Misethere
by astolat

Summary

Emhyr was looking at him for once, with a strange expression. “I have misjudged you,” he said, sounding irritated actually: how dare Geralt surprise him.

“I get that a lot,” Geralt said.

Notes

Based only on Witcher 3 and a few other bits of canon foraged from wiki, and ignoring all the rest. With heaps of thanks to Cesperanza and Mollyamory for beta!

See the end of the work for more notes.

The reaction didn’t involve thought, only reflex. Geralt was leaning half-perched against one of the random bits of statuary in the garden, tucked into a convenient bit of shadow under a willow tree, watching as a few steps away Ciri struggled to remember everyone’s names and titles and occasionally shot him a speaking look of boredom. Emhyr was standing on her other side, the corners of his mouth shifting half a millimeter up or down to tell Ciri how close she was to right. It was mostly staying up tonight: this was the third formal party since her anointing as crown princess,
not two weeks ago, and she was already getting things right more often than not.

Geralt was trying to be glad about that, but it was hard. He hadn’t wanted her to fail, he still didn’t, but he couldn’t help realizing maybe he’d had a small sneaking hope that she’d get fed up with the whole thing after a taste of court life and tell him she wanted to go back on the road after all. There sure as hell hadn’t been any other reason for him to tag along to the imperial court in Vizima with her. She’d only invited him half-tentatively in the first place, probably expecting him to say no, or maybe hell no.

“Just—just for a few weeks,” she’d said hurriedly. “After all, you said yourself you need to rest up. You might as well do it on Emhyr’s purse instead of your own, and—and you could see me settled.” Not much of an excuse, what the hell good was he going to do her with getting settled—Emhyr had already forbidden her even training—but he’d said yes anyway, for no good reason. Ciri herself had almost seemed more surprised than happy.

Even Yen had been doubtful. “And it really can’t be for long, Geralt, unless you’re prepared to get embroiled in politics after all,” she said. “Philippa Eilhart’s already got herself installed as an imperial councillor, and if she gets the idea that I’m staying at court after all, you know she’ll start to scheme. Against me, with me; whatever it is, she’ll do something.”

“I don’t think I’ll last a month,” he’d said, and judging by tonight, he wasn’t going to make it half that long. It had been a bad idea. What the hell use was there in shoving a knife into his own guts and twisting? Ciri was fine. Emhyr was treating her all right. Geralt had been a little surprised that the emperor hadn’t objected harder to his presence, but it was becoming clear that he wasn’t a threat to anything Emhyr wanted. He didn’t seem to be planning to force Ciri into anything except the throne, and since she’d agreed to that part, all he wanted to do now was get her as ready for it as he could.

Nothing there that Geralt could object to, not as long as Ciri was willing.

And she was: she’d thrown herself into all the lessons Emhyr had set her the same way she’d thrown herself at witcher training, like she was trying to swallow everything her instructor knew in one giant gulp. She was standing better in the fancy gown tonight, her head held properly under the diadem. Starting to look like the empress she was going to be, miles away from the girl Geralt had taught to use a sword. He reminded himself this was her choice, what she’d decided, and he was proud of her as hell for it, but even so, he couldn’t help feeling that a falcon he’d trained was winging away for the last time to land on someone else’s hand, the soft trailing ends of the jesses slipping through his fingers. Emhyr was even looking pleased, his own hawk’s eyes resting on her tonight with something like approval. It left a bitter taste in the back of Geralt’s mouth somewhere he didn’t like.

He probably shouldn’t have kept watching, but he did. And then the Temerian countess being presented—Geralt disapproved highly of her perfume, which had to be overpoweringly strong even for people who didn’t have enhanced senses—abruptly took hold of the philter she was wearing, a decorative glass bottle fully as large as an egg hung in gold, pulled the top open, and started to throw the contents.

He moved instantly to get it out of her hands. Only problem was, Emhyr had extremely good personal guards. Two of them also moved instantly, one going for her, one going for the bottle. Geralt still got there first, but that just meant he wound up holding the bottle when the second guard smashed into him, staggering him off balance. Meanwhile the first one put the countess—still clinging to the gold chain around her neck—on the ground. The thin glass bottle exploded in Geralt’s hand, and doused Emhyr in the contents: he’d shoved Ciri behind him.

Geralt recognized the smell—no wonder she’d been wearing so much perfume—even as it went into the air. “Oh, shit,” he said, holding the remnants of the shattered bottle in his hand. Emhyr was
staring right back at him.

“Quickly, bar the door,” Yennefer said, already throwing things into a bag. “Get your swords and your armor. I’ll teleport us to Novigrad. From there we can take ship to Skellige—”

“Yen,” Geralt said.

“Shut up!” she said. “Why aren’t you doing as you’re told? That wardrobe, move it, now—”

“Yennefer. First of all, if Emhyr was coherent enough yet to order the guards to come drag me to him, they’d have been here by now.”

A heavy thump landed on the door, a mailed fist landing. “Open in the name of the Emperor,” a voice called muffled from the other side.

Yen glared at him. “You were saying?” she hissed.

Geralt squared his shoulders. “And second of all,” he finished, flatly, “there’s nowhere to run.”

“Skellige would—”

“The only reason Emhyr hasn’t stormed Ard Skellig yet is because he’s trying to play nice with Ciri. After a dose of misethere, he won’t care about that. He’d raze the islands to bare rock to get at me. You want me to go there and ask Cerys for shelter, knowing what I’ll be bringing down on them?”

Yennefer was drawing a breath to find an answer, another place to run, but he knew there wasn’t one. He wasn’t taking Yen with him anywhere that Radovid and his witch hunters ruled, and Emhyr had conquered everywhere else there was, unless Geralt felt like running to Zerrikania or Ofier, where he couldn’t speak the language and Emhyr could trivially hire a pack of local bounty hunters to go after him. He wouldn’t be able to think that far for a few days, but he’d get there eventually. Assuming he didn’t get what he was after before then.

Geralt turned to the door and opened it. There was a double column of imperial guardsmen outside. “His Imperial Majesty requests your presence,” the officer said formally.

“I’ll bet he does,” Yennefer said through her teeth.

“And yours as well, Lady Yennefer,” the officer added.

She blinked. “What?”

Geralt braced himself going into Emhyr’s suite, his back feeling cold and bare without his swords. He couldn’t have cut his way out through the Imperial guard anyway, and every word he’d said to Yen was true, but he still missed them. And for once it wasn’t comforting having her at his back instead. If Emhyr threatened her to get him to go along—that would have been pretty subtle for someone on misethere, at least until after they’d gone a few rounds of frothing and grabbing and humping, but it wasn’t completely impossible.

Then Emhyr spoke. He was in the study standing by the window, fully dressed, hands still clasped behind his back. “Very good,” he said, without turning around. “You may go, Captain.” The officer bowed and he and his men marched out of the room.
Geralt watched them go, a little blankly, and eyed Emhyr again. He kept on just standing there. Yennefer looked over. “You’re sure it was misethere?” she whispered.

Geralt shrugged a shoulder at her. He almost doubted it himself; he knew what he’d smelled, and Emhyr had been covered with the stuff, but—

“It was,” Emhyr said.

Yen hesitated, then said bluntly, “Forgive me, Your Majesty, but a man drugged with misethere would be hurling himself at Geralt howling in half-finished sentences by now.”

“Most men spend their lives careening from one unexamined impulse to the next,” Emhyr said. “I am not most men. It is misethere. I am familiar with the effects. A similar attempt was made on me some five years ago by a Nilfgaardian noblewoman of the first rank.”

Geralt blew out an almost explosive breath of relief. “You have a cure.”

“One of limited application,” Emhyr said. “It is known that several heavy doses of Widow’s Relief, administered after viewing the object’s corpse and attending their funeral, cause the remnants of the curse to fade away over the course of a month.”

That sounded less good. “She died?” Geralt said warily.

“Certainly she died. I had her put to death for treason at once.” Emhyr raised a hand. “Before you ask, I do not propose to execute you for having done your best to save me. Aside from the churlishness, I am well aware of the objections my heir would raise. But that leaves us at an impasse. Your opportunities for flight are not quite so limited as mine for a cure, but I doubt they are significantly more to your liking. There are few places in the world my hand cannot reach. I propose a compromise.” He folded his hand back down into the clasp of the other. “Lady Yennefer.”

“Yes?” she said warily.

“Your resources are many. You will expend them. I can manage for three days’ time before the oppression of my thoughts will threaten my self-mastery. If you do not find a cure in that time…” he paused, and then went on, very stiffly, “then Geralt will come to me that night, and on further occasions as I require, until one has been found. You may be certain,” he added in dry tones, “that the occasions will be as infrequent as I can manage.”

“So,” Geralt said to Yen as they walked back to their rooms, “you can find a cure, right?”

She threw a simultaneously irritated and anguished look at him.

“Great,” Geralt muttered.

Three days later their suite stank to high heaven, littered with the corpses of mice and rats and lizards, not to mention five dozen or so incredibly repellant alchemical ingredients. Yen’s hair was a snarled mess full of powders and her eyes were red and her voice was hoarse from shouting. Not spells: the Emperor had sent over all his herbalists to help her. She hadn’t been very polite to them. Yen didn’t think much of herbalists.

“Why does she even need their help?” Ciri asked him in an undertone, perched on the table at the other side of the room, both of them keeping well out of the latest escalating tirade.

“Misethere’s not just a spell,” Geralt said. “That’s what makes it so potent. You have to put specific spells on several different rare alchemical ingredients, and then you brew them together properly, and
then apply another set of spells afterwards. Only someone who’s highly skilled in both sorcery and alchemy can manage it.”

“And they’d have to be bastard enough to do it, too,” Ciri added tightly.

When she’d first heard about it, she’d said, “So Emhyr is—in love with you now?” her voice full of laughter, until Geralt quietly said, “Misether’s not a joke. I knew a woman once—a traveling merchant had got hold of some, tried to use it to lure her into his bed after she turned him down. It misfired, she saw a neighbor first instead. Her family put up a contract for help.”

He looked away. He’d been a young witcher then, not four months alone on the Path. His career up to then had gone so smoothly he’d even spent some of the jingling coin in his purse to buy parchment and ink just so he could write Vesemir mocking letters calling him an old worrywart for all the warnings. He’d killed drowners by the dozen, cleaned out a nest of ghouls, even laid a minor wraith all by himself. He’d felt invincible.

“I couldn’t do shit for them,” he added flatly. “She had three children, a newborn infant. The baby almost starved to death in its crib because she was out pining over the fence. The husband had to leave her, take the kids to his family in the next town over. She wouldn’t go with them. She died a couple months later: stayed out all night in a snowstorm and froze to death peeking in at the man’s window. And she’d tried to jump him in the woods four times before then.”

Ciri had been staring at him with enormous eyes when he finished. “But—I spoke to Emhyr, just this morning. He’s fine! He’s not over here pining—”

“I don’t know how he’s doing it,” Geralt said. “He says he’s got more self-control than most men. He probably does. But even his self control isn’t going to last forever.”

The odds of a quick cure weren’t looking good, either. “No luck?” he asked Yennefer on the third day, fatalistically, watching the line of late-afternoon sunlight climb the wall opposite the window, going deep orange.

“I’ve found a compound that at least temporarily neutralizes the symptoms of the misether in the body,” Yen said. “It doesn’t eradicate it completely, the curse is still operating, but it suppress the effects.”

“And?”

She looked at him miserably. “It kills rats.”

He looked round at the small heap of grey corpses in the corner. “Great.”

“It doesn’t kill lizards, though.”

“It’s debatable whether Emhyr’s closer to a lizard than a rat, but I’m pretty sure it would be a sufficiently bad idea to poison the Emperor of Nilfgaard that we shouldn’t take the chance,” Geralt said. “He’s not going to take anything unless he tests it on someone else first, anyway.” He took a deep breath and stood up.

“Geralt—”

“It’s all right. I’ve been through worse.”

“We could still run.”
Geralt shook his head. “Yen, aside from everything else, what the hell is going to happen to the world if the man who rules half of it suddenly can’t care about anything but tracking me down? What would happen to Ciri?” She looked away, her lips pressed tight. “Anyway,” he added, “I already said yes, and I meant it. He’s fighting the curse harder than anyone I’ve ever heard of. If he needs it once in a while until you figure this thing out, I can handle that.”

He still sure as hell wasn’t looking forward to it, though, no matter how much of a good face he put on it. His steps slowed as he went through the palace, and they were practically dragging by the time he got to the door of Emhyr’s suite. He probably would’ve stood outside it a long time if the guards hadn’t helpfully swung it open and announced him.

He went through. Emhyr was sitting fully dressed at a low table near the fire, fruit and cold meat and wine set out, and a game of shah set up in front of him. “Leave us,” he said, without looking at Geralt, and the couple of personal attendants on duty melted out the door and closed it behind them. “Come and sit.”

Geralt wasn’t sorry to put things off a little longer, however improbable it seemed. He sat down at right angles to Emhyr. The wine in the open decanter smelled fantastic, about twelve different notes somehow harmonizing together beautifully: cherries and chocolate and dry leaves in autumn, a little hint of pepper, a few more delicate flavors drifting in and out of his nose. “If you please,” Emhyr said, waving a hand at the decanter. He still hadn’t looked directly at Geralt, keeping his eyes on the game: looked like he was playing both sides.

“Thanks,” Geralt said, and poured himself a glass. It tasted even better than it smelled, all those notes bursting into full song like an orchestra building up from a soft opening into crashing triumph. “Wow. Imperial house vintage?”

“From the Year of Summer, laid down in my grandfather’s reign,” Emhyr said. “My steward informs me your tastes tend to the complicated.”

Imperial house vintages were almost impossible to get hold of on the open market, but when they did show up, they went for thousands of crowns. Geralt had done four contracts in a week once just to be able to buy one from a wine dealer in Cintra. It’d been worth every minute knee-deep in drowner guts, and this one was at least ten times better. “It’s amazing. Do you have cellarfuls of this stuff?”

“There are only twenty bottles remaining,” Emhyr said. “It seemed to me the least I could do was get you expensively drunk.”

“I won’t talk you out of it,” Geralt said, bemusedly. It was oddly—considerate. He sat drinking his way through the decanter and watching Emhyr play. The wine wasn’t really working as intended; he couldn’t bear to drink this fast enough for it to make him drunk. But it was definitely putting him in a more mellow mood. Also, watching Emhyr play was pretty fascinating on two levels. For one, he was playing shah really well. For the other, he was playing shah. Geralt had seen a total of four people under misethere over the course of his career, and he’d read about twenty-six other known cases. None of them had done a good job maintaining even a veneer of sanity, much less functioning on any higher levels.

“Not that I’m complaining,” he said finally, “but how the hell are you doing this?”

Emhyr’s hand paused, reaching for a piece. After a moment, he said, “Do you remember when first we met?”

“It would take some forgetting,” Geralt said. “That was one of the nastier curses I’ve dealt with.”
“You mentioned it was unusual that I remained coherent after transformation, while in my bestial form.”

“Yeah,” Geralt said. “Most forced transformation curses, the victim loses human intelligence while transformed. Hell, more than half of true lycanthropes are less coherent than you were.”

“And so it was with me, when first I was cursed,” Emhyr said. He moved a squire to the third row. “Every morning, I woke in fields or deep in woods, naked and bruised, and remembered nothing of how I’d come to be there.” He shifted a mage figure five squares right. “And every night, I felt the transformation crawling over me with twilight, stealing away my self, my thoughts, all that made me human instead of beast.”

“What changed it?” Geralt said.

Emhyr shrugged a little. “There was no potion, no spell. Every night I struggled desperately to cling to myself. At first, I tried to hold on entirely. But when that failed over and over, I began to attempt a more systematic approach. I would try and think of a single place, a sheltered cave where I spent most of my days. I fixed it in my mind each night, and sought to cling to it, and after perhaps a week of doing so, I began to wake there in the mornings. Then I fixed my thoughts on food: on rabbit meat, over a fire. After several days, in the mornings I began to find the remnants of rabbits. After a month, I woke with a rabbit caught and not devoured, waiting by the fire pit.”

“Huh,” Geralt said. “You built a bridge of consciousness to your beast self.” Some lycanthropes could do it—he’d run across a werewolf pack once up in the mountains, where they all trained themselves to manage it. But it usually took them about twenty years, starting in childhood.

“After five years, I began to remain myself, more often than not, save when I was badly alarmed or wounded while in beast form,” Emhyr said. “After ten, I had established full mastery. And the effect of misethere is not entirely different.”

Geralt nodded. It made sense: inflaming a part of a person’s own bestial nature wasn’t that different from superimposing a foreign one. “Still pretty damn impressive.”

“I am glad you approve,” Emhyr said dryly, moving another page two squares, capturing the senior blue knight, then trading it for one of the red castles—seemed like a bad deal—and then he stood up.

Geralt swallowed. “Not going to finish your game?”

“It is finished,” Emhyr said. Geralt looked at the board. He wasn’t sure how it was finished. There was a pretty obvious move the red mage had to make the next turn, but—

“The red knight moves next, if you are curious,” Emhyr said.

Geralt had to look over the board again before he even spotted the senior knight, tucked away in a back corner behind a squire and two pages. He reached for it, looked for the position—Emhyr was trading the second red castle for the lesser blue knight and one page? That also didn’t make a lot of sense—

He played out half a dozen wrong moves, back and forth, before he caught sight of the actual plan; he had to reverse them all, and then he rolled down the right path, eleven moves that ended up with the red knight destroying the blue catapult and a red page ending up behind the blue line, one square away from the king: a perfect assassin’s gambit, and no blue knights left to put on the throne.

“Nice,” he said, and looked up to find Emhyr standing over him, watching with a slightly raised eyebrow.
“Perhaps we shall play another time,” Emhyr said. “Come.”

He walked away: not to the bedroom, but through another door at the back of the room, one Geralt had vaguely thought went to the gardens, from back in Folt’s day. He polished off his glass of wine and followed. But when he opened the door, he was in a dressing chamber—built fairly recently; he could still faintly smell the river water in the mortar with a deep breath. Large braziers heated the space to baking warmth, the walls around the next door slightly damp with moisture seeping in from the room beyond. “I was wondering why your suite was on the ground floor,” Geralt said.

“Temerian plumbing leaves much to be desired.” Emhyr was already mostly through undressing, discarding his dressing gown onto a beautifully carved wooden bench. He still didn’t look around. “There was a fountain in the interior courtyard that at least had functional pipes.”

“Knowing the way you Nilfgaardians are about your baths, I’m surprised you haven’t had an uprising among your nobles demanding access,” Geralt said. He sat down and pulled off his boots.

“The engineer corps are almost done with another for the general staff and higher nobility in the rose garden, as well as the public one off the harbor,” Emhyr said. “And a third for lesser nobles and senior officers will follow.”

He went on into the bathing chamber on a massive cloud of steam, vanishing inside. Geralt finished undressing slowly and wrapped on a towel, a pointless gesture he knew was pointless even while he was doing it, but he couldn’t quite make himself leave it off.

Emhyr was in the hot pool soaking with his arms along the wall and his head back, eyes closed. That helped, and the thick rolling mist rising off the slowly moving water, obscuring everything. Geralt dropped the towel and got in opposite him. He couldn’t stop a sigh escaping. It was the true southern experience: water the perfect five degrees short of scalding, fresh with the faint pleasant odor of ranogrin, and submerged channels in the walls that fed the pool steadily with water just two degrees short of scalding. Stone pitchers dewed with condensation stood every few paces, full of melting ice. Geralt submerged for three breaths into the intense heat, then surfaced and got one and poured the whole thing over his head and shoulders, gasping.

“You’d probably pacify the North a lot quicker if you built public bathhouses in every town,” Geralt said, sinking back in up to his neck. He wasn’t consciously aware of his scars and knotted muscles most of the time; pain was a witcher’s constant companion. But he sure as hell noticed when the aches went away.

Emhyr actually chuckled faintly. “Plans are already being drawn up.”

He didn’t speak for another full ten minutes. Geralt’s whole body was relaxing out from under him, involuntarily, and he was even starting to drowse off. He wondered if that was the idea: if so, it wasn’t a great one. But his eyes kept getting heavy. He hadn’t had a lot of sleep, or for that matter a successful meditation, in the last three days.

When the next wave of sleep tried to roll over him, Geralt fought it off, took a deep breath and said, “Emhyr. It wouldn’t be a good idea to wait for me to fall asleep all the way. I’d probably break something by reflex when you touched me.”

“Very well,” Emhyr said. “You will find a drowsing ledge protruding from the other end.”

Geralt found the ledge in the mist near the tepid end where the cooler water ran out of the pool. He’d seen them in smaller bathing pools before, in nobles’ houses in the south: they were carved so you
could lie with with your head supported out of the water and your upper body submerged just beneath the surface, legs slanting gently downward. “I always assumed these really were for taking naps,” he said, trying for lightness, as he lay down on his stomach. The design was pretty obvious once he thought about it.

“They are,” Emhyr said, moving around near him. “That does not preclude the recreational alternatives. You will tell me if the oil is too hot.”

He poured a thin stream of oil across Geralt’s shoulders, viscous enough to penetrate through the water and hit the barely-submerged skin. Geralt bent his head forward and groaned involuntarily, and Emhyr put his hands on him and kneaded it into his shoulders three times, vigorously, so quick Geralt didn’t have a chance to tense up.

“There is a plate of esanthus flowers beside the edge of the pool, in reach of your hand, if you care for one,” Emhyr said, and slid his hands down Geralt’s back to his hips.

Geralt looked for them, and after a moment’s consideration reached out and gathered up the whole plateful in one fist, crushed it under his nose, and inhaled deeply.

“Those are—”

“Trust me,” Geralt said. “You’ll have about fifteen minutes before the effect wears off on me.” He put the flowers in his mouth and chewed and swallowed them with a gulp of water poured from the nearest pitcher into the cup of his hand.

The wave of intoxicant swelled over him hard and fast, softening everything. He put his head down. After a moment, Emhyr reached for more oil. It didn’t worry Geralt at all anymore, or when Emhyr’s cock brushed his thigh—rock hard despite the hot water, the only evidence Geralt had seen so far that he actually was suffering from miset— and it didn’t worry him when Emhyr started to put it into him, either. Actually, it felt surprisingly—

Emhyr fucked into him straight to the hilt. “Sheiss,” Geralt gasped out involuntarily, but he still didn’t mind exactly, and he kept not exactly minding. Emhyr moved on him more gently for a while after that, but by the time the esanthus wore off, he’d built the pace back up and was ploughing Geralt like a twenty-acre field that had been fallow for three seasons, and somewhere along the way Geralt had decided to get his knees under him and start pushing back for it.

And right around when Geralt got back enough of his brain to start thinking about whether that was something he wanted to keep doing, Emhyr reached out, dunked his hand in the cold water, then in the oil, and reached under and took a firm hold of his cock.

“Oh yeah,” Geralt said, and he didn’t have any damn excuse for the next fifteen minutes after that.

Afterwards he slid limply off the ledge and staggered to the far end of the pool and collapsed back into the deep water, his whole body still shivering with aftershocks. Emhyr was already sitting there with his eyes shut, panting enormously. The side was narrower, and Geralt’s shoulders ended up resting against Emhyr’s spread arms, but it seemed kind of pointless to care anymore. After a moment, Emhyr actually slid his hand into Geralt’s hair, up from the base of his neck, fingers sliding over the scalp and gripping him. It felt great. Geralt let his head go lolling back into it.

“You will come to me each Thursday,” Emhyr said, after a moment, thickly.

“All right,” Geralt said.

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He went back to his room with half his clothes tucked under his arm, shucked his shirt and pants and crawled into bed and fell solidly asleep until the middle of the next morning. When he woke up, he stretched luxuriously into the general feeling of satiation and well-being and vaguely thought about breakfast while he stroked his cock a little, and then he went out humming and found Yen in the sitting room asleep at the table with her head pillowed on her arms and lifted her hair so he could kiss the back of her neck and nuzzle her awake.

She jolted up and nearly smashed him in the nose with her skull, which he only evaded with witcher reflexes, and then she turned and threw her arms around his neck and pressed her face against him and burst out, muffled, “I’m sorry. Geralt, I’m sorry.”

“What?” Geralt said, and then remembered just in the nick of time. “Yen, it’s fine. Vesemir’s light training exercises were worse,” he said hastily. He really didn’t need to have a detailed conversation about how it had gone with Yen. “Don’t worry about it. You’ll get the cure as soon as you can.”

She didn’t have the cure by the next week. Geralt went back to Emhyr’s quarters slowly, this time because it felt vaguely wrong that he didn’t particularly want to go slowly, especially if Emhyr planned to ply him with more expensive wine and imperial baths.

There was another decanter out, a beautiful fragrant spring wine from Mettina, so delicate and fragile it had to have been shipped cold the whole way. The traditional spread of raw slipfish and sliced citrus fruit was laid out on a cold stone as well. Emhyr was setting up the shah board. “Let us play,” he said, taking off a red castle, the senior red knight, and four pages.

Geralt forgot to keep drinking five moves in. He liked shah a lot, and he won more often than not, especially playing blue, but even with the insane handicap, it was still the fight of his gaming life. Traps closed one after another every time right when he was sure he’d managed to break Emhyr’s defensive line, and then, reaching to take his lesser knight and finally do it, Geralt stopped with his hand on the piece, and said, “Damn,” in flat admiration. Emhyr only had five pieces left to his ten, but all four of the others were aligned within one space of each other along the second and third columns, each in deceptively weak defensive positions. If he took the knight, Emhyr would turn his line, and after that—blue would be dead in three moves. But if he didn’t take the knight, Emhyr was going to take his castle, and he’d be dead in six moves. He let go and waved his hand, conceding.

“A stimulating game,” Emhyr said, refilling their wineglasses. “You are a good offensive player.”

“I used to think so,” Geralt said dryly.

“Next time I will give you both castles.”

“How about next time, I bring a Gwent deck,” Geralt said.

They fucked in the baths again. Geralt didn’t bother with the esanthus. After they dried off and caught their breath, Emhyr said, “Come,” and they went to the bed, and fucked there too. Geralt fell asleep afterwards. He woke up with a jolt and the bells ringing for sunrise and made a desperate dash back to his room before Yen woke up. He could name about ten thousand things he wanted to do more than have to say out loud that he’d liked it.

The next week, Emhyr lost six games of Gwent in a row and then crushed the seventh so thoroughly that Geralt said a bit reproachfully, “What was that, toying with me?”

Emhyr raised an eyebrow. “I have never played before. Taking a variety of extreme risks is the quickest way to learn the principles of a new game. I do like it. The operation of random chance and the concealment of the enemy’s positions, and the speed of play. Quite intriguing.”
“You’ve never played before?” Geralt said. “Where did you get the deck?”

“I ordered my chamberlain to procure one.”

“Uh huh, now I’m getting the picture,” Geralt said. “It’s a complete deck, isn’t it? You’ve got every rare card—” He reached to take it out of Emhyr’s hand, and their fingers brushed. Emhyr flinched violently, and when Geralt looked up, he was looking directly back, and for the first time Geralt abruptly lost all doubt that Emhyr hadn’t really been hit by the misethere.

Emhyr shoved the table out from between them, moving with a slow deliberation that Geralt got now was a cover for being on the edge of losing all control, and then he took hold of Geralt’s head and pulled him in for a savage, brutal kiss. Geralt found himself pulling at Emhyr’s clothes, dragging them from his body, and they went to the rug in front of the fire together.

“Intolerable,” Emhyr said afterwards.

“Huh?” Geralt said. He didn’t really want to move, but he levered up his head to squint at Emhyr, who was lying naked on the rug next to him, his jaw as tight as iron and his eyes fixed on the ceiling, a cold angry glitter in them. “Emhyr, you should be gibbering.”

“No,” Emhyr said flatly. “I should be my own master.” He rose and walked straight out to the bath. Geralt lay his head back down on the ground with a faint groan for a few minutes and then got up and went after him. Emhyr started when Geralt stepped down into the pool next to him, and jerked a look over, still furious and a little incredulous too, like he couldn’t believe Geralt had followed him.

“I guess I’m violating court etiquette again by not waiting for an invitation?” Geralt said. He sank down anyway. He’d spent too much time around hideously powerful people to start getting afraid of them now, even if he hadn’t just spent the last hour getting fucked blind by this particular one. Emhyr didn’t answer. He was staring away from him again at the far wall, a muscle jumping along his jaw, his face gone rigid. Geralt sighed. “I’ll say it out loud if I have to.”

“What?” Emhyr said.

“In case you haven’t noticed, this isn’t working out all that badly,” Geralt said. “A good time is being had by all. You haven’t destroyed any small nations. My shah game is improving. It’s fine. Stop worrying.”

Emhyr was still beside him for a long moment. “The longer I spend in your company, the clearer it becomes that you are not a fool,” he said finally. “I find that difficult to reconcile with the truly astonishing foolishness of that remark.”

“Huh?” Geralt said.

“Has it simply not occurred to you yet to consider how you might make use of my weakness?”

“Right.” Geralt rolled his eyes. “Got it. You’re not actually sorry. You’re just worrying about me asking you for—what are you worrying about exactly? Give me some pointers, clearly you’re better at this than I am. Maybe it’s something good.”

Emhyr actually snorted something like a chuckle. “Your insolence remains boundless. Tell me, has Yennefer not proposed anything at least? I find it difficult to imagine her powers of imagination have not risen to the occasion.”

“Her powers wouldn’t have any trouble imagining what I’d say if she asked me to try extorting a misethere victim,” Geralt said. “Even if it is you. Anyway, you’re Ciri’s father. What the hell would I
want to take from you that she wouldn’t just give me if I asked her for it?”

“Cirilla has very little actual power at the moment.”

“So what? It’s all going to be hers eventually. I’m going to make you give me a house or a stable full of horses out of her inheritance? Why would I? I don’t really like living in this palace to begin with, and I can’t ride more than one at a time.”

Emhyr actually closed his eyes and let his head tip back against the ledge. “You’re a remarkably competent shah player for a congenital idiot. Ask me to establish a new school of witchers.”

Geralt stiffened. “The secrets of the Trials have been lost.”

“If Yennerfer cannot dig them up for you, my archivists and scholars can. I could give you lands, conscript several dozen likely boys—”

“And more than half of them would die,” Geralt said flatly. “No.” He looked away. “You’re ending the need for witchers, anyway. Civilization kills monsters a lot more permanently than a silver sword.”

Emhyr didn’t say anything for a long time. Geralt glanced over at him finally. Emhyr was looking at him for once, with a strange expression. “I have misjudged you,” he said, sounding irritated actually: how dare Geralt surprise him.

“I get that a lot,” Geralt said.

“I do not. I will have to consider it further.” While Geralt was trying to decide how ominous that was, Emhyr rose out of the pool abruptly, stripping the water from his body with a few swift strokes of his hands before he took his towel for the rest. “Come to bed.”

#

Yennefer’s experiments bore no fruit for three more weeks. Geralt got spectacularly laid three more Thursdays, did considerable amounts of damage to Emhyr’s cellars, and managed to fight him to a stalemate in shah with a two-castle handicap.

While getting driven crazy. “Give me your opinion,” Emhyr said, making his next move instantly, which meant Geralt had walked into something that was going to bite him in the ass eight moves from now. “General Marrek wishes to take Novigrad this spring. General Voorhis wishes the city left independent and to instead focus our efforts on taking Tretogor. Is he speaking from sentiment, do you think, or sense?”

“Why the hell are you asking me? I don’t know him that well,” Geralt said warily. He didn’t know why Emhyr was talking to him about politics suddenly, but he didn’t like it.

“Humor me.”

“I don’t know. He doesn’t seem that sentimental to me when it comes to winning.” Geralt tried advancing a page.

“Mm. Victory takes many forms. However, you will find none of them with that line of attack.” Emhyr moved his lesser knight to threaten Geralt’s one remaining castle.

“Great,” Geralt muttered, and started searching the board for a hole to dive through.
Emhyr folded his arms, watching him. “Which course of action would you yourself choose?”

“Why does this feel like a trick question?” Geralt said. “What are you looking for me to say?” Emhyr just held out his hand flat, a demand. “Look, if you take the city, it’s going to be an unholy mess. You don’t need me to tell you that.”

“You would prefer that I leave it be.”

“Well, right now, it’s a holy mess.”

“The pyres,” Emhyr said.

“The last time I went through there, they’d run out of anyone they could call a witch and moved on to nonhumans.” Geralt stared grimly down at the board. “They’re still burning them at the rate of three a day.”

“So,” Emhyr said thoughtfully, “you dislike the slaughter and waste that would result from a siege, but equally dislike that of Radovid’s regime.”

“About sums it up,” Geralt said. “It’s fucked either way. Speaking of which, could we drop the politics and skip ahead to that part?”

“Patience,” Emhyr said, which was pretty rich given his eyes glazed every time their knees brushed under the table. It pissed Geralt off enough he started deliberately doing it during Emhyr’s turns, and Emhyr made a couple of mistakes, enough that Geralt managed to eke out the draw.

And then Emhyr was annoyed, which was enough to put Geralt even more solidly in the mood. He stood up and stretched, arms over his head, not innocently. “Now are you ready?”

Emhyr’s eyes were locked on him, glittering. “Come here,” he said, a faint grating rasp in his voice, and Geralt shoved the table out of the way with a foot and stepped in towards him, starting to lean down. “No,” Emhyr said. “Remain standing.”

Then he unbuckled Geralt’s belt. And unbuttoned his trousers and pushed them down his thighs, and Geralt swallowed hard, already turned on just by the chance that Emhyr might possibly—

“Put your hands behind your back and keep them there,” Emhyr said. “Move and I stop.”

“Oh, shit,” Geralt said, strangled. He gripped his left wrist tight behind his back and planted his feet. “Now that is surprising,” Emhyr murmured. His breath was skating over Geralt’s skin. “You are so endlessly incorrigible in the ordinary course of events.”

“It’s not the— the orders,” Geralt stuttered out, his tongue tangling with his breath. Emhyr’s mouth was closing over the head of his, oh. Oh. “It’s—it’s—” What the hell was he talking about anyway? He’d forgotten.

Emhyr slid his mouth off. “The challenge?”

“Uh?” Geralt said, a whine creeping in. Emhyr slapped his ass firmly enough that Geralt had to make an effort to keep in place, his hips trying to jerk with it. “Yes,” he managed. “Yes.”

“Interesting,” Emhyr said. And then he really got down to work.

Only knowing it would go away the second he so much as shifted his weight—he trusted Emhyr for that—kept Geralt from moving. It was a special kind of agonizing wonderful, and the best and the
worst part of it was feeling how much Emhyr wanted to do it. Geralt didn’t get the luxury of pretending to himself that his partners liked doing anything they didn’t. When Yen was turned on, he smelled it, and when she wasn’t, he knew. She’d do it for him, but he wanted that smell from her, he wanted to taste it in the air when he was making love with her, and he smelled it now, thick and strong rising off Emhyr’s skin, and his head knew it was misethere, but his body didn’t: his body just knew Emhyr’s hands gripping tight on his ass, wood smoke and fumes from the warming brandy rising and twining with the smell of lustful hunger, the shah board with his tiny handful of half-victorious pieces shining in the firelight, and Geralt shut his eyes and gasped and went over the edge.

Emhyr made a face after and poured himself another glass of brandy. Geralt was lying on the floor on his back, trousers still puddled around his ankles, not caring, blissful. He was vaguely aware it probably wasn’t a good idea to lie here radiating this much satisfaction in front of Emhyr’s face after having come in his mouth, and he wanted to be sorry about it, but he couldn’t manage to suppress it, even when he felt Emhyr standing over him, looking down with something between irritation and anger that Geralt had no trouble anymore reading: I just sucked this man’s cock and I enjoyed it, and in a minute that was going to cross the line over to the real anger: I am not my own master.

What the hell. “Get down here,” Geralt said.

“What?” Emhyr said sharply.

“Come on,” Geralt said. “Knees on either side of my head, facing the other way.”

That seemed like a pretty compelling invitation to him, but Emhyr actually needed a moment before he swept the skirts of his dressing gown abruptly to either side and knelt down over Geralt’s face and put his cock in reach of his—ohfuck Emhyr had already come, he was wet, and hard again anyway, and the musky stink of him was already something Geralt’s brain lined up with pleasure, a shiver of fresh anticipation running lightly over the surface of his muscles as he gripped Emhyr’s hips and licked his cock in, closing his mouth around it as Emhyr pushed all the way to the back of his throat, a solid thick presence he could barely breathe around, and his whole body shuddered again in a kind of sympathy, remembering the feel of Emhyr’s hot mouth around him.

“I can’t believe you had to think about it,” Geralt said afterwards, a little hoarsely, still dragging in deep gulps of air.

“Be silent, you infuriating wretch,” Emhyr muttered, sprawled bonelessly next to him, but not even he could manage to get any real heat behind it.

Anyway, with one thing like that and another, and a few others besides, Geralt was having a hard time mustering a lot of anxiety about finding the cure. That was just as well, because Emhyr sent Yennefer away for a couple weeks to deal with a magical storm that had blown up in eastern Temeria and wouldn’t stop raining sleet right in the lead-up to rye planting season. Two local mages hadn’t been able to manage it, and Philippa was claiming to have a feverish cold and keeping to her bed, which was code for she didn’t give a shit about peasants starving to death next year and wasn’t giving up her cozy rooms at court to help.

“I’m sorry, Geralt, I’ll be back as soon as I can,” Yennefer said unhappily.

“Yen. It’s fine. I’ve told you,” he said, and kissed her before she left. It rained that night, and he lay awake listening to the gusts spattering irregularly on the glass of the windows and was even sorry it was only Monday. He had a lot of wakeful nights these days. He’d been glad enough for a few weeks of rest, after the horrible months of desperately trying to find Ciri and defeat the Wild Hunt, but he’d recovered completely at this point. It was hard to train long enough every day to be tired when it was just him in the ring fighting the air.
Thankfully, the next morning the chamberlain came by and asked him in about twenty sentences too many if he would please go kill a royal wyvern that had parked itself over the river and was picking off cattle being driven to the city slaughter yards. Geralt was more than happy for the job; he packed up his swords and saddlebags, and after a second thought went and talked Ciri into sneaking away from her duties. They rode out together in the beautiful crisp fall weather, laughing as he taught her all the rude phrases and songs he knew in Nilfgaardian, to leaven out the lessons she was taking in high court language.

“It just seems endless sometimes,” she said. “Emhyr—my father says I’m making good progress, but I never feel as though I am. It’s all so tangled up together. With fighting, at least I could master one move, and feel I could make use of it, before I moved on to the next. But it doesn’t matter how much you know about the history of farming rights in southern Temeria if you don’t also know about the four-generation quarrel between these three noble houses, and all their vassalage relationships, and how much gold and armsmen your spy reports say each of them have—”

“You asked for it,” Geralt said cheerfully.

She sighed. “At least you’re still”— She stopped and looked away, her head lowered.

“Hey,” Geralt said gently, pulling his horse in to hers and putting a hand on her shoulder.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I know it’s for a dreadful reason, I know it’s not what you and Yen planned, your little house in the mountains—”

“We’ll get there,” Geralt said. “For now, I’m glad I’m still here too. Not sure how much use I can be to you, but—”

She gave him a slightly watery smile. “No one else will teach me how to tell someone their ancestors fornicated with goats in the stinking foothills of the Korath.”

“Well, in that case,” Geralt said.

They spent the day tracking the wyvern to its nest, spent the night camped out of scent range, and killed it the next morning in a nice and vigorous little fight. Ciri even made the final kill, and Geralt took it as an excuse to let her take the trophy and do the butchering. “Why,” she gasped out after an hour deep in the guts, swiping a bloody arm across her sweaty forehead, “why doesn’t this feel quite so much like an honor, and more like doing all the work?”

“You kill, your spoils,” Geralt said.

“I don’t actually have a need for unlaid wyvern eggs, you know.”

“Waste not, want not,” he intoned in his best impression of Vesemir. “Never know when they might come in handy.”

“A bath would come in handy right now. Ugh.” She flapped her hand, trying to fling off a trailing bit of guts.

The chamberlain, several ladies in waiting, and General Voorhis were all induced into hysteries by the sight of Ciri in the courtyard returning covered in blood and wyvern bits, even though Geralt attempted to explain none of it was hers. The two of them ended up called on the carpet in Emhyr’s study, still a mess, where the emperor mildly said, “Cirilla, much as I admire your devotion to the welfare of your subjects, I must ask that in future you do not expose yourself to an untimely death for the extermination of anything less than actual dragons. There is the dignity of the throne to be considered. Now, perhaps you would be so kind as to go and immediately change every article of
clothing you are wearing, and wash your hair. Several times, I would hope.”

“Yes, Sire,” she said, a bit meekly, although she threw Geralt a quick laughing glance before she made her escape.

“You know, I could stand to do that too,” Geralt said, inching towards the door.

“Indeed you could,” Emhyr said, standing up from behind the desk. He walked over to the door to his adjoining chambers and held it pointedly open, and Geralt realized: right, it was Thursday.

“I probably shouldn’t tell you this,” Geralt said afterwards, drowsily, in Emhyr’s bed, “but that wasn’t exactly an effective expression of your wrath.”

“Mm,” Emhyr said, getting out of the bed and drawing on his dressing gown. He went into the living room and Geralt heard him ring for a servant and say, “Geralt dines with me. Heartily, I imagine.”

“Yes, Sire,” came the answer, and by the time Geralt managed to crank himself up and out of the bed, a beautiful inlaid table had been unfolded and set with silver plate, and loaded with enough food to feed several hungry witchers: not fancy court food, either. He demolished a mountain of mashed turnips, a whole baked fish, a dozen oysters, two kinds of greens, and the better part of a suckling pig, and finally sank back, replete, to pour out the tail end of a thirty-year-old bottle of the first summer pressing of the upper slopes of the Erveluce vineyards, perfectly mature.

Emhyr had finished earlier and was sitting with his own glass, watching the destruction. He waited until the servants had cleared the wreckage and left them alone again, and then said, “My wrath, as you put it, is not directed exclusively at you.” He put down his glass. “Geralt, I am well aware that you possess Cirilla’s confidence and affection in ways I myself do not. Despite that, I have not previously discussed her with you. Quite simply, I did not believe that you had the wit either to listen or to comprehend what I might say—and I wished to spare myself what I expected would be the many annoyances of the conversation,” he added dryly. “However, it has been several weeks now since I have known better, and I have neglected to amend the situation. So I hold myself culpable also, for not having made plain to you the dangers to which you have exposed my heir.”

Geralt heaved a sigh, but a mild one. At least Emhyr had waited until after dinner and the rest to start in on it. “I know them better than you do.”

“So why don’t you ask me about them instead of making assumptions.” Emhyr held out a hand, inviting. “Fine, Royal wyverns look worse than they are. They’re tough because of their speed and claws, but their bones are brittle, and their short-range vision is bad. If you’ve got a crossbow to keep them on the ground, it’s a hard but predictable fight, and frankly, Ciri needed the break. You think I’d take a stupid risk with her? I was never out of arm’s reach. If anything had gone wrong, I’d have taken care of it.”

“Indeed,” Emhyr said. “And how will you take care of it when tonight, round every table in Vizima, the nobility of Nilfgaard and Temeria gleefully whisper of how their future empress rode out to spend the night in the woods with the witcher who raised her, and returned drenched in the bloody aftermath of the obscene rituals he uses to hunt monsters?”

Geralt stiffened, his hand clenching on the crystal glass.

“That is a mild example of the gossip you have undoubtedly provoked,” Emhyr said. “Do you imagine I experienced an instant of alarm for her physical safety in your care? I did not. But the
dangers that beset an empress are not the same as those a witcher faces. I did not speak with levity
when I told Cirilla to confine herself to hunting dragons. Slaying a dragon is fitting labor for a hero.
The skull to be mounted on the wall, the golden hoard to be dispersed to the masses, the matter of a
song for bards to write. No one will write songs of this deed, or if they do, they will write songs I
will have to hang men for singing."

Geralt compressed his mouth. Turned out Emhyr had been half right about him: he didn’t want to
listen, and he wanted to comprehend it even less. What he did want was to tell Emhyr to fuck off and
take the nobility of Nilfgaard and Temeria with him, and Ciri would do just fine no matter what they
wanted to say about her. He probably would’ve done it, too, six weeks ago. Before he’d seen the
way Emhyr played shah.

“How bad is it?” he said instead, grudgingly.

“This incident? Not disastrous, but exceptionally unfortunate,” Emhyr said. “Cirilla’s long absence
from court and the mysterious circumstances of her upbringing have already given rise to much
rumor and speculation. Her return to the court was the best opportunity to rehabilitate her reputation.
The court was ready to swallow the romance of her restoration and leave her youthful misadventures
in the past, something disconnected from the woman they knew. Now they have all been made real,
and connected with Crown Princess Cirilla.”

“Okay, but what does that actually mean, Emhyr? It’s just talk. Words. People spit in the street when
I walk by and call me a cursed freak. If I bothered to turn around and look at them, they’d run. And
the next day they’ll be begging me to take their gold to kill a pack of ghouls in the village graveyard.
Maybe it feels more real if you don’t live with a sword in your hand.”

“You carry a sword because it is appropriate to the enemies you face. To murder an emperor takes
more than the single blade or the vial of poison that does the final deed. It takes treachery, and you
cannot fight treachery with a sword. Slay one assassin and another ten will come. It took a thousand
whispers to torture my father to death, though there were only five men in the room when he
breathed his last.”

“And you think someone’s going to assassinate Ciri because she helped me kill a wyvern?”

“Do not be absurd. They will assassinate Cirilla for selfishness, to gain more power or because she
threatens what they already have. But they require excuses to act. The more of them she provides,
the more people whisper, the more emboldened her enemies will grow. And this is not merely a
matter of assassination. The best men will not serve an unpopular empress, one whose rule they do
not expect to succeed. Those who serve her will do so for their own enrichment alone, and
corruption will spread like ink in water. She will find herself unable to accomplish anything. Indeed,
she might well escape assassination through impotence. If the power devolves into the hands of the
trade corporations, they will be delighted to keep her a figurehead on the throne. Would she desire
such a reign?”

Geralt sat back heavily and ran a hand over his face. “Have you talked to her about this?” he said
after a moment.

“Of course,” Emhyr said. “But she has less than twenty summers, and she has no experience of court
life. In her heart, she, like you, still believes in the power of her sword and her will to smash any
difficulties she encounters, and naturally she wearies of the drudgery of learning now what ought to
have formed her daily study for the past ten years of her life. And when you, whom she loves and
trusts, come to her and invite her to put aside that toil for what seems a harmless single day’s
adventure, I am not astonished if she yields to temptation. Ask me first.”
Geralt raised an eyebrow. “And you’ll say yes? Ever?”

“I grant you that I would not have, before,” Emhyr said, after a moment. “Now, yes. I give you my word. If you come to me and tell me that Cirilla would do well with a respite of this kind, I will heed you, and find a way to permit you to accomplish it.”

Weirdly enough, Geralt discovered that he believed him. He frowned a little. It felt stupid to trust Emhyr—or, no, it felt like it should have felt stupid to trust him. He would’ve told anyone else thinking about doing it not to be an idiot, that Emhyr lied as easily as he breathed, and possibly more often, and you couldn’t trust any of his motives. But—now Geralt did believe him. “Okay,” he said abruptly. “Fine. I’ll come to you, when it’s my idea. But you’re on your own as far as convincing her to listen to you,” he added.

“Of that, I am well and painfully aware,” Emhyr said, dryly, and drained his glass.

“Is there anything we can do now?” Geralt asked, reaching for the second waiting decanter. He refilled their glasses. “About the wyvern.”

Emhyr tipped his hand slightly from side to side. “I will have to see what reports come in tomorrow morning. At present, I have done my best to make clear that I regard the incident in the light of a childish peccadillo. Much will depend on the reaction Voorhis chooses to have. He was present when you rode in, I understand? Unfortunate.”

“Emhyr, are you seriously considering having Ciri marry that guy?” Geralt said.

“You dislike him?”

Geralt raised his arms, let them drop. “I don’t think much of him either way. He seems all right, as noblemen go. But he’s doing a great job putting Ciri’s back up.”

“He is the ideal candidate. He possesses intimate knowledge of Nilfgaardian customs and its court, which Cirilla lacks; his family have a substantial presence in the Senate and considerable holdings in the trade corporations, and he is himself a skillful general, admired and liked by his subordinates, and a sensible man. I am surprised he has not made better efforts to ingratiate himself with her.”

“Oh, he’s made efforts all right. Maybe they’d work great on some seventeen-year-old Nilfgaardian maiden, I don’t know. But not Ciri.”

Emhyr sat silently, rolling the stem of his glass between his fingers, back and forth, for a while. “Tretogor it must be then,” he said finally.

“Huh?” Geralt said. “What does—”

“I told you Voorhis preferred conquering Tretogor to Novigrad,” Emhyr said. “He has been that plan’s most staunch advocate, and he has been intimately involved in devising the proposed plan of battle. Those circumstances make it possible for me to give him the field command, an honor I rarely grant, without excessively raising hackles among the general staff.”

“As—consolation for not getting to marry Ciri?” Geralt said, doubtfully.

“On the contrary,” Emhyr said. “As an opportunity to impress her with his skills, which do in fact exist. He cannot show to advantage with a sword in his hand compared to you and the other warriors she has known, but I assure you he is highly competent as a commander. It is one of the foremost reasons I made alliance with his family. And if she should remain unimpressed, throughout the campaign—well. He will be in the thick of battle at the end. Much can happen in such
Geralt stared at him. “Wait, if Ciri turns him down, you’d have him—”

“Morvran Voorhis has been expected for five years now by all Nilfgaard to be the next emperor. His family have kept their support behind me precisely because I made clear that I approved of him strongly: as a consort for my daughter, if she should return, or as my adopted heir, if she never did. Now here she is, and two months have passed, and still there is no word of a wedding. The command, I think, will buy us a little more time: I have granted one before only when I myself was not present in the field, and so it will be taken as a public signal of my continued support. They will then be receptive to the suggestion that my newly returned daughter, with her rustic manners, does not yet feel confident in enduring a full ritual of state. But that excuse will wear thin soon enough. They will demand a final answer.”

“And if Ciri won’t marry him?”

“Then the entire family at once will become my most implacable foes, and the natural focal point of all my other enemies in Nilfgaard. Voorhis has the best claim to the throne after Cirilla: a virtue in a husband, a deadly threat in an opponent. Every possible attack on her legitimacy, and there are many, will suddenly become one of those excuses I mentioned. If she will not marry him, he must die.”

“And you think that’s going to keep his family in your corner?”

“On the contrary. It will merely rob them of their best candidate, and give me some time to maneuver. But I will have to immediately replace them with another alliance, and find some other noble scion for Cirilla to marry. And I assure you, I did not favor Morvran idly. You would be astonished at the wealth of stupidity and brutishness available among the upper ranks of Nilfgaardian nobility, and the dearth of real ability.”

“I really wouldn’t,” Geralt put in dryly.

“I would most likely play three families off against one another, who presently form a bloc among my enemies, and all have a passably suitable heir as candidate. In the short run, that would tilt power in my direction, in fact, but sooner or later one of them must be chosen, moving the others to opposition again, and then the enemy faction would outweigh mine badly, unless I had managed to shift enough resources to my allies in the meantime.”

“What about—someone else,” Geralt said. “Hjalmar an Craite is—”

Emhyr was already shaking his head firmly. “He is not king. If Cirilla had been bred up in Nilfgaard her whole life, if she lived and breathed the city’s ways and could manage the nobility as easily as she swings a sword, she still could not afford to marry a mere jarl of Skellige. As matters are, she could not even afford to marry Radovid himself—”

“No goddamn kidding,” Geralt said sharply.

Emhyr waved impatiently. “The point is, she must marry a Nilfgaardian of unquestioned lineage and exceptional political skill. There is no alternative. If she will not do so, she would do better to abdicate and run off to the wilds with you, leave the throne to Morvran, and hope that he is romantic enough not to have her murdered to protect his heirs from any claim made by hers. I would not be so romantic, myself.”

“Shit,” Geralt muttered.
“Precisely,” Emhyr said. “And I do not exaggerate when I say that Cirilla’s chances of surviving the first six months of her reign go up threefold if she does marry him. So Tretogor it shall be. And tomorrow you will speak with Morvran, and make plain to him the need to take advantage of the situation to impress Cirilla more effectively.”

“What? Why me?” Geralt said.

“Because you can be rude to him,” Emhyr said. “Inform me how the conversation goes.”

Geralt tracked Morvran down in the court the next morning, talking with a couple of young Nilfgaardian noblewomen. They certainly seemed to like whatever he was dishing out fine, hiding smiles behind their fans and looking up at him. Geralt sighed. “General Voorhis,” he said.

“Ah, Geralt,” Morvran said, with a slight bow. “A pleasure. I hope you are quite recovered from your—expedition.”

The women both tittered a little. Geralt swallowed his first pissed-off reaction: childish peccadillo, he reminded himself, and shrugged. “A wyvern hunt on a nice day? By witcher standards, that’s a picnic. Messy, but the only recovery it takes is a hot bath. In fact, I was thinking I’d like a ride this morning. Wouldn’t mind giving my new stallion a chance against that bay of yours.”

Morvran took the invitation, and half an hour later they were outside the city walls, trotting on a back trail to a circuit Morvran said was ideal for racing. “However, before we try our horses, I hope you will permit me to take the opportunity to speak frankly,” he said. “I fear that I may have expressed myself somewhat intemperately yesterday on your return. I wish to assure you that only concern for Cirilla motivated my words, and to apologize for any offense I might have given.”

“Hnh,” Geralt grunted. One thing he had to say, he’d known a lot of rich and powerful aristocrats, and admitting mistakes wasn’t high on their list of skills, much less apologizing for them. It did say something about the guy. “We’re fine, Morvran. But you and Ciri aren’t.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Look, I don’t know a lot about Nilfgaardian politics. But it’s pretty clear everybody involved in them agrees you’re the next guy for the job, Emhyr included.”

Morvran made a modest kind of small bow from the saddle. “I take the emperor’s confidence in me as a great compliment.”

“The problem is, you seem to think that settles it. But Ciri’s the one you need to say yes. And so far, for a guy who doesn’t seem like a complete asshole, you’re sure taking every chance you get to make her think you are.”

Morvran didn’t like that any, pressing his lips together. “I take your hint in the spirit I trust it is meant,” he said after a moment. “Cirilla is a spirited young woman, of course, and I am sorry if I should have given her any cause to dislike me. But I hope, Geralt, that when it comes to so momentous a decision, she will prove amenable to advice from those around her with more experience of the world.”

“Yeah, keep hoping that, see how far you get,” Geralt said. “More experience of the world, for fuck’s sake. You need to get this through your head: Ciri’s gone toe to toe with Eredin of the Aen Elle. She’s traveled between worlds, killed old gods and riders of the Wild Hunt. She faced the White Frost and saved us all from the end of days. Those aren’t made-up stories. They happened. I
was there. And if you think the Lady of Time and Space is going to marry you because she’s 
imintimidated by Emhyr or your father or all the fucking lords of Nilfgaard for that matter, you’re 
wrong.”

Morvran had reined in and was sitting his horse very still and straight, his mouth downturned. “Are 
you saying that she means to refuse me?”

“No. What I’m trying to get through to you is that you’re not a sure thing just because you think 
you’re the only smart choice. Ciri’s got her own idea of what a smart choice is.”

Morvran was getting outright angry by now, red color standing in his cheeks. “And what is that?
Must I study to slay monsters, perhaps? I understand she is fond of Hjalmar an Craite: how many 
men was it that he led to the slaughter, attempting to kill the giant of Undvik? You must forgive me if 
I do not aspire to these particular heights.”

Geralt rolled his eyes. “No, although having a fit of the vapors because she rides in with a little 
wyvern blood on her boots isn’t helping your case any. But she doesn’t need you to swing a sword.
She took her own off because she knew she had a bigger job to do. You want her to marry you, 
what you need to do is convince her you’re going to help her with that job.

“And I don’t mean the job of sitting on a chair with a fancy hat, or making your family richer and 
more powerful, or conquering another couple countries for the hell of it,” he added. “Ciri agreed to 
take the throne because she wants to make the world better. And if that’s not something you want to 
do, then you’d be better off going home to your family in Nilfgaard and picking the fight right now,
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“Perhaps not quite to the point of urging him to go home and raise a rebellion against me in 
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“How do you even know what we said?” Geralt said suspiciously. He’d barely walked back through 
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#
certainly come pouring over the Pontar to seize Velen and Temeria—which would be equally
devastating to my position. Cirilla would only be crowned, if ever, after a civil war that would
slaughter tens of thousands of her own subjects.”

Shit. Geralt folded his arms grimly. “You want me to stop him if he goes?”

Emhyr snorted. “He will ride with an escort of thirty men. I cannot actually send a company of my
soldiers to slay the Voorhis heir.”

“If you can tell me the road he’ll take, I can handle thirty men,” Geralt said.

Emhyr paused and frowned at him. “How confidently you speak.”

“Emhyr, I’ve fought your best men. They’re good, but they’re not witchers, and his escort won’t be
wearing plate armor if they’re riding to Nilfgaard. I’d take them on the road after dark, put a couple
traps in the way, hit them with half a dozen bombs when they bunch up, blind them and poison half
of them, kill a dozen outright, and take the rest from behind. It won’t be a problem.”

“Well, I will certainly keep that in mind when next I ride to Nilfgaard,” Emhyr said after a moment,
very dryly. “And if my spies should tell me he has taken the road south. But let us hope it does not
come to that. Outright murdering Morvran would itself create extraordinary difficulties.” He lowered
his head in silence for a moment before he spoke again. “Morvran is not given to hasty or stupid
action. In all your bluntness, you did not say that Cirilla was finally determined against him, you told
him only that she was not yet won, and even reassured him that he continues to have my support,
which he must have begun to doubt. I am prepared to gamble on both his sense and his pride. He
will make a final attempt to win her and the throne with marriage, knowing the only obstacle her
personal choice, before he gives up the attempt and turns to rebellion instead.”

“So the Tretogor plan is still on?” Geralt said.

“Yes. However, I think I will let him seethe for the rest of the day before I inform him of the
command. It would not have much impact coming too quickly on the heels of your lecture. And it
would be just as well if you encouraged Cirilla to join you in one of your training sessions in the
south courtyard. Shall we say, tomorrow at eleven in the morning?”

Geralt stared at him. “You’re the one who told her not to train! You said her abilities would make the
soldiers nervous, and there was a lot of hostility to mages and nonhumans in the north, it was better
not to stir it up.”

“Yes,” Emhyr said, “but at present, I consider that outweighed by the value of reminding Morvran
that Cirilla is quite capable of slaying her enemies with her own hands, before he is tempted to join
their number. I assume she truly is?”

“More than.”

Emhyr nodded. “Then I will bring him through the gallery to observe you while we talk.”

“Fine,” Geralt said with a sigh. “Damn, I miss the days when my biggest concern was how much
they were paying a head for drowners.”

Emhyr leaned back in his chair. “Do you really?”

“Hell, yes,” Geralt said. “Drowners do what they do. You fight them the right way, they die, and
they stop doing it. End of story.”
“And the next day you ride on to another village where they spawn?”

Geralt shrugged. “It’s a living.”

“I am sure. And also sure that if that was what you truly desired, you would still be doing it.” Geralt blinked at him. Emhyr shook his head and laughed softly. “Listen to yourself, witcher. Solitude and your swords, the world rolling away around you, never knowing what beast lies round the corner—”

“I like that.”

“Yes. That is what you like, of being a witcher. The challenge of the unexpected. The thrill of some new monster or adventure that will force you to new heights. Not the dumb-animal plodding simplicity of thinning out the mindless horde for a few coins a day. You will do that work when it is all that offers, to keep your belly full and your flock safe, but it does not touch your heart. Nor should it. A man who can play shah with me at night and hunt royal wyverns for pleasure in the morning has as much business culling drowners as Richelle using the Sword of Adeline to cut her bread.”

Emhyr stood up and added, “You may entertain yourself if you like with the fiction that you are a simple witcher who has accidentally stumbled into the circles of the most high, over and over, but you will not catch me with it a second time. It was unspeakably foolish of me to believe it at all.”

He opened the connecting door to his chambers and said, “Come,” over his shoulder. Geralt followed him without really thinking about it. He felt vaguely like the time Yennefer in a temper had flung a storm at him and sent him windmilling into the air with the whole world suddenly turned upside down. He’d preferred that, actually.

The servants were putting out dinner under the chamberlain’s supervision. “Another place, Sire?” he asked.

“Yes,” Emhyr said, so Geralt ate with him again, and after the servants cleared, Emhyr said, “Shall we have a game?”

“Sure,” Geralt said, and after the game, Emhyr kissed him, and early the next morning, Geralt woke up in his bed with a start—it happened once in a while—and after the first impulse, realized Yen was away, and he didn’t need to jump out of the bed and go running through the hallways half-naked in the dark hours just to keep from having to face any awkward questions. He rolled over and went back to sleep. Emhyr roused an hour later when the sun came up, and they fucked again before breakfast.

Geralt was humming to himself when he went to find Ciri and tell her that training had been temporarily approved, only to get tracked down by her instead. She grabbed his arm, towed him into an empty bedchamber, and faced him with her arms crossed and a militant light in her eye. “I understand you went riding with Morvran Voorhis yesterday. I’m dying to hear what you talked about.”

“Uhh,” Geralt said.

She put her hands on her hips. “Geralt!”

“Look, Ciri—”

“What on earth gave you the idea you should even get involved?”

“Emhyr asked me to,” Geralt said.
Her eyes popped. “Emhyr asked you—”

Geralt shrugged. “Said he needed someone to be rude to the guy. Sounded like I was just the man for the job.” He got her: she couldn’t help a spurted laugh. He put his hands on her shoulders. “Ciri. Sweetheart. You know any time you want to call this all off, hit the road in the middle of the night —”

“Geralt.” She reached up and covered his hand with hers, smiling with a wet shine in her eyes and a small shake of her head.

“Yeah, I know,” he said gently. “But if you want to stick this out—I don’t like saying this, believe me, but I’m pretty sure Emhyr doesn’t make stupid mistakes. And he said flat-out that your chances of getting anything done, even just living through the first six months, go up a lot with this guy. I’m not saying you should marry him,” he added. “I’m saying, that’s a hell of a recommendation from an expert. So you should take a good look. Yeah, he’s a Nilfgaardian nobleman, and he’s been trying to treat you like you’re a Nilfgaardian princess. I told him to knock it off.” He nudge her. “What do you say to emphasizing the message?”

Her eyes narrowed. “How exactly did you have in mind?”

“A little training session, maybe,” Geralt said.

“Emhyr—”

“He’s going to bring Voorhis by the south courtyard at eleven.”

Ciri was staring at him. “How did you talk him into that?”

“His idea, actually,” Geralt said.

“I don’t understand, since when do you and Emhyr even talk to—” Ciri stopped abruptly and flushed, and Geralt felt his own face get hot, and they both burst out with, “The south courtyard—” “So what do you—” at the same time, and then Ciri covered her mouth with both her hands and started giggling, and Geralt closed his eyes and just sighed.

“But really,” Ciri said afterwards, abruptly, as they walked to the courtyard with their swords. “You’re talking? Without—I don’t know, strangling each other? Or I suppose it would be you strangling him, and him calling the guards to have you hanged.”

“Mostly we drink and play shah,” Geralt said. “We haven’t thrown any pieces yet.”

“Are you joking?” Ciri said. “He spots me half the pieces, and I still lose in twenty minutes. He says I’m getting better, at least.”

“I got him to a stalemate once with a two castle advantage,” Geralt said. “But I don’t mind losing to him. His final plays are always beautiful.” He looked at her and said softly, “And he’s on your side.”

She looked back, her face a little troubled. “I know,” she said, dropping her eyes. “I—sometimes I really wish I could believe he wasn’t.”

Geralt grimaced. “When he tells you shit about the inside of your head that nobody needs to hear, and he’s right even though you wish he’d just shut the fuck up?”

“Yes,” she said emphatically.
“Yeah,” Geralt said. “I know just what you mean.”

#

He heard the footsteps when the door on the upper gallery opened, and recognized Emhyr’s scent carried on the indoor air as it blew out with them. He gave Ciri a small nod, *showtime*—they’d been warming up so far, really—and then said, “Ready for me to quit going easy on you?”

“Ready for the reverse?” she flashed back, grinning, and he dived into a roll, came up at her feet already starting a full sweep of his blade, and she blinked out of existence, the air currents on his skin and the pop of vacuum the only warning he had of her reappearance just past his right blind spot, and he twisted sideways and made half a dozen quick cuts, swords ringing together, before she was gone again, and again, and again, and again, blinking impossibly in and out of the air, her sword almost in two places at once. It was brutally hard to block her, and the final blow she had to pull herself or she’d have done real damage. Geralt shook his head as they broke off, grinning at her in helpless pride: his little girl.

They went back in. He had to pull a blow of his own that would’ve taken a chunk out of her off-arm, but she traded it right back with a feinted jab that would’ve gone through his shoulder, so he couldn’t fault it. They traded a few more over the long stretch of the fight, and by the end she was still holding an advantage, and Geralt was soaked with sweat and so happy he could’ve burst. He slung an arm around her shoulders—she was beaming too, her hair a plastered mess—and they staggered exhaustedly back inside, only to find the chamberlain waiting for them with a small squadron of servants who whisked away their gear for cleaning. He informed them both austerely that baths were waiting in their chambers, and they would dine with the Emperor after.

“He was certainly impressed by the display,” Emhyr said, over the table, his own eyes narrowed. “Few would not have been, I imagine. I have been remiss, I see, in not previously making a proper observation of your abilities myself. I am accustomed to thinking of battle as a thing of numbers and artillery. Generals can influence the course of a battle, to some extent—most often by making stupid mistakes—but a single warrior cannot. Or so I would previously have said.”

“Does this mean I can stop dancing lessons?” Ciri said, flippantly.

“No,” Emhyr said. “But you may resume your regular training with Geralt as well.” She blinked. “Have you truly traveled to worlds other than our own? Geralt informed Morvran that you had,” he added. “I found it somewhat less implausible after your demonstration.”

“Yes,” Ciri said.

“How precisely are these worlds discovered?” Emhyr asked. “Does some spell permit you to look at them, before you travel there? I have understood that megascopes can only show living people who are using the same device to respond.”

“No,” Ciri said. “I don’t really know how they’re found. I traveled with Avallac’h—the elven Sage I told you of. He knows of many. I think they’re found by studying the movement of the stars.”

“If you lack direct knowledge of the destination, how can you control where the portal will send you?”

“You can’t,” Geralt put in. “The portals open at random. You jump through and you hope you don’t die before you get to the next one. Trust me, it’s not all it’s cracked up to be.”

Ciri coughed. “Geralt, I…think Avallac’h might have been teasing you a bit, that time he took you
through. We never ran into that many problems during a transit when I traveled with him, even longer ones.”

“Yeah? I owe that elf a swift kick in the ass anyway, I’ll add a second one the next time I see him,” Geralt said sourly.

After they ate, he and Ciri took on Emhyr at shah together. He gave them a castle and both knights and still beat them. “But our whole team’s been to another world, so there’s that,” Geralt said brightly. Emhyr snorted.

Ciri said goodnight, yawning, and hesitated a moment on the threshold of Emhyr’s room before closing the door behind her. Geralt watched her go before he realized he hadn’t left himself. He turned. Emhyr was watching him with that intent, hawkish look, bright and hungry, “You may as well remain,” he said. “Come to bed.”

#

Yennefer finally came back two weeks later. Geralt found out from a servant that the chamberlain had sent to tell him, and shot up to their room taking the stairs three at a time. He flew through the door—only to have a candelabra come flying back at his head with malice and magic propelling it at speed. He barely managed to deflect it from his skull with his forearm, and it hurt. “Yen! What the —”

“Was I even gone for a day?” Yen hissed through her teeth, and launched an encyclopedia at him while the candelabra came around for a second try. “Who is she?”

“What?” Geralt ducked the encyclopedia, pulled his sword and sliced off part of a curtain to catch the vicious candelabra and sling it under the bed. “Yen, what the hell are you talking about?”

“This room!” Yen said. “This remarkably tidy room.”

“Huh?” The room was a complete disaster. Half the furniture was overturned or smashed, puddles of water from wrecked vases were all over the floor.

“Before I destroyed it,” Yen snarled, “once it became very clear to me that you haven’t slept here in weeks.”

“That’s it?” He straightened up, lowering his sword, exasperated. “Yen, for ploughing’s sake calm down. There’s nobody else. I was with Emhyr.”

“You were—he made you come to him every night?” Yen said, her voice rising fresh, and Geralt hesitated and said awkwardly, “Look, Yen, I told you, it’s not—” and she was staring at him, going incredulous, and he groaned and rubbed his face. “It’s not a problem?” he finished, a little desperately.

“It’s not a problem?” Yen said. “It’s not a problem? I’ve been sharing you with Emhyr var Emreis, and you didn’t have the courtesy to tell me, and it’s not a problem?”

He swallowed hard. “What do you mean I didn’t tell you? You’ve known since—”

“Go to hell, Geralt,” Yennefer said, and hurled the entire massive laboratory table right at his head.

It stopped inches away from smearing his skull across the wood, and he took a breath of relief: okay, she hadn’t completely dived off the pier, and then Philippa’s voice drawled from the doorway behind him, “My, what a scene of disaster.” Geralt turned his eyes up to heaven. Great, that was all the
Philippa sauntered into the room, floating the table away to an already-wrecked corner with a wave of her hand. “Yennefer, are you possessed? The chamberlain was at me in a panic to come and stop your rampage.”

Yennefer took a step towards her. “Did you know?” she spat. “Don’t tell me you don’t spy on Emhyr’s bedchamber. Did you know Geralt was making a fool of me again? If you knew, and you didn’t tell me—”

“Oh, honestly, Yennefer,” Philippa said, crossing the room over to stand by Yen’s side, folding her arms as she turned to look back at Geralt, making the two of them into a united front against him. “I didn’t know, but you should have seen this coming a mile off. Emhyr var Emreis gets dosed with misethere, and you think he’s going to content himself with scraps from your table while waiting for you to devise a cure that no one in five hundred years has managed to create? Nonsense. Naturally he was going to carry out a magnificently planned campaign of action that would end with you out the door, and darling Geralt tucked snugly into his imperial bed. It’s hardly a surprise that it’s worked, either. After all, you already knew your witcher was inclined to be unfaithful. Admittedly, Emhyr doesn’t have red hair—”

“Shut the hell up, Philippa,” Geralt said through his teeth. “Yen, that’s not what this is. It’s not like that.”

“It’s not like you’ve been sleeping in the imperial suite for the better part of her absence?” Philippa inserted archly. “It’s not like you’ve been enjoying yourself every night in his bed? It’s not like he’s been showering you with gifts and favors? Didn’t he even let Cirilla begin training with you again?”

“That was for a reason,” Geralt said, but it was too late: Yen had turned away and put her hands over her face.

“And all this while, Yen’s been slaving desperately away trying to find a cure to save you from what she thought was purgatory,” Philippa said. “What an absolute beast you are.”

“Goddammit,” Geralt said. “Philippa, get the hell out of here before I put you out. Yen, listen to me. It’s misethere. You know what it does to people. I could do it, so I did it. You were away, I didn’t think it mattered.”

Yen whirled on him, tears streaking down her face. “You could do it, or you enjoyed doing it?”

He groaned. “Yen, I enjoy killing monsters—yeah, fine,” he said, as she drew breath, “I liked it. I like sex, turns out the type doesn’t matter that much. I’m sorry. It doesn’t mean I’m in love with him!”

“Of course not!” Philippa said. “You’re simply so kind and generous, you’ll submit to a poor misethere victim just to comfort their anguish and pain. I wonder how long it will be before you’re giving him two nights a week, out of the deep goodness of your heart.” She squawked another laugh. “Yennefer, if you ask me, you should cut your losses, and by that I really mean come out of this well ahead. Give up the absurd idea of becoming a hermit with no company but this lout. Turn the ship round, heave the deadweight overboard,” she jerked a thumb at Geralt, “and get us Castle Vraden.”

“What?” Geralt said.

Philippa turned to him. “You don’t even know, do you? You’ve concerned yourself with nothing of Yen’s interests, nothing of the cause of mages. We need someplace safe, we need a new school: in
Nilfgaardian territory, under imperial protection. And we’ve found the ideal place, if we can only persuade Emhyr to give it to us. Castle Vraden is carved directly into the Korvath mountains. It’s tall and narrow and utterly impregnable except by the twenty-feet-wide gate. Five sorceresses taking it in turns, one on and three off and one teleporting out for supplies as needed, could literally shield the place for as long as they lived. It wouldn’t even be difficult. If we established a mage school there, no king or emperor or would-be witch burner could ever threaten us and our pupils again.”

She turned to Yen and reached out to grip her by the arms. “Emhyr’s refused the place to us for that very reason. But tell him if he signs it over to you, you’ll take yourself out of the way. He’ll give it to you in a heartbeat.”

“I don’t believe your gall,” Geralt said. “Now you’re trying to get Yen to sell me?”

“I don’t see why not, instead of standing by pathetically while you give yourself away for free,” Philippa said.

Yen pulled away from Philippa. “Stop it! Just stop it!” She drew a deep breath and wiped her face. “Philippa, please go.”

“If you insist, darling. But do consider it. The others would all come and bring their pupils, you know they’ve agreed if we got Emhyr to give us someplace suitable. We could be there by nightfall. You’d have students, and work—work worthy of you—and you could forget you ever wasted a minute of your magnificent life on this clod.” Philippa painfully flicked Geralt’s arm with her fingernail as she walked by him and strolled out the door. “Yes, you can go in, she’s stopped destroying things,” he heard her say to someone out in the hallway.

He turned back. “Yennefer,” he started, with no idea what to say after, just as a pale-looking guardsman showed up in the door and announced in a trembling gulp, “His Imperial Majesty summons you, Witcher Geralt.”

“Oh, for—” Geralt muttered.

“Of course he does,” Yen said, with a harsh, half-broken laugh. “It is Thursday, after all, isn’t it.”

“Look, just tell Emhyr I can’t—” Geralt started to tell the guard, but the poor man’s eyes bugged out at him so far that he didn’t even bother finishing the sentence. “Yen, I’ll go tell him—I’ll ask him—”

“To trade days so you can fuck me tonight instead?” Yen said. “Don’t bother. You’d better go, your lover wants you.” She turned and walked into the bedroom, and slammed the door shut behind her.

Geralt closed his eyes and groaned.

#

“You’ve got really lousy timing,” Geralt said, walking into the suite. “Yennefer just came back—”

“I have exceptionally good timing,” Emhyr said absently: he was standing at one of the cabinets, looking over a handful of documents. “I am well aware of Lady Yennefer’s return. I thought it best to extract you.” He picked the one he wanted and took it into the study.

“You thought wrong,” Geralt said, following him. “With Yen, it’s always better to stay and take the shouting. She won’t forgive me for months if she has a chance to cool down in it.”

Emhyr sighed faintly, seating himself at the desk. “And again, Geralt, I must disagree. I thought entirely correctly.”
“What?” Geralt stared down at him. Emhyr sat back in the chair and looked at him directly. “Are you —oh shit. Philippa was right?”

Emhyr raised an eyebrow. “Was she?”

“You planned for Yen to get angry?” Geralt said. “Did—did you send her away on purpose?”

“I thought by now you would realize that you may safely assume that every consequence that results from anything I do is intentional. You will not be far wrong.”

Geralt just stood there, because his head was completely blank of any idea of what the hell else to do. He could’ve punched Emhyr maybe, that seemed appropriate, but he hadn’t had a chance to get angry enough yet. He was still stuck in bewildered. “What the hell are you thinking? Yennefer’s not going to take this lying down. You think she’s going to agree to stay and keep working?”

“No,” Emhyr said. “I imagine she will leave in short order.”

“She’s going to take me with her, too,” Geralt said flatly.

Emhyr sighed again. “Of course not.”

“Yeah?” Geralt folded his arms over his chest. “What’s the idea? Guard on my room all day? Mages keeping me unconscious until it’s time for me to perform? Think that’s going to work out well?”

“Nonsense,” Emhyr said. “I have no doubt of your ability to escape, and I have no doubt of your ability to stay beyond my reach longer than I can afford to search for you. Surely you realize I would have to take my own life within two weeks after your departure.”

It was just like the moment when you first heard the gurgle deep in the throat of a drowner close at your back, or the soft chitter of an arachna’s mandibles in the dark. Geralt’s arms dropped away to his sides as his heart started pounding, heavy thumps, his breath coming quicker, the candles getting painfully bright as his pupils widened and his blood sped up. “What?” he grated out.

Emhyr tilted his head almost inquisitively. “What did you imagine I would do if you fled? Linger on, descending into bestial madness, sending my troops marching with sword and fire across the world to hunt you down, heedless of the wreckage I made of my own nation? I do not intend Cirilla to inherit an empire of ash and flame. Of course I would destroy myself.” He held out his palm. “So you will not go.”

“You’re that sure of it?” Geralt took a step towards him. “You’re betting your life on it, that you can fuck with Yennefer and me and—”

Emhyr had the fucking nerve to shake his head, like he was disappointed. “Come, Geralt, let us not pretend I am the villain in a melodrama. I have merely controlled the unfolding of an inevitable series of events.”

“Inevitable!”

“As you well know. Tell me, why did you never confess to Yennefer that you enjoyed our liaisons rather than endured them? Surely it would have spared her anxiety over her failure to find a cure.”

“I—” Geralt stopped and clenched his jaw, looking away. Oh, fuck Emhyr anyway.

“Just so. We must face the reality of our situation. If there were a cure to be had easily, Yennefer would have discovered it by now. Therefore there will be no cure, at least for years. And our
arrangement would be untenable over such a span.”

“It was working fine so far! What the hell was wrong with it?”

Emhyr leveled a flat, unamused look at him. “We have spent some two hours fornicating every day for the last two weeks, and you have the gall to ask me what I found inadequate about having you one night in seven?”

“I thought you didn’t want to need it that often,” Geralt threw at him. “Giving in to the curse after all?”

Emhyr pressed his lips tight and looked irritated, which gave Geralt a moment of hope, and then he said, “No, Geralt. I am, however, yielding to sentiment.”

“What?” Geralt said.

“If it has escaped your notice that I have grown fond of you, let it do so no longer,” Emhyr said. “The subject requires no further discussion.”

“What?” Geralt said again, helplessly.

“The matter is simply thus,” Emhyr said, sailing coolly on past him. “I am no more willing to share you any more than Yennefer would be, and to drag out a contest between my hunger and her pride would be ruinous folly for us all. Therefore I arranged to make plain to her what you could not bear to, so she might go into a temper and leave quickly, rather than six miserable dragging months from now, angry at her own failure rather than at you. Would you truly prefer otherwise? If so, you may yet go to her and find words to delay the final end. But do not pretend to yourself you do more than delay.”

#

Geralt sniffed out a bottle of Temerian rye in an old cupboard upstairs and then climbed out onto a narrow part of the roof and sat there and drank it in fast angry gulps, wondering what the hell he’d done to deserve any of this. ‘Tha—tha’ bastard did thist to me on purposh too, I beht,’’ he slurred to a nearby gargoyle waterspout. ‘Prob’ly fuckin’—deschided to fall in love wi’ me—cuz he wanns—someone to play shhhaah with,’’ and then he tried to drink from the wrong end of the bottle and poured the dregs over his boots.

He lay there afterwards staring up at the moon, hungover and still half-drunk and angry at the same time. Because the bastard was right, fuck him. Yennefer of all women in the world wasn’t going to put up with sharing. Of course she wasn’t. He had known it all along. And he also couldn’t imagine riding to so much as the next town over, knowing all the while that Emhyr’s brilliant, jewel-dazzling puzzle trap of a mind was being brutally fucked to death by misethere behind him. No more beautiful games of shah by the fire in a quiet room, wine and fruit and Emhyr’s deep, iron-calm voice. Less than two weeks, and he’d be hearing mourning bells ringing for the death of an emperor. And then Ciri would be hanging in the wind, a nineteen year old empress with no advisors she could trust, no allies, no father, probably have to marry Morvran just to get herself crowned, and goddammit that wasn’t even the reason why Geralt couldn’t do it.

Which apparently meant that instead of getting to retire to a nice, simple cabin in the mountains with the woman he loved, he was going to spend the next however many goddamn years as the lover of the emperor of Nilfgaard, in over his head in the deepest cesspool of politics in the entire world.

“How the fuck did I get myself into this, Vesemir?” he said out loud.
He could hear the answer in his head, clear as bells. *You got involved, White Wolf.*

“Yeah,” he said. “Fuck me anyway.”

He got up and climbed through a window and went back to Emhyr’s room. The guards opened the doors for him automatically without even seeking permission from inside. Why wouldn’t they? He’d been living here for two weeks now.

Emhyr was at the desk, writing—not something important, Geralt could see; just a routine letter to his quartermaster asking about some records. He wasn’t even worried, the son of a bitch. He looked up when Geralt stalked up to the desk.

“Castle Vraden,” Geralt said flatly.

Emhyr sat back and frowned thoughtfully. “Vraden would make the sorceresses virtually impervious to any kind of military reproof. Cirilla’s children may have cause to regret that someday.”

“They’ll have to figure it out for themselves then.”

“As you wish. I will write the charter.” Emhyr reached for a sheet of fresh parchment. Geralt leaned back against the desk and sullenly watched him working on it. “What is it?” Emhyr asked, without looking up.

“It was Philippa’s idea. Pisses me off that she’s getting what she wants.”

“I will add a condition,” Emhyr said, dipping his pen again. “Yennefer, as my appointed head of the school, to have two votes on the school’s council, and the others only one.”

Geralt couldn’t help a snort of laughter. Philippa would probably bust something with fury. She’d hate it more than not getting the castle at all—but it wasn’t like she could say no to it, either, after she’d sold it that hard to all the others.

“The students will also be required to come to court and swear fealty to the emperor before they may enter the school and begin training,” Emhyr added. “It may restrain one or two of them from acts of treason at least.” He finished and signed it, put the imperial stamp on it, and folded it and sealed it with his signet ring. He handed it to Geralt. “The servants will move your things.”

Yen actually laughed over the condition too, and then punched him in the jaw, and then burst into tears in his arms. Geralt held her tight, his eyes shut, while they cried together. Then he kissed her one last time, and grabbed his saddlebags and swords and went back to Emhyr’s chambers.

“You can’t bring those—” the guard on the door started, and Geralt said, “Like hell I can’t,” and walked past them while they were exchanging anxious looks. He leaned his swords against the end table on the left side of the bed and dumped the whole pile of gear onto the floor of the emptier wardrobe. In the living room, he picked out a likely-looking stretch of low cabinets along the wall, shoved everything on top of them aside, and set up his brewing equipment and whetstones and armorer’s tools. He didn’t need to; he hadn’t even unpacked the alchemy kit since he’d first got to Vizima, and the imperial armory had better gear, but it was the goddamn principle of the thing.

The door to the study was open, with a clear view of what he was doing—Geralt had made sure of that—but Emhyr didn’t object, just stayed at his desk writing letters the whole time, barely glancing up. “Do you prefer this sort of bourgeois domesticity? The chamberlain had set aside a suite for you on this hall,” was the only remark he made.

“I don’t need a suite,” Geralt said. “You wanted me, you’ve got me. Any problem with that?”
“None,” Emhyr said equably, scratching away.

It pissed Geralt off even more. “And just so we’re clear,” he added over his shoulder as he shoved the last beaker into place, “tonight I’m going to fuck you.”

He wanted it to be a threat, but it didn’t come out that way, and it didn’t land that way either. Emhyr’s pen literally skidded off the paper as he clenched both his fists so tight that a faint smell of blood sprang into the air to mix with the strong sharp waft of arousal. Geralt went hard instantly and involuntarily, his breath picking up, and then the legs of Emhyr’s chair scraped against the floor as he abandoned his papers and pushed up from his desk.

They nearly fell into the bathing pool, still half dressed, and then Geralt had Emhyr down on the ledge and was fucking him with deep, controlled strokes, forcing grunts out of him that made his own breath come in a whine, his face pressed against the nape of Emhyr’s neck, breathing in sweet draughts of his lust and pleasure, licking up the taste of the sweat springing up on his skin right at the water’s edge, holding his arms onto the ledge over their heads, the muscles of his broad back straining under him.

Afterwards they fell shakily back into the deep end to rest, and after Emhyr finally caught his breath he reached out and gripped Geralt’s head and pulled him around. “Damn you, Emhyr,” Geralt muttered, between hungry kisses, over and over. “Damn you.”

#

“But—”

“Please can we just not talk about it?” Geralt said.

After a moment standing there with her expression a struggling mess of ten kinds of confusion and worry, Ciri said, “Yes, all right,” and then after another irresolute moment burst out, “You’re really staying?” as if it was something she couldn’t bear to hope for, and he sighed and reached out and folded her into his arms.

“Yeah,” he said softly, stroking her head. “Yeah, it looks like I am.”

He let himself be glad about that, even as the rest of it all goddamn sucked. Emhyr had also required the rest of the sorceresses to come and swear fealty before he’d let them into their new castle, so there was a hastily arranged meeting of all of them at the palace that very same night. Geralt was on the receiving end of a lot of dark looks. The only one who’d talk to him was Triss, which made it awkward when he asked her to keep an eye on Yen for him, but what the hell else could he do?

“Oh course,” she said, and then she blurted, “Geralt, I—” and then stopped short, because Emhyr came round the corner of the garden, and didn’t let Geralt get far from him the rest of the time they were there. Geralt didn’t object for once. He had a pretty good idea that Triss had been going to say something along the lines of her not being too proud to share until she found a cure. Yen and Emhyr would’ve loved that for sure, and trying to let Triss down gently again was the extra complication his life didn’t goddamn need, especially now or for that matter ever.

Dodging that kept him from thinking about what was happening too much, until the ceremony was over and they left, portals blazing out gold in the darkness one after another, and he had to face it all over again that Yen was gone, and he wasn’t, and what the hell was he even going to do with himself?

The immediate answer that night was, fuck Emhyr again, but then it was the next morning and funny
enough the emperor of Nilfgaard had some other duties to attend to. Emhyr went off at first light as usual, leaving Geralt to lie in his massive bed and contemplate just how little use there was for a witcher in the middle of Vizima.

It depressed him enough he went into the city to look at all the notice boards in the vain hope there would be something for him to do, but it was slim pickings. Emhyr had cleaned up the casual brigands pretty thoroughly with a combination of offering amnesty and free seed for anyone who turned in a blade and returned home for the planting, and ruthlessly hunting down anyone who didn’t. He’d paid locals well to clean up the battlefields scattered over the countryside and burn all the dead, so the necrophages had subsided again, and his soldiers had hunted down the rest of the typical monsters. There wasn’t anything unusual in the offing.

The only job posted worth the name was hunting down Temerian guerrillas. And even though Geralt had pretty comprehensively blown his neutrality at this point, he still couldn’t bring himself to do that. He sighed as he turned away from the last of the boards. Maybe he’d take a horse and ride out to some of the smaller villages, find some restless spirit to put down or maybe a pack of drowners. Emhyr could manage for a few goddamn days without him.

Then, “Geralt!” a voice shouted from the inn door, and Geralt was grinning even as he turned around: Zoltan was standing there, broad as a barn and beaming as wide, beckoning him over. “Saw you through the window. Come and have a drink!”

“This is a surprise,” Geralt said, slinging himself into a chair at the table across from Dandelion. “What brings you two here? Business not going well in Novigrad? What’s happening with the Rosemary and Thyme?”

“Oh, that,” Dandelion said. “I decided that innkeeping just wasn’t for me. Too much accounting and not enough poetry.”

Zoltan thumped down a round of cold mugs of ale on the table. “Lost the place in a game of gwent,” he told Geralt, shaking his head as he sat back down.

“But it was meant to be!” Dandelion said. “To be honest, the books had gotten into something of a state. I was already neglecting them for my muse, and all I wanted to do was write. It was a true blessing in disguise when I lost that game, I swear to you.”

“Quite the disguise,” Geralt said dryly.

“Laugh if you must,” Dandelion said. “You won’t be laughing after tomorrow night.”

That sounded alarming. “What happens tomorrow night?”

Dandelion drew himself up peacock-proud. “I premiere my new work, here in this very tavern,” he said, waving his hand grandiosely towards the stage, currently occupied by a sad-looking man playing an odd wheezy instrument and a trained monkey doing a little desultory dance for the late-morning crowd. “And not just any work, Geralt. My magnum opus—my masterpiece. The song which will make my name famous from Kovir to Nilfgaard.”

Geralt folded his arms. “Yeah? This I’ve got to hear.”

“Of course you do!” Dandelion said. “Zoltan will make sure to save you the best seat in the house. The cover charge is only ten crowns a head.”

Geralt snorted; he’d walked into that one. “Fine, I’ll come. What’s the name of your magnum opus?”
Dandelion held up his hands and marked the words out into the air as if he was posting them on a sign. “Cirilla and the Wild Hunt,” he declared, in thrilling tones.

Geralt spent the next hour trying to drag any information out of Dandelion about his brilliant work of genius, most specifically whether there was anything in it that was going to make Emhyr want to hang him, which given Dandelion’s track record seemed to be better than even odds.

“No, of course there’s nothing to offend the emperor!” Dandelion said. “On the contrary. The narrative framing worked beautifully to have him—oh, hey, wait a second, I get it now.” He pointed an accusatory finger at Geralt. “You’re trying to trick me into telling you about it in advance!”

“I wouldn’t really call it trying to trick you,” Geralt said. “More like trying to save your scrawny neck.”

“Well, you needn’t worry your head about my neck,” Dandelion said. “It’s like you think I’m some kind of idiot. If the song was offensive to Emhyr, I’d have stayed and sung it in Novigrad! There’s a much bigger cultural audience there, and in fact, Radovid has his soldiers tip very well if you sing rude songs about Nilfgaard. But I had to follow the dictates of my muse.”

“Also he had some rather pressing additional debts,” Zoltan muttered to Geralt.

“That doesn’t make my artistic choices any less valid!” Dandelion said. “Anyway, you might as well stop prying, I’m mute as a stone on the subject until curtain time. You’ll hear it for the first time tomorrow night, along with everyone else in the tavern.”

“Yeah,” Geralt said, “half of whom are going to be Nilfgaardian officers. Armed Nilfgaardian officers,” but there was no getting through to Dandelion when he got like this. Geralt sighed deeply. “I’ll bring my swords,” he told Zoltan.

Zoltan patted his arm. “And I’ll have my axe. Never hurts when meeting a new audience.”

“Oh ye of little faith, how soon shall ye be abashed,” Dandelion said loftily.

Geralt was smiling when he left anyway, his spirits lifted. At least he didn’t need to worry about being bored anytime soon. He’d never yet managed to share a city with Dandelion and Zoltan for more than a week without getting dragged into some kind of misadventure. He’d have to tell Ciri that they were here; she’d want to sneak out of the palace and see them. Hell, she might want to come tomorrow night.

He was halfway through the palace to her chambers when he stopped in the middle of the hallway and realized, goddammit, this was exactly the kind of thing he’d promised to tell Emhyr about beforehand. Geralt put his hands on his hips and heaved a sigh, trying to decide whether it counted as breaking his word if he didn’t urge Ciri to go, just told her—and then he shook his head and headed for Emhyr’s rooms instead. If Dandelion’s song was rude enough to get him into trouble, the last thing he’d need was for Emhyr to be pissed off for any additional reason.

“You can’t hang Dandelion,” Geralt said, by way of preamble, when he tracked Emhyr down in his study.

Emhyr raised an eyebrow. “I was unaware I intended to do so. Has he given me some cause for offense?”

“Well,” Geralt said. Emhyr heard out the explanation in silence until Geralt finished, “I need to tell Ciri they’re here, and she’s going to want to go see them. She’ll want to attend the premiere, too.”
“Mm,” Emhyr said. “I think it can be allowed, so long as it is carried out with discretion. Indeed, I will join you myself.”

“What?” Geralt said.

Emhyr shrugged. “It will be far easier to judge if he requires hanging if I am present at the scene.”

“Emhyr—wait, is that a joke?” Geralt said, half incredulous, but Emhyr just said coolly, “You may go and tell Cirilla now,” a formal dismissal, and bent back down over his enormous sheaf of documents.

“Really?” Ciri said. “He said I could leave the palace and go to a tavern for the night?”

“As long as we’re—discreet,” Geralt said.

She grinned at him. “I’m sure the chamberlain can us dig up some hooded cloaks somewhere. And he’s really going to come with us?”

Geralt realized one of Emhyr’s ulterior motives the second he stepped into the tavern and immediately spotted maybe a dozen Nilfgaardian imperial guardsmen trying as hard as they could to simultaneously pretend to be off-duty and to look alert and imposing. Several of them were surreptitiously pouring drinks out into empty plates and soup tureens. “And Ciri can’t complain if they’re here guarding you, is that it?” he muttered to Emhyr, who only slightly lifted the corner of his mouth, almost invisible inside the deep hood. “Geralt!” Zoltan was shouting over the rising roar of the room, beckoning them to a table at the front. “Come, bring your friends, plenty of room. Best seats in the house, as promised. Who’s this, then? Why, it’s our lass!”

The three guards nearest the table all flinched horribly with the obvious impulse to leap as Zoltan crushed Ciri into a hug. Geralt rolled his eyes and took some pity on them, making sure Emhyr was sitting on his other side, safely surrounded by him and the guardsmen. “Zoltan,” Geralt said, waving a hand to Emhyr, “this is…Duny.” Emhyr’s eyes flicked towards him, wry, and he held out a hand to shake Zoltan’s, leaving the guards suffering more agonies.

“Welcome, welcome! Any friend of Geralt’s drinks at my table,” Zoltan said expansively, calling to the waitress. He thumped Geralt’s shoulder. “It’s just as well you arrived when you did. Look at the crowd! They’re packing them in tonight. Ah, we’ll never hear the end of it if Dandelion’s reputation has grown so large he can get half of Vizima into a lowtown tavern on a weeknight.”

To be fair to Dandelion, he had packed in a good crowd, even without the help of the imperial guard. There were a lot of off-duty officers in the place, regulars, who were looking around slightly puzzled as they noticed the crowd of guardsmen, but there were also a lot of richly-clad city dwellers, and plenty of more threadbare listeners in the standing-only section at the back.

“Tell me, is his reputation deserved?” Emhyr asked from beneath his hood. He had further horrified his guards by drinking from the mug of beer that had been plonked down in front of him without having it tasted for poison first.

“Which part of it?” Geralt said. “The womanizing, drinking, and getting into trouble is all very deserved.” Ciri smacked his arm. “Ow! It’s true!”

“Aye, there’s no denying it,” Zoltan said. “But if you’ve never heard the lad’s work, Master Duny, I tell you, you’re in for a treat.”

The crowd was quieting suddenly: lute music had started playing, somewhere in the back behind the curtain, softly at first and then getting louder until Dandelion thrust his way through the curtain and
bowed to applause—fairly riotous applause, actually, since when Emhyr clapped, all the guardsmen clapped wildly along with him, and they were all wearing plate gauntlets under their cloaks. Dandelion swelled up at least two sizes listening and took another bow even before he seated himself and declared in throbbing tones, “Good friends, welcome! I am Master Dandelion, bard, troubadour, raconteur, and adventurer. Tonight you are all privileged to join me for a truly extraordinary event: the world premiere of my latest work. It is an epic story of courage and devotion, of battle and of grief, of glory, despair, and at last, of hope. I give you—*Cirilla and the Wild Hunt*,” and with that he struck the lute, and they were off to the races, because Dandelion started right out by shoving a beautiful lyrical speech into Emhyr’s mouth all about the long toil of the war, the fierce resistance in the North, his fears of defeat and how he wondered if his victories were worth the cost. Geralt closed his eyes wincing. It made *sense*—Dandelion took the song from there into the emperor’s sorrow over his lost heir, and how there was no one to inherit what he’d built, and then plunged on into Cirilla’s return and how Emhyr had summoned Geralt to help. But that didn’t mean Emhyr was going to like it.

It was also great. Dandelion hadn’t been wrong; this was the best thing he’d ever done. Geralt kept forgetting to be worried and falling into the story, caught by it, Dandelion drumming out the hooves of the riders of the Hunt on the top of his lute, breaking the music when they came. But Geralt didn’t need Emhyr to tell him that the better it was, the worse it was, if he didn’t like the content. And it increasingly looked to Geralt like he probably wouldn’t. One of the refrains was *all* about Ciri’s powers: about running desperate between cities and worlds and times, the Hunt always only one step behind, just waiting for the mistake that would let them catch her. Meanwhile it called Geralt *the one who guided her childhood steps, and sheltered her from harm*, and went on and on about how she’d learned fighting from witchers, magic from sorceresses, and secrets from elves, all calculated to make her seem even more like some weird mysterious half-wild creature.

And then Dandelion hit the Battle of Kaer Morhen, and Geralt suddenly didn’t give a *sh*t* anymore, about any of that, because it was—it was Vesemir singing; it was in Vesemir’s voice, low and weary and full of foreknowledge, seeing his own death and hoping only that he would not see his students, his only children, go to death along with him; asking that only, in exchange for a life of service to humanity, for which he had given up his own. Geralt’s breath was tight and painful in his throat. Ciri was crying, next to him, and the room was swimming in smears of light. He was there again, the whining high note of the lute the terrible whistling of the ice of the Wild Hunt’s coming, and then Dandelion—drew a shriek across all his strings, Ciri’s terrible cry and Vesemir’s death made one, until it collapsed into sudden silence.

It wasn’t just them crying, either; hardened soldiers all around the room were wiping at their eyes and noses, sniffles audible in the quiet, but they all hushed as the music started again—a small tiny plucked version of the melody that went with Ciri’s refrain, that grew from there louder and louder into ferocity, into a song of vengeance and determination, the lion cub of Cintra grown to full size and roaring. Ciri reached out her hand and gripped his under the table, and he held on tight as Dandelion took them charging forward again to the battle at Undvik, to the Nilfgaardian warships cracking the ice to fight for their empress-to-be, the terrible fight against Caranthir, and Crach an Craite dying as a lord of Skellige should, weakening Eredin for Geralt’s silver sword.

And then—Dandelion let one strand of music after another fade away, until it became clear that one was missing: Ciri’s melody had disappeared out of the music, when no one was watching. Geralt shut his eyes as Dandelion took him racing from the burning ships to the tower, to the terrible open door waiting to swallow Ciri whole for her final and most dreadful battle, and having to let her go through it, taking his heart with her, and only hoping—hoping—that she’d return from it, to take up her throne.
He ended it there on a last wavering note, somehow hopeful and uncertain at once, and left the room in total silence. Nobody made a sound for a moment after, and then, right when the applause was about to start, Emhyr rose from his seat, and let his cloak go slithering off his shoulders to the ground.

The gasp that went around the room choked off the first spattering of applause that had started. Dandelion, on the stage, looked baffledly around the room as all the Nilfgaardian soldiers stood to attention at once, even the swaying drunk ones, their friends elbowing them and dragging them upright. Everyone else started to follow suit, with “It’s the Emperor!” being hissed in every corner as the guards formed up and opened a path to the stage. Emhyr strode along it and climbed the stairs. By then Dandelion was clutching his lute wide-eyed, frozen and disbelieving until Emhyr was actually in front of him, and then he gathered himself and swept into a beautiful formal bow and said, very slightly squeakily, “Your Imperial Majesty.”

“Master Dandelion,” Emhyr said, “I have heard little of your work before today, but I will say nonetheless, with certainty, that you have crowned it this night with glory.” He held up his hand and drew off a ring, gold with an emerald, and held it out. “Whenever you should find yourself in need of coin, so that you would pawn this ring, you may take it to any magistrate of Nilfgaard, and they will give you the same coin freely instead. And tomorrow night you will attend at court, and perform your song again.”

Dandelion reached out and accepted the ring in the cup of his two hands, shaking, and said sounding near tears, “Thank you, Your Majesty. It—it would be my honor.”

Emhyr nodded slightly, and turned to the room and gave it a wave of his hand. “You may applaud Master Dandelion’s work,” he said, and the whole place exploded into applause, cheers and whooping, and Dandelion actually was crying, tear-tracks slipping down his face.

Emhyr went back to the palace afterwards, with about half the guards in tow, but Geralt and Ciri stayed, drinking celebratory toasts with Dandelion well into the night. “‘Crowned with glory’—what do you suppose my father would say to that, huh?” Dandelion said, holding out his hand with the ring slid onto the thumb. “That’s something, isn’t it? The Emperor of Nilfgaard himself. I bet even my sister would be impressed.”

“Thanks,” Geralt said softly to Emhyr, that night, when he finally slipped into the bedroom late and found him at his desk, still reading documents by candlelight.

Emhyr glanced at him. “On the contrary. Your poet has done me an extraordinary service. That song will travel to every tavern in every corner of the Continent, and not a single man or woman who hears it will not end by longing for the empress to reach her throne, at least for a moment. Does he speak Nilfgaardian, do you know?”

“You want him to translate it?” Geralt said.

“If he will not himself, I will hire a translator to do it,” Emhyr said. “I want that song to reach the capital before the Pontar freezes.”

“In case the campaign doesn’t go well,” Geralt said.

“Or in case it does,” Emhyr said dryly, “and Cirilla nevertheless rejects Morvran.” He sighed and leaned back in his chair, rubbing the bridge of his nose with thumb and forefinger, eyes closed.
Geralt glanced over the documents scattered across the desk, an odd mix of papers: quartermaster records of ration disbursements, proceedings from a few dozen court martials of privates from two separate outposts, accounts from tollbooths on the roads and tax records from the ports and marketplaces. They didn’t fit together any obvious way; it had the smell of some kind of fishing expedition, rummaging around. “What are you looking for?”

“A lie,” Emhyr said. “Or as I increasingly believe, several lies, acting to camouflage one another.” He moved aside a few papers and exposed the court martial reports. “There have been two separate outbursts of rioting among soldiers in minor outposts. I can find no cause that satisfies me. Both were small incidents, quickly suppressed—there was no deliberate organization, only a spontaneous eruption. The commanding officers in question do not seem unusually harsh: indeed, both requested clemency for their men. There is no report that the liquor stocks were damaged, or that fisstech use was found.”

Geralt looked at the other records: different ways of looking at the movement of supply. “They were on short rations?”

“They ought not have been, by the numbers,” Emhyr said. “But there is something I dislike in the numbers. I can find nothing obvious, nothing palpably false, only the faintest smell of deceit. As yet, however, its source evades me.”

The court martial report on the top was from Bilidan, a village a day’s hard riding past Carreas. “I could go have a look.”

Emhyr raised his head and focused in on him sharply, gone still suddenly; the way he did when you pulled a move in shah that he hadn’t expected. Geralt could pretty much see the thinking happening, and after all, it wasn’t that hard to follow. If he gets himself delayed on the road somewhere, if he gets distracted by some monster hunt, if he lands himself dead in an anonymous ditch halfway between Vizima and the mountains, if he just keeps riding and doesn’t come back to me—

“Do so,” Emhyr said, interrupting.

Geralt stopped, exasperated: it was bad enough when it happened in shah. “Why?” he said bluntly.

Emhyr was already sweeping the papers into a neat pile and setting them aside, as if he considered the matter dealt with. He glanced at Geralt. “Can you see yourself penned inside castle walls, a sword on a shelf for display? A moment’s consideration is enough to see it will not serve. You require use; let it be to some purpose. And requisition fast horses for your journey,” he finished, dry.

Geralt rode out late the next morning—at a truly spectacular two-hour fuck and a hearty breakfast—and stopped by Dandelion and Zoltan’s inn on the way to make his apologies for missing the command performance that night. He had to hunt around the place until he found them moving their things upstairs, into the best suite. “Innkeeper’s givin’ it to us for the same price as the other,” Zoltan said.

“A show of respect. Naturally, after my performance last night, he’s recognized the work of a true artist,” Dandelion declared.

“Recognized the value of an imperial endorsement, more’s likely,” Zoltan said. “Geralt,” he took him by the arm, conspiratorial, “I reckon we might even have a word with the fellow, you and I together. Seems to me Dandelion ought to be getting a wee drop of the receipts from last night, and goin’ forward as he performs. There’ll be a lot of folks who’ll like to come by and hear the song the emperor himself applauded. What do you say?”
“Sure, Zoltan,” Geralt said, amused, but when they got downstairs, and the innkeeper folded his arms and said coolly, “And who’d you be, then, to be speaking for Master Dandelion?”—a reasonably polite opening move in a negotiation by local standards—a Nilfgaardian lieutenantcolonel drinking at the bar looked up with an incredulous expression and said, “Are you mad? Mind your tongue. Forgive him, m’lord,” he added—to Geralt. “It’s a simple place, news of court is slow to come here.”

“Uh,” Geralt said, blankly, wondering who the hell the guy thought he was—not exactly a lot of white-haired, cat-eyed witchers wandering around to mistake him for—but one of the other officers had grabbed the innkeeper and was whispering urgently in his ear, clear enough for Geralt’s hearing to pick it up, “The emperor favors him, do you understand?”

“Oh, you’ve got to be kidding me,” Geralt said under his breath, and had to work at it to stop the innkeeper from promising Dandelion fully three-quarters of the receipts in sudden apologetic fear, which would’ve probably driven the tavern out of business in a month.

Geralt finally escaped the conversation with only ten percent of the receipts on nights Dandelion performed, and free room and board as long as Dandelion wanted to stay. Zoltan watched the whole exchange with a puzzled frown. On the stairs going back up, he said abruptly, “Lad, I won’t pry if you tell me to keep my nose out of it, but I’m wondering now, how are things going at the palace? I’d thought you and Yennefer meant to make for the Blue Mountains somewhere, nice and quiet. No surprise if you’re payin’ Ciri a longer visit, of course—”

“I’m fucking Emhyr,” Geralt said. There wasn’t much point beating around it when Zoltan could get it out of any mid-level Imperial officer for the asking, and probably soon enough from any man on the street.

“Oh, aye?” Zoltan said, and then stopped halfway up and said, “What?”

“It’s a long story.”

“Well, isn’t that a kick in the arse,” Zoltan said blankly. “You and Emhyr, eh?” He finished climbing the rest of that flight in silence, and then on the next one said, “Can’t say the fellow’s not a catch, I suppose. Is he treating you right?” in a desperate and yet determined way, and Geralt stopped and laughed so hard he had to sit down on the landing before he fell down the stairs.

“Zoltan,” he said, when he could breathe again, “I’ll know who to come to for help if he ever doesn’t. You’re a true friend.”

“Ah, well, we’re not so easy to move, we dwarves, once we get planted,” Zoltan said tolerantly, giving him a hand to help him back on his feet.

Geralt said a quick goodbye to him and Dandelion in their room and headed back down. Zoltan could share the gossip without his help, and he really didn’t need Dandelion to start asking him questions about the whole thing. That imperial favor would disappear quick if Dandelion wrote a song about Emhyr getting ploughed by a witcher. Although hey, Radovid would probably give ten emerald rings for it. All in all, Geralt thought it was just as well for him to be out of town for a week to give Dandelion a chance to get distracted by some other bit of news.

Before he swung back into the saddle, though, he stopped by the notice board and took the reward notice about Temerian guerrillas, with its rough sketch of locations where they’d raided. He wasn’t sure how it might fit—the guerrillas did hit the grain wagons when they could, of course, but Emhyr had reports of all those attacks, and the losses were already folded into the numbers—but it felt like another puzzle piece at least, something that went into the picture. Maybe not in the middle, but even
an edge piece would help him put it together.

The ride to Carreas was pleasant and easy. Emhyr had given him some kind of fancy imperial pass written in high Nilfgaardian using elven script, with three separate stamps on it in black, gold, and one brick-red that an incredulous sniff told him was of Emhyr’s actual blood. When he showed it to patrols and outpost commanders, they saluted him at attention and asked him what he wanted, and nothing seemed off-limits: if he asked for someplace to spend the night, he got the best room available; a simple request for a meal produced a four-course feast. He had to start specifying that he just wanted a sandwich and a fresh waterskin to take on the road.

Before he reached Carreas, though, he tucked the pass into the back of his saddlebags and just rode on anonymously with the supplies he’d already gotten. Bilidan was a smallish town not much more than a village and mostly unimportant right now, sunk far behind the Nilfgaardian lines and the front with Redania. The soldiers looked a lot less happy than the ones closer to Vizima: their armor had rust spots and their expressions were sullen, but that wasn’t too surprising for men stuck in a backwater. Most of them didn’t speak Common, and their Nilfgaardian had odd pronunciations. Geralt asked one man grooming horses where he was from, and it was a small town in Nazair: so these were conscripts from the further reaches of the Empire. It all added up to disgruntlement, the kind of thing that might’ve erupted into a small riot just through bad luck, nothing too far out of the ordinary.

Geralt stopped by the local inn and found a contract on the board posted by the local commander, to take out a wraith that was haunting a river crossing and forcing his men to go out of the way. It gave him an excuse for stopping by the outpost that night and getting a little “lost” along the way. He found a warehouse with some barrels under the eaves, and climbed on top to peer through a high narrow window left open for ventilation. He took a deep breath of the air inside: full of the rich smell of grain. It was oddly strong for a warehouse, though. Like maybe it’d come in recently?

He shook his head, hopped down, and went to find the officer. The man was tired and irritated, and he offered low and wouldn’t budge up. “You’re a witcher, aren’t you? It’s your job. Go do it,” he snapped.

“Hmm,” Geralt said. He went and took care of the wraith, letting the back of his head work on the problem, and afterwards when he dug up a silver bracelet the wraith had left behind, he walked down the hill to a cluster of nearby farmhouses and made it an excuse to walk around showing it to people, asking if they knew the history of the haunting.

The peasants looked even more sullen than the soldiers, and hostile at first when they saw him at their doors. Hostility wasn’t anything new to him, but in this case they demanded to know if he was working for the Black Ones, warily, and when he said he was, they went a combination of cooperative and clammed-up: they didn’t try to get in his way or stop him doing anything, but they also gave him the silent treatment and monosyllable answers to his questions.

The next cluster of houses on, when they asked the same question he shrugged and said, “They’re paying me. Not much, but I couldn’t do any better. Figured I might as well clear it out as not. Nilfgaardians can pay better than peasants.”

The farmer leaning on his rake snorted. “They can, can they? Wouldn’t know it by us. No fancy sword on us to make ’em serve it up for what they take,” bitterly.

Geralt glanced at the pile of empty grain sacks along the back wall of the barn. It seemed a little early for planting to be done. “How’s the planting going?”

The man shrugged comprehensively. “What’s there to sow? What they’ve left us, I’ve got into the
Geralt nodded and rode back to the camp, got a meager sack of crowns for his trouble, and paid for a room at the inn. A handful of soldiers came in to drink that night—not many, only a single table’s worth. He stood them a round and asked them what fighting they’d seen in the war. He got back a bunch of stories, more or less typically exaggerated. “I guess it’s nice to have a break from it, quiet place like this,” he said.

One of the men two glasses down made a face. “If you like bullying peasants and hanging your own,” he muttered. Another one thumped him.

Geralt waited until the middle of the night and then went back to the camp, broke into the warehouse, and sniffed through the grain more comprehensively. It was definitely recently shifted, and it was relatively young. He sat back on his heels, considering. The commander had kept his men on short commons until they’d rioted, and then he’d sent them out and rounded up the locals’ seed grain—robbing next year’s harvest to keep his men quiet for now. Not a good plan, and Geralt knew exactly what Emhyr would’ve said about it. Question was, why?

The obvious answer would’ve been that the commander was skimming off the top. It didn’t sit right, though. The man wasn’t flush personally, and he didn’t seem like the kind of idiot who’d think he could keep up the façade for long. Not many prospects for quick promotion out of a place where you weren’t going to see combat. So if he wasn’t skimming off the top, who was?

Geralt went back to the inn and got his pass out of the saddlebags and went into the commander’s office again the next day. “When I have more work for you, witcher, you will hear it from me,” the man snapped without looking up. Geralt pulled up a chair and put the pass down on the table in front of him, and the officer jerked his head up, staring at him. “What—”

“Not actually here to deal with your specter,” Geralt said. “The emperor’s got some questions. Sent me to answer them. Sit down.” The man stared at him, stared back at the writ, and then did actually sit down, slowly, keeping his eyes on Geralt like he was in the presence of an unexpected viper. “You’ve been taking the local peasants’ seed grain. Very bad idea. What gave it to you?”

The man swallowed. He’d actually gone pale. “What was I to do? My men must be fed! I already couldn’t give them their bread one day in four, and soon it would have been one day in three.”

“You should’ve had enough grain to feed them,” Geralt said.

“Should I? Am I to make it appear out of the air, when the sacks are lighter by a third than they should be?”

“You didn’t think that worth mentioning to anyone higher up?”

“I’ve sent thirteen complaints to the quartermaster in Carreas—thirteen!” the officer said. “One for every shipment since I took this post. The granary was already below regulation levels even then.”

“Hm,” Geralt said. “Heard anything back?”

“Certainly,” the officer said bitterly. “In August, I was ordered to send in everything we’d levied from the local harvest. I objected, they said they needed it at the front, and I would be sent shipments later on.” He hesitated and then said, defiantly, “I didn’t entirely comply—if I had, my men would be starving by now.”

“Interesting,” Geralt said. “Have any copies of your complaints?” Nilfgaardian bureaucracy carried the day: the officer had copies of every single one. The language in the later ones got pretty rude.
Geralt folded them up and stood, collecting his writ.

“What—what do you mean to do?” the officer said, standing with him; he was smelling faintly of fear.

Geralt shrugged. “Go to Carreas, ask some more questions there. And if I were you, I’d get that seed grain back to the peasants before planting season is over. You’re on the edge of the mountains. Take your men off patrols and send them up there after wild goats before the snows come. You’ll have enough meat to feed them, and even share with the local peasants. Keep them from hating your guts quite so much.”

Looking deeply relieved and slightly astonished, the officer stood straight and saluted. “As you command.”

Geralt examined the pass a lot more closely that night once he got to his room. It was only a single written line, so he dug out his worn reference sheets for high elven script—handy when you came across one of their ruins—and painstakingly transcribed the letters into Nilfgaardian script, then sounded out the words and tried to figure out the meanings based on common Nilfgaardian. He realized after getting four words that what it said was, When the bearer of this writ speaks, hear your emperor’s voice. Emhyr had given him a Voice of the Empire. He could literally order men put to death. Hell, he could start a war if he wanted. Geralt glared down at it and put the pass into his shirt under his armor instead of back in the saddlebags, and went to settle up his bill.

He got back to Carreas late the next afternoon. The quartermaster-general in Carreas was a busy, self-important man with a gold chain of office and fine silk clothes and nice boots. Geralt followed him home from his office to a handsome townhouse on the best square, and in the early hours of morning slipped in through an attic window and roamed through the halls. The furniture was good-quality local Temerian stuff, the candlesticks were silver but not gold. Two sets of dishes, one set of decent crystal. A couple of nice paintings, one of the man with his wife and two little girls, a few years old by the smell of the paint. There were four solid horses in the stable, reliable, not a crack matched set, and the carriage had a little bit of gilt but not overboard. It didn’t smell to Geralt like an embezzler’s house. The man was rich, and he liked to spend his money, but he wasn’t living beyond his position.

He went back inside, helped himself to a snack out of the larder and a decent bottle of Erveluce, then parked himself behind the man’s desk until morning. The quartermaster-general came downstairs fixing his cuffs and calling to one of his servants to ask if the tea was ready yet, and then he glanced in through his study door and froze, staring.

Geralt held up the pass, unfolded. “Recognize this?” The man’s popping eyes said he did. “Good. Come in and shut the door.”

The quartermaster uncertainly sat down in front of his own desk with his hands on his knees. “If—is—if there is anything—I assure His Imperial Majesty of my full—”

“Save it,” Geralt said, and pulled out the stack of complaints. “I’ve just been up in Bilidan. Had a chat with the commander of the garrison there. Ever seen any of these complaints before?”

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The quartermaster took them and read through them, a bewildered frown gathering over his face. “But this is—sir, I assure you, there has been some mistake,” he said, jerking his head up, “His Imperial Majesty inquired only the other day for records from Bilidan, I retrieved them all and sent copies, these are not—”

Geralt held up a hand. “Right. So these didn’t get to you. Question is, what did. Did you requisition
the grain from the local harvest, back in August?"

“What?” the quartermaster stared. “Bilidan does not have good soil, the area produces little more than what can sustain itself. The commander was authorized to requisition a small amount to support his men and augment our shipments, nothing more. If he has claimed—”

“How many of the commanding officers in your territory have you personally spoken to in the last year?” Geralt interrupted.

“What? I—I have not—naturally they have their duties, I cannot leave the city—”

“Do you send inspectors out to check on the supply? Make sure everything’s the way you expect?”

“We carry out inspection twice annually, as imperial regulations require,” the quartermaster said.

“Mm,” Geralt said. “How many inspectors?”

“Four men, all of whom are of unquestioned probity and—”

“Do they have separate territories?” Geralt interrupted.

“Yes,” the quartermaster said slowly.

“Who covers Bilidan? And when was the last time he was there?”

“Quartermaster-Colonel Reynil inspected the outpost two months ago.”

“If he did, and he gave you a report that everything was fine, he was lying,” Geralt said. “The shipments from here have been coming in short, too. How do you make sure the grain sacks you ship to the outposts are up to weight?”

“They are weighed when they come into the warehouses, and again when they are loaded on wagons to be sent.” The quartermaster was starting to look stunned and vaguely nauseated. “Then the weight reports must be countersigned by the receiving officer. Sir, all the records from Bilidan were countersigned and sealed properly, and the inspectors are not involved in the weighing at all—they do not even receive copies of the reports—”

“Mm,” Geralt said. “More than one lie.”

“What?”

“Talking to myself.” Geralt stood up. “Quietly pick two of your other inspectors and send them together to reinspect all the outposts in Reynil’s territory. Have them take some grain with them. I’m pretty sure you’re going to find that all of the outposts are running short, and all the commanders have been sending you frantic complaints and raiding the local seed grain in desperation.”

The quartermaster stood up too, a bit shakily. “What—what do you wish me to do with—with Colonel Reynil?”

“I’ll have a word with him myself,” Geralt said. “Then I think I’d like to meet your drovers. I’m guessing you hire local men for that work, standard imperial policy? Find ways to spread coin around the local populace?”

“I—yes—”

Geralt nodded. “Find out where they drink for me. I’ll stop by your office later today.”
He got there before dinnertime, towing Reynil slung over the back of his horse. “Have him locked up,” he told the dubious guards on the quartermaster’s office, and went inside. When he’d peered through the window yesterday, the quartermaster’s office had been neat as a pin, not a single file out of place; now it looked like a hurricane had burst through and torn all the papers out of all the cabinets and whirled them onto every available surface. The quartermaster himself was actually on hands and knees in the middle of the floor reading documents he’d laid out there.

“Reynil’s in your lockup,” Geralt said. “He spilled most of it. Got himself into big gambling debts, took on a few bad loans and got into more. A shady character offered him a deal: interest payments in exchange for signing falsified documents, skipping out on his inspection rounds. He doesn’t have any information on the guy, no way to contact him. He’d just turn up a few times a month with things for Reynil to sign. What about your drovers?”

“I am informed they drink at the Wagonwright Tavern, near the city’s eastern gate,” the quartermaster said. “Sir, I have been examining the seals on every report received from Reynil’s territory, and I swear to you, they are all correct—”

“Yeah, they would be,” Geralt said. “This isn’t a penny-ante bunch, they know what they’re doing. I’m betting there was a lot of command turnover at the outposts about a year ago, once Emhyr finished the conquest of Velen and pushed the front out up to the Pontar. They probably took the opportunity to get people into the outposts, make copies of the seals.”

The quartermaster pressed a hand flat to his forehead; he looked close to bursting into tears. “What sort of gang—” he blurted, “—who could have orchestrated—the drovers, they work in teams, we shift them round—surely the amount it would take to bribe so many would make it impossible—”

“This isn’t a gang,” Geralt said. “And they aren’t after money.”

Geralt didn’t bother talking to any of the drovers personally. One night drinking in a corner of the tavern was enough for his ears to pick up a dozen quietly muttered, “To the lilies,” and “The memory of the king,” when mugs were raised, and the young woman playing a small lap harp at the head of the tavern picked out For Temeria softly when the night got late and the crowd thinned.

He got on the road back to Vizima the next day. Two days later, he gasped out, “It’s—the guerrillas,” gulping air, “they—suborned an inspector—then they—oh, fuck,” he groaned.

“Continue,” Emhyr said, just as hoarsely, sliding all the way back into him.

“After,” Geralt said. Possibly whined.

“Surely you can manage a little more self-control than that.”

“Fuck you,” Geralt said earnestly, and gasped as Emhyr gave him a quick hammering of hard thrusts. “They—they copy the seals from outposts in that territory—they get loyal drovers to take the jobs—intercept grain both ways—messages—”

He stopped talking at that point, but Emhyr didn’t call him on it. Afterwards they sprawled on the bed eating off a tray. “A clever arrangement,” Emhyr said. “They feed themselves, and their loyal peasant supporters, while starving my men and pushing them to pillage and predation.”

“Not to mention you’d have a hell of a time next year when the harvest failed in dozens of towns across Temeria,” Geralt said.

“Indeed,” Emhyr said, and heaved a sigh, rolling onto his back. “Fortunately, you have uncovered the situation in good time. We will change the inspectors’ rounds, and ensure a different man visits
every outpost each time. And send new supplies of seed grain to all the pillaged villages. In fact, it will serve us: we have been trying to spread the cultivation of a stronger strain of winter rye, lately bred in Gemme, but the northern farmers have been stubbornly resistant to any change in their customs.”

He fell silent. Geralt blew out a sigh. What the hell, wasn’t like he had anything to lose. “You’ve still got the bigger problem,” he said bluntly. “A lot of Temerians love their country. You’re not going to make them stop loving it in a year, or even in a decade, not even with good administration and Nilfgaardian trade. The partisans won’t quit any time soon.”

“Yes,” Emhyr said. “And they are prepared to take ruthless action even against their own peasantry, which is more to the point. Will Vernon Roche negotiate?”

“Depends on what you put on the table.”

“Temeria as a vassal state under self rule.”

“He’d listen, for that,” Geralt said. “But he’s going to worry about what happens after you mop up Radovid.”

“If the black sun flies over Cintra, Aedirn, and Redania, Roche would have to be a peculiar sort of zealot to raise a new rebellion then, only to make of his nation an isolated island surrounded by enemies and trade barriers. I can think of no other reason I would be inclined to undertake an unnecessary campaign of violent repression myself, and Cirilla is hardly more likely to do so.”

Geralt shrugged. “Question is whether he’ll believe you.”

“He need not.” Emhyr looked at him. “The question is, will he believe you?”

“What?” Geralt said.

#

The whole palace was in a huge bustle for the mobilization. The weather was getting colder, and the armies of Nilfgaard were moving out to start the campaign in five days. Morvran’s plan to take Tretogor seemed reasonably solid to Geralt: wait until the Pontar froze, cross the river at a dozen scattered places to keep Radovid unsure what they were doing, mostly to the west to make it look like the army was moving on Novigrad instead, then pivot and quick-march on Tretogor on the hard-frozen ground. Hopefully by the time Radovid’s scouts figured out what was going on, they’d be at the gates of his capital with a substantial advantage.

Accordingly, the command position was going to be established at the westernmost crossing point, the one nearest Novigrad. “Once we have encamped, you will cross the river and make contact with the Temerian partisans,” Emhyr said, drawing a line with his finger on the map. “Roche may not be the ruler of Temeria in law, but the partisans follow him, and I have more than half the Temerian nobility under my hand. Whatever he agrees will be formalized easily enough, and you have the authority to commit me.”

“Look, do you really want me riding around with this thing?” Geralt said. He wasn’t completely comfortable with Emhyr’s insane writ heating his back pocket. “What if someone steals it?”

“I assure you, no one who steals it will escape your notice. Or the notice of anyone else anywhere near enough to hear their screams. The gold seal is there against theft.”

“Right,” Geralt muttered under his breath. “What’s the black seal for?”
“Treason. I would advise you not to willfully betray me with it.”

“Thanks for the warning. And the blood seal?”

“For death,” Emhyr said. “The bearer’s. In which case the writ will burn to ash at once.”

“All the bases covered,” Geralt said.

“Which is precisely why it has its power,” Emhyr said. “Those who see it know at once that the bearer has it directly from my hand.”

“You give out a lot of these?”

“You only ever the one,” Emhyr said. “Try not to lose it.”

Great. Geralt tried to decide if it would be better or worse if Emhyr just said I love you the way ordinary sane people did. He wasn’t sure. At least this way, he didn’t seem to be expecting Geralt to say it back.

On the other hand, that might’ve been because he didn’t see any need to wait for Geralt to do it for himself. Geralt went down to dinner in the court that night to see Ciri, and as it turned out Zoltan and Dandelion too, both in rich brocades and strutting like peacocks amidst the nobility. “Right at home, I see,” Geralt said.

“Geralt!” Dandelion beamed at him. “You’re back! At last! I must speak to you, you have to tell me everything.”

“I’ve already got the arc of it sketched out, but I need more detail,” Dandelion went on. “I can’t believe you never mentioned you and the emperor met as boys. No, I don’t mean that, of course I understand,” which was more than Geralt did, “—the secret heartbreak, your quarrel over Cirilla’s future, the long years of separation,” what the hell, “—but now there’s surely no reason for reticence.”

“Dandelion,” Geralt said, “what are you talking about? Who told you that we met when we were boys?”

“His Majesty, of course!” Dandelion said. He gripped Geralt’s arm. “And I haven’t even thanked you. I owe this to you, my friend, and don’t think I’ll forget it.”

“Owe what to me?” Geralt had the sensation he’d fallen through a portal into another universe that was just close enough to his own he hadn’t noticed the difference immediately. Or maybe Dandelion had.

“The commission!” Dandelion said. “His Majesty spoke with me after I performed at court. He told me you said I had your full confidence. He asked me if I felt inspired to write anything more—oh did I—and he’s funded me, Geralt! To craft an epic song cycle! Cirilla and the Wild Hunt will end up being the third song, I think. I’m working on the first one now, all about your romance and him entrusting you with raising Cirilla. I’m going to call it The Wolf and The Flame.

“Oh, don’t worry!” he added, possibly because Geralt’s face was conveying some fraction of his many wide-ranging feelings on the subject. “Obviously I’ll couch it in poetic terms, it’s not going to be anything crude.”
“What have you done?” Geralt said to Emhyr. “Wait, forget that, I know damn well what you’ve done. Why?”

“If Cirilla is yours by the Law of Surprise, there is an argument to be made under Nilfgaardian law that she is not in fact my legitimate heir,” Emhyr said. “Better if we now put about that it was merely a convenient story to protect her while she grew to adulthood.”

Geralt stared at him. “So the idea is that you willingly gave me your daughter, heiress to the imperial throne, to raise among witchers and sorceresses?”

Emhyr shrugged. “I had been cursed by a wizard myself, and murderers stole my father’s throne. Why would I not want my daughter hidden with those who could protect her?”

“What about those years you had a price on my head?”

“After I regained the throne, we quarreled. I wanted to anoint Cirilla as my heir at once. You feared for her happiness and safety amid the machinations of the court. But now we have reconciled, and Cirilla has been restored to her rightful place, to become an empress for both Nilfgaard and the North. It’s a magnificent story.”

“None of it is true!”

“It does not need to be true,” Emhyr said, in faintly pitying tones. “It merely needs to be history.”

The combination of funding and imperial approval and total creative freedom—not like Dandelion couldn’t just make up anything he damn well wanted—was apparently highly encouraging. Dandelion performed his first version of *The Wolf and The Flame* the night before the army moved out. It didn’t actually call Emhyr and Geralt lovers outright, of course. That clearly would’ve been too crude. Instead they “loved one another as fervently as any bound by blood or eternal vows” and Geralt “held Cirilla to his heart as if born of his own line, and not only of the man he held so dear,” and the quarrel over Ciri “broke both their hearts like lute strings.”

The court was enraptured. Women wept noisily through the entire second half. Ciri even asked him in bewildered confusion why he’d never told her about any of this. Geralt drank heavily the whole night.

“Are you happy now?” he muttered to Emhyr afterwards, his head stuffed into a pillow.

“Yes. Inspired, even,” Emhyr said, in meaningful tones, and put a hand on his ass. Geralt swore under his breath; he wanted to stay angry, but he wasn’t physically capable of hanging on to the feeling after the first ten minutes once Emhyr got going. It had come up on several occasions. He shuddered as Emhyr kissed the back of his neck and let his fingers slide gently around the curve of his thigh. “Well?” Emhyr murmured.

“Yeah, all right,” Geralt said. There wasn’t any sense cutting off his nose to spite his face. He groaned as Emhyr slid into him with serious enthusiasm. “Who even knew—romantic stories—turned you on,” he panted.

He had to be grateful for the timing: at least they were riding out the next day and leaving the court behind them. The nobles who’d been rude had overnight turned obsequious towards him, the ones who’d been polite had turned weirdly gracious, and the handful who’d been friendly now looked at him with a kind of smug satisfaction like he was a winning horse they’d backed. And every last one of them wanted to talk to him.

“They have realized you’re now a player in the game, and not just a terrifying feral beast kept on a
leash for my amusement,” Emhyr said. “Make a note for me of anyone who begins to court you: they’ll be either dangerous or useful.”

“You can spy on your own nobles without my help,” Geralt said.

“You will not be spying,” Emhyr said. “You will be carrying a message for them. The message may be a lie, but they mean it to reach me either way.”

#

All in all, Geralt was just as happy to ditch him on the banks of the Pontar two days later and ride to Roche’s camp. It wasn’t more than a day’s ride to the partisan camp after he crossed the river, even though it was a highly unpleasant one, an icy rain falling that mucked up the ground so Geralt had to get off and walk Roach for a bit every hour, and clean off her hooves. “Getting spoiled with palace life,” he told her wryly, meaning them both. He wasn’t much enjoying getting soaked to the skin himself.

The partisans didn’t offer him a warm welcome, either. “Come no further,” the guard declared, levelling a crossbow at him some twenty feet from the camp.

Geralt reined in and raised an eyebrow. “Seriously? I’m not that hard to recognize.” The crossbow didn’t waver. Geralt sighed. “Roche here?”

“No,” the man said flatly. “And he’s not going to be, Nilfgaardian lackey.”

“Fine,” Geralt said. “Tell him this Nilfgaardian lackey’s going to be at the Golden Sturgeon in Novigrad until tomorrow. If he feels like talking about self-rule for Temeria, he should stop by. Have a good day.”

He rode to the city and parked himself at a table in a downstairs corner of the inn with a mug of beer and had a few pickup games of Gwent. Irritatingly, it was mostly a bore. He and Emhyr played a few times a week now, and even though Geralt had firmly winnowed Emhyr’s deck down to something goddamn reasonable, he was still a brutal opponent. It had apparently upped Geralt’s game; he was beating the crap out of people now without even having to use his brain much.

The crowd picked up with sunset, died off again as the night marched towards early morning, and Geralt was starting to think Roche wasn’t coming after all when he noticed some hard-faced men filtering down into the corners, bulging weapons under their cloaks and the smell of fresh mud and crushed grass on them. He finished off his latest Gwent opponent and shook his head at the next, keeping the seat empty, and a few minutes later Roche and Ves came down the stairs and sat down at his table.

“Well?” Roche said icily. “What did you have to say?”

“What’s with the cold shoulder?” Geralt said. “I can think of some options, just curious which one outweighs the words self rule in your head.”

Ves snorted, and Roche said even more icily, “Emhyr’s whore shouldn’t expect a warm welcome among Temerians. Or did you think we would be ignorant of what goes on in King Foltest’s castle?”

Geralt sighed. “What I think is it’s a miracle if the whole goddamn North doesn’t know by now. You have any more clever remarks you’d like to get off your chest before we get started?”

Roche folded his arms across his chest, mouth looking mulish—typical. “You came to us. If you have anything to say, say it.”
Geralt shrugged. “Thought I pretty much did. Temeria gets self-rule as a vassal state of Nilfgaard. You all pack in your swords, quit killing Nilfgaardian soldiers, and get home in time for the winter, maybe even plant a few more acres before the ground freezes solid.”

“Full amnesty?” Roche said sharply.

“Emhyr’s not interested in sorting through all of you any more than he is fighting all of you.”

“Many of my men have had their lands confiscated.”

“Harder to handle, depending on what’s been done with them,” Geralt said. “Let’s say if the lands are still vacant, they’ll be restored. If not, the man gets a grant of land of equal or better worth, and can try and make a deal with the current possessor to switch. A lot of the confiscated land’s been bought up by speculators, so they should be willing to make a deal.”

Roche was frowning. “Let’s say? Are you saying that Emhyr didn’t make such an offer? What authority do you have to…” His voice trailed off as Geralt brought out the writ and put it on the table. He stared at it. Even Ves leaned over gaping.

“I’m guessing you know what this is,” Geralt said.

Roche slowly raised his eyes to stare at Geralt. His face was furrowed up in confusion. “But—” He looked down at the writ and back up two more times. “You really are Emhyr’s lover?”

“You said you knew! You called me his—”

“I didn’t believe it!” Roche said. “I thought it was some idiotic piece of court gossip. Nilfgaardian nobles will make up the most lunatic stories about one another if it suits them politically.”

“Who the hell would believe this if it wasn’t true?” Geralt said.

Roche still had his face screwed up like a wizened crabapple. “Have you lost your mind? What did he give you to get you into his bed? Riches? A title?”

“Wine, mostly. But it was really good wine, at least.”

“Is this about Cirilla somehow?” Ves asked, faintly. “You wanted to stay by her side, watch out for her, and he wouldn’t let…” She trailed off.

“Just don’t think about it too much. I try not to,” Geralt said. “The point is, Emhyr wants to get on with going after Radovid, and you’ve been making an impression. He said to tell you that if you can run that grain-stealing operation with a bunch of idealists and drovers, he’s prepared to let you run the country.”

Emhyr had a few more conditions, standard Nilfgaardian policies: an oath of fealty to the emperor for anyone seeking amnesty or military or political service, the black sun to be displayed anywhere the lilies were; no reprisals against Nilfgaardian supporters or collaborators; and a modest amount of tribute, to be used locally for the first four years, with each village to provide a proportional number of conscripts to either the empire’s military or civil service.

Roche warily agreed to the terms in principle, and then abruptly demanded, “Can we trust any of these promises to be kept? Geralt, this is Emhyr we’re speaking of—”

Geralt shrugged. “Truth is, if he’s working on some complicated plan to double-cross you, neither you or me or anybody else is going to figure it out until it’s too late.”
Roche was frowning. “That’s hardly comforting.”

“Not going to lie to you. But I don’t see him going back on it. Why would he? He’s not crazy like Radovid. You get in the harvest and keep the trade routes open and fly the black sun, that’s what he wants. No reason he wouldn’t let you do the work for him.”

They drank a glass of Temerian rye to the bargain, and shook hands before Roche and his men filtered back out of the tavern a few at a time, Roche and Ves themselves disappearing into the basement to slip out through the sewers. Geralt waited another ten minutes after the last of them were gone before heading out himself, tossing a few crowns to the barman. The dockside street in front of the tavern was almost empty; the sky was just starting to get light in the east. Geralt stopped on the stairs and drew a deep breath of salt air, and went for his sword instantly as instead he got the strong waft of sweaty bodies and leather and steel coming out of the alleyway next to the tavern. He dived forward, rolling and coming up on his feet as they came for him, but there were more than thirty of them: Temple Guardsmen and witch hunters, and they threw heavy nets of braided steel wire over him and dragged him to the ground.

# # #

Ciri ducked into Emhyr’s pavilion uncertainly. She usually knew perfectly well why he’d sent for her: she didn’t break rules by *accident*. She usually didn’t mind when he summoned her, either. It felt—like home, like being lectured by Vesemir, although only if Vesemir had been much better at pretending to be made of stone and—awful, disloyal thought—much smarter. Emhyr sometimes called her in, gave her one raised eyebrow, asked her if he needed say anything, and only elaborated if she said yes. And when he *did* lecture her, she learned something from it every time: a new window opened on the world, and not unlike visiting another one.

But today she didn’t think there *was* anything, unless it was the marriage question again; but after the last conversation, he’d told her there wouldn’t be another until the end of the campaign, with the implication that she’d have to make a decision, then. She was trying to fight her impulse to be contrary about the whole thing. Geralt was right, of course; she knew herself that Emhyr’s judgement wasn’t to be taken lightly. She could well believe that all her other options were worse. She just—didn’t want *that* to be the reason she married someone. Maybe it was too much to ask.

“You wanted to see me, Sire,” she said. He wasn’t at his desk; he was standing by the small brazier that heated the main room of the pavilion, his hands clasped behind his back.

He didn’t quite glance back, only a very small shift of his body. “Yes,” he said. “I did not wish you to hear it from another.” He didn’t pause long enough for her stomach to tighten, not as much as it should have, before he said, “Geralt has been taken prisoner in Novigrad.”

“Are—you’re sure,” she said, grasping, blank.

“Yes,” Emhyr said. “The Voice was taken from him. It remains out of his possession, but he is not dead. Two of my mages have been scrying for him: their vision is somewhat obscured, indicating he is held somewhere shielded against magic, but they are certain he is still in the city.”

“What do we do? What are you going to do?”

He made a small gesture with his hand. “Wait.”

“Wait? Wait for what? For them to find that he *has* died? I could—”

“Go to Novigrad yourself? Run headlong into a trap and make him, to my enemies’ minds,
She clenched her fists. “I’m not that easy to catch.”

“So have said many a sorceress and mage who ended on the Hierarch’s pyres,” Emhyr said. “No. You will do no good at present, and risk much ill. You too must wait.”

“I’m not going to sit around while Geralt might be bleeding to death in an alley somewhere!”

“Cirilla,” Emhyr said, wearily, “he is not in an alley. His wounds, if he took any at all and was not seized either by drugs or treachery, have been tended. His life is quite precious to his captors.”

“If you don’t even know who has him—”

“I know the shape of who has him,” Emhyr said. “Only the name is missing, and soon that will be supplied. This is no mere unfortunate accident. He has been deliberately seized, either by the Temerians, or Radovid’s men, or the Temple Guardsmen, or the Hierarch, or some alliance among those.”

“But why?” Ciri said, her throat tight. That wasn’t the sort of thing Emhyr got wrong, but—“Because they’ve found out he’s your lover?”

“We must hope for that,” Emhyr said. “I think it unlikely.” There was a rustling at the entryway of the pavilion, and without waiting, one of his aides came in and bowed slightly. “Well?”

“Sire, a woman presented herself at the edge of the camp under a flag of parley. She says her name is Ves, and she has information about Witcher Geralt that you should know.”

Emhyr inclined his head, and a moment later the aide opened the flap for Ves to come in. “Ves!” Ciri said, taking a step to her. “What’s happened to Geralt? What do you know?”

“Ciri—” Ves hesitated, and then looked over at Emhyr, who had turned halfway and was regarding her steadily, his face a severe mask. She swallowed visibly and made her bow, and said, “Your Majesty, I am—”

“I know who you are, Lieutenant Ves,” Emhyr said. “What have you to tell me?”

“I’m sorry to say I bring bad news. Although it seems you’ve already heard some of it. General Roche and I met with Geralt today in Novigrad, at the Golden Sturgeon. Afterwards we and most of our people slipped away, but a few of our local men were still at the bar when Geralt left. When—when they took him.”

“Who?” Emhyr said. His face hadn’t changed at all, or the tone of his voice.

“Temple guardsmen and witch hunters,” Ves said. “Near thirty of them. There wasn’t anything to be done.”

Ciri swallowed hard. “Was he badly hurt? Did they see?”

“Not much hurt, from what I’ve heard,” Ves said. “They used nets to take him, and he was marched off on his own feet. No blood on him far as our people saw. One of our men came to tell us about it, right away. The other two followed them, as discreetly as they could. They’ll get word to us soon as they can to confirm it, but—well. They were taking him towards the bridge to Temple Isle. Chances are they’ve taken him to the dungeons there.”
Ciri looked urgently at Emhyr, but he only raised a hand briefly to keep her silent, and said to Ves, “Lieutenant, you have done me a service in bringing this information, and run a risk to do so. It will not be forgotten. Did you reach an agreement with Geralt?”

Ves was eyeing him warily. “We did. He said—”

“Whatever he promised in my name shall be done,” Emhyr said. “My aide will take you to my scribes. Have them record the terms.”

She opened her mouth and shut it again, as if she were a bit puzzled at not having anything to challenge him about. Then she said slowly, “If you want—I could stay near the camp, and send word back to the others to bring me any news we get. As long as the messengers can come and—”

“Cedris,” Emhyr called. The aide entered. “See to a tent for Lieutenant Ves, pitched near the northern sentry post. If anyone should come and ask for her, they are to be taken to her without question and without being recorded in the logs.”

Still looking a bit nonplussed, Ves bowed again and followed the aide out. Ciri whirled on Emhyr the instant the flap fell closed behind her. “The dungeons on Temple Isle. We know where he is, now.”

Emhyr sat down behind his desk heavily. “Yes. Only the last crucial detail remains. I imagine it will come shortly.”

“What difference does it make?” Ciri said. “We have to get him out either way!”

“Cirilla,” Emhyr said, with a bite in his voice, “I have more sympathy than you might expect for the blind irrationality of your reactions, but if you cannot master yourself, withdraw until you have done so. What do you imagine can be done to extract him from Temple Isle? He is not some local irritant who has been thrust into a lightly watched cell with a few idle guards who can be either bribed or knifed. He is a significant military hostage held in the heart of a nearly impregnable fortress secured by a small but well-trained army. We will not have him save by ransom or conquest, and the Pontar remains as liquid today as yesterday, and the bridges all as burnt. And if I do not come to some arrangement with the Hierarch, then I assure you by the time it freezes, which shall not come for another month, Radovid will have half his army, if not the whole, standing between us and the city.”

She might have thrown something at him: sitting there like a praying-idol bobbing back and forth, wait, wait, wait and nothing for her, nothing she so desperately needed, but the flap opened again without a knock or a summons, and another of his aides came in, ashen faced, carrying a small box gingerly between the fingertips of both his hands. There was a faint tremor in his voice, “Sire, you said if—”

“Yes,” Emhyr said. “It comes.” He held out his hand, and the aide slowly crossed the room and gave him the box: it was made of gold, like a reliquary. “How was it brought?”

“A Temple Guardsman of Novigrad, Sire,” the aide said. “I have held him for—”

“There is no need. Let the man go,” Emhyr said. “Leave us.” The aide bowed himself out very hurriedly, as if he was glad for permission to leave the pavilion. Emhyr looked down at the box, and then he took hold of the lid and raised it. His face didn’t change, not really, but a muscle jumped in his jaw, once. He closed the box again.

“What—what is it?” Ciri said.

“The little finger of his left hand,” Emhyr said. His voice stayed perfectly level, and his hands,
resting on the lid, were steady. It took a moment for the horror to sink in.

“Why—why would they—” she said, her voice cracking, sick to her stomach. Oh gods, Geralt.

“The Hierarch has learned of the misether curse.”

“What? How do you know?”

“He is a man without subtlety, who thinks he has a great deal of it,” Emhyr said. “If he merely
thought Geralt my lover, he would have sent a crude demand for a large monetary ransom, disguised
as the work of ordinary criminals, and see how I received it. He would try to learn how much Geralt
was worth to me, first, before he began attempting to use him. This,” he indicated the box, “is a step
missed. It is a pure threat. He would not send it if he did not already know that Geralt was priceless.”

He paused, still looking down at it, and after a moment he said, “Cirilla, you will leave me.”

“What? What are you going to do?” she demanded, her hands clenched.

“What I have advised you to do: master myself. Go.” He stood and walked away through the flap
into the sleeping partition. Ciri stood a moment, shaking and furious, and then took three angry steps
after him and pulled the flap open again and stopped: Emhyr was standing by the low table at the
foot of the bed with his hands clasped behind his back, looking down the shah game set up waiting,
all the delicate carved ivory pieces standing on their marble board. Abruptly he seized the entire thing
in one hand and hurled it shattering with a crash to the ground, and sank to his knees in the
wreckage.

Ciri let the flap fall again and stood with her hands clenched. Then she turned and went out of the
pavilion into the camp and walked all the way down to the river’s edge and stopped there,
desperation knotting her gut. Emhyr’s mages didn’t bring megascopes with them into the muck of
campaign: they used a network of imperial scrying stones among themselves. There wasn’t a way to
reach Yennefer or Triss or anyone, not soon enough to make a difference, even if they could have
done anything. Maybe she could reach Avallac’h, if she tried—sometimes the portals would take her
where she wanted to go, if she gave herself up to the power. But she didn’t think she’d be able to,
not with this drumming in the back of her head: Geralt, Geralt, Geralt in the hands of people who
didn’t even care anything about him, anything he was, who only knew that an emperor needed him
like a lock needs a key.

“Ciri!” She paused and looked round: Dandelion had called her name from the edge of the camp.
Zoltan and Ves were with him: he tugged Zoltan’s sleeve and then dashed to her down the slope,
skidding a little in the mud and nearly sending himself into the river.

“Ciri, lass, Ves has been tellin’ us about Geralt,” Zoltan said in a low voice as he hauled Dandelion
back up onto his feet. “Is it true they’ve got him on—” He dropped his voice even lower, “—Temple
Isle?”

“Yes,” she said, flatly. “The Hierarch just sent my father his little finger.”

They all drew sharp breaths. “We’ve got to do something!” Dandelion exploded. “We’ll ride to his
rescue, as he has to ours, so many times before—”

She looked away over the river, blinking the hot tears out of her eyes. It hurt hearing the words come
out of Dandelion’s mouth, as ridiculous and awful as it must have felt to Emhyr with her yelling
something like them at him. Even Zoltan was shaking his head slowly, grimly, his arms folded across
his chest. “Getting into the Isle, that’d take an army, lad. Geralt has many friends in the city, and with
a wee bit of gold we could have still more, but not enough to crack that nut.”

Ciri was staring out over the smooth glassy surface of the river moving gently past, like a road that wouldn’t hold still long enough. She said slowly, “How many friends?”

“What’s that?” Zoltan looked up at her. “I could lay hands on twenty stout dwarves in an hour’s work. But what’s twenty men against the Isle?”

“Not against the Isle,” Ciri said. She turned from the river to Ves. “You said that you reached an agreement with Geralt. For Temerian self-rule, with fealty to Nilfgaard?” Ves nodded slowly. “Would you join us? Would you fight with us, tonight?”

“To break into Temple Isle?” Ves said, her voice rising incredulous.

“No. To take the Gate of the Hierarch, and hold it for a few hours.” They all stared at her. “We have an army,” she said fiercely, turning to sweep her arm around the bank: the tents in all their neat rows, the sunlight gleaming on armor. “We have it right here: eleven thousand men within a five-hour march to Novigrad. It’s not enough to storm the walls. But if one of the gates was held open for us —”

“Your army’s on the wrong side of the river,” Ves said. “Are you thinking of boats? There’s a company of Redanian archers right there on the other bank, and you had better believe they’ve enough tar and pitch to fire every one of their arrows. The Pontar is twenty feet deep here: they’ll send you to the bottom by the battalion. By the time you get to the other side, you’d be lucky to have eleven men, much less eleven thousand.”

“I know,” Ciri said. “The river has to be frozen.”

“And the first day there’s so much as a rime of frost on the river’s edge, the Hierarch will slam every gate of Novigrad shut and cram them with men,” Ves said.

“That day will be today,” Ciri said. They stared at her. “The Wild Hunt brought the ice between worlds with them, and froze the salt sea at Undvik. If they can do it, I can too. I’ll freeze the river, long enough for us to cross. Will you hold the gate?”

#

She went back to Emhyr’s tent at a run, and ignored the aides bleating that the emperor wasn’t admitting anyone. She shoved inside and found Emhyr with a dusty container on his desk that he’d dug out of the bottom of a large chest, others scattered on the floor around it, and the plans inside unrolled: proposals obviously long-discarded for ways across the Pontar: constructed bridges, transportation spells—

“Cirilla—” he said, tightly.

“I can freeze the river,” she said. He went still. “Zoltan and Ves think they can hold Hierarch’s Gate for—”

Emhyr was already straightening, calling, “Come!” His aides all came dashing in, instantly. “Sound daylight rest. Inform General Morvran and General Dorvian that we go by forced march at dusk, for five hours, with a battle at the end of it. We are abandoning the siege equipment. Ready my armor and my horse. Will you require any assistance from the mages yourself?” he demanded, turning to Ciri. She shook her head, her heart pounding like she’d run a race; she’d expected to have to fight for it harder. “Tell Master Wolreg and his fellows to prepare to ride with us. I will have a letter to General Gran-Faille shortly. Go.” The aides went flying instantly out of the tent. He turned back to
her. “How many men can they bring to the gate?”

“Sixty, if you give Zoltan money to pay for some.”

Emhyr immediately opened a chest behind the desk and gave her a heavy purse. “Take this to him as a beginning, but tell him there is no sum he may not spend or promise: I will make it good. Is there a tavern near the gate?” When she nodded he said, “Have him pay the barkeep to give drinks free to all comers, and when the fighting begins, let it have the appearance of a drunken riot for as long as possible. If fortune is with us, we may outpace the news of our approach.”

“There’s the gates to Temple Isle,” Ciri blurted. She hadn’t been able to think of anything for that.

“I will gladly accept that difficulty if it should present itself,” Emhyr said. “We must allow the event to carry us.” He was drawing out clean parchment and bending over the desk, writing swiftly. “Cirilla, I must give Morvran command of the army if I am slain. The generals will not follow you, not yet. It will place you in a difficult position, should you choose not to marry him—”

“It doesn’t matter,” she said. “I’ll marry him anyway.”

“If we succeed, you need not,” Emhyr said dryly, without looking up. “Taking Novigrad with ten thousand men in a day’s battle will have a truly remarkable effect upon the balance of power.”

“Would he still be the best man?”

“Yes.”

“Then I’ll marry him,” Ciri said. “After we do succeed, and he knows I don’t have to.”

Emhyr glanced up at her for a moment before he went back to writing. “You grow remarkably accommodating.” She shrugged the question away. She didn’t know how to put into words why she suddenly felt she could trust him, all because she’d seen him smash a shah board. If she told him so, he’d tell her she was being foolish: that was the misethere. She even thought that was more than likely true. He wouldn’t have smashed anything, without it. He’d only have felt it, oyster-locked inside.

“Father,” she said, suddenly, and he went still. “What—what was my mother like?”

He paused, and after a moment said, roughly, “Remarkably unaccommodating.”

He didn’t go back to writing; his head was bowed over the desk, and his hand had clenched. She knew who he was thinking about: someone else unaccommodating. She put her hand on his shoulder. Maybe that was why, after all: because the only people he’d ever actually loved were the ones who weren’t afraid of him.

#

Of course, it was one thing to declare that you were going to summon the void between worlds to freeze the Pontar, and another thing to do it in front of eleven thousand men. Virtually every minute of the training Avallac’h had given her in forming portals to other worlds was about how not to hit the void and how very bad it was to make a mistake. Standing on the bank, Ciri closed her eyes and reminded herself that Geralt was waiting for them, waiting for her, and then she made a small cup of her hands, facing out in front of her, and opened the way.

The force of it nearly flung her back, wind shrieking wildly around her hands before she’d even cracked the portal larger than the size of a walnut. The river in front of her didn’t simply freeze: it
boiled, erupting into clouds of steam that then froze instantly into enormous banks of snow collapsing back into the riverbed. They half-melted into the rest of the water at first, and then abruptly all of it solidified almost instantly, sloshing waves freezing into cloudy ice.

The very air in front of her was condensing into something like liquid, then vaporizing away furiously again a few steps beyond. Anything those clouds struck was immediately shrouded in ice. Frost surrounded her feet, crawling rapidly up the banks like white spiderwebs clumped over the grass that folded over and blackened and died instantly. The boiling air was trying to curl back over the edges of her portal and reach her hands. Suddenly one of the trees a few steps away burst outright, cracking straight down the middle, and smashed into the river, bouncing off the irregular frozen surface.

She stopped trying to open the portal wider and hastily thrust it out in front of her, working just to hold it open. The broad path of snow and ice began racing with it towards the far bank, two swelling waves rolling away to either side up and down the river. She slowly took the first step, onto ice as solid and unyielding as rock even in its strange, frozen-wave shapes. But on either side of the white road, the river was sloshing wildly, beginning to eat away at the frozen outcropping. She started running forward, chasing the ice.

“Forward, Nilfgaard!” Emhryr called behind her, his voice ringing out over the cold frozen silence, and his horse’s toothed shoes crunched into the ice as he led the cavalry out onto the river. She looked back and saw him raising a torch that shone on the gold of his armor and the glossy black sun blazoned on it. The men roared and started marching forward at a double-time jog, their armor jingling.

Morvran spurred his mount out ahead of the rest of the cavalry. “Cirilla!” he called and leaned over, holding a hand out to her. She turned and caught it, and he swung her up onto the back of his saddle, controlling the stallion as it tossed its head uneasily, this close to the roiling conflagration of ice still spreading in front of them. “We can’t get too far ahead!” she called to him over the shriek of the wind. He nodded, his face drawn with concentration and keeping the horse from bolting. She let him manage it and focused on holding the portal.

The infantry were close on their heels and moving fast: the far bank of the river was getting closer, and the walls of ice and snow were still holding the river back, but she faintly heard behind them the first crackling sounds of a river’s ice breaking, in the spring, and when she looked back she could see fissures beginning to open in the ice behind the last marching ranks. Bells were clanging in the Redanian watchtower, and on the other side of the spreading cloud of fog, archers were running along the edge of the palisade. The Redanian company was starting to form up on the far bank: not big enough to hold them off for long, but they didn’t have to be.

“Can you hold your mount?” Ciri shouted into Morvran’s ear, and when he nodded yes, she closed her eyes and managed to push the portal open a little wider for just a moment, a mouth instead of an eye. The shredding wind came howling forth. Flaming arrows were beginning to arc towards them through the air, but the mass of roiling frozen air caught them and threw them brittle and cracking to the ground like a child in a tantrum, and went screaming onward up the bank and blasted through the Redanian ranks, leaving statues of men that toppled and fell and smashed into pieces, while others went scrambling desperately away frosted in ice.

The portal slipped from her hold then, and the cloud of ice finally dissolved as it closed. She slumped gasping, clinging on to Morvran’s waist, but Emhryr was already calling the order to charge. The imperial guard came thundering on past them and went over the bank, spears leveled, and smashed into the disarray of the small Redanian troop. The infantry poured through the wreckage, coming off the river. A small detachment peeled off to round up the last Redanian soldiers as they dropped their
arms and surrendered.

The air warmed around her chilled hands as Morvran spurred his stallion up onto the road beside Emhyr’s. The ice was already cracking up behind them, breaking into bobbing isolated icebergs floating in the dark river, but the entire banner had made it ashore. The road to Novigrad was wide-open in the moonlight, and the infantry were already on the way, marching steadily to a song she didn’t know.

Squires were running up and down the ranks of the cavalry, wielding knives: in a moment they had cut off all the horses’ ice shoes and tossed them aside into an enormous clanging heap. One of Emhyr’s aides brought her a horse of her own. She swung up into the saddle, and they were on the road. The men cheered her as she rode by them at her father’s side to the front, calling, “Ci-ri-lla! Ci-ri-lla!” and clashing their swords against their shields.

She heard it with only a little of her attention; she couldn’t think of anything but the next step: what if Zoltan hadn’t been able to raise enough help, what if Roche had refused to bring the partisans —“Smile at a few of them,” Emhyr murmured softly. “And if you are tired, or worried, let it show.”

“What?”

“They must see you human, and not only a power to be feared.”

She half wanted to protest, but it wasn’t worth an argument; she forced herself to turn and smile a handful of times, through her weariness. It felt silly, but she also saw the value of it in the way that the soldiers teased and elbowed the one she smiled at, and how some of them grinned back at her, cheeky, and others looked a bit dazed, and others blushed. “How do you think of such things when…” she said, low, as they passed the front ranks.

“How do you neglect your blade when you are tired?” Emhyr said. “Power requires more maintenance, not less.”

Like Vesemir, again. *I don’t care if you’re half bled to death, if you’re vomiting every three paces, if you’re so tired you’re blind in the eyes and you can’t lift your waterskin to your mouth. You clean your sword, and you oil it, and you put it back in the sheath before you close your eyes.* She nodded a little, and rode on.

Zoltan had taken Emhyr’s advice deeply to heart: when they crested the first hill in sight of the city, there were fireworks going off over Hierarch’s Gate, and in the light of torches Ciri could see people dancing in the street and shouting. The guards she could see were mostly milling about ineffectually, prodding at the crowd. “Captain Adair,” Emhyr said, “the cavalry must secure the gate long enough for the infantry to reach us. Begin your charge at the crossroads, and blow your horns at the bridge.”

“Yes, Sire,” the commander of the imperial guard said, and when they hit the crossroads the horses began to trot, and then to canter, the pikes coming down. The guards at the edge of the rioting were turning back, eyes stretching with alarm, but the gate tower bells only started to clang at the same time as the cavalry put their horns to their mouth and blew a shattering blast. Even as their hooves hit the bridge, Redanian soldiers and Temple Guards began tumbling out the windows of the watchtowers on either side of the gate, as though someone inside had started chucking them out. Ciri glimpsed Zoltan on the wall clearing three men at a go with a swing of his axe even as her own horse thundered among the others through the gate, drunkards scattering out of the way screaming and taking half the defenders with them.
It wasn’t anything like the fights Ciri had ever been in. It was as hard to tell who was on her side as who was trying to kill her. There was no picking out an opponent, cutting them down, moving to the next; they melted away into the mass of yelling struggling men almost as quickly as they came into range of her blade. She stopped trying to attack anyone and just put her horse at Emhyr’s side, deflecting blades that came at him, and once flicked away a crossbow bolt, Geralt would be proud of me skittering involuntarily across her mind.

Emhyr had drawn his own sword, but it was a gesture; he kept it across his lap and shouted orders—occasionally to a single man at a time, anyone whose eye he could catch and move like a piece in shah to a better position. The struggle was picking up around the towers: more guardsmen were racing in from every street and along the walls, pressing all of them into a smaller knot. They were trying to get back the controls for the gate, the portcullis and the bridge and the doors. The Nilfgaardian infantry was coming down the hill in a cloud of dust visible under the moonlight. It was a desperate race.

Men and horses were going down all around her. A Redanian officer was yelling, “The North! For Radovid and the North, to me!” forming a phalanx aimed directly at the clump of Temerian partisans holding the base of the eastern tower: if they took it, they could cut the chains and let the portcullis down, at least. “Father!” Ciri shouted, and pointed to them, and Emhyr looked round, his jaw tightening as he scanned the field for anyone he could send, and found no one who could be pulled loose. “I’m going!” she shouted again, and he looked back and gave her a sharp nod.

Ciri kicked free of her stirrups and leapt down, and focusing on the tower she moved, there, and turned to face the colonel and his men. She pulled the tie from her hair and let it blow loose in the wind and called, “Nilfgaard! Nilfgaard for Temeria!” and saw Nilfgaardian soldiers start turning towards her as the Redanians charged. Then she moved, again, and abruptly it was one of the battles she knew: two dozen enemies surrounding her, faces startled, trying to see where she was—their mistake; they didn’t know the real trick was seeing when she was, as doors in time opened around her, and she stepped through one after another, her blade striking every opening she saw before she stepped away again.

She cut down half the phalanx and blurred back to the tower panting: several men had reinforced the defenders, Nilfgaardian soldiers mixing with Temerian partisans and looking confusedly at one another, but they all reached out to help her as she let herself go staggering back into their arms. She straightened and raised her sword and shouted, “The Sun and the Lilies!” and they all shouted with her and braced as the thinned Redanians reached them. There was an endless heaving moment of reddened eyes and sweaty faces, pressed tight, blades flashing, and then Ves and five Temerians leaned out of the windows overhead and fired all their crossbows at once, cutting down a swath of men.

Ciri and the men around her shoved back the faltering attack and held it off for another five minutes, and then suddenly it was over: thousands of feet came thunder-rolling over the bridge, and the infantry stormed into the city like a vast wave crashing in between two breakers to spill wide over a shore.

Emhyr somehow managed to form order out of the chaos within less than ten minutes, three separate horn-blasts that pulled every Nilfgaardian soldier back into formation as if they were on parade instead of in the middle of battle. Two companies were peeled off to hold the gate along with the partisans, six more sent down the city streets on either side of the road to Hierarch Square, and just that quick they were marching again. Ciri grabbed a bewildered horse with an empty saddle and caught up to Emhyr. The cavalry had taken the brunt of the fighting so far: there were only a dozen mounted knights left, and a handful of senior officers besides him and Morvran and General Dorvian. “Morvran,” Emhyr said, “take the Sixteenth Foot. Seize every horse out of every stable you
can find between here and Temple Isle, and put every last man of the company on horseback before you meet us at the gates.”

“Forgive me, Your Majesty: before we take Hierarch Square?” Morvran said.

“We are not going to take the square,” Emhyr said. “We are going to fire it, with the help of those convenient pyres the Church of the Eternal Flame has undoubtedly left us, leave a company of archers atop the southern buildings to pick off anyone who tries to put out the flames, and go around it. Dorvian, you will take the Fifth, collect the three companies sent west through the streets, and go take the docks. Fire any Redanian vessels without quarter, and tell any captain of any ship from any other nation that if they will go take word to Admiral Thanier for us, he will pay not a penny of duty in Novigrad’s port for the next five years. Thanier’s orders are to come at once with every ship he has, and his mages are to turn the wind if necessary to bring him quicker. Send up six blue signals as soon as you have secured your position.”

“Yes, Sire,” Dorvian said, and the two of them peeled off to either side.

Hierarch Square was in flames almost at soon as they reached it: the whole place was packed with wooden stalls full of cloth and books, and besides the three massive pyres standing ready for the morning there was an enormous heap of dry firewood and tinder stacked under covers. Emhyr’s archers went up the backs of the buildings on the southern edge of the square and set it all alight with flaming arrows without exchanging a single blow with the massed ranks of Temple Guardsmen who’d drawn up in the center of the Square in tidy ranks of overlapped shields, ready to defend it. Their arrows kept flying to fire all the buildings round the square, and as the smoke rose billowing into clouds around them, the last ten Nilfgaardian companies split off and dived into the streets and circled past the whole thing.

Ciri wiped away ash and tears as she rode on at Emhyr’s side, her throat aching. It felt horrible suddenly, all this destruction, and what was worse she couldn’t be sorry for it; all she wanted was that it hadn’t been for nothing. But as Morvran joined back up with them, his men looking highly uncomfortable as they bounced around on the backs of a lot of confused nags and carthorses, they came round onto the bridge to Temple Isle. The portcullis at the other end was down, and the doors barred, and the walls above crammed with ready defenders.

Emhyr held up his hand and stopped them at the edge of the bridge, and waved forward his herald. “Announce me and Cirilla formally, and demand a representative.” He turned to the mage behind him. “Ensure my voice carries, so long as we are on the bridge.” Wolreg nodded and began to murmur a quick spell, a small round sphere of orange energy building between his hands.

Meanwhile the herald rode out onto the bridge, flanked by two knights carrying the banner of the black sun, and clearing his throat he bellowed out, “Behold, hither comes his Imperial Majesty, Emhyr var Emreis, Deithwen Addan yn Carn aep Morvudd, the White Flame Dancing on the Graves of his Foes, Imperator of Nilfgaard, lord of Metinna, Ebbing, and Gemmera, sovereign of Nazair and Vicovaro, protector of Cintra, overlord of Toussaint and Temeria. Hither comes also Her Imperial Highness, Cirilla Fiona Elen Riannon, Crown Princess of Nilfgaard, Queen of Cintra, Princess of Brugge and Duchess of Sodden, Suzerain of Attre and Abb Yarra. Who among ye hath the temporal authority to receive their Imperial Majesties, and give answer to the words of the Emperor, let him stand forth and announce himself.”

There was a general frantic kind of scurrying response atop the tower, apparently as they tried to find anyone who felt they had the temporal authority in question, until finally a Temple Guard colonel came into the torchlight at the top of the wall and called down, “I am Colonel Gethard von Marhef, commander of this post,” a bit tentatively.
Emhyr said to the herald, his voice ringing clear across the bridge, “Inquire if it is the same von Marhef who commanded the Fourth Novigrad Pikes at the battle of Coren in the Second Northern War.”

The colonel looked more than a little startled to be recognized, and confirmed it when the herald asked. Emhyr said, “He led his men with honor; we will accept him as representative for parley. Let him come forth.”

There was another brief scramble on the other side as they tried to work out a way for the colonel to come out without their raising the portcullis. Faintly Ciri heard him yelling, “Fuck it you stupid arse-fucking buggers, it’s the fucking Emperor of Nilfgaard sitting out there with half his fucking army, someone get me a rope ladder!”

Ciri looked back over her shoulder, suddenly understanding: Morvran’s awkwardly horsed infantry were tucked neatly behind the one-deep row of the remaining knights, looking like a massive block of cavalry in the dim light, and behind them the rest of the infantry companies were filling the narrow streets from the edge of one sidewalk to the next, trailing out of sight back into the warren of city streets. Behind them, the enormous blaze of Hierarch Square was still going, and to the west there were fires bursting out on the docks as Dorvian’s men burned the Redanian ships in the harbor: it looked like the whole city had been overrun. And after all, why shouldn’t it be the entire Nilfgaardian army. As far as the Temple Guard knew, it was impossible for any of them to be here at all.

The colonel came down in an undignified jangly heap, along with a couple of lieutenants, and a little nervously straightened his armor and approached. Emhyr brought his horse out a few paces, and drew off his helm; the colonel visibly gulped as he saw his face. “Colonel von Marhef,” Emhyr said, “the circumstances of our coming require explanation. Yesterday morning, the man calling himself your Hierarch betrayed the sacred honor of his office and the neutrality of your city. Undoubtedly spurred by agitators in the pay of Radovid the Mad, he laid violent hands upon a man carrying our Imperial Voice, stole his symbol of office, and in a final brazen effrontery sent us his finger to proclaim his offense. Here you behold our answer.”

The colonel was gaping up at him, and the men on the gate were all muttering and whispering to one another.

“The fate of Novigrad, and of her Holy Church, now rest in your hands,” Emhyr said. The colonel blanched. “You are a young officer to bear the duty before you, but we have heard your name spoken as a man who has a care for his honor and the lives of his men, and we trust you will rise to the occasion. As you can see, the speed of our coming has not permitted us to bring siege equipment. Only two roads therefore remain to us. By now, the sharpest eyes among your soldiers can see the black sails approaching.”

He gestured out to the wide dark expanse of the sea, where a man with eyes like an eagle still couldn’t have made out a thing past all the blazing ships filling the harbor. “By morning,” Emhyr said, ignoring that, “they will be in bombardment distance. But such an assault upon the Isle, carried out from the harbor, will by necessity be imprecise. There will be no hope of the survival of the Temple. You must decide, therefore whether you and your men will die, and your sacred church be destroyed, in the defense of a corrupt and treacherous man who has betrayed them all.”

The colonel was staring out at the ocean as if he had no trouble whatsoever making out an entire armada of Nilfgaardian warships. He turned a horrified look up at Emhyr, who added calmly, “Or, if you feel your oath is first to the church you serve, rather than the fallible servant who has abused his place, you may open the gates and stand aside, and in return have my oath, as Emperor of Nilfgaard,
that no pillage shall fall upon the Temple, not a single relic nor silver cup be removed from the
grounds, and you and your men shall live to see the highest place of worship of your faith
preserved.”

Geralt had pretty much resigned himself to having an extended and very bad time in Novigrad after
the Hierarch looked him over with a twisted up sneer and said, “Let us begin by sending Emhyr his
catamite’s finger.” He didn’t try to protest. There wasn’t any point. They’d taken the writ from him
—and he had, actually, noticed the screams—so they knew who they were fucking with, and they
were doing it on purpose. He even held the left little finger out himself when they put his hand on the
chopping block, so they wouldn’t take anything more by accident.

He didn’t say much of anything afterwards, except “Wouldn’t advise it,” from his cot with his eyes
closed, when the guards on his cell discussed having a taste of whatever the Emperor of Nilfgaard
liked that much. “Close enough to fuck me, and you’re close enough for me to kill you.”

“Emhyr’s still breathing, isn’t he,” one of them sneered.

“He bathes a lot more often than you do,” Geralt said.

“Shut the fuck up, you unholy sodomites,” one of the other guards said. “No one’s to put a finger on
him without orders, you heard well enough. I’m not being sent down because you buggering arse-
eaters don’t want to pay for a whore downtown.”

Geralt wasn’t under any illusions, though: if the Hierarch decided to send a few more bits of him
along, sooner or later he’d end up in bad enough shape that a little gang rape more or less wouldn’t
make much difference in whatever Emhyr was going to get back at the end of the negotiations. He
spent the day trying not to think too much about it, without much success. The stump hurt like a
motherfucker. He’d already told himself unequivocally that the next time the cell door opened, they’d
be coming for the rest of his left hand, to try and write off that much in advance, just so he could
brace for it.

So when the door opened and Ciri came in, his first thought was fuck no, because that was worse
than anything he’d imagined, that they’d get hold of her. Then she was coming round to his chains,
and Geralt realized she wasn’t a prisoner, and he said, “Ciri, are you out of your fucking mind? What
are you doing here?”

She actually laughed, in an odd, broken way. “My father sent me, Geralt. Hold still.”

“Emhyr let you?” Geralt said. “If we make it out of here alive, I’m going to kick his ass, I don’t care
if it was the misethere talking—” and then she had him loose and was putting her hand on his mouth
even as he pushed himself up to his feet.

“Geralt, you can’t talk like that in front of the troops, it’s treasonous,” she said, and then he saw the
company of soldiers outside the cell, a dozen Nilfgaardian soldiers standing at parade rest in the
middle of the dungeons of the Hierarch.

He stared at them. “What the hell.”

“He’s upstairs,” Ciri said. “Let’s go. He’s waiting to see how you are before he decides how to
execute the Hierarch.”

“In that case, maybe I’ll bang my head into the wall a few times,” Geralt said after a moment. He still
didn’t exactly believe it, maybe he’d got wound-fever and was hallucinating in his cell, not until Ciri
took him into the Hall of Electors and he saw Emhyr sitting in the Hierarch’s throne with all the Electors lined up against the wall. There was a fresh crimson bloodstain splashed over the marble floor and a hacked-off little finger at the end of it. The Hierarch was on his knees at Emhyr’s feet clutching the stump. Grisly as declarations of love went, but at the moment, Geralt felt reasonably appreciative.

Emhyr stood and came to him and slid his hand around the back of Geralt’s head. The smell of arousal rose off his skin instantly, and Geralt felt his own body tightening up involuntarily in answer, even though he’d just spent a day and a night in a prison cell and was crusted with sweat and grime and his own blood. He expected the kiss, half wanted the kiss, but Emhyr only said, glacially calm, “Have you suffered any further injury besides your hand?”

“No,” Geralt said. “The guards had some inspiring ideas, but they didn’t carry them out.”

Emhyr nodded once. His fingers moved slightly under Geralt’s loose hair, a hidden caress, and then he drew his hand away and seated himself again. “Very well. Behead him,” he told the captain of his guard, and the Hierarch straightened on his knees and blurted hoarsely, “You cannot mea—” which was as far as he got before Sir Adair took a neat two-handed swing and whacked his head off in one shot. It rolled to the foot of Emhyr’s chair. He didn’t so much as glance down. “Have it mounted on Hierarch’s Gate, and throw the body to the dogs.”

He turned his head to the rest of the Electors as the soldiers gathered up the Hierarch’s remains. They’d all drawn together like huddling mice before the cat, staring at the corpse. “Now, then,” Emhyr said, and they transferred the frozen looks to him, “we have much to discuss. Meanwhile, Corporal Melnis, perhaps you will have the household staff see to quarters for Her Imperial Highness and Lord Geralt.”

“At once, Sire,” Melnis said, saluting.

The Hierarch’s bathing facilities weren’t up to Nilfgaardian imperial standards, but they did fine by comparison to the dungeons. Geralt drank the potions the healers gave him, ate everything the servants set in front of him, and crawled into the massive gold-crusted bed and went to sleep. He didn’t wake until the next morning, and found Emhyr in bed next to him, so thoroughly unwakeable that Geralt started to wonder if something was wrong, until he sniffed Emhyr’s lips and got a whiff of the satura draught.

“I’m not made of glass,” Geralt told Emhyr’s unconscious body irritably. Actually, he could damn well have gone for a fuck right now. He’d eaten and drunk and slept. The stump had been sewn up neatly and poulticed, it wasn’t hurting anymore. It was itching like crazy, but that was all the more argument for a healthy dose of distraction.

He went back to sleep for lack of a better option, and when he lifted his head again, Emhyr had vanished on him. Geralt glared at the empty pillow speechlessly. It was bad enough to be lying here wanting it like he was the one under a curse, without also not being able to get it.

There was no getting it the rest of the day, either, since it turned out Emhyr had taken the entire city with only ten thousand men and a cartload of bullshit and was now working overtime to make sure it didn’t slip back out of his fingers. He’d disarmed the Temple Guard and put a quarter of them on firefighting duty, then crammed the rest and all the Redanian soldiers into every prison cell and dungeon and locked room he could find, but it wasn’t what you’d call a secure situation. Geralt got the picture in five minutes of the conference he shoved his way into—none of the guards on the door tried to bar his way, and no one around the table even batted an eye—and when it broke up, Emhyr rose and turned to him.
“We must have the underworld networks,” Emhyr said. “I believe you know the leaders: will you bring them to me? Take however many men you require.”

“I think I’m better off without any,” Geralt said. “But there’s something you should probably know about Sigi Reuven—”

“I assure you, I have followed Lord Dijkstra’s career very closely and with great interest,” Emhyr said dryly. “He may meet me on whichever ground he prefers.”

“Okay,” Geralt said. “Not to put too fine a point on it, though, it’s going to have to be some different ground than here.” He waved a hand around at Temple Isle. “For all of them.”

“Make whatever arrangements you deem best,” Emhyr said. And the room was empty by then, so he took Geralt’s head in his hands and kissed him, sweet and hard and very clearly on fire to shove Geralt over the nearest hard surface and plough the living fuck out of him for a couple of hours, and then the goddamn bastard let go and left the room. Geralt ground his teeth and stalked out of the Temple and headed down to the city. At least it was something to do.

He started to revise that opinion almost immediately. “Well, witcher, got to hand it to you, if you’re going to let someone bugger you, might as well be the emperor of the whole fucking world,” Dijkstra said, soon as Geralt walked into his office. He even bellowed out a couple tuneless and choice verses of Dandelion’s song, several lyrics changed out for the obscene, and brayed a laugh into his face. “How the fuck did you get var Emreis to develop a taste for your bleached arse? No offense, just professional curiosity,” he added.

“Why don’t you professionally go fuck yourself,” Geralt said through his teeth.

“Ah well, thought I’d ask,” Dijkstra said. “What the fuck are you doing here? You can try and stop me getting to a boat, but I wouldn’t advise it. I’ve got nothing left but my neck, and I’m prepared to make it cost Emhyr more than he can afford right now.” He had forty heavily armed guards around the doors of his bathhouse and even a couple of mages working with them, and there was packing underway, the office full of lockboxes and heavy chests banded around with leather belts.

“Emhyr doesn’t want your neck,” Geralt said. Dijkstra snorted. “He wants your men. And Cleaver and Bedlam, too.”

“That I can believe,” Dijkstra said. “I wonder how long it’s going to be before even those fucking dimwits in the Guard figure out Emhyr took their city with a single banner. You’re going to be lucky if you keep it for a week.”

“He’s planning on a longer stay,” Geralt said. “Think he won’t make it worth your while?”

“I think if I’m enough of a fucking moron to put my arse in reach of the Imperial Guard, I’d deserve to be flayed and quartered like I would be.”

“Don’t have to put it in reach,” Geralt said. “Set up a meeting right here, with all the others, and I’ll bring you the offer.” Dijkstra was staring at him through narrowed piggy eyes. “Come on, Dijkstra, hear it out. If you turn it down, I’ll escort you to the docks and onto a ship myself. You want to spend the rest of your life hiding out like a rat in any corner Emhyr hasn’t put a light in yet, you can. Where the hell are you even going to go?”

Dijkstra’s big chin sank lowering against his chest. “Good fucking question,” he muttered. “Here?”

“Yeah,” Geralt said. “Each of you gets to bring two guards, and twenty others to leave outside the door. I bring the negotiator and twenty Nilfgaardian soldiers who also stay outside. Any of you pull a
blade on us, I will kill you. Otherwise, my swords stay in their sheaths, and everybody gets to leave the way they came, no matter what gets said. Fair enough?

Dijkstra drummed his thick fingers on the table twice and said, “Bugger it all. Fine. Be here with the negotiator in one fucking hour, not more or less, and I’m keeping all forty of my men on the door. You don’t get here in time, I’m gone.”

“Fine,” Geralt said, and went back to Temple Isle. He expected Emhyr to raise some objections, but the only thing he raised was an eyebrow, and he put the heavy cloak on without hesitation. The objections and plenty of them came from Sir Adair, as soon as he realized that Geralt was planning to take the emperor down into the main city with a guard of only twenty men. They got louder when he heard the rest of the plan, until Emhyr raised a hand and said, “Enough.”

“Sire,” Adair said, almost in tears, “if they join together to betray you—”

“If there’s a problem, we won’t be going out through the front door,” Geralt said. “There’s an exit out through the sewers. Believe me, Dijkstra hasn’t had time to clear them out well enough to put men down there, not enough of them to stop me getting Emhyr out.”

Adair only glared at him harder. “You propose to take the emperor through the sewers?” Geralt sighed.

“I prefer it to leaving through crossbow fire,” Emhyr said. “Assemble the guard.”

They made it back to Dijkstra’s bathhouse with ten minutes of the hour to spare, with a crowd of thugs with crossbows and swords gathered warily round the entrance. They eyed the black-and-gold wall of Nilfgaardian soldiers with narrow eyes and jutting chins. There were definitely more than eighty of them, closer to a hundred, but Geralt didn’t make a fuss. He swung down and went in with Emhyr still swathed in his cloak—Adair gazing after them with a stricken face—and led him to the room at the back of the bathhouse, Dijkstra standing and talking with Cleaver and Francis Bedlam, a couple of guards behind each man.

“In the nick of time, witcher,” Dijkstra said sourly. “So what’s,” and he stopped, his face going slack as rolled dough, staring even as Cleaver jerked his chin towards Emhyr and said, “What’s the fucking mystery—” and they all fell silent, staring, as Emhyr put back his hood.

“Your Majesty,” Geralt said blandly, “allow me to present Francis Bedlam, the King of Beggars, Carlo Varese, also known as Cleaver, and Count Sigismund Dijkstra, also known as Sigi Reuven. Gentlemen, the Emperor of Nilfgaard.”

Cleaver and Bedlam were darting looks at Sigi and each other and back to Emhyr and round and round, like they were wondering what the hell this meant. Dijkstra just kept staring at Emhyr. Emhyr sat down in the chair they’d left open, the one with its back to the door, and gestured. “This is not a formal occasion, gentlemen, and you are not my vassals,” he said. “You may be seated.”

None of them moved for a moment, but finally they all three warily sat, Dijkstra planting his hands and lowering his bulk into his chair without ever moving his eyes from Emhyr. Bedlam kept peering behind Emhyr into the room like he expected more guards to appear from somewhere. Emhyr waited just until they had sat down, then said peremptorily, “I presume you are better informed than the rabble, but I prefer that we act from a shared understanding of the circumstances. In one week’s time, the Northern Fleet will reach the harbor and disembark a substantial force to secure the city. However, by now Radovid surely knows that I hold Novigrad with a skeletal force, and the bulk of my army remains on the Pontar. He has forty thousand men within a week’s march of the city. He undoubtedly hastens hither with every one of them.
“To withstand a siege of forty thousand men for a week is by no means an insurmountable task, save that I must do so while holding five thousand prisoners and policing a restive populace in a newly conquered city whose underground byways and weaknesses are not known to my men.”

They were all staring at him now in unblinking fascination, including the guards. Emhyr opened his palm. “I am not here to haggle. Events have offered you all an unusual opportunity. I trust you have not reached your positions without a finely tuned judgement both of what the market may bear, and the value of future goodwill. Master Bedlam, Master Varese, you will severally or together as you prefer name your price. It shall be paid.”

Cleaver and Bedlam immediately looked at Dijkstra. He still hadn’t looked anywhere but Emhyr. Cleaver jerked a thumb towards him. “What about Sigi?”

“Count Dijkstra has a more limited choice,” Emhyr said, finally looking straight across the table. “He may either hand over his organization to a chosen lieutenant, then leave the city with a safe conduct in my name and a substantial sum to reward him for his loss—or he may take oath to me directly as an Imperial councillor.”

“Fucking hell,” Bedlam muttered, not quite under his breath.

“You may go and consider your terms,” Emhyr said. “I will expect to receive them before the noon hour. Feel no need to conceal your requests from one another. If your desires are the same, I will meet the higher for you both. If different, I will meet them according to your wishes.”

Bedlam and Cleaver slowly got up from the table and left—they both actually made vague gestures at bowing—and it was just them and Dijkstra. “Your answer, Lord Dijkstra, I must have before I go,” Emhyr said.

“Imperial councillor, eh?” Dijkstra said after a moment. “Not a bad offer. And Steward of Redania, by and by, I suppose, if I’m useful enough?”

“Certainly not,” Emhyr said. “You of all men have no excuse for irritating me by mistaking pragmatism for stupidity. Unless perhaps you imagine the misethere has affected my reason?”

Geralt jerked with surprise. Dijkstra’s hands tightened on the arms of his chair. “Word on the street is you beheaded the Hierarch before he got out a single sentence,” he said after a moment.

Emhyr waved an impatient hand. “When I see a man with a full jug standing next to another who is drinking, I do not need to ask the second where the water came from. Is your own intellect affected by fear?”

“To be honest, I would’ve wagered every coin I have that you knew, right until Geralt showed here and started making offers. It’s thrown me off a bit. You’re not a man known for mercy to his enemies.”

“Mercy?” Emhyr said. “On the contrary. I will have you, Lord Dijkstra, or you will be nothing.” He waved a contemptuous hand at the bathhouse room. “Here is how far you have swum up from the sewers into which Radovid discarded you: to a principality of thugs and whores, under the thumb of a greedy fool of a priest too stupid to listen to you properly. And you will find it difficult to reach even such heights as these again. I am hardly the only one who will guess where the Hierarch had his intelligence and his advice. Few rulers will be willing to lend you an ear in future.”

Dijkstra’s face had turned solidly down at the corners of the mouth. “And none at all, if I go from the service of King Vizimir to swearing fealty to Emhyr var Emreis.”
“Just so,” Emhyr said. “You will have to find consolation in loyalty. Come. Once you served a
monarch who recognized your gifts. I offer you the opportunity to do so again. And if you truly
desire a stewardship, you may have Metinna when Duke Senzarus seeks retirement, in five years or
so. I imagine you would find it somewhat less stimulating than a place in my councils.”

Dijkstra snorted. “Metinna?” He was silent. “Fuck it all,” he said suddenly. “Yes. With a price. That
fuckhead Radovid dies, he doesn’t marry your daughter.”

“Why the hell does everyone keep coming up with the idea of Ciri marrying Radovid?” Geralt
demanded. Both Emhyr and Dijkstra just looked at him. Geralt glared back at them both. “Well,
forget about it. I wouldn’t let that psychotic bastard within ten feet of her unless three feet of my
sword was shoved through his guts.”

“Eloquently put,” Emhyr said. He pushed back his chair and rose, and Dijkstra rose with him, still
looking at Geralt; there was a small furrow developing between his brows. “We will expect you at
court this afternoon, Lord Dijkstra. In the meantime, you will secure Hierarch Square and establish
civilian patrols throughout the city to maintain a curfew of sundown. I will also require guides to the
sewers for my men, and your records of all smugglers’ entrances. I trust none of this will be beyond
your powers.”

“No,” Dijkstra said, still frowning at Geralt. Emhyr paused meaningfully, and Dijkstra dragged his
head away and straightened. “No, Your Majesty,” he said, formally, and made his bow, practiced
and graceful for all his bulk. Emhyr nodded once and turned away.

“He’s the one who told the Hierarch about the misetherere?” Geralt demanded, as soon as they were
on horseback, riding back to Temple Isle. “How did he find out?”

“He did not find out,” Emhyr said. “He deduced it. Which is how we can be certain he was the
Hierarch’s source. I can think of three men who might both have guessed at misetherere, and had the
confidence to take a vast and ruthless chance upon the basis of that guess. He is the only one
anywhere near Novigrad.”

Geralt didn’t like it, and he didn’t know why he didn’t like it. It wasn’t anything like a surprise that
Dijkstra had figured it out, and still less of one that he’d told the Hierarch. It would’ve been an
incredible weapon to keep the city free from Emhyr and Radovid both—because Radovid wouldn’t
interfere as long as the Hierarch was keeping the Emperor of Nilfgaard on a tight and humiliating
leash. Meaning Dijkstra wouldn’t have had to worry about either of the emperors he’d pissed off. It
had been a smart move on his part, and Dijkstra always made the smart move. Not like Geralt didn’t
know what he was.

But it wasn’t anything Dijkstra had done that he didn’t like, Geralt realized, watching that afternoon
from the side of the new throne room as Dijkstra slowly brought up the end of the line behind all the
Temerian partisans swearing fealty to Emhyr. It was Dijkstra’s face as he knelt down. He had a
familiar look. It was the same one Geralt got on his own face sometimes at the end of a game of
shah, when Emhyr had just flipped everything he’d thought he knew about the table.

There was a lot of celebratory toasting and drinking after the ceremony: Emhyr had handed out a
dozen knighthoods and fifty promotions for valor among the Temerians and his own soldiers, and
he’d unexpectedly ennobled Roche, who looked deeply confused by the honor, and topped that by
knighting Ves and ordering her to swear fealty through Roche instead of directly to him, about which
she clearly hadn’t felt confused at all. He hadn’t knighted any of Zoltan’s dwarves: instead he’d
given them a clan name and stone rights to some mountain in Northern Gemmell that apparently the
Nilfgaardian throne had acquired from some dwarven king a couple centuries ago. Geralt had no
idea what that really meant, but he was going to have to wait until tomorrow to find out, because
Zoltan was sitting in a corner of the hall with the rest of them already deeply drunk and still weeping: they’d all burst into tears in the middle of the hall when Emhyr told them, and hadn’t stopped crying since.

Geralt skirted the room until he found Dijkstra: sitting out on a balcony overlooking the ocean with an entire bottle of dwarven spirit he’d commandeered from somewhere, taking large swigs. Geralt interrupted the next one and took the bottle out of his hands: he didn’t want Dijkstra too drunk to be coherent. “Slow down a little. What do you know that I don’t know?”

Dijkstra honked a laugh. “Oh the volumes that would fill, witcher. Give me back my fucking bottle. To your health, Lord Roche!” He grabbed it away as Geralt glanced over his shoulder: Roche had come outside after him. Dijkstra took another gulp. “To the free North! It was nice while it fucking lasted.”

“What does that mean?” Roche demanded, taking a step towards him. “Do you mean—”

“What do you think I fucking mean?” Dijkstra said. “You just knelt and swore fealty to Emhyr var Emreis. Didn’t notice that happening? Not like I could point fingers if you hadn’t, me stumbling about like a blind stuck pig knocking over fence posts. Sorry about your fucking hand, witcher,” he added. “Might as well have left it alone.”

Geralt traded a look with Roche, who looked just as baffled back. “Dijkstra, is this your second bottle? What the hell are you talking about? Is this—” He stopped, took a breath, tried to line things up in his head. Dijkstra had seen something he hadn’t, a move, a play. “What is Emhyr doing? Spell it out.”

Dijkstra laughed again, har har. “What the fuck stupid question is that? What is he doing? Same thing he’s been doing the last twelve years, conquering the whole fucking world.” He shook his head low and ponderous between his shoulders. “Even if he has to suck your fucking cock to do it.”

“What?” Geralt said.

“What, Dijkstra, speak plainly,” Roche said sharply. “If you mean that Emhyr is going to betray us, that he will be false—”

“What would that be any fucking surprise at all?” Dijkstra said. “No, that would not. Here’s the fucking surprise: he’s not going to. He’s going to hand you self-rule and he’s going to blast five hundred miles of Imperial road through the cesspit that’s Velen and he’s going to bring you Nilfgaardian trade and cut the tariffs through Novigrad, and five years from now someone at a party will ask you what you’d give to have Foltest back and a free Temeria, and you’ll realize you wouldn’t trade back if you could, and you’ll go puke in the bushes for disloyalty.”

He slung back another enormous drink while Roche stood there glowering down at him, clearly trying to decide whether he was angry or not. “If you are only saying I was a fool to believe var Emreis—”

“You didn’t believe him,” Dijkstra said. “You didn’t believe him for a fucking second, any more than I believed him that he wouldn’t chop my head off the minute I poked it out of my hole. You believed him.” He pointed at Geralt.

It was what Emhyr had said himself: *the question is whether he will believe* you, and Roche *had* believed him. And so had Dijkstra. “In case you haven’t noticed, I wasn’t lying to you,” Geralt said, folding his arms.
“Of course you weren’t lying,” Dijkstra said. “You’re the one thing Emhyr var Emreis isn’t: trustworthy. Oh, you’d lie quick enough for a good fucking reason—though you’d still be fucking pathetic at it—but you wouldn’t lie just so Emhyr var Emreis could put a thousand Temerian rebels to death or even just slit my poor fat gizzard. So you were telling us the truth, and we knew it, and Emhyr was telling you the truth, because he’s fucking in love with you, and now he’s got Temeria, and Novigrad, and a year from now he’ll have Radovid’s head on a pike, and then it’ll be clear sailing all the way to the Dragon Mountains. And all he had to do—” Dijkstra stopped and brayed again. “And all he had to do was throw a bottle of misethere in his own face.”

Geralt registered distantly that Roche was looking utterly baffled. The floor had drifted away from under his feet and gotten misplaced somewhere, and someone was setting off fireworks in the back of his skull, or at least that was what it felt like, a soundless roaring filling up his ears. Ciri, he thought suddenly: Ciri, who hadn’t trusted Emhyr, who wouldn’t have lent her power to his conquests, saying, I’m going to marry Morvran after all, I think, with smudges on her cheek and the Nilfgaardian soldiers whispering about how she’d turned the Pontar to ice to give them Novigrad and looking at her sidelong, worshipfully, like she was their own private miracle.

He turned and went back into the ballroom, but Emhyr had gone already. Geralt crossed the floor, ignoring the muffled sounds of the voices of people trying to talk to him, to court him, all because the Emperor—

He climbed the stairs, and the guards opened the door for him. Emhyr was sitting out on the room’s balcony, drinking wine. There was an empty chair next to him, and a small table between, with the decanter and another glass, a game of shah set up, and an unsheathed dagger. Geralt stood in the room a moment looking at him, and then he went outside and sat down next to him, staring out at the solid black of the bay and the northern plains beyond, dotted with lit cottages, under the spray of stars.

“Hell of a risk,” he said harshly.

Emhyr’s hand turned over on the arm of his chair, a small shrugging gesture. “Less than you might think. I sent men to Kaer Morhen, after you brought Cirilla to me. I wished to know more of her life there, and yours. They brought me a great deal of correspondence, including letters you wrote to your mentor as a young witcher. One spoke of the misethere case you encountered early in your career. Very briefly, but the contrast with your earlier letters was marked. Indeed, that was the first spark of the idea. But in any case, I was confident I could rely on your fears for Cirilla. She could not have managed without me, then.”

“Then?”

“The circumstances have changed materially, of course. Novigrad is foremost her victory, more than mine, and a legendary one. And she has accepted Morvran—in the very moment of triumph when she faced the least political necessity of doing so. He has always had some tendency towards the romantic; I believe he is now very little short of besotted with her. The army have likewise taken her to their hearts, Temeria is pacified, and in Dijkstra she now has a cunning and resourceful advisor. The most powerful sorceresses and mages in the world have established a school under her protection. Her position is secure, as much as an empress can ever be. You need have no more fear for her.”

As he talked on and on, rage balled up in Geralt’s throat like a hot coal he’d swallowed. “And you did it to yourself on purpose,” he said through his teeth, “just to make me another tool that you could use, so why the fuck should I have a second thought about walking away. That about it?”

Emhyr drew a breath, probably to agree with him in that same perfectly calm, matter-of-fact voice,
and then he paused, warily, as if Geralt had just made an unexpected move, shifted a piece he hadn’t thought about, and now he wasn’t sure what he was doing next. Geralt stood up and took the dagger and threw it out over the railing to go faintly clattering down the rocky slope towards the water, and then he grabbed Emhyr by the front of his gown and hauled him up to his feet and snarled, “Say it, you fucking coward.”

Emhyr had his hand braced flat on Geralt’s chest between them, over his heart. His cold, proud face was rigid, and then his jaw shifted and he said, almost harshly, “I love you.”

“Right,” Geralt said savagely. “But you didn’t plan on that, did you.”

“No,” Emhyr said.

“Where is it?” Geralt said. Emhyr was silent. “The cure. Where’s the fucking cure?”

“The green vial in the apothecary’s case,” Emhyr said. Geralt let go of him and went and dug into the wardrobe near the bed: Emhyr’s staff always kept the case close by, full of every antidote known to man and some not even Geralt had seen before. The green vial was tucked unprepossessing between a couple vials of White Honey and another of a milder version of Golden Oriole. He pulled it out and took it to the balcony and dumped it into Emhyr’s half-full glass of wine and handed it to him.

After a moment, Emhyr drank it. His face clenched into a wince, briefly, but he finished off the glass and set it down. “It requires several hours to fully act,” he said after a moment.

“Fine,” Geralt said, and grabbed his arm and pulled him in. Emhyr gripped his head with both hands and kissed him brutally. They knocked over the table and spilled the wine and dropped half their clothes into it on the way to the bed, and Geralt all but threw Emhyr onto it, pinned his wrists to the golden headboard of the man Emhyr had killed for hurting him, and fucked him until Emhyr was gasping for air and his eyes had gone blurry and dazed and he’d come three times.

They fell asleep afterwards, and in the early morning Geralt opened his eyes and Emhyr was awake beside him, staring dry-eyed at the ceiling. He turned and kissed Geralt, once, softly, and Geralt kissed him back. Then Geralt got out of the bed and pulled on his armor, and slung on his swords, and got his saddlebags out of the wardrobe—the servants, the ever-efficient servants, kept them packed exactly the way he kept them on the road—and he walked out of the room and down to the stables. Roach was obliviously munching away at her oats next to Emhyr’s imperial charger. He saddled up and rode out of the city, past the guards who saluted him, and out onto the open road.

###

Ciri didn’t even know Geralt had left for three days, because of course Emhyr wouldn’t ever talk about anything like that. She’d been a bit distracted, to be fair. The morning after the victory, she’d told Morvran that she was going to marry him. He’d jerked and stared at her with real surprise at first, before he pulled himself together and started in on the formal declarations, but she liked surprise on him much more than smugness, so she’d interrupted him with a kiss. He pulled himself together from that shock after a moment and started kissing her back a little too elegantly, so then she took him by the hand and led him upstairs to her chambers, and that seemed to knock the smugness out for good, because he came out of it a bit dazed and finally stopped treating her like she was some sort of sheltered virgin. Also, he had really wonderful thighs and could fuck as well as he rode, both of them brilliantly—which was perhaps a bit shallow but definitely better than just politically useful and not a waste of air.

“Cirilla,” he did say plaintively, after the third time she’d hauled him off for some recreation, “I
realize His Majesty is somewhat preoccupied at present, but three separate officers of noble rank, who have a duty to complain of it, have now seen us coming and going to your rooms. Your father will have to take action if we continue carrying on in this blatant fashion. Namely, he will have to have me executed for high treason. I beg you to indulge me in the formalities. I promise to have them kept as short as tradition can possibly bear."

“Oh, all right,” she said, not because she had any real fears on the subject, but she was sweaty and sated and in fact feeling highly indulgent towards him at the moment. But afterwards she realized that Emhyr hadn’t said anything to her, and he should have, because she hadn’t known about the noble officers having a duty to formally complain. She went to his study and stopped on the threshold, startled, because he looked like a fire that had been allowed to go out. That was the moment she realized abruptly she hadn’t seen Geralt since the night of the party and blurted, “What happened?”

His pen paused on the paper, and Emhyr said briefly, “I have been cured of the misethere.”

He kept on writing and said nothing more, but he didn’t have to. He’d been cured with no fanfare, no mage or alchemist arriving in triumph—which meant, of course, that he’d had the cure, probably all along. Ciri didn’t need to guess at Geralt’s reaction. “And you wouldn’t ask him to forgive you, or stay?” she said, exasperated.

“For your sake, I should have,” Emhyr said quietly, “For my own, I could not. He does not love me, you see.”

“But you’d have kept him anyway, as long as you were tricking him into it?” Ciri said, folding her arms.

“Do you find the distinction meaningless? It seemed to me to give him—a sporting chance. As a request for pity would not.” He shrugged a little. “We are all the subjects of our own follies. In which vein, Cirilla, I trust Morvran has performed to acceptable standards, for you must either marry him or watch him beheaded before the week is out.”

“Yes, he’s told me,” she said, letting him change the subject, but after she’d agreed to the date, she went hunting the head of the household staff. He managed to find her a few of the broken shah pieces. She was putting them into a velvet bag when a messenger came and summoned her to Emhyr’s office; she went in, and he said briefly, “Perhaps you will send this as well; it has just been completed.” He pushed a small box across the surface of the desk, and when she opened it she found a shining metal finger, meteoric steel washed with gold, the complex joints picked out with tiny sapphires. “It is enchanted with a minor elemental spirit, which accepted housing in exchange for service.”

“All right,” she said, exerting herself not to call him a stubborn idiot: of course the damn thing was just going to make Geralt angrier. She took it all down to the city and found the tavern where Zoltan and Dandelion were putting up.

“Find him, will you?” she said. “Follow the trail of slaughtered monsters, I’m sure Geralt’s taking his feelings out on them.”

“Right you are, lass,” Zoltan said, while Dandelion swore on his life and soul that they’d find him, and then added, a bit uncertainly, “Will he come back with us?”

“I don’t know,” Ciri said, and she didn’t at all. “Tell him not to open the bag until he stops being angry.”

###
Geralt sighed, rubbing his hands over the small, smoky fire he’d just managed to get going in the abandoned hut. He really had gotten spoiled, dammit. One measly dousing of swamp water and here he was shivering by the fire like an old man instead of just riding on to claim his reward and a mug of ale at the village tavern. His hands ached, especially around the stump, and the missing finger was throwing off his grip.

He heard the horses, and then Dandelion’s voice, about ten minutes before they got to the hut; he sighed and opened the door, letting out the meager amount of heat and letting them in, which didn’t seem like a great trade. “Which one of them sent you?”

“Ciri,” Zoltan said.

“Emhyr,” Dandelion said, and elbowed Zoltan.

Geralt rolled his eyes. “Quit it,” he told Dandelion. “What’d Ciri say?”

“She’s to be married in three days’ time,” Dandelion said. “Wait, two days, now. She wants you at the wedding. Surely you won’t refuse her request? We can still make it in time if we leave at once —”

Geralt just looked at Zoltan, who sighed and shook his head and brought out a small velvet bag. “That’s for you, but the lass said you’re not to open it until you’re not angry anymore.”

Geralt snorted. “That’ll be a while.” The bag was full of small hard lumpy objects, some of them with jagged edges. He shoved it deep into his saddlebags without letting his hand tell him anything more about it.

Zoltan watched him put it away and nodded. “And, well, so’s this.” He gave him a small, oddly heavy box. He didn’t say who it was from.

Geralt opened the lid and felt his jaw clench. The gold and steel finger fit perfectly onto his stump when he tried it, and abruptly it tightened and started to flex with his hand, back and forth. It was exactly what he’d just started wanting, only Emhyr had obviously thought of it a week ago and he’d had it done ten times better than Geralt could’ve arranged. It pissed him off even more. “Nice to see you both. Feel free to spend the night. Pretty sure the last owners are dead.” He put on his still-squelching boots and picked up the saddlebags.

“Wait!” Dandelion said, following him outside. “Geralt, I don’t know what you’ve quarreled about —”

“Not telling you, either,” Geralt said, but Dandelion hadn’t even paused.

“—but you can’t do this to me!”

“To you?”

“My cycle!” Dandelion said. “The final song! I already wrote the end, and this is not it, it’s all wrong —”

“Goodbye, Dandelion,” Geralt said, exasperated, pulling himself aboard Roach. He leaned over to shake Zoltan’s hand. “See you, Zoltan. Keep an eye on Ciri for me.”

“Aye, lad, that I will,” Zoltan said. “Good fortune on the road.”

“Thanks,” Geralt said, and nudged Roach into a trot, ignoring Dandelion’s wail of “It’s not
narratively satisfying!” rising behind him.

He went through seventeen towns in five days, slaughtering drowners, nekkers, and ghoulies by the dozen, and also several groups of the worse kind of bandits. It brought him to the coast, and he managed to find a Skellige trader, more than half a pirate, going back to the Isles, who was willing to take him aboard as a passenger. Geralt woke up one day into the journey overhearing the sailors outside his cabin discussing the amount of ransom they were going to ask Emhyr for him, and he was so pissed off he blew through the door, killed the captain and all the men standing around outside waiting to coss him over the head, and then grabbed the first mate and put a sword to his throat and told him flatly to sail to the Isles in three days if he didn’t want to join them.

He stayed awake all three days until they came into sight of Ard Skellig, and then he dived overboard and swam for shore instead of waiting for them to bring the ship into port among their clansmen. Underwater, the sapphires on his metal finger glowed with a strange light that made it easy to see through the murk, and drowners swam away from him. He climbed up into the mountains dripping and half-numb with cold and was sneezing his head off feverishly by the time he found a handful of druids living in caves and gathering herbs. They gave him a cot by the fire to sleep on, and he spent a few months with them studying new alchemical formulae and brewing potions—between bouts of coughing, which none of the potions made go away. “Ye’d be better off going somewhere southerly for a few months, Black Ones or no,” one of the brothers said.

“I’ll get over it,” Geralt said grimly.

Not much news reached the enclave, but even there they eventually got word of the marriage of Imperial Princess Cirilla to Lord Morvran Voorhis, and the fall of Tretogor. Also they heard about it when a group of Redanian assassins tried to murder the emperor of Nilfgaard. Geralt broke into the satisfied story-teller’s longwinded description of the flashing blades coated with green poison, a dozen and more of them, and demanded harshly, “Did he make it?”

“Aye, more’s the pity,” the man said, a bit deflated, and the rest of the audience looked irritatedly at Geralt for spoiling the tale. He got up and walked away from the fire. The involuntary knot in his stomach made him angry all over again, and even more when he found himself straining so he could still hear the rest of the story being told, the terrible wound Emhyr had taken and the weeks he’d spent hovering on the verge of death, even though Geralt damn well knew if Emhyr hadn’t died, the actual consequences had probably been fifteen minutes of a headache from a light scratch once you allowed for poetic license.

Once the spring sun came out, Geralt finally kicked the chest cough and headed back down to civilization. He wandered the villages of the Isles taking minor witcher contracts and selling harpy eggs to alchemists to pay for his meat and bread, and also for more of the local mead than he probably should’ve been buying, which he drank to try and pretend he wasn’t bored out of his fucking skull. He didn’t go visit Cerys or Hjalmar or any towns he’d stayed in before. If someone recognized him by name, he left that village behind the same day.

“My in such a rush?” an old woman cackled loudly after him one day as he rode out at a good clip, after a man in a tavern had asked him if he was “Gerald of Slivia or whoever his name is.” As soon as she asked, Geralt realized to his enormous irritation that he was trying to keep Emhyr from getting news about him. He’d been keeping his gloves on, too.

It pissed him off that he cared, but he didn’t stop doing it, and he kept on killing drowners and run-of-the-mill sirens and rabid bears for small purses of coin, the witcher’s bread-and-butter, like he could prove Emhyr wrong if he just kept doing it long enough. It was summer, and the taverns were inescapably full of news about the new Nilfgaardian offensive. Radovid had lost Roggeven. People
said that Princess Cirilla had led the attack on the city, and afterwards had personally kept the troops from sacking the place.

Geralt hunched angrily over his mug trying not to wonder why Emhyr hadn’t led it himself, and then trying not to care about the answer when someone else asked, and after the sailor said, “Still ill from the assassin’s blade? They say he maybe won’t live to next Yule,” Geralt shoved back his half-full tankard and went outside even angrier. He knew it was bullshit: everyone on Skellige wanted Emhyr dead, they’d put him at death’s door if he got so much as a papercut. If he really had died, that wouldn’t be a halfassed rumor, that would be a thunderclap heard loud and clear across the ocean. The assassins hadn’t gotten to him, and he was fine, and who gave a shit.

Geralt slept cold, under a tree, curled around a tiny fire he had to relight every couple of hours. Halfway through the night he sat up and rubbed a hand over his grizzled face and said savagely, “Fine, he’s dead,” trying it out just in case. “He’s already dead. So what? You weren’t going back anyway, were you?” and then he got up and dug into the bottom of Roach’s saddlebags and pulled out the velvet sack from Ciri that he’d never opened. He was still angry, but if it was going to make a difference ever, there wasn’t much point waiting to find out.

It was a handful of broken shah pieces from Emhyr’s favorite set. Random ones, as far as he could tell. He picked one up and breathed it in, but they didn’t have the smell of Emhyr’s hands on them anymore, they’d been riding around in the bottom of a leather saddlebag too long. Geralt set them up on a stump and stared at them, trying to figure out the message, if there was a message. When had they gotten broken? He and Emhyr had played a game with them on the banks of the Pontar, the night before he’d ridden out to talk to Roche. The next day he’d been in a prison in Novigrad, and Emhyr—had smashed his own set—

Geralt knocked them all off the stump with a wide angry sweep of his arm. What the hell, Ciri. He knew already. He knew Emhyr loved him. Geralt threw himself back down on his bedroll, seething. What was the point? To make him feel sorry? If Emhyr had wanted that, he could goddamn well have begged him to stay instead of trying to hang on to him by shoving him all around a board. Emhyr was too proud. And because he was too proud, he wouldn’t quit pulling the same kind of shit either. He probably couldn’t quit. He’d manipulate in his sleep if he forgot to do it during the day.

But the next morning Geralt spent half an hour finding all the pieces in the underbrush before he rode away again. He didn’t like doing it. He came across shit like that all the time, useless broken scraps tucked away in ruins like some long-dead person’s idea of treasure, and it always felt like depressing stupidity from the outside. He couldn’t make himself leave them behind either, though.

It pissed him off so much he made an even more deliberate effort to disappear, a kind of revenge. He went to taverns late at night or early in the afternoon to buy food, when he didn’t just roast something he’d hunted over a fire or barter with a single farmer. He grew his beard longer and wore a hood, and kept out of sight. He felt mean and petty and satisfied every time he slipped through another village like a ghost, and then standing in a thundering September downpour one night, he found the notice posted in a backwater village of six huts, written in waterproof ink on good paper that wouldn’t rot: If the witcher known as Geralt of Rivia should read this, one who holds him in affection would be glad to know that he is well.

He ignored it, and then found the same notice posted in the next four villages: someone was riding all over Skellige putting them up. He left them all alone, but they were gnawing at the back of his head, and then the one he found three weeks later in Svorlag, so fresh he could still smell the ink, had been revised: it said would be very glad instead.

So he’d gotten Emhyr to beg him after all, not to come back but just to let him know he wasn’t
decomposing in an anonymous ditch somewhere on the Skellige Isles because a swamp hag had got lucky. It made him feel simultaneously victorious and also like a childish asshole. He scrawled *I’m fine* on the bottom of the sheet and left it up. Then he went into the inn, paid for a room for the night and a bath and got his hair and his beard trimmed.

Once he went back to staying in taverns and letting people occasionally see his face in the street, the notices all vanished as quickly as they’d appeared. But he heard more news, inescapably, and soon he gave up trying not to listen. The peace was holding in Terneria, the harvest was looking good. But Radovid had won a couple of important battles in northern Redania to hold back the conquest, and there was a plague of necrophages erupting all over the country.

It wasn’t just corpse-eater colonies getting fat on the dead in battle, the usual wave that followed war. Radovid had ordered the Redanian army to stop even trying to suppress them. They weren’t burying their own dead. They were leaving corpses strewn like seeds through the fields that they’d retreated from, raising ghouls and nekkers to be their own front lines. They were even planting bits of corpses deep in grain shipments and sending them to Novigrad under neutral flags, selling the cargoes to the Nilfgaardian army, so when the grain got to the front the smell would lure the necrophages into their camps at night. Radovid turning monsters into weapons of war, undoing the work of a thousand years of civilization just to keep a crown on his own head, tearing apart his own nation and his own people.

It made Geralt grind his teeth and clench his hands around his cup, wanting the hilt of his silver sword, and knowing that wasn’t what he really wanted. He couldn’t keep pretending Emhyr hadn’t been right about him. The challenge of his disappearing act had been good enough to occupy the hungry parts of his brain, but now that it was gone, they were ravenous all over again. He didn’t want to plod down the Path hunting drowners and sirens. He wanted to be *there*, he wanted to *do something* that would last for longer than it took him to ride out of town, and it was getting harder to stay sure that he was never going back.

It was late October when Dandelion found him drinking in a tavern on Ard Skellig and grabbed his arm and said, “Geralt, *finally*. I’ve been looking for you for *weeks*.”

And at first it felt like an opening move, the start of a gambit, and some part of him came alight. He sighed and said, “Did Emhyr send you?” and let exasperation through, but he couldn’t really feel it.

“No,” Dandelion said. “But Geralt, you have to come back. You can’t let him die alone, longing for one last sight of you.”

“Uh huh,” Geralt said, folding his arms. Really, *that* was what Emhyr was going with? “The poison from the assassination’s still affecting him, I guess?”

“What? Oh, that story. No, Radovid’s assassins never even got into the same room as him. It was the cure. The misethere cure,” Dandelion said. “It damages the heart.”

Geralt got up from the table and went upstairs and packed his things mechanically. He put the broken shah pieces back in their bag one after another. Somehow he’d gotten into the habit of setting them up on the mantle whenever he took a room. He *had* started to feel something other than angry when he looked at them. Guess he’d taken too long after all.

It wasn’t a gambit. He knew it wasn’t. Emhyr wouldn’t have sent Dandelion to tell him that lie. He sure as hell wouldn’t have sent Dandelion to tell him that *truth*. But maybe when Emhyr had found out he was dying, that was when he’d let himself break just enough to say *would be very glad to know*, so he wouldn’t have to die wondering.
Geralt went back down, settled his tab, and followed Dandelion to the port and onto the first Novigrad-bound ship they found. Dandelion paid. Geralt stood in the prow where the icy water would spray his face with every wave and spent most of the journey there, using it not to think. In Novigrad he followed Dandelion off the ship and through the streets—the black sun flying from dozens of rooftops, and Nilfgaardian patrols keeping the peace—all the way to Temple Isle, and up to an office, and on the other side of the desk—

“About fucking time,” Dijkstra said. “Did you have to look in every fucking tavern in Skellige?”

“Just about!” Dandelion said. “No one wanted to talk to me.”

“What the hell,” Geralt said, and then he turned around and grabbed Dandelion by the collar with something furious between rage and hope. “Is there anything wrong with Emhyr?” he said dangerously.

“Yes, of course there is!” Dandelion strangled out, clutching at Geralt’s wrist.

“Is he *about to die*?”

“These things are all so relative,” Dandelion squeaked. “If you consider the lifespan of say an elder vampire, surely we’re all about to—”

“I’m an idiot,” Geralt said, and shoved him off and turned towards the door.

“We’re agreed on at least one thing,” Dijkstra said. “Where the fuck d’you think you’re going, witcher?”

“Back to the tavern Dandelion dragged me out of.”

“The fuck you are,” Dijkstra said. “We don’t have time for this shite. That rabid sack of weasels Radovid is kicking our arses either way up the Buine, and I need Emhyr to put his brain back on the fucking war instead of this little dance you two have going. Go down the hall and kiss and make up. You might as well. It’s not like I won’t tell him you came running with tears in your eyes like a snot-nosed child the instant you really thought he was dying.”

Geralt ground his teeth. “*Fuck* you, Dijkstra.” He slammed out of the room, except then he was alone outside the door, and he could see straight down the hall to the ornate study doors with a guard of six men in Imperial Guard uniforms formed up around them, rigidly on duty, and Emhyr was *right there*, and it was going to take two fucking weeks to sail to Skellige, and he’d have to spend three more weeks hunting enough drowners to pay for his passage, and Geralt swore under his breath and stalked to the door. “Open it,” he said bitterly, and the guards still knew him and did it.

Emhyr said, “I trust there is an adequate reason for,” as he started to raise his head, and then he stopped.

“Did you have those notices posted?” Geralt demanded, slinging his swords and his crossbow off over his head. “Or was that Dijkstra, too?”

“What has Dijkstra done?” Emhyr said, watching him unmoving. Geralt stripped off his gauntlets and tossed them in a heap in the corner of the room.

“Set me up to believe the misethere cure damaged your heart,” Geralt said grimly. He sat down on the chair across from the desk to pull off his boots.

“How unexpectedly poetic of him,” Emhyr said. “And the notices were indeed mine, so one cannot
even call it wholly inaccurate.” He took the chain of office from around his shoulders and got up from the desk and came around to him, and seized a fistful of his hair and kissed him savagely while Geralt desperately yanked at the buckles of his armor. They didn’t talk for a considerable amount of time after that. Turned out the misethere hadn’t been responsible for a lot of things.

Geralt sat up on the carpet afterwards and ran his hand through his sweaty hair. Damn, he needed a bath. “I’m still pissed off at you.”

“I would hardly expect otherwise,” Emhyr said, but he was propped on his elbow looking at Geralt with something as close to soft as his raptor’s eyes could possibly have managed.

“I might be more pissed off at Dijkstra now, though,” Geralt said grudgingly.

“I must remember to reward him. I am sorry you should have been dragged back through so crude a method.”

“What was your plan?” Geralt said, because of course there had been a plan.

Emhyr shrugged. “You are a witcher. I meant to offer you a contract.”

“A contract.”

Emhyr stood up and went to the desk. Watching him was a suddenly odd experience. He wasn’t a stunningly beautiful sorceress; he wasn’t even a handsome young man, hardened with labor or military work. He kept himself in reasonably good trim, but Geralt had never consciously wanted to just—look at him before. And now he did, greedy for the sight of him after all this time starved of it: his broad shoulders and wide back, heavy thighs, even the softness at the belly and sides; all the skin shaved clean in the Nilfgaardian tradition, bathed and scraped and oiled so Geralt could run a hand from his shoulders all the way to his ass in one perfect smooth glide. He’d just done it, and he wanted to do it again already, and he wanted to nose at the back of his neck underneath his hair, and he wanted to mouth the skin over his collarbones, and he wanted.

Emhyr was poking through the papers on his desk, saying, “You have an almost limitless supply of obstinacy, but I thought even so a year would see you at the limit of your capacity for, shall we say, the well-trodden stretch of the Path. Ah, here.” He dug out a rolled and sealed parchment sitting on the corner. “I meant to send it at the end of the week.”

He turned round and saw Geralt watching him, and got a peculiar expression like he wasn’t sure if he was gratified or irritated. Geralt grinned at him and made it even more of a leer, and Emhyr compressed his lips. It was great. Geralt held out a hand. “Well, let’s have it.”

Still looking annoyed, Emhyr handed it to him and reached down to start putting his clothes back on, pointedly. Geralt made a loud wistful sigh just to bother him some more even as he cracked the seal.

“So what were you going to,” and stopped, his throat closing into a tight hot lump as he read The Redanian army have deliberately spurred a plague of necrophages along the front lines which threatens to infest the entire North with the creatures for generations to come, and he let it down and put a hand over his face laughing a little, and said brokenly, “I’m never playing shah with you again, you brilliant fucking son of a bitch.”
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