Lilies of Temeria, or a Romance of a Hopeless Cause

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Summary

"A lot happened between the events of Loc Muinne and the Battle of Kaer Morhen.

A tale of how Vernon Roche, ruthless leader of the Blue Stripes and last hope of Temeria, survived the Battle of the Dyphne and came into the company of a troublesome she-elf -- a tale of unexpected alliances and strange bedfellows. Literal bedfellows, you ask? You'll have to wait and see. I wouldn't want to spoil the story." - Dandelion, the Bard

Stuck in a storming Kaer Morhen with nothing to do but brood and wait, Dandelion and Ves cajole Vernon Roche into telling the story of how he wound up separated from Temerian Army and how he found his way back towards Novigrad. Not 100 percent canon-compliant, but takes strong cues from canon (both book and games).
Roche was shaken from his darkening thoughts by the sound of tearing paper. He realized too late that the parchment in his hands was starting to crumple and tear under his grip. He forced himself to unclench his hands and put the letter down, smoothing it out gingerly before folding it up and stowing it carefully in his pocket. Not a second later, he took it out again, as though by looking at it more closely he might pick up on some secret message he’d missed on the first read-through.

There is yet no sign of the crown princess or Natalis, though we continue to chase down every lead concerning their whereabouts. It is possible, probable even, that Natalis has simply gone to ground, hiding somewhere with Anais. That we have been unable to find his trail suggests that our enemies are likely facing the same difficulties.

That said, in the name of thoroughness we have also begun looking into the deaths of unidentified individuals who match their descriptions. While we have no reason to believe they have been killed (and indeed, if the Black Ones or any other party had killed the heir to the Temerian throne, they should want to proclaim such news from mountain peaks), it is possible that they befell some harm at the hands of someone or something other than Termeria’s political foes.

“More bad news?”

“Is there any other kind?”

Ves sat across from him without answering.

Roche sighed and rubbed a hand across his face. The spies were right: if someone had captured or killed Anais knowing who she was, he would have heard about it by now. What aggravated him was the fact that his own spies -- seasoned, hardened professionals who should be used to bad news and death, plough it -- felt the need to reassure him. It only made him more cynical. At least if they ended every letter with “oh by the way, we’re wasting our time, because she’s probably dead already,” then he could take heart in contradicting them. He might be able to find it in himself to push back, to hope that she would surprise everyone and come out of it alright. But in the face of baseless confidence, his pessimism asserted itself. Violently.

In some ways, helping Geralt face the Wild Hunt had been a relief. It turned out there was an upside to facing almost-certain death and impossible odds: there was no room to think about anything else while one prepared for a battle of that scope. As long as he’d had a task he could sink himself into with single-minded devotion, he could crowd out the worry and worst-case-scenarios.

Now that battle was won, and it was back to the hideout for him. Back to keeping up the pretense of guerilla warfare, back to jumping at shadows. Back to twiddling his thumbs and waiting for news until bloody Dijkstra decided they were ready to act…

“Kingslayer’s left.”

Roche nodded.

Ves raised her eyebrows. “What, not even a curse or a ‘good riddance?’”

“Good riddance. But I’ll save my breath and insults for a time when I can inflict them on the man himself.”

She looked as though she was about to say something sharp, then thought better of it. She put her
elbows on the table and took a long drink. For several long moments, they sat there in silence. In their quiet, the other noises of the hall seemed to grow louder. At the opposite end, closer to the fire, the two younger witchers were drinking and playing gwent, laughing a bit too loudly to be natural. Ordinarily the noise might have annoyed him, but under the circumstances… He could sympathize. As far as methods of coping with the loss of a father figure, there were worse options than a bit of forced cheer. He could attest to that many times over.

A storm pelted the roof with wintry slush, filling out the hall’s echoes and the crackling hearth with a rhythmic patter.

Ves broke the silence. “Look, I know better than to try and convince you Anais is safe,” she mumbled. “But we can at least talk about something else instead of brooding silently.” She pulled her cloak closer about her as a draft swept in. “How’d you wind up back in camp after the Black Ones smashed us? Never did tell me.”

“I was injured. I recovered. I made my way back to camp.”

She scoffed. “Gripping.”

“You expect me to write a song about it?”

She gave him a look. “We’re stuck in Kaer Morhen until this storm lets up anyway. And while the mead they have here is shite, it’s a sight better than what we’ve got back at camp. So I plan to enjoy a few mugs while I can, and I’m not going to do it sitting alone.”

He smirked. “At your size with witcher-made brew? One might be a few too many.”

“Come on, Roche. There’s more to it than what you’ve told me. I want to hear.”

His smile faded, and he resumed staring at the mug between his hands, stewing over his next words carefully.

Ves tapped a finger impatiently. “You scared to tell me you did something stupid? Afraid it’ll make you look bad?”

“No, I’m not concerned about that.”

“Then what?”

He grimaced. “Some of the details… There is no good way for me to tell you the story without getting into things that I would ordinarily keep private.”

“I’m not going to tell the men, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“It’s not that.” He sighed and drained the rest of his mead, partly to buy a few seconds, but largely because he didn’t want to drink it anymore. The honeyed taste suddenly seemed oppressive and cloying, turning his already-sour stomach. “I’m not used to talking of such things. I’m not sure I can convey what happened. I worry if I describe them I won’t do them justice. Just trying to form the words out loud makes it seem two-dimensional and ridiculous.”

“What if I describe them?”

Roche looked over and immediately regretted it, as his eyes were assaulted by the approaching bard’s violently colorful ensemble.
Ves peered at him. “Why d’you want to write a ballad about the commander?”

Dandelion took Ves’s reply as an invitation to join them, and settled into a seat on the bench next to her. Roche tensed.

“Usually I rely on Geralt for source material. But this whole Wild Hunt business…travelling across worlds, a spectral army out to destroy a girl with the power of time and space itself…It’s dizzying. I can only write so much of it before I get bogged down in minutiae and lose sight of the human element. The adventures of the Temerian resistance seem downright humble in comparison. It makes a good palate cleanser.”

“Do you always flatter the would-be subjects of your tales so?” asked Roche.

“You jest, but I mean every word. To a bard, nothing could be more romantic than a lost cause. A few scrappy rebels, fighting to the last for their beloved country… or whatever it is you’ve been up to these days.”

To Roche’s surprise, Ves was studying Dandelion with interest. If he didn’t know better he’d say she was intrigued, and actually considering the possibility.

“Say Roche does tell you what happened between that battle with Nilfgaard and now—”

“Ves!”

“Roche, wait -- just listen.” She turned back to Dandelion. “If you get the story, will you spread it among the common folk? Stir them up with stories about us, make them want to support the Temerians?”

“The common folk, nobles, I’ll spread it to anyone who will pay to listen.” He looked slightly affronted. “But I won’t be a mouthpiece for propaganda. I may be willing to do a lot for coin, but I’m not going to give up my artistic integrity.”

Roche let out a dubious laugh at that. Ves didn’t, though Roche caught a flicker of a smirk before she suppressed it. “You won’t have to,” she said, determined. “People already hate the Nilfgaardians as it is. They just don’t see what they can do about it. Story could change that. Convince them they can fight back.” She gestured to Roche. “Give them someone they can rally behind.”

He glared at her. “You can’t actually be considering this?”

She shrugged defiantly. “Tell me I’m wrong,” she said. “Tell me giving the common folk hope and getting us a boost in recruitment isn’t just what Temeria needs right now.”

He didn’t stop scowling, but the severity lessened. He began to stand. “I’ll need water if I’m to talk nonsense with this peacock. And possibly something stronger.”

Ves pushed him back down. “I’ll get it,” she said, standing. “‘Sides, I already know what happened at the battle up until you gave the order to retreat. You’ll get your drink and I don’t have to listen to rubbish I already know about. Win-win.”

She sauntered away before Roche could protest, leaving him alone with Dandelion. The bard was already taking out a quill and parchment, readying himself for the tale.

“So,” he started, far too chipper given the subject matter. “it sounds like there was a battle?”

“Obviously.”
“Where was it?”

Roche tried not to lash out in frustration. The bard was making it very difficult. “Every sodding fool in Temeria’s heard about what happened at the Mount Carbon-Dol Blathanna line,” he said. “Why are you asking me?”

“Every sodding fool might have heard about it, but they weren’t all there. You were. On the front lines, I assume. Hearsay and village gossip don’t make for good ballads. I want to hear the details, the truth.”

“What, so you can spin it into a ridiculous fabrication?”

“Of course. What else are bards for?”

Roche ground his teeth. Ves was right, he knew that. It was a good idea. To say their numbers were dwindling would be an understatement in the extreme. They needed a boost to recruitment, badly. But that didn’t change the fact that there were some events he didn’t feel like recounting - lost battles among them. Then again, it wouldn’t be the first time he’d done something he didn’t particularly want to for the sake of Temeria.

He sighed and closed his eyes. *For Temeria*. “When Nilfgaard crossed the Yaruga, I dropped everything. Threw it all away to hell and rode for the front to fight the invader. Joined the Second Temerian Army under John Natalis. We were to stop the Black Ones’ advance along the Dol Blathanna-Mount Carbon line. And we did. For three days. Then they smashed us into splinters…”

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**The Dol Blathanna-Mount Carbon line, many months prior**

To the left, ahead -- one of the Nilfgaardians moved in on a Temerian -- a farmer, most likely, judging by how awkwardly he held a spear. He stood paralyzed in the attacker’s path, too far for Roche to shove out of the way to safety. That left one option.

Roche rammed into the Nilfgaardian shoulder-first. The invader, thrown off-balance, let his shield sag as he fought to regain his footing. Roche put a sword through his chest before he had the chance.

He peered down to see the man was properly dead, then he turned to the trembling farmer.

“Fall back,” he barked. “Natalis has ordered a retreat. Round up as many men as you come upon and fall back behind the Dyphne. We’ll regroup there and use the bridge as a bottleneck.”

“What about them mobile bridges? The Nilfgaardians have got—”

Roche shook his head. “We’ll deal with that later. That kind of war machine is built for sieges, not speed. It’ll take hours to lug those monsters into position. Gather as many soldiers as you can and stick together. Scavenge for supplies along the way. We’ll need as much food, water, and medicine as we can muster. And arrows, so when the bastards do show up with their bridges we can pick them off from afar.”

The farmer nodded vigorously. “Aye, sir,” he said, in a voice that gave the distinct impression he
was too frightened to remember half of what had just been said.

Roche simplified. “Look for a woman in blue stripes. I sent her ahead to coordinate the regrouping. Now move!”

The farmer scurried off.

Roche found his next target.

Forty yards off, a Nilfgaardian on horseback was terrorizing a pair of infantrymen and a handful of terrified archers.

The rider struck. One infantryman and a handful of terrified archers.

He sprinted at the lot. A boulder jutted out of the ground a short way from the cavalryman, and Roche took advantage of it. Clambering up the boulder, he jumped up and off its peak, launching himself at the rider with a yell.

The rider was too sure in his saddle to be thrown off that easily. Roche kicked one of the stirrups away, then threw an elbow into the man’s jaw. He heard teeth snap together. As the Nilfgaardian reeled in pain, Roche grabbed on tight and rolled to one side as hard as he could. He fell from the horse and dragged the Black One down with him. He’d hoped to land on top and use his enemy to cushion the fall. As fate would have it, they landed side by side. Roche let out a grunt of pain. But there was no time to be winded. Panting and growling for breath, he drew a dagger and forced the crown of his opponent’s head into the mud, exposing his throat. He ended the Nilfgaardian with a single, clean cut.

As he got up he wiped the sweat from his brow with the back of his hand, streaking blood and dirt across his face in the process. He turned to look at the archers and surviving infantryman, who were looking at him with a mixture of thanks and horror.

He kept his orders brief this time. “Dyphe. Bridge. Gather supplies along the way. Look for a woman in blue stripes and follow her orders.”

They nodded dumbly and hurried in the direction of the river.

The next hour was a blur filled with more of the same: fend off Nilfgaardians who had broken off from the line, relay orders to fall back, and do everything possible to slow the Black Ones down. He helped a few men with axes fell a cluster of small trees, set an overturned wagon ablaze (once it had been stripped of supplies -- except for some of the vodka, which he left inside to fuel the fire). At one point he got lucky and stumbled on a cache of munitions. He stowed as many bombs as he could reasonably fit on his person and attached the rest to a makeshift fuse. With luck, they would ignite right as the bulk of the Nilfgaardian force was swarming through. An explosion of that scale might slow them down. If nothing else, he’d ensured that no useful munitions would fall into the invaders’ hands.

He kept fighting. Victory was a lost cause. Survival was now the only goal: his own survival, and the survival of enough men that this wouldn’t be the Temerian army’s last stand. He needed to buy them time to get across Dyphe. He focused on the stray pockets that were advancing too quickly and got separated from the main army. Perhaps if he harried the outliers enough, they’d take heed and stick with the rest of the (slower-moving) main body of the army.

He could only slow them so much. Eventually -- much sooner than he’d hoped or expected -- the Nilfgaardians had pushed him and the remaining forces within eyesight of the Dyphe. He could see
the bridge, not far off. To his immense relief, Ves was no longer there. He prayed that meant she’d fallen back with some of the troops to a rallying point beyond the river. If not…but… no, he didn’t see any fallen soldiers in blue stripes.

Yes, she must have fallen back with the remnants of the army, as he’d ordered. The few stragglers making their way over the bridge were injured, or helping the injured. None of them were fighting forces in any position to ‘rendezvous’ or ‘rally’ anywhere.

The black line on the horizon grew thicker. Nilfgaard was pressing in.

“MOVE!” Roche bellowed. “If they’re too feeble to run, carry them. Now move! Get over the bridge, NOW!”

Besides the men escaping, a feeble pack of soldiers were holding fast, assembling a patchwork barricade at the mouth of the bridge. Brave. Brave and stupid. He counted only two crossbows among them, and gods only knew how many bolts they had left.

One of the men let out a gurgling cry. Roche spun to see the man pale with panic, a black-feathered arrow buried in his throat as he fell. He was still upright, eyes open and back against the barricade, when he stopped shuddering.

Roche grit his teeth. May your flesh and blood strengthen the barricade, he thought, and buy your brothers-in-arms the time they need.

The army was still a few hundred paces off by his estimation. The arrow had been a lucky shot, but soon more would be incoming.

“Cover overhead!” he ordered. “Shields, wood, fabric, anything to stop the arrows.”

To their credit, the remaining troops complied the best they could. Most of the sturdy material had been spent on the barricade, but they made do with a few scraps of wood and the draped gambesons of the fallen. Two more fell in the time it took to gather the materials. Barely a dozen remained.

Roche took cover, ducking out occasionally to see if the Nilfgaardians were in range. He didn’t have enough bolts to spray them wildly. He’d have to pick and choose his targets.

As he came down to the last bolt, he cursed his stupidity for not grabbing arrows or a bow. He cursed the farmer for not being able to remember his request to do so. He cursed bloody Nilfgaard for all of it.

The last bolt grazed his target’s arm and kept going into another soldier behind him, one whose corpse would be smaller and less likely to trip up his comrades. The near miss made Roche itch. In target practice he would have insisted on one more round as a matter of pride, but he didn’t have that luxury. He’d have to make peace with the fact that his last shot -- perhaps ever -- had missed.

He cursed Nilfgaard again. Then he looked around and took stock. Twelve had become five.

Five men and a flimsy barricade wouldn’t hold back the White Flame’s armies for long.

His fingers settled upon one of the bombs, tied to his belt. He settled on a plan.

“Fall back,” he ordered, hoarsely. Earlier, he’d felt a crackle and a tear in his throat as he shouted at the soldiers. Now he was feeling the effects. He breathed deep into his belly, putting as much gumption behind the command as he could muster. “Fall back,” he ordered. It wasn’t a roar, but it was audible. Audible and firm.
The remaining five exchanged glances.

“I’ll hold them off,” he said. “I’ll manage. Go. Rendezvous with the others. Go!”

The soldiers had the good grace to look hesitant, but they obeyed. Keeping low to the ground, a couple of shields carried over their heads, the five moved across the bridge towards the forests waiting just beyond.

Roche didn’t have time to watch and see if they made it. The army was close now.

Working as fast as he could, he laid out the bombs in an evenly-spaced ring. He hoped it would be enough to break through the stone.

He laid down a line of fuse as he backed away, crouched low to the ground. He was beyond the barricade’s awning now. Arrows were beginning to rain down.

He growled as one hit his shoulder. No time to deal with it now. He had to slow them down.

He pulled out a flint and began working furiously, trying to create enough sparks that the fuse would light reliably. If a wind blew it out or the horses got here and trampled it before the bombs could ignite…

It caught.

He let out a triumphant laugh and a smile that was more grimace than grin. Rolling up his sleeve, he tore away some of the fabric and laid it down alongside the fuse for good measure. More to burn.

Then he ran. The fuse was burning quicker than he thought it would. Too soon and not soon enough, for he could hear the thunder of horses drawing ever nearer.

One of the bombs went off.

The percussive force caught him off-guard. He staggered to the side, clapping hands to his ears as they rang ferociously. World spinning, he looked to the other bank. He still had half the bridge to go. Too far to run.

He looked down at the river. He hoped the water was deep.

He jumped. He distantly heard the second bomb detonate just before he hit the water, then all was silent. It was a very loud silence -- his ears ringing on the high end, the rush of water filling in the low.

He could feel himself being pulled -- in one direction by the current, in another by the weight of his chainmail -- but he had no sense of direction. His vision was a blur of gray and darkness.

A sharp pain erupted at the crown of his head, the kind that began as a shock and a sharp intake of breath before the injury really settled in. His last waking thought before he lost consciousness was keen awareness of the pain: stinging, then throbbing, then black.
Everything hurt when Roche regained consciousness. Dull pain shot through one side of his head, and it was heavier than it should be. Bandages, though it took him a few seconds to form the thought. He could feel numerous bruises, cuts and scrapes, and would probably discover more on further inspection. He paused in his inventory of aches and pains to be thankful that he had woken up at all.

His gratitude immediately vanished as he tried to stand up. He collapsed with an involuntary noise as hot pain shot up his left leg. More bandages there. To add insult to injury, he realized as he hit the dirt floor that he was naked apart from a loincloth. He lay on the ground for a moment, breathing through gritted teeth as the pain receded. He spotted a thin blanket rumpled by the side of the pallet where he had been unconscious, and debated whether to pull it around himself.

Someone entered the room. Roche reached for a knife that wasn’t there, then stilled in embarrassment. Not only was he (as he had already established) mostly naked and unarmed, he was bandaged, alive, and decidedly not chained up. Whoever it was, he probably shouldn’t pull a knife on them. Yet.

The intruder was a dark-haired woman. An elf, he realized belatedly by her ears -- though perhaps the nose should have been a giveaway as well, with that delicately-crafted strength characteristic of elven faces. A quick sweep found no weapons but a small knife at her hip, and her garb wasn’t bulky enough to hide anything dangerous.

She was studying him too, though he was too bleary to try and read her stony expression.

“You’re awake,” she said. “Good. I was starting to get worried you’d be unconscious long enough to shit in your sleep.”

There was a short list of topics he’d expected to hear about. Who she was, who he was, what happened…this was not one of those topics. He turned the words over in his mind, still foggy with sleep, not sure he had heard her correctly. “What?”

She didn’t repeat herself. Instead, she met his eyes, daring him to challenge her bluntness.

He didn’t. He was used to such talk, and worse, among the Blue Stripes -- jarring as it was to hear a pretty elf maid talk as matter-of-factly as they did. He kept his guard up, didn’t betray any discomfort, any sign of weakness. Instead he looked around, trying to find some sign of time’s passage. As he seemed to be inside a cottage, that proved difficult. “How long have I been here?”

“There’s about three days.”

That broke through the fog. “Three days?” He swallowed and sat up, pulling the blanket to himself. The chill air on his skin made him feel vulnerable.

The details of the war and the battle came rushing back. In a surge of clarity he remembered all the things he needed to see to instead of lying on a pallet recovering.

She anticipated his next question. “The Temerian army’s scattered,” she said quietly. “Nilfgaard won the battle handily. They’re continuing to press North.”
“Where are they now?”

“Not sure at the moment. Getting over the Dyphne without a bridge slowed them down a bit. Once they got past that they moved at a fair clip until they reached the Pontar. They control the bridges along the Kaedweni border now, but I don’t think they’ve pressed into Kaedwen.”

He nodded, outwardly composed despite feeling like the news had punched him in the stomach.

“Where are we?”

The elf woman narrowed her eyes. “Cottage.”

“I gathered that,” he said, glowering. “I meant where is this cottage located in relation to the ongoing conflict?”

“Far enough that we’re safe from skirmishes,” she replied sharply. “Close enough that I was able to drag you here by myself from where you washed up on the shore.”

“Awfully kind of you,” he shot back. “Not often you find such unbridled generosity that isn’t driven by ulterior motives.”

“Not often you find Vernon Roche half-dead and looking like a drowned rat in the Dyphne.” She quirked an eyebrow. “Almost explains why you wear that stupid towel, only that got wet too so…”

Roche sat up abruptly, clapping his hands to his bandaged head. The blanket slipped down past his shoulders without hands to hold it in place, but he didn’t care. There were more important matters at hand.

“Where is my hat?” he asked.

“I burned it. Poor thing had so much river muck in it I had to put it out of its misery.”

At his look of abject horror, she relented. A suppressed laugh flickered at the corners of her mouth.

“Alright, it’s safe,” she admitted. “Although I wasn’t joking about the river muck,” she said. “I had to give it a good wash along with your clothing and armor. It’s all still drying by the fire.”

Roche relaxed a fraction. If he was a captive and this was an elaborate interrogation scheme, she was going about it a very strange way. Captors didn’t usually rescue their victims, nurse them to health, wash their clothes, or give information about troop movements freely. Though it was possible she was lying, especially about the last part.

“How did you know who I was?” he asked.

“Every elf north of the Yaruga knows who you are. Vernon Roche, the Temerian scourge of non-humans. His shadow casts a pallor on the ground. He devours elven ears and can catch our scent a mile away. His dread hat is cut from the same cloth as the banners of the netherworld.”

“You sound as if you don’t believe all that.”

“I don’t. I believe you’re a man, an ordinary one, who’s murdered countless women and children and done terrible things to innocent people.”

“If you think I’m so horrible then why did you bother saving me?”

“Spite, of course.”
She said it like was the most natural thing in the world. When he looked at her as if she’d sprouted wings -- wondering to himself if maybe he’d hit his head harder than he thought -- she rolled her eyes.

“I thought to myself, what could infuriate Vernon Roche more than to be rescued by an elf?” she asked. “Indebted - a life debt - to a member of the race he despises? I couldn’t resist the irony. When I saw you lying in the rocks, I was torn about the right thing to do -- let you die, to save elven lives, or to save you, knowing what you are, because you were helpless and in need. The second option seemed cosmically funny, so I chose that one. I saved you because it was amusing.”

“Is that what you do to spite an enemy? And how would you seek revenge against someone who had wronged you? Knit them a blanket?”

“I very well might if I could knit two stitches. I’ve been known to go to incredible lengths for a punchline. As it is, I’ve never had a talent for sewing, so I’d have to settle for other methods. Risking my life to save them, perhaps.”

Roche shook his head. “I’m afraid the joke is on you, woman. Being rescued by an elf doesn’t bother me. I’m not selective about who patches me back together provided I live another day to fight for Temeria.” He began to push himself to his feet. “Sincere thanks for helping me,” he said. “Now if you could show me what you’ve done with my clothing and my chaperon I--”

In their bickering he’d forgotten about his leg. On standing up, he remembered. He let out a grunt as the muscles spasmed. His left knee folded, sending him sprawling forward.

The elf maid darted forward and ducked to catch him, staggering under his weight. He reflexively accepted the help, draping his arms around her shoulders to lean on her as she pushed up against his chest. Her face contorted with effort as she rose from a crouch to push him upward, turning as she went to pull one of his arms over her shoulder.

“What was that about fighting for Temeria?” she taunted breathlessly.

He grumbled incoherently as she helped him back onto the pallet, to lie on his back. She ignored his mutterings and cradled his wounded leg, bending it slightly and testing its range of motion. He hissed at one particularly uncomfortable angle.

“Mm.” She repositioned his leg to lie flat, then she stood. “You’ll need to stretch that leg once you’ve recovered enough to move,” she said. “Maybe even before then if you can manage working on the floor.”

He scowled at her. “And how long would it take for this treatment plan you have in mind?” he asked. “Shall I write the Emperor and ask him to put the war on hold a month, or just a few weeks?”

“To walk I’d say at least two weeks,” she replied without hesitation. “Six until you’re not a liability on the battlefield.”

“Alright, alright,” he huffed. “I’ll stay off the battlefield. What about horseback? Will I be able to ride in two weeks?”

The elf woman frowned at him -- not mockingly, for once, but genuinely bewildered. “Say you do ride out in two weeks’ time,” she said, “what exactly do you plan to do?”

“I’ll regroup with the Temerian army.”

“ What Temerian army?”
He sat up. “The one I threw myself off a bloody bridge for!” he barked. “The one I was buying time to escape! The one I risked so much to keep alive - that Temerian army!”

The elf woman jumped a little at his tone. The traces of mirth vanished from her expression and she stiffened. Her eyes widened a fraction. He thought he caught a tremor in her hand - the shadow of a thought to draw her knife.

Shame pricked at his conscience. He was no stranger to the look of fear flashing in his opponent’s eyes. But she wasn’t an opponent. She had saved his life. He had no right to alarm her.

He started to apologize, but the words died in his throat. He looked away again, abashed. He was behaving like a child. She wasn’t the reason he was angry, and neither was his inability to fight. He knew how injuries worked. He knew they took time to heal, that soldiers needed time to recover and get back to full strength. If this were a camp with one of his soldiers, he’d be on her side, forcing the soldier to stay put and do as he was told until fully healed. Anything less would be a weak link in the army’s chain, and put everyone else at risk.

If it were about wanting to get back in the army and fight, he would agree to stay put. But it wasn’t the army he was most worried about. It was the crown.

“After the battle,” he asked abruptly, “was there any word of Temerian nobles fleeing?”

“Not apart from the rich prats fleeing Vizima like rats leaving a sinking ship,” she said. She dropped to her knees to sit closer to eye level with him. She narrowed her eyes at him, seemed to sense that he was holding something back. “Is there someone specific?”

His tongue froze, teeth clamped shut. If Natalis’ movements weren’t public knowledge, then he shouldn’t draw attention to him -- or to her -- by asking. It would be better for him not to know than to find out Natalis’ location and leak that information in the process. He shouldn’t ask.

“There was a child with one of the Temerian camps,” he said quietly. “A young girl. Golden hair, around eight years old.”

At the mention of the child, the elf maid’s caution thawed a little. Her eyes softened with something like recognition.

Roche tried to tamp down on the hope that rose in his chest. “Do you know something? You’ve seen her or heard of her?”

The elf woman’s face fell. She shook her head. “No,” she said, “I’m sorry.” And she seemed as if she meant it. “This is the first I’ve heard of any child with the army group.”

Roche nodded and swallowed, looking down. It was what he should have expected if he were being reasonable. He nursed his fallen hope in silence for a moment, before the woman broke into his thoughts.

“This child,” she said slowly. “She’s important to you? That’s why you’re so desperate to get out of this cottage?”

Roche nodded again. “In part,” he said. A larger part than was strictly necessary. “There are others I need to find. People important to me or to Temeria. I’d like to rejoin them as soon as possible.”

The elf sighed and stood. She started pacing, worrying her lip as she went. Finally she stood still and turned to look at Roche.
“Whatever’s left of the Temerian army will be far gone by now,” she said, “and scattered to the wind. It’ll take some doing to track them all down.”

“I know. Which is why I want to leave as soon as possible… even if I’m not ready to fight.”

“You’re notorious. If you go trodding around the continent looking for Temerian army remnants directly, you’ll draw attention and get yourself killed. And bring down the Nilfgaardians on whoever you do find. You need to work more carefully. It’ll take more time… but I have an idea.”

Chapter End Notes

(to be continued)
“The plan was fairly simple,” said Roche. “Not even a plan, really, at that point in time. Or at least not a specific one. But we agreed on a goal. Once I’d healed enough to walk and fight without making my injuries worse, we would set out and gather information about the war’s status -- undercover. She was right that if I went around asking the locals directly, I’d draw attention to myself, and put anyone who helped me in danger. Traveling as simple common folk was safer for everyone. It meant we could help Temerian villages in trouble without fear of Nilfgaard’s retaliation. Also made it easier to interfere with the Black Ones’ operations… nothing major. Our primary aim was gathering intelligence. Still, when the opportunity presented itself, we made ourselves a thorn in Nilfgaard’s side, making trouble in small ways they could dismiss as mere accidents rather than a coordinated military effort.”

“Undercover,” Dandelion repeated thoughtfully.

Roche could almost see the half-oren pamphlets printing in the bard’s head. “Before you start getting ridiculous ideas of glamour and court intrigue, let me assure you there was none of that,” he said curtly. “Our whole purpose was to avoid drawing attention. Everything we did was unremarkable by design.”

“What was your cover story?”

“It varied, but usually traders of some kind. When we approached a settlement, one of us would do basic reconnaissance at a distance to figure out what the town needed and what sorts of people might pass through. From there, we’d adjust our clothing and baggage to blend in, and then enter town.”

“Where’d you get enough baubles to pass yourself off as a merchant?” Ves asked.

“Liathan was a jack-of-all-trades, or so it seemed. She had the equipment and knowledge to pass herself off as an artisan of any number of different trades, constantly picking up new ones. Occasionally we had to supplement by gathering material of our own -- wood, or herbs, or meat…”

“You said her name was Liathan?”

Roche stumbled on the unexpected question. Had he really gotten up to this point without mentioning her name? Perhaps he left it out because he hadn’t yet learned it at that point in the story - thinking chronologically, he hadn’t known her name yet, she was just the mad elf woman who saved his life to spite him. But now that he was stepping back to describe the whole, remembering her in her entirety, it seemed ridiculous not to know her name and use it.

Rather than fumble through that explanation out loud, he simply nodded.

“She had a few names, as I understand it. Her full given name was Liathalán. Liah if she needed to pass for a human. Sometimes Ealaín to other elves who knew her.”

Dandelion chuckled at that, though he didn’t bother to explain why.

“She was resistant to the idea of you getting up to fight right away. How long did she make you recover?”

“All told? A bit more than three weeks. First week was the worst. Confined to bed with nothing to do but practice throwing knives and fiddling with a mandolin the owners had lying about--”
“The owners?”

“The cabin wasn’t Liathan’s by right. She was a nomad of sorts, found shelter where she could, in places burned out and abandoned by the war.”

“She traveled alone, looking for places ravaged by war?” Dandelion asked in disbelief.

“Strange, I know. I asked her about it too. She had gotten fed up with my amusements by midway through the second week and started venturing out for small trips to regain my strength. We needed food, so we went hunting…”

Roche huffed as he clambered awkwardly up the tree behind Liathan, praying she didn’t choose a branch too small to hold his weight. More than once, he gritted his teeth as the branch beneath him gave a precarious creak. In some ways he would have liked his chainmail back, even if the weight wasn’t ideal for climbing trees. It was bizarre moving without it. Everything moved too easily and too fast. He felt like a fawn, spindly-legged and wrestling with unfamiliar legs. And then there was the lack of a chaperon. Without it, he kept catching glimpses of things in his peripheral vision. He jumped every single time, mistaking every oddly-shaped tree for an enemy soldier lying in wait, thinking that every waving branch was an assassin charging for his king.

Dread rose in his throat like bile. He needed a distraction.

“You travel alone out here in the woods?” he asked lightly.

She gave him a look from several branches up, keeping her expression stern. “Not always. Right now I’m traveling with a d’hoine.”

“Very funny.”

Perhaps it was the tone of his question, or the sour note in his reply, but she seemed to realize he wasn’t baiting her. She paused, and the mocking twist of her expression faded as she looked down at him between the yellowing leaves.

“To answer your question: yes, I do usually travel alone.”

“Dangerous for a woman,” Roche said, his voice straining as he pulled himself up onto a fat branch. “Dangerous for a man.”

“It is, which is why only outcasts and madmen do it.” He gave one last pull and then he was level with her. He dusted off his clothing. “I’m wondering which you are.”

“Neither. I’m just tired.”

He frowned. “Tired?”

“It’s been an exhausting few decades. All this war… and for what? To see who controls the most ruined villages? To prove once and for all whether dh’oine or Scoia’tael can commit more atrocities? All these kings and nobles looking down upon the chaos and suffering of their people, and all they can see is a road to more power. You can hear it every time they talk about the war, or fret about the state of the world.” She scoffed. “‘The state of the world.’ Anyone who talks like that, they’re not
thinking about famine or illness or rape. They just mean their pockets will be a little leaner, or they’ll have to lick a few more boots to get their creature comforts.”

She looked at him then, and he was struck by the depth of her gray eyes -- transfixed by the way the light filtering through the trees illuminated the white-gold threads woven into her irises. In some elves, silver eyes had a way of turning white and uncanny. Not hers. Hers were two dark ponds interspersed with sunlight.

“I couldn’t stand to listen to them anymore, so I left the cities.” She looked away, and Roche came back to himself with a pang of loss. Their gazes had only locked for a second, but he still felt dazed at its end. “I tried to live quietly in the country among peasant folk, pass for a human. But I could never stay long.” She sighed. “The scrutiny in small villages was untenable. Even the larger villages always found me out eventually -- always someone on the lookout for knife-ears. When that happened I fled before someone could get it in their head that elves were to blame for the latest misfortune, and I should die as recompense.”

She sneered. “Thus I travel alone, with my bow and my wits to protect me. An outcast by choice so the world doesn’t make me mad.”

Roche opened his mouth to respond, but Liathan turned stony as soon as he did. Like an animal spooked by sudden movement, she darted away… or as the case might be, busied herself so he couldn’t press for any more details. She peered into the woods and began to slide around the tree’s circumference, trying to find an angle where she might spot wildlife.

He left her to her hunting at that point, keeping still and silent so as not to disturb her shot.

They started back to the cabin a few hours later, carrying a deer between them in silence. Roche was planning: they had a deer and, unless Liathan could eat as much as his boys did after a long march, they wouldn’t be able to eat it all themselves. So they would have to find a use for the excess. War meant ravaged farms. Ravaged farms meant crop shortages. Crop shortages meant hungry people looking for other ways to fill their bellies. Fresh meat -- along with bones for broth and furs to keep warm -- would be well received in local villages.

He was about to raise the subject to Liathan when she stopped dead in her tracks, forcing both of them to a standstill as her half of the deer stayed put.

“What?” he asked.

She gestured to the hut, where the front door was just visible through the trees. “Before we left, I stuck a red scarf in the door, halfway up. It’s on the ground now.”

Roche tensed. The lurking feeling of nakedness without chainmail increased tenfold, and he became very aware of all the ways they were exposed to enemy attacks.

He gestured to her to get down. She followed his lead, crouching until they could set the deer down quietly. Hands free for fighting, he returned his attention to the cabin.

“Doesn’t look bashed in from here,” he murmured, bending closer to her ear so he could keep his voice as low as possible.

She shivered slightly. “That could be very good or very bad,” she said, matching his low voice. “Could be the doorknob’s shit and it just popped open with a breeze. Or it could be bandits with enough experience they know how to open a door without breaking it.”
It suddenly dawned on Roche that *she* knew how to open a door without breaking it, or else she was a talented-enough craftsman to seamlessly fix the door after she’d broken in to the house. Another odd skill in her seemingly endless supply, and one he would have to ask about… later. Right now, he had more pressing concerns. She’d given him a random sword plucked from the battlefield, but it was poorly-made and fragile. It was also tiny compared to the two-handed and bastard swords he was used to.

“Do you have any other weapons?” he asked.

“My bow, some arrows, and a few knives.”

He gave her a look. “How many is a few?”

“Enough. Big one or small?”

“Sharp.”

He caught the ghost of a smile on her lips before she reached into one of the folds of her outer layer and pulled out a dagger. She handed it over, her fingers cold as they brushed his hand.

Her eyes flitted down to his still-bandaged leg. “Think you can handle a fight if I cover you?”

“I’ll manage.”

“Good. You scout the doorway. I’ll stay back here where I have a clear view.”

Turning the dagger over in his hands, he rose and began to creep towards the cabin. As he drew close, he saw gouge marks and scuffing around the doorknob that hadn’t been there previously. Definitely not the wind.

He pushed the door open, and the hinge let out a low creak. Someone heard it on the other side.

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The sound of a scuffle outside shook him from his reverie. He heard Liathan yell.

He hurried out of the house to find Liathan walking backwards at a rapid clip, trying to land an arrow on a large man with a sword and shield as she moved. Cenric, he realized. The other bandits were calling out to an accomplice in wait.

Liathan landed an arrow on Cenric’s sword arm. The man screamed like a stuck boar and lunged at her, swinging his sword. She jerked back and started running.

Roche let out a roar and ran at the man, flanking him. Before Cenric had time to react, he punched the man’s arrow wound, forcing him to drop his sword. They wrestled over the wooden shield, struggling against each other. Roche soon realized they were evenly matched in strength. He had to end this another way.

He strained and managed to get the shield in a low position, the bandit’s head exposed. The maneuver cost him his grip on the shield; in a few seconds, the bandit would be able to snatch it back and bash him over the head with it.

Roche stuck a dagger in the bandit’s eye.

Cenric writhed around the blade for a second, flailing with his hands to get it out, then he fell limp to the ground, his shield landing with a heavy thud.

Roche, panting, yanked the knife out and wiped it on the bandit’s clothing. He turned to Liathan, who was gaping at him.

“Are you alright?” he asked.

She nodded.

“Is… Is any of that yours?” She gestured at the blood covering his hands and clothes.

He shook his head. “Not much. Maybe a little.”

Liathan swallowed. “Alright.” She shuddered a little. “Let’s check your leg to make sure you haven’t re-injured it fighting, bury the bodies, and get the hell out of here.”

“No. Bury them?”

She glared at him. “Yes,” she said flatly. “Bury them.”
"Once we’d buried the bodies and cleaned the deer, Liathan set about packing her things. Then we set out for the nearest village straightaway. The first few we tried, we didn’t get much information. The Nilfgaardians had left them alone for the time being, and they hadn’t seen head nor tails of the Black Ones, except as columns of smoke in the distance. It seemed that whatever Emhyr’s plan was, he was focused on getting to his destination with as little delay as possible -- not burning and looting every inch of the North as he did in the previous war. We made a small amount of coin selling venison and deerskin, but gained little else beyond that.

"After the first three villages, we came across a larger town by the main road: Trostberg -- still quite small, but large enough to have an inn, as well as messengers passing through on a regular basis. With our merchants’ supplies limited, we posed as refugees fleeing the destruction at the Dyphne."

“It’ll be fifty ducats for the night, seventy if you’ll be needing hot water for a bath.”

The venison and skins of two deer combined had barely gotten them sixty. “Fifty ducats?” Roche scoffed, careful not to let his Temerian accent slip out. “Is the bed made of gold and jewels?”

“Might as well be. There’s a war on, if ye haven’t noticed. Beds are scarce. You’re not the only refugees who’ve come along looking for a roof over their heads."

Liathan interceded before Roche could protest again. “And how much would that be in florens?”

“Wot?”

She reached into one of her pockets and withdrew a fat golden coin emblazoned with the sun, making sure to angle it just so the light caught its edges. The ploy worked, and Roche could almost see the battle raging in the innkeep’s head -- Northern patriotism warring with avarice. In the end, avarice won out.

“Fifteen.”

It was well-played, Roche begrudgingly admitted to himself. Nilfgaard’s occupation was bound to get worse over time, and with that occupation would come Emhyr’s tightening grip on supplies and safe havens. Northern coin would be worth as much as cow dung once the Black Ones had control. Imperial coin, on the other hand...

He tried not to grind his teeth as Liathan handed over a handful of golden florens in exchange for a brass key.

“You’ll be on the second floor, entry’s by way of the rear stairs. Mind you keep the noise down and don’t move yourselves or the bed around too much -- floors creak something fierce, that part of the house.”

“We’ll keep that in mind,” Roche answered. “Is there any food ready?”
The innkeeper scratched his beard. “Not ‘t the moment, no, but there should be porridge ready soon enough, and some grilled fish for supper.”

Liathan nodded. “We can wait a couple of hours.” At that precise moment, her stomach let out an audible growl.

The innkeeper glanced at her belly sympathetically. “If you’d like to keep your mind off things, there’s some gents over there playing gwent. Usually play for coppers, but I suspect they’ll let you join a few rounds for the fun, or let you wager a card instead.”

She smiled politely and thanked him.

As they made their way through the dining area, Roche looped his arm through hers in the agreed sign that he needed to say something out of character.

“Wise idea, keeping florens on hand.”

“Pure luck and improvisation, I’m afraid, but it worked out. You know how to play gwent?”

“I do, though I haven’t had a chance to play since the Mahakaman campaign,” he said quietly. “I know the cards are magnificent, but when did people start wagering on them?”

Liathan chuckled. “People have started printing face cards with specific people on them. Collecting them is quite popular in the cities.”

“I see. Don’t suppose you have any of those on you that we could wager?”

“Not yet, I don’t. But I have coppers and a deck laden with spies and decoys.”

“Things went smoothly for a while,” Roche said, “playing for coppers and fishing for what information we could. Until Liathan’s competitive streak got the better of her and she forced one of the players to bet his finest card.”

“Which was?”

The man across the table looked at Roche and Liathan with a smirk, then proclaimed triumphantly:

“Vernon Roche.”

Immediately, Roche’s blood froze. Time seemed to still as he took in his surroundings, taking an inventory of the things lying about that could be used as weapons. He wondered distantly how he’d been made, how this common peasant had recognized him out of uniform -- and why he hadn’t said something about it immediately -- but there wasn’t time to fret over that right now. He needed to get out before they drew unwanted attention. He grabbed Liathan’s hand to make a run for it and bring her with him --

Then he saw the card that had just been played, trimmed with intricate lily patterns and lovingly painted in brilliant lapis colors: a soldier wearing a blue striped uniform and a black chaperon, standing in the woods beside a tree shot with arrows. The soldier’s bearing was wrought like a coiled spring, ready to strike at the Scoia’tael lying in wait. It was him -- or rather, it was a version of him drawn by someone who’d never actually met Roche, but only heard vague descriptions of the man.
He felt Liathan shaking and realized he was still gripping her hand very tightly under the table. He let go and turned to glance at her in reassurance, to let her know their cover hadn’t been destroyed. Her eyes were glittering, not with fear or relief, but with suppressed amusement. He could tell she was struggling not to laugh at his expense.

He coughed, and the noise almost made Liathan’s composure break. He found himself trying not to smile at the absurdity. Something about the amount of trouble she was having keeping her laughter under control made him want to laugh.

She cleared her throat and managed to compose herself before anyone noticed her odd reaction.

“My! Ugly fellow if that card is anything to go by.”

The tale came to an abrupt stop as Ves started laughing so loudly he could not continue. She pounded her fist on the table.

Roche shot her a dark look.

After a few seconds, she wiped her eyes and struggled to contain herself. “Gods. You sounded so put out by her comment. And now I’m trying to imagine what kind of picture of you they had on that card, to piss you off so much.”

Dandelion clucked his tongue sympathetically. “Alas, though gwent cards may be known for their artistic quality, they are not always the most faithful representations of one’s likeness.”

Ves froze with her tankard halfway to her lips. “Wait, you’ve got one too?”

“I certainly do. I’ve seen many variations, in fact -- some more flattering than others. In point of fact, I believe you’re on a card as well… or at least, it’s supposed to be you. Though I suppose there could be other fighting women in blue striped uniforms with a penchant for impossibly low necklines.”

It was Roche’s turn to laugh now. Ves ignored him, still focused on Dandelion. “What’s it look like? My card?”

“I’ve seen two. One was a reasonably good likeness -- nothing extraordinary about the artwork, but an accurate depiction. The other one…well, I didn’t get a very good look at your face on that one. It had a more dynamic fighting posture, and the portrait was arranged in such a way that it drew the eye to… other assets.”

Roche had chosen a poor moment to take a swig of beer. He choked on a laugh mid-drink and slopped half of it down his chin. He coughed a minute, wiping the beer from his chin with a sleeve -- and resumed laughing as soon as he’d caught a breath. Far from being peeved, however, Ves was grinning ear to ear.

“Brilliant,” she said, once Roche’s laughter had quieted enough for her to be heard. “That’s how I’d like to be memorialized. Tits out, striking fear into the hearts of men.”

Roche sobered quickly at that. “All well and good until they’re striking a dagger into your heart by way of the exposed neckline,” he said. “Which is why I keep telling you to wear a--”

“It’s a tactical distraction!”
“It’s ridiculous!”

“Alright, let’s strap a pair of tits to your chest and see how you feel about a thick piece of metal trapping all the sweat around your--”

“Friends!” Dandelion gestured for them to settle down. “Let’s not get caught up on petty details. I’d still like to hear the rest of the story.”

Roche glowered at Ves with an expression that clearly said their conversation wasn’t over. Then, rolling his eyes, he turned to Dandelion.

“Yes, alright.” He cleared his throat. “Where was I? We were playing gwent. Liathan goaded one of the men into betting my card. She ended up winning it. The man was a bit irritated by that and so he played a few rounds to get it back. She kept winning all of them until she got distracted…”

More folk had arrived at the inn as suppertime drew near, and with them came a cacophony of sounds. Someone had taken up a flute, while another was rapping a drumbeat on the benches. There was a goat bleating as it wandered between the tables. A babe wailed, startled from his nap.

“Three units of the Impera Brigade, stacked.” The man waggled his eyebrows. “Not bad, eh? Let’s see what you can bring against that!”

Roche turned to see Liathan’s response… only she wasn’t looking at the board, or her cards, or the man in front of her. She was looking past him towards the other side of the inn, where the infant child was crying, a strange look on her face.

“Liah,” he said, trying to get her attention. When she didn’t respond, he moved slightly to be in her line of sight, and squeezed her hand. “Liah,” he repeated in his faux-Aedirnian accent, “it’s your turn, love.”

“What? Oh, yes, of course.” Eyes roaming over her cards too quickly to scrutinize, she picked a card seemingly at random and placed it down on the table. The man across from her widened his eyes in surprise; it was one of a matched set, meant to stack atop each other, and she’d played it at what seemed to be nearing the end of a round.

Roche turned to remark on the unusual move, but her eyes were already searching for the baby. He followed her gaze and found the child, quieting as it nestled into its mother’s breast to nurse.

Liathan stopped staring shortly after, but her mind was obviously far away. She lost the round, and the set, and had to hand over the Vernon Roche card she’d just won a few sets prior. The man playing her chuckled as she shuffled the remains of her deck, remarking (with cheeks growing ever ruddier) that her luck had to wear out sometime. Roche knew it wasn’t bad luck that lost the card. Something was distracting Liathan. He put it to mind to ask her about it later, to find out why her eyes got so far away when she heard an infant’s cry.

It was at that moment that the door burst open, and a man wearing a dented metal breastplate came stumbling in out of breath. Roche heard a ripple of recognition and whispers at the man’s entrance.

“They’ve split into two! The Nilfgaardians -- their main column’s broken off into two separate groups. They’re both headed away from here. They’ve not decided to raze our lands to the ground.”
I was going to cover more ground in this chapter, but I decided I didn't want to rush the next part I have planned. Also I realized on replaying Wild Hunt that the gwent cards in-universe canonically have real people on them -- I'd previously written it off as a game mechanic to keep Gwent interesting, but there's actually a questline about getting collectible cards with certain people on them. Decided to have a bit of fun with that - since I figure the characters who are depicted on cards would have some thoughts about it.
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The inn burst into chattering conversations and shouted commentaries.

“Aye,” said one man authoritatively. “Th’ye’ll make good time th’aways. To the North’s naught but an empty throne since Henselt ate it, and to the West is even worse -- an empty throne and squabbling noble houses to boot.

A well-dressed man beside him scoffed. “If only t’were that easy.”

“Wot, you think Henselt and Foltest are just waiting to pop out of the grave and surprise Emhyr? Who’s to stop the Black Ones’ advance with no ruler?”

“You forget that to the west, between here and Vizima, th’ere’s forests for at least a hundred miles. The forest’s elven land, everyone knows that.”

The first man snorted derisively. “Ah, come off it -- a few Scoia’tael against Nilfgaard?”

Another peasant chimed in against the well-dressed man. “Even if they could do it, you think Iorveth and his band of mangy elves would help Temeria?” He spat. “More likely th’ye’ll help the black-clad bastards along the way. They worked for the Nilfgaardians once. Who’s to say they won’t do it again?”

A chorus of general agreement went up around them.

The well-dressed man was unperturbed. “Alright,” he said, “so let’s say the elves help Nilfgaard waltz right into the palace at Vizima. That still leaves Radovid and what’s left of Henselt’s army to deal with in the north.”

Roche’s ears pricked up at that.

“Radovid?” he said. He cleared his throat, remembering just in time that he ought to disguise his accent. “What’s he doin’ on the other side of the mountains?”

The well-dressed man raised an eyebrow. “Haven’t you heard? Radovid’s taken half of Kaedwen. Barely had to put up a fight to do it. Henselt didn’t leave any heirs. So after Loc Muinne, Radovid leaves a few men behind, kindly offering their service to help ‘keep the peace’ in Kaedwen. Only he turns around not two months later and seizes the capital.”

Roche exchanged a look with Liathan. This changed things. Already, he was forming a new plan. He decided to stick around a few more minutes -- just in case any new information arose -- then they would find an excuse to retire to their room and discuss.

The peasants who’d been disputing seemed to deflate a bit. The first let out a whistle. “Shite, I’d forgotten ‘bout him,” he said. “Nor’d I know he’d moved so quick. He’s a right sly bastard, that one. He’ll keep the Black Ones busy.”

His companion raised a mug. “Here’s to Radovid. May he keep the Nilfgaardians busy, and keep them the fuck away from ‘ere.”
A cheer went up around the room, and people slowly returned to their previous conversations with a new spring in their step. The innkeep served dinner, and Roche and Liathan ate in silence. When they had finished eating and it was clear there was no more news to be had, they slipped away to their room.

Roche glanced around to make sure there were no eavesdroppers. Then he shut the door. “How much more Nilfgaardian coin do you have?” he asked.

Liathan paused in thought. “Forty florens. Some other assorted coins too, but I’m not sure the locals will accept them.”

Roche nodded and sat down on the bed.

“We’ll have to share a horse, then,” he said.

“With forty florens, I’ll be impressed if we could manage half a horse. Besides, I’ll bet you anything Nilfgaard has taken the roads, which means if we want to avoid them we’ll have to travel through the forests to get to Vizima. A horse won’t do us much good in that underbrush, not to mention the swamps.”

“We’re not going to Vizima.”

Liathan frowned. “What?”

“Temeria will need aid if she’s to hold Vizima. Radovid is our best chance of getting that aid.”

She sat down in a chair beside the bed. “If he’s invaded Kaedwen, that means his troops are already stretched out across two kingdoms. Even if he was sympathetic, he’s not going to send troops into Temeria and spread them out even further across three kingdoms.”

“I don’t need his entire army. Just enough trained men and equipment to bolster the castle’s defenses.”

Liathan didn’t say anything to that. She was quiet for a moment, and seemed to be chewing on whatever she was about to say.

“What about Iorveth?” she said, after a few seconds.

He stiffened. “What about him?”

“If you don’t need an entire army, it doesn’t make sense to go chasing Radovid in Kaedwen. Especially with the winter coming on. By the time you get there, the snows will make it impossible to travel to Vizima with troops in tow. You’ll never make it to the capital before Nilfgaard does. If it’s material support and fighting bodies you want, the Scoia’tael have both, and you won’t have to go out of your way en route to Vizima.”

“Ragged elven terrorists are not the sort of help I need.”

“And why is that?” she asked, in a tone that said he ought to be very careful how he answered.

“Once I get there, I intend to hold Vizima against the invader. We need disciplined troops to hold a fortress, not scattered bands who wreak havoc and then hide in the bushes.”

“Oh? And when was the last time you fought on the field of battle proper, rather than wreaking havoc in the bushes?”
“The Blue Stripes did use unconventional methods, I admit it,” he said. “But I am capable of discipline and military formation. I simply used other methods at the orders of my king, who decided -- wisely, I might add -- that guerilla tactics were better suited to deal with Iorveth and his ilk.”

Liathan laughed derisively. “Is that what this is about? Are you still feuding with the Scoia’tael? Nilfgaard is at Temeria’s doorstep. Hell, they’re past the doorstep -- they’re tracking mud all over the foyer and headed for the master bedroom. Now isn’t the time to get hung up on old, petty grudges.”

“What is it a time for then?” he asked, scowling. “Time for Vernon Roche to hang up his sword, put aside violent ways, and make peace with the elves? To live together in harmony, braiding each others’ hair and dancing to elven flutes in a glen?”

“You don’t have to be friends. You don’t have to like the Scoia’tael, or Iorveth. You just have to work with him against a common enemy.”

“Which requires trust. Trust I do not have.” Feeling agitated, he got up off the bed and started pacing.

Liathan turned in her chair to track him with her gaze. “Trust doesn’t enter into it,” she said. “It’s a simple calculation of who he hates more -- the Nilfgaardians or you.”

“I think you underestimate his hatred of me.”

“No, I don’t.” She rose from her seat and strode towards him. “Whatever his quarrel is with you, it can’t possibly compare to his hatred of Nilfgaard. Emhyr slaughtered Iorveth’s comrades, tried to murder him as well. That was the reward for all their loyal service. Can you even imagine how badly Iorveth wants vengeance for that?”

Roche froze beside the hearth. “Enough,” he said quietly.

“Can you imagine how it must feel to watch your friends and comrades killed like dogs,” she went on, “their bodies thrown into a ravine, by men who should have been their allies?”

He snapped, pounding his fist against the wall above the mantle. “Enough!” he roared.

At that, Liathan fell silent. Roche didn’t look at her as he turned on his heel.

“I need a walk,” he said, determinedly keeping his gaze towards the door and turned away from her.

He stormed out, only pausing to close the door quietly. No need to draw the other guests’ attention. He moved down the stairs as swiftly as he could and made for the back door once he reached the dining room. He didn’t want to deal with crossing the room to the front entrance right now, didn’t want to see or speak with anyone.

He managed to get outside without any unnecessary interactions. Dusk had fallen, and the night air was cool on his flushed skin. Though there was nobody outside, he kept walking for several minutes, to the edge of town and past the outskirts, until he found a quiet grove with a few tree stumps that offered some privacy. A tiny creek trickled past a weathered statue of Melitele. He stopped there.

It was only then that he noticed his eyes were burning. He angrily wiped his face with the back of his hand and sat down on one of the stumps. Needing to busy his hands and distract himself, he took out one of his knives and a whetstone from the pouch on his belt, wet the stone in the creek, and started sharpening the blade.

He fell into a rhythm, repeating motions that he’d carried out a thousand times before. In the quiet
repetition, his mind’s eye replayed what Liathan had said. On the first iteration, the memory only made him angrier, outraged that she would dare to taunt him that way. The second was the same. And the third. Then he thought about it again, and a flicker of sympathy crossed his mind.

Did Iorveth really mourn his men the way he had mourned the Blue Stripes? Did he relive the moment where he found his comrades’ lifeless bodies, callously disposed of like animals? Was he plagued by nightmares -- or worse, awake from pleasant dreams only to remember all over again that it wasn’t real and his friends were gone forever?

His grip faltered and he almost dropped the whetstone. The break from the rhythm took him out of his thoughts, and he noticed that it had gotten much darker since he’d sat down. He checked the knife’s sharpness. Satisfied, he sheathed it, put away the whetstone, and stood. He forced himself to think of other things as he made his way back to the inn -- logistics for the trip north, arguments to offer King Radovid. As much as logistical questions might keep him awake, once asleep they could not trouble him as did grief or rage.

The dining area had quieted significantly since he’d left, and was now vacant except for a handful of the innkeep’s boys eating leftovers by the fire. He made sure to step quietly on the stairs. He didn’t want to wake the other guests…and he certainly didn’t want to wake Liathan and continue their argument.

She was asleep when he returned, her back turned to the vacant space on the other side of the bed. Working by the light of the hearth’s embers, he undressed to his trousers and undershirt, and set his outer garments on the chair. He crept into the unoccupied half of the bed and quietly situated himself with his back to her.

He lay there in silence, trying to fall asleep. Then, after several long minutes, he heard her sigh quietly.

“I’m sorry.”

His eyes opened, but he didn’t move. Perhaps he should pretend to be asleep?

“You asked me to stop talking… but I kept digging. It was unkind, and I’m sorry.”

He didn’t say anything, but the breath he let out shook ever so slightly. He felt her weight shift on the other side of the bed, as if to prop herself up and look at him.

“Your men… the ones who were taken from you… What happened to them?” she asked.

The petty part of him didn’t want to answer, wanted to keep feigning sleep. But her concern sounded genuine -- strange as it was to consider -- and before he could argue with himself, he started to answer. “We were in Henselt’s camp near Vergen,” he said roughly. “His sorcerer Dethmold got it into his head that there were traitors. That we were scheming to overthrow the king.” He paused, swallowing hard. “I was. But the others had no idea. While I was away, he lured the men into a trap and executed them all. All except Ves, my lieutenant. She lives. She alone.”

“She,” Liathan repeated, giving the word more weight than he had. She was silent for a moment, and Roche could tell she was putting the pieces together. “I see,” she said finally. “Then it was you who killed Henselt.”

Roche nodded, though he wasn’t facing her. “I almost let him live,” he said. “I should have. I knew that his death would destabilize the entire North. I was about to release him, let him off with a kick in the stomach and a foul curse. Then he started talking about Ves.” His voice hardened. “‘Squeaky
hinge,’” he said. “That’s what he called her. ‘Squeaking like a hinge,’ as if it were a boast. If he said anything after that, I didn’t hear it. Just a ringing in my ears. I grabbed him by the scruff of his neck and made him look me in the eye. I don’t know what I hoped to find -- remorse? Fear? Instead he just taunted me, daring me to kill him with those filthy beady eyes. So I did. All that trouble, trying to catch a kingslayer, only to become one myself.”

“I’m sorry.” Her hand came to rest on his shoulder. The softness of the gesture startled him. For an instant, his resolve to remain calm wavered, threatening to crack under the weight of her hand. But in the dark he steeled himself, and stifled any reactions that played across his face. After a moment, she withdrew, and he felt her weight settle back onto the bed.

“What were their names?”

At that, he rolled over to stare at her in astonishment -- but it was too dark. He fell onto his back and stared at the ceiling instead, calling to mind their faces one by one.

“Silas. Fenn. Thirteen. Igo. Oven. Sheridan. Shorty. Finch…” He kept listing them, name by name, until he reached the last man.

When he finished, Liathan didn’t ask any more questions. She simply said, “Good night.”

Chapter End Notes

One thing I should probably clear up (based on comments on previous chapters) -- I don’t think that Roche is necessarily telling Dandelion *all* of this in exact detail. Essentially, I'm writing the parts that are in flashback (so to speak) as they really happened, and Dandelion is probably getting the essential parts of that. So in general, the emotional/introspection-y stuff is probably censored in Roche's telling, whereas the key events (as well as anything Ves & Dandelion specifically comment on) get included in the story. Kind of like how, in the games, Dandelion's tale is used as a framing device, but presumably he doesn't know about *all* the intimate details that we, as the players, see -- he just knows the big picture items.
Chapter 6

The air took on a brisk chill the morning they departed the village. In the end they managed two feeble horses with the money they had -- not strong enough to journey far, but enough to get them to Radovid's camp. And if the horses didn’t make it that far, or if they didn’t find Radovid after all… he couldn’t say either beast looked especially appetizing, but he’d eaten stringier meat before.

He doubted it would come to that. Fortune was on their side, and they made it across the Lixela a few hours before dusk. They decided to camp in the forest where they might find meat for supper. Liathan set off hunting while Roche built up a fire. By nightfall they had two rabbits and a merry fire. It was, all things considered, as good a night as he could have asked for. As he sat enjoying his pipe and a full belly, he drank in the sounds of a peaceful wood, broken only by the occasional sharp crack of a warm fire.

Liathan seemed less at ease. She said nothing, but he could read it in the rise of her shoulders: tensed up until they almost touched the bottom of her dainty pointed ears. Those deep gray eyes of hers were distant again. He considered prying, but thought better of it. Whatever hollowed those eyes, they would not be filled by his asking. Instead he smoked his pipe and pretended he wasn’t watching her. He hummed an old Temerian song as it came into his head.

A short while after he’d stopped humming, Liathan stood abruptly. He gave her a questioning look. “I’ll be back in a little while,” she said. She didn’t specify why.

Figuring she needed to relieve herself, he grunted an acknowledgment and resumed staring into the fire. He sat there like that for a long time. The old song came back to him again and he half-mumbled, half-hummed the chorus to himself. It was then -- in the deep quiet his tuneless song had broken -- that he realized how dark it had gotten. The woods seemed very loud as soon as he stopped singing. The crack of the flames was too violent. There was a sound missing: Liathan sounds, the sounds of another person fidgeting and breathing nearby.

He stood and looked about, straining to listen in the direction he saw her leave. There was no sound of struggle or distress. No monster he knew of would lurk around near this road when Nilfgaard had left so many corpses to feast on in their path (though, he admitted to himself, he knew very little of monsters). And the idea that Liathan would let a beast sneak up on her, much less silently kill her, was laughable.

Still… she’d been gone some time, and he was decidedly not laughing.

Brow furrowing, he set off after her. “Liathan!” he said, as loudly and clearly as he could without yelling. No sense in drawing bandits. “Liathan!”

He’d begun to debate with himself whether it might be worth the attention to yell ( ‘To hell with bandits, where is that woman?’ ) when he caught a flicker of light up ahead through the foliage. It was a small flame, barely visible through a thick curtain of vines, but there was no mistaking its light. He drew nearer cautiously, conscious of every twig and leaf he broke underfoot. Whoever had lit the fire, they did not wish to be noticed, and neither did he.

Something caught on his foot and he nearly stumbled. He caught himself against a stone pillar,
muffling the blow, but not before he’d started to fall and set his adrenalin pounding. He paused to let his heart still. As he looked around, his gaze fell upon the ledge that tripped him: a massive slab of cracked granite. Weather and moss had worn away the edges of the engravings in the ground, but in the pillar -- up close, against his hand -- he could see and feel the remnants of a carved pattern. He stared at the sculpted form until his eyes had adjusted to the twilight, revealing a white stone rose.

Roche felt a flicker of recognition. He tore his eyes from the carving and carried on towards the flame he’d seen.

He rounded the corner to find Liathan with her back to him, holding a solitary torch.

He approached to stand next to her, letting himself be heard with steady, deliberate footsteps. She did not move to acknowledge him. He followed her gaze to where it fell upon a rosebush: woody, overgrown, and thick with white-lilied flowers. Beside it was a statue half-missing and strangled with ivy. What remained stood defiant, with one eye blazing and one arm raised high in a rallying gesture that terminated abruptly at the elbow.

“Aelirenn,” he said.

Liathan nodded.

Roche waited for her to say something more. When nothing was forthcoming, he spoke. “I should have realized we would be passing by Shaerrawedd,” he said. “I’d forgotten it was so near.”

“So did most humans. That was the idea.”

Her tone was careful, each word spoken so intentionally that it could only be a conscious effort to control some fierce emotion -- though what, Roche couldn’t say. Sorrow? Anger? Resentment? Perhaps, but strangely it didn’t seem directed at him, or at humans.

She went on. “Strike Shaerrawedd from every map,” she said bitterly, “gods forbid that the memory of our people should live on when we are dead. Strike Shaerrawedd itself. Better that elven buildings be destroyed and forgotten than become the foundations of a dh’oine city.” The chord of indignation in her voice seemed to resonate in Roche’s chest.

His heart ached, and he felt the need to say something. “In a way,” he said, “I can’t help but admire Aelirenn -- opposed though we may have been, were she still alive. She fought until the very end. Refused to give up her ground, no matter how hopeless the odds. It takes courage to keep up the fight when victory seems--” He caught himself mid-speech, seeing the impassive look on Liathan’s face. He wasn’t her commander, and she wasn’t a recruit. She didn’t need his lectures. He shut his mouth. “Aelirenn fought bravely,” he said lamely, “to the last.”

Liathan smiled sadly. “Yes. Aelirenn fought bravely. She fought bravely, and then she died bravely, along with all the young elves who followed her. And with them died all hope for the Aen Seidhe.” Her breath shook. “What did it accomplish?” she asked, a barely restrained tremble in her voice. “Was it really worth our pride, to have our story of one last, noble stand, at the cost of our future?”

Roche looked at her, his brows knotted. “I suspect it’s the principle of it,” he said, a bit hoarsely.

“No,” she said, “I understand a stand on principle. This wasn’t principle. This was pride. My people could have had a future. And one generation -- the last generation -- threw it away, because they would rather die the subjects of a noble tragedy than plant seeds for their future children’s happiness!”

She broke off, closing her eyes. When she had composed herself, she found his gaze and held it.
“Don’t make our mistake,” she said.

“I-”

“That little girl,” she said, her gray eyes burning into his brown ones, “the one you’re looking for? What good is it to know the Temerian flag still flies if it becomes her burial shroud?”

He scowled. “It’s not so simple to separate protecting her from protecting Temeria.”

*That* gave Liathan pause. Her intensity diminished somewhat. “What do you mean? Is her mother… Is she someone important to Temerian politics?”

“Her father,” he corrected. At Liathan’s confused stare, he continued. “Anais is not my daughter. But her father is…” His voice caught. “*Was* someone important to me. And to Temeria. King Foltest.”

Liathan’s eyes widened, but she said nothing.

“You talk of carrying on your people, your family. I have no family but Temeria and its king. A king… a king I couldn’t protect. I failed him. Even in vengeance, I failed him. All that remains is his crown. And his daughter.”

Liathan looked at him, deep in thought. After a moment’s consideration, she nodded. “Then I will help you find her. And I will do whatever I can to sway allies to your cause, to make sure your king lives on.”

Chapter End Notes

So sorry for the long delay! Life got the better of me. Thank you for those who are still reading, your comments are really encouraging and brighten my day! I hope to have the next chapter up within a more reasonable timeframe (ie not six months), and it should be easier for me to write because the plot’s really going to start moving along.
Chapter 7

Roche pulled up short before the gates of Ard Carraigh. His horse reared and let out a sharp whinny of protest -- one he paid little mind. His attention was fixed on the spikes that lined the walls above the gate. Radovid had lost no time in making the city his own. A single flag hung above the main gate: the Redanian eagle emblazoned on a crimson sheet so large it had to be tied down at all corners, ballooning in the wind like a mainsail. The unicorn was gone, and in its absence the battlements had become a warning to Radovid’s enemies.

The smaller flagposts along the battlements stood naked and bannerless, their spiked ends jutting dangerously into the sky, with a corpse affixed to each post around the middle. It was too far to see clearly, but Roche doubted very much that the bodies had been tied in place. Some of the corpses were fresh: flies swarmed around them in thick black clouds, and their clothes still had enough strength to flap around in a cruel mockery of the flags that had once flown there. Others had started to turn dull and dessicated, though none were rotted beyond recognition. It was in the second group that Roche spotted a familiar form, set apart by its tufted scarlet hat.

Liathan didn’t notice Roche had stopped until she was a few paces ahead of him. When she caught on, she pulled her horse around in a wide turn.

“What is it?”

Roche gestured with his chin. “Up there, on the wall.”

Her eyes first narrowed as she squinted to see the wall, then went wide.

“Are those—?”

“Corpses,” he confirmed. He bit back a sneer. “That mess with his bowels hanging out in the center-left is Dethmold.”

Liathan’s dainty mouth and nose had curled into an expression of deep disgust. “Dethmold,” she repeated. “The name seems familiar. Who is… who was he?”

“A sorcerer. The greasy worm I told you about who persuaded Henselt to slaughter my men.”

Liathan nodded. She swallowed her disgust, though not enough to completely wipe the expression from her face. She turned to look uneasily at Roche.

“You don’t seem terribly happy about finding his body. I can’t imagine you’re sorry to see him dead?”

“Dethmold was mine to kill,” he growled. “I should have been the one to bury a knife in his chest. I would have gutted him. Torn him to pieces for what he did.”

She raised a graceful eyebrow. “Like you gutted Henselt?” she asked, her tone veering dangerously close to a challenge.

“Exactly,” Roche spat. He shot her a dark look. Whatever verbal sparring match she had planned, he had no interest in playing along. Not now.

Liathan swayed slightly as her horse moved in place. She said nothing, apparently deciding now was not the time to antagonize him. Instead she turned her attention to the other spikes. Her eyes scanned
down the line of corpses, narrowing to make out the finer details.

“They’re all sorcerers and witches,” she said, sounding both relieved and a little bit sick to her stomach. “For whatever reason, Radovid is killing magic users. No elves or other non-humans...yet.”

“You’re accompanying me on business that concerns the Temerian crown,” he said. “Even if he was killing elves, I wouldn’t allow him to harm you.”

Liathan flustered. “That’s…” For reasons he couldn’t fathom, she started to blush, the apples of her cheeks and the tips of her ears turning a pretty rose color. “That wasn’t the point.” She shook her head. “Never mind. Let’s get inside.” A frown formed on her face as they continued towards the gate. “How exactly do you plan to get in on ‘business that concerns the Temerian crown?’ You’re not wearing the colors.”

He had been pondering just that before Dethmold distracted him. Roche wore no uniform, bore no writ or seal. Any guardsman worth his salt (and even some of those not worth a grain) would refuse him entry unless he could produce something more substantial. Iorveth had taken his insignia, and he had given the special forces dagger etched with lilies to Anais. That left only the silver medallion hidden under his shirt in support of his claim.

He unconsciously ghosted his fingers over where the pendant lay hidden. What if they didn’t accept it as proof of his affiliation? Worse, what if they stole it from him? It was wartime, resources were scarce, and there was no guarantee that foreign soldiers would give back something made of valuable metals if he handed it over. Anger flared in his chest at the thought of it melted down. He still remembered when he received the medal: the mark of the Special Forces commander.

He remembered the battle before his promotion. The world was never as safe or romantic as the bards made it out to be. Battles weren’t rows of gleaming helms colliding in a dance. It was filth and chaos, the air thick with the broken screams of wounded men and the stench of their shit as their bowels convulsed in death. The battlefield was just another alleyway; the soldiers merely better-armed urchins fighting over scraps. The enemy approaching was just another howling drunk john he had to keep away from his mother, only this time he had a sword. The power of death in his hands, and he thought only of survival.

Until he saw the king.

Foltest’s robes were matted with filth, but even streaked with sweat, his face had a noble character. His brown eyes gleamed fervently as he stooped down to pull up a wounded man to his feet. When Vernon had seen him before at a distance, during inspections, he had scoffed at the king as just another noble flouncing about in ridiculous jewelry unsuited for battle. But now that he was here in the mire, he saw something in it. Somewhere in the light flashing off that absurd chain was a glimmer of something better than fighting for scraps. This man with mischief in his creased, deep-set eyes, who got his finery covered in muck and stopped to help a simple infantryman…

For the first time since he was a boy, Vernon drew himself up to his full height. All his life, he’d made himself small and mean — a practiced slouch that told predators he was too poor and broken to have anything worth stealing, and just feral enough that they wouldn’t dare try. Today, he was fighting to protect more than a crust of bread or a dry space to sleep. Today, he protected a king, no matter the cost.
He wasn’t able to save his mother. But he could see to it that Temeria would not be orphaned.

He threw himself into the battle with a reckless abandon, launching himself with a roar at anyone who dared to approach the king. He had no sense of time passing. The only increments he could measure were the foes he cut down, the drops of sweat that rolled down his face.

Eventually, the attackers stopped coming. Still he did not relax. Years of half-sleeping in exposed areas with a shiv under his pillow had honed his reflexes. He stood there, trying to catch his breath in deep, rasping gasps, blade at the ready, waiting for one more enemy to strike when he least expected it.

He nearly jumped out of his skin when he felt a hand on his shoulder.

“Easy, soldier,” said Foltest, “I don’t think they’re getting up.” He chuckled, gesturing at the field of dead before them. “And if they are, I suspect even you would need a silver sword to deal with them.”

Vernon took in the sight before him — really looked for the first time at what he had done. Had there really been so many enemies? Had he really fought them all? Was it really over?

The king was expecting a reply. “I— Yes, sir,” said Vernon hoarsely. He let his sword arm drop, suddenly overwhelmed with exhaustion.

“What’s your name?”

“Vernon… sir.”

Foltest heard the stammer before sir and snorted. “Not used to speaking with royalty, are you, Vernon?”

He flushed and looked down. “No, sir.”

“Well, then, you’d best start practicing and get used to it. I need more men who can fight like you. And since you’re the only one I’ve seen fighting like that, I must ask you to train others.”

“I… Thank you, sir.”

Hesitantly, Vernon started to take a knee. Foltest waved it away.

“Oh, no need for all that right now. I’ll promote you later in a proper setting. I’ve no desire to think about ceremony or titles at the moment. I just want to bathe, drink, and bury myself in a nice pair of tits for a few hours.” He grinned. “Come along, the Special Forces commander’s tent isn’t far from mine. I’ll see you settled in before I drown all memories of the day in ale.”

Vernon had followed him in a daze. He ended up traveling farther into the center of the camp than he’d ever been. He tried not to gape open-mouthed at the tents they passed, as drab officers’ blue started to mix with noble banners.

His skin crawled as he realized how many eyes were on him. Everyone in their path stopped what they were doing to make way — some scraping and bowing, others staring openly.

It’s the king they’re staring at. He’s the reason they’re all watching. But even as he said it to himself, he knew he didn’t entirely believe it. The bows were for the king, of course… but a good number of the stares were directed at him: at the filthy, skinny, ill-armored whore’s son. He felt his shoulders rising back into a feral back-alley slouch.
If Foltest noticed his nobles’ hostility, he didn’t draw attention to it. He continued straight ahead without breaking step, until he reached a dark blue tent much simpler than its neighbors.

“You there,” he said to one of the soldiers standing guard. “I need to speak with your commander.”

“He’s dead, your grace. We got word from one of the stragglers.”

“Well then, you report to the lieutenant commander. Where is he?”

“Dead as well, sire. Lost more than half our unit, including most of the officers.”

“Most, you say. But not all.” His eyes narrowed. “What of the others?”

The soldier swallowed. “Other, sire. Just a one. The lieutenant. He… he disappeared right before the battle, while we were forming up. He hasn’t been seen since.”

The king swore. “Damn it all. Must have defected to the Nilfgaardians. Traitor scum.” He eyed the soldier. “And what of the rest of you? Do you obey the orders of the Temerian king?”

The soldier stammered, taking the question for an accusation. “Yes, of course, sire.”

“Good man. Then you’ll obey the orders of your new commander, and take his word as if it was my own.”

The king turned to look at the new commander. Vernon followed the king’s gaze, ready to salute the newcomer. He found nobody. The king was looking to him.

He thought perhaps he should bow… or maybe kneeling was the correct response? He took too long to decide. By the time he realized he should be doing something, the king was removing the chain around his neck, and proffering it to Vernon. He lowered his head uncertainly, allowing the king to bestow the medallion upon him. It was warmer than he expected.

“Roche.”

Vernon shook his recollections away, and met Liathan’s questioning look with new determination.

“I will tell them to inform Radovid that Vernon Roche wishes to speak with them. And I will show them the Temerian medallion.” He withdrew it from under his shirt, Liathan’s eyes following the motion attentively. He let her see the insignia before closing his fingers tightly over it. “I will let them see it, but not have it. Gods help any one of them who tries to take it from me.”

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