party was to leave that morning and Ciaran wandered out to take a last look at Beauclair but the clouds were low and hid it from sight.

The tents were dismantled, the wagons loaded, and they began to plod their way further up the mountain to the tunnel.

At first, Ciaran left the wagons whenever they halted, but being caught between the slate-dark, sheer facades of the rock faces that towered over them was worse than being trapped in the wagons and he soon settled on having the doors opened for a few minutes to change the air.
They were above the snow line now and the mist that usually shrouded Mount Gorgon’s peak seemed to have spread so that they too were wrapped in a white limbo. It condensed on the windows and streaked down them like tears.

Ciaran tried to sleep but whenever he put his head too near the wagon walls he could hear the wind’s shrill whistle as it came in through the cracks in the tar.

*Why? Why would you?*

He lined his litter with pillows to block and muffle the wind and huddled with the blankets pulled over his head. Underneath, he curled up, wide-eyed and stricken.

There was no point telling Emhyr or the imperial mages, there was nothing more they could do for him. Besides, he wasn’t even sure he was really hearing things. Perhaps he was only imagining them. Perhaps he’d been more upset than he’d realised by his encounter with Annika’s ghost.

They stopped for lunch in a place where there was barely a horse-breadth of space between the wagons and the vertical mountainside. The snow on the ground had been trodden into slush but bits of snow and drips of ice occasionally fell from above and when he looked up, way up, Ciaran could see the cap of snow, over ten feet thick, that sat precariously on the cliff above them.

By the time they started off again the wind had picked up and Ciaran could no longer pretend not to know that it was blowing past Tir ná Béa Arianne and carrying to him the pleas of the spirits trapped there.

He sought refuge in Emhyr’s wagon, forcing himself to focus on the discussions there, hoping to drown out the rest.

“What is it, elyennen?”

Ciaran blinked at Emhyr in surprise then looked around the wagon.

The wagon was moving but they were alone. They had halted, all the aides and the secretary had left, but Ciaran hadn’t even noticed. He’d been too wrapped up in trying to ignore the voices that asked him why he was leaving without having done a thing to help them, how he could bear to do so, that if he couldn’t — or wouldn’t — help them then he should stay with them. With his own kind. To comfort them as he could.

“Oh nothing, I…”

He saw Emhyr’s nostrils flare slightly, scenting him, and he quickly kissed the emperor, desperate to distract him and himself.

Emhyr indulged him, deepening the kiss, but the cool look in his eyes as he pulled away to kiss one of his ears suggested he had not been fooled by the display of affection.

Ciaran tried to relax and for a while it worked. He huddled against Emhyr, shivering happily, as the emperor slowly peeled away his layers of wools and fine batiste to kiss the silken skin beneath. A hand slipped lower, into his clothes and Ciaran bit Emhyr’s lip then gasped against his mouth as a stroked him but he wasn’t wet and Emhyr did not breach him. Instead, Emhyr looked into his eyes a moment then kissed his forehead slowly.

“Maybe later. No need to force yourself.”

Ciaran’s blood ran cold. Even in the early days of their relationship, he’d always found pleasure in
the emperor’s touch. Emhyr did not sound disappointed but the elf knew he must be.

“I’m sorry,” he murmured.

Emhyr gave him another kiss then helped him dress.

They tried again after dinner and by then Ciaran was even more desperate to lose himself, having spent another few hours haunted by the ever more pressing demands of the voices in the wind.

Laid out over the emperor’s lap, he tried to focus on the long fingers inside him that stroked and reached and nudged with the confidence of long habit all the sensitive spots within him. Twice he nearly came and when for the third time he nearly crested then felt the orgasm slip away, Ciaran couldn’t quite bite back a sob of frustration and despair. He pressed his face against Emhyr’s hip, ashamed.

Emhyr wiped his hands, tidied them both up, then touched the enchanted stone on the table to summon Mererid.

“Lord Ciaran needs rest. See he is given something to help him sleep.”

The next morning, the elf woke feeling haggard, with words of elven suffering swirling through his head and the certainty that he would not be able to perform for his emperor. He waited, dreading the moment when he’d be called to Emhyr and would let him down yet again, oppressed by the wind that howled past his wagon, setting it rocking.

There were so many voices now and they were so clear. Those of the innocent, that asked him to free them or stay and comfort them, who lamented his departure and reproached him for doing nothing for them. The voices of the warriors, who scoffed at him for giving up, for abandoning their cause for the comfort of down pillows and fine clothes, and derided him for running away. And above them all came the commands of their king, whom Ciaran had never known but whose wishes still held sway over him.

Emhyr’s summon came during their mid-morning stop, far earlier than usual, and after a moment’s panic during which he wondered if he could claim to be indisposed and decline, Ciaran made his wretched way over.

He was brought a pot of his infusion, settled into a nest of blankets, and Emhyr gave him books to read while he discussed Skelliger raids and Nazairi shipyards with his aides. The elf barely touched his lunch but drank the fortifying decoction the medics had prepared for him in view of his declining state of health. Mererid and two of the senior medics stayed with them when the wagon rattled into motion, and Ciaran curled up by Emhyr, his head pillowed on a thigh, drifting in and out of sleep, soothed as Emhyr stroked his hair while he studied some tables and diagrams.

Ciaran sat up, shaking the woolliness from his head, when a horn sounded and he heard the foot soldiers break step.

“Emhyr?” he said, in his alarm forgetting they were in company.

“We are just going into the tunnel, there is nothing to fear.”

Ciaran scrambled over to one of the doors and wrenched it open, leaning out to the dark maw of the tunnel that loomed ever nearer. He rolled the door shut again and leapt back to Emhyr’s side.

“Please? Please, I can’t go in there!”
“It is safe, there are no shaelmaars in it. Morvran went ahead to make sure of it and they would not like the noise we make.”

“No, it’s not that, it’s—!”

Ciaran stared at Emhyr, stricken, unable to articulate his dread of dark, enclosed spaces, that he could barely stand the sight of the wagon’s dark-planked sides and that the thought of being entombed in stone was unendurable.

He huddled in Emhyr’s arms, breathing quickly, his nose pressed against Emhyr’s neck to breathe in the reassuring scent of him.

“We are safe. You are safe. There is nothing to worry about,” Emhyr soothed, pulling the elfling into his lap and cradling him close.

Ciaran tried to focus on Emhyr’s steady heartbeat, willing his own to steady with it, but his senses were straining to hear the way the footsteps began to echo once they crossed into the tunnel, the strange distortion of the wind being sucked in.

The dark of the wagon became even darker and even though the sounds of steps and ironbound wheels were amplified and echoed into cacophony, he could hear the creak and groan of the wooden walls, the way they did under the pressure of water.

Only beyond these walls were more walls and no escape.

“Emhyr, I can’t breathe. I can’t breathe! Please, can we open a door?”

“It will be worse if we do.”

But Ciaran begged and they did as he asked but Emhyr was right — the noise was deafening and more vibrant — so they closed it again.

“Mererid, the pomander and some water for Lord Ciaran.”

Ciaran took the silver tumbler gratefully and drank deeply, but it was only melted snow, dead water, tinged with milk of the poppy, and he flung it away in frustration, bursting into tears.

Emhyr pulled him close again, laid his head down in his lap and put the pomander nearby, then covered Ciaran with a light blanket.

Ciaran cowered beneath it, clinging to the hem of Emhyr’s doublet, as Emhyr slowly stroked a hand up and down his back, and eventually, he drifted off again, only dimly aware of the low hum of conversation around him. His mind was filled with the creak of wood and whispered reproaches that he no longer had the mental energy to fend off and he lay, helpless, a feast for the shadows in his mind. Every time he closed his eyes, even in just a blink, he wondered if he was dreaming or dead, and his conscious self hurried back to the safe anchorage of Emhyr’s caressing hand, the only thing he knew was real.

Emhyr was served his afternoon coffee. They’d been in this accursed tunnel for well over an hour.

And still they marched on. Ciaran melted into tears, sobbing in misery and exhaustion.

Then the distortion of the footsteps changed. They started to fall off.

Ciaran sat up and Emhyr caught him and held him close.
“We are almost at the end. Just a little longer.”

All Ciaran’s senses so strained towards the tunnel’s exit that he didn’t even notice Emhyr wipe away his tears. He could hear the quality of the sound change, the echoes becoming shorter and shallower, and then they were out. He could hear it and he could see it as sunlight hit the windows.

“May I look? Please?” he chirped up at Emhyr, already heading for the nearest door.

Emhyr sighed but moved into the centre of the wagon, pulling his elfling onto his lap and holding him tightly, the little heart still beating wildly against his chest.

Ciaran gasped softly as the door was opened for him and beyond it he saw the the mountains around them veined in snow, leading down to the deep emerald valley laid out before them, filled to its brim with sunshine and air so clear Ciaran could see straight to the plains beyond.

“That is where we are going next,” Emhyr said, indicating a fortification in the distance and hooking an arm securely around his elf, “Fort Zivelina.”

Ciaran held Emhyr’s arm tightly as he leant out of the door to look around. The road wound down the mountain like a ribbon while the rock face they were moving along was punctuated by several waterfalls that fell hundreds of feet down. Cavalry and infantry stretched out ahead and behind them. As Ciaran watched, a flock of white birds flew across their path from below, while ahead of them, high above, carried by the thermals, a pair of eagles circled.

“Could I go outside? Could I ride for a while?”

“You are too weak but you may ride with me,” Emhyr compromised then gave orders for his horse to be saddled for them.

Ciaran waited, glued to the door, oblivious to Mererid’s efforts to wrangle him into another layer of wool and a fur cloak.

When they came to a halt Ciaran immediately hopped out, closely followed by Emhyr who got onto his enormous war horse then pulled the elfling up. He asked for water to be brought, and Ciaran took long grateful swallows of the fresh spring water he was offered, so cold it was like taking a dagger to the head and threatened to make his teeth explode.

They set off again and Ciaran settled happily against Emhyr, tucked into both sets of fur cloaks and still grasping the flask of water in his gloved hands.

Only now did he notice the grim looks of the soldiers around them. Even var Cleef’s smile did little to hide that he was appalled and Ciaran suddenly realised what he must look like. Wiping his face discreetly, he could feel the salt tracks on his skin and realised they’d probably heard his wailing. He felt a moment’s shame but he was still too freshly relieved to be out of the tunnel for it to last long and he tried to smile reassuringly at anyone who looked his way.

As the shadows lengthened, Ciaran asked Emhyr about everything he could make out — their base camp, the city in the distance, landmarks the names of which he tried to recall from the maps he’d studied.

But eventually the pass filled up with darkness and when they reached their rest stop, Emhyr bundled him back into his wagon for dinner. The elfling kept up his bubbling stream of happy, nervous chatter while he fusssed over the emperor’s food, serving him a bit of this and a bit of that and breaking it all down into bite-sized portions, not eating anything himself, only pausing occasionally to drink more spring water.
Emhyr watched and ate and answered Ciaran’s endless questions. When he’d finished, he dug into
the fruit bowl and took out a pomegranate, which he offered to Ciaran.

Nonplussed, Ciaran took it, turned it over in his hands, rapped his knuckles against it, sniffed it, then
tried to dig a nail into it. He looked askance at Emhyr and held out the pomegranate to him.

Emhyr took it, pulled the dagger from his belt and used the tip to pierce the outer shell. He put the
blade away, hooked his thumb tips into the gash then cracked the fruit open. He offered the halves to
Ciaran who picked at the jewelled seeds curiously, his face breaking into a delighted smile as he tried
a few.

Emhyr watched Ciaran eat and despite his precise manner, the elf’s mouth and fingers were soon
stained with juice. When he’d finished, the elfling put down the empty shells and looked at him
shyly.

“Come.”

A moment later, Ciaran was on his lap. He was smiling brightly but still quivered with nervous
energy, like a megascope image just before it flashed out of existence.

“It is passed now, elyennenin. The worst is over.”

Ciaran’s smile flickered but held, Emhyr cupped his face in his hands and kissed him slowly, gently,
until he finally felt Ciaran’s timid response. Then he folded the elf into his arms and kissed his hair
and waited for the erratic heartbeat to slow and steady.

Cradled in his arms, Ciaran looked up at him then wordlessly held out his wrist.

His face impassive, Emhyr hesitated. Ciaran was still in such a state of agitation that he couldn’t
possibly know his own mind. But he also needed this.

Emhyr opened a desk drawer and pulled out a small case containing an ink stone, an ornate gilded
ink stick, and a seal carved out of jet. He uncovered the ink stone, pressed a finger onto the tiny thorn
built into it, then squeezed a couple of drops of blood into the well. He ground the ink stick into the
blood, pressed the seal into the paste then looked down at Ciaran, who was still holding out his wrist,
wide-eyed.

“Just eight hours to start with,” Emhyr murmured then spoke a short sentence in high Nilfgaardian as
he marked the pale wrist, “Do not attempt to remove it before then.”

Ciaran watched the ink dry, ears pricked up, but his body gradually relaxed and eventually he fell
asleep, curled up against Emhyr.

— N —

They had caught up to Morvran and Ciaran rode alongside him, asking him discreet questions about
the empire and what they could see from their vantage point. The general had a carrying voice and a
way of answering questions that always made it clear what the question had been but Ciaran soon
stopped minding. His questions and remarks were never treated as stupid and it was clear the soldiers
were delighted by his interest.
“Fort Zivelina is our main military camp in the north of the empire, the largest one after Fort Torres,” Morvran Voorhis explained, “It is the main training centre for the northern provinces and states — Metinna, Nazair, Cintra, and so on — and it has strong links with the naval base in Nazair. It is also a staging ground and rear base for our operations in the North and we can send rapid response forces to Toussaint, if needed. It would also be the first line of defence should we ever be invaded from the North via Toussaint.”

During the warmer seasons, there were easier ways in and out of Toussaint along the river valley, Ciaran knew, but even so his mind boggled at the thought that Nilfgaard had contingency plans for an invasion that would never happen, that they knew would never happen, almost as a mental exercise. Nilfgaard’s losses would always be relative. Nilfgaard had lost the second war and yet Aedirn had paid the territorial price when Dol Blathanna had been carved out of it. Nilfgaard was safe behind its mountainous fortifications. It could afford to retreat, recover, then try again in its own time. Unless the empire disintegrated from within, its conquest of the North was just a matter of time.

Even the Scoia’tael in Angren hadn’t known about the military base just a few days’ ride from a pass through the Amells. No elf ever went into Toussaint and no Northerner ever went beyond — they traded there and sometimes not even as far as that when relations with the empire were tense, and Southern traders took Northern goods down into the empire. It was the same with the ships. He’d never heard of a Northern merchant vessel going further than Cintra, where the powerful imperial navy patrolled the straits to defend against raiders from the Skellige isles.

“Metinna is a vassal state, don’t they mind… hosting such a large military base?”

“They fought for it,” Morvran replied with a smile in his voice, “Nazair had made an excellent bid for it but they were already to have the naval base and in the end Metinna outbid them. It was what we wanted, in any case.”

“But why would they…?” Ciaran trailed off, at a complete loss as to why a nominally independent state would volunteer to have within its borders a militarised fortification stuffed full of armed soldiers from the empire that had effectively conquered them.

“Why not? An uprising when we control all the territories around them would be foolish. And a military base generates enormous demands for goods and services — all the soldiers must be fed, clothed, equipped, they want entertainment. The base needs constant upkeep and expansion so there is always a construction contract or two to bid for. The infrastructure necessary to a military base benefits the entire area — more clean water, more roads, a better mail service, more trade. The plains of Mag Deira have never produced as much as they do now, and the area greatly benefits from being on the same north-south trade route as Toussaint.”

The midday sun drove away the last of the mist and Ciaran’s gaze followed the ribbon of water below to the horizon.

“The Sylte?”

“We will be following it to the coast,” Voorhis confirmed.

The coast. No matter how much he strained his eyes, Ciaran couldn’t see it. His mind projected Novigrad’s craggy coast and dark waters onto the landscape before him but that didn’t seem right. He almost asked the general about it but decided it could wait and that meanwhile he was happy to enjoy the clean air and the warmth of the sun.

The young elf appeared in Emhyr’s wagon that afternoon, beaming and so obviously wanting it that Emhyr stopped what he was doing and leant back.
“Well?”

“Ears, please,” Ciaran requested primly, once he was settled on Emhyr’s lap.

Emhyr did start with his ears but eventually moved onto something more and by the end of it Ciaran was practically purring in his arms, a mess of sweat-glazed limbs.

“You should wash and change before dinner,” Emhyr murmured, mouthing a bare shoulder before covering it up.

Ciaran clung and tucked his face against Emhyr’s neck. He wanted to stay with Emhyr, he didn’t feel up to facing other people.

Emhyr buried his nose against the dark hair and breathed in.

Nobody, not even Mererid, dared oppose Ciaran in even the smallest way yet. He’d lost weight again during the crossing, there were still shadows under his eyes, they could all see the price the elf had paid. And they could all see that the elf’s spirit was brittle, that he was still too highly-strung for any upsets.

Morvran and Mererid were handling it well but Emhyr knew var Cleef’s nerves were being slowly wracked, just as his own were.

“Perhaps you can wash here today.”

He touched the communication stone and informed Mererid.

Ciaran wiping himself down happily, seated on a little stool, utterly naked, with his feet in the tub of hot water. It was spring water, freshly-drawn and heated for him, and Ciaran delighted in it, nearly upending a bucket of it on the floor in his enthusiasm, so buoyantly glad that he didn’t mind Emhyr putting aside his work to watch him.

“Shall I scrub your back for you?” Emhyr offered, already ducking his head to move nearer, eyeing the trail of blue-black marks that ran from the elf’s nape right down the length of his spine to his tailbone.

“What about you?” Ciaran asked as Emhyr towelled him down, anxious to prolong their intimacy, “I could do your back for you.”

Emhyr looked into the golden eyes a moment then gave a nod.

“Very well.”

Clean and in fresh clothes, cheerful and fluffy as a newly-preened bird, Ciaran helped Emhyr undress, offering him a massage as he felt the tension in the broad shoulders under the quilted doublet. Despite their closeness over the weeks, he’d never really been free to touch the emperor in this way and relished it now. Emhyr was down to his undershirt, his feet in the tub, and Ciaran unbuttoned his shirt then ran his hands over the smooth chest, touch-soft but unyielding. Then he moved behind Emhyr to pull the shirt off and he stopped, his breath catching, when he saw Emhyr’s back, mottled with dark, angry blood blisters.

Emhyr turned his head slightly.

“I should have warned you.”
Ciaran didn’t answer, absorbed in his examination of Emhyr’s back. The marks were scattered all over it but the bulk of them were concentrated about the shoulder blades and along the spine.

Ciaran held his hand over one of the larger blisters.

“Do not touch them, elyennen. They could be dangerous.”

“This is a curse!” Ciaran said indignantly, ignoring him.

“The remains of one.”

“Can’t your mages break it?”

“It was broken years ago. These are just the remnants. The mages have done what they can, but we cannot seem to clear the dregs.”

Ciaran touched around one of the marks gingerly.

“Do they hurt?”

Emhyr remembered the white-hot shards of pain that had erupted along his black as he’d turned his back to shield himself when he’d first been cursed. And then every morning when the sun rose and he changed yet again.

He picked up the washcloth and continued to wipe himself down.

“Not anymore. They only flare up on occasion.”

“The back pain and the headaches?”

Emhyr nodded.

And more, Ciaran thought to himself grimly, reading between the lines. The placement of the blisters, many of them just on the spine, also explained why Emhyr always slouched when he was seated, as if he couldn’t get comfortable, even though he stood and slept ramrod straight. They also explained his performance problems and Ciaran felt a rush of gratitude and affection towards Emhyr for showing him these scars.

He took the other washcloth and ran it over Emhyr’s back carefully, appalled by the virulence of the curse contained in the raised marks. It seemed to move beneath the skin as his hand moved over it.

“What kind of curse was it?”

“A transmogrification curse.”

“Transmogrification?” Ciaran scowled, “What into?”

Emhyr breathed out slowly.

“A hedgehog beast. It was a play on my name,” he explained, “But it did not work as the mage intended. I turned back into my human form from midnight to sunrise.”

Ciaran stared at the marks, affronted and breathless with disbelief.

Eimyr. Hedgehog.
The pattern of marks made horrific sense to him now and he could see, in his mind’s eye, the bristle of quills they stood for.

“Who did this to you? And why?”

“A mage named Braathens. He was trying to kill me. I was thirteen at the time, he saw me more as an amusement than a challenge.”

An amusement. A play on his name.

Ciaran’s scowl deepened.

He was endlessly disgusted by what humans did to each other. Yes, you could kill a person with magic, but it was hardly an efficient way of doing so. They weren’t difficult to kill and certainly if you had one in a position where you could kill them with magic then it was likely you could more efficiently kill them with a well-aimed throwing knife.

This toying with death and magic brought together two of the worst traits to be found in human mages and Ciaran felt a slow loathing for the faceless mage build up inside him.

“Couldn’t we find this mage, this Braathens, and force him to reverse the curse?” Ciaran asked in a tone that dripped with hope at being allowed to do the forcing.

“We did but he could not reverse it. It had not worked as he had intended. He was executed years ago.”

“How?” Ciaran asked coldly.

“As an amusement, I thought I should return the favour,” Emhyr replied coolly, “His name sounds like the Nilfgaardian word for ‘fried’.”

Emhyr waited for his elfling’s reaction. He felt a quick kiss against his ear then the strong, slender fingers began to knead his neck and shoulders and Emhyr realised just how knotted with tension they were. He wanted to tell Ciaran that this wasn’t necessary or expected but he didn’t dare break a silence still thick with all the unsaid things he still wanted the elf to hear and to understand.

Under the pressure of Ciaran’s fingertips, all the anger and other feelings that had resurfaced were broken up, ground up. Then Ciaran brushed them away briskly, with the flats of his hands, like a woodworker would clear his work space of sawdust.

Emhyr had mostly dried himself but Ciaran now came around to help him dress, fussing quietly without ever meeting his gaze.

Emhyr didn’t know why he’d felt compelled to reveal himself to the elfling after weeks spent taking pains to ensure he didn’t see. He could easily have turned down Ciaran’s offer to help him bathe. But Ciaran’s state of health, both that of his body and that of his mind, had been laid bare by recent events, nearly broken by the mountain crossing, and it had seemed unfair, even cruel, to keep secrets from him now. It had seemed right to reveal a part of himself too.

And yet, Emhyr knew he might soon have reason to regret this gesture.

He and Ciaran had both invested a great deal of time and effort into each other but their relationship was yet to be tested. And it would soon be. They had both avoided bringing up the past but the anniversary of the Peace of Cintra was days away and they would not be able to ignore it then.
Emhyr reached out and cupped Ciaran’s face in his hand, gently tilting it up, hardening himself against the pity or the disgust he might find in the hazel eyes.

There was none.

There was none at all and instead Ciaran’s eyes were hard and resentful, brimming with the thirst for blood that some elves felt so strongly, and a disdainful scorn for yet another human who had proved themselves unworthy. No, there was no pity there.

“Thank you, elyennen,” he murmured, twining his fingers into Ciaran’s hair, content to pretend that the elf had done nothing more than help him bathe.

The elf’s eyes glowed, the golden flecks in them expanding just as Ciaran’s mouth curved into an affectionate smile and Emhyr leant in to kiss it.

Soon Ciaran was laid out on the pillows, pulling up his knees and pressing them against Emhyr’s sides.

Emhyr was too large and too vigorous in his pursuit of their pleasure for the sex to ever be boring. But this was the closest they came to boring sex — Emhyr moving slowly inside him, watching every gasp and breath as he brought them closer to completion, looking away only to press a kiss onto his nose, his mouth, his temple, his ear, letting Ciaran moan into his mouth as he came.

Sterile seed planted into barren soil.

And yet, there was something between them and it grew stronger whenever they were together. It made everything easier.

Later that night, Ciaran woke hazily, so closely tucked up against Emhyr that he was partly under him, and his mind immediately went to the marks on Emhyr’s back. Even wealthy, high-ranking Nilfgaardians like the emperor and General Voorhis seemed to rely very little on magic, if at all. They preferred science. Most of the magic Ciaran had seen used in the army had been defensive or in the form of healing potions and spells, such as they’d used on him, and outside of these it had been mere entertainment. That the emperor himself should have fallen victim to a curse his mages could not break seemed beyond improbable. They did use magic, sophisticated magic.

transmogrification. A very rare and sophisticated type of magic.

This was not a type of magic Ciaran knew much about. Elves and dryads, for the most part, disdained this post-Conjunction magic. It was alien, other, entirely different from their own intrinsic magic. The magic of elves and dryads relied on intention, on focusing it and sometimes bolstering it with potions and other aids until it became strong enough and specific enough to keep its form. Then it took on a life of its own. But it was always bound by the original intention, even if its wisher became corrupted or if their wishes changed. A wish to heal could never harm, although a wish to protect could kill. The elven curse on Toussaint was a dreadful thing, but it was not unintentional. It had not gone rogue.

But this magic… this mage magic… It sought to harness a power none of them truly understood and that did not belong to this world or to nature. Some people said that it was just an element like any other but even so, it seemed to Ciaran that the elements had wills of their own. Water wanted to flow. It could be dammed for a while but not forever. If it wanted to go to the sea then it would cut through mountains to do it. If it wanted to melt into the ground then it would and if it didn’t then it would not. Somehow, it would always find a way. Magic had a will of its own too. Mages could sometimes bend magic to their own purposes but magic always sought to go back to what it was doing. It
buckled and strained in unpredictable ways under the pressure of imposed forms carefully crafted by
careful measurements and unnatural ingredients to suit the quantity and nature of the magic, its aim
and its recipient. A spell that turned a chicken blue would not have the same effect on a pig. This
type of magic did not rest with the wielder, it had to be trapped and shackled with spells and potions
and arcane rituals, it had to be bound to the object.

And in Emhyr it had been bound to his blood.

Ciaran looked at his wrist. He could just make out the mark on it in the darkness but even if he had
not, he remembered it well. It was a sun, of course, that encircled a number of arcane symbols.

Ciaran wet the tip of a finger and carefully rubbed the very tip of a ray. And immediately hissed at
the sharp, burning sensation.

Emhyr woke, sat up, lit a candle and found his elf holding his wrist tightly.

He touched his stone.

“Mererid, the emulsion and a bandage.”

Ciaran looked down at his wrist. The part of the mark he’d wiped was raised in a welt like a brand.
He looked at Emhyr.

“And what did you think would happen?”

Ciaran didn’t reply, his face a model of contrition.

Mererid arrived and gave Ciaran a judgmental look as he left a pot of emulsion and a roll of gauze on
a tray by them.

Emhyr applied the cool medication then bandaged up Ciaran’s wrist.

“Reapply as needed.”

He kissed the dark head, lay back down and pulled Ciaran onto his chest, sinking a hand into his
silky curls.

Ciaran lay very still a moment then pressed a kiss over Emhyr’s chest and settled down to sleep.
The Amells (from Reddit)
Chapter Summary

In which the past resurfaces.

Chapter Notes

Hello, everyone! This chapter dredges up a lot of backstory and as such is lore-heavy. I've written up a short primer on the Second War and the Peace of Cintra, you can find it in the Addendum section here — note that it is not intended to be comprehensive but covers what would be generally known by people within the universe, such as Ciaran.

Other points:

- Francesca Findabair is an elven sorceress. Her elven name, Enid an Gleanna, means Daisy of the Valleys.

- "Squae's me" means "forgive me" in Elder Speech.

Enjoy! <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

THE GREATER GOOD

— Amell Mountains, Metinna, early April, 1272 —
Ciaran’s euphoria lasted the few days it took them to reach the wooded hills at the foot of the Amells. He spent them almost entirely on horseback, neglected his studies, and only relinquished the saddle to eat, sleep, bathe and change, and whenever he felt the urge to be with Emhyr.

They had dinner together then Emhyr would mark him and see to their pleasure, as he did first thing when he woke. And in between, Ciaran slept soundly, tucked up against Emhyr, happy and still amazed that Emhyr did to him out of sheer lust things that elves usually did for each other out of the deepest affection.

But inevitably, as the days wore on, April drew nearer, bringing with it the ghost of Cintra. Ciaran’s good mood evaporated and his mind was clouded by old resentments and creeping apprehensions.
The evening before, Ciaran slept in his own wagon while the emperor and his secretary dictated some letters, and when they had lunch the following day, Ciaran only toyed with his food.

He had wondered if he could avoid seeing Emhyr, avoid the fight he knew was coming. He had wondered if Emhyr would let him avoid it. He hadn’t, of course. Deep down, Ciaran had known he wouldn’t. He wouldn’t have been Emhyr if he had. In a way it was a relief.

They had spent the morning circling each other, so cool and dryly polite that the air crackled with tension. The storm would break soon. Ciaran knew it and knew Emhyr was waiting for it. He was determined not to start it but Emhyr’s placid patience irritated him.

Lunch was cleared and, before they set off again, Emhyr’s secretary dropped in to update him on the column’s readiness and tip a fresh crop of messages into the tray on the desk.

Ciaran was curled up on his end of the bench, careful not to touch Emhyr, holding a book. He couldn’t focus and so instead watched Emhyr idly, saw his hand reach for the topmost letter then hover. He recognised the writing on the envelope.

“A card from Shilard Fitz-Oesterlen?” he inquired scathingly, snapping his book shut, “‘Happy Anniversary, we finally got what we wanted’?”

“As did you.”

“And for how long?” Ciaran scoffed, “How long before we become a duchy or a barony? How long before we’re booted out of our lands and made to roam the North like bandits?”

“That was not my doing.”

“Still, convenient for you. Convenient that we were exiled from Dol Blathanna and forced to harry the Northern kingdoms for years.”

Emhyr’s eyes narrowed at the new edge in Ciaran’s voice.

He wanted the elf to understand the role he could play and to accept it but he couldn’t lie to him — wouldn’t lie. Aside from the fact that Ciaran might find out the truth, if he didn’t already know it, he didn’t want to deceive him.

“You only pretended to create an elven state in Dol Blathanna,” Ciaran continued, defiant in the face of the steely temples and steely voice, “but made sure it wouldn’t shelter us so we would keep fighting. Is that what Lady Enid apologised for? Squaess’me, evellienn*. Forgive me, but I must bow to Emhyr var Emreis’ reasons of state.”

Emhyr’s expression hardened.

“It is true that I wanted you to continue to fight with Nilfgaard instead of hiding behind your borders. If you were to be given an independent state, it seemed right that you should fight for it.”

“Dol Blathanna is not independent, was never independent,” Ciaran scoffed, “It belongs to Aedirn just as Toussaint belongs to Nilfgaard.”

“It was. Try to remember, elyennen,” Emhyr said in a voice like thin ice, “Until we lost the war and the talks at Cintra, it was an independent elven state.”

“You lost the war! Because of princes of Nilfgaard like aep Dahy and de Wett!” Ciaran hissed, “Nilfgaard lost the war but we elves paid for it!”
“Everybody lost at Cintra, we all compromised,” Emhyr said darkly, “You may feel Dol Blathanna was diminished but Demavend thinks he lost it. Kaedwen was on the side of the victors but Henselt had to pay restitution to Demavend for Upper Aedirn. Francesca Findabair was forced to allow human settlers back into Dol Blathanna, but ours were hounded out of Angren with nothing but the clothes on their backs and what they could carry, losing everything they’d built and invested there. And while all the nations and their representatives were discussing terms, the Lodge of Sorceresses sat above, deciding which parts of the agreements being made below they would allow to stand — your sorceress queen among them. Nilfgaard was not among the victors, we were in no position to dictate terms. Francesca Findabair had her own reasons.”

“Reasons of state?” Ciaran sneered.

“Yes. Reasons of State. Do not be disingenuous, elyennen, we both know you are not stupid. You understand the rules of the game and you play it well. You allowed yourself to be wined and dined in Toussaint, a place your kind had sworn never to set foot in for the wrongs done to them there. You enjoyed yourself and praised the people there while you took their coin and lobbied their help for Iorveth and the rest of your kin.”

Ciaran recoiled, eyes wide.

It was true and he had done it knowingly. Knowing both what to do and why.

“But what would you understand about the pressures of holding onto power?” Emhyr asked, pressing his advantage, “When you were threatened, you elves abandoned your great cities and palaces, tore them to the ground with your own hands until you had nothing left to protect, nothing left to defend but a few scattered enclaves lost in the forests of the North. To hold onto the things you have you must stand your ground, sink your nails and teeth into it, elyennen, and to take hold of the things you want, you must push forward with every ounce of your strength.”

Ciaran stared, breathless with resentment.

“Findabair did no more and no less,” Emhyr continued, watching him closely, “She gave everything away just so she could keep her Valley of Flowers for her own lifetime. She knew that even with you Scoia’tael by her side, she could not defend Dol Blathanna against the combined forces of Aedirn and Temeria. She knew she would only be allowed to keep her kingdom — her duchy — if she cut ties with you. And so when it came to fighting for what she had, your Daisy queen cited ‘the greater good’ and chose the path of least resistance.”

“Your queen! You chose her!”

“She was the one I had an agreement with and the best choice at the time. Or do you think King Iorveth, first of his name, would have done any better then than he is doing now? You are Nilfgaard now. You have your free state in the Pontar. Are Iorveth and the others prepared to do everything it takes to defend it, will they compromise, or will they just rely on Nilfgaard?”

“Rely on Nilfgaard?!” Ciaran lashed out, incensed, straining his voice, “Iorveth and I would be dead if we’d relied on you!”

“We lost that war, elyennen, despite your best efforts and mine. And the war criminals are always on the side of the losers. Francesca Findabair declined to give you shelter. How could we argue when your own queen seemed to accept you were war criminals? She gave you up and we still fought to protect you and negotiated them down to just fifty-two officers.”

“Just fifty-two!”
“Yes! Just fifty-two!” Emhyr thundered, eyes blazing, “Do you know what that rat, Henselt, demanded at first, on top of the heads of all your officers? Decimation. The same punishment Nilfgaard applies to its own troops. Every tenth soldier made to step out of line and summarily executed by the other nine. Where would your Scoia’tael be now if we had agreed to those terms? Would it have survived that?”

Ciaran stared. He remembered the words of the Nilfgaardian officer who had told them that none of their soldiers would be sent to the Nordlings. He had spoken of amnesties too but he and Iorveth and the others had been more focussed on the fifty-two officers who would be surrendered and on ripping from their uniforms the imperial insignias of their allies-turned-jailors.

Emhyr watched him with blazing eyes.

“You think I went to war intending to lose? Or that having lost, I wished to give away as much of my gains as possible? How much choice do you think I had, caught between officers who had lost a war we should have won through wilful insubordination, merchants who wanted to sue for peace at any cost so they could resume selling their goods into the victor states as soon as possible, and a restive population who had paid for defeat with the blood of their friends and family, whether settlers or soldiers.”

Emhyr paused, looking deep into Ciaran’s eyes.

“I know it is easier, more convenient, for you to believe that the empire is all-powerful, that I am all-powerful, that I am the empire. But it is not so simple. And if you want to truly understand, elyennen, you will have to let go of some of your convenient untruths and accept some inconvenient truths in their place. Everybody has their reasons and an empire is made up of a thousand different interests that do not align with each other, or with mine, or even those of the empire.”

“You never held back when it came to getting your own way,” Ciaran accused.

“I had to sentence and execute several of my own officers after Brugge and this after the purges of Sodden,” Emhyr dismissed impatiently, “Do you think my officers were pleased with that? Was it unreasonable for Henselt to expect the same punishment for the Vrihedd as was meted out to other divisions? Do you think any of us wanted to hand you over? When yours was almost the only success of the day and the Nauzicaa had already been annihilated? Evrard threatened to resign. So did others. A year after the war, Hamilcar Danza did resign his commission because nobody would shake his hand or fight by his side for the part he had played in the execution of the Vrihedd officers.”

Hamilcar Danza.

Memories returned and now Ciaran could also see the face and hear the pitch of the voice of the officer who had convinced them to let themselves be transported to Dillingen.

“I’ve done it all again, haven’t I?” Ciaran murmured then laughed mirthlessly, “Sacrificed myself for the greater good. Allowed myself to be carried off by Nilfgaard without knowing what awaits me. Because, once again, I listened to words of reason spoken by voices that I shouldn’t have trusted.”

Emhyr was watching him warily but when he opened his mouth to speak, Ciaran cut him off.

“Riordain was lynched, handed over to his killers by your troops. Just as Iorveth and I would have been if we hadn’t escaped. That’s the fair trial Shilard negotiated for us, the amnesty we were promised!”
“Not by our troops, elyennen,” Emhyr said with a voice of iron, “Try to remember. Your amnesties are also a matter of record and the soldiers who gave you to the mob were Redanian.”

“But it was your soldiers who surrendered us to the Redanians! Knowing what would happen!” Ciaran accused, his voice breaking, then shook his head in frustration, “Why should I trust you? How can I? All you’ve done is remind me of all the reasons why I shouldn’t! You just dress up convenience in reasons of state to make it look like necessity! But you betray even when there is no necessity. No necessity. No honour. No trust. I do remember! I remember your actions as well as your words, and you too chose the path of least resistance!”

Emhyr looked at the elf who was gripping his book tightly like he meant to throw it at him, and so to prevent him from doing something they’d both regret, he reached out and was about to touch his communication stone when orders rang out outside.

As soon as the wagon came to a stop, Ciaran dragged the door open, jumped out, then slammed the door shut with a great bang after a last white-hot glare at Emhyr.

— N —

They arrived at their camp after sunset but Ciaran could still make out the brooding looks that followed him as var Cleef led him to his tent, connected, as always, to the imperial one. The brigadier’s smile, if it could be called that, was tight.

During the afternoon, while he’d been hiding behind his curtain on his litter, his anger a little cooled, it had occurred to Ciaran that his and Emhyr’s argument had likely been overheard and that he had slammed the door on his way out. And now, as he lay in bed, he could hear the soldiers posted outside his tent whispering and grumbling. Occasionally, there was mention of Cintra, and one or two times it was followed by the hiss of spit landing into the fire.

Ciaran of Nilfgaard.

He had thought, at first, that they would all side with their emperor against him. He had thought it when they had halted again in the afternoon and his wagon had been shrouded in silence and he hadn’t dared leave it. He’d always understood that making him an imperial concubine and keeping him in comfort and good health was intended as a form of reparation but it had always seemed to him a diplomatic matter — almost an administrative one — in the superficial manner of war reparations paid by one side to another. It was only now that he understood what Emhyr had once tried to explain to him regarding Evrard var Cleef, that this need to make reparation was fed by visceral guilt and dissatisfaction.

Dissatisfaction and discontent hung low in the air all around them like storm weather. They had been defeated and they had wronged their own and they would all, all of them, have wiped both Brenna and Cintra from history if they could have.

Squaess'me, evellienn.

Nilfgaard had certainly betrayed them but perhaps the Scoia’tael had rewritten their history too. When they were barred from entering Dol Blathanna they had assumed it was on Emhyr’s order and when Enid an Gleanna had asked for their forgiveness, they had taken it as confirmation that she’d given in to him.
The Nilfgaardian soldiers had done nothing when the Redanians had fed them to the mob though they could have. It hardly mattered whether there really had been amnesties for them or not.

And yet… Perhaps those orders had not come from the top. Ciaran had seen the settlers being herded back south, it was because of that confusion that Iorveth and he had managed to slip through checkpoints and villages unnoticed. He could believe that the local Nilfgaardian commanders, harassed and laden with more responsibility than their ranks warranted, had agreed to turn a blind eye to the actions of a mob for whom they were not accountable to guarantee safe passage for a few hundred of their colonists. For the greater good.

_You are Nilfgaard now._

 Nilfgaard’s hold in the North was more secure than it had ever been. Dol Gwennelen, Gwyngaard, Dol Blathanna, perhaps even Mahakam, were explicitly or implicitly allied with Nilfgaard. Angren was being resettled. Perhaps Nilfgaard could be trusted as an ally now. Perhaps it could be trusted to fight for what it had. For Dol Gwennelen. Because he and his had once fought with Nilfgaard’s soldiers but also because, for a while, Dol Blathanna had been theirs and they’d thought that every elf who would end up living there would be under their protection. For a while, they had all — Ciaran, Iorveth, Riordain, Lady Enid, and all the others — been of Nilfgaard.

And Emhyr…

Ciaran pressed his face into his pillow.

_Squaess’mé, evellienn._

Ciarán’s stomach dropped as black doubt clouded his mind and he wondered whether the elven queen had asked to be forgiven for giving in or for giving up without even trying.

And Emhyr had put his finger on Ciaran’s deep-seated fear that they would fail. A fear he and Iorveth had always shared that without blind idealism and a common enemy, they would lose their drive and their focus. The Dol Blathanna elves had and the Scoia’tael had long disdained them for it.

After hours of sleepless tossing and turning, Ciaran was tired. He berated himself for being so weak but he couldn’t stand the discord and tension between himself and Emhyr anymore, and he couldn’t stand the doubt. He hated it. And what he wanted more than anything was to feel the bond between them again.

It was weakness and Emhyr would take it as capitulation.

But Ciaran listened anyway, part of his consciousness creeping past the lowered flaps that separated their tents, to where Emhyr sat at his writing table in silence. No murmurings with his secretary, no rustling of papers or scratching of quills — just the occasional spark from a dying fire and the quiet, steady beat of his heart.

Ciaran slipped out of bed and into his slippers and robe then tiptoed across to peek at the emperor from between the tent flaps.

Emhyr was slouched in his chair, staring sightlessly at the glowing embers in the fireplace, dejection in every line in his body — the tilt of his head, the crease in his brow, the slope of his shoulders.

The canvas flaps twitched between Ciaran’s fingers a moment then he swept over to Emhyr and wrapped his arms around his neck, pressing his face against his back, his tears soaking into the doublet. Emhyr took his hand, kissed the back of it, then gently tugged him into his arms, letting the elfling cry against his neck as he tucked the robe in around him.
“I’m tired of being angry,” Ciaran hiccuped, his voice muffled.

He felt a kiss against his hair and was relieved and miserable all at once.

“I know, elyennen,” Emhyr murmured.

He held Ciaran close, his head bent to him, listening to the ragged breathing.

All afternoon he’d tried to work around the upset of the fight, and failed. The past could not be undone with orders or soldiers or coin or spells, and it left him feeling impotent, just as Ciaran’s near-fatal illness had.

Their future was in Ciaran’s hands and he hoped his little elfling would be willing to keep trying.

Emhyr carried the young elf back to his own tent and tucked him into his abandoned bed. He kissed the pale forehead and was about to leave but Ciaran clung to his robe.

“Emhyr? What you said about Lady Enid… Is it true?”

Emhyr’s deep, hooded eyes regarded the young elf. Then he let out a long breath.

“Very well. Perhaps we should have discussed these things sooner.”

He sat on the edge of the bed and when he tuck the blankets more securely around Ciaran’s shoulders, the elf caught one of his hands and held it.

“I understand your personal dislike of Shilard but he is a veteran diplomat. He held out against the surrender of the Vrihedd soldiers and he would have held out for Dol Blathanna. He had instructions from me to do so and he had already submitted the memorandum detailing the empire’s position. But before they had even started discussing our terms, Francesca Findabair capitulated to Demavend’s demands.”

“Why would she have done that?”

“One of our sorceresses was there. Findabair said that peace comes at a price, just as war does.”

Ciaran unconsciously tightened his grip on Emhyr to still his trembling.

“Elves do not betray each other like that.”

“Perhaps that day she was feeling more sorceress than elf.”

Ciaran digested this a moment, still clinging to Emhyr’s hand.

“And you? Are you more emperor or man?”

Emhyr looked away, his expression leaden and weary.

“I must be the emperor. I must be Nilfgaard.”

He turned back to the elf and continued.

“Elyennen… You have no notion what it means to create a state. Not simply to take one over, that is easier, but to carve a nation out of another. It requires the creation of mile upon mile of borders that must be secured and guarded, it means dispossessing those who live there — dispossessing humans for elves, no less — and in doing so cementing enemies, resentments and racial hatreds that will last
for generations more. Kaedwen and Aedirn have been fighting over the Pontar valley for centuries. But you are Nilfgaard now. Dol Gwennelen’s existence is underwritten by the empire, elyennen, but it comes at a great cost. At a much greater cost than the head of a king and one good charge in a lost battle in a lost war.”

“And my job is to help make up the difference?”

“You know it is.”

“Even though you can’t guarantee it? Dol Gwennelen’s continued existence.”

“No, I cannot. I can only promise you that I do intend to maintain and protect a free state for the elves of the North. I cannot promise more. Nobody can.”

Emhyr took Ciaran’s face in his hands and held it firmly, his gleaming amber gaze boring into the golden one.

“I may be an emperor but I am just one man trying to hold all the threads together while others try to tug them away. And sometimes I fail.”

Ciaran stared into Emhyr’s smouldering eyes, his hands on Emhyr’s, paralysed and trembling, until Emhyr released him, his citrine eyes cooling.

“The memorandum in question is on record. Henselt would have invaded Dol Blathanna at the first opportunity — he and Foltest thought you would use it as a rear base from which to continue to attack their kingdoms, their subjects. I will show you all the papers we have when we reach the City but I cannot prove everything and I cannot change the past, elyennen. I have done what I can to make amends, you must decide whether that is enough for you to leave the past behind and trust me.”

Ciaran stared, pupils blown wide.

“If you cannot, you will still be respected and cared for. You will still be allowed to play your part within the parameters we have defined,” Emhyr continued calmly, “But no more.”

Ciaran gripped his hand tightly, nerves strained to breaking point.

He could not promise it. If Emhyr asked, he would not be able to say it.

“I must have your answer before we reach the capital.”

Seeing his elfling’s stricken expression, Emhyr pressed another kiss to his forehead.

“If there is nothing else, you should rest.”

Ciaran clung and stared a moment.

“Letho.”

The name broke the silence like a rock dropped into a still pond.

“Iorveth wouldn’t tell me. He said Letho was working for the Lodge of Sorceresses. It’s what most people believe, it’s what Anna-Henrietta believes too, but I don’t believe it.”

Emhyr continued to look at him levelly.
“He was working for me. Our aim was to destabilise the North by leaving a kingdom or two leaderless and driving a wedge between the remaining monarchs and the sorceresses advising them.”

“Did Morvran know? Did var Cleef?”

“All the high command knew. We had to be ready with a follow-on invasion plan.”

Ciaran considered this.

“Did you have Letho killed?”

“The witcher had his own reasons.”

Ciaran felt the truth of what the *Gwynbleidd* had said and felt again that creeping suspicion that he too was just another puppet whose strings Emhyr was pulling.

“I should have been the one to kill him.”

Something flickered in Emhyr’s eyes but his voice was impassive.

“We were not sure you would survive.”

“He killed my entire unit. My closest kin. All those I should be writing home to.”

“We did not intend for that to happen. We had not foreseen he would seek an alliance with the Scoia’tael or be so successful.”

“You didn’t tell him to?”

“No.”

Ciaran turned this over in his mind then nodded and leant back against his pillows.

Emhyr moved to leave but paused at the door.

“I will not sacrifice you, *elyennenic*.”

— N —

Ciaran faced up to the beast bravely, looking up its great towering height, the sheer unbelievable heft of strength and being, up to the two long pairs of brass-bound tusks, the ears that flapped idly like sails in a gusty wind, and the snake-like waving trunk that looked down at him through its two nostrils.

The oliphantarch offered them a tour of Fort Zivelina and its environs on the creature’s back and when Emhyr glanced at him, Ciaran steeled himself and nodded.

Soon they were ensconced in the swaying canopied *howdah* atop the war oliphant who ambled along slowly, and Ciaran looked around, astounded by the base’s scale and sophistication. It reminded him of a child’s building blocks, only built of stone and mortar and rising out of a stretch of high plain dominated by a nearby aqueduct. There were barracks arranged around several squares and interspersed with training yards, a flock of iron-headed battering rams were neatly sheltered in a
large hangar, ready for duty, not far from one of the stable blocks, built around a spacious courtyard.

Beyond the fortified walls of the core structure were also the vast practice grounds where specialist teams fine-tuned their skills at loading, aiming and firing trebuchets, mangonels, a variety of ballista-class weapons, including several fearsome scorpions, currently shorn of the hellish green Zerrikanian fire that had given them their nightmarish reputation in the North. In the distance, Ciaran could make out teams of oliphants ripping down what looked like a forest of green cane or giant grasses, and dragging bundles of the stuff back to a long cavernous stone-walled building with arched doorways along the side and domes along the top.

“Those are the oliphant stables,” Emhyr said in answer to Ciaran’s quiet enquiries, “That plant is bamboo, from eastern Haakland. It grows quickly and we use it as building material and as fodder for the oliphants.”

Emhyr took in the solemn expression then reached out for a slender hand and placed it on his thigh, a spark of warmth coursing through him as he felt the delicate fingers settle between his.

They were still finding their way back to each other after their fight. They made a point of spending time together, of being close and avoiding delicate subjects, but it was as if their relationship had lost a month. Ciaran no longer slept in his bed, Emhyr hadn’t even bothered touching his thumb to the elf’s wrist, he hadn’t even kissed him since.

But Emhyr could be patient when he needed to be. He knew Ciaran was trying to trust him and to accept their situation, and he could afford to wait a little longer.

When they returned from their oliphant ride, Ciaran was confronted with something even more unnerving than a war oliphant.

It was an elf.

Not Aen Seidhe. A pure-blooded Nilfgaardian elf.

Even if Ciaran hadn’t already known it he would have sensed it instantly, the subtle otherness mingled in with all the sameness. Emhyr had mentioned that their contingent of medics would be joined by one of the enclave’s savants — their name for the elves who dedicated their long lives to knowledge and understanding — and there he now stood, tall as a Nilfgaardian, with the sharp features so characteristic of elves and that were becoming rarer in the North, as pale as Bastiaan, ancient and ageless.

“My Lord Ciaran,” one of the senior medics made the introductions, “May I present Master Aelrindel of Inis Mor’hwess.”

Inis Mor’hwess, the City’s elven enclave. To Ciaran it had always seemed remote as a star, real yet beyond his existence. Master Aelrindel seemed to see right through him despite his eyes being clouded over like the thinnest sheen of ice over the waters of a Skelligan lagoon. Not unseeing but all-seeing, as if they only looked beyond the visible.

Ciaran was bundled away for an examination and he was astonished to see with what deference the mages and medics treated the savant, whose every suggestion and opinion, expressed in the highest of High Nilfgaardian, was unanimously deferred to.

Savants rarely left the ivory towers where they conducted their studies and it was a mark of Ciaran’s importance that an expert on elven physiology had left his for his sake. He had arrived by portal at what was considered the earliest opportunity, as no savant would ever be risked north of the Amells
The usual tests and measurements were carried out under the older elf’s watchful eye, Ciaran was questioned on his condition, appetites and so on, some of his medication changed or the dosage adjusted, Master Aelrindel prescribed the use of a leaf that would boost his appetite and help his nerves, then he was able to make his escape.

As he sought refuge, Ciaran was waylaid by Mererid. It transpired that their meeting with the Nazair duke was to take place in colder climes than planned and would require a selection of Ciaran’s Toussaint clothes to be unpacked then repacked into a smaller case.

“Why was the meeting place changed?”

“Lord Heudebert claims he has unexpected and urgent business in the highlands,” Emhyr explained, then his eyes gleamed, “I suspect he is not unhappy to avoid having twenty thousand of the empire’s elite professional soldiers camped within sight of his capital.”

“He’s being inconvenient to force your hand.”

“In the interest of the negotiations, we are accommodating him. The road up to Alaronde Keep is narrow and there is little land around it so we will have to leave the carriages, the baggage carts, the Alba and most of the Impera in the foothills.”

The next day, the harried chamberlain directed the loading of both imperial carriages. Not the dark, dank wagons of the North but Southern ones, spacious and light-filled.

Emhyr’s was his usual imperial carriage but Ciaran’s had been newly-build specially for him and he listened closely as an engineer explained its construction, particularly the new suspension system they were testing and that would be copied over to the emperor’s carriage if it proved successful.

The carriages were wider and longer than the wagons and the large divan set into the back was long enough for even Emhyr to lie straight in. The windows were of clear glass, unbarred, and slid open easily to let in a breeze that moved the gauzy curtains even when the slatted shutters were closed.

Emhyr’s carriage was liveried in black and gold suns but Ciaran’s had been painted white and from its short eaves fluttered the same white banners stamped with silver stars that Bastiaan’s team had flown at the tournament. They seemed to make his nickname official.

“Stirwen? Do you like it?” Morvran Voorhis beamed as he fed Smeriglia a carrot, “It came to me that day in Hagge when the emperor chose you. A soldier standing behind me said it — a north Nazairi, I believe, he spoke in the common tongue and with such an accent. But of course with your being an elf and an imperial concubine… Nilfgaardian seemed more appropriate. I suppose some of my men must have heard me. By morning, they were all saying it.”

Ciaran could barely credit that word could have spread so quickly and put the question to the emperor over lunch.

“Morvran is a very popular with his men. They would claim the Great Sun had fallen into a lake if he said so.”

Though he watched him closely, Ciaran could discern no dissemblance in that answer. What was more, it seemed entirely plausible. By now he was used to the streak of whimsy that sometimes manifested in even the sternest Nilfgaardian.

“Even though this is only his first war and he did not actually lead his troops into battle?”
“They are kindly-disposed towards generals who do not send them to their deaths and very kindly-disposed towards generals who guide them to victory — from whatever position they lead from. That he passed this first test with flying colours just makes him more worthy of admiration.”

“As much as Brigadier var Cleef?”

“Evrard leads from the front, Morvran from behind the lines. They are different but complementary, and they are both admired.”

Ciaran rode by the emperor’s side to review the troops with him, gleaming in his armour. He was known by the Alba and the Impera to have a keen eye for irregularities and, judging how self-conscious the troops looked, word had spread. They stood straight, squared their shoulders, puffed out their chests, and held their breaths as they watched for a narrowing of the hazel eyes or a lingering look, both known telltale signs that the elf had noticed something.

A few Alba and Impera soldiers always contrived to be there to watch so they could tell the others and they particularly enjoyed the nervous fidgeting of the new recruits and the latest crop of conscripts, who were as awed by var Cleef and Morvran Voorhis as they were by the emperor and his concubine.

The standard issue armour was serviceable but minimal compared to that of the professional units — a simple, unadorned cuirass and a kettle helmet that probably doubled as a mess bowl, rounded off by a sturdy pair of leather boots to boil in it if the going really got tough. Weapons were assigned after the first phase of training, when the instructors had had a chance to evaluate abilities and aptitudes.

“The empire provides the basics. Each soldier is expected to maintain the equipment they’re issued in good condition and they may supplement it out of their own pocket,” var Cleef explained as they left Morvran Voorhis’ tent.

Some court formality had reasserted itself while they were at the fort. Morvran Voorhis liked to have dispatches read to him while he dressed and many officers joined him for this briefing before attending the emperor’s petit lever where they often discussed the latest news.

“Is military service compulsory?” Ciaran asked, lengthening his strides to match the brigadier’s pace.

“It is in Nilfgaard and practically so in the home provinces, but voluntary in the rest of the empire. That might change in the near future. If the territories want more rights then they must also accept more obligations.”

As far as Ciaran could see, they did not seem to lack for volunteers. Certain territories, like Nazair, maintained army units of their own, which they were expected to contribute to any war effort. Metinna provided mercenaries. Anybody who had gone through military service became part of the reserve and could be recalled in wartime and evidently it had crossed the minds of a few people, on a private and personal level as well as at an official one, that since they would have to fight one way or the other, they may as well be trained by Nilfgaard. What was more, those who became professional soldiers and not just reserves were granted the same rights as Nilfgaardian veterans when they’d completed their service.

The training provided was sound and refresher sessions were held every year. Those who chose to become professional soldiers would either be taught some specialised skill of given a chance to improve on an existing one, as in the case of guild school graduates. They were taught bricklaying, firefighting, disaster relief, languages, cooking, sewing, and a plethora of other competencies that they could rely on in wartime, in peacetime and once they left the service.
What surprised Ciaran was that Nilfgaard was willing to train soldiers who might not be loyal to
them, who might, in fact, band into a militia against it.

“Nazair would have to fight on all sides. Metinna would only have a southern front and a western
one but even so, it is a large, sparsely-populated region,” Morvran Voorhis mused as he patted his
horse’s neck, “it would be hard for it to maintain territorial control or to regain it. And Nilfgaard
would not give up, it must maintain access to Toussaint. Besides, Metinna has not been an autarky
for many decades, it is unlikely it could hold out for very long.”

Smeriglia, who was following the general’s horse on a lead, nudged Ciaran’s thigh and was
rewarded with a scratch behind the ears.

“Nazair and Metinna would have to band together, at least, so they would have fewer fronts to
defend. But they would have to agree to do this and their forces would have to take over Fort
Zivelina and the Vilishtingen naval base. The imperial navy patrols the coastal waters continuously to
guard against raids from the Skellige isles and Fort Torres is just days away by road. No, I cannot
imagine it happening. The people like the empire, you know. The great lords, yes, sometimes they
resent Nilfgaard — their power has been weakened, it is only to be expected. But the people
themselves are not unhappy. They have peace and food, and the expectation of a better future. They
are more comfortable, healthier and wealthier than they have ever been.”

When they left, Ciaran was finally able to fully test the comfort of his new carriage. All his rugs,
pillows and cushions had been moved into it, as had the brass shelving from the old wagon, which
now held all his little cases of teas and teapots and his desk set, and beneath them were a few trunks
containing his wardrobe for this leg of the trip. Emhyr had lent him his portable library and it stood
by the foot of Ciaran’s bed, while near its head a place had been reserved for his little writing desk.

They followed the Sylte to the great plains of Mag Deira, which they traversed quickly along the
unveering imperial roads that unrolled endlessly, as far as the eye could see, crossed by herds of wild
horses or the occasional pronghorn that stopped to look at them inquisitively.

They had been resupplied at Fort Zivellina. The food stores had been replenished, they had a few
more sacks of the volcanic salts, and there was a small stock of a wood-smoke scented tea Emhyr
favoured. There was a manifold improvement in the quality of life on every front.

The suspension system made travel infinitely more comfortable, as did the fact that the imperial
procession moved at a stately pace and with plenty of leisurely stops along the stone-paved roads,
wide enough for two siege engines travelling abreast.

The soldiers used signal flags to manage traffic coming either way so that it could run alongside the
column and Ciaran often watched these manoeuvres from horseback. He’d been mildly surprised at
being allowed to ride out in the open with there were so many comings and goings but var Cleef
hadn’t given it a second thought.

“The imperial roads carry the empire’s trade, its goods, its workers, its people, its soldiers — all the
things that are its lifeblood — they must be safe,” Morvran Voorhis explained firmly as Ciaran
studied a nearby milestone, “The penalty for highway robbery is hanging in chains along the road.
The Nordlings are being slow to adapt, as you may have noticed, but they will understand in time.”
Ciaran was fascinated by the imperial roads and by their milestones in particular. He often rode out to the nearest one during their longer rest stops then used the information on it to chart their progress on his maps. That the stones were marked with not just the mile number in either direction but also the name of the road it was on and the distance to the next intersection and road, seemed to Ciaran the pinnacle of organisation and efficiency. At the head of every stone was engraved the name of the emperor who had had it laid and Emhyr’s name echoed from Metinna to Nazair.

The sappers and imperial engineers had let him have one of their later draft road plans for the North and he spent many happy hours projecting travel times on it, thinking dreamily that once the roads were completed it would be possible to go from Novigrad to Oxenfurt in just a day.

He had also fallen into the habit of climbing onto the flat roof of his carriage whenever they stopped, to survey the area and scan it for interesting plants to collect, and it was from there that he first caught sight of Mil Trachta, the land of a hundred lakes, or Centilo, as it had once been known, through which the Yelena flowed.

Much to Ciaran’s surprise, the water-loving Nilfgaardians continued along the highland roads, skirting the lake district rather than going through it. He was also intrigued by the fog-wreathed ruin of a tower set against a dark forest that he could just make out on the far shore and when he overheard some soldiers say it was haunted, he wondered, shamefully, if that was why they went no closer.

Master Aelrindel was intimidating but he, at least, had not heard of the incident at the amphitheatre.

“Those are centaur forests,” the savant told Ciaran after some gentle but insistent prodding, “And they do not like intruders.”

Once they’d passed the glittering lakes, they continued along the Yelena into the Nazairi foothills. These were beautiful, covered with the pine and oak forests native to it and that the empire so carefully managed as an essential resource for its shipbuilding industry. Ciaran often went foraging and his collection grew.

At night, Ciaran slept alone in his own bed, wondering if he’d ever share Emhyr’s again. But the men threw pinecones and handfuls of dry pine needles onto their night fires, releasing familiar scents into the air, they spoke low and laughed among themselves, as if to reassure Ciaran that the disharmony the ghost of Cintra had brought to them all was fading.

Eventually they left the carriages and baggage carts and took to horses to climb up the winding mountain road. During one of their halts, Ciaran trod reverently through a forest of firs, basking in the gentle rays of light that filtered through the high canopy down between the tall, bare, slender trunks. This was what elves tried to reproduce with the tall, delicate columns and lofty heights of the great halls in their palaces.

At dusk, they halted a last time before the final push to the castle and Emhyr accompanied Ciaran to the nearest milestone to stretch his legs. As Ciaran perched on it and looked up at Emhyr, trying to find words to reach out to him, a puff of wind carried the high notes of an ocarina to them.

Ciaran ears pricked up and as the player became more confident, they could both hear the distant melody quite clearly.

“Do you like it?”

“I used to play the ocarina,” Ciaran murmured distractedly, carried away by memories of playing with Iorveth, of his ocarina answering Iorveth’s flute through the forest.
“Why did you stop?”

“My ocarina broke when— And… my hands.”

Ciaran only realised how much he’d given away when he felt the kiss brushed onto his hair. He looked up at Emhyr and they stayed there, silent and immobile, until the last strains of music faded away. Then they walked back to the horses wordlessly and continued on their way as the wind picked up.

Alaronde Keep was nothing like an elven palace. It was the remains of a tiny ruined fortress of dark stone, seeming cut from the very stone of the precarious clifftop it perched on, starkly outlined against an enormous moon. Along the south-facing, sheltered side grew a few of Nazair’s famous purple-tipped blue roses, of which Ciaran contrived to take a few surreptitious cuttings.

The castle was cold, dank and musty and though it provided a welcome shelter from the thin, chill wind that swirled around, Ciaran quickly decided he preferred the relative discomfort of their army camps.

The lord of the manor was otherwise occupied so they were led to their quarters by torch-bearing servants and they’d barely had time to look around and freshen up when they were all called into dinner.

“Forgive me,” a rolling, booming voice bounced off the stone walls, “An unexpected appeal from a last-minute visitor.”

The host finally made his appearance, rotundity first, and soon filled the cramped room.

“You know how these things go,” he continued, wearing an ear-to-ear smile that didn’t reach his small eyes, “But one must always listen to the concerns of one’s subjects, mustn’t one?”

“One should certainly listen,” Emhyr agreed gravely.

They were soon seated around the table. A plate was placed before each guest then the domed covers were removed with a flourish, revealing what looked like an enormous, very raw, very full, round sausage on a thin bed of rucola.

“Nazairi specialty,” their host explained too genially, “Bull’s testicles build virility. We say that just a bite can put chest hair on a boy and make a man of him.”

Ciaran took in the barely-concealed smugness.

Nilfgaardians ate fish. They had tolerated large quantities of salt pork on their journey south and the several small herds of cows and bullocks that formed part of their contingent provided much of the meat, but on the whole they preferred fresh fish and whenever there was a watercourse nearby they never failed to see what it would yield. Raw or even undercooked meat they largely considered indigestible.

This was an insult dressed up as a local delicacy. And his Nilfgaardians would swallow it. Because they were polite that way, they tried to be adaptable. It was why they swallowed cream sauce by the quart in Toussaint and wore such overdone outfits in the North. Whatever traditions and customs were not in direct contradiction with their laws were tolerated and sometimes even encouraged. *When in Nilfgaard, do as the Nilfgaardians do.* But when Nilfgaardians were elsewhere… well, they wore leg-of-mutton sleeves and ate raw genitals.

Lord Heudebert was still smiling his smarmy smile at Emhyr and every part of Ciaran bristled.
So far, the Nazairi lord had ignored Ciaran, but his gaze now moved to him when Ciaran daintily picked up the unwieldy teste and considered it. Ciaran met the man’s gaze coolly and held it as he took a neat, deliberate bite, his sharp teeth cutting easily through meat and membrane, and coming together with a delicate click.

He chewed then swallowed, unhurried, still looking straight into the widening eyes, then made his pronouncement, deadpan.

“Delicious.”

Beside him, var Cleef and Morvran Voorhis picked up theirs and bit into them, their aides followed suit, as did, eventually, Emhyr himself, looking darkly and visibly amused.

There was talk but dinner never really recovered. Afterwards, Ciaran retreated to their quarters for his bath while Emhyr and his aides went into negotiations with Lord Heudebert’s and his.

He was still in the bath when Emhyr returned.

“Done already?” Ciaran asked cautiously as Emhyr stalked over and watched him being towelled dry.

“The talks broke down. When you are ready, join us in the common room. I have promised General Voorhis a game of shah.”

Ciaran dressed with care. He wore both his rings and the colours and scents he knew Emhyr liked on him. It wouldn’t solve the problem with Heudebert, but it might improve the emperor’s mood. Emhyr liked seeing him well-dressed and Ciaran needed to feel Emhyr was pleased with him.

He headed for the nearby common room but stopped as he overheard one of Heudebert’s guards.

“Is it safe to have the elf around?”

“Lord Ciaran is very reasonable, if unpredictable, on occasion.”

“They say elves move like shadows.”

“That is true. I never know if Lord Ciaran is in his own bed or His Majesty’s.”

The two parted ways and when Var Cleef rounded the corner, he and the elf came face to face. They stood and stared at each other in silence as they listened to the sound of receding footsteps.

“I didn’t mean to eavesdrop.” Ciaran said once he was sure the guard was out of earshot.

“Of course not, My Lord. It can hardly be avoided in castles this small, but then this was not our choice of venue.”

No, it had not been.

“You do know where I sleep, brigadier.”

“I expect I usually do, My Lord. But he doesn’t know that.”

Clever Lord Heudebert had wanted to avoid having twenty thousand soldiers camped around his capital and reminding its inhabitants that they were a conquered land, but that only meant that those same twenty thousand soldiers were instead encamped at the foot of the mountain at the top of which his little castle was perched. Perfectly positioned for a neat, short siege.
Everyone stood a moment as he entered the room, Ciaran went to Emhyr’s side and settled down to continue reading his current book, occasionally raising his gaze to follow the shah game. Var Cleef went to stand at his emperor’s shoulder.

There was a brief commotion at the door then Lord Heudebert was announced just as he stumbled in. He’d shed a layer or two of clothing and formality and stood, legs planted further apart than usual to keep himself steady, swaying gently, a tankard in his hand. From his expression, he didn’t know whether he was coming or going.

“Ah, didn’t mean to interrupt your game.”

He was trying to be polite but couldn’t help the mocking inflection on the last word.

“Is there anything we can help you with, My Lord?” Morvran Voorhis asked easily once the silence had stretched just a moment too long, moving an infantryman and looking up.

“Well, I thought… since you’re still up,” Heudebert’s gaze wobbled to Emhyr, “We could continue our conversation.”

“I had understood that conversation to be over,” Emhyr murmured, moving a knight.

“That… might have been a bit hasty…”

Another lingering silence then Emhyr finally raised his gaze to him and studied him a long, long while. Then he turned to Ciaran and when he stood the elf took his place opposite Morvran Voorhis.

Heudebert trailed after Emhyr, looking like a man about to have a drink too many but fortunately, as he caught var Cleef’s friendly look, he dropped off his glass on a sideboard.

“Listen, Emhyr, maybe we got off on the wrong foot — or the wrong castle, eh?” he attempted a jovial laugh as the door closed behind them.

By now Ciaran knew his emperor’s voice well and his sharp hearing had become finely attuned to its particular pitch and cadence. Heudebert’s voice was easy to follow too. It belonged to a man who rarely bothered to lower his voice and now fluctuated accordingly, as habit and intention chased each other.

Var Cleef was now standing just to the side of the door and the elf had little doubt that he too could follow snippets and scraps of the conversation, though the equable expression revealed nothing.

“A big fish in a small pond,” Morvran Voorhis murmured, considering his options, “Like a pike.”

“Did the talks go very badly?”

“Lord Heudebert started by saying he was prepared to hear our offer. But of course, Nilfgaard is not here to offer, we are here to grant, if we see fit.”

“He’s not subtle…” Ciaran grumbled, wondering how this encounter would have played out in a more public forum.

“He has never needed to be. His family have been in power here for generations without ever needing to employ subtlety. And that man could never resist playing to an audience, perhaps His Majesty will have more success dealing with him alone.”

Ciaran studied the general’s impassive expression from beneath lowered lashes.
It seemed to him that Voorhis had subtlety to spare despite his family having been close to power for generations. Emhyr was subtle and so was his sphinx-like Impera captain.

“Is Lord Heudebert that important?”

“The other Nazairi lords defer to him. Nazair has an independent streak, there have been several rebellions here. It would be more difficult for us to push through an agreement that he had not assented to.”

Morvran paused to consider the board.

“But Lord Heudebert has no doubt realised that he does not have as much leverage as he thought. His Majesty does not have to grant him or his people anything at all. And His Lordship risks looking a little foolish if every other territory manages to negotiate some advantages and he alone comes away empty-handed. The other lords might not be pleased with that at all.”

“But why expect an offer at all?” Ciaran frowned, “And wouldn’t he and the other lords have a whole list of things they’ve wanted for years?”

“Lord Heudebert has spies, you understand,” Morvran Voorhis said in mild amusement, “and no doubt he has heard of our discussions in Toussaint. His ambition will be to obtain better terms — for himself — than the Toussaintois. Which is quite impossible. Toussaint may be a duchy but it has been attached to the empire for far longer than Nazair has and the Nilfgaardian community there is of consequence. They are Nilfgaardians — twice or even three times removed, perhaps, but still Nilfgaardian — and the question of citizenship rights for them is merely a strengthening of existing rights. But here… Nazair is not Toussaint. Lord Heudebert wants the benefits of citizenship but conferred in such a way that they come from him. If they come from Nilfgaard itself, people will soon wonder whether they really need him and his kind.”

“But Ebbing is a vassal state too. Doesn’t it have the same problem?” Ciaran asked, suddenly keenly aware of the brigadier’s silent presence.

“Ebbing…” Voorhis mused as he moved a knight, “Ebbing has been part of the empire for over thirty years. People of my generation have only known a world in which Ebbing is part of the empire. And even before its annexation, it had close ties with Nilfgaard.”

He paused and waited for Ciaran to make his move.

“And certain parts of Ebbing are more loyal to the emperor and the empire than to their own hereditary lords. Loyalty trumps many things.”

They heard noises from the next room and fell silent, focussing on their game.

Emhyr stepped out, followed by now sobered Lord Heudebert.

“I hope your discussion had the desired outcome, My Lord,” Ciaran remarked politely, his diamond ring catching the light as he struck one of Morvran’s towers off the board then tucked it neatly into his line of captured pieces.

“Ah, yes…” the lord mumbled, smiling too widely, “Very interesting.”

“My Lord,” var Cleef said as the man made to leave, “Don’t forget your drink.”

Heudebert retrieved the tankard he’d abandoned, eyed it suspiciously before his gaze travelled to Ciaran, who was watching him dispassionately, waiting for Morvran’s next move.
Once Heudebert had left, Emhyr came over to study the shah board.

“That cannot have been your strategy. That move will cost you the game.”

Ciaran shrugged, his eyes gleaming.

“Perhaps. But he doesn’t know that.”

* * *

The Ravine of the Hydra

Chapter End Notes

*Squaess'me, evellienn: Forgive me, everyone.

Thanks for reading! <3
It wasn’t the ears, it was the eyes. And once Ciaran saw it he couldn’t stop seeing it and he wondered how he had believed for even one instant Morvran Voorhis’ ludicrous claim that the hidden glow in Nilfgaardian eyes was the divine spark of the Great Sun that all Nilfgaardians were imbued with since the founding of Nilfgaard.

“Nilfgaard’s lagoon was created when a flare off the Great Sun landed in the Alba — you will see the blackened fragments of it strewn everywhere. Elves and humans were all touched by the Sun’s grace and we became one people,” the general had explained, before admitting, with the air of a great conspirator, that in truth the lagoon had probably been created long before even the elves had settled there and that Nilfgaardians had become one people by the longer, more traditional method of living together and interbreeding.

That light, that spark, came from their elven blood and Ciaran now saw it everywhere, even in the gleam of coffee in Bastiaan’s velvet-dark eyes. He’d always seen it in Emhyr’s and Morvan’s and recognised it now in the sudden wash of sea foam green in the usually clear azure of the brigadier’s gaze.

“You can’t swim,” var Cleef repeated, deadpan, “At all?”

“Most elves can’t.”

Ciaran wasn’t sure whether he should sound defensive or consoling.

“I can move myself through water,” he clarified but this was met with even more consternation.

It didn’t last long and soon the brigadier’s face had a determined set that Ciaran found alarming.
“Ours can and so will you. You’ll just have to learn. You are of Nilfgaard.”

Ciaran of Nilfgaard.

Ciaran had thought the renaming an obnoxious symbolic gesture on Emhyr’s part. But from the outset, most of the thousands of people that made up their contingent truly treated him as one of their own, then in Toussaint he’d stepped into his role as a representative of Nilfgaard, and now that they’d crossed the border into the provinces, he realised that Emhyr had conferred on him rights and privileges that most of the empire’s population did not have. He was of Nilfgaard, as Nilfgaardian as any other Nilfgaardian citizen. And apparently Master Aelrindel was somehow even more Nilfgaardian than anyone else — perhaps by sheer force of age — because everyone who was not Emhyr treated him with the sort of hushed respect usually reserved for gods and mythical beings. Emhyr treated him very nearly as an equal.

But being Nilfgaardian also came with obligations and apparently these included knowing how to swim. It would never have occurred to Ciaran to know to swim, just as it had not occurred to the Nilfgaardians that he might not.

The soldiers had started to shed bits of amour after Fort Zivelina and as the weather grew warmer, roundels, spaulders, and bevoirs came off, helmets were worn tipped back. The atmosphere had relaxed considerably after leaving Alaronde Keep. The sun shone more often than not, they travelled along the river and whenever they made camp the soldiers bathed and fished in it.

Then one day a bend in the road had afforded them their first view of the sea and Bastiaan had remarked how much he looked forward to having a swim in it and asked Ciaran if he felt the same.

“But why does it matter? I don’t even want to swim,” Ciaran asked Emhyr a little petulantly when they were alone in Emhyr’s carriage.

“The City is on a lagoon, elyennenic, there is water everywhere. You must be able to swim.”

Ciaran grumbled a little longer but was soon distracted by the lanterns. Many of the fixtures had been moved from the wagons to the carriages. He’d noticed the lanterns and lamps were different but he only now noticed that they had no flames.

“Science?”

“Magic.”

“Why weren’t we using them before?”

“Magic leaves a trace, it can be spied upon and interfered with. The wagons were protected but these carriages are warded in the very walls at the moment of their construction the way the navy’s ships are.”

Considering the marks he still bore on his back, it should not have come as a surprise that Emhyr so distrusted magic, but it had never stuck Ciaran strongly before. Emhyr routinely used his communication stone but Ciaran now realised that he was even more laconic than usual whenever he did, never saying anything that couldn’t be overheard by anyone.

His gaze went from the communication stone to the reports and plans strewn over Emhyr’s writing table.

“Pereplut?”
“They concern the drainage works we started there a few years ago. They have been quite successful and we will be shown around them,” Emhyr explained. “The engineers think they can adapt the system for Velen and perhaps even Angren.”

Because he liked understanding things and Emhyr’s explanations, Ciaran prodded him with questions, settling down to listen. He’d once asked Emhyr about the aqueducts and had been indulged with a full exposition of the principles of physics at play, with diagrams, with a retelling of the testing and work that had gone into calculating the minimum inclination needed to keep the water flowing. Emhyr didn’t just know, he understood, and to Ciaran’s even greater surprise, he discerned passion behind the impassive expression and clipped tones. Emhyr was proud of his empire and its achievements.

But then, they all were. Not just Emhyr and Morvran Voorhis and var Cleef but even the ordinary soldiers, in their own way. They bore their unglamorous peacetime duties with patience because they took pride in the monumental infrastructure it resulted in, and Ciaran had been astonished to find that even infantrymen could explain how imperial roads were laid down and what the various layers that the stretch they were currently on would be made up of based on their environment and the resources available. They were all taught how to build, maintain, check the state of, and repair the imperial roads. Specialisation came afterwards.

This mentality seemed to permeate every branch and level of their society, or at least the part of it that Ciaran had seen so far. They saw themselves as architects on an ideological and continental scale, and their roads were just the first brick laid in their great work of civilisation and improvement of the continent. Emhyr didn’t see himself as a tyrant or a destroyer. In his mind, he came bearing gifts.

Ciaran leaned against Emhyr and noticed an eddy in the flow of his words. In other times, he would have been on Emhyr’s lap with Emhyr’s arms around him and Emhyr would have paused there to kiss his hair, but Ciaran knew the emperor was still giving him space.

They weren’t where they had been but the relationship was recovering. Most of what they had thrown at each other they had already known or at least suspected, and after weeks tiptoeing around the issues and trying to ignore them away, it was a relief to have it all out in the open.

The imperial party headed due south back to the Yelena, on the banks of which they would meet another one of the province’s influential lords for the usual negotiations and a celebration before crossing over into east Metinna.

While they’d been up at Alaronde Keep, the carpenters had set up a canopy and a low railing on the roof of Ciaran’s carriage. Ciaran had asked var Cleef’s permission to sit there as they travelled and been answered with a warm smile and a firm refusal. The threats presented by the open road made that quite impossible.

He was, however, permitted to sit there whenever they stopped and after a light lunch he climbed up into it for a quiet nap in the shadow of the enormous oak under which his carriage had been parked. He lay there, listening to the swish of leaves and creak of the branches shaken by a breeze that toyed with the light drapes hanging from the canopy as it carried in the scent of earth and bark and fresh, unfurling new life.

Emhyr had gone for a walk with some of his officers to stretch his legs and talk and the sound of their voices floated back to Ciaran, while from a different quarter he could hear the sounds of splashing and laughter. They would soon leave the river and the soldiers were making the most of it. Ciaran wondered if, given the possibility, they wouldn’t prefer to swim to Nilfgaard rather than ride there.
Ciaran rode whenever he could. An-Nayyir was becoming tamer and his temper was improved by being out in the open with the disciplined cavalry horses. Ciaran’s temper was improved by the fresh air, the exercise, and being able to quench as much of his curiosity about the empire as he could by looking around and asking questions.

As they headed to more populated areas, the imperial roads got busier and they often crossed merchants taking their carts to market, journeymen going from village to village, and heavy trade caravans. And more often than anything else, they crossed the mail.

As Morvran had promised, they saw several mail relay points and stopped at one so Ciaran could see its functioning. They always had large stable of good, fast horses so messengers and mail coaches could make a quick change then move on and he watched as an express messenger did just that, pausing only for a drink and two mouthfuls of fresh bread between one horse and the next. Oftentimes an eatery had sprung up nearby, and it might even have a few beds, so that the place ended up looking part inn, part post office.

At these relays, Ciaran saw the mail go by in all its forms — the regular mail loaded in huge sacks onto mail coaches, the express mail carried by couriers riding at breakneck speed, and the imperial messengers, plumed and with a great sun plastered onto both chest and back, and for whom everyone else stopped or stepped aside.

Everyone was excited to receive mail. Bastiaan showed Ciaran a letter from his mother confirming that she’d bought him the tourney prints he wanted, var Cleef grinned even more broadly whenever he received a letter postmarked in Venendal and carrying his wife’s assurances that all would be ready for the imperial visit. Emhyr handed Ciaran a small package in which the elf found the most exquisitely crafted ocarina he’d ever seen, intricately inlaid with mother of pearl.

The bulk of the emperor’s mail had previously arrived from the City in official, locked despatch cases, but now it flooded in from all parts of the empire and beyond, not just for Emhyr but for all his officers. Morvran Voorhis received a stream of letters from friends and acquaintances in the City, several of which mentioned the fire that had warranted an emergency meeting, and var Cleef received a missive from a former trainee currently posted in faraway Zerrikania. The circulation of these among the emperor’s entourage caused much whispered comment and a few dark looks.

It was also thanks to the mail network that Ciaran started getting more mail from Iorveth. The Nilfgaardian embassy in Dol Gwennelen was up and running and Iorveth now brought his messages there, from where they were somehow transmitted to the embassy in the South nearest the imperial convoy’s position and to which it was delivered in a diplomatic pouch by an imperial messenger.

Iorveth’s messages had normalised, perhaps in response to Ciaran’s own calmer ones. Ciaran had not apprehended any immediate or even medium-term threat to Dol Gwennelen and had allowed this sentiment to bleed into his writing. Emhyr had let him send a few more letters folded into his own, unseen by even Emhyr’s eyes, and in them he’d done little more than relate what he was doing, somewhat more freely than he otherwise would have, before begging for every last detail regarding how the reconstruction works and other developments back home were progressing.

Iorveth’s replies had initially been circumspect but by now had unfolded into vivid and flowing accounts of the work that had been done, was being done, and of the ever-expanding list of things that still needed doing. Sometimes there was irritability in them, sometimes resignation, most often there was barely-contained impatience.

Ciaran wished he could better visualise what was actually being done and itched to ask Iorveth to send paintings and sketches the way he did so that he could use them to anchor himself to reality. But he was keenly aware his friend had neither the resources or the spare time for such frivolities.
Master Aelrindel had given him a brass canister filled with very slightly scented, translucent tapers that burned without giving off smoke, and that were used by the elves of the enclave to aid their meditations.

Ciaran used them as directed. He watched the flickering flame and tried to empty his mind, and in the heat shimmer his mind sometimes conjured up the palaces of Toussaint on the banks of the Pontar.

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On the day of the parade, the sun shone and the crowds cheered, many people dressed in or waving banners of the same Nazairi blue as the province’s famous roses. Ciaran had intentionally dressed in a white tunic patterned in the same hue, reminiscent of the ceramics the nearby port city of Feldt was famous for, and it suited his ornamental armour beautifully.

Shortly before sundown and after a full day of celebrations, the emperor and his concubine followed their host, another of the Nazairi lords, up onto the dais where this latter held up his hands for silence before embarking on his droning, congratulatory speech. Ciaran risked a sidelong glance at Emhyr, trying to signify that he expected recompense for putting up with it.

The talks had been cordial but here too there had been marked resistance. So much so that the emperor and his team were already quietly discussing what pressures could be brought to bear on the Nazairi lords if they continued to be recalcitrant. The mentality of these latter reminded Ciaran of certain Northern lords and this in turn reminded him of how different the Toussaintois and the Nilfgaardians were from them.

As Ciaran’s gaze shifted away from the emperor, a distant glint and a shadow on a rooftop caught his attention and instinct took over. He leapt in front of Emhyr just as their Impera guards moved and was knocked back against him as the crossbow bolt hit a rondel on his breastplate.

Ciaran hung there, pinned out of the flow of life into immobility, then everything spun into a blur. His lines of sight were obstructed by the wall of Impera armour that instantly surrounded him and he was stunned into boneless near senselessness, but beyond the bubble of his immediate surroundings he was dimly aware of shouts and waves of panic, warped and muffled as if by a great distance of space and time.

He floated like this until, back in the imperial tent, his breastplate was removed and the blinding pain jolted him out of his daze.

Emhyr was there and paced like a hungry and ill-tempered tiger. He could barely contain his anger and it often spilled over in furious looks, peremptory questions to the medics, and occasionally in sharp reproaches to Ciaran himself.

“How could you put yourself in danger in that way? When we have the Impera — the elite of the empire’s military — to protect us?”

Ciaran tried to ignore him but his self-discipline soon wore thin under the dual strain of resentment and pain, and his expression grew increasingly sulky. The medics saw to Ciaran’s injury as efficiently as they could and tried not to cower. Only Aelrindel seemed to keep his cool and it was he who gave the irate emperor their assessment of the elfling’s condition.

Ciaran bore it all with fortitude but after the medics left them alone and Emhyr’s remonstrations
continued, he soon broke.

“Fine!” he spat out resentfully, “Next time I’ll just let them kill you!”

And with that he threw himself onto the bed and buried his face in a pillow, his slim shoulders shaking.

The elf’s tears and his hurt put out Emhyr’s anger in an instant, and he went to sit by his concubine, chastened.

“You are right, elyenncic. I should not have shouted at you,” he murmured into the dark hair, “You shall have real armour like mine, real Impera armour, I will give the order. I should not have shouted. I was worried. Look at me, elyennen?”

Ciaran hiccuped a few more times then turned and looked up at Emhyr with bright, tear-filled eyes.

Deep down he knew Emhyr was not angry with him but he’d had a fright and the admonishments, on top of the shock of his injury and the threat to Emhyr’s life had shaken him.

Emhyr looked down into the tremulous eyes then leaned in and kissed away the tears before pressing his salt-wet lips to Ciaran’s, a thrill of relief running through him when he felt Ciaran respond and twine his arms around his neck to pull him down.

“I didn’t think,” Ciaran hiccuped between kisses, “I just saw it and I—.”

“I know. I am not angry with you,” Emhyr assured him and continued to murmur soothingly until the sleeping draught took effect and the young elf’s hold loosened.

The emperor was eventually able to extricate himself safely. He brushed his lips against the bandage before pulling the blankets over it.

As soon as the emperor stepped into his own quarters, he caught his head of security’s significant look and motioned var Cleef to follow him into the room he’d requisitioned as a study.

“The rebels?” he asked curtly, settling sideways into a chair and motioning his lieutenant to take the other one.

Var Cleef instead stayed on his feet, standing to attention.

“The raid is underway, sire. Aside from the… incident with Lord Ciaran, everything has gone according to plan.”

“And our agent?”

“Safe. We think his cover is still intact and Lord Ciaran’s actions will help muddy the waters.”

“The original arbalist?”

“We have him. The substitution went without a hitch, it should be easy to make the others believe he gave up names under torture.”

And they, in turn, would give them — or be thought to have given them — the names of their backers, Emhyr reflected in grim satisfaction.

It had been entrapment, of course.
Pockets of resistance had persisted in Nazair for years, enabled by the province’s lords, who took advantage of the foolish and the romantic as they grappled for the influence their forebears had wielded. As expected, the prospect of a public appearance by the emperor during his victory tour had been too good an opportunity to pass up.

Still, it would be a nasty shock for some.

“Good.”

Var Cleef fell to one knee and lowered his gaze.

“There is no need, Evrard, you could not have predicted what happened. None of us could have. And the medics say Lord Ciaran will recover and that no permanent harm was done. It was the shoulder he injured in that fall during the hunt and that attendant of his, the Aedirnian girl, stitched together a small padded cushion to protect it from the armour,” Emhyr paused, then continued, “Your knighthood will have to wait, however—.”

“Sire—! That’s not—!” var Cleef looked up, horrified.

“I know, but you shall have one all the same. I have guarded against accusations of favouritism, Evrard, but this is already long overdue. You will be included in the midwinter honours list instead of the midsummer one, that is all.”

“Your Majesty is too generous. Lord Ciaran was injured, Your Majesty could have been injured. The whole operation was unsound, poorly planned and poorly executed. I should never have agreed—.”

Emhyr held a hand up to stop him.

Evrard stared a moment then hung his head again.

“We always knew there might be, we planned it to an acceptable level of risk. We will be more careful in future. We must not forget that Lord Ciaran still has the instincts of a soldier and a commander. We obtained the result we wanted — the rebels will be rounded up and tried, that will set a salutary example to any others. And Lord Ciaran has publicly saved his emperor’s life, which should quell the last of the objections against him. It did not go as we had planned but I count this a success.”

Var Cleef didn’t answer and steadfastly continued to stare at the ground.

Emhyr straightened in his seat, leaned forward and took var Cleef’s head in his hands, tilting it up, fingers sliding into the neat blond hair.

He knew his head of security well, they had been through much together in the years since they’d started their maecenate. And he could not recall ever seeing him so shaken.

“Lord Ciaran will be fine, Evrard,” he said, looking into the clear blue eyes, “I am fine. This was not your fault.”

Then he pressed an insistent kiss against the brigadier’s mouth and soon var Cleef put his hands on the emperor’s knees to pull himself up and into the kiss.

They indulged in each other for a while, then Emhyr pulled away.
“Lord Ciaran is sleeping but tomorrow you may see for yourself that he will be fine.”

“Will he really? The force of the blow…”

“The armour will need heavy repairs but it absorbed much of the shock. The wound is ugly and will no doubt be painful but nothing was broken and there was no permanent damage.”

“Lord Ciaran didn’t notice the bolt was blunt?” var Cleef asked after a fleeting grimace.

“He did not remark on it. He did get a shock and your people stepped in quickly and took the bolt away. Perhaps he did not notice.”

Var Cleef considered this.

“We should have stayed with the original plan. He was not supposed to be there.”

“It would have been strange for him to be absent after his success in Toussaint and the incident at Alaronde Keep.”

“Then we should have revised the plan. Even if he hadn’t seen the arbalist, there was always the chance he would notice the bolt.”

“The plans were made when Lord Ciaran was just a name on a list. It would have been difficult to coordinate meaningful change with the team here, Evrard, you know that. Should there ever be the need to plan anything similar, we will certainly take Lord Ciaran’s presence into consideration.

“Did he believe it was the rebels?”

“He did not question it. But then we’ve been planting the idea in his mind since we crossed the Amells and he heard that we have sent a team after them.”

Var Cleef still looked dissatisfied but unconsciously leaned into the caress as the emperor cupped the side of his face, fingertips sinking into the hair at the nape of his neck.

“He’s so sharp, he might have noticed something.”

“If he asks then we will address the issue. But for now all is well. In a way, this helps us. The idiot lords here will have something to think about, those implicated in this will soon be flushed out, and those who are not will have occasion to be grateful they were not and that we had our discussions beforehand — as we intended. Lord Ciaran has publicly saved the life of his emperor at the risk of his own.”

Var Cleef finally let out a long breath then nodded, running a hand through his hair.

“Thank you, Emhyr.”

Emhyr rubbed a thumbpad along the familiar jawline, sweeping away the last of his maecenee’s concern.

“Will you stay?” he asked quietly, aquiline.

A tug of satisfaction low in his gut when he saw the pupils widen, awash in an aquamarine glow.

“We’re supposed to be on high alert,” var Cleef defended, “It would practically be dereliction of duty…”
“But if your emperor wanted the close, personal protection of the head of his bodyguard, for his peace of mind…?”

Var Cleef’s mouth curved into its usual smile and he nodded.

— N —

The talon of a sinister, formless fear ripped into Ciaran’s sleep and he struggled through the cotton cocoon of artificial slumber to grasp it and wrestle it into a known shape. Then, to calm his palpitations of dire foreboding, he repeated to himself over and over that Emhyr was alive and well.

The urge to go to him was strong but it was the dead of night, so late even Emhyr would have gone to bed, and Ciaran berated himself for being so weak and dependent.

Emhyr was safe, they were all safe. While the medics had been tending to him, one of the emperor’s aides had come in to tell him that a group of Alba and Impera had immediately been sent to track down and apprehend the rebel group responsible for the assassination attempt, and though he was certain var Cleef had secured the premises, Ciaran couldn’t help a shiver and the throbbing in his shoulder echoed the growing disquiet in his mind.

Morvran Voorhis had said the rebels had been reduced to little more than desperation and yet they had come so close to succeeding in near impossible condition, and an icy chill ripped through Ciaran’s veins as he tried to imagine Emhyr’s death.

His mind shied at the precipice so he forced it to more practical thoughts. He hadn’t the first idea of what happened to imperial concubines when they ceased to be concubines, nor whether a new emperor would consider himself bound by the treaties his predecessor had signed. Emhyr was known for breaking treaties he himself had negotiated and so compliance would no doubt depend on his successor’s inclinations. Ciaran wasn’t even sure who would succeed Emhyr.

He jumped out of bed to retrieve The Imperial Dynasty then hurried back to his nest of blankets. He flipped through to the genealogical tree, almost blind with a rising black dread and his own deafening heartbeat pounding in his ears. For the first time, he noticed the twenty-year gap between the start of Emhyr’s reign and the end of his father’s curtailed one. Trying to quell the tremor in his limbs, Ciaran traced with his fingertip the line back up Emhyr’s branch of the family, across and down to the bottom of the next one, so desperate not to see what he’d find there that he closed his eyes a moment, drenched in cold sweat.

Morvran Voorhis.

Morvran Voorhis, whom the emperor consulted on everything. Morvran Voorhis, who was not an appropriate choice as captain of the emperor’s personal guard. Morvran Voorhis, who could decline to rule Toussaint, one of the wealthiest nations in the civilised world, because he had expectations of something far better. Morvran Voorhis, who had called de Wett and aep Dahy and even Emhyr’s own father “uncle”.

Disappeared, surrendered, died, poisoned, beheaded, survived.

How many of them had been uncles to him to some degree or other?

Ciaran’s eyes fell again to the name above Emhyr’s and to the dates beneath it. Fergus var Emreis
had reigned only a handful of years before dying without reaching his fortieth birthday in a nation of people who routinely died centenarians. Then over twenty years of someone else’s reign — not a regent, Emhyr had been almost in his thirties when he’d taken the throne, and not Morvran Voorhis’ father, who should have been next in line. Not anyone mentioned in this book or any other.

He heard the distant echo of Dandelion’s voice, telling him, amid the sounds of gruff laughter and pewter steins thunking against wood, the smell of roasting meats and stale ale, that Emhyr had been injured in the fight to regain his throne.

He flipped the book shut and fled from the shadowy threats that hung about every corner of his room to the emperor’s quarters.

The guards let him pass but insisted the chamberlain be called.

Mererid wandered into the common room wearing a frown and a nightcap.

“Surely the young gentleman should be resting?”

“I must see the emperor.”

The chamberlain looked over the young elf, barefoot and agitated and still clasping his book to his chest with white-knuckled hands.

“One moment.”

But as he turned to leave, Brigadier var Cleef stepped out of the emperor’s room, straightening his collar.

“His Majesty says you may go in, My Lord.”

Ciaran did and found the emperor sitting on the edge of his bed in his nightshirt and robe.

“What is it?” Emhyr asked, sharp gaze narrowing as he took in the book’s title, every sign of distress his elfling gave off as he stood beyond his reach, and the blood that was started to stain the bandage and nightshirt.

“Was it really the rebels?” Ciaran asked, standing still but vibrating with that familiar nervous energy.

Emhyr’s eyes narrowed further.

“Why do you ask?”

Ciaran’s trembling became visible and and tears welled up in the hazel eyes.

“Was it Morvran? Were they acting on his orders?”

“It is late,” Emhyr said slowly, “We can talk about this in the morning.”

He inched forward but the skittish elf took an instinctive step back.

“I need to know. I need to know what would happen if you ceased…” he paused to draw breath then continued resolutely, “If you died.”

Emhyr didn’t flinch and gave the elfling a long look before eventually drawing back the covers and motioning him over.
“Come, elyennen.”

After a fractional hesitation, Ciaran moved forward and allowed himself to be pulled into Emhyr’s arms.

“There is nothing for you to worry about,” Emhyr murmured into the hollow beneath Ciaran’s ribcage, “You will be taken care of. As a former imperial concubine you would have an allowance — you could go back to Dol Gwennelen or retire to a private villa anywhere in the empire with a few attendants. Morvran likes you, he might over you a post as an advisor or ambassador. He might even offer to take you as one of his concubines.”

“That’s not funny!” Ciaran half choked on a sob.

“You are right,” Emhyr soothed, taking advantage of the distraction to manoeuvre Ciaran onto his lap and cradle him close, “It will be all right, elyennen.”

Ciaran listened to Emhyr’s heartbeat and his own gradually slowed to match it. He was still gripping the book tightly.

“What about your daughter?”

A pause.

“I do not know where she is. I cannot plan around her.”

“So it would be Morvran?”

“It would likely be Morvran. He has the right credentials, the right pedigree, and the backing of the right people. But I have not formally named him as my successor and if I die without having done so his accession might be contested by the other factions, especially if he is in a weakened position at the time.”

Emhyr kissed the dark hair.

“But there is nothing for you to worry about. Morvran likes you and he will never forget what you did for his mare. He will protect you. And if he cannot, he will see you safely home.”

Ciaran looked into the amber eyes and saw that this was why Emhyr had let him heal the horse when he should not have. After all the effort and expense Nilfgaard hard already expended to ensure his survival, it had been absurd to risk even a small relapse on a broken leg. But Emhyr had weighed up the options and decided it was a risk worth taking in order to be owed a favour by Morvran Voorhis.

“And Dol Gwennelen?”

A skipped beat.

“I am certain Morvran will do everything in his power to maintain the alliance with Dol Gwennelen.”

Ciaran stared, still as stone as he listened for the unsaid.

“But he will face the same opposition you do? And depending on how he comes to power, he may find himself in a weaker position than yours?”

Emhyr gave a grim nod.
“When we reach the City, you will be free to seek out more powerful and influential supporters of the Northern elves than Morvran and I am. I doubt you will find any.”

Even without having yet set foot in Nilfgaard, Ciaran sensed the truth of this. Morvran Voorhis, var Cleef, and others had an ideological attachment to the Northern elves that went beyond their personal like of him, but there was no reason to suppose it extended to everyone else, or even to a majority of Nilfgaardians. And even of those who did care, any that mattered would stop caring if the empire’s capital was swept up in a leadership contest. Countries had devolved into civil war for less — it was why Letho’s actions in the North had been so effective.

Ciaran struggled to sit up then straddled Emhyr’s lap to look at him, still clutching the book.

“But Emhyr, what if Morvran is behind this? Surely Morvran is in a strong position now? If you died in an accident, who would go against the heir apparent, who is now also returning a victorious general, loyal to his emperor until the end?”

“It was not Morvran.”

Ciaran stared into the citrine eyes, his heart hammering as the shadows closed in.

“Who is in charge in Nilfgaard while you’re out here?”

“Prince Voorhis is the Shadow of the Sun and is acting in my name,” Emhyr said evenly and went on despite the alarm in Ciaran’s eyes, “He is my uncle and the highest-ranking noble in Nilfgaard, it was only proper.”

“But Emhyr—!”

“It was not Morvran.”

“But how can you know? Surely he—?”

Emhyr cupped the delicate face in his hands and held it firmly, looking straight into eyes whose pupils were blown wide and just ringed with gold.

“It was not Morvran. Listen, elyen nenin, Morvran has no interest in succeeding me yet. He is an ambitious man and would like to rule someday. But you know him, he is an idealist. He wants to be a good emperor to an empire that is powerful, prosperous, civilised, and the envy of the world. He knows as well as I do that profound and difficult changes must be made for this to happen. And we both know that these changes and Morvran himself will have a much better chance at survival if these reforms are forced through during my reign. He could start with a clean slate rather than with a series of unpopular laws to enact.”

Emhyr pressed his lips against Ciaran’s forehead a moment and Ciaran covered the emperor’s hands with his, not to pull them away but to slip his fingers between Emhyr’s.

“I have enemies, elyen nenin,” Emhyr continued quietly, so quietly his usual flatness of delivery was almost effaced, “The people like me now because I have brought them victory. But the people are fickle and they will not always protect me against those who run the empire and finance it. Morvran would inherit all my enemies without even the protection of the laws I intend to have passed to curb their powers. Morvran has the ear and favour of Nilfgaard’s aristocratic families. He can help keep the peace for a year, perhaps two. Just long enough, perhaps, to do what must be done.”

“What happens then?” Ciaran asked, drawing away to look into Emhyr’s eyes.
“If I am fortunate, I will be allowed to abdicate.”

The usual clipped tones, the familiar impassive expression. Ciaran knew the answer to his next question but felt compelled to ask it regardless.

“And if you’re not?”

And all at once the walls came down and weariness showed in every line of Emhyr’s face.

“Then I hope Morvran wields the knife. He must be the one to wield the knife.”

Because if anyone else did, then Morvran’s legitimacy would seem weakened, even if Emhyr had named him his successor.

Ciaran stared at Emhyr’s face and saw it as that of another fallible creature who was prepared to sacrifice everything for what he wanted to protect.

The elfling had been so consumed by the idea that he might one day have to kill the emperor himself to protect his kin that it had never really occurred to him that someone else might want to, and he’d never worried about what would happen afterwards because he hadn’t expected to survive it. Back when Ciaran had only known him from his profile on a golden coin, his face had been that of a shadowy threat that hung over Dol Gwennelen and the North, but now Ciaran saw that Emhyr was just a man standing deeper in the shadow than anyone else.

“Who was emperor before you?”

Emhyr gave him a long look and despite the enduring air of despondency, the citrine eyes were cold and hard.

“His name has been wiped from history. He was only a Usurper but you must never name him as such. You should not know even that much of him.”

Tears welled up in Ciaran’s eyes and Emhyr enfolded him in his arms.

“It might not be so terrible, to stay in the City with Morvran,” Emhyr said quietly, running his hands in long, soothing strokes along Ciaran’s back, “You should have a few more years left, you could still do some important advocacy work.”

“I don’t want Morvran!” Ciaran dismissed hotly, tossing aside the book to lean into Emhyr and cling to his nightshirt, “I want you!”

Emhyr froze and three missed heartbeats later realised he was gripping Ciaran’s hips, where his hands had come to rest.

“Do you, elyennenin?”

Emhyr felt Ciaran’s slender fingers slip into his hair, the tips brushing over his nape as the thumbs came to rest along his ears. He was drawn down and when his forehead came to rest against Ciaran’s, he stopped breathing. He recognised this gesture, considered the most intimate among elves. Ciaran was communing with him and he was afraid even a stirring of air might disturb him.

But eventually he had to let out a long breath and let go, letting his heart and his lungs and his mind melt into Ciaran’s.
On the other side of the river, the Metinnese local lords drowned the emperor and his entourage in assurances that they had had nothing to do with the assassination attempt. They were easily brought to the Nilfgaardians’ views on the projected constitutional changes and promised to help sway the rest of the vassal state’s leaders in that direction.

The imperial party continued southwards and the landscape changed to one that was new to Ciaran. Lonely farms floated here and there amid rolling, poppy-strewn meadows punctuated by the tall cypress trees that lined long, winding paths.

Ciaran’s carriage rocked gently in its suspensions, which Emhyr had already admitted were indeed superior to those of his own carriage, and the elfling slept in it quietly, lulled by the sedatives and painkillers he was administered.

Days later, he still couldn’t ride but he could walk and he took every opportunity to go exploring, especially when they stopped to make camp. He had a pair of sandals made of white, butter-soft kid whose gilded laces came up almost to his knees, and that moved with him like a second skin. Their thin leather soles had been gummed somehow and he could run, hop, and climb in them with complete freedom. Doing so made him so happy it was easier to ignore the dulling pain in his shoulder.

One late afternoon, when they’d stopped earlier than usual, he came upon a group of shepherds who where swarmed by Impera the moment they raised their hands in answer to his hail.

“It’s because I’m the emperor’s new concubine,” Ciaran explained after he’d apologised but the term didn’t seem to resonate with them at all and they responded by offering him some cheese.

Ciaran accepted, sat down on a rock to share their simple dinner of bread and cheese, and gave orders for his own dinner to be brought so he could share it too.

Meanwhile, they chatted and ate.

The wine was not the delicate rosé the region was famous for and that rivalled even those of Toussaint, but a sturdier red that washed down the peasant bread and exceptional sheep’s milk cheese admirably.

Ciaran tried a few of the techniques and lines of questioning he’d employed as a spy to see if they would compromise themselves in complaints against the empire. And complain they did — about the fact that though they learned both Nilfgaardian and Common in school, all the youngsters affected to speak only Nilfgaardian and had big dreams of the City; that if an imperial road or bridge had so much as an uneven paver* it was fixed within days but that the little stone bridge over a nearby ravine that they’d used since time immemorial was now so rundown it was unsafe even for sheep, let alone people; and that the winter had been the harshest in living memory.

They then went on to grudgingly admit, with no prompting, that they’d said the same about the weather the previous year; that they made a much better living off their wines and cheeses than they had two decades before because even Toussaint bought them; that their children and grandchildren had better prospects in life — two worked at the naval base, another five provided goods or services to it — and therefore the empire was doing right by them; and that, broadly, there had been little change but that what change there had been had mostly been for the good.
Ciaran’s dinner arrived and they shared it out and Ciaran sensed their estimation of him rise to match the quality of the food.

The idle chatter continued, Ciaran promised to bring their bridge to the emperor’s attention, and eventually the shepherds packed away some of the food for the following day and thanked Ciaran for it before excusing themselves to set up a nook for the night.

Ciaran returned to the camp, thoughtful.

He’d been not unlike them once. He and Iorveth and the others had hunted and made their own food and slept under the stars. Life had been hard but it had been simple. Now he was so far removed from the everyday life of these shepherds that he would likely fade from it entirely, as if he’d been but an apparition.

At his desk, he moved aside a wax-sealed package of information on the harem and the box holding the ocarina on it so he could open one of the drawers to retrieve one of the spare prints of himself he’d kept from Toussaint. He wrote a short thank you note on it, then asked his de facto aide-de-camp to go and buy some of the sheep milk cheese and leave the print when he did.

Then he marched to the writing table where Emhyr was working and informed him, without preamble, that a nearby bridge needed fixing and was satisfied to see an aide take down his comments and directions for immediate communication to the Alba sappers. He didn’t need to be told that a couple of fatigue teams would be made up by nightfall so that they could go out at dawn or that someone would be up half the night preparing the paperwork. He knew.

After this, Ciaran contrived to speak with the local people as often as possible and even convinced var Cleef to allow him to visit the roadside taverns and eateries that lined the imperial roads and that the soldiers themselves often stopped at. Nobody, he argued, could plan an attack at such short notice and nobody would improvise one in a place black with armed and armoured professional soldiers.

Var Cleef was not pleased but bore the hardship with his usual smiling stoicism, under instruction, Ciaran supposed, from Emhyr himself.

“Do not take unconsidered risks and do as Evrard asks,” Emhyr murmured, with just an edge of resignation in his voice, by way of confirmation when Ciaran put the question to him, “And let me know if you discover anything of interest.”

Ciaran made the most of these escapades. He wore his travel clothes and despite his Impera escort he was usually treated with the friendly familiarity of those used to dealing with total strangers. The innkeepers were used to soldiers, as were most of their patrons, a mix of regulars from the environs and travellers from further afield, many of whom were more than happy to chat with him, telling him tales from every part of the empire while they helped him chart out imaginary journeys on his map using the ubiquitous pewter cups found in places all along the imperial roads and that bore along their sides the itineraries for some of the most popular routes. Eiddon to the magic academy in Vicovaro, Metinna city to Beauclair, Baccalà to the City of Golden Towers — they were there, imperial miles and milestone intersections marked out in lines and dots and numbers.

His ears attracted less and less comment and as they had dinner one night at their camp on the way into Claremont, Morvran Voorhis told Ciaran of the nearby settlement, now known as Jealousy, that had once been burnt to the ground by a love-crossed elf.

In Claremont, while the emperor and his team dealt with the intractable royal quadruplets, Ciaran was shown around the city and when they came to its arena he was reminded of Voorhis’ claim that Ebbing was close to the core of the empire. He wore a veil over his eyes and his ears attracted less
attention than his clothes did. Rumour of what had happened at Alaronde Keep had overtaken them
but with such a distortion of the facts that Ciaran was variably believed to have bitten the balls off a
live bull or to have bitten Lord Heudebert himself.

The broad lines of an agreement were concluded and they were on their way again.

Then one day, as they halted along a ridge, Pereplut came into sight. Ciaran invited Bastiaan to take
tea with him on the roof of his carriage and together they looked out onto the wide stairway of grassy
terraces leading down to the sprawling marshlands through which pooled and snaked the Lete, the
Velda, the Arete, and their tributaries, intermingling and joining until finally throwing their combined
waters into the distant ocean.

“Rice paddies,” Morvran Voorhis explained when Ciaran asked him about the crops being cultivated
in the terraces, “They are irrigated by the Lete. Rice is a labour-intensive crop.”

No doubt that explained the great number of slaves working in the rice paddies and Ciaran’s tuitored
eye made out a high proportion of Skelligers picking out weeds and manning the oxen. As he
watched Bastiaan pause to pluck a stalk to show him, Ciaran noticed fish swimming among the
grasses.

“Pereplut could be one of the richest regions in the empire,” Morvran continued, “But marshlands are
insalubrious and unwieldy. If the drainage works and water management systems are as successful as
the engineers claim they could be, we will be able to cultivate more of the land.”

Though the heat increased, even the infantrymen and other footmen who had taken to wearing just
their tunics and cuirasses now donned their hose, greaves and gauntlets to guard against the bugs and
thorny bushes. Ciaran had long since traded his wools for linen. Emhyr’s skin had started to darken
in Metinna and now bronzed under the Ebbinger sun, while var Cleef went a peachy golden colour.
Morvran Voorhis pinkened along the cheekbones and nose, while Ciaran and Bastiaan stayed as
studiously pale as if they’d never left the wintry North.

Though the road skirted the marshes, Ciaran was afforded a good look at some of its plants and
wildlife. The landscape was a curious mixture of wetlands encroaching on arid, dusty soil, and the
trees and bushes and grasses that grew there had pale trunks, branches and leaves with a silvery cast
that gave everything a flat, sun-bleached look. A handful of velvet-black water buffalo raised their
heads to stare at them mutely and Morvran Voorhis pointed out a herd of pure white wild horses
racing away in the distance.

When they stopped, Ciaran wandered over to peer into the rice paddies that still lined the other side
of the road and in its waters found not just a selection of fish but also prawns, a snake, and when he
plucked out one of the larger crabs out of curiosity someone immediately whisked it away for his
dinner. And when he was given a handful of grains from the previous year’s harvest, Ciaran
recognised the scent of the cosmetic powder he was dusted with.

That night, he poked at the mosquitos that congregated and tried to get past the netting hung over the
bed he and the emperor shared until Emhyr tired of his fidgeting and drew him close, tucking the
sheet in tightly around him.

The next day they ventured deeper into the estuary and because he did not expect to encounter
bandits or rebels crouching in the swamps, var Cleef allowed Ciaran to travel on top of his carriage
where the netting hung from the canopy kept out the insects but let in the breeze.

Constrained by the terrain, the road narrowed, the column thinned, and the trees all but disappeared
as the water spread and some colour returned to a world a-shimmer with dragonflies. Along the road
grew reeds twice as tall as the average Nilfgaardian and the birds came in every size and in the most fantastical shapes and colours. Ciaran stared at a footprint the size of a breakfast plate and was soon confronted with the slate-blue heron that had left it, nearly tall enough to look him in the eye, and he watched, fascinated, as it casually snapped up a two and a half foot snake that swam between its legs. He felt a light touch of sanity return when he recognised a common kingfisher.

By now, every plant he looked at was unknown to him and he resigned himself to only collecting samples and taking note of the things that seemed to him to be unusual even in their own habitat. Ludivine spent every free moment she had sketching or painting the flowers, birds, insects that the soldiers picked, shot, or swatted to show the elf. Ciaran started a collection of dragonflies.

Another night swathed in mosquito netting and breathless heat but before lunchtime the next day they reached the shore and the sea breeze came in over the carefully crafted, tussock-tufted sand dunes that protected from erosion the ground the road was laid on.

They marched, sea on one side and the marsh pools on the other so that they were surrounded by water and the salt that filled the very air with its scent and clung to their clothes and hair and skin in a veil of microscopic crystals.

“It gets everywhere!” Ciaran complained, throwing off his clothes to wipe himself down.

“It is highly prized,” Emhyr murmured, waylaying the elfling to suck a mouthful of it from his neck, “All over the empire.”

Ciaran lingered in the embrace. He could smell brine on Emhyr too and tentatively licked him. Emhyr immediately caught his mouth in a tangy kiss then murmured against his ear.

“We will stop for a few days, you will be able to rest properly. We will have a suite to ourselves with a bath in it.”

Ciaran’s breath caught at the implied promise and he moved to press his forehead against Emhyr’s a moment in a foretaste of intimacy.

Finally, the lighthouse came into view, then the long crenelated city walls and the taller ones of the fortified citadel, and, as the ground levelled out, so did the rose and lavender-hued salt flats surrounding it.

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Ciaran stared out at the vast expanse of the ocean before him, so calm and unruffled it became a mirror for the clear, slowly pinkening evening sky disturbed only by a few spun sugar clouds. Another wave came in, tickled his ankles, then ebbed, playfully stealing away the fine-grained sand from around his feet and between his toes.

He hated it.

Having to get into the Pontar was bad enough but this was exponentially worse.

Daintily lifting his feet and taking a step back, Ciaran shot Bastiaan an aggrieved look.

When they’d arrived, at low tide, the beach had stretched out for another hundred feet at least, but
after a late and leisurely lunch with the engineers and the city notables, the incoming tide had already covered up most of the sand. Emhyr had gone straight into meetings and the ever-efficient var Cleef had suggested Ciaran be given his first swimming lesson.

“The water is nice and warm.”

Ciaran’s eyes narrowed suspiciously. By now he was all too familiar with a Nilfgaardian tendency to wilfully and woefully misread situations.

The Impera captain was standing on the other side of him, wearing a grin and the same simple black tunic, belted and slit almost to the waist on either side, that Ciaran and Bastiaan wore. Further down the beach behind him, a cohort of off-duty Alba, most of them naked, streaked by before diving headlong into the deeper waters. The flamingos feeding on what the rising tide brought in shuffled over a little but otherwise seemed unfazed by the disturbance.

“We’ll just go in to the knees,” Bastiaan encouraged, raising up a silt-like cloud in the clear water as he strode in.

Evidently he’d meant his and var Cleef’s knees and by then the hem of Ciaran’s tunic was trailing in the water.

Emhyr had signed special dispensations in triplicate for each man in preparation for just this eventuality and Ciaran clung tightly to the arm Bastiaan and var Cleef each held out to steady him as he tentatively pushed himself off his feet.

Even the water was different, he decided. It was denser, heavier, and had more buoyancy to it than fresh water did. Not to mention the odious push and pull of the tide.

Elves loved water and they had an unparalleled ability to find it and use it. They even loved bathing in it, when it gurgled in streams and creeks, when it pooled into ponds or bubbled up in springs. Some of their number had been so enamoured with water that centuries ago they had adapted and evolved into separate creatures, such as nympha and merfolk. But elves — real elves, common elves — did not much favour deep lakes of unplumbable depths and rivers full of hidden currents. They understood the mystery and power of water, the part of magic that came from all water being connected. It was one and several the way elves were.

And this, this ocean that stretched beyond Ciaran’s field of vision, beyond the horizon itself, was the most unfathomable water of all.

“We could try floating,” Bastiaan glanced at var Cleef, “I could demonstrate?”

A nod and Bastiaan was bobbing along the water’s surface easily. Ciaran’s expression grew stony and his grip on var Cleef’s forearm became vice-like so the Impera captain decided to call it a day and they waded back to shore where Ciaran turned his attention and Bastiaan’s to beachcombing.

The elf had never seen seashells in their natural habitat and he spent a happy hour quizzing his companion on the different forms they found while trying to keep his feet just on the surface of the sand he did not trust before retiring with his hoard to a beachside cabana perched on stilts, beyond the tideline. When the Albas came back from their swim and heard of his new interest, they brought him shells by the handful and Ciaran spent the next hour happily sorting through them to find the best ones, tossing the rejects out of the window.

Mererid said not a word when the elfling turned up at the imperial suite shedding sand, holding a bucket full of shells and sand dollars, but Ciaran noticed that he was scrubbed more forcefully than
usual during his bath, and he turned up as delicately pink as a flamingo for his dinner with the emperor.

They were served a simple but hearty dish of rice and lamb with a smattering of fruit and vegetables for colour. Ciaran manoeuvred some rice onto his fork and eyed the grains curiously before taking a cautious bite. He decided he liked it, it had a subtle flavour and a nice amount of bite.

“This is the furthest north it will grow so it is not often found in northern regional cuisines,” Emhyr explained, “And most of what is produced here is consumed here, few other grains will grow. And yet it is one of the most fertile areas in the empire. East of here, water is often scarce and we have had to build aqueducts and dams and sluice gates just to create a few acres of arable land.”

“This lamb is delicious,” Ciaran announced, “Would you like some more?”

“You have it, elyennen. I cannot appreciate the flavour, I do not have a good palate.”

Ciaran stopped mid-serve.

“But I watched you! At the wine-tasting!”

“I do not have a strong sense of taste but I do have a strong sense of smell,” Emhyr explained, “Few people know this.”

Ciaran mulled this over as he absently piled his plate high with lamb, and as he noticed his elflings’ preoccupation, Emhyr sought to distract him with tidbits of information about the area.

The delicately-salted lamb came from further up the coast where they fed on the shoreline’s flatlands, the grass there watered by the sea tides, the salt of which was drawn up into the grass. The conjunctions of the rivers into this wide valley and the warm sea current that ran by the coast here accounted for Pereplut’s microclimate, which made it so like the City that they shared much of the same flora and fauna.

Emhyr talked and Ciaran listened as he always did whenever the emperor spoke of his empire.

The emperor had spent the last few days with the sappers and members of the engineer corps, intensively studying the plans for Pereplut in preparation for this visit. Some of the plans were spread out on the writing desk and Emhyr went over them now — partly to organise his own thoughts but also to explain them to his questioning elf, pausing occasionally to brush his lips against Ciaran’s still damp hair.

Later, Ciaran held out his wrist and Emhyr put his seal on it and carried the elfling off to bed then brushed his thumb over the sallow, fading mark on his shoulder.

“It doesn’t hurt anymore.”

It was what Ciaran always said but this evening Emhyr chose to believe it and Ciaran’s insides squirmed happily under the intensity of the amber gaze. He loved that concentrated look. It seemed to say that nothing existed beyond the boundaries of his being.

Emhyr began to move down but Ciaran instantly stopped him.

“I want to look at you!”

Without missing a beat, Emhyr tugged the elf lower onto the bed and covered him, quickly catching him in a deep kiss.
Sometime early the next morning, as he drank his coffee and gave his notes a final read, Emhyr found himself wondering how he’d landed himself in this situation.

Ciaran was draped over him, leaning on the forearms he’d placed on either side of his book, his delightful rump in the air, and one of his feet waving back and forth idly. Emhyr would have said something about the preposterous position, only the elf’s lovely backside was in the perfect place for Emhyr to lean his papers against.

Emhyr slowly drank his second cup of coffee, suddenly loathe to leave their quiet, cozy netted cocoon.

He liked his new concubine far more than he’d expected to, and — more dangerously — more than he thought was wise. He was also acutely aware of having already spent more time with this concubine than he had with any of the others, including his first, Klaervy. He was unused to spending so much undivided time with any one of them and had not foreseen all the possible consequences. By the time they reached the empire, it was likely he would have spent more time with Ciaran than he had with the rest of them put together.

He put down the cup and gave Ciaran’s rump a gentle pat.

“You may stay in bed but I have to get up.”

This was met with the baleful, slightly martyred look he’d been fully prepared for, but the elf did languidly move off him to snuggle by his side. When Emhyr leaned over to kiss Ciaran, he felt the slender arms creep about his neck.

“You will be the ruin of the empire,” he chided, as much himself as Ciaran, untangling himself.

Ciaran yawned delicately.

While Emhyr was in his meeting with the engineers, Ciaran went exploring.

The port city’s streets were lined with sun-baked buildings of the same pale, sandy colour as the ground, with doors and window frames painted a characteristic bright sky blue. There was something quaint and almost sleepy about it and yet it was the region’s economic hub and it moved with quiet, deliberate efficiency.

The nutrient-rich waters around the mouth of the river supported a thriving, and noisy, fishing community, which in turn had spawned a flourishing of shipwrights, net-makers, and the potters who turned the amphorae, pots and other receptacles into which the region’s olive oil, wine, salt and salted fish were packed. These filled the port warehouses that also held sacks of rice and stacks of reed canes, ready to be loaded onto the merchant ships plying up and down the length of the empire.

The hard work of the paddy fields and salt flats was done by slaves, however, and as he wandered through the town, Ciaran glimpsed their much more modest and closely-guarded accommodations and the overseers’ quarters above them.

Despite the novelty of the wetlands, his attendants had been subdued since their first sighting of the paddy fields and he overheard them one afternoon, when they thought he was napping.

They were all still coming to terms with slavehood. The two Aedirnian serfs were especially shocked, but given they’d been bought and sold by their Northern lords and had never themselves owned land, it was difficult for them to pinpoint exactly how their former and current states differed. They earned no wages but were so much better fed and clothed that they both privately though they might be paid in years of life. Still, they objected to the principle.
“There are laws,” Ludivine the Cintran explained with a show of patience, “There were terrible slave rebellions in the past so His Majesty changed the laws so they wouldn’t happen again. You can be fined for beating or killing a slave without cause. Especially since these slaves belong to the empire like we do, not to private owners. That’s why they have the same tattoo we do.”

The outline of the Great Sun. Nilfgaardian citizens had a filled in black sun and Ciaran would have his done when they reached the City.

“What is the point of laws if they don’t give you rights? Like the right to leave.”

“They could run away.”

“How? Even if you could steal a horse, if you stuck to the roads you’d soon be caught, and if you didn’t you’d probably never be seen again. You couldn’t hide in these marshes for long and they have professional slave-hunters.”

Synnøve’s words had been savage but she herself had merely sounded analytical. And they had put an end to the discussion. Seeing slaves toiling in the fields under the midday sun had been a salutary reminder that things could have gone much worse for them and there seemed little point arguing options that none of them were seriously contemplating.

Meanwhile, the emperor’s meeting had continued after a short, friendly lunch during which the Nilfgaardian engineers had plied their compatriots with less technical questions about the North. It was finally adjourned so they could go out into the marshes to see the results of the engineering works for themselves.

Moving away from the table, Emhyr glanced out of the window at the nearby olive grove where Ciaran was waiting for him then wandered out in search of his elfling.

Even without the handful of Impera discreetly standing in a wide ring around it, Emhyr would have known to look for Ciaran up the eldest and finest of the olive trees in the grove.

Emhyr came to a stop beneath it, hands locked behind his back and as he looked up into the shadowy branches he caught the gleam of golden eyes and could just make out a dim outline nestled in one of the studier forks.

“I hope you do not expect me to catch you.”

“Wouldn’t want you to hurt your back,” came the sly reply and the corners of Emhyr’s mouth quirked.

“Can you get down or should I send for help?”

A dismissive huff then Ciaran left his perch, slunk down the tree trunk, flitted across to Emhyr and rocked onto his toes to press a kiss against Emhyr’s jawline, his fingertips feather-light against Emhyr’s chest for balance.

“Finished?” Ciaran asked, sinking back onto his heels, and smiled at Emhyr’s nod.

“You refused the sand cure?”

“Delayed it,” Ciaran corrected, “I thought we could do it together. It would be good for your back.”

Emhyr observed the young elf. Ciaran knew his back problems would not be cured by any amount of hot sand but he knew it went beyond this. They were just a fortnight away from the City and
Emhyr’s trained gaze could see the anxiety that simmered beneath the surface.

“‘It cannot hurt,’” he agreed.

They applied insect-repellent to their exposed skin and ventured into the marshes where wooden walkways had been laid down on pylons sunk into the mobile soil, a few inches above the water level.

War and poor land management had turned Velen into a noxious bog into which people constantly planted things that lost any inclination to continue living once they’d raised up their seedling heads long enough to have a good look around. What forests existed were too saturated with monsters and bandits to be safely exploited, and all the while the stagnant, creeping waters of the many rills and runnels** gnawed away at their undefended, once-fertile banks.

Pereplut was not Velen. Pereplut was a marvel.

A bug-infested, waterlogged, salt-corroded, sun-flattened marvel, perhaps, but all these things only served to make it more unique. Birds and fish of every shape and size gorged on the wealth of mosquitoes and dragonflies and other insects, then bigger birds and bigger fish fed on them in turn.

Tracts of the wetlands were already being converted into paddies and imperial-grade roads, but the deeper, more inhospitable areas would be left untouched. Ciaran was offered a small telescope so he could look out across the flat terrain to the areas that remained inaccessible on foot. One of the black bulls, quietly chewing its cud while an egret perched and preened on its heavy head, peered back.

Ciaran lowered the telescope then stared when by his feet, from beneath the walkway, a large turtle paddled idly by then paused in the sunshine by a patch of tiny white marsh lilies.

Emhyr, who knew his elfling well, warned him mildly.

“They bite.”

Everywhere Ciaran looked there was hidden beauty, and aside from the numberless plants unknown to him, he was also fascinated by the birds. He’d had Ludivine paint some watercolours of the flamingos to send to Iorveth but worried his friend might think it a prank and briefly considered the practicalities of having one stuffed.

“You’ll find plenty in Nilfgaard,” Bastiaan informed him, “We eat them. You could send your friend some feathers or even a beak.”

The beaks, like the legs, were even more improbably pink than the feathers and were consequently even more likely to be taken as fakes.

The tour ended and after they’d changed into their black tunics, Ciaran and Emhyr were buried to their necks in baking hot sand, side by side like carrots, their heads shaded by a small open tent.

As they watched the tide coming in, Ciaran’s mind drifted back to the marshes.

They were one of the most fantastically beautiful places he had ever been but it evidently suffered from being so unwieldy and isolated, the land route to it too troublesome for non-essential trade and travel.

The drainage works were monumental. They involved underground channels and ditches dug into the shifting soil to divert some of the water. The ground all around the marshes was stepped and walled, with drains sunk along the edges to minimise the runoff and loss of topsoil, with the same
care and effort that had gone into the creation of the sand dunes that helped protect the wetlands, planted with grasses so that they themselves would withstand erosion by the sea and the wind. They had had to use a form of cement developed in Nilfgaard that was impervious to seawater.

These were not temporary works, they had not started weeks or even months ago. They were built on slave labour, yes, but also on technology developed over decades in all parts of the empire. It wasn’t just a ongoing outlay, a few lines of expenditure in a ledger somewhere. The real investment was intangible, it was in the schools that had trained the engineers, in the research these had conducted, in the trial and error and endless experimentation, in the painstaking collection and scrutiny of information from every far-flung corner of the empire and beyond to see what could be of use and what might be built on or adapted to be of use.

It was humbling to think that so much of this would be made available — almost freely given, when seen from such a wide-angle perspective — to the Pontar elves and even that corner of Temeria that Vernon Roche now ruled.

“Can it really work in Velen?” Ciaran asked once they’d been dug up again and were sipping drinks under the tent even though the sun had started to dip and wasn’t as fierce.

“The challenges are different. We left one of our best engineer corps in Velen and they are in continuous communication with the team here,” Emhyr murmured, a hint of resignation taking the edge off his gravel tones, “It will take many years, however, and we cannot do it all ourselves. But no doubt any failure will be seen as our failure.”

Out on the water, the fishermen were coming back with their catch and hooked their large nets to counterweighted cranes to lift them out. On a sandspit in the foreground, a pelican waddled by self-importantly, throat pouch heavy with fish as if to claim credit for where the idea had originated.

Var Cleef materialised and cheerfully dragged Ciaran off for his swimming lesson.

Ciaran later found himself staring up at the sky, gripping var Cleef’s arm and trying to listen to his instructions even though his ears were intermittently submerged. For the fifth time. And once again, he felt his feet start to sink and tried to pull them up again, but that meant he started to fold up and so his backside began to sink and he had to throw his head back to keep his nose out of the water, spluttering to keep it out of his mouth.

He felt strong arms fish him out of his panic and huddled against Emhyr’s familiar chest.

“Why can’t I do it?”

“Elves find it harder to float. You are so lean,” Emhyr soothed, sliding him back in the water, “Try again.”

And after Ciaran had gripped his arm and kicked up his feet, Emhyr did what neither Bastiaan nor var Cleef had dared do despite the dispensations. He gently tugged his arm away and placed both his arms under Ciaran, holding him up and straight until he’d stabilised, then lowered his arms an inch to let him float unassisted.

He waited a minute then pulled Ciaran back into his arms and waded into deeper water until Ciaran bobbed loosely in his hold and there they stood for a moment, watching the sun dip lower and fill the sky with a flash of scarlet and tangerine before fading to dove’s throat hues.

Ciaran looked out at the flat sea and how the the light caught on the few wisps of cloud, and thought about the wax-sealed package of papers that still sat on his desk, ignored.
“This is not real life,” he whispered.

Emhyr kissed the top of his head slowly.

“No.”

And as they watched, the black ships of the Nilfgaardian armada sailed into sight, silhouetted against the soft sky, and dropped anchor in the middle of the wide bay.

Chapter End Notes

*a paver: a type of paving stone
**rills and runnels are both types of shallow stream.
Chapter Summary

In which we sail ever closer to the wind.

Chapter Notes

So this was going to be the penultimate chapter but it became so long I had to split it. Ah well, I had fun :D
Thank you for the lovely comments! <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

THE BLACK SHIPS

— Off the Coast of Ebbing, mid-April, 1272 —

The ships they’d been on in Oxenfurt had been large, but they’d only been the largest that the Pontar could accommodate. These were ocean-going vessels and they were colossal. The most monumental of all was the flagship, a galleon rather predictably named The Great Sun and whose stern-castle towered over even the city’s lighthouse. They looked menacing enough in their own right but Ciaran knew they were heavily-warded and he could well imagine the terror they inspired in anyone who woke to find them just offshore, darkening the horizon, rounded bellies full of the dreaded Zerrikanian fire that could burn even on water.

By the time the tide turned that evening, the flagship and its escorts were ready to set sail and Ciaran and his entourage had been afforded a couple of hours to settle in. They’d been assigned a neat, cosy berth in which Ciaran recognised many of the efficiencies of organisation and practicality he’d become accustomed to in his wagon and carriage.

The unspoken understanding between the emperor and the elf, however, was that the elf would spend his nights in the emperor’s vast and luxuriously-appointed, stern cabin, and it was here that they finally found themselves alone after their dinner at the commodore’s table.

Ciaran made a point of asking Emhyr to help him out of his jewels and outer layers, revealing the gauzy shift and simpler jewellery he’d put on beneath for his benefit, before covering some of it back up again when he unpinned his hair with studied carelessness. Emhyr settled into an armchair to
watch him and Ciaran wandered over to the sideboard to pour him a drink before bringing it to him and perching on his lap.

Emhyr sipped his drink and continued to watch the elf, stroking his thigh absently.

The emperor looked tired. It was barely noticeable but beneath the colour he’d recently acquired he was pale and the fine lines around his eyes and the long one on his forehead had deepened.

Ciaran kissed the corner of Emhyr’s mouth, licking away a trace of malt, then buried his face against his neck, suddenly feeling worn too.

“It will take us a couple of days to reach our anchorage for Venendal,” the emperor murmured into his hair, “The ship is comfortable and we have no engagements. There are some letters for you but they can wait until tomorrow. Try to rest as much as you can.”

“And you?” Ciaran asked, raising his head to look at him.

“There will be issues to attend to but the bulk of the negotiations are done. The Venendali should be amenable, I do not foresee difficulties there. I could have asked to see them in the City but they will appreciate the courtesy and Evrard has not seen his family for over a year. His youngest was just months old when we left.”

Ciaran’s long ears pricked up at the warmth of affection in the final words and the image they conjured but he fought to quell a flutter of anxiety as a shadow fell over it.

“What about Morvran?”

He had tried to believe Emhyr and he’d taken great pains to not treat the general any differently but hadn’t managed to forget or even dismiss his suspicions.

“Morvran will accompany us. He is a valued advisor and I will need his counsel.”

“But Emhyr—!”

“There is no need for you to worry,” Emhyr said softly but firmly, “And surely you can see it would be safer to keep him with us?”

Ciaran stared at him, pupils widening as they tried to see the unspoken.

Prince Voorhis currently held Emhyr’s throne but Emhyr had his son. And as the assassination attempt had shown, anything could happen. Even to an emperor. Even to a general.

Emhyr pressed a long kiss against the pale forehead then put down his glass and pulled him into his arms.

“We will worry about these things when we reach the City,” he murmured into Ciaran’s hair, rubbing his arm soothingly, “But not yet. We still have a fortnight. You should enjoy yourself.”

Ciaran snuggled.

“What is Venendal like?”

“Hot,” Emhyr answered dryly, “Hotter than you will like. Hotter than Nilfgaard, but it is a dry heat and the nights are cool. It was mostly desert, as hot and dry as parts of Zerrikania and Ofier.”

“Do they have oliphants there too?”
“No, they would be too costly to feed. But there are camels that can go days without drinking that we brought in from Zerrikania and a species of Ofieri striped horse — Morvran will probably tell you about those.”

Ciaran listened, comfortably cradled, occasionally prodding Emhyr with a question when it sounded like he might stop talking, soothed by the deep rumble of his voice through his chest. A hand wound into his hair and rubbed his scalp gently and he nearly nodded off halfway through an enumeration of the many uses of sisal fibres.

“I didn’t get all dressed up just to sleep!” he spluttered, more to himself than to Emhyr.

“No?”

Ciaran looked up at Emhyr sharply, piqued by his barely veiled amusement, but settled again in satisfaction at the warmth of his gaze. He waited and, sure enough, Emhyr soon leaned in for a light kiss, barely more than a brush of the lips, then another more insistent press against Ciaran’s top lip, then his bottom one, then a teasing tip of tongue between the two, then more of the same until Ciaran nipped him impatiently.

After that the kisses became hungrier. Ciaran tipped his head back, smiling at the rake of teeth against his throat, the nips going up his jawline, the delicate pressure of a sharp canine in the centre of a soft earlobe, then the rough swipe of tongue the length of the shell.

Ciaran swung himself up so he straddled Emhyr’s lap, gave him a hard kiss, then set about the business of unballasting the emperor of his finery, starting with the weighty chain of office.

“Go on, I will do the rest,” Emhyr bade fondly as he watched the elfling’s mounting impatience.

Ciaran sauntered away, throwing off his shift as he went, then slipped between the sheets while Emhyr stripped down to his undershirt.

Emhyr soon settled between Ciaran’s thighs and caught him up in a devouring kiss as he rolled his hips against him insistently.

The bed gave a terrifying creak and they both froze.

“Do you think anyone heard that?” Ciaran mumbled against Emhyr’s throat.

They strained their hearing for sounds of alarm but the discreet answering silence suggested that everyone knew what they were up to.

“Try again?”

Emhyr obeyed, cautiously, and the bed protested even more loudly.

“The floor?” Ciaran suggested after they’d stared at each other a moment, then added, as Emhyr frowned at the floor, “We could move the mattress.”

“I am the emperor of Nilfgaard,” Emhyr ground out, “I refuse to end up on a mattress on the floor like a wandering minstrel doing three nights in Oxenfurt.”

Ciaran’s ears pricked up in interest as Emhyr went on, incandescent.

Emhyr’s mercurial temper was like a pot of water simmering away on a stovetop. You wouldn’t know it was hot except that occasionally someone lifted the lid and released a cloud of steam. Even
those who knew the pot and were used to cooking with it handled it with care and even then it sometimes boiled over and a face in the crowd disappeared.

Ciaran had never seen Emhyr lose his temper before except when they’d fought over Cintra and he’d been too near it then to really see it. This was aimed at others and Ciaran observed, dispassionately analytical.

“Who does one execute for something like this?” he asked in idle curiosity when Emhyr had finished, “I know this is usually the commodore’s cabin — and his bed — but maybe the creaking is more the carpenter’s responsibility?”

Emhyr gave him a long, narrow look.

Ciaran held it solemnly for as long as he could.

“Besides, don’t we need the commodore to get us to Nilfgaard?” he continued as the corners of his mouth twitched and he soon dissolved into giggles.

Emhyr grabbed a piece of railing for leverage, gave his elf a bruising kiss, then thrust vengefully. And this time the bed consented.

They looked at each other again, Emhyr smirked, and Ciaran wrapped his legs high around his waist.

Later that night, the Impera captain slipped in to finalise the arrangements for their expedition into Venendal and the two men talked in low, quiet tones on the far side of the room.

“We’ll bring all of Lord Ciaran’s attendants and a couple of medics. I get the sense from the mages that Master Aelrindel would prefer to stay with the ships but I will speak with him directly,” var Cleef murmured and continued to go through the list of those who would make up their retinue, “And young aep Larsen. Lord Ciaran likes him and I’d like Vanina to meet him.”

The emperor gave him a long, long look from behind hooded eyes.

“A medal and his transfer to the Impera will be reward enough for the boy, Evrard. There are no expectations placed upon you.”

“I know, but he has potential. He’s principled, determined, and there’s more depth to him than first appears.”

Emhyr observed his lieutenant closely. He knew Evrard var Cleef better than anyone and could see past the throwaway smiles and easy tones to the steel beneath.

Var Cleef’s regard for the aep Larsen boy was no secret but Emhyr knew his maecenee had not yet decided. Neither he nor Vanina would have any formal say if Evrard wanted to take aep Larsen as his maecenee, but it was entirely in Evrard’s character to seek their opinion and would likely give up the idea if either objected.

His and Evrard’s shared conception of how a maecenate should work had been one of the first areas in which they’d found common ground. Many, particularly in the higher circles of society, treated it as a question of prestige and convenience, a specific form of nepotism, another way of tightening reciprocal bonds of interest. For Evrard to elevate a soldier of low birth but high promise would be unusual, and yet it would only be an iteration of what Emhyr himself had done. It strengthened their doctrine of promotion by merit rather than seniority or status and Emhyr knew Evrard would spare no effort in mentoring a maecenee of his own.
“His family is tied to the Voorhises. His father was of the Alba, the boy himself owes his place in the Alba to Morvran, and his mother relies on the Voorhises’ patronage for work through her guild. You will split his loyalties.”

Var Cleef shook his head slightly.

“His loyalty is to the empire and to the emperor. He supports the Voorhises because they support you, but should that change, I think he would not hesitate. He would know where his true duty lies.”

Evrard paused a moment.

“He would give his life for Lord Ciaran. And you. And me, I expect, even now.”

Emhyr nodded gravely.

“Very well, we shall revisit the question when you are ready. For now, give your orders. But Evrard, once we are there you will be off duty.”

Evrard broke into a grin and gave a curt nod.

He glanced at the heavy curtains that hid the alcove where the bed was tucked away.

“Is Lord Ciaran asleep?”

Emhyr nodded.

“The bed creaks,” he said at length.

“Loudly,” Evrard confirmed, his grin widening, “I’ll have someone fix it.”

He leaned over the table to kiss Emhyr briefly then gave another nod and slipped back out.

Emhyr shrugged off his heavy outer robe and carefully moved Ciaran over a little so he could get into bed. He was gratified to find that the sated elf slept soundly through the night, with barely a twitch of his slender feet.

— N —

Despite the winds that propelled the ships, the same relentless sun that shone over Pereplut beat down on the wooden decks until it threatened to melt the tar between the planks and made the cleats and every other bit of metal too hot to touch. Since they were still caught in the warm currents that eddied along the Ebbinger coast, a sail was sometimes thrown into the water so that anyone who so inclined could jump in and cool off and Ciaran could splash around and practice floating. It had come to var Cleef’s attention that Ciaran’s attendants didn’t know how to swim either and so swimming lessons had been added to those in Nilfgaardian and other daily miseries.

Ciaran had only ever been on a few river boats and he spent a part of each day as close as he could get to the bowsprit, mesmerised by the trail of churning froth the ship ahead of theirs left in its wake and at the feeling of speed. He was fascinated by the way the squadron stayed in formation despite the waves and the winds, and admired the taut discipline on board that made it possible.

They passed numberless ships of every shape and size and function. Fishing vessels and the
occasional leisurecraft that didn’t stray far from the shore, while further out to sea they crossed troop
and horse transport ships similar to theirs, fat merchantmen almost as heavily armed as the navy
ships, and the flurry of quick, light vessels that hurried between the larger ones, resupplying them,
delivering messages and running errands. And once or twice they passed a convoy of merchant ships
who had their own armed escort and whose yards of sail were painted with the triangle and flaming
star of the Guild of Merchants.

But it was the evenings Ciaran found truly delicious and he often spent those on the aftercastle,
listening to the wind rolling in the canvas and singing through the rigging, the creak of wood, the
voices of the sailors on the other ships as they drifted along the water in huffs and puffs. By day, he
could barely stand to look out in the expanse of the ocean, at a horizon too wide and full of the
unknown for his mind to contain. By night, the ocean’s vastness was more acceptable, its edges were
blotted out. The darkness that fell over the water on the starboard side was the same darkness that fell
over the larboard one, and the land breeze carried with it the familiar buttery scent of sun-warmed
sand.

And once he’d cooled off enough to feel the night chill and had scared himself into a pleasant shiver
rather than a terror, Ciaran sauntered off to the imperial cabin and fell asleep to Emhyr’s reassuring
presence just a few feet away.

The ships that passed them brought news and sometimes mail from wherever they’d come from.
Ciaran’s writing desk had been set up by the some of the large windows that lined the back of the
stern cabin, his neat stack of letters on a delicate side table by it, and he went through them
methodically while Emhyr laboured at the enormous map table onto which his mountain of letters,
reports, dispatches, orders to sign, and other miscellaneous papers had been sorted into piles and
trays by the private secretary and his army of clerks.

The first letter Ciaran opened was from Eugène de la Faisanderie, written on cotton paper nearly as
heavy as card and full of effusive thanks for the letters of introduction Ciaran had given him for
Iorveth and other key figures in Dol Gwennelen. The marquis had already established contact, had
started transferring the funds they had collected for the Northern elves and exploring business
opportunities, and even his meticulous copperplate couldn’t keep his enthusiasm from flying off the
page.

The letter from Iorveth read like the reverse of the marquis’. It thanked Ciaran for what he had done
in Toussaint before referring to the marquis in polite platitudes. The tone was cool but Ciaran could
discern whether this was because Iorveth had not trusted the message’s bearer or because he
resented Ciaran’s actions in Toussaint.

Ciaran picked up the next envelope, thought he recognised the hand, frowned, then checked the
postmark.

Temeria.

Sure enough, it was from Vernon Roche and Ciaran perused it a couple of times. Its ostensible
purpose was to say that the triumvirs would be entertaining some Nilfgaardian businessmen and to
ask what foods they would prefer and whether Ciaran knew someone who could supply them with
wines a little out of the ordinary. It also contained indifferent enquiries after his health, indifferent
hopes that he was enjoying Nilfgaard, and in among other banalities there were equally indifferent
remarks about irksome raids being conducted along the border by Redanian bandits that they were
successfully dealing with.

Another letter was from Elihal, brought by one of the merchant ships, thanking him for the fabric
samples he’d sent, conveyed a little news from Novigrad and asked him a million questions about his
health and the empire. As Ciaran was about to put the final seal on his reply, his heart swelled anew with affection for his friend, who had certainly gone to a great expense of time, effort and coin to send the letter. He went to Emhyr to enquire how they might facilitate things for Elihal.

“Leave it unsealed, I will have my secretary include a prepared envelope for your friend to send his reply by. He need only take it to the nearest Nilfgaardian embassy or guard post. Here is a letter from Iorveth, perhaps you would like to see it.”

Ciaran unfolded the letter and out of it fell another one with his name on it, folded into a complicated shape and still sealed with wax.

“Do you want to see it?”

“Only if you wish me to.”

“There have been incursions by the Redanians,” Ciaran said as he read, frowning at the similarity of language, “They haven’t dared go into Gwyngaard but they’ve crossed into both Temeria and Dol Gwennelen in places.”

Ciaran’s gaze went from the letter to the emperor.

“Iorveth and Roche both say they’re bandits but I’m certain they’re soldiers.”

“I agree,” Emhyr said, looking up from his papers.

Ciaran looked into the cool citrine eyes.

Gwyngaard hadn’t suffered any of the attacks but it was undoubtedly aware of them. After all, one of its functions was to serve as a spy base.

“You knew?”

“I have heard reports.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I thought you should hear it from Iorveth. And this sort of thing was to be expected.”

It was, Ciaran realised. In truth, the peace treaty was only a truce and Radovid’s assurance that he would satisfy himself with his part of the North was as insincere as Emhyr’s. Now that the threat of Nilfgaard didn’t seem as near or as great, Radovid was pressing his advantage.

“The raids are not serious,” Emhyr continued evenly, watching him, “I believe Roche’s word was ‘irksome’.”

“Not serious yet,” Ciaran immediately qualified, deep in thought.

“It is a provocation. They must not respond to it. Do you understand?”

Ciaran stared.

“Do nothing at all?”

“They can and must patrol their borders, of course, and hang whomever they capture. But no retaliation, no pre-emptive strikes, not on Redanian soil. Any concerted effort on their part will only escalate things,” Emhyr paused, “Do you understand, elyennen?”
Ciaran tried. It was hard to think like a Nilfgaardian, he was still used to thinking like a Scoia’tael. He was used to being accountable for immediate successes and failures, for how they played into the simple wider strategy of trying to keep what was theirs, but had rarely had to worry about the long-term consequences and implications. Theirs had been an asymmetric war and their side had had nothing to lose.

Now the asymmetry was different. The war and, especially, the peace had changed everything.

Radovid could afford to disown his soldier-bandits, but if armed elves or Temerians crossed onto Redanian soil he would claim that the protectorates for which Nilfgaard had pledged to stand as guarantor had broken the terms of the peace treaty.

“It would justify Radovid attacking us in self-defence?”

Emhyr gave a slow nod, still watching him closely.

Kaedwen had been invaded but had capitulated without putting much of a fight. Lyria, lower Aedirn and the other nations that now made up Aedimia had similarly seen little damage, and Redania had not been invaded at all. Their infrastructure had not been demolished, their barns and stables had not been burned down, their supplies of grain and livestock had not been ransacked and requisitioned, and their fields and farms not trampled to muddy ruin. No, the Redanian and Kaedweni soldiers had gone back to their farms and fields to sow that part of the grain that had been kept aside in barns and silos for this purpose and they could expect a regular harvest to supplement their existing stores. They still had their cows to milk, families to feed, still had taverns to go to at the end of the day for a pint or two of ale.

But the Pontar valley and all of Temeria had been battlegrounds and they were not prepared for and could not afford a renewal of conflict. Not for a long time.

“But they — Temeria and Dol Gwennelen — would be the ones acting in self defence! Wouldn’t you defend them?”

“I? I know nothing of this.”

Of course he didn’t, neither Roche nor Iorveth nor anyone else had told him. Not formally. Because while King Radovid the Mad was accountable to no man, Temeria’s and Dol Gwennelen’s independence were underwritten by their ability to manage their own affairs. They could ask Nilfgaard for help but that help might come at the cost of direct rule.

Another one of Gwyngaard’s possible functions.

“I cannot have another war begin before this peace is even formally celebrated in Nilfgaard, elyennic,” Emhyr said quietly.

No, his lords, his merchants and his bankers, and maybe even some of his generals would not stand for it. This time they would force their emperor to cut their losses.

Ciaran stared at the letter in his hand, one that now seemed to him more dangerous than any weapon. He had always acted on the belief that the path to freedom was paved in blood not ink, but he now saw that to avoid more bloodshed they would have to stand by the words of the peace treaty, no matter the cost.

Roche wasn’t one to rush into things and besides, his hands would be tied by his fellow triumvirs, but Ciaran knew Iorveth’s temper and he understood what pressure he and the rest of the leadership were under to appear strong — not just to Nilfgaard and Temeria and Redania, but also to the
Aedirnians who had been displaced from the Pontar valley to make way for Gwyngaard and the elves of Dol Gwennelen and who lay in wait, hoping to take it back at the first opportunity. They also could not afford to appear weak.

But both Temeria and Dol Gwennelen would have to. At least for now. They would have to swallow this offence and the next one too, and meanwhile Radovid’s forces could continue to harry them both, diverting manpower and resources from the reconstruction efforts, undermining the leaders of both nations and fomenting unrest.

Ciaran felt tears sting his eyes at the realisation of what he would have to ask — encourage, maybe even beg— Iorveth to accept. Iorveth, who wouldn’t have bent to death itself.

“We must buy time.”

Emhyr gave a slow nod.

“I could recommend restraint and advise them to send reports and maybe, in time, I’ll suggest a formal complaint, via the official channels,” Ciaran suggested slowly.

“That would be wise. We will wait and watch and, in time, Ambassador Fitz-Oesterlen will make an official complaint.”

Ciaran dropped the letter onto the desk and went to settle in Emhyr’s arms. He felt a kiss against his hair.

“Tell them the empire is celebrating, that the emperor is looking forward to his triumph and thinks of little else.”

Ciaran nodded against his shoulder.

“Thank you, elyennen.”

— N —

Emhyr watched Bastiaan give Ciaran his swimming lesson. Evrard was right, he was a good-natured boy, disciplined, quick to learn, and possessed of that priceless soundness of instinct that couldn’t be taught.

The sky suddenly darkened and clouds gathered in an instant, building up and thickening around them despite the strong wind that rose up.

“Get him out!” the captain snapped shortly, leaning over the side, “Get Lord Ciaran out!”

Several ropes were thrown over the side, Bastiaan grabbed one, jerked the sheathed dagger from his belt and tucked it into a loop in the line, creating a handle.

“Hold onto that, My Lord,” he bade quietly, then made another quick loop for Ciaran’s feet before tugging on the rope and calling out for it to be heaved up.

As soon as Ciaran was on deck, a towel was thrown over him and he went back to the side to see what the fuss was about and check Bastiaan got out. The others were swarming back on board and the waterlogged sail was being hauled to the side of the ship. All done in minutes.
Bastiaan clambered onto the deck just in time to wrap a length of solid rope around Synnøve, securing her to a mast. She had been standing there, staring out at the sea in a kind of frozen terror, too mesmerised to take hold of anything as the ship broached to.

“Take him below!” the captain shouted into the raging wind, indicating Ciaran.

But it was too late and a gust of wind like a kick between the shoulders nearly knocked Ciaran off his feet and buffeted him until he was pressed against the side, holding onto it tightly so he would not be thrown off as the ship heeled sharply.

Emhyr gripped the rails, pinning Ciaran tightly between himself and the side, snaking an arm around him.

The captain’s shouted orders echoed about the ship, relayed by his officers and echoed on the escort ships. There was a mad rush to secure the decks, to furl the madly-flapping sails while avoiding the innumerable ropes and cables that whipped free.

The waves grew and seemed to release a deep, low wail, and then the water began to boil.

“What is it?” Ciaran asked, straining his voice to be heard above the din, gripping Emhyr’s clothes with one hand and the ship with the other.


Their heads rose half out of the water, blue-hued and gleaming, what little hair they had floating around them, knotted like kelp, and stared back at thin with oversized, glazed-over eyes that were all pupil.

They spoke — Ciaran assumed they were speaking — in high-pitched, penetrating pulses that throbbed through the water, hit the hulls of the ships, then rose up into the air, cutting through the wind.

Emhyr began to address the creatures but even Ciaran could barely make out what he was saying. He spoke in high Nilfgaardian and the swirling wind brought his words back to him so that they echoed and echoed and melted into each other.

The high winds still whirled around them, pulling at Ciaran’s hair, the towel he was wrapped in, and splashed him with sea spray. He could feel the salt clinging to his skin, as if the sea were securing a vicarious hold on him.

“He is mine!” Emhyr finished, slow and deliberate, “I have named him and he has recognised our bond. You cannot break it.”

The howling and wailing continued but the calls had stopped and despite the noise and commotion there was a stillness in the air. A question.

“This will be war with Nilfgaard,” Emhyr warned, thunderous, “You must all decide if this is what you want.”

A few clicks raced and crossed in the water, then the wind died. A last long collective look at Emhyr and Ciaran and the heads all bobbed down beneath the surface of the water like a flurry of raindrops. The clouds melted away and the sun shone down on an empty sea.

“They’ve left us becalmed,” one of the sailors muttered, worried, glancing up at sky and the sails, “We can’t move without the wind.”
As they watched, however, a length of rope hanging from a cringle began to swing then the corner of canvas itself flapped idly.

“Prepare to make sail!” the captain called out and the bustle resumed.

“They do not usually come up this far north,” Emhyr later explained to Ciaran who was wrapped in blankets and furs and warming his hands on a tall, steaming cup of sweet hot chocolate, “The waters around Nilfgaard are the coolest they can comfortably survive in. They crossed the cold current to get here. And they brought their mages with them.”

“But why?”

“They wanted you.”

“Me? But why?”

“Because you are an omega. The same reason the dryads wanted you.”

“But I can’t live underwater!”

“It is possible they did not think that far. As a race they are simple and single-minded. Their young are all born unable to breathe in water but they change and adapt. Perhaps they think you will too. You can change, after all. And as you saw, they have some very powerful mages. Perhaps they do have ways.”

“How do you protect yourselves against them?”

“We do not. They help protect Nilfgaard. They need the lagoon. They give birth and raise their young there until they are old enough to survive in open water. In return, they prevent unauthorised access to our territorial waters. They help to keep the lagoon clean and free of predators.”

“They’ve never tried to…”?

“There are sometimes tensions but we have lived in relative peace for years. They cannot manoeuvre on land so they cannot break our hold on the lagoon, they cannot use it without our express consent. It would be almost impossible for them to raise their young outside it. Access to the lagoon is existential for them.”

“So they protect it?”

“They may sink any ship not under Nilfgaard’s protection. When we go further south into their territory you will see Gemmera’s skeleton coast. The Nazairi and Cintrans are still wary about sailing down to the City — something the Nilfgaardian merchant marine has taken advantage of.”

“So… Skelliger raiders are no threat to you?”

“No real threat to Nilfgaard proper. Nazair and North Metinna suffer most of their raids. They sometimes reach further but they know they do so at their peril. They know not to sail too close to the Sedna Abyss.”

“What’s in the Sedna Abyss?” Ciaran asked, breathless, his empty cup of chocolate still clutched in his hands, forgotten.

“We do not know half of what is in the Abyss. But what we do know of it is reason enough to avoid it,” Emhyr murmured, “Did you notice your Skelliger’s reaction?”
Ciaran had. He’d never seen Synnøve show fear before.

“She knows. She has heard stories. She heard from the few who returned of what happened to the many who did not. Skelligers are better sailors than we are, they live and learn in stormier waters. But they are brave to the point of foolhardiness and they have died in all the myriad ways it is possible to die in these waters — tritons, sea serpents... And the most powerful of all, Fata Morganas, powerful sea witches who can create enchantments on the water. They have led astray more ships than have been sunk by the tritons. Even our ships fear them.”

“Couldn’t you send the Navy against them?”

“You cannot fight a Fata Morgana. They can create the illusion of landmasses where there are none or hide existing ones from view. They can make a day last a week and wipe all shadows from sight. They can hide the stars in the sky and put false ones in their place. Once you are in their grip you cannot even turn back and go home. Even if we devised a way to defeat them we would not know where to find them. We only know they exist and have some idea of what they are like from the tritons. The tritons sometimes deal with them but they do not trust them.”

“But there aren’t any Fata Morganas in Nilfgaard?”

“No,” Emhyr smiled faintly, taking the cup from Ciaran’s hands and setting it down so he could tuck the blankets around him more securely, “The tritons and nereids keep them away.”

“Are there a lot of tritons and nereids around the City?”

“The City is full of nereids, but they are mostly friendly. Many of them are part elf. Immature tritons live in the lagoon but otherwise they come there for trade.”

“But will they try to take me again?”

“They understood that you are mine. They knew before they came but it is in their nature to ask the question even when they know the answer. Nonetheless, when we reach the City I will speak with their leaders and ensure they understand.”

Emhyr brushed away a couple of stray, still-damp curls then pressed a long, deliberate kiss against the pale forehead as if to leave his mark on it.

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Pereplut had been unfamiliar but Venendal was alien. A landscape scorched to ochre and hammered flat by the unrelenting sun, on which the occasional rocky promontory stood out like an anvil. The imperial road ran alongside a river lined with tall trees that had long, spiky fronds instead of branches but even the grass dried up a dozen yards away from the banks. The only living things that could seem to survive were desaturated plants made up of paddle-like arms or long pointed leaves. All of them had spikes.

Synnøve often looked out at the surreal scenery with narrowed eyes, Jayne affected to notice nothing and went about her duties with the same clucking cheerfulness but even she stopped and stared when they passed a thorny, umbrella-shaped tree whose spreading, layered branches were loaded with goats. Ciaran watched the dust devils that sometimes materialised in the barren distance and wondered why Mererid had bothered packing any of his finery.
The soldiers wrapped long sashes around their helmets so the sun wouldn’t beat onto the metal and as he watched them wind the cloth in complicated shapes around the wings, Ciaran understood why the Venendal division helmets were plain and pointed and had flaps at the back to keep the sun off the wearer’s neck.

This land was self-defending. If you came unprepared you would soon find yourself without food or water or shade, an easy prey for the merciless sun.

“Almost all of it was like this before it was annexed,” Morvran Voorhis said as they rode in the shade of the enormous palm trees planted along the road once the sun was low on the horizon.

Neglected by its viscount and even more so by his Ebbinger overlords, the region’s sparse and scattered population was land-rich but poor in every other way. Extended families lived on large plots of ungenerous land that they had toiled over to make it yield enough to sustain themselves and scrape a living. As a people, they were tough and self-reliant.

Horses and water meant survival and Venendali rated the former almost as highly as the latter. The province still routinely turned out the finest horsemen in the empire and the descendants of the mounted soldiers who had fought against the Nilfgaardian invaders now made up their elite light cavalry units. Ciaran knew them well, both by reputation and experience. The Venendal division had fought and been crushed at Brenna.

The empire had prevailed as it always eventually did and had celebrated its victory by laying down miles of imperial roads, building aqueducts and irrigation systems, and had turned acre after acre of dusty desert soil into arable land.

“They didn’t want the aqueducts,” var Cleef explained as he Ciaran toured the camp after dinner that evening, “Every internal conflict worth remembering was over water — where it goes, who gets to use it, and what for. They evolved a complicated system of laws that effectively kept anyone from doing anything that might be seen to affect the amount of water going to those further downstream. And even then it didn’t prevent clashes in years of low rainfall or drought. Whole families were killed over their perceived wrongs. The thought of using aqueducts to divert a half or a third of a watercourse, of putting in sluice gates and dams and water mills — all of this was anathema to them.”

Left to their own devices, as they had been for centuries, the different families and clans would have never agreed to meaningful change. The empire hadn’t asked. It had planned, decreed, and done. It brought in crops and livestock suited to the climate and terrain from parts of Zerrikania and Ofier. Landowners who were used to working themselves to skin and bone and an early grave to eek a minimum yield from their land suddenly produced a surplus.

“They earned enough to pay taxes. And once people start paying taxes they feel entitled to things. The Venendali started asking for more infrastructure. They wanted more roads, to be made part of the mail and trade networks. They wanted schools. Now that they didn’t need so many hands to work the land they could afford to send their younger sons to the Academy.”

Venendali hands had been replaced by the efficiencies of tools and machinery and the might of water-powered mills, but they had also been replaced by slave hands. When the plantations came into view from the road, the slaves that worked them could be easily picked out as they worked, some darker even than the Ofieri, all shaded by their wide-brimmed hats, between rows of maize or sorghum, or through snowy cotton fields.

The sight of them also made Synnøve’s eyes narrow and though Jayne studiously avoided mentioning them, she did stare. Ciaran, who just as studiously avoided doing anything to remind
anyone of how good his hearing was, sometimes overheard them discussing the situation while they were off washing his linens or attending to other duties.

The Aedirnians were still outraged but still confusedly so and, despite possessing her people’s deeply-rooted acceptance of slavery, even Synnøve listened in absorbed interest whenever Ludivine recounted what she remembered of the stories her father had told her of the slave revolts that had plagued the reigns of several emperors.

Ciaran found mention of these revolts in just two books — one an updated fifth edition of a history book written some fifty years ago but that his de facto tutors assured him was a classic reference text, and the other in a newer work focussed on Emhyr’s reign, in a chapter on the legal status of slaves that made oblique reference to the troubles that had resulted in the legal rights and protections for slaves being strengthened.

His own slaves were resigned. Ciaran wasn’t sure whether it was Synnøve or Ludivine who had reasoned with the others and convinced them to at least bide their time. Pereplut, the galleon, and Venendal were not places to stage an escape.

Not that any of them were seriously planning an escape.

Ciaran watched Jayne fuss over a hemline while Arly watched Ludivine teach Synnøve to write in Common. Arly was still worried about what would happen to his private parts once they reached the harem — despite the assurances he’d had from various quarters — but even so all four had gained some confidence and no longer behaved like they had an imminent death sentence hanging over them.

Ciaran’s gaze went to his writing desk. The box holding the new ocarina was well in evidence on it to make the point that it was cherished, but Ciaran had not yet tried it. Beneath it, the information package on the harem and his residence sat untouched, the seal unbroken.

Their journey southward had had its perils and hardships but even so it was easy to see it as an adventure. At the end of it, however, was reality. A gilded cage.

Ciaran remembered most of what he’d read about the harem back in the woods of Dol Gwennelen, but it had been a dense mass of rules and regulations, and it was hard to make sense of which would matter and which would not. In theory, there was a complicated system of ranks for the concubines that were irrelevant in practice because they were tied to the production of heirs. And even these ranks were structured by seniority throughout, which meant Ciaran himself would be at the bottom of the food chain. He also knew that he’d been provisionally assigned a pavilion of his own on the harem island and knew that he could still ask to use a different one if one of the ones that stood empty was more to his liking on paper. He knew it had a name. But he hadn’t yet dared look at the map. The thought of a floor plan, of rooms, of a bed in one of those rooms, or of his little writing desk — that was more reality than he could face.

He was still coming to terms with the reality of what the empire was.

They stopped for lunch and looking out of a window, Ciaran watched Emhyr walk off with his officers for an al fresco lunch.

The Alba men had stripped down their armour to the bare minimum but the Impera — and Emhyr — had completely abandoned plate armour in favour of the much lighter uniforms they usually wore in the City — scale mail vests that made them look like golden fish over the usual short tunics.

Ciaran had questioned Emhyr’s use of such light armour in light of the assassination attempt but the
terrain in Venendal was so flat it made an ambush near impossible and he’d been assured that it was not hostile territory and that the emperor would be more at risk of heat stroke than assassination.

And Emhyr had been right, Pereplut was hotter than Ciaran liked and he could well understand the urge to wear as little as possible. He himself usually just threw one of the short tunics over his gauzy robes, double belted by a stiff cestus and a soft sash, and considered himself dressed enough for dinner with the emperor. And while Mererid insisted the tunics be embellished, that his hair be done and that the whole be touched up with accessories, he seemed otherwise satisfied.

Their travel schedule had been adjusted to suit the climate so they rested in the shade and the afternoons and marched into the night. The enervating heat had dampened Ciaran’s appetite and energy and the medics had advised that the elf spend the daylight hours in the relative cool of his carriage, so Ciaran only venturing out to ride once the worst of the heat had dissipated.

Returning from his lunch, Emhyr went to Ciaran’s carriage, let himself in and dismissed the attendants with a slight nod.

His warm gaze swept his young concubine’s reclining figure.

Ciaran had always been beautiful in the way elves were but that sense of the ethereal that came from his slenderness and the impossible perfection of his reconstructed features was now doubled by the high polish that came from careful care and maintenance.

His elfling was napping — pretending to nap, Emhyr’s instincts unerringly told him — on the large divan at the back of the carriage, screened behind whisper-like drapes that swayed in the breeze, artfully laid out among his many pillows and cushions. Ciaran’s silk outer robe lay discarded at his feet and he wore nothing but his under-robe — a gauzy confection of layered chiffon and tantalising transparencies, tied with a black bow at the nape and with a long line of tiny cut-jet buttons down the back of it. Utterly impractical most of the time and Emhyr’s favourite, as Ciaran well knew.

Emhyr discarded his mail vest, perched on the edge of the litter and leaned over to kiss a long ear lightly. He felt the coolness of a brass comb against his brow as he buried his nose in the tossed strands of glossy hair and breathed in deep past the exotic fragrances that rose from it to the omega’s own scent beneath. He took one of the ribbons and let it slide slowly over his index until he reached its swallowtail end and brought it to his lips. Then he pulled the bow loose gently, bent to kiss the delicate nape through the silken hair and felt Ciaran shift a little beneath him, as if slowly waking.

The carriage jolted into movement.

“Emhyr?” Ciaran eventually opened his eyes, made a show of hiding a yawn and stretching delicately before sinking back down onto his pillow, “Emhyr, it’s too hot! How can you still want it when it’s so hot?! Emhyr!”

“I will wipe you down with cold water afterwards,” the emperor promised against the silken skin even though the gurgle of laughter his elfling hadn’t been able to hold back told him he’d won the argument.

Emhyr took his time unfastening each button, starting with the one almost hidden in Ciaran’s dark hair then methodically working his way down, gently pulling the shirt open as he went, revealing the line of stark markings that lay beneath, as if the buttons were still there, kissing each star as he uncovered it. He paused when he came to the scars low on Ciaran’s back, contemplating them in silence before splaying a large hand over them.

He hadn’t minded them at first, he’d never thought of them as marring the elf’s beauty and had rather
seen them as a part of him just as the Conynhaela markings were. But now he couldn’t help thinking of them as another being’s brand on him, one that had been left against Ciaran’s will, and though he knew they had not been a single man’s doing, he often saw Loredo’s face when he looked at them.

Ciaran was watching him, still and attentive, and Emhyr could see a ripple of anxiety in the usually unruffled gaze.

“Once we are at the palace, we will ask the mage-medics to remove them.”

He waited for Ciaran’s nod then pressed a warm kiss into the small of his back, watching as the golden eyes half-closed.

Emhyr finished unbuttoning the undershirt, revealing the entire length of Ciaran’s slender body and his gaze was drawn to the deliciously-rounded rump. He admired the gentle flare of muscle in the lean thighs, the new dimples in the sides of the taut buttocks.

“You’re getting stronger.”

Ciaran nodded, stretching his arms under his pillow and blinking happily.

It was thanks to the exercise, all that time spent on exploratory walks, on horseback and splashing around in water. And the leaf Master Aelrindel had suggested Ciaran be given to smoke had improved the elfling’s appetite.

Emhyr leaned forward and pressed a kiss onto a pale cheek then bit it gently, reveling into its elastic resistance. He slowly ran a warm hand up and down Ciaran’s back, feeling the vertebrae and ribs under his palm and fingertips, listening for Ciaran’s breathing as it slowed and the elf lapsed into real half-sleep.

Emhyr stroked a hand along a thigh, his thumb trailing down the back of it, and Ciaran moved it, his breath hitching, revealing more of himself. Emhyr eyed the little pink sack then leaned in to swipe his tongue along the neat seam, gripping Ciaran’s hip tightly.

Ciaran pressed himself against the mattress happily then watched and waited as Emhyr retrieved their box of toys from its drawer under the litter bed and couldn’t quite hide a smile as Emhyr deliberately went through it, handling each in turn before settling on the long, black and gold one.

He moved Ciaran over slightly, gave his rump another kiss, then eased the glass shaft into him carefully, moving it gently so the flared head would massage him from within. Ciaran tried to bite back a low moan than came out as a hum, stretching slightly in pleasure, the thought drifting through his sex-hazed mind that Emhyr really was good to him.

Once the shaft was settled deep inside him it still and Ciaran made a tiny sound of impatience, wriggling his hips slightly, trying to build up a little friction.

Emhyr held the free end of the toy firmly then let his hand rest against the side of the wagon, allowing the the vibrations from it travel through to the shaft buried deep inside Ciaran.

The elf yelped and would have bucked but Emhyr’s other hand restrained him and Ciaran whimpered as every jolt shot up his spine and exploded right to his nerve endings. The pressure mounted quickly and he soon came, bright and sharp. Emhyr kept his hand against the wood of the carriage and Ciaran felt his whole body begin to tauten again, wracked by hot and cold chills, even as he still lay there gasping for breath.

Once his sweet elf had come again, Emhyr tidied up, poured water into a basin and wiped Ciaran
down as he’d promised, then lay down beside him on the bed.

Ciaran snuggled against him and when he’d recovered some of his strength he propped himself up on his elbows to look at Emhyr and found him breathing deeply, eyes closed.

“You’re not supposed to sleep unprotected.”

“I am just resting my eyes.”

Ciaran bit back a giggle, considered, yawned then stretched out across Emhyr’s chest, smiling to himself.

“I’ll protect you.”

Emhyr opened his eyes just enough to take in the sight of his happy elf and laid a gentle hand on the dark head.

That evening they stopped at a mail relay station on the banks of a reservoir built in the shadow of an aqueduct. Several copses and a small settlement had sprung up around it and Ciaran could see some of the striped horses Emhyr had told him about drinking at the far end of the artificial lake.

“Coconuts,” var Cleef said, indicating the large, round fruits nestled where the fronds of a tall palm tree met.

A signal from the brigadier and the village boys pulled up a netful of young coconuts that had been cooling in the river then whittled the shells of the still green fruit to a point with a few sharp blows of their machetes. A last blow took the top off and var Cleef offered the first one to Ciaran, whose eyes widened at its weight and the clear sense he got from its balance that it was full of liquid. He lifted the cap curiously and found the shell was filled with juice that looked as clear as spring water against the white lining, and after watching Bastiaan, var Cleef and the others take long swallows from theirs, he took a cautious sip.

It was delicious. Cool, round, slightly nutty, and with a long, lingering sweetness.

Var Cleef had already had a coconut sent to Emhyr so Ciaran arranged for his attendants to be brought a couple so they could have a taste too.

They were firmly on the empire’s trade and mail routes now and so when Ciaran had another coconut to round off his dinner, it had a couple of squeezes of lime and a sprig of mint in it.

He still tasted of coconut when he settled on Emhyr’s lap afterwards.

“Do not drink too much of it. You will make yourself sick,” the emperor warned between kisses.

The Venendali viscount was officially too old and sick to received them and unofficially no longer influential enough to be worth meeting with so their visit to Venendal was an informal one. Their current contingent numbered just hundreds rather than thousands so they no longer descended on towns and settlements like a plague of locusts and though they would only stay at the var Cleef estate, Concord, for just a few days, in order to feed the imperial party as well as the guests at the festivities being thrown in the emperor’s honour, Vanina var Cleef had asked her husband to bring back as much game as he could lay his hands on, and so the brigadier had dutifully organised a hunting expedition for the next day and eventually agreed to take Ciaran along.

“Mostly antelopes,” var Cleef explained in answer to Ciaran’s questions about the game available in the region, “There’s a mountain goat native to the region — you might have seen it — but it’s
considered a poor man’s meat so it wouldn’t be appropriate for a celebration. We brought these antelopes in from Zerrikania and Ofier. The environment is harsh but its very close to what they’re used to and they have no natural predators so they’ve multiplied well enough.”

Some of the village’s youths accompanied them and their camels loped along, useful but ungainly compared to the horses. They stopped in the shade of some trees for a quick lunch and Ciaran openly stared as one of the boys slung a belt around a tree trunk then started walking his way up it, a machete between his teeth, then once at the top, tossed down coconut after coconut to his companions below.

An-Nayyir was delighted to be back in the southern warmth he’d been born to and cantered easily, quick and light, melting into the terrain as its reddishness faded to bread crust hues.

The local fauna too had a knack for disappearing into the environment and Ciaran’s keen eyes could not at first make them out, tricked by the heat shimmer coming off the ground and by messages from a brain that at the mention of game had started idly looking out for dusty local versions of fallow deer or maybe even boars.

“Gazelles,” var Cleef said, pointing out the herds and individuals that roamed the flatlands ahead of them.

Some looked like small, slender deer with short horns, while others were tall as stags but with long spiral horns, curved ones or corkscrew ones instead of antlers. Some were sand-coloured, others white and sable, most had striking markings on their faces.

They were all magnificent.

Even though they had no predators here, the antelopes and gazelles still had the responses programmed into them by centuries of flight instincts. They sprinted and sprang as if they had wings on their feet and could turn on an oren to go dashing in a different direction, and as their party gave chase, all of Ciaran’s senses quickened and his hunter’s instincts returned.

The Pereplut sand cure had done its work and greatly lessened the deepest of Ciaran’s aches and pains. It had loosened the hardened tendons and soothed the tortured nerves. The heat of the Venendali sun continued this work and now that his body could more closely keep up with his reflexes, it only took Ciaran a few shots to slip into something like his former virtuosity.

“You have the start of a fine collection there,” var Cleef grinned as they oversaw the tagging of Ciaran’s kills so the horns would be kept back as trophies.

Ciaran felt a swell of pride as he looked over his share of the day’s catch. They were not the thirteen-point red deer stags they usually boasted about in the North, but they were more than worthy prey and Ciaran listened closely to var Cleef as he detailed the taking. These included a magnificent kudu with corkscrew horns over three feet long, and there were ponderous spiral horns nearly as long on an eland bull that took a half-dozen soldiers to manoeuvre onto a transport cart.

Iorveth would be green with envy when he saw them.

“Those can skewer a lion, the Ofieri copied the shape for their sabres,” var Cleef smiled as the wide-eyed elf ran his finger along an elegant pair of barely-bowed black horns ringed with ridges. “You must ask His Majesty to take you on a hunting expedition in Zerrikania. The Ofieri like to hunt there with great cats and eagles. Neither are permitted here in case they escape.”

Ciaran smiled, still flushed with the excitement of the hunt and having played his part in it.
“I brought something for dinner,” Ciaran announced to Emhyr when he returned to the imperial tent, sweaty, dirty and beaming.

He could feel Emhyr’s caressing gaze linger as he stripped off his clothes and went to wipe himself down happily.

When he returned to the main tent, he found the brigadier there, taking his leave of the emperor.

Var Cleef was to go on ahead to convey the day’s catch and check the security arrangements at his estate and Ciaran followed him out to watch him and his small escort leave, and returned Bastiaan’s wave.

Bastiaan was nominally still an Alba. His transfer had been accepted in principle but it would only be formalised after the triumph at the same ceremony where all the promotions and medals would be announced and handed out.

In practice, however, his time was almost evenly split between his current commander and his future one, acting as a de facto liaisons officer and preferred messenger whenever General Voorhis moved away from the imperial carriage to another part of the column. It was in a similar capacity that he now left with the brigadier.

The next morning, Ciaran rode out with Emhyr and Morvran Voorhis, taking up his place between them as if it might make any sort of difference in the face of a concerted coup.

Emhyr had taken up swimming in Pereplut and often joined his brigadier in his morning swims. He sat taller and easier in the saddle, darkly handsome in the Impera colours, but underprotected, to Ciaran’s eyes. Ciaran himself had been given a variant of the Impera mail made of white silver scales shaped like feathers. It was beautiful, more lightweight and comfortable than plate but it would not stop a crossbow bolt nor any pointed weapon with serious strength behind it.

With var Cleef gone, they were in Morvran Voorhis’ hands and the desultory, friendly conversation between the emperor and the general so grated on Ciaran’s anxieties that he eventually retreated to the canopy on his carriage to keep a wider eye on things while sippeing some coconut water.

A flash of cold sweat came over him and he nearly dropped his coconut when he saw dust rising further ahead in the gathering shadows on the road, relief robbing him strength to stand when he recognised Bastiaan as one of the three outriders who arrived to confirm that all was ready at the var Cleef estate.

When they turned off the imperial road onto the thoroughfare leading up to the var Cleef estate, Ciaran was still at his observation post, straining to see.

“There it is,” said Bastiaan, who had joined him after reporting to the emperor and the general, pointing to the distant splash of green in the dusty wilderness, “Concord.”
Chapter End Notes

* cringle: an eyelet, sometimes fashioned out of rope, through which another rope is passed, usually along the edge of a sail. This definition sounds dumb so I've added a

(source: Msail.se)
picture for clarity.

Thank you for reading! <3
Chapter Summary

In which we meet var Cleef's family.

Chapter Notes

This is it, folks, the penultimate chapter — time for me to start encouraging you to subscribe to the series if you haven't already. The final chapter should come out on schedule but after that I'll need time to draft, after rereading the Squirrel (no joke, I don't remember what happened at the beginning).

The picture at the head of this chapter was supposed to go at the end of the last one but I guess I forgot. Oops.

Reminder that Inis Mor'hwess is the elven enclave in Nilfgaard, and that's probably it for technical terms this time.

Thank you for all the lovely comments! They're much appreciated! Enjoy! Happy Bastille Day! <3
Venendal Division

All Morvran’s talk of var Cleef’s relatively humble origins had led Cieran to expect a neat little rural estate, and he was therefore not prepared for the sprawling fields of cotton and agave from which the master house rose, white-walled and lined with arches.

Var Cleef was at the gates to welcome them, on horseback and in a simple ecru tunic, with an escort of Impera and plantation hands, while his wife met them at the house, her youngest child on her hip and the other at her side.
The elder child ran to his father and var Cleef swung him up high, making the boy screech happily, then held him as he made introductions.

The child had evidently been sternly briefed on how to behave with the emperor because he stared, wide-eyed, then shook himself and bowed his head solemnly, gripping his father’s arm.

“And this is General Voorhis.”

“General Morvran Voorhis of the Alba?” the boy piped up, “Would you sign my prints, please?”

Morvran Voorhis sketched a small bow.

“It would be my pleasure.”

The boy looked at him a moment longer then tipped himself out of his father’s arms and into Morvran’s. The general caught him quickly, looking momentarily nonplussed, then beamed as he answered the child’s many questions.

Vanina had a ready smile like her husband’s and quick, flashing eyes with small pupils like starlings winging into a clear morning sky. Once the introductions had been made and while the brigadier led the emperor and the general into their home, she fell into step with Ciaran and thanked him for having contributed his skill as a hunter to the stocking of their larder.

“It was my pleasure,” Ciaran dismissed graciously as the infant on her hip stealthily grabbed a tiny fistful of his hair to compare it with his mother’s.

They came out into a central courtyard filled to bursting with plants and the gurgle of water.

“Evrard’s corner of Nilfgaard,” Vanina explained fondly, seeing his surprise.

“It is really like this?”

Vanina tilted her head to one side.

“Greener. But we cannot afford to spend more water on it.”

Emhyr and he had been given a large, airy suite of rooms on the first floor, with a view onto the inner courtyard and another onto the nearby reservoir and the village beyond it.

“We have a few hours before dinner to tour—” Emhyr remarked before being interrupted by a knock at the door.

“As Emhyr unfolded it, Ciaran caught sight of enough to know Morvran had received more news about the fire from a contact in Nilfgaard.

“I have to speak with Morvran and the others,” Emhyr said evenly, “You could take aep Larsen and explore. We will join you.”

“Are there mosquitos?” Ciaran asked suspiciously as he peered out past the voile curtains, the memory of the one very itchy bite he’d acquired in Pereplut still vivid in his mind.

“No, it is too dry here. But remember to always check your shoes for scorpions before putting them on.”
“Scorpions?”

Scorpions had all the charm of a pocket-sized endrega, Ciaran decided once the ever-obliging Bastiaan had caught him a specimen. An attack by an arachas or an endrega was nothing to laugh at but they were the size of a heifer and it seemed to Ciaran that being able to see them coming gave one a fighting chance, whereas for a thing that possessed enough venom to kill a grown man to hide away in the toe of one’s shoe was hitting below the belt.

“Should we kill it?” Ciaran asked, still vaguely thinking of endregas.

“It’s just a scorpion,” Bastiaan reasoned.

He released it and as they watched it scurry away, a bird swooped in, caught it, and impaled it onto the spike of a nearby agave leaf.

Ciaran and Bastiaan stood, dusted off their hands and went to the stables.

Even on horseback, it took the better part of the following hour to reach the other end of the estate at a slow plod, led by a couple of the plantation hands. The plantations were so large that the nearest human habitation could be upwards of half an hour’s hard riding away and even the smaller estates — the estancias that produced food and fodder for the larger export plantations — could only be effectively patrolled on horseback. All the estate hands were fine riders and the region’s small, hardy horses were suited for the work.

The masters’ house was nestled in a flourishing of palms and tall ornamental grasses atop what in these parts passed for a hill, while the overseers’ watchtower stood on another elevation at the other end of the estate with most of the plantation between them. It was on a patch of cool grass in the shade of some date palms at the foot of the tower that they were served refreshments while they waited for the emperor and the others to join them.

“Do you know why they’re still talking about that fire in Nilfgaard?” Ciaran asked Bastiaan, eyeing the long limp form of a black viper hanging from a two-inch thorn on a nearby acacia tree.

“Because everyone in Nilfgaard is still talking about it, and because they suspect it was sabotage,” Bastiaan said absently, feeding a handful of grass to var Cleef’s horse, Philotimo, the use of whom he’d been allowed while his own horse was being rested.

“What happened?”

“A fire in one of the warehouses where the City’s grain is stored. The fire slaves didn’t get there in time and there was a lot more damage than there should have been.”

“How is that sabotage?”

An-Nayyir butted in so Bastiaan automatically started feeding him too.

“The slaves were waylaid, some think intentionally. The man in charge of the fire slaves in that district is a senator, he was a maecene to His Majesty’s father, he is still seen as a close ally of His Majesty’s.”

Emhyr would need the support of all his senators in the months ahead, and even one lame duck might make all the difference.

“So the whole thing could have been engineered to undermine His Majesty and his allies?”
Bastiaan nodded, lost in thought.

Ciaran watched him a moment.

“What’s wrong?” he asked after Bastiaan had stared unseeingly at his glass of agave-sweetened lemonade for a couple of minutes, “Don’t you like it?”

“I do,” Bastiaan automatically shook himself, smiled and took a sip, “Sorry, I was just daydreaming. Getting ideas above my station.”

Ciaran was just about to ask about these dreams and ideas when their guide informed them that the emperor and his entourage were approaching.

The group rode through the cotton fields and the neatly laid rows of spiky agave plants. They were shown the processing sheds and mills where the raw materials were worked, prepared and packed for export.

Var Cleef rode with his youngest son strapped to his chest and though he did most of the explaining around the plantation’s running, it was under the watchful eye of his wife and the plantation foreman, who seemed to be testing his knowledge. Vanina stepped in for the more detailed answers and anything concerning the plantation’s future or needs. It was clear that she didn’t just nominally own the plantation, she ran it and knew it inside out.

They stopped by the ostrich pens and after staring up at one of the mature males that was nearly twice his height, Ciaran shot a withering look at var Cleef, who had earlier misrepresented the beasts as a kind of large chicken.

Var Cleef missed the look entirely, his attention on a scorpion that had scuttled out of its hole and that he deftly kicked into the pen. It was promptly eaten by the nearest of the two pink ostriches — a rare genetic mutation, Ciaran was told, though he privately wondered if they hadn’t rather been selectively bred for black and white.

He was given to hold one of the enormous eggs, equivalent to some two dozen chicken eggs, and was shown some of the characteristic studded leather produced from the skins. Then one of the plantation hands brought down one of the smaller birds with a three-headed sling not unlike the falling meteors Ciaran had seen demonstrated at the Toussaint tourney, so that he could have a closer look at it and touch the strange, soft feathers.

“These are for our own consumption,” var Cleef explained, having left the emperor, the general, and most of their aides to his foreman’s explanation, “The economy is more rationalised now. The smaller farms specialise in producing food and clothing and other necessities for the larger export ones. Even so, old habits die hard and Vanina keeps reminding me that we can’t eat cotton.”

It had taken Nilfgaard a lot of time and many inducements to persuade the Venendali to dedicate so much of their land to export crops. They’d always been subsistence farmers for whom the earth had never yielded a surplus. They didn’t want to put all their eggs in one basket — especially if the eggs were actually rope and hemp that could not be eaten and it was someone else’s basket.

It was for this same reason that they’d also been resistant to the idea of crop rotation.

“They did things the way they’d always done things because they were sure that worked. The land yielded so little nobody could afford to take a gamble because if it failed, they’d go hungry.”

The brigadier’s proud gaze swept the estate and as Ciaran’s followed, what var Cleef saw in his mind’s eye like a mirage in the heat shimmer was conjured up the way Ciaran himself sometimes had
visions of white palaces on the Pontar. More aqueducts, more reservoirs, enough water that they could waste it on baths and ornamental plants, and the dusty expanses turned into a patchwork blanket of crops, stitched together by the empire’s great roads.

And the rest of the empire similarly optimised, until every province and every region in the great empire ran smoothly, like well-oiled and minutely-mitred gears in an exquisitely-tuned Toussaint clockwork.

They were architects, they had a vision, and they were prepared to use steel as well stone to build it and to grease its workings with blood.

And yet, as he surveyed that really was there, var Cleef was smiling fondly, stroking the head of the child who might one day inherit it.

“You like them. The Venendali.”

“I do,” var Cleef conceded with a flash of a smile, “They’re dignified, they work hard. In Nilfgaard, any idiot can grow a plant — even fence posts will put down roots and sprout leaves if you make them out of wood that is too green. But here… they’re permanently at war with the earth and the elements.”

“You know a lot about it.”

Var Cleef laughed at this then nodded in response to a signal from the foreman.

“I married into a Venendali family, I had to pick some of it up. Agriculture is all they talk about.”

Agriculture and slaves, Ciaran thought to himself as the brigadier rode off to rejoin the emperor. But then, the two had quickly become closely entwined ever since Venendal had become part of the empire. The aqueducts brought water, the dams and reservoirs managed it, the irrigation systems allowed crops to grow, but these crops still needed to be planted or sown, picked or cut down. The machinery they used to process it all did make things easier but it still needed to be operated and powered.Neither magic nor science had done away with the need for slaves.

The sheer number of them was overwhelming. Some of them had iron collars clamped around their necks and and from beneath the wide, sloping brims of the ubiquitous hats many of them stared at Synnøve, some in open hostility.

“Why were they looking at you like that?” Ciaran asked Synnøve, who had met them at the stables to tell Ciaran the medics would wait on him at his earliest convenience.

“They think it would be easy for me to escape,” Synnøve murmured as they went back inside, “And they know I haven’t tried because I don’t have a collar.”

An hour or so later, Emhyr glanced up as his elfling padded into his makeshift study and over to him with a face like a mask. Emhyr could tell he was cross, the way he always was when he’d had to undergo the monthly full medical check that so tried his strength and, more perilously, his patience.

This fortitude was one of the things Emhyr most admired in his precious concubine. Yes, Ciaran sometimes snapped, he was sometimes snide, he exacted payment for obscure wrongs, but in public, when it came time to project an image and hide the cracks in the facade, he showed all his grit as a soldier and a survivor.

Ciaran mutely allowed himself to be given the kiss and the cuddle he wanted then stalked off to have his evening bath and when Emhyr went to dress for dinner he spied Ciaran still in the tub, smoking
his leaf, feet propped up on the rim of the tub, crossed at the ankles. The bath was consolation for the medical check and the last one he would have here in Venendal where they were a prohibitive luxury.

A tendril or two of the leaf’s acrid smell reached Emhyr and he reflected that at least that would help to take the edge off Ciaran’s irritability.

By the time they sat down to their dinner, the elf did look a great deal less irritable and eyed the offering covetously.

“I’m hungry,” he announced then set about piling both their plates high.

They ate, discussing the plantation and Ciaran plied Emhyr with questions about Vanina, var Cleef, about their plantation, while he ate ravenously, disregarding the cutlery entirely as he picked at things with his fingers.

Emhyr had never forced the elf to stand on ceremony when they were alone together but even so he was surprised since Ciaran usually never passed up an opportunity to practice his table manners.

All that was forgotten, however, once he was settled in an armchair with Ciaran’s legs and arms thrown over him and the elf was pressing heated kisses onto his mouth.

“What does it mean? This one looks like a dragon. Is it a dragon?” he swung his wide, solemn gaze to Emhyr, “Do you have dragons in Nilfgaard? Emhyr? Will you show me your dragon? I’m not afraid of dragons. I like your dragon.”

The elfling babbled on and Emhyr watched, his thoughts and feelings so finely balanced between utter outrage at what had evidently been a gross error in the dosage of the elfling’s medication and utter delight, that for a long while the two hung in perfect equilibrium and he did nothing at all.

Emhyr spent the best part of the next hour cajoling the ebullient elf — who was prancing around their rooms, naked as a worm, as his attention fluttered from thing to thing — into drinking plenty of water then finally wrangled him into his arms and onto the bed, in preparation for when the elfling would wind down and fall asleep.

As an effect of the leaf, Ciaran was even more sensitive than usual and so couldn’t stand the rasp of Emhyr’s embroidered silk robe. He had pushed it open so he could curl up on Emhyr’s chest, skin to skin, and he lay there, making low, happy sounds and filling the air with the scent of contentment as he drew symbols onto his emperor’s pectorals while Emhyr brushed the large pink ostrich feather
he’d fished out of a vase of ostrich and pampas grass plumes over the tender skin.

“Emhyr?” Ciaran murmured drowsily, hiding a yawn, “I’m happy. Are you happy?”

Emhyr stroked the silken hair and breathed in deep of Ciaran’s vivid, tart-apple scent. He felt his chest expand and realised that, in that moment, he too was perfectly content.

“I am, elyennenic.”

— N —

Preparations for the party had started days before their arrival. Enormous fire pits had been dug, seating and tables borrowed and brought in from neighbouring estates, lanterns strung high across the inner courtyard and along the outer walls and between the trees. Now decorations were being put up and tall torches planted in the ground and in the large, cool kitchens, the servants were busy preparing food and drinks.

Antlers and baskets of fluffy ostrich plumes lined the stone walls of a long, cool meat hall where the many antelopes they’d hunted hung from the rafters. The ostrich skins were sent away for tanning as had been the various antelope hides, but a couple of the enormous carcasses were also strung up along with a few smaller ones, and all of them bore the brand of the farms they’d come from.

Some of them would be broken down into smaller pieces for cooking but the finest ones would be roasted whole. They would take hours and hours to cook and some were already being mounted onto roasting spits and racks. The fires had been lit before dawn, trestle tables were being laid out, the whole estate bustled with activity, creating a new sense of life and plenty.

The warehouses by the meat hall were filled with rolls of tanned ostrich leather, cotton in its many forms, and coils and coils of rope in every size — from butcher’s twine to the enormous hawsers and cables as thick as Ciaran’s thigh that the Navy so prized.

Bastiaan gingerly broke off a piece of a cactus to show Ciaran that it was full of moisture inside and the elf reflected that even here, in this dusty and desolated place, Nature had found a way to yield. The cacti were used as fencing wherever possible because they had defensive spikes and were cheaper and required less maintenance than wooden fences. But they could also be used as animal fodder and the prickly pears they produced were edible. The ostriches seemed to survive on little more than rocks and scorpions and yet they produced meat, eggs, feathers, leather, and endless utensils were whittled from the eggshells and bones.

It was a from a carved eggshell bowl filled with dates and almonds that Ciaran snacked as he and Mererid finalised his outfit for the evening festivities and in from the open windows drifted the sounds of the musicians and other entertainers arriving and setting up.

“The Venendali love colour,” the chamberlain had informed him. There was so little of it around in the environment and most of the dyes were imported and expensive.

And so Ciaran picked out a bright persimmon chiffon that flickered like flame when it showed at the long slits of a gem-encrusted robe of the glossiest plum silk. The long ends of an elven sash in emerald with fish and waterfalls picked out in blues and silver thread fell down nearly to the ground. His chrysoberyls, a rope of moonlight pearls and hair ornaments of threaded silver flakes that tinkled and glittered like raindrops completed the look.
He’d expected to be overdressed but when he went downstairs to join the others, Vanina swept over to meet him, smiling and astoundingly beautiful in tangerine and scarlet.

“How lovely you look, My Lord,” she beamed and took his arm, “Now, you should know that people can get a bit rowdy once they’ve been at the spirits, especially towards the end of the evening, but there’s nothing at all to worry about, they’re all harmless. Come, I’ll make the introductions.”

Though it was still light out, the sun had slipped low and flung a violet glow onto the star-studded sky that gave the land an even cooler cast. It took the glare off the pale, gravel-strewn ground, lent more iridescence to the silvery cacti, blanketed the cotton fields, and created pools of cool shadow around the swaying palms. And against the encroaching dusk, a last rim of palest apricot along the horizon, and the fires and torches that dotted the enormous estate like flares at sea.

Despite the informality of the reception people kept a respectful distance from emperor — as mindful of his august presence as they were of the fact that their host was his security officer.

The first introduction was to Vanina’s father, Carbonaro, one of the region’s most influential landowners. He had a reputation as a shrewd negotiator, as Ciaran could well believe as he remembered how he’d tied up the estate in his daughter’s favour and saw the speculative glint in the dark eyes as they appraised the emperor.

Most Venendali were taciturn and had features that seemed fired into immobility by the sun like terracotta. When they spoke they were often gruff and reticent, and when they did decide to communicate they were stark and straightforward almost to brutality.

They all looked somewhat out of place, in their silks among the dust, barely out of snagging distance of the cacti and agave plants. Even now, the Venendali lived hard, isolated lives and they cherished these opportunities to come together and share what they’d produced through so much toil. They came in extended families, the older children took care of the younger, and entire wings of the master house had been thrown open for the guests.

They didn’t need palaces or expensive entertainments. The cool night air, the smell and sight of greenery, the bubble and gurgle of water playing — these were all the luxury any of them wanted. They wore their finest, ate and drank without reserve, and from laconic and reserved they became loquacious and warm.

Ciaran stayed by the emperor’s side until the introductions were completed then wandered off to circulate among the guests.

The sun dipped behind the mountains and though there was still light, stars filled the empty desert sky above while below, the plantation was dotted with warm licks of flame. The house had been thrown open and was filled with light, and the tall palm trees around it, dramatically lit by the lanterns that hung like pendulums from the base of the fronds, rose like giant torches above it.

The fire pits had been dug beyond the main house’s gardens and flared like beacons along the main lane that led to overseers’ tower and in the open spaces near mills and warehouses, and so the guests wandered off to them down the estate’s paths.

Though most of the work was done by the slaves it was traditional for guests to turn the spit a few times before helping themselves, slicing off slivers of roasted meat or plucking from the heat bits of fruit and vegetables.

Ciaran had more food than he could eat pressed on him and was plied with questions about the North. Venendal was well connected now but it was not on any major trade routes and most of their
trade was with Nilfgaard and its neighbouring territories. Most of what they’d heard of places like Nazair and Toussaint had come to them second or third hand. They were as fascinated by the notion of air so cold that it could turn water into a solid as a Toussaintois would be by the Venendali sun that burned so hot it could shatter stone.

“And the North? What is life there like?”

Difficult, Ciaran answered, though he had trouble pinpointing why. Northern peasants toiled all day every day to scrape a living, and most farms were little better than huts. No, the weather conditions were not as harsh as those of the Skellige isles, they were mostly temperate; and yes, they had water, in fact the North was crisscrossed by several rivers; and plenty of forests and minerals too, just like in Nazair and Toussaint; and the soil itself was fertile, extremely fertile in places and certainly more so than was common in Venendal.

“So what makes life hard there?”

And so Ciaran found himself trying to explain that much time, coin and effort had gone into the continuous wars and other conflicts between the four kingdoms. Nobody but Nilfgaard had ever bothered to take Venendal and though the Venendali had put up a valiant fight, they did not have a long history of organised warfare. The situation in the North was unfathomable to them, and looking at their gently questioning expressions, Ciaran realised he couldn’t have made a stronger argument for the potential benefits of the empire’s conquest of the North if he’d tried.

The younger children, who’d been allowed to stay up past their bedtime just this once, had been listening as avidly as anyone to his tales of mountains capped with snow that never melted, of rivers and lakes that ran over, but their attention had started to wander at explanations of grain silos being raided or requisitioned, of cattle being stolen in the night, of sown fields being trampled underfoot during skirmishes and troop moments, or buried under a campful of pitched tents. Var Cleef’s boy grabbed one of Ciaran’s sleeves and tugged him over to the shadow puppet theatre that had been set up in a quiet corner near the house.

The children made requests of the puppeteers and told Ciaran all their own stories until Carbonaro arrived at the head of a contingent of nursemaids and older children.

“There you are! Come and say goodnight to your poppa!”

He swung the child up, accepted a kiss on the cheek then pressed a kiss of his own onto the sun-streaked locks before handing the boy off to his nursemaid.

The other nannies and cousins collected the rest of the sleepy children and the two adults found themselves alone, watching them leave.

“You have beautiful grandchildren.”

“Oh yes, I will say that for var Cleef. He produces wonderful children.”

Carbonaro motioned a slave to hand him the bottle of agave liquor he had on a tray and offered to fill Ciaran’s cup.

Ciaran, who’d been warned off the stuff in no uncertain terms by every single one of the medics severally over the past few days, declined with a graceful gesture and accepted lemonade instead. Carbonaro took the tray with the pitcher and the bottle from the slave and waved him away.

“It was good of you to indulge the children, My Lord,” Carbonaro said, settling onto the bench by Ciaran with the tray between them, “Are you enjoying the show?”
He poured himself a small glass and knocked it back.

“Very much. We — the Aen Seidhe — sometimes do something similar around the campfire in the evenings. But it’s just making shapes with our hands against the flames as we tell stories, nothing this sophisticated. Your puppets are articulated.”

“Ah yes. They are made of painted vellum and cane. They’re lovely things in their own right.”

“Painted? Even though it doesn’t show?”

“Not all of them, not anymore. But they used to be. For centuries this was our main form of entertainment. Because of the heat, most of our recreations are nocturnal. After the day’s toil, families and farmhands would gather around the fire for food and rest in the early evening. The same puppets were reused to create new stories to supplement the traditional myths and folktales and then on occasions such as weddings, the best stories would be traded. They gave everybody something to talk about And it’s useful for keeping the children occupied on occasions like this one. Now many of the puppets are disposable, but the older, traditional characters are still painted. Usually quite elaborately so. I can have some sent to your rooms tomorrow if you’d like to see.”

“I would like that very much, thank you.”

They turned back to the figures dancing on the screen around a central puppet crowned with spiky rays.

“Is that a sun god?”

“It is. Not the Great Sun, we have our own sun cult. The Nilfgaardian Sun is usually characterised as benevolent, a creative force. Ours is a hungry, vengeful god. A destroyer.”

He poured and swallowed down another drink.

“Our god is being absorbed by the Great Sun though.”

“But Nilfgaard does not force its provinces to adopt its religions and culture,” Ciaran frowned slightly, noting the slosh as Carbonaro refilled his glass.

“It does not. That is a key element of the Pax Nilfgaardiana. But the iconography was always similar and over the years the retellings of the old myths evolved. Nilfgaard’s is the dominant culture. The best schools are Nilfgaardian, more books are written in Nilfgaard than anywhere else in the empire — except Toussaint but most of theirs are useless.”

He finished his glass in a long swallow while Ciaran took a discreet sip of his lemonade.

“Vanina attended a Nilfgaardian school. The Great Sun is more familiar to her than our own god. She thought nothing of marrying a Nilfgaardian.”

Another spill as the glass was refilled. On the stage, the sun god had exited and the people puppets jumped about as they selected and prepared their sacrifices to him.

“But maybe that was always going to be,” Carbonaro muttered, staring at the glass in his hand, “For people of her generation the empire has been a benevolent and beneficial influence.”

The next cup he poured was more out than in and Ciaran decided to offer him lemonade at the first opportunity.
“And maybe she was right. I’ve lived to see the emperor of Nilfgaard in my own daughter’s house.
Of course, Vanina did keep saying that var Cleef is Emreis’ maecenee — whatever that means —
but, by the Great Sun, if somebody had told me on the day they married that after just five years our
family would be welcoming the emperor of half the bloody continent onto our land… That Vanina
would play hostess to him like this in her own home…!”

“She’s made a beautiful home here,” Ciaran murmured.

“Yes, yes. I did help her choose the plot, mind, made sure she’d have the best available. But what
kind of name is Concord? We’ve always named our farms after our families or landmarks! Things
that mean something, not ideas!”

“What matters is that she’s happy,” Ciaran soothing, filling the empty cup with lemonade, “And she
does seem happy.”

Both their gazes swung from the puppets to the other side of the garden where people were still
congregated at a respectful and safe distance around the emperor.

They watched var Cleef pause to give his wife’s hand a fond squeeze as he circulated among the
guests.

“He smiles too much. Even for a Nilfgaardian,” Carbonaro said glumly and took another swig
straight from the bottle, “But he’s done right by Vanina and by us. He’s made sure we’ll have our
pick of suitable slaves. The Great Sun knows we need them. We used to be able to get as many as
we needed, during the Wars, and cheaply too. Then the slave revolts came and now we have to
scrounge what we can get. Can’t even afford to send the rebellious ones to the mines like we used to.
We have to keep them, knowing they’re plotting against us and all we can do is hope the chains will
hold them.”

“What happened during the slave revolts?”

Carbonaro stared at the nearly empty bottle broodingly then launched into his answer.

There had been three revolts. The first during the reign of the current emperor’s grandfather. It had
been a small rebellion in an isolated region and the army repressed it easily, but, on becoming
emperor, Fergus var Emreis had amended the slavery laws, changing the ways in which they could
be bought and sold and how they were to be treated.

“It was peacetime so the only slaves we could rely on were the usual Skelliger raiders and what
Zangvebaris the Ofieri could spare us — oh, and the occasional Zerrikanian, their highest form of
punishment is being sold into slavery, you know. The empire still had first pick of the slaves for its
own needs, and for the rest of us supply started going down and the prices up. Nilfgaard still had all
the slaves it needed to keep its streets swept clean but we barely had enough hands to get the harvest
in. And other regions had the same problem.”

The next emperor, Carbonaro explained off-handedly, had taken up the wars of conquest again and
wound back all his predecessor’s slavery laws — no doubt it had been a pre-condition for his rule.
Slaves flooded back into the empire, another small rebellion was put down and the slavery laws
changed again to give the masters more power. Then a third revolt, the one everybody remembered,
that had started in Fort Zivelina when a whole battalion of conscripted slaves broke into the armoury,
set fire to part of the fort, then disappeared into the nearby forests to get themselves organised before
marching southeast, their numbers swelling at every village and township they passed.

“Some people said they were trying to reach the coast, others said they wanted to take over the City,”
Carbonaro mumbled, lost in memories, “We didn’t really think they would come here — the terrain and climate are so hostile. But we couldn’t be sure. At the time there were over ten slaves for every one of us, the mines were stuffed with them. It wouldn’t have been impossible for them to work their way through the province, taking over one farm at the time — in that sense it would have been easy, the slaves must have tools to work with and anything can be used as a weapon. We hardly talked about it so word wouldn’t get out, but all the slaves knew something was happening. They were getting nervous too, getting ready, and we started to make plans, we barricaded the houses, in case they decided not to wait for the others to arrive.”

He paused, staring fixedly at the figures that leapt about in celebration on the screen.

“We lit fires and kept watch through the night. We used the puppet shows to distract the children. Vanina was just a child, still learning to speak and she loved the puppet shows. That’s all she remembers of that time. The puppet shows and that her mother had died in the summer.”

He automatically offered Ciaran the bottle then upended the last of the liquor down his throat.

“In the end the army got them, lined mile after mile of imperial road with their bodies, all the way to the City. But the emperor had lost face, he’d had victory after victory against outsiders but had failed in dealing with the internal threat, nobody trusted him anymore. That’s probably what lost him the empire. Skelligers would stop raiding here if word of these things ever made it back to their islands. But the empire hides its shame, it would never admit that for months a groups of slaves with no generals, no plans, most of them with no real weapons or training, had been a threat to the White City itself.”

He lifted the bottle to his lips again, seemed surprise to find it empty, and tossed it aside.

“Bah. We’re not supposed to talk about these things. They happened under previous emperors and they could never happen during the hallowed reign of the glorious Emhyr var Emreis,” Carbonaro finished with an ironic inflection, then turned to Ciaran.

“Those four slaves of yours must be worth a small fortune. Two of them already trained up, that beauty of a Skelliger, and one that can read and write?”

“Ludivine can, yes,” Ciaran confirmed, startled, “His Majesty has been very generous.”

He’d known, vaguely, that he’d been provided with the best available, but he only now realised what the slaves that had so underwhelmed him were actually worth. And he knew he was to have more when they reached the City — real palace attendants, hand-reared from eggs by Mererid himself.

“There you are, poppa!” Vanina called out as she approached, followed by a couple of house slaves, “Have you been hiding with Lord Ciaran all this time?”

“We were discussing the shadow puppets,” Ciaran explained, catching Vanina’s significant look after she caught sight of the empty bottle.

“Thank you so much!” she whispered before she and the slaves ushered away her tottering father with practiced strategy.
Once he’d seen the guests off or settled for the night, var Cleef went searching for Emhyr and, slipping quietly through the darkened rooms where the elfling concubine was sleeping, found him on the balcony, smoking.

“Where did you get that?” he grinned, going over and accepting the rolled leaf from him.

“From Lord Ciaran’s supply. The medics gave him too high a dosage so I confiscated some.”

Evrard laughed through his inhale.

“You should be with your wife,” Emhyr observed, watching him through the veil of bluish smoke.

“She was exhausted. I said I’d take care of things so she could get to bed a little earlier. I’ll see her tomorrow when she’s rested.”

“I appreciate her doing this. I know it was a lot of work.”

Evrard laughed softly.

“You’re joking, Emhyr. Vanina’s almost as pleased by your visit as her father is,” he drew on the joint, “Vanina says he was feeling very pleased with himself after your talk. Downed a whole bottle of agave while talking Lord Ciaran’s ears off about shadow puppets.”

Emhyr listened as his maecenee related more of what he’d heard and seen that evening. They traded the rolled leaf back and forth idly and eventually their talk turned desultory as it often did when they had a few quiet moments together.

Emhyr had never had any doubts about Evrard var Cleef. Not since an essay of his, written when he’d been a young cadet of just seventeen, had landed on his desk. An essay ostensibly about military hierarchy and the importance of respecting the chain of command, but behind which Emhyr had been able to discern the wider philosophy and the understanding of the mind behind it.

The coup to unseat his predecessor had cost the empire several officers who had found themselves on the losing side and so Emhyr had added Evrard var Cleef’s name to a list of students who showed promise, whose ideas had not been set to how the old regime had thought the empire should work, and who might in time make officers loyal to him and his ideas.

He’d watched Evrard closely then approached him to sound his character and ideas in person, and by the time Evrard had graduated top of his year, Emhyr had been certain of what course to take and had offered to become his maecenor.

Those had been different times. An emperor might take as maecene a noble of the first or second rank but Evrard was only third in line to inherit his long-living father’s minor title. Even now, years later, many still ascribed the emperor’s interest to his captain’s solar good looks. But while Emhyr had many enemies, var Cleef had none. Even those who believed he’d slept his way to the top were on friendly terms with him. The emperor had made var Cleef his aide-de-camp, but that had been no less than anyone expected, and well, var Cleef had not disgraced either himself or the empire as an Alba captain either. Making him head of the Impera was a bit much but if Emhyr himself trusted him then nobody else could really object. After all, it was his neck on the line if var Cleef failed.

And many would say that Ciaran’s injury was Evrard’s failure.

Evrard would have his hard-earned knighthood regardless, Emhyr would see to that, but there was little more he’d be able to do for his protégé before he went or was forced out. He hoped Evrard’s strengthening friendship with Morvran would keep other avenues of promotion suited to his many
qualities open to him but that could not happen if Emhyr was removed by a coup — any coup, but particularly one in which Morvran was heavily implicated.

Emhyr breathed in a lungful of leaf, stepped over to his maecenee, covered Evrard’s mouth with his own then slowly blew the smoke out into it. Stepping away, he handed the rolled leaf back to Evrard.

“Oh, and this is the good stuff too,” Evrard murmured then took a deeper pull and threw his head back to blow it out, “Why is it so hard to get anything this good in the City now?”

“Ombryn and his people have been tightening controls on trade out of the enclave.”

Evrard passed the joint back to Emhyr, blowing out a thin stream of smoke.

“Too much?”

“Not yet. Inis Mor’hwess needs protection from the Guilds too.”

Evrard opened his mouth to speak, stopped, then smiled.

“Did we wake you, My Lord?”

Ciaran shook his head and slipped out of the doorway where he’d been standing.

He took the leaf var Cleef held out to him, took a puff then handed it to Emhyr.

They talked of the party, the ostriches, the pleasant coolness of the night, and Ciaran studied the Impera captain.

“Well, I’ll be off,” Evrard finally announced after accepting the stub from Emhyr, his bicep bunching as he brought it to his lips.

The emperor folded a generous pinch of the leaf into a square of paper then handed it to his lieutenant.

“Take this down to Morvran, will you? He will enjoy it.”

Ciaran’s speculative gaze followed var Cleef out then drifted back to Emhyr.

“Is that why he’s your maecenee?”

“It happened afterwards.”

“Is that how it usually goes?”

“It happens but it is not required.”

Ciaran accepted the stub from Emhyr and drew on it thoughtfully.

“Do people know?”

“It is not a secret. Only private.”

Private and an open secret, Ciaran realised. Though his features were too regular, too proportionate, too expected, too human to have the fey effect of the Aen Seidhe’s beauty, var Cleef was handsome even by elven standards.
Emhyr accepted the proffered stub and took a few idle puffs, his smouldering eyes on the elf.

“It does not bother you?”

Ciaran shook his head slightly, stepped forward, slipped the stub from Emhyr’s hand and after inhaling one last time, put it out in a nearby ashtray. Rocking onto his tiptoes, he pressed his mouth against Emhyr’s, slowly letting the smoke escape into it. When he’d breathed it all out he pressed himself against Emhyr’s chest and felt his arms around him.

“And you really trust him?” he asked, looking up into the molten eyes.

“With my life. Trust him as you trust me.”

— N —

“No! A long pass!” Ciaran howled in exasperation as he watched the game below, then groaned, “We’re going to lose!”

“I’m still surprised that these amusements are of any interest to outsiders,” Carbonaro remarked to Emhyr, shielding his eyes from the glare, “Our hands only play to keep their riding skills up.”

“Lord Ciaran has a competitive streak.”

The mistress of the plantation had given as many of the slaves and hands as possible the day off so they could all rest and recover. Her father had stayed because he was family, as had a handful of cousins whose children were now running around together as a wild and happy herd.

Morvran Voorhis had noticed the hands at play and after having the rules explained to him, had set up an impromptu friendly match.

The game, the aim of which consisted in using a long-handled mallet to whack a ball through the posts that the opposing team was defending, did rely on excellent horsemanship but it also had a strategic component — two things Ciaran couldn’t resist.

Emhry looked on fondly as Ciaran asked Synnøve to fetch his riding clothes then tried to shout suggestions at Morvran Voorhis, who was watching from a ringside seat below and couldn’t hear him, finally giving up in frustration and sending off a boy with a message instead.

Soon after, the game was halted and Ciaran strode onto the fallow field, still adjusting the sash he’d wound onto his head and obviously giving orders to the Nilfgaardian side. Ciaran motioned them into a strategic huddle while the home team looked on in vivid interest and amusement.

They sat up a little straighter in their saddles when an-Nayyir was trotted out and Ciaran was handed a mallet.

The Nilfgaardians’ game improved but they still lost, though by a less dishonourable margin.

As consolation, a few races on ostrich-back was organised. The second of these Ciaran unexpectedly won by a comfortable margin after discovering he had a knack for handling contrary creatures and how to dig in his heels to avoid bouncing around on the creature’s back. Handled correctly they were light, nimble mounts but that could only take the lightest of riders, and Ciaran was astonished at how
much he enjoyed himself.

However, it was the game the locals called polo — which they had learnt from the Oferi handlers who had introduced the antelope and other wildlife that now inhabited the region — that had really caught Ciaran and Morvran Voorhis’ attention.

“Ours are the wrong horses for this kind of game,” Ciaran told Morvran Voorhis as they headed back outside once the elf had washed and changed, “An-nayyir is perfect but the cavalry horses are too heavy. We need smaller horses that are more nimble and lighter on their feet. Smeriglia would have done too but we can’t risk her leg yet.”

They both stopped short when they were confronted by var Cleef’s two milk caramel boys and a couple of their young cousins, who stared up at Ciaran as they usually did, wide-eyed and solemn.

They were soon tearing across the courtyard, screeching in delight, with Ciaran in hot pursuit, trailing silk and ribbons.

The elf eventually returned holding one of the plumes from the ornamental grasses he’d taken a liking too, collapsed beside his emperor and took a long draught of lemonade out of Emhyr’s glass before stretching out, head pillowed on Emhyr’s thigh, pretending to fan him with the plume.

He felt Emhyr start to card his hair.

They were not usually this demonstrative in public but they were tucked away in shadow and it seemed natural in an atmosphere so familial and informal, though even here, the bubble of respectful distance that always enveloped Emhyr still existed.

Leftovers from the party had been laid out that morning and all day people had helped themselves to them and to ostrich egg scrambled in the shell over the coals of the previous day’s fire pits. The farm hands and slaves sat in the shade and talked or carved the shells. Sometimes they sang.

Soothed by Emhyr’s caressing fingers, Ciaran watched var Cleef play with the children, soon joined by Bastiaan who helped him toss each child up into the air in turn until they were red in the face from screaming and laughing.

He knew from Iorveth’s letters that Dol Gwennelen was already expecting a few births. Ciaran had thought he had let the idea of children go, just as he had let the idea of a future with Iorveth go, but he realised now that he still would have liked to watch some children grow up.

He glanced at Emhyr whose cool gaze was fixed on the toddlers.

Perhaps Emhyr too had some regrets, but then again perhaps not. Children could have no place in a future as uncertain as his was.

Two children streaked past, chasing a spotted ostrich chick.

Ciaran had been wondering what he should do if Emhyr was not permitted to abdicate. It was probably true that Morvran would want to protect him but Morvran might find himself needing protection more than able to give it. And besides, with Emhyr gone, there would be nothing to keep him in Nilfgaard. Watching young elves try to run before they could crawl might console him of it.

The children were taken inside for their afternoon naps and the others soon followed to pass the hottest hours of the day indoors.

The emperor, the general, the brigadier, their aides and officers congregated in a large reception room
that Emhyr was using as his study. Servants brought drinks and snacks, and Ciaran curled up in a corner, trying to be as small and discreet as possible, while the aides set up maps and pulled out their notes on the various deals they’d struck with the empire’s various regions.

By now they had a firmer picture of what the new senate would look like and several papers had been laid out together to form a rough map of the empire, the rights and obligations negotiated with each province listed out on them. For the next couple of hours they discussed these arrangements exhaustively, debating particular rights or obligations, judging the collective terms for each regain, weighting them up those of other regions, making suggestions for each proposed settlement, trying to determine how this intricate web of interests would play out.

*Divide et impera.*

Ciaran sat quietly, watched and listened, trying to soak up as much of it as possible, trying to understand the thinking, trying to see through it. He took careful note of who spoke and who did not, and of who said what. He noticed again that var Cleef himself never spoke to the substantive issues but this time also noticed that his officers and aides spoke as freely as any of the others.

Ciaran glanced at Emhyr, wondering at being allowed to hear these sensitive issues being aired and realised that it was because Emhyr and var Cleef and Morvran Voorhis accepted his presence and that this was a potent sign of trust.

And though most of those present liked him, liked him personally, if he ever turned traitor they would know it and the punishment would be swift and remorseless. They had been chosen to serve the empire and Emhyr had chosen them well.

The sun sank lower, the shadows lengthened, and the air cooled. The maps were rolled up, the notes tidied away, food was brought and as they began to eat, the talk turned social.

Morvran Voorhis took his leave, which marked the start of a quiet and gradual exodus, and when they were finally alone, Emhyr turned to Ciaran.

“Shall we have an early night?”

A couple of hours later, Emhyr brushed the tips of the pink ostrich feather over the elegant line of Ciaran’s back, noting that the Venendali sun had succeeded where even the Pereplut one had failed in putting a dusting of colour on the alabaster skin.

They had washed and retired to bed and his elfling had lost all sense of time, as he sometimes did, and had spent the last half hour stretched out on top of him, just lapping at his mouth, flicking the tip of his tongue between Emhyr’s lips, sometimes pushing it in a little deeper, sometimes pressing his lips against Emhyr’s, sometimes biting.

This had left Emhyr free to run the feather and his hands up and down Ciaran’s back and he now abandoned the feather, pressed the flats of his hands over the smooth skin, over the scars, then grabbed the taut buttocks and kneaded them gently.

Ciaran made the softest sound of approval and finally pushed his tongue past Emhyr’s teeth, hungry and entitled.

Emhyr smiled to himself, rubbed his own tongue against Ciaran’s, and gave his rump another squeeze, parting the cheeks. When Ciaran felt the kiss of the cooler night air against his skin, he pulled away to stare down at Emhyr, pupils blown wide.
Emhyr slid his hands a little lower then pulled up again, gently, letting his fingertips trail between the pale cheeks. He watched in satisfaction as Ciaran’s lips parted in a hitched breath. He did it again, even more deliberately, and then again, this time brushing against the underside of Ciaran’s sensitive sack before pulling up a little harder. And the next time he did it, his fingers came away wet.

Ciaran had held his gaze throughout but at the next squeeze, he leaned in and bit his mouth then pushed his tongue into it, slow but insistent. He moaned into Emhyr’s mouth softly when the first finger breached him and arched his back. Two fingers, then three, which only ever meant one thing.

“Emhyr, can you…?” Ciaran asked hopefully, pulling away to look into the amber eyes.

“Yes.”

Ciaran slid lower until he could press himself against the stiffening member, then sat up, pressing his knees hard against Emhyr’s sides and tucking his toes under Emhyr’s thighs as he prepared to take him.

Emhyr’s thirsting gaze drank up the sight of the long, bared throat, the parted lips, the slender hands splayed over his stomach as Ciaran braced himself and began to slowly sink onto his heated shaft. A gasp at the stretch then a long blown out breath when he got past it. Emhyr resisted the urge to thrust up and was rewarded by that adorable wiggle of the hips Ciaran typically gave when he was trying to take him deeper.

The elf bowed his head and bit his lip in concentration as he sank lower, as far as he could, then let out another compressed breath once he was seated.

Emhyr watched and relished the melting friction as Ciaran began to move his hips, timidly at first, then more urgently, rolling his hips easily once he’d hit his stride, steadying himself with just the barest brush of his fingertips, lithe and slender as a ribbon as he rode him, radiating pleasure and his now deep confidence that he could take it.

He cradled the slim hips as Ciaran doubled down, his fingers curling around Emhyr’s sides and gripping him as he rode him harder, a thin edge of desperation beading into sweat on his pale brow. Emhyr let out a breathed snarl between gritted teeth and let his precious elf peak before allowing himself release. Sharp nails dug into his flesh then Ciaran collapsed on top of him, worn and limp, gasping, heaving.

He sank a hand in the dark hair, buried his nose in it, and breathed in deeply.

“You will be the ruin of the empire, elyennen,” he breathed out.

Ciaran smiled, yawned, then drifted into sleep.

— N —

Var Cleef kissed his wife and children goodbye and they all left for the castle in Tonnerre, where they were to be hosted overnight by the Duke of Salm.

When they were still hours away from the castle, they found themselves battling one of the terrible storms Ciaran was told were common in the area.
His attendants drew the curtains, lit lamps, and made tea, then they all huddled with their blankets on the sheepskin throws and played cards while the wind and rain battered the carriage. The carriage was better built than the wagon and even more generously padded, but even so, the weather was difficult to ignore. They hadn’t had a storm like this one in weeks — like another thing they had left behind in the North.

Bastiaan was at the door, smiling and soaked to the skin, when they finally arrived.

Mindful of reestablishing his reputation after Nazair, Ciaran was courteous over dinner with the duke. Then he went off to have a long soak in the tub — the first one since Pereplut and the last one until they reached the Tower of the Winds in Gemmera, one of the home provinces and practically Nilfgaard.

It was there, in the elven-built tower, that they would prepare for the emperor’s triumphal return to the City.

Ciaran sat curled up by the fireplace, tucked under blankets and furs and sipping his infusion, watching the storm through the heavily mullioned windows as he thought about these preparations.

Emhyr returned and while he poured himself a drink, Ciaran scooted over to make space for him, then stretched his legs out over Emhyr’s lap once he was settled.

“It went well?” he asked as Emhyr sipped his drink and began to massage one of his slender calves absently.

By now he could read between the lines of Emhyr’s impassive face.

“The duke was as amenable as expected.”

“What did you settle on?”

He listened, only occasionally interrupting with questions, as Emhyr patiently laid out the terms in relation to Salm’s situation.

Back in Dol Gwennelen, Ciaran had imagined the emperor of Nilfgaard as a careless, thoughtless monarch who feasted on the best the continent had to offer while being waited on by cowed and fawning slaves.

Absurd to think of that now. Nilfgaardians did not fawn. Not even Mererid fawned. And the slaves didn’t seem to be in any greater danger of death than the generals. There was an odd kind of equality in that.

Emhyr was hardly thoughtless, and never careless. And he was not always surrounded.

When they’d first started dining and spending their evenings together, Ciaran had assumed Emhyr had done so out of a sense of obligation — and perhaps he had. But then he’d started to see that Emhyr was used to spending time alone or nearly alone. It was in the familiarity with which he prepared his own drinks, in how comfortable he was in his own silent company, in the impression of long habit of it that his manner and Mererid’s seemed to betray.

But by Venendal it had become clear that Emhyr did not have to endure his company, he enjoyed it, sought it, craved it. Just as Ciaran craved his.

And Ciaran did crave it.
He was content to spend his days studying, exploring, and fulfilling his duties as an imperial concubine, safe in the long and large shadow the emperor cast, but he was happier still to come back to Emhyr in the evenings, to be quiet and easy together, and to sleep curled up in the hollow between Emhyr’s side and his arm always tucked around him.

And now they were both clinging to these last days together.

He moved, tucking himself up beside Emhyr, propped up against his thigh, and felt a kiss against his hair and Emhyr’s warm, strong hand begin to massage the back of his neck carefully. Together, they stared out at the raging storm as it rattled the small, thick panes in their frames.

“I’ve never seen a storm like this,” Ciaran murmured then turned to Emhyr, “Is it the tritons?”

“Their mages could easily bring a storm like this but this is not one of theirs. They are common here. A current of cold water separates the warm waters of Pereplut from those around Nilfgaard. That is what causes all the wind and rain.”

“Why would the duke live here?”

“He does not. We met here because it is a convenient place for us to stop before boarding the ships again.”

The ships. They were out there in the wind and the rain and the waves.

“Will they be all right?”

“There is a sheltered cove along the coast, they will have sought shelter there. The weather is difficult but we are used to it.”

“Skelliger raiders would have you at an advantage if they made it this far.”

“Some have made it this far, but they did not survive to challenge us.”

Ciaran glanced at Emhyr, a chill going down his spine at the flat, matter-of-fact delivery.

“Emhyr, why are the terms for Dol Gwennelen so favourable?” he asked quietly, “They’re more generous than Temeria’s even though Temeria is larger and wealthier.”

Emhyr observed him a moment, cool eyes assessing.

“We owe the Scoia’tael much. And Dol Gwennelen is important to the elves of Nilfgaard. And the elves of Nilfgaard are important to Nilfgaard and we are still rebuilding relations with them.”

“What did you do?” Ciaran asked, eyes narrowing.

“It was before my time. But twenty, thirty years are just a moment to elves.”

There was a note of finality to the clipped voice but the hand at his neck was still gentle and soothing.

“What’s happening in Zerrikania?”

This time Emhyr’s brows furrowed a moment then his expression settled back into its lines and the emperor touched a finger to his elf’s long ears.

“What do you know of the steppe tribes of northern Haakland, elyennen?”
Almost nothing. They were barely more than myth or rumour to Ciaran, the only element of which he felt could be trusted being the fact that tribes of some kind actually existed.

He listened with growing alarm as Emhyr confirmed much of what he’d heard of the fearsome tribes and explained that they had federated under one leader and now posed a real threat to the great walled kingdom of Haakland. But if, for whatever reason, their ambitions in the east were thwarted — as the Nilfgaardians and Ofieri thought they were likely to be in the long run — they would turn their attention westward, to the less accessible but also less defended North.

“But the threat, if it does materialise, is still years away. It will be Morvran’s problem, or perhaps his successor’s.”

Ciaran stared at the impassive face and at the temples that had been turned to iron.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“It would have worried you unnecessarily. It is not your responsibility.”

“But if might affect Dol Gwennelen and Dol Blathanna too! What can I do?”

“Cultivate your marquis’ friendship and that of the Ofieri. Peace is not underwritten just by the paper of treaties but by the paper of business contracts and promissory notes. Encourage diplomatic ties but, especially, encourage inward investment into Dol Gwennelen — encourage Iorveth and the others to allow it. Temeria might help you if they can be made to understand that the mountains of Mahakam will not protect them forever, but the lords of Nilfgaard and the rest of the empire, Ofier, Kovir and Poviss — they may not be inclined to help you out of selfless principle, but they might be moved to protect what is theirs out of selfish greed.”

Ciaran managed a nod.

“What else?”

Emhyr seemed to hesitate, his eyes colder and harder than Ciaran remembered them ever being.

“Do not antagonise Klaervy, be wary of her. She is the figurehead of her father’s faction and the Guild. They pledge allegiance in public but try to thwart me in everything.”

Later that night, Ciaran lay in bed, wide awake, Emhyr’s words still swirling in his head and sparking question after question.

He finally lit a candle, fetched the harem package then slipped back into bed- He stared at the unbroken seal as he composed himself a moment, then broke it, took out all the papers, and began to read.

By the time they made landfall in Gemmera a couple of days later, Ciaran had soaked up most of the package’s content. Aside from taking a quick look at the map and noting that the housing he’d been assigned was right on the tip of the island, he had ignored the rest of the papers on his accommodation. He still wasn’t ready to face that.

The ships made anchor off a narrow cove at the end of which lay a crescent of sand between two rocky outcrops. The sun was shining, the sea was calm and their little cove seemed so safe and secure after stormy Tonnerre, but Ciaran knew better than to trust appearances.
Emhyr’s back pain had flared up violently overnight but he’d refused to be carried off the ship. Now the emperor lay prostrate in his tent, pale and beaded with sweat after the effort of walking, just a few dozen feet from the beautiful shore.

Ciaran had a camp bed set up near Emhyr’s and lay curled up beside him, as quiet and calm as he could make himself as they waited for the pain to subside enough to make the rest of the journey up the deep, curving pass that would take them up to the tower perched high on the seaside cliff.

He raised his head in anger as he heard a soldier run up to the tent.

“Brigadier, the ships have sent a message. They see tidal waves coming in. They believe the tritons have returned.”

Var Cleef ducked into the tent, looking grim. Ciaran turned to Emhyr as the alarm rang around the camp, but the emperor’s gaze was on the Impera captain and he shook his head slightly.

“Have Lord Ciaran taken to the Tower.”

“Wait! Emhyr, I want to stay with you!”

“It is too dangerous, elyenennen. They want you and I cannot be moved yet. I will deal with this and join you,” Emhyr explained quickly but firmly, then took the seal ring from his finger and pressed it into Ciaran’s hands, “Take this. They are expecting us and should make no trouble. Do not put it on, but if anybody makes trouble or questions your identity, show them this.”

He looked up at Var Cleef and the captain nodded and whisked Ciaran away even as he protested.

Once outside, he gave sharp orders to his lieutenant to pick a few men for the escort.

“You too, aep Larsen,” he said to the boy, who had already appeared on horseback, ready to volunteer, “I’m putting Lord Ciaran in your care. We’ll see you at the Tower.”

He swung Ciaran onto the horse, Bastiaan dug his heels in and raced off, the rest of the escort soon trailing him.

They stormed the tower, where information and orders were traded, and a contingent of the soldiers stationed there were sent to the camp as reinforcements while Ciaran was bundled away to the imperial suite.

Ciaran tried to stay calm and dignified but was soon pacing from window to window, trying to find the angle that would let him see furthest down the curving pass to the sea, expecting to see water come flooding through.

Bastiaan stood and watched him, desolated and helpless. He’d wrapped a blanket around Ciaran’s slender shoulders. He knew the elf was not cold but he didn’t know what else to do.

“Bastiaan, outriders!”

Bastiaan strained to look.

“His Majesty is unharmed,” he stated, “See those banners, My Lord? They are a signal. His Majesty is well.”

Emhyr paused at the door, pale with the effort of pushing past the residual pain in his back. Even from here he could smell Ciaran’s distress. Evrard was by his side, looking grim, and when they
opened the door they saw Bastiaan standing by the elf, pale and stricken.

“Emhyr?” Ciaran said with a voice full of tears then rushed to him.

Emhyr swept him up into his arms and carried him away to the bedroom, his pain forgotten. He laid Ciaran down on the bed and knelt by it, buried his hands in the dark hair and covering the tear-wet face with kisses.

“You’re not hurt?” Ciaran hiccupsed, looking Emhyr over frantically, clinging to him.

“I am not. They only wanted to frighten us,” Emhyr reassured him, “Their leaders came with them. They wanted to bargain, but they have accepted the situation now. They understand that we fought alongside your people and that we saved you. In their minds, I have earned you. They will not challenge me again and they will not try to take you.”

Ciaran stared up at him then melted into tears again.

“Don’t leave me again!”

Emhyr pressed his lips against Ciaran’s forehead for a long moment.

“I am sorry.”
Far, far below, the navy’s black ships were visible for a moment longer, bobbing on the waves whose flowing crestlets were lit by the last rays of sun’s dying light. Ciaran watched and waited until the last of the glow had faded and even the endless sea was shrouded in darkness.

He moved away from the large window and wandered through the large, vaulted chamber towards his own room.

Nowadays, the cliff-top tower was the last link in the defensive chain that protected the empire’s only dimerium ore mines and access to the whole area was restricted. Before that, under a Gemmeran duke, the fortifications had been expanded for use as a prison. But the Tower of the Winds itself was of ancient elven make and, like the palace in Beauclair, there was a familiarity to its designs and proportions that Ciaran found deeply moving.

One of the human-built, thick-walled courtyards had been converted into a garden — something Nilfgaard believed its soldiers were entitled to — and Ciaran had spent a few hours in the afternoons surrounded by the flower-laden fruit trees and shrubs that thrived there, sheltered from the seaborne wind and salt. Emhyr, meanwhile, had been kept busy with endless meetings dealing with the finer points of ceremonial protocol on top of his ordinary business.
There hadn’t been a triumph in decades. Not one in the whole of Bastiaan’s lifetime, Morvran Voorhis had been too young to remember the last, which even var Cleef seemed to have only vague memories of.

As far as Ciaran understood, all he himself was expected to do was stand by Emhyr and look beautiful — something that by now he’d spent weeks perfecting and that he was not unduly worried about.

He sat at his vanity table and studied himself in the mirror whose delicate etchings framed his face. Its quiet perfection was still strange to him. Foreign. But he recognised it now. It was Ciaran of Nilfgaard’s face, the mask of the imperial concubine, and it was well suited to the task.

No, Ciaran thought as touched his nose unconsciously, he was not worried about that. He was worried about what would come after.

His outfit for the triumph was a faithful reproduction of the one he’d worn when Emhyr had chosen him back in Dol Gwennelen, remade in lighter fabrics more suited to the Nilfgaardian climes and embellished with gold and silver thread, gems and pearls and beads. It had arrived by ship from the capital and with it had been delivered a couple of born and bred palace slaves that Mererid had hand-reared from eggs.

After nearly two months of regular bathing and a Southern diet, his four original attendants’ appearance and smell were no longer as offensive as they had been.

They’d all changed. They were all becoming Nilfgaardian.

For a moment, Ciaran stared into his own eyes, the part of him that seemed least changed, to see if anything remained of Ciaran aep Easnillien. Then he looked away.

His canopied camp bed, his little writing desk, the rest of the campaign furniture and all the superficial luxury of silks and furs thrown over the stone floors and wooden booms, creating a familiar cocoon beneath the ancient vaulted ceilings.

They had followed him in the wagon, the carriage, his tent, the many places he’d stayed. They would accompany him to Nilfgaard, but this time he would not have the comfort of telling himself their stay there would only be temporary. The next place they went would be his new home. Perhaps the last he would ever know.

It was named after a mythical bird. It had a place on the map, carefully labelled, a floor plan, a certain acreage of garden surrounding it. Ciaran had skimmed over these things, looking without seeing.

He’d read as much as he could bear to of the rest of the harem file, most of it broadly familiar from his readings back in the woods of Dol Gwennelen, had studied the protocol and rules of the harem whose complicated hierarchy and system of promotion was based on a combination of seniority, status, preference and the production of offspring — the last of which, at least, was irrelevant.

Emhyr had intimated that this had been reduced to simple seniority and so, by virtue of being the newest addition, Ciaran would be at the very bottom of this hierarchy while seniority and status placed Klaervy at its head.

Probably not that simple, Ciaran reflected, remembering how full of arcane minutiae Nilfgaarian rules and protocol habitually were.

The essence of it, when Ciaran could get to it, was jarringly familiar. All the nuances of elven community, their variegated, subtle ways of ensuring they could live together harmoniously were
there. Only they were made explicit, codified and nailed down, much of their natural adaptability and fluidity stripped away, the flow of social and communal life as closely managed as water — with locks and gates and reservoirs.

Perhaps that was how things needed to be between humans. They had no sense of their place in the universe or even their own societies, they needed to be told their place, to be regulated.

Perhaps that was how things needed to be between humans and elves.

Over the weeks, Ciaran had taken careful note of how people behaved with him and Master Aelrindel and he could no longer maintain the belief that it was all due to them being an imperial concubine and a savant. That accounted for the extra layer of deference but beneath that there was the same respect afforded to any other, the same afforded to the few elven soldiers.

They were all Nilfgaardians.

Just as Ciaran himself would have to learn to be.

There had to be a way — at his core, beneath his Nilfgaardian veneer, Master Aelrindel was as much an elf as any elf of Dol Blathanna.

Turning back to the mirror, Ciaran’s gaze came to rest on the brass canister Master Aelrindel had given him.

His attendants were occupied in making last-minute fit alterations to his clothes or preparing for the journey and Emhyr was with his advisors and might not return for hours yet.

Ciaran selected a taper from the canister, settled it into the lid, then lit it and focused on the flame, whose three reflections flickered in the triptych’s panes, on the sweet, smokey scent it released.

At some point a large silhouette darkened the doorway — Emhyr, Ciaran sensed — but moved away before his concentration broke.

Once the candle had burnt down, Ciaran tidied the canister away and went looking for Emhyr. He found him standing by his little writing desk, where the papers from the harem package were still out, the map of the island topmost.

“I can’t imagine it,” Ciaran confessed as he approached, “I’ve never seen a place with so much water.”

“You will see it soon,” Emhyr said then kissed the top of his head, “Yours is one of the smaller pavilions but it has the largest gardens. I thought you would prefer somewhere quiet.”

Ciaran nodded, his gaze still on the map as he huddled closer to Emhyr.

The imperial palace where the emperor lived would be just across a nearby bridge, on the neighbouring island, the strip of blue water that separated them the presage of another type of distance. The elf had read the papers, he knew the the various responsibilities that would eat up most of the emperor’s time and the rules of protocol that would divide up whatever time Emhyr had left between the eight other concubines.

“I can see it from my balcony,” Emhyr murmured into Ciaran’s hair, as if reading his thoughts.

Ciaran tilted his head back to look up at him.
“Would you like a game of shah?”

Emhyr looked into the golden eyes, at the long throat, at the slender hands pressed against his chest.

There might not be any more games of shah once they were in the City. It would be difficult to find the time.

He considered the generous offer, his gaze on the sharp-featured face.

“Thank you, elyennen.”

He would miss his elfling’s company. He would miss the golden eyes, the slender body, the bitten-back gasps. He would miss the long looks, the snide comments and other flashes of Ciaran’s true self that he did not show to anyone else. He would miss the secret complicity that went from formal occasions when they had to stand on ceremony to their nights spent together when they absolutely did not. He’d never known that sort of honesty and intimacy with any of his other concubines.

No, perhaps he had, with Klaervy, in the first days of their relationship, when they’d believed in their destiny, before they’d seen through each other. Perhaps they had. It was difficult to remember.

The pre-emptive longing intensified the following day as they sailed ever closer to the capital and they often stood together on the stern castle.

A long stretch of the seaboard was hung with a perpetual fog created by the collision of hot and cold currents, the skeleton coast strewn with the gaunt outlines of wrecked ships that had been washed ashore and were now mired in sand.

A pod of dolphins raced alongside them and when Ciaran went to the side to have a closer look he saw tritons swimming with them, occasionally touching a flipper or a dorsal fin for a speed boost. Alarmed, he backed into Emhyr who immediately reassured him.

“They will not harm you or try to take you. We have come to an agreement.”

So Ciaran continued to look over the side, fascinated by how smoothly and speedily they moved in the water.

“A hunting party,” var Cleef remarked as the mixed group peeled away from the ships and took off towards the open seas.

“You said they trade with Nilfgaard?”

“Yes. They have, in their own way, as complex a society as most humans. They have farmers, hunters, craftsmen. They trade their surplus to Nilfgaard in return for what they do not themselves produce. They bring us fish, whale meat, seaweed, seashells, corals, pearls from the Sedna Abyss…”

They saw a whale soon after. The biggest beast Ciaran had ever seen, and whose movements were so slow and colossal that it seemed to exist in another plane of time.

“The Friendship Isles,” Emhyr nodded oceanwards and handed Ciaran the brass-bound telescope.

Ciaran knew from his studies that the Friendship Isles were an extensive archipelago of island clusters that ran down along the Nilfgaardian coast, across the Strait of Belone to the Sea of Winds to touch the northern Ofieri coasts.

Now that he raised the telescope to his eye, he saw several of low-lying islands, covered in greenery
above which swayed the fronds of tall palm trees similar to the ones he’d seen in Venendal, and ringed with fishing boats that bobbed gently on the clear azure waters. Behind them, veiled by the haze, was a large dark mountain that swept up from the ocean in an almost perfect triangle, its peak hidden by a wisp of cloud, stark in the amber afternoon light.

“Are they valuable?”

“They protect the Nilfgaardian coast from the worst of the waves and many natural resources can be found there. The tritons live in and around them and husband these resources carefully.”

Emhyr took the telescope from Ciaran and handed it off to an aide who stepped forward to take it before bowing and leaving them.

“They are the cornerstone of Nilfgaardian-Ofieri diplomacy,” Emhyr explained when Ciaran glanced up at him. “The question of security and shared resources make them the point of greatest tension. Every year, after the rains, a high level meeting between our two nations takes place there where our respective situations and common interests are discussed. Our victory in the North has changed much, this year I will attend in person, as will all four Points of the Crown.”

He gave a nod, indicating what lay ahead.

“Look, elyennen, the gates to the City.”

Ciaran could now make up the chain of small forts dotted along the heights of the coastline and the fortified walls that ran between them to the mouth of the lagoon.

“Nilfgaard?”

“Nilfgaard,” Emhyr confirmed, the word released in one expansive breath.

The ridges were too tall to see over and Ciaran’s gaze followed the gentle slopes of the curving headland, holding his breath for his first sight of Nilfgaard.

“Come,” Emhyr murmured with a ghost of a smile, “Close your eyes.”

Ciaran obeyed and his heart jumped into his throat a moment when he felt the cool whisper of a silk over his eyes, but then he became aware again of Emhyr’s presence, of his scent and his warmth, and settled again.

He waited, listening for the orders that rang around the ship and the changes in the sound of the surf. He heard the whip of rope through metal and the dull sounds of the sails and felt through the ship’s timbers the shift in momentum, the long change in gravity and direction.

“Now,” he finally heard Emhyr drop into his ear, slipping the silk from his eyes.

He blinked as his eyes adjusted then gasped softly.

The late afternoon glow warmed the pale, rocky shoreline and even their submerged parts visible through the clear, green-tinted water. A few merchantmen and a couple of navy ships were at anchor around the mouth of the lagoon. Beyond them Ciaran could see oliphants were feeding and resting on the shore and a large bull shook his great head, shaking the dust loose from his flapping ears.

Pilot boats appeared at the sea gates and helped guide the navy ships into the outer lagoon, just visible behind the chain of fortifications that ran along the coast and hopped over a broken line of sandbars that lay across the Alba’s mouth, guarding it. Tall lighthouses stood like sentries on them,
bracketed by two monumental ones topped by twisted cupolas, gilded and flamelike, and as they passed them, Ciaran saw that they doubled as boom towers for the colossal harbour chains that hung, between them, ready to be winched up in defence of the capital.

Beyond them loomed two promontory islands, the starboard one rearing out of the water, its cliffside hammered and chiselled into the shape of a ship’s bow.

“The Ostzeebad naval base,” Emhyr murmured, “The other is the Markus Braibant military academy.”

There had been much discussion about which of the two would host the imperial party overnight but ultimately it had been decided that until the emperor formally touched soil during the triumph, he remained the navy’s guest. So it was to the naval base that they slowly glided under the endless gun salute that punctuated their entry into the harbour — the boom of canons blasting through the air and releasing plumes of smoke into a sky already lit by the dramatic flame and fire of a nascent sunset.

The ships dropped anchor and Ciaran tried to calm his nerves while they were ferried across to the naval base, his wide-eyed, curious gaze trying to take in their new surroundings. They were ushered into the base to the usual endless round of protocolary welcomes and introductions — this time a number of admirals, rear admirals, vice admirals, and an assortment of captains, commanders, lieutenants and their various hybrids. Some of the military high command had come over for the formal dinner and as he looked at the smart uniforms and glittering medals, Ciaran thought of Field Marshall var Moehorn and the other officers still in the North.

They were shown to their suite overlooking the lagoon and once they had bathed and dressed for dinner, Emhyr led the elfling out onto the balcony.

By now the sun had dipped beneath the horizon and only the faintest glow remained in the sky, painting the harbour and its many islands a dusky pink. The City’s bells were still ringing and Ciaran stared at the many towers from which they pealed and that dotted the sprawling, amorphous dark mass of the city, their golden conical caps twisted like flames lighting the gathering dusk.

The bells faded then fell silent and as they watched, lights began to appear all over the city.

“The customs house,” Emhyr indicated a nearby building, just on the water, long and colonnaded, then drew his attention to a distant island tiered with pale buildings, “The business district.”

Ciaran stared as he used these two reference points to readjust the scale of his mental map of the City.

Lights were still appearing all over the city. The public buildings had been the first but now they flickered into being all over the sea of darkness, showing up the land against empty waters and the far reaches of the city, beyond what the eye could make out.

Ciaran’s instincts as a scout kicked in, used to estimating the number of people in settlements and soldier camps by size and the numbers of fires, and he soon found himself breathless, the thought slipping into his mind unbidden, that the City was full of reservists. He’d known the City was larger than any capital in the North, he’d heard of its million citizens, but he’d never been able to imagine what it would look like.

“What do you think?”

It was monstrous. Vizima could have sunk into the waters of the outer harbour without leaving a trace and judging by the number of tiny lights in the vague, featureless mainland, even Novigrad
would have been lost in it.

“It’s so big,” he answered haltingly, “There’s so much water.”

Dinner had been laid out in an airy circular hall perched high on the prow of the cliff and it afforded a panoramic view of the open sea, the Friendship Isles, the harbour, the city, framed into segments by the many columns and balustrades. Ciaran, in his silks and pearls and diamonds, floated into it like a lily among the darkly and severely dressed Nilfgaardians who made up the bulk of the empire’s high command.

Dinner was served in the Nilfgaardian fashion and once the meal was underway, the atmosphere grew congenial and spirited. The officers who had distinguished themselves during the war were full of anticipation at the prospect of the triumphal procession to take place the next day. As many who dared to came to sit by the new imperial concubine and pay their respects. By now they all knew him by reputation and from the accounts of the officers that had accompanied the imperial party south, but even so most of the army officers respected Ciaran’s understanding and experience of warfare while the naval officers were delighted by his questions about the navy, of which Ciaran still felt he knew and understood little.

Despite the formality of the event and the gravitas lent to it by the emperor’s presence, the victory dinner had as much of a celebratory atmosphere as even the most hedonistic elf could have wished for. The victory felt as new as if it had happened just days — rather than months — ago. Officers who had returned home soon after the peace were now reunited with comrades just returning and reminisced. Those who had been North recounted their battles and escapades in minute and animated detail to those who had not. Wine and conversation flowed, the air was lit by flashing smiles, the glint of cut crystal, and gold epaulettes.

It was from the terrace that they watched the fireworks spectacle, the boom of each salvo echoing over the water lit to fire by the flares above.

The empire’s wealth once again going up in heat and light to honour its emperor.

With every flash, Ciaran tried to make out more of the city. Nearby, the customs house’s many columns were like sharp teeth guarding the huge fiery maw of a submerged giant. The guild island and its reflection, all ablaze, seem to float in the sea and air now the same inky, indistinguishable blackness, suspended in the void.

After the main fireworks, the individual districts had organised their own displays and these had continued at intervals throughout the evening.

As a sign of favour, the emperor derogated from his habits and stayed beyond his usual two hours. Ciaran was standing at the drinks table, looking out as Morvran Voorhis, Bastiaan and half a dozen other officers and aides told him about the City.

The two men were handsomer than ever in their severe dress uniforms, the usual high-necked, short tunic, trimly belted, the long slit on either side revealing the striped of gold braid that ran from the waist right down to below the ankle and make them look impossibly long-legged.

“I’ve requisitioned some flares and firecrackers,” var Cleef said with a grin as he accosted them.

“What a charming—,” Morvran began but was cut off when an aide came to say the High Admiral begged his presence.

The general ran his gaze over the bottles, picked out a few, then nodded at Bastiaan and the others.
“Enjoy yourselves,” he said ruefully.

They sidled out discreetly then raced each other to the top of the watchtower where Ciaran’s silks were whipped around his slender frame by the strong sea breeze. Above, the air crackled with fire and from below came distant strains of music — from the dining room, from the customs house, the covered marketplaces on the floors of which flickered the shadows of the people dancing within.

Ciaran and Bastiaan glanced at each other, still surprised at finding themselves playing truant, but var Cleef and the others were popping open bottles and pouring them out into their glasses, using the empty bottles as supports for the flares. Soon the first one fizzed into the sky to shouts of “Hael Ker’zaer”. The next was to the glory of the empire, followed by the glory of the emperor, toasts to Stirwen, to Bastiaan, to var Cleef, to each of them, to the Alba and to the ships that had carried them home, until finally they devolved into laughter and toasts to the flamingos with gilded beaks that wandered the imperial gardens and to the health of a famous carp in one of the gardens’ ponds.

When they’d finished the wine, they surreptitiously reentered the dining room and Ciaran went to the emperor’s side and looked up at him wearing his very best wide-eyed look of innocence. Emhyr said nothing but carefully wiped a smudge of soot from the elfling’s nose with his thumb.

Soon after he excused himself and soon after that they were in their suite, soaking in a large sunken tub and looking out at the City once again.

Ciaran fell asleep curled up by Emhyr’s side almost as soon as they got into bed but woke a few hours later. He could still make out the lights and sounds of fireworks and so he slipped out of Emhyr’s arms and his bed to go out onto the balcony to once again look up on his great City.

Emhyr soon joined him and drew him close to enfold him in his robe.

“There’s so much light,” Ciaran said, once again at a loss, still soaking up everything Nilfgaard was.

“The City is never dark.”

Even now, in deepest night, there were lights all over the City. Its many towers and lighthouses, of course, but some public buildings and what Ciaran took for public lighting along the coast and in the wealthier quarters. And most of all, something that smouldered at the far end of the lagoon, unseen but for the amber glow it threw into the dark like burning moonlight.

“What is that?”

Emhyr kissed his hair.

“The Seraglio. Home.”

— N —

The next day, the sun was out and the sea breeze skimmed over the glittering lagoon and carried with it the clean, sharp scent of the ocean. Ciaran looked out through the crisp air to the many islands that littered the vast lagoon, dotted with tall white towers whose gilded caps gleamed and flickered in the morning light.

Breakfast was laid out in the same hall as dinner had been and when he’d eaten what little he could force-feed the butterflies in his belly, Ciaran went back out onto the large balcony where he was offered a selection of telescopes and eyeglasses so that he could take a closer look at the city and watch the preparations. As always, a half-dozen aides and officers were on hand to provide explanations and answer any questions.
In the generous light of the sun and from this distance, the City now appeared clean and gleaming. The mainland was dotted with towers and public buildings and Ciaran could make out the roads and avenues that radiated out from each and joined to form a web against the pervasive greenery.

The citadel, the capital’s highest security island prison, was not far from the naval academy. Further along was the large merchant marine harbour, laid out around the customs house, and beside it the smaller fishing docks into which the fishermen piled, eager to bring in the night’s catch before the harbour and the lagoon’s main waterways were cleared for the day’s festivities. A dozen or so bull sharks idled around, happy to snap up whatever was thrown to them as the day’s catch was gutted fresh off the boats at small tables set up right on the docks. Ciaran could pick out the silhouettes of a few tritons among them.

The customs house that had seemed so threatening in darkness and was still imposing by its sheer size, seemed to have nothing to hide now that there were quite ordinary people moving around in it and with its walls given life by the dancing reflections of the water rippling over them.

And once again the veteran Scoia’tael revelled in Nilfgaardian efficiency. All of the City’s ceremonial barges were being put to use, as well as several of the navy and merchant marine’s smaller craft such as pilot and supply boats and transport barges given a new coat of paint. They were being loaded with the various treasures that had been stowed in warehouses requisitioned for that purpose, by chains of soldiers who themselves had been housed in the military and naval barracks and on the Citadel, the City’s island prison, whose smaller sister island hosted the City’s largest slave market and from which slaves captured in the North were being ferried, under heavy escort, onto barges. A few larger barges were laden with trophy kills, including the skull, spikes and stinger of the royal wyvern they had killed in Vengerberg, and after the slaves and other spoils came a single black-laquered gondola wreathed in Nilfgaardian banners and bearing a single empty suit of armour, to honour the fallen.

By mid-morning, the first of these heavy barges set off, powered by rowers and oliphants in harness who walked along submerged towpaths. The main canals through the City had been cordoned off and were being patrolled by the Impera and the City Guard’s light craft, but beyond them both land and water were now crowded with people who had come out to see the spectacle and in the hope of catching a glimpse of their emperor — perhaps for the only time in their lives. The fishermen who had offloaded their fish had loaded friends and family onto their boats, the sailors of the merchant ships at anchor in the harbour had swarmed into the rigging and the fastest of them now sat along the yardarms, while on shore slaves, citizens, visitors and provincials of all shapes and sizes and colour came together into a crush at the water’s edge. Sunlight bounced brightly off the brass sailing ship mounted onto the pediment of the austere customs house while inside merchants and brokers mingled with the sober customs officials who had invited them there, having availed themselves of the prerogative of turning their workplace into one of the City’s most sought-after viewing platforms.

The rest of the lagoon was also littered with watercraft of every description — the simple reed-woven canoes common in the City’s many floating markets, every last one of the sleek and dark river taxis, private boats that ranged from neat commuters that bobbed happily on the harbour’s choppier waters to the stately two-masted pleasure yachts beyond the business district. And off the Central Station were enormous paddleboat ferries that made Ciaran stare and stare.

He strained, too, to see the Seraglio — the imperial complex where the palace, the harem, the Impera barracks and most of the City’s political and administrative bodies were. It was the oldest part of the city and the one deepest in the lagoon, where the haze of morning mist had not completely lifted, but try as he might, Ciaran could not make it out.

The elf was given a quick lunch then bundled off to dress but he was constantly distracted by the
sights outside his window. Var Cleef soon arrived with Bastiaan, who glowed with excitement. He was to ride with Morvran Voorhis while var Cleef would ride with the emperor and his concubine, but for now they were intent on watching as their fellow soldiers and officers began to set off on barges and they provided Ciaran with a running commentary while he remained tethered to his mirror.

Several groups and companies of soldiers who had distinguished themselves by some particular action were part of the procession, and after them came the commanding officers on nobler barges with rowers and at their head creatures that Ciaran had never seen before, that Synnøve took for kelpies and that the two Nilfgaardians assured them were hippocampi, led by nereids each more beautiful than the last.

“How do you feel?” Emhyr asked Ciaran quietly when he joined him.

He was in full Impera armour but with the sun-embroidered cloak instead of the Impera one with the salamander emblem. His had his winged helmet tucked under his arm and wore his wreath of golden oak leaves.

Ciaran couldn’t put words to his feelings and settled for a small nod.

“For you,” the emperor said with a nod and one of his aides presented Ciaran with a jeweller’s case, opening it to reveal a silver circlet strung with pearls and diamonds, the largest of which was nestled at its centre, quietly sparking fire.

And so it was that Ciaran followed the emperor out into the sunshine, carrying his own winged helmet of white silver and dripping diamonds as casually as if they’d been drops of water, to the deafening cheers of the nearby soldiers and of the crowds whose fevered excitement charged the air.

Emhyr’s imperial barge, like Morvran Voorhis’, was drawn by seahorses, manned by rowers, and adorned with the flags and banners of defeated battalions and conquered cities. Ciaran knew the barges were heavily warded but even so, as he climbed onto the platform to take his place one step behind Emhyr under the canopy, he couldn’t help feeling exposed.

There were people everywhere — they lined the waterfront, the streets and the bridges, and some of the more adventurous youths had even contrived to perch on the striped mooring posts — and Ciaran felt as though the weight of a million gazes was already on him, though a look at what lay ahead reminded him that this was just a fraction of Nilfgaard’s population.

They rounded the coast and the colossal central station came into view, large and many-legged like a monument to some ancient crablike god. Tall palms, oversized ferns and long-stalked flame-like flowers burst out from from between the many columns that held up the high domed roof as they had had in the courtyard in Venendal that Vanina had built to remind her husband of home. High-arched bridges connected the station to the mainland, their sunflare-spiked outlines reflected in the water to form full suns, and myriad walkways led to the many quays from which river taxis, ferries and private boats came and left.

Beside it, in the foreground, were the low, large, stepped piazzas of the mainland’s downtown area, brimming with people wearing their feast day best, waving flags and banners — the black and gold ones of Nilfgaard but also white ones with silver stars. They looked healthy and happy, they radiated the same joy that had met the imperial party in Beauclair. They hung off the statues, they sat along the balustrades, they became such a crush that the City Guards who stood beyond the roped off areas were in danger of being jostled into the water.

Everything was noise. Ciaran had never heard such a frenzied din in peacetime.
They were just people. Ordinary, everyday people. And they were happy. They were celebrating. With noise and colour and flowers and banners like all people did, like elves did, like Northerners did. And Ciaran realised how absurd it had been to expect Nilfgaard to be populated by one million people dressed in black.

Half a dozen children raced along the shore to keep up with the barges and when they caught Ciaran’s eye, one of the curly-haired imps shrieked in delight and waved.

Caught off-guard, Ciaran waved back.

A roar surged up and the whole city seemed to be crying “Stirwen!” with banners waving furiously. Ciaran caught Emhyr’s slight backwards glance at him and his eyes widened at the lightning certainty that Emhyr really had — somehow — orchestrated the nickname.

Across from the station, on a large island of its own, was the business district where the City’s banks, guilds, brokers and insurers were concentrated. Perched at its peak like a crown, blinding white, was the Guild of Merchants’ hall and the sun radiated off the brass of the star emblazoned on its pediment, the same star engraved on Morvran Voorhis’ medallion. Beneath it, the various other buildings were elegantly placed along the slopes of the rocky outcrop, nestled among luxuriant parks, broad stairways and streets unfolding down to the water’s edge where they flowered into large piazzas like an invitation.

These piazzas were almost as full of people, most as precisely and soberly dressed as the customs officials, if more expensively so, which put Ciaran in mind of Emhyr’s private secretary. Here there were few banners but the same excitement ran taut through the onlookers, barely contained, and shouted hails fired from the crowds even here.

Ciaran’s gaze scanned the opposite bank — skimming over the central station, the piazzas, the parks — as he tried to take in as much as he could of the city. His curious mind tried to follow the shop-lined avenues that led away from the waterfront square but everything was just an ocean of people.

Ahead of them, the last of the oliphant-drawn barges followed the curve in the itinerary and the great beasts left the tow paths and began to swim slowly through the water, the rowers picking up the slack.

A firecracker burst into the air from a nearby park and Ciaran startled, instinctively moving closer to Emhyr.

Emhyr took a step back and held out an arm to drape a wing of his cloak around Ciaran protectively.

“I’m sorry, I wasn’t expecting it,” Ciaran apologised but could barely hear himself over the wave of enthusiastic cries that surged then submerged them.

Emhyr said nothing and eventually removed his arm and turned to look ahead of them again, but he didn’t take up his former position and instead stayed by Ciaran’s side.

Their barge too began to turn and Ciaran’s eyes widened when he saw the archipelago ahead, from which rose the distinctive thorny outline of the opera house, shaped like a crown conch. The entertainment district’s many restaurants had evidently arranged special viewing events, and even at distance Ciaran could see their terraces were all peopled with onlookers.

He was soon distracted, however, by the Temple Isle on his left — a verdant, nearly overgrown island dominated by a vast, towering oak, and whose pale buildings floated like islands among the lush greenery.
One of the Impera’s small fast boats launched from the Temple Isle and was soon alongside. Ciaran recognised the scent of lime in the barley water Emhyr was served and discerned a few drops in the mint-garnished glass of spring water he was offered. Water so freshly drawn Ciaran could still taste the cool depths from which it had sprung.

He could feel Emhry’s gaze on him and met it.

“What do you think, elyenenn?”

Ciaran’s gaze flitted back to the lush gardens of the Temple Isle and lingered longingly on the familiar silhouettes of the spires and gleaming marbles.

“It’s like a dream,” he murmured past the lump forming in his throat and he took another sip of water to swallow it.

He wanted to press himself against Emhyr’s chest and feel his arms around him, but even though they quite a distance from the nearest islands and the curious gazes that peopled them, they were still in public and he was keenly aware of having let his mask slip twice already.

Emhyr turned his head and nodded slowly.

“The Seraglio.”

Ciaran followed his gaze then stared speechlessly, golden eyes wide.

More towers rose at regular intervals from the chain of islets that ringed the Seraglio, while a trick of the light made the islands within it seem slightly suspended above the waters of the inner lagoon like a floating city, a waterfall as its backdrop, enclosed in a faintly iridescent sphere that shimmered like a soap bubble.

They passed through the scintillating veil and sailed the length of the palace island, past the people-lined squares and lush garden terraces stacked between the avenues and the three cornices that structured the rocky slopes.

Rounding a promontory they came to an exceptionally wide waterfront piazza almost level with the water, extended by a shallow shelf almost as long again beneath the mirror-like water and bracketed by two long quays that reached out to them across the water, each lined with slender, spiralling, statue-topped columns.

This piazza too was dark with people, dressed in the formal Nilfgaardian style Ciaran was becoming accustomed to, and his heart seized up at the sight of so many strangers. As they neared, he tried, fruitlessly from that great distance, to scan the crowd for familiar faces.

Morvan’s barge turned into this fluvial avenue and Ciaran realised that what he’d taken for statues were living elves and as they blew into the conch shells they held the vibrant bellow travelled over the water and vibrated right through him.

Ahead of them, the side of Morvran Voorhis’ barge kissed the stone ledge of the landing area and Ciaran was relieved — relieved — to recognise Mererid and some of the officers and soldiers who had been disgorged from the barges, all standing to attention, waiting for their emperor.

Standing out from the circle of courtiers were three figures, one a tall, handsome, confident man with a leonine head of elegantly-greying hair upon which sat a wreath of blackened oak leaves similar to Emhyr’s. His nose and high forehead comforted Ciaran in his assumption that this was Prince Voorhis.
The prince was flanked by two women. One was pale and icy and absolutely elven in form and features, the other was draped in long folds that clung to her statuesque form and Ciaran recognised the face beneath the coils of hair like old gold. Klaervy.

As Morvran Voorhis, Bastiaan and the others disembarked, Lady Voorhis’ gaze swept over them, lingered on her son and, for a fleeting moment, betrayed a hint of relief.

And once var Cleef had leapt to solid ground, the general was there, with a handkerchief draped over his gauntlet, ready to hand Ciaran down, just as he had all those weeks ago on that rainy evening in Vengerberg.

And when the emperor set foot on solid ground, they all sank to their knees and bowed their heads.

“Uncle,” Emhyr acknowledged.

“Your Imperial Majesty,” Prince Voorhis said in his carrying voice, “Welcome back.”

He lifted the blackened oak wreath and offered it up to Emhyr who took it and placed it upon his own head, where it fit neatly inside the golden wreath to form a crown.

“Rise,” the emperor bade, holding a hand out to the prince.

They all rose though Prince Voorhis kept his head bowed.

“I trust you find your City well, Your Majesty.”

“Very well, uncle, I thank you for your fine stewardship of her.”

Prince Voorhis’ bow deepened further then he moved away and they all melted into applause.

The two men turned to walk the length of the piazza into the palace, arm in arm as befitted family and though the words exchanged had seemed warm enough, Ciaran had little doubt that it would have gone the same way under any circumstances. They were kin and Nilfgaardians valued harmony, whatever turmoil there was behind closed doors and in the deepest corners of the palace, they wouldn’t be allowed to cause more than a ripple at the surface.

The emperor’s return was being celebrated in a vast reception room and not his notorious ballroom. The high-vaulted ceiling was held up by slender twisting columns of marble so fine it was translucent, more elven than anything Ciaran — and perhaps even Iorveth — had ever dreamt of and the floor was chequered in white marble and black veined with gold.

Several people were staring at the emperor’s newest concubine but Ciaran was ushered to one side where a couple of imperial medics lined the walls discreetly, looking him over, trying to gauge his condition as he was fed and watered, sheltered from most of attention.

“My son, the hero,” Lady Voorhis gushed breathlessly as she approached them then cupped her son’s face in her slender, elegant hands.

“Lord Ciaran, permit me to present my mother, Lady Kerydwen Voorhis,” Morvran Voorhis introduced smoothly.

Ciaran managed the appropriate niceties while trying not to stare. Prince Voorhis’ fair, slender wife looked only a handful of years older than her son and seemed so much an elf in appearance and deportment that Ciaran caught himself staring at her very human ears several times, unable to believe that she was not a full elf.
“Excuse us, we have not seen each other in some time,” the general continued.

He left with his mother on his arm, their heads bent together as they spoke low.

As in Beauclair, strict rules of etiquette dictated which people could introduce themselves to Ciaran directly, who would need to be introduced to him and by whom.

General Morvran Voorhis, son of Prince Tacitus Voorhis, was of sufficient rank to introduce anyone to an imperial concubine, but Brigadier Evrard var Cleef was not and though the Impera captain smiled as warmly as ever, there was a protective reserve to his manner that conveyed to people that he would not be forced into a breach of protocol no matter how festive the occasion was and how high curiosity towards the young elf ran, fed by the many rumours that had preceded him.

Klaervy and a handful of the other concubines were standing by the emperor, while few of the others stayed to one side, evidently waiting for Klaervy to greet Ciaran so they too could have their turn.

Morvran Voorhis passed by his sister’s side, smiled at her and exchanged a few words at which Klaervy looked over her beautiful shoulder at Ciaran, dislodging a heavy lock of old gold hair.

The elder Voorhis sibling and her small retinue made its way over.

As she approached, Ciaran saw Klaervy run her expert eye over him and for a moment her smile brightened fractionally.

“Welcome to Nilfgaard, Lord Ciaran. We have heard much about you. I am told that you will need a little rest to recover from your journey but I hope you will favour me with a visit when you are able.”

She nodded graciously, absently, at his acquiesce then turned to var Cleef, leaning in to touch his arm lightly.

“Brigadier, I see you are well. I thank you will all my heart at having brought His Majesty back safely.”

A short desultory exchange be she was soon back where she felt she belonged, between her emperor, her father and his *maecenee* — more empress than concubine.

Her companions, meanwhile, had been left behind. One of them was Mara de Wett, who looked from Ciaran to var Cleef, responding shyly and awkwardly to their remarks.

She was a slim, almost thin, young woman, long necked and wide-eyed, with a smattering of freckles over her pretty nose. Her smiles and movements started and stopped, as though something now curtailed a once more outgoing, expressive personality. A faunish, natural kind of beauty that, however, paled into insignificance beside the perfection of Klaervy’s classical features and statuesque proportions.

They were saved by the arrival of yet more of the emperor’s concubines. These were led by a woman who appeared older than Klaervy, dressed in black as Nilfgaardians often were but without embellishments, without richness of fabric and without the virtuosity of construction that characterised true Nilfgaardian tailoring. These were not just soberly dressed, they were austere.

As the highest-ranked among them, it fell to Mara to make introductions, which she did, nearly faltering in nervousness.

“Lord Ciaran,” Lady Saverina said, bowing her head slightly, “Welcome. You have come a long way, I hope the journey was not too arduous. We have heard you are not in strong health.”
“Strong enough, my Lady, thank you.”

“We have heard much about you and you are welcome here. I hope I may call on you once you are rested.”

Ciaran assured her he would be honoured then watched, unsettled and intimidated, as she made her way back to her group.

Leaving Prince Voorhis and his daughter, Emhyr came to stand by Ciaran, shielding him from the bewilderment of faces and voices.

“You are tired,” Emhyr murmured as he scanned the upturned face, “Just a little longer, elyen. Then I will take you home.”

The emperor made his closing speech and invited them all to step outside onto the terraces and balconies for the final pyrotechnics. He led Ciaran to a balustrade and stood close behind him.

“Look, there it is,” Emhyr murmured into Ciaran’s ear, “Lun’aïne. And there, at the end, your new home.”

Lun’aïne, the harem island, the full name of which meant the Isle of Reflected Moonlight in high Nilfgaardian and in ancient forms of Hen Llinge.

The rocky crescent was wrapped around a lagoon that lit up like a drowned sun as the first of the fireworks sailed up above their heads and blew out into being, filling the sky and the water.

Lun’aïne also shone with its own light, especially on its mainland side where a large central piazza was all ablaze. But Ciaran knew his own pavilion was on the other end of the island, so dark even under the fire of the artificial suns that exploded on and on above their heads that, try as he might, strain his eyes as he might, Ciaran could only make out the lighthouse tower at the very tip of it.

Ciaran’s attention was drawn away by the deafening finale but it was taken up again as turn by turn, various districts in the City sent up their own fireworks — from the opera house, the guild houses, even the distant lake far into the mainland, ending with those fired from the imperial navy ships out in the harbour.

Once the last of the blaze had faded and as the night breeze had swept away the last of the artificers’ smoke, there was a horn from below. Each of the towers that circled the Seraglio lit up in turn as the chain-nets strung between them went up one by one until they came full circle and the sphere that encapsulated them blazed to the amber colour Ciaran had seen in the sky the night before.

The show over, people drifted back indoors to the continuing reception.

“Come, elyen.”

Soon they were in a exquisitely-sprung carriage, var Cleef at the head of the escort cantering alongside them on their moonlit escapade. They drew further from the light and the noise of the palace and soon came to the easternmost of the three sun-shaped bridges that connected the harem island to the main one and as they crested it, Ciaran caught another glimpse of the island.

Most of it was a pool of darkness from which scattered, dimly-lit rooftops emerged. They plunged in and were soon submerged in the vibrating sounds and high calls of the insects in the trees and the songs of frogs sitting in hidden ponds.
They made their way through the wood along a road lined with stone lanterns that were the originals of the miniatures on Ciaran’s writing set. They paused along a ridge before the path dipped and Ciaran strained to see their destination.

They slowed as they reached the large ornate gates topped by two gilded birds. “Fenghuang,” Emhyr said, using the Haaklandian word’s original cadence, “The phoenix pavilion. I wish you could have seen it in daylight.”

“No… This is perfect,” Ciaran breathed, pupils wide, drinking in the outlines of the ghost-white buildings perched along the curving tail of the island.

He was still speechless as they passed the gates and pulled up before the main entrance, lit almost to daylight by a cluster of hanging lanterns and torches.

His attendants were all there and lined the entrance half where he and Emhyr left their sandals. His belongings had been sent ahead and the empty cases stood stacked to one side in an alcove.

“Go on,” Emhyr encouraged.

He trailed behind to watch as Ciaran stalked cautiously through the airy rooms, all built to Nilfgaard’s perfect proportions in contrasting marbles and the glint of gold and brass in the gloom lit by moonlight from the glass windows and doors.

Here, a vast reception room with heavy bronze ribbons and garlands hung below the ceilings, while over there the variegated marbles had been chiselled and inlaid to form graphic patterns and gradations, impressions of cascades or stylised flowers. Then smaller rooms with plaster walls painted with forest scenes where long-tailed birds perched on the flower-laden branches of exotic trees and fed on their colourful fruits, or mist-covered mountains feathered with the curious horizontal pines they had here in the South, or tranquil ponds dotted with gentle-hued waterlilies and lotuses.

“It has been cleaned and naturally you may change the furniture as you see fit,” Emhyr murmured when the Ciaran paused to study a hanging lamp, “Fenghuang has not been used in years, the garden has been neglected but I had them leave it as it was. I thought you might enjoy directing its care and design yourself. You may have the use of the gardeners for as long as you need.”

Ciaran went to the nearest open window.

The garden — if it could still be called that — was unkept, abandoned, and beyond the tangle of gnarled shrubs and long, knotted grasses, was a still, mirror-like expanse of water that stretched out to the very edge of the grounds and beyond, falling off to rejoin the rest of the river water below and the inner lagoon that stretched out to where the distant lights marked the mainland’s shores.

Ciaran looked out hesitantly, wide-eyed, then stepped out but his foot had barely brushed the grass when Emhyr swept him up into his arms.

“Careful, elyenennic. Even on the palace grounds there could be snakes in the grass.”

— FIN —

Chapter End Notes
Thank you again for reading! <3 <3 <3

End Notes

Comments and questions always welcome!

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