Afflictions of the Heart

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Summary

Aloy is content with finding her own way through the world while the tribes are desperate for her aid in rebuilding what was lost to the Eclipse. Prospects emerge from every corner of the land, none that she finds herself ready to face, even a kind king’s offer to secure their future in peace. Exhausted from the constant demands, Aloy daringly seeks the company of a man notorious for seeing people as mere disposable pleasures, Nil. Helplessly intertwined in his being, Aloy seeks to know what events tore him apart so that they might grasp a chance at helping recover what could have been, in her eyes, a better man. In her search for truth, she discovers a unique history hidden beneath the bloodshed - one of beauty, sadness, and acceptance.

As word of their companionship spreads, Nil suddenly finds his second chance at life in jeopardy when someone threatens to bring his past deeds to the surface. He is then forced to choose between paths of either the lone warrior who fulfills his own desires or the soldier who knowingly sacrifices it all for the future of those who wished to forget his existence.
The silver-eyed Carja soldier treaded quietly through the canyon, keeping off the trail. A full moon hung in the sky, bathing the desert in silvery blue. A flock of glinhawks soared above a nearby mesa, scanning the area for any metallic carcasses to snatch up and mutilate. Nearby forests had been changed into nothing but fields of stumps as the loyalists turned every resource they could find into fuel for weaponry, no longer having Oseram slaves available for blacksmithing. The reconnaissance team informed the ambush party that Sun King Jiran’s followers were holed up in a small village north-east of Sunfall. The Shadow Carja soldiers had taken the village huts cabins for themselves, forcing the owners to sleep outside in the wilds.

There was a team of five ahead of him and a team of eight at the rear. When the signal is given, the company would begin the raid. The orders were clear, kill every defector, maim no innocent. Rescue any wounded survivors. The rules were simple enough to follow. The Carja Soldier was not fearful for the coming confrontation. His hands twitched in anticipation. The only concern was that he would end up out-living the war. Some said that is what makes him the better soldier but the Carja Soldier knew that there was more to battle than being superior in combat. It was about being the one standing in the end.

The village rested in the depression of a canyon. There were five small houses total. Not a soul was in sight. In the far distance, above the small village, a torch was lit, signaling the readying of the strike. The platoon swept into position, setting fire traps throughout the area. The doors were barred from the outside in order for no one to escape. The Carja Soldier’s fingers twitched as he poised himself behind a boulder, ready for the ambush. It would begin any second.

“What are you doing here?” The Carja Soldier looked down to see a starving toddler boy staring up him. Something wasn’t right.

“Fire!” roared the commander. The platoon unleashed a swarm of fire arrows onto the thatch rooftops of the houses. From above the village, sharp-shot arrows rained down. The platoon had been set up. Innocent screams erupted from the burning houses as the village was overrun with Loyalist soldiers. There had been a traitor among the ranks.

At the Carja Soldier’s feet lay the toddler, pierced by an arrow, blood pooling around his sandals.

“For the one true sun-king!” a loyalist soldier leaped out from the other side of the boulder and slashed at the Carja Soldier who dodged and rolled to the side. The Carja Soldier drew his blade and gutted his opponent without hesitation.

“You betrayed us!” cried out one from the ambush party, pointing to the commander. The accused removed their helmet, revealing a red tattoo across his face, one that the Carja Soldier was not familiar with. It was a circle with a line cutting the bottom of it. This man was an imposter – the commander has long since been dead. Platoon members charged at the man in furious vengeance. The imposter was holding a strange heavy automatic weapon, that of which cut down everyone, friend or foe alike.

The Carja Soldier slew every adversary in his path. Making blade meet skin was the only solace he could find during this twisted turn of events. One by one, fallen heads kissed the dirt, mixing the soil with crimson blood. The madness ensued as long as the fires upon the houses burned, cremating their inhabitants. The Carja soldier’s vision grew hazy. He began to only see red. The fires eventually smoldered and dawn crept from below the horizon. Reinforcements from Meridian would be on their way. The Carja Soldier saw the traitor, the one who sabotaged the ambush. He had just cut through the last member of the platoon before collapsing to the ground from an earlier blow to the leg.
The Carja Soldier walked slowly towards the last survivor, the imposter.

“Haha…ha… like what you see, young man? It’s more of what’s to come,” cackled the traitor.

The Carja Soldier raised his blade towards the sky.

“What do you think you’re doing? You know your orders. Now you’re going to take me back to Meridian. I’m a survivor, see?” said the imposter. “If you don’t, they’ll execute –.” he couldn’t finish. The Carja Soldier’s blade impaled the imposter through the chest. The soldier stared into the eyes of his victim until their pupils clouded over with death, feeling satisfaction sweep over him like sudden overcast on a sizzling summer day. There would be no survivors.

The reinforcements were nearing the site of destruction. The Soldier could see them from afar. He returned to the place where the child’s body rested, bloody and motionless. The Carja Soldier knelt down beside the child’s corpse and covered his eyelids. Seeing there was nothing else to be done other than await his judgement, the soldier leaned against the boulder and closed his eyes. The soldier was no stranger to collective punishment, able to recall his first experiences serving under the addle-minded Sun-King. But the new leader on the throne, the righteous and pure-hearted prince - he would likely not accept the old conventions of battle, nor stay to traditional punishment. Well-intended actions are not without their regrets, however. This massacre is a primary example.

When the soldier uncovered his eyes, he jumped back, startled by the new image. The corpse had transformed into the body of a young woman with fair skin and vermilion hair. There she lay, lifeless beside a broken bow and shattered spear. Blood was trickling from her mouth. She had been impaled by the tail of a demonic machine. Suddenly, his entire surroundings went ablaze. He reached out to the young woman but her body turned to ash, searing his hand.

Nil slowly opened his eyes to see the campfire flicker in front of him. His hand was outstretched towards the fire - the source of his fresh burns. He waited a moment before retracting it, accepting the snarling heat. Across from Nil was the woman in his dream, the corpse in his nightmare. She was sleeping curled up on her side. They were resting from a long day’s battle against the bandit stronghold, Shattered Kiln.

There was something strangely different about the young woman, Nil had noticed. The huntress usually fought with restraint, unsure of whether or not she wanted to truly let loose an arrow upon her opponent. She pitied her victims, regardless of their villainous nature. This day had been particularly different. She killed every bandit without single wince or hesitation, something completely out of character for her.

Ever since her travels into the northern snowy mountains, her behavior had become slightly altered. After returning from her venture, the girl had grown seemingly jaded by whatever she had discovered within the ruins. Returning with her was a heavy burden, but one she would not openly discuss with others or at least not yet. She had informed Nil of the Eclipse, but Nil had his reservations about involving himself in another conflict between opposing factions, much to her disapproval.

The young woman let out a sleeping shiver.

Their past encounters had not been pleasant. Their differences lead to arguing, despite their mutual understanding of each other’s fundamental virtues. Nil respected her decision to abstain from one last honorable affair, but the ideals upon which her decline was grounded upon perturbed him. She naively believed that there lies a place for him beyond inconsequential carnage of bandit slaying. She would be understanding if she learned more about him, but he secretly wished she never did. The girl did not fully comprehend what it means to be standing at the edge of all things, to see the dark abyss as the only way forward, unable to go back the way one came. She wanted to believe that there was a semblance of good inside the hearts everyone, a sense of compassion that gave all
bloodshed a deeper meaning beyond the purpose of selfish inclinations. She wanted to believe that the hunter was of no exception.

"I'll disappoint you." Nil whispered.

The huntress shivered once more in the cold. He quietly rose up and retrieved a boar-skin blanket he had looted from the Bandit’s stockpile. Gently, he placed the blanket on her exposed skin. Nil did not know the details of her struggle, but strife had it's way of making an outward appearance and he pitied her.

“Need to… Avad… Elisabet,” she mumbled, miserably.
“Acquainted with the Sun King, I see,” he said as he sat on a wooden bench and peered up at the stars. *It’s a long story,*” she told him earlier, doubtful that he would understand.

The headhunter closed his eyes, knowing that sleep wouldn’t come. But for someone else, it could. Nil grabbed his weapons and departed the camp.
Contemplation

Chapter Summary

Revised Drabble :P

Chapter Notes

Under revision.

He had heard the stories from the whispering Nora who secretly weaved in and out of the sacred land, disguised as Carja tradesmen. They had discussed the derangement as being the fault of the event of a motherless daughter’s birth – a malicious omen. During the Red Raids, Nil could hear the trembling sobs of prisoners blaming their misfortune on the “no-mother outcast.” The derangement, the raids, the bloodshed – all fault was placed on a nebulous adolescent. The unjust superstition more than once caused Nil to grimace in his years of active duty during the Carja wars. The Nora were as feebleminded as they come to assume the mysterious circumstances of an infant’s birth those many years ago had caused increased aggression of machines. Nil did not doubt that they were connected, however, especially now.

Even so, the Mad Sun-King Jiran made no more sense when he decided to appease the blazing sphere in the sky with the slaughter of innocents in the sun ring, all considered as just and holy sacrifice in the hour of desperation. Did Jiran really hope pleading to a higher power with blood would eventually end the raging of the machines? Or was he looking for an excuse to murder at the slightest remark?

Nil was disinterested in religious dogma or temporality. Regardless of an individual’s devoutly lived life, or one that was wrought with heathenism, everyone met their end. Mortality was the only truth.

Still, when he first saw her approach him in the sacred lands, lead only by her curiosity, Nil knew that the life he once understood was going to be forever changed. He had not encountered a demon that day. It was only a young woman out for blood who rode towards him on a strider - a unique sight to behold. Instead of representing the derangement and aggression of the machines, the huntress turned the tale around by calming even the most vicious of the robotic terrors. She had been the complete opposite of the Nora’s claims.

And now they worship her.

The beautifully spry huntress was no devil of urban legend, but a woman whose steadfast nature enabled her to overcome the harsh trials of surviving the wilds and the wickedness of humanity, despite her youth and inexperience. She sought justice not for the sake of her spiteful tribe, but for mankind, avenging and defending any person fortunate enough to have come within the reach of her compassion. The headhunter found respect in her resolve, despite not sharing an ounce of it.

Nil could hear her voice in his head, scolding him for his destructive and untamed disposition
towards warfare. He returned her words with displayed dissatisfaction whenever he noticed she was holding back.

He was patient. She simply was not.

But those moments… when she would take his breath away. When the arrow-shaft flew from her fingers with calculated precision. The intensity in her eyes as she would glare with relentless fury one moment and soften with compassion the next. It was the way the rain fell upon her hair, bathing it in crimson, like the red heathers she camouflaged herself in that made Nil lose himself in moments when it was only the both of them around. She would catch the raindrops in her porcelain hands, smiling blissfully into the thunderstorm above. When she was close enough to him, he could breathe in the aroma from the wildflowers she had collected on her trail.

“Perhaps you know of the Nora’s holy anointed? Her name is Aloy. She was once an outcast and now has proven herself a savior among the tribe, called upon by All-Mother herself to end this reign of terror wrought by the so-called Eclipse, the ones who use corruptors to turn the machines sick with madness.” said the Nora War-chief, gravel in every word.

“Hair like a splash of blood, tenacious as a scrapper’s jaws?” Nil asked.

“That’s… Aloy,” spoke the War-chief’s son, unused to Carja metaphors.

“‘Aloy,’ what a beautiful name, like a blood-red sunset over the horizon,” Nil replied.

“Just as she is,” said the War-Chief’s son. Dreamily. Longingly. It was no surprise to Nil that the young huntress had attracted many hearts of men and women during the course of her journey. She was the embodiment of passion and calculated fury.

The mention of corruptors caught the hunter's attention. He had not fought one personally, but the description fit perfectly of his nightmare. Onyx tail that can shred someone to pieces or impale them, killing someone in an instant. They turn the mechanical beasts into enraged demons, seeping with corruption that ate away at both skin and metal. The corrupted machines were difficult enough to kill as they were, each attack unprovoked, accompanied with madness that spread and consumed.

Aloy.

“They’re murderers and they’re raising up an army of machines. That’s a little more than political!” she had snapped.

“Don’t hate me for being single-minded. Besides, I doubt how much longer the Shadow Carja are going to last, if you’re going in for the kill,” he replied, attempting to subdue her indignance.

She was furious with him, he could tell. But a week wouldn’t be long enough to explain why he had reservations about joining the cause.

The young huntress was weary from her burdens and whether or not she is victorious in her endeavors, this world will not thank her. Instead, her humanity will be stripped away. In their eyes, she is a political tool to be used. Tribal councils will run each other over, attempting to win Aloy’s favor. Once they gain levity over her, she will be objectified, tied down, her influenced used for their own gain. The Nora already have done this, referring to her as “the anointed one,” as if she had been one of the tribe her entire life and plead for her strength when they were all but falling apart. The Oseram, despite worshipping metal and fire, will do the same, ask for favors, employ sympathy, demand she create a standing army of machines.

Then there was the Carja. Though the beloved Sun King Avad lusts after the mighty huntress’s
spirit and body, there is no doubt that his advisors find her power and influence too convenient to not have on their side. Nil doubts that they will use threats - only clever words. She would carry out their requests willingly because of her conscience, claiming she owes them everything, despite that she had been their savior from the start.
The Face of Extinction, Aloy heads for the spire, only to encounter obstacles as well as allies. Nil finds his challenge in playing defense.

“I’m terrified,” Aloy sputtered and then winced at her admittance. She expected Nil to ridicule her for showing weakness underneath the shell of her of ancient armor, woven into her Nora clothing. Instead, he kept his view above the river, seeming as carefree as the machines in the valley.

She was staring off into the setting sun over the mesas watching the shellwalker caravan stroll up the trail towards Cauldron Zeta. Chargers had their horns the grass, sniffing the ground for blaze, all while watchers patrolled the perimeter. To the machines, it was just another day of collecting, investigating, and protecting, and Aloy found herself envying the simplicity of their roles, secretly wishing she could switch places. Any person would, right? Not the man standing next to her, the Carja hunter who had told her weeks before that he was not interested in this affair. Now he looked as if he couldn't wait for the battle to begin. She wasn't by any means upset that he decided to change his mind last minute, after all, she needed all the help she could get. But now, the question still gnawed at her side even after he had given her his explanation: impossible odds, fine company, killing without consequence.

If the answer had always been this simple, why didn't he take up her offer before? Just when she thinks she has this strange man figured out, he kindly reminds her that she doesn't understand a single thing.

Aloy shook her head in an attempt to clear her thoughts. Her tendency to overthink things never led her astray before, but now was not the time to test the limits of her mentality.

“This is your first war, isn’t it?” Nil replied, in a tone that was too aloof for her nerves, but fit perfectly in the calm of the evening. He didn't seem worried at all, and was even smiling. Why was he smiling? She didn't know if that kind of mindset was sourced in courage or simple madness. Maybe a little bit of insanity would help her right now.

“Oh this large of scale, yes. Is there any advice you can give me, other than kill everything that comes my way?” asked Aloy.

“Yes. It’s simply to never stop moving. Don’t make yourself an easy target,” Nil said. He rolled back his shoulders and gave a reassuring grin. “And if it’s any comfort, know that I will find my way to you.”

Eight hours later.
Aloy gagged on the smoke-clouded air as she struggled to move her way through the shattered village. She had applied healing salve to her wounds but the healing process was slow and time was not on her side. Nearby, she caught sight of Uthid and Nakoa engaging in combat against corrupted machines. The old soldier seemed to be faring well, his numerous years of war had accumulated to the skills needed to make an impact on the side against the threat of extinction. However, not all victories were won after felling an enemy. Nakoa shrieked in pain when the corruption ensnarled her body. Aloy desperately wanted to charge in and assist her allies, but with wounds this heavy, she would only become an interference.

Work through the pain and make your way towards the spire. Aloy winced as the smoke stung her eyes, listening to the sounds of buildings toppling around her. There wasn't a clear path in sight.

Metal screeched - a corrupted longleg lunged at her from above. Aloy did her best to roll and dodge, however there was hardly a safe place to hide in entire village set to flames. Janeva had luckily been in the city, running to her aid by blasting the longleg with freeze arrows, allowing Aloy time to attempt an escape, but not enough clean air to express gratitude.

Suddenly, a wooden beam overhead had given way. Aloy tried to jump but her boot was stuck between two heavy planks. The longleg had become unfrozen and prepared for another charge.

“I can’t die here, dammit!” Aloy shot the beam with a tearblast arrow. With a ringing echo, the impact threw her backwards onto the ground, knocking the wind out of her. On a positive note, she had become unstuck.

Unstuck but surrounded by five more scrappers that had gathered to investigate the sounds of fighting. After finishing their previous battle, Uthid and Nakoa rushed to Aloy’s defense where they engaged the corrupted beasts.

War made combat a confusing nightmare. If the various machines were not enough to take into consideration on the battlefield, Aloy had to avoid the flailing of her comrades just as much as attacks from the true adversaries. They were fine warriors, Aloy knew this. However, she had found only few people were able to work in sync with her during battles against numerous enemies. As Aloy downed a beast with a finishing stab, she began to think of a particular person, shamefully wishing for their presence at the current moment.

Where could he be?

“Aloy! To your left!” shouted Uthid as he downed the last scrapper.

A corrupted longleg charged at Aloy. While she somersaulted away from this screeching horror, another was ready to strike at her vulnerability, red tendrils from virus-afflicted nano machines dripping from its beak. As if these machines were not difficult enough face in the wilds already. Aloy guarded with her spear and braced herself for the inevitable.

Instead of attacking her, the corrupted longleg was struck with a burst of electricity.

With such deadly grace in his movements that even Glinthawks would be envious of, Nil swiftly finished off both longlegs with a thrust of his sword, one after the other. The longlegs fell to pieces onto the ground where corruption oozed from the mechanical carcasses, bubbling around his feet. Nil stepped away from the energy and sheathed his blade, seeming unfazed by the destruction and violence.
“Where the hell have you been?” Aloy shouted and quickly embraced the Carja hunter.

“Doing this and that,” Nil replied aloofly as her arms released him, slightly taken aback by her gesture of relief. There was barely a mark on him, only few shallow grazes on his skin where he had been within close enough proximity to explosions. There was a complete lack of distress on his face, only resting lines from a previous smile - a predictable juxtaposition to the current state of affairs. Aloy should not expect anything less than this sort of attitude from him. Whatever attitude seemed appropriate for the situation, Nil held the complete opposite. City being torn to shreds, possible awakening of an ancient undefeatable army – no big deal.

“Well, well. This was unexpected,” Janeva said, looking at her ex-prisoner and then at Aloy, a small smile creeping around the mouth of her former.

“So, you’re the reason as to why I’ve been encountering many of my old inmates in the smoke and fire,” Nil said to Janeva, giving his regards with a polite nod.

“Many would rather die for their freedom here than spend another day at Sunstone Rock,” Janeva explained, gesturing to the surroundings with a hand.

“I suppose that’s a fair trade.” Nil replied with shrug. He almost lazily rested his blade against his shoulder as three Carja soldiers ran frantically behind him.

“We’ve been trying to secure the maizelands, but this army seems endless,” Nakoa said, bringing them back to the battle at hand. She hung herself over her knees in an attempt to catch her breath. Despite the Nora maiden’s rough shape, the fierceness of her spirit never left her. Uthid flung scrapper oil off of his spear while Janeva felt his hand on the back of this quiver, checking how many arrows were left. With the four of them working together, Aloy thought it possible to leave the fate of the lower village in their hands without a heavy conscience.

“I need to get to the spire,” Aloy added, her heart sinking, remembering Hades’s presence rolling past her. Time was running out. Aloy began limping towards the western ridge.

“You’re injured,” Nil stated with a hint of concern. “Don’t tell me you’re going to expire before this battle is over.” Aloy was unsure if his words were rooted in compassion or disapproval.

“A building fell on me and I’m trying to walk it off, but thanks for noticing” said Aloy, exasperated. Nil noticed the blood on her side, a statement of her vulnerability.

A wall crumbled and fell between the party, dividing Aloy and Nil from the rest of the command.

“Nil!” Aloy shrieked.

A corrupted ravager tore at the two humans while another one leaped from the opposite direction. Both hunters would have been torn apart if Nil had not quickly grabbed his partner to safety. One of the ravagers fired its ballistic disc, littering the ground with bullets. Aloy ducked her head down as she dashed from the line of fire. She simply couldn’t catch a break.

The ravagers growled at the Carja soldier, who in return taunted them, almost feral, like an animal, trying to take their attention off of Aloy. One of them jumped at hunter who swiftly evaded before responding with accurately shot fire arrows at its canisters, leading up to a satisfying explosion. The other hurled itself at Aloy. She rolled under the machine and stabbed at its underside with her spear. Angrily, the machine jumped back and clawed at the huntress, that of which was blocked by Nil’s sword. He grunted against the ravager’s force, its jaws snapping at his body. Aloy hoped this was the battle that Nil lived for as she swung her spear, knocking the metal beast unconscious then
finalizing its destruction.

Aloy glanced back at the Carja Hunter. Nil’s veins were stark all around his muscles, his body worn from that last two fights in sequence, the effects of corruption were taking a toll on him. Killing, he could do. He was not so used to defending others, however.

Death leaped from above. Several Eclipse soldiers appeared and surrounded them. Aloy and Nil stood back to back, familiar with their teamwork, sensing each other’s strength.

“If you ever wonder why I don’t keep count it’s because I’d lose track,” Aloy said, gritting her teeth. She readied her spear with two hands blackened by smoke.

“Now you’re just making excuses!” Nil snarled as he cut open two enemy soldiers who charged at him without a moment's hesitation. The thrill of death ignited the hunter’s blood, finding what he lived for. Adrenaline ran through Aloy’s body, deafening her fears because she knew that they were stronger together. Heeding the call to arms, as Nil would say, Aloy allowed a smirk to pass across her face as she laid to waste the enemy forces alongside him. One by one, Eclipse soldiers fell at the feet of the two apostates, unaware of their previous deadly collaborations. For a moment, Aloy thought she could hear Nil laughing in merriment.

The ancient armor had finally recharged, rendering the enemy attacks useless. Arrows shot at her were deflected by its shield. Aloy lunged at her adversaries, piercing their insides, smashing their heads. Bodies fell to the ground as she laid her fury upon them. She only became momentarily distracted when she heard the hunter’s agonized groan. Nil’s right side had taken an arrow where his skin was exposed. Another was planted in his left shoulder.

He is going to have a hard day tomorrow if he survives this, thought Aloy. The blood trickling down his body did not force the hunter to give way, only strengthen his resolve. With a harrowing yell and glinting teeth, he slashed through the rest of the soldiers, relishing in the violence, until none were left standing.

“Damn it, look at you,” Aloy said, inspecting his gashes. His chest was heaving, his eyes reflected the flames surrounded them.

“It’s not as bad as the first time we went hunting together,” Nil grunted as he pulled out the shafts.

“Ugh, don’t bring that up. I didn’t shoot you on purpose,” Aloy said, eyes rolling at the memory.

“Let me at least help you with that.”

She reached into her medicine pouch to retrieve healing salve but was yet again interrupted.

“Aloy, lookout!” Nil pushed the huntress down with his arm, barely escaping the tail whip of a corruptor. They took cover behind a wall that still belonged to the beer tavern.

Aloy knew this machine too intimately. Faro robot. Scarab Class.

“This kind of machine doesn’t fall apart so easily, from what I have observed,” Nil said, gripping his blade, his expression vicious.

“Don’t fight it up close!” Aloy warned Nil, knowing his preferred style of combat. This machine would shred them both. He dashed left and right, avoiding projectiles thrown his direction. After freezing the machine, Aloy and Nil took cover behind what was left of the old tavern, which wasn’t much.

"It’s not like other machines. It’s from a different creator,” Aloy explained, “It shoots grenades from the canister on its back.”
“You need to keep moving. I’ll handle this,” Nil ordered. His sudden strange behavior caught Aloy by surprise. Never before would he demand that they break off before a fight was over.

“What? No, we can take it out together, like we’ve always done before,” Aloy argued. “I’m not going to let you fight a corruptor alone.”

“This is not like before,” Nil replied. “You’re its main target and you’re wounded.”

Aloy squinted through the smoke. There was an unprecedented urgency to Nil’s words, as if the war was drawing out the previous soldier from within him, preparing to act on whatever tactic necessary in order to win the fight, even if that came at the cost of his life.

But this was no ordinary war and Aloy did not consider Nil to be just another expendable human being. That’s the reason she abstained from their duel to the death in the first place.

“Don’t underestimate –” Aloy couldn’t finish as their wall was blown apart by a grenade. Aloy covered Nil with her body, taking the brunt of the explosion. Her armor’s battery was back to 0%, forcing her to draw back to evasive maneuvers.

Nil was still dazed from the blast and was trying to regain his balance. The scarab had its attention strictly on Aloy, as predicted. It jumped high in the air and landed heavily on the spot where the huntress stood seconds ago, shattering whatever contents had been beneath it. Aloy tried firing arrows but her accuracy was failing. She pulled out her ropecaster and frantically shot wired harpoons at the corruptor.

Just as she thought the machine had been fully bound, the corruptor spun completely around and shredded the wire. Cursing its cleverness, Aloy attempted a firebomb. The machine had responded faster, dousing her in corrupted energy. Aloy could barely move as defilement spread through her muscles, making her writhe in agony. The corruptor whipped its tail, throwing her into a wall. She fell to the ground, defenseless, and began coughing up blood from the force dealt to her.

The nightmare was replaying in his waking world as he saw the corrupter approach its prey, lift its tail, and ready the strike. Again, he saw her laying on the ground, almost lifeless. For a moment, he could sense her pain and fear attempting to transfix him, choke his movements, stop his breath.

He aligned his senses, heeding her cry for help. The flames and smoke surrounded them as if the world had turned itself inside out. His hand was outstretched towards her, sensing the distance between them. He couldn’t rely on his vision anymore, so he closed his eyes. One foot in front of the other, he readied himself.

Aloy flinched as she saw the tail’s end dive towards her head. Rather of finishing her off, the scarab was dealt a killing blow from its side, collapsing onto the ground. The target had been terminated, much to Aloy’s relief. Nil fell to her side, inspecting the damage.

“It could have killed you!” Aloy cried at his recklessness, weakly slapping his chest.

“No, it never stood a chance,” Nil said softly, helping Aloy to her feet. She spat the blood from her mouth and downed salvebrush. The path to the spire was finally clear for her. They stood beside each other amongst the carnage. The headhunter deeply inhaled his surroundings. Where one demonic machine fell, multiple others would take its place. Nil turned to Aloy, placing his hands on her shoulders and looked directly into her eyes.

“This is where I belong, Aloy. The spire calls to you,” Nil said.

She did not leave immediately. She didn’t want to free herself from him, not when she was finally
able to find reason within his exploits. Initially disgusted at his ways, annoyed at his homicidal relishing, she understood that he was not without his own honor. Her heart ached at the possibility of losing him, hurting even more when she realized that she had misjudged his character.

Aloy’s wisdom finally kicked in and she understood what must be done.

“Fine, but I’ll hunt you down if you die out here, understood?” Aloy said. Nil grinned at her attempted threat, blood trickling down his face.

“I wouldn’t want to have it any other way,” Nil said and readied himself for the gathering eclipse soldiers. Aloy nodded and made her way towards the ascension, pulling her greatest effort to not look back.
Relief

Chapter Summary

Aftermath of the battle against the Eclipse. Despite her own injuries, Aloy takes it upon herself to see the headhunter in a more forgiving light.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Swiftly and subtly, Aloy made her way through the infirmary tents. She noticed her tribesman, Teb, running around frantically, assisting the wounded. She walked on, not wanting to distract the stitcher from his duties. Though more sophisticated in design, Meridian’s infirmary reminded Aloy of her time at Sunfall, viewing a refugee camp for the first time. The workers had done their best in ensuring every wound was covered, utilizing whatever cloth was available, even precious silk.

Aloy saw Elida mixing potions together, creating healing remedies. Aloy smiled briefly at her as Elida delivered a sweet and welcoming glance before returning to her duties.

“Glorious hunt, fellow warrior!” Aluki was sitting on a chair with a large grin. Her left arm was in a splint. Aloy was rattled by the rejoicing, still aching from the previous day, and not quite emotionally healed.

“Glad to see you made it,” Aloy said, remembering the Banuk huntress nearly collapsing from the heat of the battle.

“Until next time,” Aluki said cheerily. Aloy hoped that next time wouldn’t include having the world at stake.

Aloy pulled a hood over her head and walked on towards the area containing those in critical condition. On a thatched bed lay her partner, seemingly unconscious. His helmet, vest, and gauntlets had been removed. There were visible wounds from various attacks – bellowback burns, corruption bruises, arrow cuts, etc. There seemed to be no sign of head injury, though a few metal plates from his helmet were missing. After he fell the corrupter and saved her life, Nil had continued fighting until he collapsed at the remains of a deathbringer.

“Black, of course,” Aloy said. She placed her hand to his head, feeling the soft texture of his hair. She doubted he would allow her to do so while awake. The original image of him in her mind had been altered by what she was currently seeing. No longer the malicious headhunter with an unrelenting desire for blood and violence – motionless on the table, he was another man who had almost lost his life fighting against the Eclipse, against nearly impossible odds.

Nil looked unusually serene as he slept. Taking advantage of her anonymity, she knelt down and whispered to him, unsure whether or not he was able to listen.

“It appears I misjudged you, Nil. You told me that you didn’t want to get involved, being that the war was political, yet here you are, as a result. You saved many lives during the battle. I suppose it was a bit of a change for you.”
Damn her, she was acting like a complete ass, but at the same time Aloy wasn’t quite certain how to express the way she was feeling. She wasn’t even sure what she was feeling. A lump was forming in her throat. The seams that held her together ever since the attack on the proving were becoming undone. Her pride wanted her to remain quiet but her heart desired mending.

She clutched his motionless hand and spoke to him, “I’m not good expressing myself, but I would at least like to thank you being out there when we needed it the most. I hope the battle was everything you wanted it to be. As soon as I leave, I will be making my way west to visit my mother’s resting place. I will return, though, and when I get back, I don’t want to hear about how there’s nothing left to hunt because, as long as I’m still alive, there will be conflict. I suppose my strife is where you find peace, and I guess… I can be okay with it. I would like to get to know you better. May we find each other again in the future, but that can only happen if you survive today…”

Tears pooled in her eyes. Aloy took out what was left in her medicinal pouch and rubbed it on her hands. Lifting a cloth from one of his wounds located on his ribs, she gently rubbed in the salve. Aloy let out a mournful laugh, remembering his earlier claim, stating that she had wounded him “not by metal.”

She began rubbing his body, knowing the muscles would eventually cramp up if left unused for too long. She started with his neck, moving downwards to his shoulders. Even unconscious, the firmness of his muscles never left him. He is a man of well-crafted physique, like a strider operating at full capacity. Except he was hardly operational at the moment.

“Please, say something, even if it upsets me,” Aloy begged.

“Aloy…?”

How long have his pale blue eyes been staring at her? Aloy looked into them as if she were meeting someone else. Those eyes she had never met before that were full of repose and clarity.

Drops of water fell upon Nil’s face. The Carja soldier’s eyelids began to flicker and then slowly pry open. With immense will, he opened his eyes to see the young heroine softly crying over his aching body. Her fingers wrapped around his hands, shaking. She reached into her pocket and began applying medicine to his skin.

“…I’m sorry,” she sobbed, her hands were bruised and burned. She was hooded, likely to avoid attraction.

“Aloy…?” Nil coarsely whispered.

“Nil? Nil! Thank goodness…” Aloy lightly caressed his face as if to make sure what she was seeing was true. He had never seen her behave this emotionally. She must have made an additional discovery after the battle that had moved her so.

Nil groaned as he tried to move his body. His limbs felt as if heavy sand blocks were weighing them down. Every part of him ached.

“Don’t try to move your body – give your injuries time to heal,” Aloy said and poured water into a nearby bowl. She supported his neck with her arm, feeling her own bruises inform her of their presence under the weight. Nil tried supporting himself on the table with his hands, but could not summon the strength to do so. It had been many years since he’d been rendered to this state of near immobility. He didn’t miss this feeling. Nil groaned through gritted teeth, unable to think clearly.
“Calm down,” Aloy hushed him. Carefully, she pressed the clay bowl to his lips, allowing him to drink the water, keeping him from dehydration.

After delicately laying his head back down on the table, Aloy applied more salve to his wounds. Nil felt every touch of her fingertips against his skin. She tried to be gentle, but his skin was on fire. He would groan in pain every now and then, wincing, gritting his teeth at the stinging discomfort, understanding how it was necessary.

“Do you want dream-willow?” Aloy asked. Nil shook his head.

“Need anything?” Elida had walked over with potions. She nearly dropped them when she saw Aloy’s patient.

“Oh! You’re uh…” Elida stumbled on her words. She was staring at Nil fearfully. The nobleman’s daughter, Nil remembered.

“He’s in pretty bad shape,” Aloy commented, “Hand me some clean rags, Elida, and don’t tell anyone I’m here.”

Elida obliged and went to retrieve them.

“Do you two know each other?” Aloy asked. Nil nodded. Aloy furrowed her brow in curiosity. She felt an unpleasant sensation in her gut. Her hands became sweaty.

“Not like… that,” Nil insisted, taking notice of Aloy’s increased tension.

“Oh,” Aloy said sheepishly, feeling guilty at her assumptions.

“Or at least not her like that,” Nil admitted quietly. The guilt dissolved almost immediately.

“Please explain,” Aloy said, eyebrow raised.

“She… had many friends.”

“Wow, do I even want to know how many?” Aloy demanded. Nil groaned, rolled his eyes, and shook his head.

“Dammit, sorry. I don’t know why I’m even asking you this, as if it’s any of my business,” Aloy said, regaining her composure.

“Here are the bandages, Aloy,” Elida whispered. “He looks a lot better than when he was first delivered to the infirmary. I didn’t even recognize him then.”

“Don’t say that out-loud or you might hurt his ego,” Aloy jested. Nil let out a slight chuckle. She moved down to his thighs, applying salve and massaging his aching muscles. Before getting his calves, Aloy noticed that Elida was staring at the both of them. When Aloy peered at her friend, Elida quickly turned away, as if embarrassed. Before Aloy could ask what was going on, Elida left from her spot and returned to her work.

“That was weird,” said Aloy.

“You’ll understand when you’re older,” Nil muttered.

“Do you have to be such a smartass?” Aloy said, “What did she see that was so funny?”

“You could ask her yourself,” he replied.
“You could quit being so evasive,” Aloy retorted.

“How often do you see men and women interacting with each other in Meridian?”

“I’m not of the Carja, so what does that have to do with me?”

“I’ll have that dream-willow.”

“Oh, how fucking convenient.”

“Just cut me open and let me bleed out, make things easier for you.”

“And show you an act of mercy? I think I’ll keep you alive instead, just to spite you, make you agonize in every waking moment. Or even better, I’ll place a shock collar on your neck and zap you if and when you get out of line.”

“Your cruelty is unparalleled,” Nil was now grinning through his pain. Aloy couldn’t help but break a smile in return.

“Remember when you tripped and fell between the battlements?” Nil asked. Aloy flushed red at the memory.

“I didn’t trip and fall, I was pushed off,” she said.

“Dead bodies don’t push people, but fine. The corpse pushed you off,” Nil says, “I thought you had actually fallen to your death. I was thinking, ‘oh no, how am I going to explain this to both the Sun King and Nora Matriarchs that the chosen one literally fell off a cliff to her death?’”

“But I didn’t,” Aloy said, flustered. “Instead of landing on spikes, there was a turkey there to break my fall.”

“That’s right – you literally sat on a turkey and it saved your life. I thought I was going to die of laughter that day, I couldn’t believe what I had just witnessed, your graceful movements are beyond my comprehension,” said Nil.

“It totally was not funny at the time,” Aloy said but couldn’t maintain solemnity on her face. She broke into laughter with him.

“It was totally hilarious,” Nil said, mimicking her vernacular. Aloy shot him a dirty look but smiled as she wiped the residue off of her hands. His soreness was gradually fading. Aloy could see the healing process at work.

“I’m heading out west today and I should be gone for almost a week. Could you survive without me until then?” Aloy asked.

“Unfortunately, yes,” said Nil, frowning.

“Don’t give me that look. You’re in no shape to fight, so don’t even try going berserker or else all of this would have been for nothing,” Aloy warned, stretching her hands.

“You’re asking too much of me,” groaned Nil.

“I’ve been told I’m high-maintenance,” Aloy replied proudly.

“No shit.”
As Aloy gathered her items and bid her partner farewell, Nil heaved a huge sigh of exhaustion, comprehending the last 24 hours of his life. He had survived impossible odds and so had she, barely. To be honest with himself, he did not at first truly care about the outcome of the war. Mortality is truth and death is inevitable, it doesn’t matter whose side you chose. However, Nil had been particularly biased this time around.

Despite that his original motives, his reason to fight was changed when he saw the deathbringers arise from the ground, feeding on nearby lifeforms. Sins from the old-world haunted those living in the present, especially Aloy, who had been fighting on her own from the beginning, not for glory, but for answers. Nil hoped she had found what she was looking for, because the ordeal will be costly, far after the battle is over.

Where one war ends, another begins, and not all wars are fought on the same battleground or with similar tactics. Aloy had proven herself desirable in the eyes of many in the region. At the same time, she had displayed strength and ferocity, that of which will be challenged. The further her influence grew, the deeper the political trap she made for herself. Even worse, Nil had shared his involvement with her openly in battle. His trap was being created as well, slowly forming. Eyes would be upon him once more.

She had made available to him the fight of his life. Was there anything to regret?

Nil thought about that more than once as he looked and saw a figure in the distance, staring at him. They had been there ever since his awakening.

Watching.

Listening.

Observing.

Chapter End Notes

The suspense pulls the anticipation "tight as a wire."
Aloy takes it upon herself to help clear the rubble from Meridian.

Nil can't avoid violence.

The journey to and from Elisabet’s grave had not taken as long as Aloy had originally expected. On her strider, she rode through herds of grazing machines who did not bother a second glance at her direction. Storm birds soared the skies, ionizing the air, but kept its distance as long as Aloy did the same. Ravagers patrolled mountains but there was no attempted pursuit at the heels of her steed. She had returned to the Sundom within four and a half days.

Meridian was making a quick recovery from the battle. The palace’s wall had been the first to be refortified. Afterwards, Oseram engineers and Carja architects guided workers on reconstructing the lower market areas and western ridge. Within less than a week the area should be clear for rebuilding.

Aloy did not plan to return without gifts. Trotting beside her were two tramplers and a behemoth. Workers quickly ceased their labors and backed away from the small herd, unsure of their safety. Banuk hunters cheered at Aloy’s arrival, seeing the soothing songs of benevolence spirits at work. Who knows? The Banuk claims might be right after all.

“Damn, girl. You always know how to make an entrance,” Petra approached Aloy who had unsaddled herself from the strider.

“Did you pick these babies up for me?” Petra asked with a flirtatious smile.

“For the rebuilding of Meridian, but especially for you, Petra,” Aloy replied. “Bring the engineers over. We’ll discuss rebuilding the city.”

The tramplers crushed and bulldozed any rubble left from the wreckage and placed it in a pile near the outskirts of the city. Bold children would take closer looks at the machines, never once seeing them work alongside humans before. With instructions from the engineers, Aloy directed the Behemoth to levitate log piles and stones, constructing new buildings.

“This is a spectacular scene to behold,” Blameless Marad approached Aloy with Erend by his side.

“I keep telling you she’s amazing,” Erend said and warmly hugged her.

“Indeed, but I hear enough of that from the Sun-King,” Blameless Marad stood next to her with an appreciative smile.

“You truly go above and beyond expectations, Aloy,” Marad continued. “The amount of time it would have taken for the city to recover is something I don’t want to consider. But my worries were put to rest as I witnessed this from above. The markets will be up and running in almost no time at all.”

“I do what I can to help. I owe it to the Sun-King and Meridian for taking a stand against the
Eclipse. I couldn’t have achieved any of this without your help,” Aloy said, modestly.

“I seriously doubt that. You’ve convinced me that you’re capable of nearly anything,” Erend said.

“Thanks,” Aloy said, accepting the mutual appreciation. “How is Avad doing?”

“Probably not so well since Blameless Marad isn’t there to help him with his paper-work,” Erend answered.

“He’s –“

“Aloy!” she was swept off her feet by the arms of the Sun-King. Aloy yelped in surprise and delight. One of the tramplers turned around in curiosity.

“Not doing paperwork,” Marad muttered under his breath.

“By the grace of the sun, you have returned to us!” Avad exclaimed and beamed at the sight of the behemoth levitating wood beams and arranging them properly. It was not there to hurt them.

“In the service of the city, nonetheless, your radiance,” Marad nodded to the work at hand.

“Of course, blessing us all on this day,” Avad said and stared in wonder at the machines.

“They are docile, correct?” the king inquired.

“As long as there is no perceived threat in the area,” Aloy assured him. “The derangement seems to have slowed down and the machines have mostly assumed their regular functions. If they get out of hand, I’ll take care of it.”

“It’s just as I remember. It’s been twenty years since I’ve seen peaceful machines,” sighed Blameless Marad. “I agree with the city engineering head – it is quite convenient to have machine-whisperer on our side.”

*Our side.*

Aloy blinked at the thought and let it pass. They’re simply showing gratitude.

All that once stood previously would be made again, just as it was before. The process took approximately two days to complete. Both nights, Aloy slept alongside her robotic companions near the edge of the maizelands, despite protests from both Erend and the sun-king. The dull hum of the behemoth’s circuitry created a rhythm that laid her heart to rest. Peaceful sleep found her within the safety of the synthetic herd.

“Return to your duties. You did fine work here,” Aloy whispered and patted each machine on its rear, setting them back on their original designations. She thought of the praise given to her by those witnessing her tame the machines. Aloy knew that she was actually one of the many who were able to override their functions, though each person their own process. She thought of Sylens and the three ravagers he had strategically lured to Sun-ring, mentioning that overriding machines was not too different than the Banuk doing their spiritual rites. The connection between the two had sparked Aloy’s curiosity.
Nil avoided walking openly in the streets at night. Instead of using the common paths, he leaped rooftop to rooftop, frequently checking over his shoulder. After his pursuers had lost his trail, he would return the stalking. There were always three or more of them and they were equipped with crude weapons. He saw their tattoos, a label of their origins. They had begun pursuing him not long after he left the safety of the infirmary. Tonight, there were five.

The thrill of the hunt had returned. Uneven odds were the best odds. The group was in a dark alley, looking around, discussing where their target could be next. Armed with only a switch-blade, Nil dropped to the dirt ground in complete silence behind the group.

“Looking for someone?” Nil asked. The gang jumped at his voice. They turned around and drew their weapons.

“Decided to come back to the holy city, did you? That was your first mistake, Shadow of the West,” growled one.

“It’s been forever since someone called me by that,” Nil says, “Am I supposed to know who you are?”

“Don’t act like you don’t remember,” said another, “We were inmates at Sunstone Rock. While we rotted in there for three years, your sentence was shortened, even though your crimes more than out-weighed our own.”

“I served my time with good behavior. Picking fights with Janeva and trying to poison the guards is not a good way to earn probation,” Nil said, crossing his arms.

“You can earn many things by snitching on others, sucking off the warden from behind closed doors. And now you’re in bed with the sun-king’s new mistress, the red-haired whore…”

A switchblade was planted in the thug’s right eye before he could finish his sentence. He fell to the ground with a thud.

“I don’t take well to unflattering rumors,” Nil said, his voice cold as ice, “especially when they’re involving a beautiful woman,”

The thugs charged at him, armed with weapons that were blunt, spiked, and chained. Nil grinned and laughed wildly.

Oh, it was on.

Attacks came from nearly every direction. Nil jumped into the air and landed on top of one’s shoulders. With a turn of his ankles, Nil twisted their head around and broke their neck. Another thug swung a scimitar, barely missing the headhunter’s solar plexus. The danger was too thrilling, making Nil miss his time incarcerated as he was fond of the occasional prison fight.

Nil dodged a blow from a spiked club, and connected his fist with their nose. He knelt down, pulled out the knife from the first thug’s eye-socket, grabbed the shoulder of another adversary, and stabbed him three times in the gut. The two remaining thugs took a step back in horror. Nil was untouched and unfazed.

The thugs dropped their weapons and scrambled immediately, running in opposite directions.

“Pitiful,” muttered Nil.
He did not leave at once because he was not yet alone.

“I know you’re out there. You might as well show yourself,” Nil called to them.

The figure revealed himself to be a middle-aged man dressed in court attire.

“You’ve gone soft, Shadow,” the man says, “All quick deaths, even letting two escape?”

His voice sounded like the hissing of a snake.

“I can show you a painful death, if that’s what you’re asking,” Nil replied, unamused.

“No, no, I’m just making an observation,” said the stranger.

“Are you one of Marad’s men? I don’t remember you being on the council,” Nil said. “What do you want?”

“To put it simply, I want the natural order to return here in Meridian. I want things to align back to the way they should be,” the stranger replied. “You could either help with that endeavor or you could be the one standing in our way. I’m simply trying to decipher which it is.”

“What is this about?” Nil said with growing concern. “What are you, a survivor from Sunfall?”

“No, no. I’m here in Meridian, in the palace, keeping close watch on the water’s current,” they said.

“Be wary of the past. It is never far behind the future,” with that, the stranger disappeared into the darkness.

Nil did not like being reminded. He washed his hands in a nearby well and made his way towards the palace.
Meetings and Confusion

Chapter Summary

Nil and Avad meet each other again for the first time in two years. An unexpected visitor shows up, distracting Nil from his original objective.

The Sun-King was relaxing on his sofa reading century old scriptures with candles lighting the area, just as Nil remembered him, years ago.

A rock hit Avad’s book, slamming it into his nose.

“Ugh, are you being serious?” Avad shot up and glanced at his surroundings. There was only one person other than his older brother Kadaman who would antagonize him in that manner.

“Nilead?” Avad said as Nil dropped down from sun roof overhead.

“I hope you don’t mind that I didn’t make an appointment. But I believe I’ve waited long enough,” Nil answered.

“Indeed, two years,” Avad smiled and the men grabbed each other’s hands in salutation. They proceeded to walked over to the balcony that overlooked the holy city. The lights from below spoke life and resilience.

“You have questions or information?” Avad inquired.

“Do you know the names and faces of all your advisors?” Nil asked.

“Blameless Marad mainly handles that,” Avad replied.

“You’ve got to be joking,” Nil said in dismay. “Do you know how dangerous that is?”

“I trust Marad to do his work well. I lead my people by example and he handles legislation,” Avad explained.

“Marad is just one man, Avad,” Nil said, slapping the balcony in frustration.

“If there is an issue I will have it resolved,” Avad said with authority, “I’ve just been recently distracted.”

There was a moment of silence between them.

“By Ersa’s death?” Nil inquired, attempting to sound apologetic. Though the hunter bore no ill will towards the woman, he believed she had it coming.

“That, and someone else. But that’s another story for another time,” Avad answered.

“They had better be quite the unique individual if they’re distracting you from your responsibilities,” Nil muttered. Avad turned away from him and looked at the glimmering skyline.
“Trust me, she is. Speaking of responsibilities, I got word that you joined our side in the fight against the Eclipse,” Avad said, still looking at the city. “Did Sunstone Rock treat you well after all?”

“That’s wishful thinking,” Nil replied, not wanting Avad to believe he had been changed for “the better.”

“I disagree,” said Avad. “I’ve seen many differences in you already.”

“Whatever helps you sleep at night, though I should add that I appreciate you giving me such a brief sentence. Though the prison’s hospitality was of paramount quality, I’m relieved that it’s over,” Nil said, not fond of the heated isolation.

“I wish more could have been done,” Avad sighed, “I’ve been aware of your integrity ever since we were young. But there were no alive witnesses, my friend. No one to testify. I never believed the allegations, however you know how grave a situation that places you in.”

Nil shrugged.

“I don’t like leaving a job incomplete. But it doesn’t really matter in the end when communications are sabotaged and innocent people are massacred,” Nil said, tapping his fingers on the ledge. The memories of the canyon slaughter began to reply in his mind.

“Like hell it doesn’t matter. Every action is judged by its intent,” Avad argued, then remembering his father who sacrificed others in order to end the derangement.

“Does it truly matter when the results remain the same?” Nil asked. Avad was silenced by this for a moment. Whether or not Nil had been guilty of his convictions, Avad couldn’t have spared him from his sentence due to lacking evidence.

“Then why did you join the battle against the Eclipse? What made you change your mind?” Avad asked. Footsteps came from the stairs.

“Avad! I needed to discuss…” Aloy stopped in her tracks at the sight of Nil standing next to the sun-king, shoulder to shoulder. She raised a hand behind her ear in puzzlement, wondering what was going on in front of her. A previous war criminal would be the last person she’d expect to find at the sun palace.

“Aloy, it is good to see you on this wonderful night,” said Avad happily and hugged her per usual. Aloy glanced at Nil innocently, noticing his jaw tighten. He changed his body language and relaxed against the balcony, as if taking the entire interaction in stride.

“Nilead, have you met Aloy? She’s an extraordinary individual, blessed with many gifts and hails from the Nora tribe,” Avad said, his hand rubbing Aloy’s shoulder, “Taming machines, clearing away bandits, interacting with the ancient world, I could go on.”

“I’ve heard about her. We may have passed each other by on the road once or twice,” Nil answered. Aloy’s eyes widened at his understated response.

“Yeah, maybe. But I think I’d remember meeting someone as unique as yourself,” Aloy said, playing the game. Avad’s arm moved down to Aloy’s waist as if she had already been claimed by him. Entitled bastard, thought Nil.

“First an Oseram warrior and now a Nora huntress. It seems the sun-king has a strong taste for exotic women,” the hunter said brazenly.
Avad’s mouth dropped open. Aloy wanted to push Nil over the balcony.

“I just wanted to inform you that the lower levels reconstruction was finished,” Aloy said coolly.

“Yes of course. It took hardly a full two days for you to heal the wounds of our city. Thank you for assisting us with the tramplers and behemoth,” Avad replied.

Nil’s eyes flashed at Aloy. How many saw her do this?

“Well, this was quite unexpected. Aloy, if you could do me a great service by not disclosing this man’s appearance at the palace. He’s a dear friend of mine from my childhood,” Avad said explained.

“Certainly, Avad,” Aloy answered and bowed her head in respect, “I can see you’re busy. I suppose I will meet with you tomorrow?”

“Of course, Aloy. You are most certainly welcome here. Always,” Avad smiled. Nil let out a cough. The Nora huntress shot him a glare before taking her leave from the palace. After she had gone, the headhunter turned and faced the Sun-King with contempt.

“Wow, that was quick,” Nil said.

“I know, our meetings are always too brief for my liking,” Avad said dreamily. Nil groaned.

“That’s… not what I meant,” Nil replied, perplexed by the king’s behavior.

“Do explain then?”

“You loved Ersa for what… years? And not even a week after her body is returned to the Claim, you are drooling over a Nora outcast? What’s next, Avad? A Banuk soothsayer?” Nil’s voice was rising as he spoke.

“The Nora’s anointed one,” Avad corrected, confused by Nilead's sudden frustration. “And it’s not like I’ve proposed she be my consort.”

Nil’s eyes flickered angrily at the mention of the word consort. He knew Avad could maintain his temper whereas Nil could not. If this were a competition, Avad would most definitely win.

“If you spent more time with her you would understand how and why she moves me so,” Avad sighed. The Sun-King was as romantic as they come. Nil could not argue with another man’s infatuated emotions and did not have the patience to explain to Avad why his behavior was nothing short of appalling.

“Right. It’s time for me to get out of here,” Nil said and placed his foot on the ledge. Before he leaped out into the darkness, he felt a small impact of a stone at his shoulder.

“Mind knocking next time?” Avad asked. Nil flipped him off and went on his way.
Aloy demands to know the truth about Nil’s past. Unfortunately, her lack of charisma slows down the process.

Walking along the semi-quiet streets of the market area, Aloy was trying to make sense of what just happened up at the sun palace with Avad and Nil. The romantic Sun-King and the vicious Headhunter.

What was their shared history? Had Nil been a palace servant at one point in his life? A guard, perhaps? Neither seemed plausible for Nil’s demeanor – the man was as proud as a stormbird and too intelligent to do such low-ranking work.

Nearby, a woman let out a terrified scream.

“Look over there! Three bodies recently murdered!” one of the guards exclaimed. Aloy rushed to the scene of the crime. Sure enough, three freshly killed corpses rested in the back of an alley. They had been armed with weapons, so the killer must have been armed as – wait minute.


Two of the deaths had been clean and quick. There were no footprints leading out of the alley, so where could he have gone?

“Crude weapons,” said a guard. “Must have been a gang fight.”

Aloy had her doubts so she flipped on her focus. One set of tracks lead upwards and onto the rooftops. Aloy followed them, however the tracks had been cleared away meticulously. But Aloy knew what to look for, being familiar with the killer’s work. She knew who they were but not where they went. With careful deduction, Aloy scoured the city for her prey.

Nil broke off the leaves of fire kiln root and chewed on them restlessly while standing against the post of a rooftop garden. After his incarceration, Nil sought solitude within the wilds. Here in the city, it felt strange to sit without the company of the two princes who would sneak away from the palace and into the night, joining his ventures. Ersa would be there as well, making sure Avad did not stumble or fall from the heights.

“Clumsy idiot,” Nil whispered at the fond memory.
The air pressure changed. Nil felt the end of a spear at his back and chuckled.

“You have some nerve,” Aloy hissed behind him.

“ Took you long enough,” Nil mocked her. She touched the tip of the spear to his skin.

“Make any sudden moves and I’ll paralyze you from the waist down,” she whispered. “I wouldn’t want you to make that mistake,”

Nil exhaled.

“You see, your first mistake was getting within my reach—“ Nil rolled to the side and snatched her spear, disarming her. Aloy jumped back to a safe distance, equipped her bow and pulled back an arrow.

“Don’t even think of trying to escape, Nilead.” Aloy warned him.

“I was going to tell you the same thing, Nora,” Nil replied, unafraid. He took a defensive position with her spear, bending one of his legs.

“Is that all you consider me to be?” Aloy snapped. “A lowly savage, not worthy of the king’s presence? A savage not even worthy of knowing you?”

“Your assertion is wrong,” Nil replied.

“Explain yourself! Explain how you know Avad!”

“We grew up together,” Nil says and moved his hand up and down her weapon, “How is this spear able to override the machines?”

“You wouldn’t understand even if I told you,”

“Try me,”

“You were targeted by those three men. Why?”

“The dead never speak, the living shall never know,”

“You’re being evasive,”

“I’m being honest,”

“Quit lying!”

She let off a warning shot that met the ground near his feet. Nil remained unflinching. She aimed at his knee.

“Right here, right now, you’re going to start telling me everything,” Aloy commanded. “I’m not going to ask you again.”

“And I’m telling you right now to rethink what’s playing in your head,” his tone was threatening. He took a step closer to her.

Aloy shot another arrow. He deflected it and lunged at her before she could reload. With two quick motions, Nil knocked the bow out of Aloy’s hands and shoved her into a wooden post, pushing the spear across her throat, gripping her wrists.
“Think about the company you keep around before you start showing off your damn tricks,” Nil said angrily, increasing the pressure against her throat. “Loose lips tighten Death’s grip.”

His eyes glared into hers and then fell downwards to the scar on her skin where her throat had been cut open. He released her and backed away, not losing his handle on her spear. Aloy fell to the ground, gasping for air.

“Who… gave you that scar?” Nil asked. Aloy stared up at him coldly.

“Don’t act like you don’t already know,” she replied with venom.

“Helis.” Nil answered.

“Yes,” She said flatly. “You fought for Jiran, of course you knew who he was and what he did.”

“I wasn’t a Kestral, Aloy,” Nil said. “Why did he try to murder you?”

“He attacked the Nora and targeted me. My guardian knew what was going on but withheld from me the information. If I had known beforehand then maybe…”

Aloy began to choke up. She fought back the tears with fierce determination.

“Why did he target you? There was a war fought and you were in the center of it,” Nil stated.

“Because of my unique origin. My circumstances as to why I’m even… why am I even talking to you about this? As if you’d understand how it feels to be targeted and then see everyone around you slaughtered due to sheer relation –“

Nil knelt down to meet her eyes.

“Why do you think I prefer solitude in the wilderness?” Nil asked, his voice was soft.

“Less accountability for your actions?” Aloy raised an eyebrow, as if the answer was obvious.

“That’s not a bad perk,” Nil said, giving it some thought.

“You avoided political situations, at least until now,” Aloy said. “You don’t want to get involved with…?”

“Others,” Nil answered. “You will see soon enough how quickly alliances dissolve, where there was once loyalty, there is now bitter rivalry. Count how many alliances you’ve made over the last year. Consider their backgrounds – Nora, Oseram, Carja, Banuk – what are their endeavors? How long until the tribes find another reason to fight each other? Think of every person you’ve learned to trust, who you’ve fought alongside against the threat of extinction. Now imagine within say… three years, you see them die right in front of you, by your own arrows.”

Nil mimicked the motion of pulling an arrow back and letting it fly.

“That’s insane,” Aloy said, horrified at the mental image.

“That’s war, Aloy. That’s politics,” Nil replied and stood up. “At least with bandits, I don’t have to worry about loose strings.”

“You’re unbelievable…” Aloy dusted herself and off grabbed her weapons.

“No, I’m simply genuine,” Nil said and smiled. Aloy rubbed her eyes. The night had been
exhausting. There was so much that she still did not understand. She would find a way to make him talk, though it might take longer than she would have liked. Was attacking him the wisest decision she could have come up with? Perhaps they could come to an agreement.

“We’re friends…” Aloy said finally. “We shouldn’t be treating each other this way. I’m… sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Nil said and turned to leave.

“Nil, wait.” Aloy grabbed his hand. He looked at her in confusion.

“Come with me to my apartment,” Aloy said. Nil raised his eyebrows.

“I like where this is going.”

“Don’t get excited.”

Aloy placed equipment on the wooden countertop. Heavy armor, metal crown and bracelets, she removed them all, releasing herself from the burden.

“Go ahead and make yourself comfortable,” Aloy said to her guest. Nil shrugged and removed his armor as well. She never realized how much of it he actually wore. Shoulders, gauntlets, vest, headdress, battle dress, sandals – countless hidden knives. After his equipment was placed aside, he wore nothing except his silk trousers.

Nil stretched his arms and rolled back his shoulders. Aloy’s mouth twitched at the sight of his bare chiseled chest. His arms were muscular as well. She wondered for a moment what it would be like to have them wrapped around her body, to be pressed up against the wall by -

“Like what you see?” Nil inquired, catching her mid-leer. Aloy looked away, sheepishly. Easy girl.

“Come upstairs,” Aloy said. “And don’t get any ideas.”

“You’re one to talk.”

Sitting together on the bed, Aloy began writing on a piece of parchment.

“What are those?” Nil asked, looking at the strange characters on the paper.

“These are the characters of the old ones,” Aloy explained. “There’s twenty-six in all. Put them together like this and you get ‘bow,’ or ‘war,’ or ‘kill.’ Arrange them this way and you get my name, see?”

“Hmm…” Nil examined the paper. “Ancient manuscript. Their rules don’t seem to make any sense. No wonder their civilization went to pieces.”

“The rules bend every once and while. Not very consistent, but with practice, you’ll understand it,” she said and removed her focus. She gestured Nil to come closer. She placed the device over his ear and guided his hand to switch it on.

Aloy giggled slightly as she saw his eyes widen larger than she had ever seen before.

“By the…”
Nil was encompassed in the digital sphere, glancing at the variously highlighted objects. The sphere moved with him.

In front of his eyes were two sets of languages – one in the writing of the old ones and another in the language of the Carja.

“Options… language… “ Nil scrolled through the menu of options.

“Ah, there it is,” He said in relief as the digital menu was switched to that of his native tongue.

“Cheater,” Aloy said, knowing what he had done.

“Not today,” Nil winked at her. Aloy rolled her eyes in disgust but couldn’t help enjoy this experience of watching the headhunter of legend swipe his hands across invisible words like an eager child. He seemed to grasp the focus’s interface rather quickly.

“You’ve detailed analysis of every machine in this region, even the tall-necks,” Nil said while browsing. “Thunderjaws, Stormbirds, Rockbreaker…”

“I’ve overridden them all,” Aloy said, attempting to disguise her smugness with modesty.

“So you have…” Nil said and saw her personal database. Though tempted, he decided against peering at it, at least not without her consent.

Nil looked at Aloy’s body covered in blue. He could not see the details of her clothing, only the light of her shape and her motions. He could see the movements of her chest inhaling and exhaling air, the rubbing of her hand against her thigh. It all felt incredibly surreal to him.

Nil reached out and placed his hand on her chest, trying to understand all that he was perceiving. He felt her silk undergarments under his fingertips. Aloy released a small gasp at his touch. He pushed her down onto the bed, taking in every line that wrapped around her body, trying to differentiate between his digital vision and reality.

As Nil reached the skin beneath her breast, a bright yellow label popped up over Aloy’s body.

“Elizabet… Sobek?” Nil squinted, puzzled.

“What is it?” Aloy asked, straightening up.

“Elizabet Sobek,” Nil read. “Rank… Alpha… Prime -”

“Nil, stop for moment!” Aloy touched Nil’s hand but was instantly shocked by an unknown force. She was thrown back, pulling Nil along with her.

There was blood everywhere. Corpses littered the dirt, pierced by arrows.

Bodies fell to the ground like leaves during the fall.

“You betrayed us!”

A pool of blood. A child’s.

“Whose side are you on anyway?”
Aloy screamed until her there was no air left in her lungs. When she finally came to, her body was damp with sweat. Tears rolled down her face. She felt nauseous, suffocated, as if she were hit by the tail of a thunderjaw.

She heard Nil let out a pained groan beside her. He was facing the ceiling, hands rubbing his face.

“Fucking… ugh…” he grunted. “Do we need a safe word?”

Chapter End Notes

I know you guys are wanting that smut. Have patience and let it build...
Cultural Norms Part 1

Chapter Summary

This will be a three -part episode beginning with our hunters participating in mundane acts. Rest assured, no day for them can be tame. Aloy experiences both sides of being famous as well as a simple woman in a previously patriarchal kingdom. Many mistakes are made along the way.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Nil, we need to talk about this.”

“No.”

“Nil, come on.”

“No.”

Aloy threw herself atop the bed in dissatisfaction. The night had grown progressively bizarre. The mystery coaxed her, taunted her. She needed to find the pieces and arrange them into a clear picture. This is the drive that motivated Aloy ever since she found the focus deep in the old ruins. She wanted to know more.

Nil didn't look well at all. He had turned away, sitting on the bed with his feet on the floor, hands on his head as if he had been afflicted with a headache. As moments turned to minutes, leaving heavy rainfall pelted against the rooftop as the only sound between them, Nil finally spoke. “You should get some sleep.” Aloy glanced at him with suspicion, finding his suddenly reserved demeanor comparable to a candle flickering in the night having been extinguished by an unexpected gust of wind.

“You as well. Feel free to sleep here, if you’d like,” Aloy offered, patting the bed. Nil looked at her incredulously, letting his mouth hang open for a moment. “You want me to sleep on the same bed as you?” he asked, needing to clarify.

“Until you’re willing to speak, I want to keep my eye on you,” Aloy answered. “Besides, there’s enough room for two people and I trust you’re not foolish enough to try and take advantage of me.” She drew an imaginary line in the center, dividing them. She moved to the edge of the bed, far away from where he sat.

Nil frowned at her. “Yes, your mighty boundary will most assuredly withstand any potential threat from my erect –“

“Come too close and I’ll blacken your eye,” Aloy said. “And that’s not a threat, but a promise.”

Nil doubted her life as an outcast gave any education on the male anatomy upon waking up and he was too exhausted to explain. Heeding her warning, he made his way to the other side of the bed and stretched out his body. Placing his arms behind his head, he relaxed, feeling the cracking of his joints from every abused limb in his body. It had been many years since he spent a night in this
level of comfort and her offer to sleep in her bed enticed him more than leaving in the pouring rain.

Once feeling comfortable enough with the distance between them, Aloy lifted the silk sheet over their bodies and rested her head on her pillow, allowing the rhythm of rain pelting the rooftop to lull her to sleep.

Thunder boomed outside, jolting Aloy from her sleep. She reacted by suddenly scrambling to Nil who was still wide awake, burying her face in his chest.

“You didn’t want to sleep alone because of your fear of thunder?” Nil asked, bewildered by the absurdity. Aloy said nothing and simply nodded like a timid child. Nil sighed, wondering how this unexpected fear came about in an outlander who was raised in the wilds. Cautiously, he placed an arm around her body, allowing a her a comforting gesture that she didn't flinch away from.

It was late morning before Aloy awoke from her slumber to the sound of familiar voices downstairs. She peered over the wooden railing and saw two Carja men passing the morning playing some sort of board game involving dice, cards, and a bottle. Avad was fashioned in ordinary noble silks, forgoing his usual ceremony dress and crown. His curly black hair was side-swept in an undercut, falling gracefully over to the right side of his face, making him appear less regal and more ordinary.

"Single only this time," Avad said, gathering a red die in his hand.

"As His Radiance wills it," Nil replied, rubbing his nose and mumbling something under his breath. He was outstretched on his side, scratching his chest. Every now and then, his eyes would drift over the game, to the Sun-King, and around the room, maintaining an awareness of his surroundings like a stalker patrolling its grove in the jungle. The sound of the dice roll brought him back to the moment, smiling at the look of dismay on Avad's face. “Snake eyes means a swig of your favorite Snake-blood ginger mead. Here's to your health." Nil grinned sharply pushing the bottle to Avad's side.

"I don't care what the healers claim, this brew is more poisonous than a Banuk's scrappersap recipe.” Avad said, taking a swig from the bottle. Nil took the dice and lazily rolled it from his fingers where it dropped on different pieces of parchment paper. He gathered the first one from the space, reading, "Recite the names of your family tapestry while doing... " he gathered the other die, looking to the parchment it landed on. "Push-stands? I haven't done those in years."

"Remember how father used to motivate us when we studied our academics?" Avad asked. "If we faltered, we'd have to spend the day cleaning the barracks with a chamber-maid."

"That's why we called it Trivia and Torture." Nil smirked. "I remember Kadaman trying to get out of this with the claim he hurt his wrist while sparring." He stood upwards and bent down, pressing down to the floor with both hands and slowly lifted his legs upwards, chronologically reciting the names of the sun-kings with every bend of his elbows. “Araman, Amavad, Sadahin, Juwadan, Zavarad, Iriv, Basadid, Khuvadin, Ranan, Nahasis, Marvid –"

“Marzid –“Avad corrected and pointed to his body. "Your back is curving."

Nil grunted impatiently and fixed his form, “Marzid, Hivas, Jiran, and Avad…” Finished, he lowered himself to his feet with the careful dexterity down and wiped the sweat off his brow with
his scarf.

"I think that's enough for now," Avad said, standing up to stretch alongside the hunter. "Is she going to wake up any time soon?"

"I doubt it," Nil answered and chugged the bottle of Snake-blood ginger-ale, unaffected by its bitterness.

"Disgusting," Avad said. "I don't understand how you can tolerate the taste of these herbal remedies, especially the putrid sensation that claws back the throat."

Nil shrugged, "It tastes better than what I was given in the infirmary." A knock came at the door, followed by Talanah entering the living quarters.

"Sunhawk Padesh! Wonderful to see you!" Avad said, welcoming her.

"Hey guys!" Talanah said with a large smile. She ran to Nil who then picked her up in a grand embrace, sweeping her off her feet.

"Talanah, it’s been quite some time," Nil said, speaking too cheerfully for Aloy's liking. "Congratulations on your achievement at the Hunter’s Lodge."

Aloy bit her lip, perturbed by the amount of warmth and etiquette the hunter was displaying in the company of others. It was completely unlike what she was used to witnessing from him out in the wilds. His speech was carefully filtered, etched in a way that fit into the cogs of social normalcy that made Aloy imagine how popular Nil had been with his fellow tribesmen before enlisting in the military or if Avad's presence had something to do with this.

"Thanks, but I honestly couldn’t have done it without help from my thrush," said Talanah modestly.

"Ah, yes. Aloy. She’s truly marvelous," Avad said in agreement, while the headhunter rolled his eyes.

"I’m down to making final preparations at the lodge for tonight’s celebration," she said to Avad. "Are you sure you don’t want to come, Your Radiance?"

Avad smiled politely, "Though I would so enjoy basting in the merriment of our fellow heroes, I feel my presence would create too grand of a distraction."

"Don’t think so highly of yourself," Nil muttered. Avad pushed him back with his hand and followed on with the conversation, grinning in embarrassment.

"If there’s anything else you require, please do not hesitate to say so," Avad said.

"Let’s see... music, alcohol, fireworks... Oh! Could you have some of the vanguard present?" Talanah asked. "The crowd could get a bit rambunctious."

"I’ll have Erend see to that." Avad replied.

"Great, then that’s all we’ll be needing," came another voice, one that nearly caused Aloy to leap out of her skin. Vanasha was standing right next to her over the balcony.

"When did you get here?" Aloy snapped, making her presence known to the uninvited guests.

"Well, well, well. Look who’s finally awake," Nil said, crossing his arms.
“Hi, Aloy!” Talanah ran upstairs and gave her a hug. “I haven’t seen you since the battle and I was growing worried. Been hunting machines?”

“No, just tracking a little bit.” Aloy said.

“More like shamelessly harassing people,” Nil interjected.

“Call it whatever you want,” Aloy said and looked around the apartment for open shutters. Finding them all closed, she turned to Vanasha. “How did you get in here?”

“The door was open, sweetheart,” Vanasha said. Aloy knitted her brow, wondering how she missed seeing her walk in.

Vanasha looked to Avad and said, “I’m here to inform His Radiance that if he doesn’t get his cinnamon-skinned ass back into the palace within thirty minutes, his chief advisor is going to send out an official missing report to every corner of the Sundom.”

“Uh oh…” Talanah said.

“Have I been gone that long?” Avad asked.

“Since daybreak.” Vanasha answered sharply. “Do you understand just how much it freaks out the sun-priests when you’re not present in your throne for every song?”

“Fine, fine” Avad lamented. “Give me moment.”

The sun-king suddenly leaped into the air and clung to the balcony that Aloy was leaning against, as if he were a brave that had succeeded in The Proving. His earth-colored eyes smiled warmly at her as he gave Aloy a light kiss on the cheek, causing her to flush red at the bold display of affection. “Have fun tonight, my dear.” Avad said and jumped down, landing near Nil.

“And you need to clean up after your messes.” The sun-king playfully slapped the hunter on his rear before dashing out the door.

“We’re about to fight.” Nil called to him in response to the gesture. Aloy grew tense, wondering how much heat was behind that threat, Sun-king or not.

“Catch me outside then if you can,” Avad turned back, “But I think decorum would slow you down.”

“Damn, Nilead.” Vanasha cooed in amusement as if she had just seen him be burned by a fire arrow.

“Damn, Nilead.” Vanasha cooed in amusement as if she had just seen him be burned by a fire arrow.

“I could kill him,” Nil said.

“Don’t make my job any harder for me,” sighed the spymaster who walked downstairs. “Aloy, get dressed in Carja silks so you don’t draw the public eye when you’re out shopping for celebration attire. I suggest you also keep Nil by your side while you’re walking around. Since he’s a Carja man, you’re less likely to be bothered.”

The Shadow Carja had proven themselves as still a mighty force in spite of their small numbers, inspiring further doubt in Meridian's inhabitants towards their Sun-King, especially when he seemed more enticed with appeasing foreign neighbors than strengthening his own tribe. With Avad's favoritism towards Aloy obvious to the public ever since the incident with Dervahl, it was assumed that Avad's attention would still remain beyond the lands of the Sundom, enticing spite among his subjects. After taking heavy losses to their police force, there was no telling what
commotion would come about with Aloy's appearance drawing the public eye and Marad suggested it would be best to avoid the situation entirely.

Aloy eyed the the armorless silk outfit with scrutiny, wondering if this amount of effort towards subtlety. "I'm going out in public wearing this?" There were so many other tasks she could be tending to, like fixing her shield-weaver armor or re-stringing her bow. "Do I have to go to this celebration?"

"Yes!" answered the spymaster and Sunhawk in unison.

"I'll see you all there tonight, right?" asked the Sunhawk.

"Damn right," Vanasha said. Talanah looked at Nil. "And you?"

"Yes, I'll be there," Nil answered, sounding just as excited as Aloy. The Sunhawk grinned happily and took her leave.

"You'd better be there," Vanasha said to Nil. "Before any other man makes a move on her."

"What are you talking about?" Nil asked.

"Don't act like I couldn't tell that you wanted to knock Avad's teeth out when he gave our pretty little heroine a peck on the cheek," Vanasha said with a smirk. "I don't remember you ever being the jealous type. Is Avad finally making you nervous?"

"He's just taking his revenge for our adolescent years," Nil replied. "I suppose I can't fault him for that."

"That's right – you wooed nearly every dame who had caught his eye before," Vanasha said.

"Well, I see that it's time you take your exotic – great choice of words, by the way - girlfriend on a date. That is… unless you two aren't public. If that's the case, she's fair game. Really, you should consider putting on your gentleman act again. Avad certainly has."

Vanasha left the apartment, leaving Nil to ponder the nagging thoughts in his mind. It had not slipped past Vanasha's nose that Avad's shameless flirtations with Aloy struck a low fire within the hunter. But despite their joint conquests in the wilds, Nil hadn't considered Aloy as a partner in a domestic prospect. He had only been in the city for no more than two weeks and the constant attention shed on him like shared light underneath a sun-roof was already making his skin crawl, making him want to leave for the wilds where he could breath again.

"Does this look right? Vanasha left it on the bed." Aloy said uncomfortably as she walked down the stairs. Nil's eyes widened in amazement as he saw the huntress glide towards him, wreathed in silks of light blue and gold, while masked by a veil. She looked oddly domesticated.

"Let me pull your hair back behind a scarf," Nil said. "It's the key identifier."

"I'd rather be in the woods right now," Aloy muttered, going through the motions of the day per Vanasha and Talanah's request. After using the holy city of Meridian as a stronghold, the least she could do was show her appreciation by making an appearance at tonight's celebration, even if the thought of having everyone's eyes on her in mystical fascination daunted her. Perhaps this
discomfort meant she had some personal adjustment to do, coming out of her many years of isolation.

“You and me both,” Nil said as he chewed on a piece of fruit. He was wearing upper class clothing that reminisced of his years in the palace - flowing silks that connected as a collar with tassels that hung loosely off his shoulders and a silk waist wrap that glided off his trousers. Had he worn the gaudy sandals and ornamented headdress like Vanasha suggested, Nil could have passed off as a lord, an idea he was not fond of when there were plenty of downtrodden survivors begging for help after losing nearly everything in the battle.

Aloy, who was used to navigating the streets alone, kept walking ahead of her partner.

“We could go soon,” Aloy offered. “Do some hunting?” Many male passersby were ogling at her, but for reasons she was not used to.

“What kind of hunting are we talking about?” Nil asked.

“By now, I really don’t care,” Aloy replied. The dry heat of the summer sun beat down on her body, making her want to leap into the lily ponds. “Does it always get this hot in Meridian?”

“You get used to it,” said Nil, who was not even sweating.

“I still haven’t forgotten about last night, Nil.” Aloy stated, going through the motions as they arrived at the lower-class clothing bazaars where there were hardly any guards present.

“Neither have I – you literally tackled me during a thunderstorm.” Nil said, nonchalant.

"Nil, you know what I'm talking about. What happened with the focus?” Aloy said. “I saw some things, heard voices. It was horrible.”

“I recommend you focus on the current moment,” Nil replied. “I’m here, dress-shopping with you of all things – are you sure this is the best time for an interrogation?” Aloy furrowed her brow, wondering why he was dodging the subject as if it were a shock arrow.

“This takes priority over what we're – ah hell.” Aloy quickly ducked behind Nil.

“What is it?” Nil griped.

“The vanguard,” Aloy muttered. She saw the Erend leading his patrol at the opposite end the street, checking for any suspicious activity.

*I think she likes you captian.* Aloy cringed at the jests atop the spire's courtyard. Not only that, Varl was among them, glancing at clothes with Teb. The vanguard captain appeared to be showing them around the city's wares and the two seekers seemed to have taken well to his company. "If you like silk hats, silk pants, silk *anything*, you're in the right city," Erend said. Teb picked up a set of outlander armor, examining the stitching with intrigue. "If my mother caught me wearing something like this, she'd personally have me cast out from the tribe," Varl said.

Nil stepped to her side and swatted her on the shoulder. “You’re wearing a disguise, remember? They won’t be able to recognize you as long as you don't act suspicious... which is what you're doing right now.”

Aloy wasn’t convinced. She walked the opposite direction to the end of a darkened corner, but was caught off guard by a grab at her breast, waist, and rear.
“Young and supple, what a find!” came a husky voice behind Aloy that made her skin crawl. She spun around to see a man adorned in upper-class silks more commonly found in the streets of Sunfall. A sudden gust of wind blew under his flowing silks, revealing a pair of shackles on his person.

“I could kick your ass for that,” Aloy snapped at him. A few heads in the crowd turned to the direction of the scuffle. Her hand went behind her shoulder, reaching for a spear that wasn’t there, left at her residence. Aloy bit her lip, realizing that she hadn’t much experience fighting bare handed. Before she spoke again, she felt a protective arm move around her waist, a gesture she was growing more accustomed to from her previous interactions with Avad.

“They will recognize your voice, you know,” Nil warned. Seeing the situation as diffused, bystanders continued going about their business. The perpetrator tilted his head at Nil’s presence, but otherwise kept his attention on Aloy with a calm gaze that spoke little to his earlier offenses.

“Don’t speak,” Nil whispered to her. "This man works as a procurer for one of the underground pleasure houses. Chances are he’s not alone."

“That’s a rather fierce one you have in your hands, isn’t it?” asked the man. “How much is this one worth?”

Might as well call me ‘entity,’ Aloy thought.

“I’m afraid she’s not for sale,” Nil replied, maintaining unexpected civility in his voice.

“Come now, my friend,” he said with intense charisma, as if he were a sun-priest offering to do a blessing. “I could give you say… 10,000 shards in exchange your property. I might actually be removing a burden from you. Women can drain a gentleman’s pocket and his patience when not placed properly.”

“That’s a fair point,” Nil said. “But I should inform you that you’re making an exchange at my wife.”

“Ah, your ‘wife,’ you say?” the trafficker inquired, eyeing Aloy with scrutiny. “Has she been spoiled?”

“No,” Aloy answered immediately. Nil dug his fingers into her waist. The man’s eyes glimmered, his initial suspicions confirmed. “Then I demand that woman, now.” He snapped his fingers and three armed thugs crept out from the darkness, joining him.

“You just had to open your mouth, didn’t you?” Nil said irritably. “What is it going to be? Are you going to let me murder these four men in broad daylight?”

“I could call the vanguard over,” Aloy said quickly.

“Call them over? After you just ran from them?” Nil asked, trying to grasp her logic.

Nil had to cover his ears as Aloy let out a bloodcurdling scream. Passing traffic came to a halt, followed startled glances in their direction.

“What’s going on over there?” Erend came rushing over with his command, followed by Varl.

Nil cleared his throat. "These men tried to force themselves upon this young woman!” He had coward his stance and raised the pitch of his voice to appear more convincing.

Aloy stood dumbfound as her partner made a switch from bloodthirsty manhunter ready to square off against the perpetrators to helpless Carja nobleman under attack, an act that Aloy had least
expected to witness from Nil of all people.

“Is this true?” demanded the vanguard captain, looking at the damsel. Aloy turned away and buried her face in Nil’s unarmored vest. "It is, all of it." Aloy said, faking a sob, smearing her eye makeup with a trembling hand that made

“You two get out of here,” Erend told them reassuringly. “We’ll take care of this. Vanguard, surround them.”

Keeping her head down, Aloy didn’t notice the presence of a Nora Brave in her path until brushing into Varl’s fur jacket. She shrank down as she felt eyes on her back. Her hair had become partly undone, hanging loose on her shoulders.

Once the two made it out of the alley, Aloy tucked her hair back behind her headdress and wiped off her makeup, her skin still crawling from where she had been touched. She's had spears pointed her direction, arrows raining down overhead, but never in her life has someone ever approached her with such lewd intentions. What unnerved her even more is that this was likely a common occurrence for women in the Sundom where carrying a weapon was socially unappealing.

“Alert me ahead of time before you go wandering off alone in some dark alley, would you?” Nil said. “Though the thought of mutilating each of those men with a kitchen knife sounds dances in my mind, I would prefer not going back to prison so soon.”

“My fault, Nil. I didn’t expect to be touched like a piece of boar meat on a skewer,” Aloy said defensively. "What is it with the Carja and seeing women as objects? For a tribe that shamelessly writes how the Nora are savage and backwards, the Carja leave much to be desired in ways of equality."

“At least the Carja don’t shun someone at birth,” Nil retorted. “What? Too soon for the Nora’s chosen?”

“No, not ‘too soon.’” Aloy replied. “I need to get out of civilization for a while. After tonight’s grand celebration or whatever, I’m heading back into the wilderness. I expect you will be joining me?”

“You’re damn right I will be,” Nil answered without hesitation. “Don’t get used to the labels, my love.”

“‘My love’ – I can’t believe what you did back there, just then,” Aloy said. “Your character was so precise, like you've done this sort of thing before."

"When you know you're not cut from the same cloth as everyone else, it helps to learn how to blend in.” Nil said.

"Then would it be too much of a stretch to say you've worked alongside Vanasha?” She asked.

“On occasion, yes,” Nil answered. “She’s was great to work with, actually. Very cutthroat and methodical.”

“So… what kind of work did you two do together during war-time?” Aloy asked.
Nil sighed in frustration. “You’re not going to let this curiosity of yours go, are you?”

“Would you believe me if I said yes?”

“No.”

“Good answer.” Aloy said and then noticed her behavior had become out of line. “Thanks for saving my ass back there.” she said finally.

“You’re welcome.” Nil shrugged. "Though I must say though, your scream was…”

“Don’t say something creepy,” Aloy warned.

“Let’s just say I’d never thought I would hear you sound so helpless. Is that going too far?”

“It’s pushing it.”

The two hunters had walked the path upwards to the wealthier markets. Elida spotted them and walked over.

“Forgive me for asking this, but… are you two…?” Elida didn’t finish her sentence.

“Elida?” Aloy said. “How did you recognize me under this disguise?”

“Are you kidding me?” Nil said to Aloy, who had just given away her identity.

“I didn’t recognize you until I saw him,” Elida pointed to Nil. “Then I put it together.”

Aloy looked up at Nil and gave him a dirty look.

“Elida, look. It’s like I said at the infirmary – don’t tell anyone that we’re involved with each other. Nil’s my hunting partner and he is extremely private.” Aloy said.

“Yeah right. If that were true, I wouldn’t even be standing here next to the most famous woman in the region, who practically shouts who she is over the mesas.” Nil growled.

“I’m not the ex-convict making secret rendezvous with the sun-king at his palace and at my apartment!” Aloy hissed.

Nil threw his hands in the air in disbelief. “Did you seriously just say that out loud?”

Elida waved her hands at the both of them. “Hey, hey! Calm down, you two,” she said, mainly looking at Nil.

“Aloy, I know who your partner is,” Elida said. “I’m already aware of his friendship with… the former prince.”

“Yeah, of course you knew,” Aloy said unhappily. “We’ve been through hell together and he still refuses even the slightest bit of transparency.”

“You’re putting me through hell right now.” Nil replied and ran a hand through his hair.
“Would you two quit bickering for a moment?” Elida was growing impatient with the constant hostility.

“Aloy, Captain Ni- I mean – Nilead –“

“Nil,” he corrected.

"Right," Elida said. “I would hope that you two care more about each other’s wellbeing than your own pride."

Nil frowned. “Did something happen that I’m not aware – oh wait… never mind," he said, assuming the worst. Elida looked away from him and nodded, the wound of loss still fresh in her memory.

“Elida, there you are!” Lahavis ran towards his daughter. “I’ve been looking all over for you – hold on a minute. Captain of the Western Rai-“

“Lord Lahavis,” Nil nodded to Elida’s father and regained his position next to his partner. This day just keeps getting better, thought Nil.

“Hello, father. I just finished gathering medicinal herbs from the garden,” Elida said. “However, I need a discreet moment with my friends, please.”

Lahavis wanted to say more, yet he heeded his daughter’s request and went along his way, not without taking another glance at Nil.

“Elida, I apologize for any inconveniences I may have caused you,” Aloy said, exhausted. “Honestly, I’m just trying to find some proper attire to wear to the celebration.”

“You’re dressing shopping?” Elida said, suddenly becoming excited.

“Yes…” Aloy replied. “Nil’s my escort. I’ll admit, I haven’t exactly made this very easy on him.”

Nil didn’t say anything, much to Aloy’s surprise.

“Well that’s wonderful! I suggest blue, or green! Or a dark orchid. Something that brings out your eyes!” Elida eagerly recommended. “Whatever you need, let me help!”

“Alright, I’ll look into that,” Aloy replied. “Actually, would it be possible if you came over to my apartment in the evening? I’d appreciate it if you could assist me in getting ready.”

“Yes! Yes, of course!” Elida was practically jumping. “I’ve never dressed a Nora before! This will be exciting.”

“Thanks… um… my husb – my partner and I will be on our way,” Aloy said and intertwined her arm in Nil’s. The physical interaction between the two hunters made Elida smile as they parted ways.

Aloy walked alongside Nil the entire way to her apartment. Before Aloy opened the door, she noticed her friend stiffen up, his eyes squinting at something unseen. He suddenly put a hand to his face in dismay.
“What is it?” Aloy asked.

“Those scum who surrounded you earlier today…” Nil said. “I remember two of them from last night.”

“The ones you spared?” Aloy asked, remembering additional tracks had escaped from the alley. Nil nodded.

“What are you so worried about? What if they did happen to recognize you?” Aloy asked. “They likely didn’t know who I was.”

“They grasped a clearer image of me…” Nil began. “They could alert the vanguard, a warrant could be made…” Worst yet, Nil did not doubt the Nora’s suspicions of Aloy’s identity beneath her disguise. People would talk. Specific individuals would know. One trail always lead to another.

“Nil?” Aloy turned to him, wondering why he seemed paranoid all of a sudden. “For a moment, could you please let me know what’s going on?”

Nil shut his eyes and pondered his response.

“I think… I will feel more at ease once we have returned to the safety of the wilderness,” Nil answered quietly. He gently placed his hands on Aloy’s arms. “We’ll start talking then, alright? But for now, my wish is for you to enjoy what this evening has to offer you.”

Chapter End Notes

Does Aloy only need Elida there to help her prepare for the celebration at the lodge? Or is there a hidden motive? Nil glanced into the deep waters, only to feel the sensation of something darker looking upwards at him.
Cultural Norms Part 2

Chapter Summary

A brief chapter delving further into the plot.

Man to Man and girl talk is done.
Nil's reason for posing as Aloy's protective escort is revealed, as well as his motives for reconnecting with Avad. The Sun-King exchanges information that upsets the headhunter.

Aloy asks Elida how she and her father know the ex-soldier.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

All was quiet within the royal bedchambers except for the scrubbing of pen against parchment. Avad leaned on an elbow as he drafted a new decree that allowed for specific previous Sunstone Rock inmates to have an audience with the Sun-king. More amendments would be added to the decree as new circumstances would arise inevitably. It was necessary, however. Avad remembered earlier that morning, secretly conversing with his friend in Aloy’s apartment living room.

“Are you certain of your speculation?” Avad asked quietly over their board game.

“As certain as a body that’s been decapitated is dead, Avad. There’s been eyes everywhere ever since she silenced that ancient menace at the spire,” Nil replied. “I do not believe this is single person but an intricate team pulling strings from various corners.”

“Waiting to strike while the empire is attempting to heal,” Avad nodded. “Did they tell you of their demands?”

“No, only uttered threats,” Nil answered. “I don’t know this man, but he made it very clear that he had wanted me to be aware of his existence in the case of interference.”

“And the only way to threaten you is with personal leverage.” Avad said.

“Not only myself, but leverage over everyone,” Nil said. “This attack will likely come from within. Division, absolving of the fragile strings holding these various alliances together. This network is possibly one that arose from the ashes of Helis. Though I’m not wanting to jump to conclusions just yet.”

“What would Ersa say?” Avad curled his first. “What would she do?”

“She would say ‘kill the bastards’ and then brazenly pursue them, wrecking the walls in the process.” Nil answered. “Sounds like someone else we know.”

“Aloy. Did they mention her?” Avad asked. Nil shook his head.

“I won’t rule her out as one of their points of interest,” Avad said quickly. “I can’t let what happened to Ersa be repeated.”
“Are you saying…?”

“I remember your efficiency during past trials,” Avad said. “But this time will be different. You cannot terminate the threat without first finding its root.”

Nearby, Avad heard the creaking of a window opening behind him.

“That woman you have eyes on sure is high maintenance.” Nil complained as he crawled from the space outside.

“It comes with the nature of being extraordinary,” Avad answered, setting down his pen. “No reports on dead bodies, you did clean work this time.”

“Don’t count on it always being like this,” Nil replied. “The woman draws trouble to her like fire arrows to a canister of blaze.”

“And you seek out the trouble, if I recall correctly.” Avad reminded him.

“This is not the same, especially when you’ve disarmed me,” Nil said. “She nearly found employment in an underground brothel.”

“I did hear mention of a street quarrel in one of the lower districts involving members of the ring,” Avad said thoughtfully. “But no identification of the victims. Just a terrified noble who was about to fall to pieces had the vanguard not been there to save him and his wife. No names.”

“That’s because the vanguard doesn’t know me by name,” Nil snorted. “Though I’m sure that will change the longer I stay here in Meridian, the longer my assigned task is drawn out.”

“Your task is simply more complex than what you’d prefer,” Avad replied. “But I’m truly grateful that you accepted my morning’s request.”

“Well, what am I going to do? Tell the Sun-King that I refuse to provide protection for his majesty’s new beloved?” Nil scoffed.

“Who knows, my friend. Perhaps with you being here my worries about losing another person dear to me can be laid to rest.” Avad said mournfully. Nil disliked how solemn Avad became during moments of sentimentalism. It was a waste of brain power.

“Protecting her is a lot for you to ask of me,” Nil continued. “I’m a killer, not a royal guard. Are you planning to tie the strings together this time, even if she’s a Nora? Or would the city burn up in flames?”

“Quite the opposite, actually,” Avad sighed. “Suitors from all over have come to Meridian, their eyes set on Aloy.”

“What a surprise.” Nil said sarcastically. “Anyone would pay an insurmountable price just to use her for physical satisfaction. Like a highly-esteemed prostitute.”

“Not only that – there’s political pressure as well,” Avad continued. “I have been suggested by… numerous advisors that a communion between our champion and...”

“Don’t say it.” Nil growled.

“An arranged marriage has been proposed, considering Aloy and myself,” Avad said. “You shouldn’t be so alarmed.”
“I’m not.”

“That’s right, you’re familiar with pressures from suitors.” Avad said, remembering Nilead’s formerly outstanding military reputation.

“So, you need an heir, huh?” Nil said. “What are you going to do? Royally force yourself upon her, hoping she births the next of line of luminance?”

Avad grimaced at the mental image. His advisors felt free to remind him of his duty in maintaining the line of the holy dynasty, despite Avad’s discomfort on the subject.

“I would hope that… she would be willing, first of all. Second, as long as the offspring is male, there will be no need of her in the palace beyond the initial procreation.”

“Wow… that’s all she really is to them,” Nil said in disgust. “Birth your son and then dispose of her.”

“Hopefully that’s not what it comes down to,” Avad said. “I feel strongly for Aloy… but…”

“Why not a daughter?” Nil asked. Avad raised his eyebrows in surprise.

“Would you be satisfied with a daughter as your heir?” Avad asked in wonder.

“Yes. Tribeswomen are not to be underestimated and they carry the same amount of blood as sons,” Nil mentioned fondly. “If I had a daughter, I’d let her carry my sister’s name.”

“Not your mothers?” asked Avad.

“No. There’s a certain taboo in the clan regarding… I would actually have to discuss this with my hypothetical wife,” Nil said and chuckled, knowing he was getting ahead of himself.

“Poor woman, whoever she is. May the sun show kindness and mercy, making up for all that you lack.” Avad replied in jest.

“At least I wouldn’t treat her as my prisoner. Dress her up in silk, tie her down to the royal bedchambers like the dowager queen.” Nil said.

“Itaman’s mother does not have to endure that any longer. She’s free to roam the palace with her son.” Avad informed him.

“But the palace is not where the huntress belongs. She belongs in the wilderness, where I first found her.”

“You never informed me that you had met her before! Just how long have you been acquainted with Aloy?” demanded Avad.

“Relax, I didn’t even know her name then.” Nil answered throwing a hand up in defense. “She caught my eye in passing and joined me on several hunts. I began to see her as a fellow colleague, eventually, despite the opposing ideology.”

“All this time…” Avad said aghast. “You would have attempted murdering her given the opportunity!”

“That is... accurate, but she didn’t give me the opportunity,” Nil said, annoyed at the memory. Then his expression changed into one of fondness.
“Aloy… she…” Nil scratched his head trying to find the correct expression. How could he truly explain the tugging sensation in his chest? This strange tangibility of uncertainty has plagued him ever since he saw her at the edge of the river, looking into the sunset. The panic he had sensed from her, the anxiety – all the while the headhunter himself was shaking with excitement, thankful that she had seen a future where Nil’s own vision had been clouded.

“Hey there,” Avad snapped his fingers in front of Nil’s eyes. “Are you still with me?”

Nil blinked back into the moment, adjusting his spirit to the present.

“Excuse me, what were you saying?” Nil asked. Avad glanced towards his draft.

“I’ve almost finished the decree,” Avad answered. “Soon, you will be able to roam the entire city, even the palace, as you please without the guard hindering your movements. But this can only go into effect if you maintain a clean record until it has been passed through the council. It will be approximately a week before that takes place. Until then, no blood can be shed within the walls of Meridian. If you want that unrestrained investigation on my advisement team, you will have to tread carefully.”

“Aren’t you the Sun-king? Don’t you have some divine solar powered abilities that allow you to establish new laws at a glance?” Nil demanded. Avad frowned.

“I’m a king of my people, not a tyrant,” he snapped. “My father is dead and I do not intend on carrying out rules by force.”

“There will be moments that will make you want to reconsider your patience with the council and your subjects.” Nil mentioned.

“And my mercy. I can personally overlook the bodies from the night before but if the vanguard or military finds out, I will have to carry out protocol.” Avad declared to his friend.

“Fine, fine. I’ll be on my best behavior.” Nil said impertinently and moved to the royal wardrobe.

“I should inform you, Nilead, if you retook your previous title, you would regain all access to what you previously had before.” Avad mentioned.

“And regain my responsibility as a commanding officer in the military? One that is restrained by treaties and war doctrines? One that is riddled with Oseram oafs who can barely hit the mark on a target within ten feet? Please.” Nil became sick at the image.

“I wouldn’t underestimate them.” Avad replied. “Aloy has taken quite well to working with them intimately.”

“Out of obligation.” Nil asserted. “Just another means to an end when it comes down to it.”

“That’s how you feel about others.” Avad remarked.

“That’s simply the basis of humanity,” Nil claimed. “I do have my exceptions, of course.”

Avad drew a hidden dagger from within his belt.

“Nil, if I were being honest how I felt towards the suitors and their thirst for Aloy, I would feel much more at ease if you removed the heads of every single person who demands the huntress’s hand and womb.” Avad said and threw the dagger in Nil’s direction, narrowly missing the outlander’s throat.
Nil removed the dagger from the wall and grinned at the king’s admission.

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Aloy looked at the skirt she had adorned. It hung at the hips, decorated with metallic accessories. Her top stopped at her midriff, leaving skin bare, much like the style of the hunter’s blazon. Elida suggested either a crown or shoulder plating, but Aloy declined, much rather opting for ease of movement.

“Hold still while I do your eyes,” Elida said and applied a powdery dust to Aloy’s skin.

“Elida, could I ask you a few questions?” Aloy began.


“Good, it’s about to get personal,” Aloy said. “Can you tell me how your father knows Nil?”

“Oh. That.” Elida sighed. “That was many years ago, when the mad sun-king was still in power. My father actually wanted to arrange a marriage between me and the then captain.”

“He what?” Aloy was in shock. “You were supposed to marry Nil? Even with his background?”

“You’re thinking of it quite differently, Aloy,” Elida explained. “Marrying a ranking soldier was actually desired among families. Strong men to protect their wives, to create fierce children.”

“We’re the ones who create the babies.” Aloy argued.

“We bring them into this world, yes. But the male lineage is carried on through traditions in their family, the legacy, if you’ll have it,” Elida continued. “Sun-king Avad is trying to change this and I pray to the sun that hearts will change given enough time.

“After the revolt against his father, the prince wanted everyone to be held accountable for their actions during the civil war. Though I don’t doubt that His Radiance would have brushed what the captain had done under the carpet, Nil openly admitted his deeds. The Sun-King sentenced him and not happily. That ended the possibilities of an arranged marriage between Nil and myself, thank goodness. Then there was the secret matter of Atral, may the Sun watch over his soul. The proposition was dissolved much to the relief of me and Nil. I didn’t want Atral replaced and Nil was not interested in settling down.”

“Nil was tried for war crimes and sent to Sunstone Rock,” Aloy mentioned. “I’m sure Lahavis was aware of Nil’s actions before the decree. Why would your father want you to marry a war criminal?”

“Nil’s actions during the wars weren’t considered crimes during Jiran’s reign,” Elida said. “Back then, more killing meant further glory. Victory during battles, the higher the kill count – it all meant excellence during the old reign. I’m sure you can see how desirable Nil would be in the eyes of suitors.”

“He hasn’t changed that much,” Aloy said, grimacing at the memory of Nil “keeping count” during their hunts. Old-fashioned.

“It’s hard to let go of what you were born into,” Elida went on. “But why would he let go so easily? Women fell at his feet. He was even one of Jiran’s favorites. It’s a dark history, I understand, and yet it remains a part of us.”
“Is that how Avad knows him?” Aloy asked.

“Actually, the circumstances in which ignited a friendship between Nilead and the princes was a mysterious one,” Elida said, lowering her voice. “There were many attempts made upon the lives of the princes – each attempt thwarted by Nilead when he was barely a teenager. Every assassin met their end and were killed in the same fashion. We do not know how long this went on before Nilead was enlisted. Some say that this man, your hunting partner, is a natural born killer but with discriminating taste. His desires are simple, yet his nature is complex. Such is the way of those who are from the west.”

“He’s not originally from Meridian? Where did he come from and why did he grow up among princes?”

“Why don’t you ask the sun-king yourself, Aloy?” Elida suggested and put away the cosmetics. “I think you’re ready!”

Aloy peered into her reflection and could hardly recognize herself. Elida had professionally sculpted Aloy’s face, accentuating her hazel eyes. She had even inked Aloy’s lips with a berry-red hue.

“Stand still and don’t breathe.” Elida as she sprayed some sort of setting spray onto Aloy’s skin.

“There! That should set the makeup in place for the night,” smiled Elida. “I think he’ll like it, too.”

Aloy stopped looking in the mirror and turned to Elida.

“He? Are you talking about Erend?” Aloy asked. Elida shook her head at Aloy’s inference.

“No – not the Oseram captain. I’m referring to your hunting partner.” Elida said.

“Nil?”

“Yes, Aloy. I see the way you look at him, the way he fascinates you,” Elida said. “Ever since I saw you kneel beside him at the infirmary, I could tell the sun had shed a light upon your heart and into the path that led to his.”

Aloy wasn’t sure if she liked being called out.

“Is that what you call this?” Aloy asked. “The desire to kill someone at any second yet become lonely the moment they’re not with you?”

“You just have a slight crush on him,” Elida laughed. “No one ever speaks of these feelings as if they’re easy understand.”

“Whatever,” Aloy mumbled and grabbed her focus. “Thanks for your help, Elida. I really appreciate the talks we had this evening. It helped to clear the many questions I had in my head.”

“It was my pleasure, Aloy!” Elida said and the two young women hugged each other.

“I’ll see you tonight.”

Chapter End Notes
Who isn't curious about Nil's background? I have a story written in my head. It's not a happy one, of course.
Cultural Norms Part 3

Chapter Summary

This is a longer one.

Aloy has her first experience with alcohol, dancing, and... her first... just read.
Erend confronts Nil.
Aloy has grown sick of hiding her relationship.
The hunters challenge each other to a dance.
Suspicious arise.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Erend and Varl stood beside each other at the entrance of the lodge, keeping an eye out for any suspicious figures. Their eyes had been trained by prejudice stemming from years of tribal conflict, allowing them to discriminate fairly. So far, the crowd had been a mixed one – nobles, hunters, and veterans alike had made their way to the lodge for celebration.

“Have you seen Aloy recently? I haven’t spoken to her in almost a week.” Erend asked the Nora brave. Varl shook his head.

“No, I haven’t.” Varl answered. “But I’m telling you, she’s been around the city. Scouts would have informed me if she’d gone back to the Sacred Lands. And your scouts would have told you of any sightings out in this region.”

“You still believe that the noblewoman that you saw the other day could have been her?” Erend asked, remembering Varl’s suspicions about the incident.

“Yes, it had to have been. I saw her braids fall loose beneath the clothing on her head. And I could almost swear upon All-Mother herself that I had seen that nobleman before, except he isn’t a noble at all. He had to have been wearing a disguise,” said Varl. “That man is an outlander - Carja, to be specific. My mother heard reports of a lone hunter of man leaving trails of dead bodies throughout the sacred land, briefly after the attack on the Proving. The story itself sounds improbable, however the description fit. The War-Chief and I met the outlander personally before joining ranks at spire. His strange demeaner was unlike anything I had encountered before. It’s as if he couldn’t wait for the battle to start. What surprised me is that he apparently had done hunting with Aloy, despite not knowing her name.”

“No name means less of a connection. Less of a connection means less of a conscious during a fight, if she ever became one of his targets.” Erend said with distaste. He was all too familiar with cold and callous nature of Carja infantrymen.

“And the description of the killer lines up perfectly with what was given by the crooks your vanguard arrested earlier today.” Varl mentioned.

A Sunstone Rock inmate who has resumed his murderous practices post release, Erend pondered. For a Carja to be brazen enough to commit murder within the holy city is a true rarity and the
punishment is always severe. But then dressing up as a Noble? Supposedly escorting Aloy around the capital in secret? If this is true, that means the Sun-King was hiding something from Erend and he was determined to find out what it is and why. Varl gave him a slight nudge on the arm.

“Erend, look – that’s him.” Varl whispered. Erend’s eyes found the Carja male making his way up the stairs along the crowd. Translucent eyes, tattoos, facial hair, soldier’s stride, eerie gaze – the description was a perfect match.

Nil felt eyes upon him. He looked up to see the Nora brave and Vanguard captain from earlier watch his every move like a glinthawk. Nil did not appreciate the staring. The closer he moved to them, the harder Nil fought back the urge to reach for his dagger and lay it into the eye socket of that impudent Oseram.

“Outlander.” Erend muttered bitterly as the headhunter walked passed him. Nil’s eyes narrowed at the audacity of the Vanguard captain. They were the foreigners roaming freely in the Carja Capital. To call a native an “outlander” was preposterous.

“Vanguard.” Nil replied patronizingly. The captain’s mouth twitched. The Nora brave was silent, remaining only observant of the exchange. The headhunter walked on, leaving Erend cold and dissatisfied.

“Keep an eye on him,” Erend said to Varl, as if he were talking to one of his charges. “I want to have him taken for questioning before the night’s over.”

The city was lit up in jubilation. Lanterns were ablaze throughout the streets, illuminating the city in golden light. Carja from every class were dressed in fancy garb, like birds in the Southern Jewel. Oserams were in studded outfits that jangled with every step. The Banuk painted their skin in multiple fluorescent pigments. To Aloy’s surprise, even Nora folk had joined in the festival, despite being few in number. She couldn’t help but smile at the life surrounding her.

Music was blaring from the lodge’s entrance. It had temporarily transformed into a dancehall. Eyes and hands were on Aloy, as the exalted champion walked up the steps. Fingers brushed against her skin in fascination. The huntress faked a gracious smile. Some looked her way in admiration and gratitude. Others sneered quietly amongst their peers, not quite accepting that the Sun had blessed a Nora savage with unique abilities, doubting the authenticity of her tales and deeds.

“Aloy! You made it!” Erend ran outside to greet her with Varl next to him. The Nora brave was grinning widely at her. Aloy smiled back, pleased to meet her tribesman. Both men drank in her glowing beauty and lavish attire.

“It feels forever since I’ve seen you.” Varl said as they made their way into the lodge.

“Sorry for being a ghost. I’ve just been busy.” Aloy replied. Not a complete lie.

A band was playing Your hand of Sun and Jewels. Many hunters surrounded the musicians and danced.

“Aloy!” Talanah rushed between everyone to hug her friend. Elida followed behind Talanah with her usual sweet smile. Aloy was in awe of the beauty these women held. Their outfits were hand-tailored, dazzling in intricate patterns. Speaking of beauty, Aloy saw Vanasha dancing in the middle of the crowd. Her hips swayed and dropped seductively to every beat of the music. Many onlookers were gawking at the scene, even the mighty huntress herself.
“How does she do that?” Aloy uttered in disbelief.

“It’s the way she’s designed. I bet she loves the attention, too.” Uthid joined them with a pint of mead in his hands. He was still wearing armor, only slightly less of it. Nearly everyone began throwing their hands in the air, dancing and clapping to the music.

“We should dance soon!” Talanah said. Aloy grimaced at the suggestion. She had never danced before and wasn’t certain she’d like to appear a fool in front of everyone.

“I’m going to grab a drink, first.” Aloy said, growing anxious with the people surrounding her. She stepped out of the crowd and made her way to the bar-top.

“Hey there, baby-doll, looking good.” Petra walked over to her, barmaid for the night, drinking up the supply. She leaned over the counter, breasts in full view. Damn. Aloy did her best to focus on Petra’s eyes.

“What can I do for you?” Petra asked flirtatiously.

“That’s a great question,” Aloy said and then blushed at the innuendo.

“How about something strong and vicious, something to make your legs a bit wobbly but in a good way,” oozed Petra. “Do you like it fierce?”

“Is that a kind of drink?” Aloy asked in confusion. Aidaba came over to explain.

“She’s referring to the options we have available tonight,” said Aidaba. “There’s the Green Jewel Stalker - it’s sweet and you can hardly taste the alcohol –“

“Which makes you shit-faced before you even know what hit you!” Petra laughed.

“- there’s an Oseram Brew that’s earthier in taste,” Aidaba continued. “And a Nora Strider Stout if you want something familiar.”

Between the noise, her inexperience with alcohol, and the confusion of the party, Aloy didn’t have the patience to think about which poison she was going to drink.

“Give me the first one, I guess.” Aloy said, wanting to close the exchange.

“Wow, Aloy. I didn’t expect you to be that kind of girl,” Aidaba giggled, looking at Petra as she made Aloy’s drink. There were many liquids of various amounts involved, all being mixed together in a large glass and then poured into a pint.

“We have a saying,” Petra said. “That how a woman wants her drink is also how she wants her man… or woman.”

“And they’re apparently fierce,” Aidaba said to Petra. “Makes sense with the company she brings around.”

Aloy snorted at their talk and drank her beverage. It tasted like fruit with a spicy tone at the end and was surprisingly good. Before she knew it, the contents of her cup were empty.

“Can I have another?” Aloy asked Petra, feeling unaffected.

“Easy there,” came a familiar voice. She turned to her right and saw the headhunter on a barstool beside her. A smile passed across his face when he looked at her, the smile she became familiar with when she approached him outside the ruins crawling with bandits. I did tell you we’d meet
again.

Aloy pressed her lips together hard as she felt her cheeks grow warm. He was holding a beverage that foamed at the top. She could smell the cologne rolling off of his shoulders, making her mouth water.

“You always got onto me for holding back,” Aloy pointed out. “Well, here, tonight, I’m not. I think drinking myself into a stupor is the only way I’ll be able to get through these next hours.”

“You should reconsider that.” Nil replied. “Just because you won’t remember what happened doesn’t mean others won’t.”

“Don't worry about it. Besides, I think it’s interesting how we can interact here in the open, without our disguises,” Aloy said.

“We’re *comrades in arms,*” Nil said, mocking the seriousness of the title. “The occasion calls for its allowance.”

“And I assume I’m not allowed to play favorites?” Aloy asked. Nil nodded.

“See, you’re catching on,” Nil said and gestured to various people looking Aloy’s way in the back of the lodge. Of different tribes, they appeared to be of high status, if their flashy adornments were anything to go by.

“They have plans for your future, if you catch my meaning.” Nil informed her.

“Gross!” Aloy spat in protest.

“Now, now, you don’t want to disappoint them, do you?” Nil said. “They’ll do anything they can to obtain your favor. Or an alliance. The most peaceful way is through marriage. Be on the lookout for suitors, is all I’m saying. Try not to offend the wrong people tonight. Maybe dance a little bit with a few of them, when the music gets a steady downbeat. This night is only the beginning of what’s to come. You’ll want to avoid any ribbons falling on you, as well.”

“And what happens if I *don’t* act like a proper lady?” Aloy challenged.

“Someone will likely die.” Nil shrugged.

About ten feet away were a group of gorgeous Carja females ogling Aloy’s partner. Their eyes were all over Nil, drinking him in. They whispered back and forth to each other, grinning and giggling.

“You could do well to take your own advice,” Aloy said. “These wenches behind you look like they want to rip your clothes off.”

“Oh really?” Nil’s eyebrows raised in curiosity. “How many? See any red-heads?”

“Why do I even bother?” Aloy groaned into her drinking glass. Nil was examining a piece of parchment with ancient glyphs, the one that Aloy had written on from the previous night.

“Are you studying?” Aloy asked incredulously.

“You could say that,” Nil answered. “I believe knowing the writing of the ancients could be of great assistance for future occasions.”

“I can only wonder what occasions those will be,” said Aloy, drinking her second round.
“You know how my imagination runs wild. But what about you? What would you want them to be like?” Nil asked. Aloy gestured to her focus.

“Beneficial ones,” answered Aloy, leaning into him. She smiled in a coquettish manner. “As long as you have something to give, I will have something for you to take. Or give. Do you have something for me?”

Nil sputtered his drink over the bar-top. Aidaba and Petra hurled into laughter. He grabbed a silk cloth and wiped the liquid off his face.

“Do I have – is there something I can give to you? Do you want something from me?” Nil turned towards the barmaids. “Aidaba, bring this girl some bread and water. I think she’s thirsty.”

“The way she’s looking at you, I’d say that’s an understatement.” Petra laughed. “Aloy, why don’t you just shag him over the counter top with the way you’re staring at him?”

Nil turned to Aloy and said, “If you keep pressing the issue, I just might press something into you.”

“Are we talking about a long-sword or a knife here?” Aloy snickered. Nil licked his teeth at her comment and grinned.

“This is another reason why I like you.”

On the second floor, Teb had joined the company of Varl and Erend next to the fellow vanguard.

“I don’t know where she went.” Erend said, his eyes searching about the lodge. Teb was the first to find Aloy sitting at the bar-top with a Carja man.

“She’s over there.” Teb pointed out.

Erend stopped mid-conversation when he caught view of Aloy’s company.

“Who’s that she’s with?” asked Teb. She was leaning in closer to the Carja tribesman, laughing, blushing.

“Trouble.” Erend growled territoriality and put down his drink.

“Though I’m not surprised she would find interests outside the sacred lands, I’m not sure if the Matriarchs would approve.” Varl said sorely.

“They definitely wouldn’t. Carja or not, he’s gorgeous,” Teb declared and quickly realized his mistake when the drunken captain began making his way downstairs.

“There you are, Aloy!” Erend ungracefully moved his body between them, almost knocking over Nil’s glass. Erend acted completely oblivious to Nil’s presence.

“Hi Erend, did you need something?” Aloy asked, growing nervous.

“Yeah, a few things, really,” Erend said. “First, what do you plan on doing now that the war’s over? Ever think about going back to The Claim with me? You could meet the clan, get to know my relatives. They’ve been asking about you and I’d love to show you around in the flesh.”

“You told your family about me?” Aloy asked, stunned at his bluntness. Erend nodded with pride.
She noticed Nil’s fingers drum the bar top. *At least they’re not on his blade,* thought Aloy.

“It sounds… lovely, but that will have to wait,” Aloy said quickly and gestured with her hand in Nil’s direction. “I’m actually embarking on an expedition westbound with a fellow comrade after tonight’s celebration.”

Erend turned around and faked a grin.

“Oh really? Who’s the new guy? Is he from around here?” Erend asked, giving the headhunter a hard slap on his back. Nil coughed uncomfortably at the heavy force. Aloy was horrified.

“I’ve been around a lot longer than you’d think,” Nil answered coolly. He, like many Carja, were not fond of gruff advancements - much of a distinguishing trait among Oseram.

“What’s your name then, son?” Erend asked, alcohol rolling off his breath. “Because I sure would like to know you better. Where you’ve *been.* What you’ve *done.*”

“No, you really wouldn’t,” Nil said in a low voice. His hand crept down towards his boot.

Aloy saw a dangerous light flash across the hunter’s eyes, similar to the way he looked before gutting a target. Aloy then noticed that both men were armed. She sensed that Erend was suspicious of Nil, but this wasn’t the right time for an investigation. In addition, Nil was not someone to be openly threatened within close proximity, something Aloy knew from first-hand experience.

“Wow, okay, Erend, this is Nil, he fought in the battle against the Eclipse and corrupted machines,” Aloy hastily explained. “But we met before that, actually. Truth be told, he’s one of the main reason the roads to Meridian were made safer. He even claimed me as his hunting partner...”

*Oops.* Aloy noticed she used the incorrect choice of words when she saw Erend’s expression change from slightly agitated to completely flustered.

“Really? Is he that important? Because I don’t remember you ever mentioning him to me at all, like he even existed.” Erend replied, his eyes still on Nil.

“That’s hilarious because she didn’t mention you, either. But I’m sure that there’s a reason as to why,” Nil said sharply. His eyes were daggers.

“Who the hell- “ Erend reached for his hammer but was stopped when cold water splashed into his face.

“Erend, cut it out *right now.* Or I’m going to cut you off!” Petra snapped, slamming the water pitcher down. She looked furious. Erend growled in dissatisfaction. He looked at Aloy’s distressed face and regained his composure.


“Is everything okay?” Aidaba asked as she walked over to check on the situation.

“Yeah, my fellow Oseram nearly started a fight with this Carja soldier, as if we needed another damn war,” Petra said, frustrated, and looked to Nil who had secured the dagger into place.

“Look, I know he’s belligerent when he’s drunk, but he has well-meaning intentions.” Petra said, trying to soothe the situation.
“We all mean well.” Nil muttered and went back to his pint. He looked over and saw Aloy cover her face in her hands.

“Hey, hey. Everything’s fine,” Nil said gently shaking her shoulder. “Don’t be upset. No one’s dead yet.”

“The night’s still young, Nil.” Aloy said, biting her nails and then let out a sigh of relief, grateful that he did not try anything. Nil could have easily escalated the situation. He was getting better at this, at acting normal around others. Before then she didn’t know if that were even possible.

The band began a new piece with a heavier drum beat. The Carja girls in the lodge immediately cheered as this song was familiar to them.

“The party is about to get crazy!” Aidaba said excitedly.

“Crazy?” Aloy inquired. She couldn’t help but feel increasingly foreign.

“Hey, Aloy, you ready for this?” Vanasha walked up to her in her naturally seductive way.

“Ready for what? Are you asking me to dance?” Aloy asked incredulously.

“Oh yes. You’re even dressed for the part.” Vanasha said, wiggling her hips. Aloy didn’t know if it was in her to move like that. She looked over to the rest of the girls in the hall, all baring their mid-drifts. Their arms swayed in the air as they dropped their hips to the beat. Hanging on the outskirts were the men, not dancing but waiting.

“Vanasha, I can’t do that.” Aloy said, growing red. She looked to Nil and wondered if she should ask him if he felt like running off with her somewhere to hunt. Instead, Nil was smiling, familiar with the routine. He nodded to Vanasha. Go for it.

“Don’t worry about your handsome soldier, Aloy,” Vanasha reassured her. “He’ll join you soon.”

“Nil dances?” Aloy asked in disbelief as they made their way through the crowded dance floor.

“Of course. He’s a Carja, isn’t he?” Vanasha said. “Nobles, regular folk, soldiers, the king – we all do it. Now watch, it’s very simple. Throw your hands up like this, move your hips like this.” Vanasha explained, displaying her body in a snake like motion. Aloy looked around, making sure no one else she knew could see her. Assured that she was in the clear, Aloy attempted the moves.

“See? You’re getting it! Now shake your hips in this sort of fashion.” Vanasha began to shimmy. Aloy’s mouth dropped open. Vanasha moved closer to Aloy and began grinding on her. Giggling, Aloy welcomed the advancement and even found herself enjoying the motion, feeling slightly aroused. Talanah ran over and joined in on the merriment, throwing her hands in the air.

“You have large one on you, don’t you?” Talanah said and lightly slapped Aloy’s rear in a drunken daze.

Like clockwork, the beat changed and the men wasted no time in leaping to the feet, taking part in the motion. Aloy noticed the three girls from earlier who had been leering at Nil. They were gesturing with their fingers for him to join them in their circle. Like a Sawtooth would investigate Aloy’s whistle, Nil slowly made his way over to where they were dancing, grinning at their request.

“This dance has a little bit of choreography to it,” Vanasha said, bringing Aloy back to the matter at hand. “You clap twice above your head, stomp, stomp...”
The way Vanasha explained the dance made it seem so simple. But looking at her actually do the motions, it seemed as if there was much more to it, especially in the hips. Still, Aloy followed the instructions.

“Just stay loose and – there!” Vanasha said with excitement.

“You got it!” cheered Talanah.

The fires that lit the lower levels were suddenly snuffed out, shrouding the floor in darkness and smoke. Faces and identities became obscure. Aloy felt light as a feather while she danced around, feeling as if no one were watching her. She laughed and shuffled her feet along with her friends without a care or worry. Even if it was for a moment, the huntress felt a sense of belonging. Closing her eyes, Aloy moved to the pattern of the beat, jumping and throwing her hands up in the air, letting her hair fly around with newfound grace and confidence, the anxiety ridden away by the alcohol within her bloodstream.

Aloy felt the familiar hand of her partner grasp her own and spin her around.

“Excuse me, but do we know each other?” Aloy teased him.

“I never thought I’d live to see the day where a Nora tribeswoman does Carja dancing so well.” Nil replied, seemingly pleased.

“And what about yourself?” Aloy asked. “Care to follow along?”

“Well aren’t you the cocky one? I know I usually follow during our hunts,” Nil said and pulled Aloy closer to him. “But right now, why don’t you let me take the lead?”

“What is this, a courtship dance? The rooster seducing the hen?” Aloy asked.

“It goes both ways. The challenge lies in how much you know about the other person, knowing what ways they like it best,” Nil answered. “Knowing what makes them weak.”

“You’re on.” Aloy said, accepting the challenge. It was always about leverage when it came to Nil. Aloy was just as prideful.

“Maintain eye contact.” He said, gesturing with his fingers. “Are you ready?”

Nil began clapping in rhythm, nodding for her to do the same. Aloy found steadiness within the music and followed the movements her friends had previously instructed, executing them as soon as the beat dropped. Amidst the dancing crowd, the two hunters began the routine alongside each other. Dumbstruck, Aloy watched as Nil moved to the rhythm of the music with deliberate motions and a looseness that rivaled even that of Vanasha. The manner in which his feet swept across the floor with such grace made it appear as if he were walking on air. Tonight, Nil was putting his Carja tribesman authenticity on full display, doing so with pleasure. In passing, he threw a smile in Aloy’s direction, that which of which she returned. Nil signaled the huntress to take his hand and from there, he spun Aloy in, out, and all around him. Aloy giggled at the excitement she felt from within as she moved beside him, their motions completely in sync.

Sensing she had grown comfortable, Nil placed his hands on her waist.

All at once, Aloy’s feet were off the ground and she was above him. She laughed in delight, feeling nearly weightless in his arms. When Aloy’s toes touched the ground, she looked into his gray eyes and nearly melted.
“You think you have me pegged, don’t you?” Aloy asked, her chest heaving up and down.

“I wasn’t going to say it, but yeah, I think I’ve got you.” Nil said confidently. Aloy squinted her eyes.

“Don’t get ahead of yourself, Carja,” warned Aloy. “You’ll regret it.”

The beat changed into a slower, heavier tempo. She took full advantage of the obscurity that the dark room had provided for her and moved closer to her prey. She felt desire, lust, and greed for his being, yearning for power over him. Forthrightly, the huntress pressed her rear up between his legs, rotating in large circles. She was ensnaring him in her web of seduction, weakening his mind, eroding his composure. The huntress wanted to make him regret ever thinking of killing her. Careless of her own disposition, Aloy felt a surge of pride rise within her chest and a pulsing sensation between her legs as she made him writhe behind her, fully aware of her cruelty.

“Tempting me, are you?” Nil whispered, nearly overwhelmed by her adventurous motions. He placed his hands on her waist with a tight grip. The hunter fought against the desire to let his hands wander her body, to take advantage of her lowered state of mind. She was drunk, fog-minded, behaving boldly and unrestrained - Nil understood this all quite clearly. He felt more confident in the night knowing that she was in his hands and not someone else’s.

The music came to an end and the lanterns were re-lit. Nil swiftly released his hold on Aloy’s body and discreetly moved to the side. The huntress turned to her partner, laughing mischievously, almost falling over. Nil steadied her once more with his hands, daring the wave of onlookers at his back. Despite the need to make distance between each other, Nil did not feel secure leaving a flushed woman alone in an equally plastered crowd filled with individuals who wanted to remove her clothing, despite himself wanting to do the same.

Nil queued the Sunhawk for assistance. Talanah moved in and took Aloy by the hand, leading her towards the front of the lodge. The Vanguard captain caught a glimpse of them and headed their direction.

“Excuse me for a minute,” Erend said to Talanah. “We have an important matter to discuss.”

Though slightly concerned by the sudden urgency, Talanah obliged and gave them space.

Aloy felt a large hand squeeze her shoulder. The Vanguard captain pulled her closer towards him.

“Aloy, I need to talk to you. Your hunter friend, Nil, or whatever you call him, he’s a dangerous - Fire and spit, you’re a mess!” Erend exclaimed as Aloy stumbled back and forth, not quite feeling a sense of balance.

Observant of the entire exchange, Nil cursed under his breath, unsure of what to do in the heat of the moment. He noticed a few vanguards slowly approaching his position. Someone had tipped them off.

Flashes of light appeared outside followed by sounds of gunfire. The herd of people rushed out of the lodge to view the glorious spectacle of colors. There was a superstition surrounding fireworks among the Oseram and Carja, both tribes differing in their meaning. The Oseram, being the engineers of the craft looked towards the lights with pride and jollity. The Carja, however, felt a sense of romanticism, even creating a game surrounding it. Once the Blazing Sun was seen in the sky, ribbons would fall and land on individuals, symbolizing good fortune. The single red ribbon was most sought after. Whoever it landed upon, the individual would kiss the person whose hands grabbed it first.
Nil quickly took advantage of the commotion and joined the rush of people like a drop of rainwater falling into a river. He looked back to see the Vanguard captain place a protective arm around the huntress, blocking any advancements made towards her. She was secure for now.

“Here, drink this. Good, good, are you with me yet?” Erend asked as Aloy guzzled down a water flask. Her mind was becoming clearer, but she was still confused with all the commotion. There were lights flashing all around her, sounds, voices, shouts.

Where was Nil?

“Erend? What’s wrong?” Aloy asked, trying to mentally pull herself together.

“I just confirmed the murderer’s identity with a witness,” Erend explained. “There was a third person there at the scene of the crime, a court noble who saw those three men killed in cold blood.”

Aloy’s face grew dark, knowing Nil had been their target and was merely acting in self-defense. This all sounded like a set-up.

“Who is this court noble?” Aloy inquired.

“I cannot disclose that information, Aloy.” Erend said grimly. “What we need is your cooperation. This man is extremely dangerous. I haven’t done research on his previous record in detail yet, but from what I’ve heard is that he’s got a terrible history behind him, ruthless and savage. I don’t know why he has returned to the city, but you’re in danger if you keep him as your company. Aloy, you need to stay away from him.”

As if all this was something Aloy hadn’t already known before. Erend didn’t realize that the headhunter was also her own personal target, whom of which she wanted information from. There’s a connection Nil has between Avad, the people who are after him, and the focus. Erend’s pleading wouldn’t be enough to satisfy her curiosity. She needed more than just rumors. She needed the truth.

"Blazing Sun!" someone shouted from afar.

A firework exploded into an enormous circle of orange light. Lodge members jumped up and down with pride. Aloy looked up to see crimson sphere-shaped lanterns floating above the cheering crowd. A metallic-yellow colored balloon glided below tied to a lantern, with a red silk ribbon loosely dangling from it.

Nil began drawing closer to the vanguard captain, his dagger in hand. The foolish Oseram was getting on his last nerve. There were enough people around, plenty of exits to utilize. If Nil could make it look like an accident –

An arrow pierced the balloon, shattering its glittering contents. Aloy caught a glimpse of the headhunter appear behind the vanguard captain, holding a weapon. His eyes were a chilling silver, filled with malicious intent. Erend was caught by surprise as Aloy suddenly embraced him, holding his body tight to her own, pressing the ring-locked armor against her bare skin. Responding to her advances, Erend placed his heavy arms around her back, welcoming the intimacy that he had experienced only in his dreams.

“You should come with me, Aloy,” Erend whispered. “Let’s leave this place for a while.”
Knowing that her diversion was working, Aloy faced the headhunter.

Nil regarded Aloy coldly. Whatever the huntress was playing at, she had only succeeded in rendering Erend more vulnerable. This would only take a second.

Aloy knew what was about to happen. She subtly reached around Erend to stop Nil, aiming for his hand but instead catching the blade, cutting her fingers.

*Aloy*, Nil mouthed her name. He glared into her eyes, unnerved by her continuing interference.

*No*, Aloy pleaded, shaking her head. His hand tensed, baring the whites of his knuckles. With reluctance, the headhunter withdrew from his initial attack. As Aloy watched him retreat, two other vanguards came rushing towards Nil’s position once more.

Nil stopped in his tracks as something else caught his eye. Nearly everyone began to point in the direction of Aloy.

“Should I even be surprised?” Vanasha asked.

“Aloy, it’s you!” Elida called out. Sure enough, the red ribbon had landed on her shoulder, tangled in hair. Erend grabbed at the ribbon, reaching for his golden opportunity.

Aloy was suddenly shoved into her male comrades by a drunk Banuk, pushing them onto the ground. Erend searched around for the red fabric. It was nowhere to be seen, gone like smoke.

“Ugh,” muttered Aloy as she sat up. Where had the ribbon gone?

The crowd gasped as Nil opened his hand, revealing the red silk fabric.

Aloy looked around and saw the crowd staring at both her and Nil. She glanced at her partner, anxious of the obligation. Nil looked at her in a quizzical manner, uncertain of what to expect.

*The woman wouldn’t possibly make a scene right now*, Nil thought to himself. All eyes were on them. The huntress would stand up, dignified, unabashed by the frivolous nature of the celebration. She would say something callous and storm away. She would -

Nil’s eyes opened wide in shock as Aloy reached out, grabbed the back of his neck, and kissed him full on the mouth. Accepting of the consequences this would surely bring to him, Nil closed his eyes as Aloy had already done, taking in her soft lips. The crowd clapped and cheered in excitement. Aloy felt Nil’s facial hair brush against the outside of her mouth. She tasted mint and spice on his breath, making her eager to draw out the kiss. She pressed her wounded fingers to his cheek, leaving trails of blood on his skin, while his hand crawled up her arm, passionately squeezing. She was sick of the games, the disguises, the protocol, the cage. Let them watch.

“Whoa, are you going to let him breathe?” Vanasha pulled the two apart and turned to Nil. “Are you okay, dear?”

“I’m…” Nil was lost for words and light headed as well. The hunters slowly stood up, weary of the crowd. All eyes were on them. Some surprised, others confused. A few looked upset. The herd of vanguard had stopped in their tracks, unsure of what to do. Erend stood dumbfounded at what he had just witnessed.

“Nil.” Aloy grabbed a hold of her partner’s wrist. “Let's get out of here.”
The hunters ran through the streets as if a stormbird were hot on their tail, turning many heads in the process. Aloy's head was still dazed by alcohol, disabling the agility she needed to move through the streets. She stumbled many times on her way to the apartment and Nil gave a willing had to assist her to her feet. Though his lips formed a playful smile, his weary silver eyes told a different story. He was stressed.

Finally arriving at her apartment, Aloy quickly gathered her belongings for the trail while Nil equipped his armor and weapons. They hadn't been there for five minutes before a knock was heard at the door.

“Shit!” Aloy snapped. “Nil, if needed, escape through the balcony.”

“Neither of us are safe without the other at the moment.” Nil reminded her and approached the entrance. Aloy opened the door. Outside were two of the royal guard. Among them stood Blameless Marad. He squinted at his vision, slightly startled by the presence of Aloy’s company.

“Well, this was an unexpected find,” Marad said. “I was certain Aloy would be alone.”

“Why did you expect me to be alone? What do you want?” Aloy asked, suspicious.

“Incorrect intel, it seems,” Marad answered and turned to Nil. “At ease, former captain. Vanasha is handling the situation at the lodge. You have approximately an hour and a half before the search resumes.”

“Why are you here, Marad?” Aloy asked again, impatiently.

“His Radiance has requested your presence,” Marad answered stiffly. “Will you see to that before leaving?”

“I – “

“You’d best hurry.” Marad said and took his leave.

“Fuck, what does he want right now?” Aloy snapped, throwing her fist against the wall. Nil remained silent for he knew the answer. His hands curled into a fist as he followed her outside.

“I’m going,” Aloy said. “I’ll try to be as fast as possible. Meet me near the Raingathers. I’ll shoot a fire arrow to signal my arrival.”

As Aloy turned to leave, she felt Nil grab a hold of her hand.

“Nil?” Aloy asked. He looked on edge, his translucent eyes were hollow with concern, as if he didn't want her to leave. Aloy saw where she had left blood on his cheek from their kiss, a kiss that seemed like ago ago already.

“Right, I’ll meet you there.” Nil said and released her. Aloy nodded and jogged towards the palace, confusion circulating through her mind.

Chapter End Notes
Alright, I hope this work is satisfactory until I post the next chapters.

About the dancing: There was content written that I decided to cut out or else this would have been an entire chapter about dance moves. If you want a clearer picture of what I'm referencing, look up Indian couple dances (student ones), Bollywood, as well as tango.
I think the Iron age is a bit too early for Patrick Swayze and Dirty Dancing, but feel free to imagine that as well.
Into the Wilds

Chapter Summary

Aloy’s meeting with Avad reveals alarming information. Finding her partner in the jungle was no walk in the forest, either. Tensions rise between the hunters at a time when they need to have each other’s back.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Aloy found her royal acquaintance in his personal barracks sitting on a bench, wiping the sweat off his face with a towel. He was without his formal armor and crown, wearing only silk trousers and a few arm bands.

Aloy greeted him first.

“Avad, Marad informed me that we needed to speak?” she asked, always straight to the point. He looked up to his lavishly dressed visitor and smiled.

“Yes, of course, my lovely friend,” Avad said and welcomed her.

“Why aren’t you asleep?” asked Aloy. The night was incredibly late. Avad opened and closed his hands, as if grasping something, a weapon.

“Late nights are becoming a regularity for me,” Avad answered. “Council meetings and their subject matter have become increasingly tedious. Envoys from faraway lands have ventured here with promises from their respective sovereign. The stakes are being raised and I’m not certain how much longer I can last on my own.”

Avad stood up and drew closer to the huntress. She looked to his hands and saw that they were marked with fresh cuts and bruises. The king’s body looked… more muscular than she had remembered.

“What happened to your hands?” Aloy asked.

“I’ve resumed my combat regimen,” Avad answered. “I don’t want to lose touch with my defense against danger, despite being Sun-King. There may be a time when I’ll need to brandish my sword once more.”

Aloy grasped his right hand, feeling the marks on his skin. He wasn’t taking the training lightly. The sores were evidence of his determination. Aloy was familiar with it, a defining trait of her adolescence.

“You’re stressed about something,” Aloy said, able to sense his desperation all the way to the canyons of Blazon Reach.

“Yes, many things.” Avad sighed. “I won’t lie to you and say that you’re not at the center of it. Between the demands of tradition, coercion, and my own personal values – I’m attempting to discover even ground.”
“We all… act strangely, crazy, even, when under incredible amounts of pressure,” Aloy added sympathetically as they walked outside and leaned against the railing. “Perhaps you could find assistance confiding in your closest of allies. One’s that you’ve known and trusted all your life.”

Avad looked to the sky and smiled mournfully. “Known and trusted? My elder brother is dead at my father’s hands, my father at my own. Ersa is gone as well, killed by one of her own tribesman. Life, love, and trust are truly fleeting just as rain that sweeps across the land.” That last sentence Avad spoke sounded like it would come out of Nil’s mouth, not the Sun-King’s.

*He has a point,* thought Aloy. How many allies had she tallied up to fight beside her do so with a mind that has been well acquainted with loss? Everyone, wherever they are, are just survivors. They both seemed at a loss for words or solution. The next name Avad mentioned took Aloy by surprise.

“Nilead.” Avad whispered. “Out of thin air, he reappears.”

“As a friend or…?”

“More like a brother forged from the essence of hellfire and damnation. To say I trust him… A rushing river that provides water to the land will still drown the inhabitants when it floods. A burning fire that warms a cold room can rage out of control if not properly maintained.” Avad said. The described ambiguity was fitting of Nil’s character.

“Yeah, I’ve come to know how dangerous he is.” Aloy replied dryly.

“Only when you’re not careful.” Avad added generously. He spoke in warning metaphors about Nil but would still defend him. Why?

“How long have you known him?” Aloy asked. Avad lifted his head towards the stars as if their lights held the fragments of memories. His expression changed to that of wonder while he reflected. Aloy rather liked this look of his.

“Since adolescence,” Avad answered. “I caught word that you two met in the wilderness by chance.”

“Unfortunately. He was surrounded by three dead bodies and treading on *Sacred Ground.*” Aloy replied. Avad laughed in amusement.

“Whatever negative impression he made upon you, please understand that, though he may seem indistinguishable from a brigand – bloodthirsty and vicious - he never acts mindlessly. He grew up in the capital surrounded by death. It had not been by choice. As he grew older, killing simply became a matter of fact to him, just as your hunting of machines. And in my father’s empire, killing was glorified.”

“I see a clear difference there between hunting man and machine.” Aloy argued and then recounted. “Or… I used to at least.”

After discovering Gaia’s Hephaestus sub-function and how the machines she previously hunted for game were originally predisposed to recreate the world for human life were only growing aggressive in response to continuous human poaching, the line between right and wrong was becoming blurred and Aloy hated every bit of it. Everything had a sense of self-preservation, flesh and blood or robotic.

“Your trophies are on display at the lodge,” Avad mentioned. “An impressive collection, at that. We have no trophy stands for skulls here in Meridian. Thankfully.”
“You’ve been aware of Nil’s murderous practices since youth?” Aloy asked.

“I do not know fully of his life’s story, his life before he was brought to the palace,” Avad answered. “He lived alongside myself and Kadaman before joining the military. Let’s see… I first remember how he spared us from assassination on numerous occasions. Each assassin was killed in the same manner - their throats cut open, allowing blood to run freely over the rugs, leaving the bodies in their places until discovered by horrified servants.”

“He was killing the assassins in the same fashion that they would have done to you, if given the opportunity.” Aloy said.

“Indeed,” Avad answered. “His methods were meticulous, well thought-out.”

Despite the grotesque mental image, Aloy was rather intrigued. She remembered how he disarmed her with her own spear. When murdering brigands, he did so brutally, a reflection of their own ways of killing.

“After our meeting, I’m heading back into the wilderness, westbound. Now that the machines pose less of a threat, I believe it’s time for reconnaissance. After scouting, I plan on traveling further, past the land of the Daunt.” Aloy stated.

“Into the forbidden west?” Avad asked with concern.

“Yes. I’ve read the glyph concerning its dangers,” Aloy said. “But I’ve traveled quite a bit already. Take a look through my focus.”

Aloy placed the focus over Avad’s ear. She moved his hand over the device to turn it on. Similar to Nil, Avad’s expression brightened at the digital images appearing in his vision.

“This is a strange place.” Avad said.

“It used to be a ranch, or at least that’s what they called it in the metal world,” explained Aloy. She needed to know if what she had experienced with Nil on her bed, the shock, the intensity – if it would manifest itself again. Gently, Aloy lowered Avad’s hand to her chest where her tattoo was spread across her skin. She noticed the dilation of the Sun-king’s pupils and the way his eyes shifted all around her being.

“Look at my body. Did you see anything appear?” Aloy asked, having left the Carja language on in the interface. “Any text?”

Avad squinted.

“I see your name: ‘Aloy.’” Avad answered. This is so strange, Aloy thought. How could Avad’s interaction with the focus differ from that of Nil’s? Perhaps if they all had focuses, she would be able to create joint networks and share visions. She would need to enter the ancient ruins and sift through the contents. There, she’d likely find what she was looking for.

“That’s all I wanted to show you for now.” Aloy said.

Avad turned off the device and set it on a table next to him. His eyes readjusted to his vision without the focus.

“It’s an impressive device,” Avad said. “But it would take some getting used to.”

Aloy was lost in thought trying to understand the circumstances that played a difference in the two individual interactions. How was Nil able to read Aloy’s Alpha Registry?
“Avad, I apologize but I’m in a bit of a hurry. What is it that you wanted to speak with me about?” Aloy said, returning to the current state of affairs.

“Ah, yes. It is a simple matter of diplomacy,” Avad answered. “I’m sure it’s of no news to you that you are a very sought after individual in the kingdom, Aloy.” Avad said.

“Not to my liking, Avad,” Aloy replied coldly. “I feel as if I left a part of my humanity behind the moment I laid Hades to rest on the spire.”

“That’s understandable. I know what war does to people,” Avad replied sympathetically. “I remember what you said before in regards to staying in Meridian, but do you ever think you may reconsider?”

“There would have to be a damn good reason for me to stay in one place.” Aloy answered.

“Yes of course, Aloy.” Avad replied. “I think… I need to be forward with you if you’re willing to hear me out.”

“What is it?”

“By many people of the land you’re considered a heroine, a savior, if you will. But others deem your machine taming abilities as threatening, especially when uncertain of your allegiance – you’ve yet to state any. Due to the example the Eclipse set when they decided to terrorize the region with their demonic machines, many have grown fear that you may do the same.”

Aloy leaped to her feet at the information.

“Are you saying that I’m a target?” Aloy asked.

“Of both fascination and destruction, yes.” Avad sighed. Aloy threw her hands in the air in frustration.

“Was the example at the spire not enough to show where I stand?” Aloy snapped. “I risk my life in saving the world and now I’m public enemy number one?”

“Not enemy, yet,” Avad said. “First and foremost, sovereign territories will want you on their side. Then they will want to know how you found the power to override the machines for reasons which you can imagine. My team and I have kept many of them at bay by sharing the information as vaguely as we could, wrapping it with mysticism. But eventually, they will ask for more. Meridian will be hosting a gathering of the sovereign tribes within a week. Leaders will gather here to discuss the recent events concerning the Eclipse and the spire and of course get to know you more personally, if you would allow it. Many will come with bearing requests, some of which pertains to marriage.”

Aloy cursed herself for not being more careful. The headhunter couldn’t have pushed her spear against her throat any harder that night when he snarled at her for the reckless display of machine handling.

“You mentioned my allegiance. Is that why you asked about the possibility of me staying in Meridian?” Aloy questioned.

Avad nodded. “For your own safety, of course. We can provide you protection if you ally yourself with the Sundom. We are currently allied with the Nora and Oseram, the makings for a strong region.”
How long until the tribes find another reason to fight each other? Think of every person you’ve learned to trust, who you’ve fought alongside against the threat of extinction.

“I don’t think the Nora would approve if I outright declared my loyalty first to the Carja,” Aloy replied. “Neither would the Oseram.”

“There are ways around that particular issue,” Avad answered promptly. “Erend is my link between his clan and if I could have you as the primary link between the Nora as well it would most likely end our concerns over peace.”

The only way to prove that was through marriage – the clearest declaration of unification between opposing tribes. Avad knew this and that’s why he requested her presence. But how would that work if even someone like Ersa was disapproved of? The Carja looked down upon the Nora more so than the Oseram. Even if the Carja somehow did approve of a unification between Aloy and the Sun-King, to be tied down to a kingdom is not what she wanted.

The Sun-king felt nothing but good will towards Aloy, but this meeting seemed more like a plea. Avad was being pressured by his council to act quickly, to get to her first. Perhaps Erend was enduring the same ordeal from his tribe? And Varl? Aloy felt herself disappearing as a person and instead being replaced as an object of desire.

She felt Avad’s hands crawl around her body and smelled royal fragrance falling off his shoulders. She didn’t remember who kissed who first, only that she was tired, stressed, and confused. Maybe he had a right to do this? Avad was only looking out for the welfare of his people. Was Aloy the selfish one?

“One night is all it would take.”

It sounded like a command.

Aloy shut her eyes. The first image that came to mind was Nil. His gray eyes, his antagonizing snarl, the way he gently pressed her down on the bed and touched her skin in fascination, the way he saw her as an equal in his own way. She felt a part of herself break inside.

When Aloy had nearly made it to the city streets, someone called out to her.

“Excuse me, huntress?” Aloy turned around to see a middle-aged gentleman in court silks approach her. He had a wide smile on his face.

“Can I help you?” Aloy asked with wariness. The man held up her focus. Aloy’s eyes widened in horror. She had been too lost in the moment with Avad to realize she had forgotten it.

“I believe you left this with His Radiance.” said the stranger and gave the focus to Aloy.

“I appreciate your help.” Aloy said, quickly placing her device over her ear.

“No, no,” said the man. “We always appreciate what you do for us.”

The man went back towards the palace and into the darkness like a slithering snake. Aloy found the last part of his sentence strange sounding. Who’s we?
Aloy called for her mount when she had reached the southern gates of the city. The strider galloped to its mistress and gave her an enthusiastic nuzzle on the cheek.

“Let us waste no more time, my friend.” Aloy whispered as she mounted her steed. Torches lit the path she followed. With a firm tug of the reins, the huntress made her way through the path with urgency.

“Shit.” Aloy cursed as she saw the vanguard rally near the exit. They turned at the sound of the hooves. The inside of her chest twisted around, knowing who was there, knowing who she had wounded.

As she passed them, the huntress made eye contact with the vanguard captain. An aching sensation rose up in her insides, nearly causing her to tumble off her steed. Time seemed to slow when Aloy caught a glimpse of Erend’s pained expression as she passed him by, refusing to stop for a moment to explain herself, refusing to spare him a simple moment of her time.

Aloy pressed on, determined to not let anything stop her.

The trail of the dead led the huntress to her target. Several freshly murdered bodies littered the path, all killed with arrows belonging to Nil.

Aloy stopped by the river and shot a fire arrow into the sky. It began to rain heavily. As the arrow fell into the river, the headhunter quietly emerged from the thicket, eyes glowing silver. He had been injured. Blood was rolling down his side from a flesh wound. The huntress rushed towards her partner, nearly frantic.

“What the hell happened?” Aloy cried out. Nil quickly pressed his hand against her mouth and pulled her towards a secluded spot beneath a large tree. Aloy turned on her focus and examined the surroundings. Her vision came up empty.

“My focus isn’t picking up anything.” Aloy whispered. Nil didn’t reply. Instead, he shut his eyes and held his blade in front of him with both hands.

A stealth-cloaked cutthroat silently appeared to the right, unaware of its prey’s close proximity. Nil thrust his scimitar into the unsuspecting attacker’s vitals, instantly slaying them. Upon sheathing his sword, the headhunter fell back against the tree, out of breath.

“My focus didn’t register their presence.” Aloy said. Her digital vision was showing static. She turned the device off and back on. The focus displayed the same results. Determined to get to the bottom of this, Aloy searched the body of the recently fallen. After a thorough shakedown, she found a small metallic device emitting a flash, looking similar to the stealth emitters found on stalkers. Aloy scanned the device with her focus before crushing it between her fingers. To her relief, the digital interface had been restored.

The rain had ceased, allowing the hunters to rest at a campfire.
After Nil’s wound was tended to, Aloy decided to break the silence.

“Once you’re ready.” Aloy said to him. The hunter nodded blankly and stared into the fire with an unrelenting gaze.

“Who attacked you?” she asked.

“Marshall Assassins.” Nil answered.

“Marshall Assassins? What are those?”

“The meaning is within the name.”

“So, you’re on bad terms with a high court official? How did this happen?”

“I became an interference.”

“With who?”

Nil shook his head, “You don’t know them.”

“Do you think she would regard you the same way if she knew your history? If she knew what kind of man took away so many loved ones, leaving families buried in their grief? Even your own? Consider this a warning.”

The hunter clenched his fists.

Aloy thought for a moment and remembered Erend informing her of a third witness to Nil’s murder.

“Was the third witness a court noble by any chance? He sounds like a snake hissing?” Aloy asked. Nil’s eyes glanced up at her in surprise.

“Erend, the vanguard you tried to attack, he told me,” Aloy explained. “The word of thugs doesn’t weigh much to the military police but that of a court noble does, which is how they found you out. Apparently sparing lives doesn’t always have benevolent results.”

“I didn’t spare him out of the goodness of my heart, huntress,” Nil replied, unsurprised at how the events of tonight played out. “Spilling a member of the court’s blood on holy ground is a capital crime. I’d have the whole empire out for my head if I decided to kill him.”

“I see,” Aloy said. “The same nobleman, I believe I met him on my way out of the city. He had retrieved my focus for me. And he had seemed extremely… pleased about something.”

“Your meeting with Avad must have gone extremely well then.” Nil declared and exhaled deeply. Aloy furrowed her brow.

“Care to explain what you mean?”

“You’re a prized possession, Aloy.” Nil answered coldly. “But no one has ownership over you. Yet.”

Aloy bit her lip. That explains Avad’s strange behavior. Somewhere deep in the palace, his strings were being pulled. But Aloy was no angel either as she too had manipulated others tonight. Erend and Avad, she had exploited them both for self-gain.
Another issue was tugging at her, complicating her feelings of guilt. This mess could have been avoided if Nil had not made an attempt on Erend’s life. Why had Nil not ran instead?

“You won’t kill a court noble but you were completely willing to try murdering the vanguard captain.” Aloy stated grievously. “Had I not been there…”

Nil raised an eyebrow at her.

“’Try’?” Nil asked, sounding insulted. “You think I was trying? Woman, if I had approached the vanguard captain with intent to kill, he would already be growing cold on the ground tonight, his blood running through the streets. Mark my words.”

“That’s Avad’s link between Oseram, a keeper of the peace between tribes!” Aloy snapped, “You would truly consider killing the vanguard captain? Ersa’s brother and Avad’s friend?”

“That wouldn’t even be the worst of the things I’ve done,” Nil said, crossing his arms. “And if you truly believe that maintaining this illusion of peace between tribes is of upmost importance, you aren’t doing well at convincing me or anyone else.”

He was right. The huntress covered her mouth at his words when she realized the gravity of her mistake. She might as well have placed a target over Nil’s head when she made out with him in front everyone, shamelessly snubbing the suitors, and openly kissed an ex-convict. She was sure Avad would eventually catch wind of her actions, likely from Erend himself. The pressure was making her sick while tears entered her eyes. She hated that she had used her friends, feeling even further disdain that they had sought more than friendship.

Nil looked away from her, feeling a tinge of regret at his words. This sensation of remorse, it had been safely hidden inside until now.

“I was born an outcast, turned seeker, became the Nora’s anointed, and now I’ve become a political pawn or… or princess.” Aloy choked. “Everywhere I turn, there’s nothing to be gained.”

“Avad… might carry the best options.” Nil offered. “You’re already acquainted with him.” The words were bitter sounding as they escaped his lips.

Aloy shook her head frantically. She felt slimy, disgusted with herself.

“What happened while I was away?” Nil asked, his voice assertive.

“Avad… he looked at me like I wasn’t even a person.” Aloy answered. “Even worse, I feel as if I looked at him that way first and encouraged it. Things began to escalate out of control and I feel as if Avad could tell that I was becoming more than uncomfortable. He backed off eventually.”

Nil’s fingers dug into the wooden log. He was furious at his friend and the situation. I thought you were better than this. The hunter didn’t know how much more of this he could take or what he would do to Avad upon seeing him again. Then again, it takes two to dance.

“Did you learn what you wanted to know?” Nil asked. Aloy shot him a glare.

“What are you getting at?” Aloy asked, feeling wrongfully accused. Nil rolled his eyes at her agitation.

“When do you ever give someone the time of day when there’s nothing in it for you?” Nil said.

“Are you saying that I used him?”
“No more than he’s using you, or than you used the vanguard when the time called for it,” Nil stated. “Except I think Avad and Erend actually care about your wellbeing.”

“And you’re saying that I don’t care for them in return? That none of what happened tonight bothers me in the slightest?”

Nil leaned back in his seat.

“Why don’t you tell me? Tell me why you are so concerned with peace, Aloy.” Nil said. “Wars will come and go. You can choose whether or not you want to fight. But if you were truly concerned with the region’s welfare, you would have taken a representative position already. Became a leader. Instead, you couldn’t wait to get away from it all.

“You’re not concerned the slightest bit with these people. No, the reason you have anything at all to do with the political demands of the Carja, Nora, or the Oseram is because doing them a favor is the key to unlocking a door which leads you to whatever it is you’re hunting. A war starting would only get in the way of what you’re after, so instead you ungraciously move around the demands of the world until your path is finally cleared.”

The huntress was infuriated by his words of accusation, especially by the sliver of truth found within them. She couldn’t bring herself to admit he was in the right. *This is your battle Erend, not mine.*

“You’re wrong about me, Nil,” Aloy said.

“Then prove me wrong,” he replied. “Hell, you’ve been practically biting at my heels ever since that incident with your ancient device.”

Aloy shook her head in denial.

“You’re different than them.” Nil said. “You always have been and always will be.”

*Different.*

“Then what about yourself?” Aloy asked. “I don’t suppose someone has leverage over you, or else you wouldn’t have rebuilt all those bridges you burned once you were court martialed.

“That’s a great question. The answer is complicated.” Nil said nonchalantly. Aloy glared at him.

“How am I supposed to work alongside someone I can’t trust?”

“Never stopped you before.”

“Out with it, Nil. What did you discuss with Avad? Why are you really here?” Aloy demanded. Nil ran his fingers through his hair, knowing she wasn’t going to like the answer.

“There was a trade-off,” Nil began and spoke as if he were being force to recite a sun-priest’s prayer. “In exchange for a decree that allows me certain privileges… I will oversee the safety of the king’s beloved warrior princess.”

Aloy stared into the fire for a moment. She almost laughed at the answer. The sun-king was desperate enough to have the soldier of infamy provide protection.

“He really does see me as he saw Ersa, doesn’t he?” Aloy whispered. “That’s why he wants me protected. He doesn’t want to lose someone else he admires.”
“Not quite.” Nil said and pulled out his blade and whet stone.

“Ersa and Avad could not be together officially. Despite her high standing with the sun-king, she was still an Oseram,” Nil said. “No one would accept her as the potential mother of the heir to the throne, not even a consort. You on the other hand…”

Aloy nodded in understanding. Nil did not say more on the subject. He was familiar with the expression the huntress now carried on her face. It was the face of one who felt the end was near, a villager whose home was about to be conquered, a slave who was to be sold off to the highest bidder. Nil knew how she felt from his own experience.

“Let’s put this matter to rest for tonight.” Aloy sighed. Her partner nodded in agreement and sharpened his blade.

“Nil?” Aloy said.

“Yes?”

“How old were you when you were taken from your home?”

The headhunter blinked, as if in a daze. He slowly put away his whetstone and blade. He didn’t ask how she found out because it didn’t matter.

“I was seven years old.”

Chapter End Notes

Did a little digging into psychopathy while writing this chapter. Sobek and the Nile river are key influences on this fanfic, btw. I’ll have the next one posted quite soon so stay tuned ;)}
Many events take place during this chapter. Aloy and Nil take the time to share a part of their lives with each other, though with limitations. Nil warns Aloy of an old threat that even he is fearful of. Aloy displays her desire of wanting to take their relationship further physically. The situation nearly gets out of hand.

I imagine I have much editing to do, even after proof-reading several times. No complaints there.
Hope you enjoy ;)
"We did a lot of things last night," Nil replied nonchalantly and pushed the flask onto her chest. "You were so drunk off your ass that I was worried I’d have to carry you all the way to your apartment." Aloy took the flask and drank it.

"Last night was a lot of fun, I remember that much." Aloy said and then noticed the bandages on Nil’s side. The assassins.

"May I examine it?" Aloy asked. Nil didn’t appear to be sick, but she wanted to make sure he hadn’t been poisoned.

"Go ahead."

Aloy carefully lifted the bandages from his skin, revealing the wound. It was healing well, showing no sign of infection or poison.

"I had taken the antidote already." Nil said as if reading her mind.

"You knew they were coming?" Aloy asked.

"Yes. They’re a specific group working under high officials, like we’ve discussed earlier," explained Nil. "I encountered them a few years ago upon being court-martialed and sentenced to prison. If a member of the court doesn’t agree with the ruling sentence, the prosecuted suddenly ‘disappears’ overnight, and suicide is given as the cause of death. So many accused would rather take their own lives than spend a day at Sunstone Rock, or at least that’s what they’d say the reason was. In the end, an undesirable was eliminated, allowing the politician to sleep better at night, knowing their secrets were laid to rest in a shallow grave."

"So, you fought them before?" Aloy asked.

"That’s why I’m still here." Nil hissed in discomfort as Aloy rubbed salve on his wound. She’s why I’m here, Nil thought to himself.

“And I trained them personally.” He added and thought about covering his ears, knowing how she was likely to react.

“You trained assassins?” Aloy almost shrieked.

“And led them into battle,” Nil said. “Under the old ruling, my title was Captain of the Western Raids – it was an elite death squad with specific targets, the Sun-King’s finest – not to brag or anything. My title changed to Shadow of the West during Avad’s rebellion, seeing he could put my abilities to use for his own gain. Things got too out of hand, according to him. I mean, it’s not like my missions during Jiran’s reign were any less violent. The laws changed and suddenly what used to go unnoticed was now considered a war crime."

“And enough to send you to prison for what you did, apparently.” Aloy said. “I mean, you tracked down and eliminated people who got off on a light sentence under the old Sun-King and did similar during the civil war. That’s all your job was, right?”

“Yeah, sure.”

The huntress didn’t question him any further as the fish were finally done cooking.
Aloy noticed different habits between tribes when it came to eating. The Nora ate primarily with their hands, the Oseram with clay bowls that they placed to their lips, and the Carja handled their food with strange sticks that enabled them to grab at their food.

“What’s that? Some sort of spice?” Aloy asked as she saw Nil dust a peculiar red powder over his food. He smiled deviously.

“Try it.” Nil pushed a small portion her way. Aloy cautiously took a small bite out of the cooked fish, unsure of what to expect. Her tongue lit up like a rainbow as her taste buds were overwhelmed by the flavorful sensations she had not yet experienced.

“Mmm…” Aloy gasped. Many adjectives that she never before used came to mind.

“Are you moaning?” Nil asked, squinting at her absurd reaction. “Don’t forget to chew.”

“Spicy!” Aloy coughed and chugged the flask’s entire contents of water in an attempt to find relief. Nil laughed at the spectacle, finding amusement in viewing a Nora’s first experience with a seasoned meal.

“You’re sweating, right?” said Nil as Aloy fanned her face. “Good, that’ll free you of your hangover.”

The hunters walked a trail north along the river, undisturbed by the tilling machines. Aloy looked over to the body of water and wondered if she had been wasting her arrows this entire time when trying to catch fish.

“I’ve never seen anyone fish like that before.” Aloy said. “Who taught you how to do that?”

“My sister.” Nil answered. Aloy pursed her lips in astonishment. This is suddenly gotten interesting.

“You have a sister? What is she like? She’s not like you, is she?”

“I had a sister,” Nil corrected. “As for what she was like… I only remember a few things, it’s been so long. She was a fearsome warrior, intelligent, and… vindictive.”

“How did she die?” Aloy asked. Nil’s fingers twitched.

“Let’s just say she was a casualty of war.” Nil replied slowly. Aloy sensed that wasn’t the whole truth but she left the answer concerning his sister’s death at that for the time being. She was curious about something else.

“Did she also teach you how to see the invisible?” asked Aloy. Nil’s brow raised in puzzlement.

“Don’t play the fool with me, Nil,” said Aloy. “My focus couldn’t pick up that assassin last night yet you slew them with your eyes closed. There were a handful of them, I’m assuming all cloaked. Yet you were able to defeat them.”

“My senses are simply sharper than most.” Nil said, indifferent.

“Sharper than machines who are designed specifically for detection purposes?” Aloy pressed.
“You were able to catch me sneaking up on you. Not even watchers or stalkers can hear my footsteps.”

Nil didn’t reply.

“Do you have a focus hidden under your helmet or some other device planted somewhere that you’re not telling me about?”

“Maybe I’m psychic. You’ve met Banuks before, right?” Nil suggested. Aloy frowned at his continued evasiveness.

After they had reached a clearing, Nil decided to instruct Aloy on the basis of self-defense seeing as she had little to any training at all on the matter. The more vulnerable she was, the more difficult his duty to keep her alive would be. Aloy inferred that they both needed to blow off some steam and this was a somewhat productive means of doing so.

“Raise your hands to your head – no, too far. Okay, now keep your knees bent. Yeah, like that.”

Aloy was clumsy at first as she was used to using her spear for balance. The headhunter dropped her onto the ground many times before she felt coordinated enough to dodge his advancements. She would push for an attack but he was able to block and evade everything she delivered without breaking a sweat.

“Watch my legs.” Nil reminded her. Aloy tried to but was instinctively drawn to his hands instead. He feinted a punch and then kicked her to the ground. Aloy took a moment to let the stars clear before dusting herself off.

“On your feet, Nora. Don’t make a killer’s task any easier by making yourself a stationary target.” Nil scolded.

The huntress could feel him looking down upon her. Frustrated, Aloy squared up and prepared for another advance. He threw a punch and Aloy dodged it successfully. Thinking she saw an opening, Aloy shot out her fist in the direction of the hunter’s face. Nil caught her fist with his hand, yanked her forward, kicked her locked knees which collapsed her legs, and dropped her to the ground once more.

“You’re too impatient, making your movements too predictable. Too predictable means you are an easier target, which makes my job increasingly difficult,” Nil said, crossing his arms in disapproval. “And before you go asking questions again, my father taught me how to fight.”

The last sentence stung Aloy as it sorely reminded her of what she was lacking.

“Oh really? So, did mine.” Aloy replied. She grabbed her spear and poised herself. The headhunter didn’t reach for a weapon. Instead, he held his hands in front of him, preparing for her advances.

“If that’s how you want it.” Aloy warned.

“It’s not going to make a difference.” Nil shrugged and coaxed her to attack. Aloy pressed on and leaped at her opponent. Nil dodged her first swing and pushed her off balance with his palm. Frustrated, Aloy thrust the blunt end of the spear at him. Nil grabbed her weapon and attempted
to disarm her again. Sensing what he was trying to pull ahead of time, Aloy held a flexible grip and moved fluidly with his motions. Their hands locked onto the spear and the hunters fought each other for dominance. Feeling she had gained the upper hand, Aloy shoved the spear’s body against her opponent’s throat.

Nil smirked at her audacity.

“Your strength against mine? Really?” Nil cackled and slowly pressed down on her spear drawing out the struggle for his own pleasure. “That’s right, try to fight back.”

Aloy felt beads of sweat roll down her face as she saw the wood of the spear leave his body and lower towards her own. Aloy grit her teeth and pushed against her opponent’s power. She knew he was stronger than her, yet she fought back anyway. She could see the headhunter’s eyes dance as he pushed her into submission, rendering her resistance futile. He was enjoying every second of this.

Aloy grunted angrily in defeat as her shoulders made contact with the dirt and her spear reached her neck. The headhunter straddled himself over her body, balanced on a bent knee. Her hands had not left the weapon. Nil lifted the spear over her head, throwing back her arms, pinning them to the ground.

*Turn your face to the sun, child.*

Aloy’s eyes squeezed shut, the horrific memory brought stinging tears to her eyes.

She felt a warm hand brush stray hairs off her brow, bringing her back to the present. Her eyes fluttered open and she saw the hunter glancing down at her with a look of puzzlement. Aloy sighed in relief. Nil wasn’t a kestrel, isn't Helis. He is Just another killer.

“Something’s bothering you.” Nil said as he sat himself beside her. Aloy did not respond immediately as she sat up and placed her spear in her lap, rubbing her eyes.

“You said your father taught you how to fight,” Nil said. “Where is he now?”

Aloy pointed to the scar on her neck. Nil nodded in understanding.

“He wasn’t my real father,” Aloy mentioned. “But the pain hurts just the same.”

“Who was your father?” Nil asked.

“There wasn’t one.” Aloy answered absentmindedly and then realized her mistake. She wasn’t talking to Sylens. She shouldn’t be sharing this information.

“Okay…” Nil said, unbelieving of her answer. He pointed to the globe charm attached to her belt.

“And that?”

“It’s the world. I found it on my mother’s grave. She died long before I was born.” Aloy answered. What was the point in withholding information? Neither of them could believe the other, anyway. So what if none of it made sense? Truth is stranger than fiction.

“You said that you didn’t have a father. That’s the world and you retrieved it from your mother’s grave whose been long dead,” Nil repeated as if clarifying.

“You don’t believe me?”
“If what you said is in fact true, I can understand why you would keep it a secret,” Nil said. “Superstitions among tribes can pose ill will to what is not fully understood. But telling this to an outcast – excuse me – chosen one of the Nora is a bit redundant.”

“’Aloy’ is fine.”

“Right, as I was saying, - some things are better left secret.” Nil said. Aloy found the hunter's advise against transparency to be unusual of his nature. It seemed the longer time spent with each other, the more closed off he became. Perhaps Nil was more reserved of a man than what she originally thought?

Or it could be that there is much he has to hide. “Secrets, whether they be about myself or someone else usually don’t stay hidden for long, if I have a say in it.” Aloy said with pride. The entire world is well aware that she is a seeker of the unseen, drawn to the hunting of the unknown.

“Some secrets are buried away for good reason, huntress,” Nil replied softly. “It can be wise to hide parts of ourselves away from others.”

Again, he urged her to think in the other direction, to reconsider, as if her personal prerogative would have negative effects. Aloy wondered if this is what she sounded like to him when she openly opposed his homicidal philosophy when speaking to him outside of bandit strongholds. Surely this conversation would have taken a different turn had they been there instead.

“That doesn’t make well for a strong relationship.” Aloy added. “Relationships are built upon trust.”

“Or fear.” Nil replied with a curt tilt of his head.

“That kind of sounds like a difficult way to live a life.” Aloy declared.

“It’s a way to keep others from dying, actually.” Nil stood up and looked across the river. He needed a target to shoot, something to slay, an obstacle that would put his life at risk. An idea came into Aloy’s mind.

“Speaking of dying – I have a dare for you.” Aloy said, tapping her focus. Nil winced in disgust. “That cursed thing?”

“Don’t get so superstitious. My focus is how I am able to control the machines. You asked how my weapon overrides them, so why don’t you let me show you how?” Aloy said and handed her spear to him. Nil frowned at her suggestion, not completely on board.

“Unless… that is... you’re too afraid.” Aloy sneered like a playground bully. Nil wanted to push her hard against a wall with a knife to her throat, relieve her of her clothes, and show her what it means to truly be afraid.

Actually, with the way he’s recently caught her looking at him, she’d probably have too good of a time.

Nil growled and took her spear.
“Remember not to touch me when I have this thing on.” Nil warned her as they crept through the tall grass. He had grown weary to equipping the focus due to his last unpleasant experience at her apartment.

“You were the one touching me last time!” Aloy hissed.

“Maybe if we went ahead and had sex like we were supposed to that night, we would have both left satisfied and I wouldn’t have mercenaries on my neck!” Nil hissed back.

“I’m not just some hit it and quit it kind of girl, Nil,” Aloy said. “And you’re touching me right now!”

Nil’s hand anxiously hovered over Aloy’s thigh as they saw ripples in the air fall in and out of vision.

“You see them, right? With that clairvoyance or whatever you’d like to call it.” Aloy asked.

“Yeah, and there’s at least three because they always travel in packs,” Nil said. “How are we going to do this?”

“I’m going to whistle. Once a stalker gets close enough, take my spear and stab it with the blunt end. Hold it down long enough so it can fully override. Let go too early and you’re dead,” Aloy explained. “Are we clear?”

Nil nodded. Aloy put two fingers to her lips and whistled. A single cloaked stalker began approaching the source of the sound. The headhunter knew how devious the huntress was being. They could have practiced overriding with watchers, grazers, or striders. Instead, she takes him to a stalker site – to a pack of machines who deliberately hunt man. He found respect in her cruelty.

“I can’t believe I’m about to do this,” Nil muttered and closed his eyes. The four-legged man-slayer growled in curiosity as it examined the tall grass.

Sensing the time was right, Nil leaped into the air and thrust the spear into the neck of the mechanical beast. Nanomachines formed blue-lit tendrils that encircled its synthetic structure. After he heard the electronic que affirming its success, Nil hopped away from the machine in caution. The stalker leaped after him, following his steps. Only when they reached a safe distance from the stalker site did Nil finally exhale and return Aloy’s spear.

Aloy pat the machine’s head. “That wasn’t so bad, was it? I think it likes you.”

The stalker gently curled its tail around the hunter as if claiming him.

“We share the same profession.” Nil grinned proudly and rubbed the stalker’s elongated neck. The machine playfully placed its paw on Nil’s armored shoulder and nuzzled the feathers on his headdress.

Aloy smiled at the exchanges between the two manhunters, finding the interactions uncannily pleasant. A warm sensation fluttered on the left side of her chest while she watched the killers match hand with paw as if greeting each other. Nil made it seem as if Aloy had neglected her machines, never showing them the affection they deserved. Perhaps it was because she didn’t quite know how to do so?

Nil felt Aloy’s metal crown rub against his skin as she rested her head against his chest. Her hair
fell under his fingers while he lightly placed an endearing arm on her shoulder, returning her sudden affection, something she had been starved of. *Fierce as a ravager one moment and soft like a rabbit the next,* thought Nil.

The moment was fleeting as the huntress removed herself from him and walked towards the edge of the jungle mesa, overlooking the Southern Jewel of the Sundom. There was still more territory for her to finish mapping out. Aloy considered their options: either rappel down here or go all the way around and climb down the cliffs.

“You know, Nil, for a man who relishes in homicide you’ve taken quite well to taming machines.” Aloy mentioned.

“Down, boy.” Nil ordered the stalker as if he were a field animal. “Now circle around. It’s fine to think that as long as you don’t tell anyone. I don’t want four different tribes to come after me like they do you. Machine taming and playing the hero is your profession, not mine.”

Aloy smirked at his claim.

“Who knows? Maybe there’s something of me inside of you after all?” Aloy suggested. Nil turned around and glanced at her body frivolously.

“I’d prefer it be the other way around, if you catch my meaning.” Nil said, half grinning. The stalker raised its tail in approval.

“Hmm, maybe if you show me that you can override a thunderjaw, I might let you hit second base.” Aloy replied in a coquette manner, placing a hand on her hip.

Nil raised his brow and lifted the stalker to where it stood on its hindlegs.

“Oh? And what about a stormbird? Hey, this focus or whatever you call it is picking up a signal.” Nil pointed to a tallneck patrolling the southern jungle. The huntress grinned eagerly.

“You override that tallneck and I’ll rock your world.” Aloy dared.

“Ah, the promises of a virgin,” Nil sighed, dismissive of her false goading. “Shall we get started?”

“Did you bring rappelling rope to descend with?” Aloy asked, pulling out hers.

“Nope.”

“Looks like we’re climbing down, then.” Aloy said. She felt Nil snatch away the rope from her hands and take her by the waist.

“Nil what are you doing?” Aloy asked, growing nervous.

“Taking a short cut. Hold on tight - I haven’t done this in a while.” Nil said and picked her up.

“Oh hell no. You’re going to KILL US!” Aloy screamed as he threw both of them over the cliff’s edge. Aloy squeezed her eyes shut, not wanting to know whether or not if Nil threw the rope correctly.

It was early evening by the time the hunters reached the patrolling giant. They had made their way up a rock hill and looked for proper footing.
“This machine loads a full view of the area’s map onto my focus,” she explained. “It gives me exact intel on the surroundings as well. Pretty useful.”

“This is how you do reconnaissance?” Nil winced as he felt the heavy footsteps shake the ground beneath their feet.

“You’re good at climbing. What has you so nervous?” Aloy asked.

“I’m not nervous, I’ve simply never climbed a walking tree before.” Nil answered flatly. He looked at his surroundings and saw plenty of machines designed specifically to hunt humans littering the area.

“It’s all about timing, Nil,” Aloy said. “I won’t be far behind. The way down is the best part.”

“I’d better get laid after this.” Nil muttered. Aloy rolled her eyes and handed him her spear.

Aloy whispered in his ear, “Get me that map.”

“Don’t have to tell me twice.” Nil smirked and gave her a hard squeeze on the thigh. The hunter was off before Aloy could swat his hand away.

“Don’t go yet!” Aloy warned. “You have to time this correctly or else you’ll fall to your death!”

Not heeding her words, Nil sprinted and took a leap of faith at the tallneck whose body was still too far behind the ledge.

Aloy covered her eyes. “Gaia help me, he’s dead, he’s dead. I told him not to jump.”

Nil successfully caught hold of the tallneck’s disc and pulled himself upwards. Satisfied he had reached the disk of the tallneck without attracting any attention from the wilderness’s killing machines, Nil crouched low in order to not lose his balance on the shifting surface. He found the outlet and completed the override process. A hologram emerged and Nil twisted the digital dial around as Aloy had instructed.

“Not bad, outlander.” Aloy said, making her way up the tall-neck.

“No probl-“ the huntress tackled her partner and knocked him to the ground before he could finish speaking. She swallowed his words as she placed her lips on his and wrapped her fingers around his face, kissing him passionately. Nil parted his legs, allowing her hips to rest easy on his lap. Her hair was set ablaze from the light of the sunset, taking his breath away.

“You crazy bastard.” Aloy whispered and kissed him once more. Nil chuckled as she pulled away and composed herself.

“You keep doing that and I’ll begin to think you like me.” Nil teased, making Aloy blush.

“Do I like you?" Aloy asked. “Or… do I like being with you? ‘Do I like Nil?’”

“Sounds strange when you say it like that.” Nil replied and smiled. She’s just a simple girl at the end of the day.

“The fun isn’t over yet.” Aloy said and pulled out her rope.

“One three,” Aloy said. “One, two, - “

Nil jumped over the edge with her before she finished, making her wail in surprise.
The campfire cracked and hissed as the hunters threaded ammunition. The stalker made its rounds, laying mines every now and then. The huntress saw the machine as anxious, almost lost without a target to hunt now that Hades had relinquished control over Hephaestus’s functions. Its purpose was still encoded in its hardware, despite the changing times. It saddened her in a sickening kind of way, like seeing a fire suffocate due to lack of oxygen.

“How are you doing in there?” Aloy asked her partner, tapping her head. “I know it’s been awhile since… well…”

“Since I’ve hunted anyone?” Nil asked. “How kind of you to be so concerned.”

“Yeah. I know you have this sort of… addiction to murder and I can tell when you’ve been having withdrawals,” Aloy said. “But you don’t seem to be having them right now, which is surprising. You’re not even searching for a fight.”

“That’s probably because I know the fight will come to us soon enough,” Nil replied.

“What do you mean? You killed all the assassins after you. What are they going to do? Send a whole army after one man?” Aloy asked.

“You’re going to need to broaden your vision, huntress.” Nil replied. His response caused Aloy to frown.

“Why don’t you fill me in?” Aloy suggested. Nil’s expression changed to one of seriousness.

“Do you remember what happened when the Nora were attacked? When filth crept into the Sacred Ground?” Nil asked.

“Yes, I found you there, standing outside Devil’s Thirst.” Aloy recalled. “Bandits were taking advantage of the tribe’s weakened state.”

“Yes, yes, yes, the mighty Nora of the east were brought to their knees by a death cult and rogue killers sought to take claim on its territory.” Nil said. “Now consider this – the most developed civilization within our known world has endured years of conflict, including a civil war. Within the last month, Meridian, the empire’s capital, was nearly besieged by a literal underground threat. Though the Nora is making a slow recovery, and Meridian, with your assistance, has done rebuilding, the land is not fully secure. Rumors are spreading towards every secret corner about the empire’s vulnerability. I’ve listened to a few of them my travels. None of them are good news.”

Aloy gripped her spear as she felt the air grow cold around her body. Typically, Nil would be overjoyed upon learning of vicious dangers. What could make this case so different?

“What were the rumors?” she asked.

“There are whispers that a certain group of cutthroats have made a return,” Nil answered slowly. His tone was not impertinent or condescending. Aloy sensed urgency in his voice.

“What do you know about them? What makes them any different than other bandits?”

She saw Nil straighten his back and even out his posture. His cocky hunter demeanor was gone and from it emerged a soldier preparing to debrief.
“Over twenty years ago, a band of outlanders of varying origin made their way through the land, sadistically terrorizing various tribes and clans, claiming hostages. Unlike the Red Raids of the Carja which had higher purposes, if you will, these killers did not state their reasons for slaughter. Even more disturbing - they would prey on those considered highest treasured whilst also being most vulnerable.”

“Wives and young children…” Aloy whispered.

“That is correct,” Nil replied. “Those who would go after the hostages were met with a sickening scene.”

“They killed a hostage every time someone got too close – Nil, I know of the outlanders who you are referring to. My guardian tracked them all down.”

“He was the Nora Brave who scoured the land, eliminating the twelve.” Nil nodded.

“Yes, he lost his wife and mate at their hands but was bent on vengeance.” Aloy said. “But they are dead – Rost killed them all.”

“Your late guardian killed the twelve.” Nil replied. “There exists more.”

Aloy’s eyes widened in horror.

“There’s more? Is this a clan, a tribe or something?” she asked. Nil shook his head.

“Like you and I have been informed – the outlanders were of varying origin. I do not know who or what brought them together or what they want.”

“I wish Rost were here right now.” Aloy murmured and then realized something was off.

“These are just rumors and yet you seem certain that they will make their attack. How can you be so sure of their actions?” Aloy asked.

“Well, it helps that I myself am a killer. Having the mind of one allows me to think like they do.” Nil answered. “If I were searching for easy targets, I would certainly take advantage of the land’s turmoil. The only thing is these people, these murderers are of the unusual breed. Serial killers often play games, that’s understood – except they typically work alone. Imagine the worst kinds of killers from across the world, ones without a dogma, no identifying nation or cult, brought together by something unknown.”

“That sounds… ominous,” Aloy said warily. “But if we do encounter these rogues on our travels, we’ll just take up old-fashioned practices and kill them.”

Nil shook his head, much to Aloy’s surprise.

“If we encounter them, we’re running, even if that means we have to return to the capital.”

“Are you being serious?”

Nil nodded.

“I won’t lie to you and say that within Meridian’s walls aren’t currently the safest place for you to be right now, no matter how much you might detest its welcome,” Nil went on. “I know every inch of this territory, even that of which is hidden. With the possibility of a band of sadists making a return, I request that you never go beyond my reach while we are still in the wilderness. I hope I was clear enough in my warning.”
 Nil had already informed her that her life was his responsibility, prohibiting him from experiencing the risk-taking pleasures of battle. Whatever trade-off he made with Avad must have steep importance.

“Hopefully these stories of rogues coming back were just rumors.” Aloy murmured, thinking of Rost. “It’s bad enough that you and everyone else have to remind me constantly of the threats of the world, as if my political standing made my value of life increase.” Aloy muttered.

“Get used to it, princess.” Nil said.

Aloy glowered, “I’m no more a princess than you are a prince, Nil.”

The hunter smiled. “It’s interesting you say that, Aloy.”

She rolled her eyes. “Oh, please do not tell me that I’ve been talking to the long-lost heir to the throne this entire time. Just when I thought I could get away from the royal shenanigans…”

Nil laughed.

“Still not accustomed to the demands of the tribes?”

“No, I’m not. My guardian taught me how to survive in the wilds, not weave in and out of petty politics… or relationships with people.” Aloy pulled at her hair. “I seriously have a lot of explaining to do once I return.”

“Worry about that once the time comes, huntress,” Nil said.

Aloy nodded in agreement and they returned to their weapon crafting. The stalker made a metallic sounding yawn as invisible paws left impressions in the sand.

She looked at him, his colorless eyes seemed to glow amidst dark, reflecting the light of the flames. Much like her, his crafting was patient and meticulous, never allowing a faulty product to go into his quiver. Hunters were aware that any fault in design could lead to waste of time and materials. Soldiers knew that it made a difference between life and death. She looked at his fingers, hardened and slender, and began to wonder if they had held anything other than tools or weapons, items intended for destruction.

Nil sensed something was amiss. He glanced up at the huntress, seeing her body language reflecting that of longing and confusion.

“Aloy?”

“I like it when you say my name,” Aloy admitted. When he said it at the riverbed, filled with excitement and warmth, she couldn’t help but smile. The way he said her name made her feel as if she were a part of something outside of the concerns of the world, that all that mattered was the present.

“I rather like your name,” Nil replied, grinning.

“Nil, about two nights ago when I first…” Aloy began sheepishly and didn’t finish her sentence.

Nil chuckled and continued crafting arrows, remembering the way she tackled him during the party, eagerly locking her innocent lips on his. She had been oblivious to the crowd, behaving as though she had ensnared him into her bed.
“When you caught me by surprise,” Nil answered.

“Yes that, I wanted to apologize if I embarrassed you in any way,” Aloy began, “I was caught up in the moment…and in the alcohol. Some of my composure had left me. And then today… well there was no alcohol. No excuse.”

“Is this what’s troubling you?” Nil asked, growing serious. He placed his equipment on the ground.

“Not all, of course,” Aloy said, “But at the moment, yes.”

Nil, with his age and maturity, was able to disentangle the emotional puzzlement of the young woman sitting across from him. Despite her legend and political standing, the savior of the Nora was still a shy and inexperienced girl at the end of the night.

“Did you enjoy it?” Nil asked. Aloy’s cheeks grew rosy.

“It feels too embarrassing to admit.” Aloy said.

She had confided in Elida about this but to confront the person she felt oddly attracted to was a different matter. After the alcohol’s passing, Aloy still found herself longing for his touch, the feel of his lips against hers. These emotions were all too new for her. Her feelings for Nil had changed in a way she didn’t understand. Even scarily is how she was uncertain of his feelings towards her.

“Would it be okay if we slept together tonight?” Aloy asked suddenly.

“Like…?”

“Like that time I got frightened during a thunderstorm.” Aloy clarified.

“Oh? Are you frightened now?” Nil asked.

“You being frightened frightens me.” Aloy replied.

The hunters laid down beside each other beneath the stars. Nil rested his head over his forearms while Aloy curled up on her side. They weren’t touching each other out of consideration.

“I never asked before, but did it ever make you upset when I kissed you out of nowhere?” Aloy asked.

Nil shook his head.

“Not at all,” he answered. Aloy was relieved.

“Yeah, I assume you’ve had quite a bit of experience with the opposite sex already.” Aloy murmured.

“Oh yes, you know me – I’m just a wanton whore.”

Aloy burst out laughing.

“Okay, okay – I never insinuated that you were a playboy. I’m just assuming that you’re more experienced, being an older… gentleman and all.”

“She called me older gentleman.” Nil put a hand over his eyes and grimaced. “I’m barely the same
“Don’t bring him up right now. Look, I know you’ve alluded to… desiring my body on more than one occasion.”

“Of course. Who hasn’t?”

“Fuck, okay, I’ll get to the point.”

“Finally.”

“Have you ever wanted to kiss me?”

“Yes, among other things.”

“Then, why haven’t you?”

“There’s many things I want to do but restrain myself from doing so until I have the other person’s consent.”

“So, you need my consent?”

“Well yes. I’m a killer with a code, not a sex offender.”

“Oh. Well, if I give you my consent to kiss me, will you?”

“Yes.”

“Then you have my consent. To kiss me.”

“Now?”

“Yeah, why not?”

“You go first.”

“Alright, sit up.”

The shadows of the night accentuated the sharp contours of his face, complimenting his otherwise soft bone structure. The Carja soldier was a truly handsome sight to behold and she wondered if he was aware of how easily he could bed her.

_Aloy_ thought. They were only going to make-out.

Aloy leaned over and shyly pressed her lips to Nil’s. She kissed him for a few seconds before Nil placed one hand on her upper back and another beneath her head, kissing her hard and slow on the mouth, his fervent motions relieving her of her breath. She tried to hold herself steady, to match his force, while being fearful that a lewd challenge would come out of it. Aloy dared to relax her jaw, to allow his tongue to venture inside her mouth. He had been chewing herbs again - Aloy could taste the cold mint on his tongue as they explored each other there. She felt light headed, realizing she had forgotten to breathe. The huntress closed her eyes as she let him take the reins. There was no fear or discomfort in her gut, only a curiosity that needed satisfying. She wanted to know what he was capable of outside of battle and within the realms of intimacy.
Nil unlocked her lips and gently pulled back her head, opening her neck to his touch. His facial hair grazed the delicate area of skin as he began to suck hard, leaving ruddy impressions with his teeth.

Aloy moaned from the overwhelming stimulations, feeling a sense of powerlessness as he melted her with his mouth. She ran her fingers through the thick black hair of his head while he chipped away at her armor, igniting the fire in her blood. *So this is what it feels like to be truly kissed by a man?* A man she felt a desire for, no matter how strange the circumstances. The huntress felt a familiar throbbing sensation between her legs, its presence was all but a mystery until now.

Nil stopped at her shoulders where leather met her collar bones. Aloy pulled away the cloth, baring the skin of her chest to his touch, which he proceeded to explore until reaching the silk of her bandeau. The huntress’s now very vocal moans aroused him deep down, similar to that night when she danced on the heat of his body, taunting his urges. Just like that night, Nil fought for restraint. His fingertips gripped the blue silk cloth covering her breasts, wanting it gone.

Aloy was lost in a lustful trance, proceeding towards the removal of her undergarments. Whatever he wanted, she would give.

*Elisabet Sobeck.*

*Rank: Alpha Prime.*

*Why did that yellow label reappear?* Nil blinked into focus.

The hunter hovered a hand over his temple. The focus was still attached to his body. They had forgotten it there. But he had not turned the device on.

Nil’s eyes opened wide as he regained a moment of cognition. Heeding the consequences of the huntress’s own arousal, Nil clasped Aloy’s wrists tightly, preventing further removal of her clothing. He knew Aloy would regret their actions in the morning if they allowed this to continue.

Aloy blinked her eyes open, focusing them on Nil’s moonlit irises. She didn't want to stop.

“What are you thinking about,” Nil spoke softly. “Is this really what you want?”

What were they doing, exactly? Aloy peered down at her loosened clothing, suddenly realizing how quickly she had been to coming completely undone. Embarrassed by her indecency, Aloy frantically pulled her clothing together and covered her skin, shaken by the thought of what could have almost happened.

Nil felt the huntress’s body tremble in his hands like a white slave experiencing freedom for the first time, not knowing what to do in a situation that wasn’t forced. *This is Avad’s doing,* Nil thought angrily. He exhaled deeply, knowing he was getting too ahead of himself. *Focus on the matter at hand.*

Aloy.

Nil pressed the huntress’s head against his chest, gently rocking her back and forth. She wasn’t ready. Even if she had bared herself naked on the grass and allowed him to take her, she still
wasn’t ready. Not yet.

“Never submit yourself to anyone, do you understand?” Nil said. Aloy nodded and fell asleep in his arms. Nil would not gain much sleep that night as he heard a voice speak from the focus.
Eyes of Spies

Chapter Summary

It seems now like every major character in this story is competing for "who has the worse job?"

Nil and Vanasha - the Sun-King's loyal yet deceitful friends
Avad - the man with a gentle soul who shoulders everything himself
Aloy - a girl with a crush, a bag of questions, and an insatiable curiosity

Chapter Notes

Been holding off on posting this for too long.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Nil was not disappointed that he had not done the deed with the huntress. Though he believed they would have had more than enough time to finish before the secret rendezvous, he felt uneasy knowing someone had been watching them through the focus. However vulgar in other aspects, Nil preferred their intimacy to remain only between the two of them.

He had been caught off guard by her flustered reaction. His first thought was of the Sun-King’s mistreatment of her. To go forward when one was not ready usually results in psychological harm. Nil was unaware of the details of their frivolous actions or to what extent they had reached. Furthermore, he would not ask for an explanation because the huntress would likely not even recall taking off her clothes tonight.

“Perhaps another time.” He whispered to Aloy who was sleeping on his lap. Her head was propped up against his chest while he held her there with an arm. When one opportunity is lost, another presents itself in its place. He turned on the focus and began his digital hunt.

For almost an hour, Nil sifted through information on the device’s neural interface, searching for specific intel. Many of the files had been encrypted in the writings of the ancients, likely for reasons being that much of their vocabulary simply did not exist in Carja, such as “empathetic neural-connections” and “informational DNA encryption.”

Every person of significance scanned by Aloy, including the hunter himself, had been filed and stored on the device. Additionally, the focus contained multiple ways to observe and record data just by scanning an object and identifying its purpose. The more he used it, the more the focus’s capabilities seemed endless. This woman could undo an entire kingdom using only this device, Nil thought to himself.

The soldier searched through the facial profiles. He had seen glimpses of his person of interest through her memories that night on her bed.
Dark skin, Banuk chin piercings, Machine tamer.

The profile listings came up empty.

This specific individual had taken countermeasures ahead of time to cover his tracks. The Dark Wanderer, as others have come to know him, had sought out Aloy over the months preceding the Eclipse’s attempt to capture the spire. According to those who witnessed his explosive appearance in the Sun-Ring, he had exposed himself as an ally of the huntress, risking his life and obscurity in order to remove her from the clutches of the Shadow Carja. His motives were unknown and there exists many who wanted a clear explanation.

Two machine tamers. No stated allegiance. One was under constant observation while the other had vanished like smoke.

Both individuals had connections to a dangerous technological deity and neither felt obligated to give an explanation. Regardless of one’s admittance to solitude, the issue still remains that someone had to answer for what nearly caused the downfall of the known world.

Not that it personally mattered to the Nil - for he was simply doing reconnaissance at the request of the spymaster, bartering information for information. The only other person who had any previous link to the Dark Wanderer had died by Aloy’s hands, leaving the huntress to be the only person capable of relaying information. If that is the case, Nil might need to interrogate Aloy himself, which would no doubt turn into an unpleasant ordeal. Unless…

The hunter was aware of Aloy’s infatuation with him. He could take advantage of her emotions and possibly -

“No, that’s what Vanasha does.” Nil muttered to himself. He wouldn’t stoop lower than he already has.

A file on the screen caught the hunter’s eye.

“Wandering Researcher with a case of Moral Ambiguity?” Nil read and touched the screen. The interface showed static. Datafile access had been blocked off.

The hunter scratched his chin. This man knew how to cover his tracks well.

“Looking for someone?”

Nil immediately froze at the sudden voice. His eyes darted around, seeing no one. The focus only picked up the patrolling stalker whenever it decided to decloak itself. He peered down at Aloy. She was still sleeping on his lap.

The voice returned, speaking through the focus.

“Be weary of what you say. Every line is at risk of being compromised.”

Vanasha came into the light of the fire, hips swaying to and fro.

The stalker began to growl.

“Easy…” Nil said raising a hand to the machine to pacify it. Vanasha treaded carefully around the machine and glanced at the sleeping huntress.

“What’s this?” The spymaster asked, pointing to Aloy and then Nil.
“It’s where she fell asleep.” The hunter lightly shrugged.

“Is that so? Well, you two look quite comfortable with each other.” She said. “Physical proximity is one of the key factors in love and attraction. What did you do? Sing her a lullaby?”

“It was slightly more intimate than that.” Nil answered, running his finger over his lips.

“You laced your lips with sleeping powder?” Vanasha put a hand to her mouth in amazement. “Wow, Soldier. I never took you for a honeypot. Everyone’s full of surprises.”

“The situation called for it.” Nil said. “She’s been quite the eager one, making things easier on me. Although… I don’t know how much longer we can remain tame.”

The spymaster rolled her eyes at the hunter’s attempt to ploy less fault.

“Don’t act like you didn’t have anything to do with it.” Vanasha replied. “You can’t just lift a girl into the air like that and not expect her to fall at least a little bit in love with you.”

Aloy began to stir in her sleep, uttering nonsensical words. The hunter gently rocked her back and forth in his arms to soothe her.

“Do you have any information regarding my quarry?” asked the hunter.

Vanasha emitted a pensive sigh.

“I’ve searched around for the man you had described, yet all I’ve come up with is air.” She answered. “Even Erend confirmed the noble’s description, yet he’s nowhere to be seen, as if both of you saw the same ghost.”

And Aloy.

“What about you? Did you meet, hear, or learn about any of Aloy’s special acquaintances?” Vanasha asked.

“Not yet. She trusts me enough to let me use her focus, but there’s a learning curve involved.” Nil replied without pause. “Perhaps the next time I see you the trail will have warmed up. But as of now, it seems we’re both tracking ghosts.”

Vanasha nodded and put a hand to her belt.

“Good news for you. The decree is in the process of being passed, due to Avad’s unusual assertiveness. The murder charges have also been dropped. Soon, you’ll be able to return to the capital with nearly the same privileges as Aloy. Oh, I almost forgot.” Vanasha set a leather pouch onto the ground.

“You know to take that only when symptoms arise,” said Vanasha. “I’ll have you know that this medication is terribly difficult to come by. The apocatharist from Sunfall is only willing to barter with crystal braiding. Maybe if you ask a stormbird or thunderjaw politely they will give it to you.”

The hunter examined the contents of the pouch.

“This will last me approximately two weeks,” Nil answered, not displeased. Being a time limit will ensure that he does not overly draw out the investigation.

“As long as you don’t abuse it,” warned Vanasha. “If you do, you’ll have to spend double the time you had at Sunstone Rock just for rehabilitation.”
“It will have to do until I can find a cure, if one exists.” Nil said, though he knew he truly needed to find a shaman and get therapy. That will be next on his list of priorities.

The hunter noticed the spymaster glance towards Aloy’s spear that was resting against the hunter’s knee.

“So, Nilead. How does it feel to be working again?” Vanasha asked.

“I prefer self-employment, to be honest.” Nil replied. “And this is only temporary. I don’t plan on making a permanent return to working under the empire.”

She drew closer to the both of them.

“Even when you have the most sought after woman in the world literally falling into your arms?” Vanasha asked.

“Boasting never suited me, nor was it ever a motivator.” Nil said plainly. “Aloy and I were doing just fine with occasionally collaborating.”

“But now that’s over.” She said. “No more fortresses full of vicious rogues to purge. You’re going to become restless again, if you haven’t already. Which is why you’ve resumed self-medicating.”

The spymaster was now standing over them. She looked at Aloy as if she were a kitten resting on a royal sofa.

“The sleeping little huntress,” cooed Vanasha. “It’s so precious to see.”

Vanasha knelt down and reached out to Aloy’s sleeping body, only to be stopped by the protective arm of the hunter.

“She’s had a long day,” Nil said, almost threateningly. “I wouldn’t want to wake her.”

The spymaster backed away slowly.

“Easy there, killer. We’re on the same team,” Vanasha said and stood up. “Good to know she’s in safe hands, so to speak. Just remember that she’s for rent, not for sale. You will have to return her by the end of this week. Make sure she’s aware of that as well before you two become too beholden to each other.”

Nil leaned against the tree as he watched the spymaster leave the camp and began to wonder who the most objectified person in the area was. The hunter had no qualms with being referred to as a tool himself by Vanasha, but to regard Aloy as such did not bode well for him. Nil also understood that the spymaster meant no ill will towards either of the hunters. She was an expert in the field of espionage and lived to make the most out of the games she played whenever she could.

He did not wait long before the mysterious label reappeared over Aloy’s body, along with a voice speaking over the focus.

“Ah, so you’re finally alone. Move to an undisclosed area and there we will talk.”

The hunter did not argue. After carefully removing Aloy from his body, Nil waved over the stalker.
“Deliver a violent end to any undesirables that come within the perimeter.” Nil ordered. The stalker wagged its tail enthusiastically.

The hunter equipped his bow as he walked a small distance from the campfire.

“As you may have already perceived, my physical presence is nowhere near your vicinity, nor is there an ambush waiting for you. We are communicating via the focus’s telecommunicative network.”

“Your words alone aren’t going to put me at ease.” Nil replied.

“Learned behavior from experiences in the field of warfare and espionage, no doubt.”

Nil looked over to check on Aloy. The stalker had taken rest beside her.

“I’m assuming you’re the one responsible for making that label appear out of nowhere.” Nil mentioned. “First on her bed and then out here.”

“Indeed. I’ve been making a habit of ghosting Aloy’s network at the most inopportune times, it seems. Luckily for us all, you ended tonight’s situation before it escalated out of control.”

“I’ll have you know that won’t always be the case,” Nil said, cracking his knuckles. “I’ll make sure this device comes off with her clothes next time... unless you’d like to watch and listen.”

Nil heard the stranger clear his throat on the other line.

“Let’s return to our priorities, shall we? I’m here to negotiate new terms to your mission which contains rewards far exceeding that of which has been offered. There’s information regarding the huntress and your quarry that you’re severely lacking.”

“I’m listening.”

Aloy awoke to a heavy arm wrapped around her waist. She felt the rise and fall of the hunter’s chest against her back and his breath tickling her neck. His face was nestled in her hair. He had heeded her request to sleep together, and though she had not expected such intimacy it strangely didn’t bother her. The warmth of his body in the cool morning was welcomed.

Aloy realized that this was the first time she had woken up before the hunter. Usually he would be active at the first sign of daybreak. How late did he stay up last night? Aloy wondered. They had chatted briefly and the last thing she remembered was a heated kiss between the two of them before falling asleep. Her clothes were still on, always a good sign.

The hunter began to stir awake.

Aloy’s cheeks flushed as she felt a rising pressure against her rear. She let out an exasperated breath and cleared her throat. Nil sighed sleepily and turned around to lay on his back, removing his arm from her body. She turned around to look at him, intrigued by his unusually vulnerable state. His eyes shuttered open in slight fatigue, followed by grey irises peaking through the narrow openings. Aloy wondered whether or not if having lidded eyes had any effect on his vision. Then she considered that his deadly bow accuracy should be a sufficient enough to answer.
Nil appeared to Aloy much younger in the midst of awaking, seeing a bit of innocence in his eyes. His pitch black hair had grown longer and she wondered if he was going to take a razor to it again. The way it threatened to fall over his eyes made him appear less intimidating and more human, something Aloy found a small appreciation for.

The huntress sighed and remembered that looks can be deceiving. The man is a proud killer and Aloy was sure that it would be unwise to grow familiar with looking at him in this regard. Their relationship will likely amount to nothing more than temporary armistice.

“So… does that happen every time a man wakes up?” Aloy asked.

Nil glanced down at the bulge in his silk trousers. He thought for a moment about covering it up but decided not to take away from the huntress’s learning experience.

“As long as everything else if properly functioning.” Nil answered.

“Oh? So, it’s a sign of a man’s good health?” Aloy asked with sincere eyes. Her naivety continued to baffle him. He was unsure if he had ever come across another girl Aloy’s age with the same amount of ignorance regarding this subject.

“Yes, among other things.” He answered.

“It’s wonderful that your body is able to tell you this.” She replied.

Nil chuckled appreciatively. She is unbelievably adorable.

Aloy stretched and fluffed her hair. She took her braids and began to undo them so she could wash her hair properly. She took out the beads and placed them in her pockets and glanced at Nil.

"Did you sleep well?" Aloy asked. "I know that I have a tendency to kick in my sleep."

Nil shrugged. "If you did I didn't notice. You did forget to take this back yesterday."

He placed her focus on a rock beside her equipment.

"Damn it, again?" Aloy bemoaned and equipped her device. This was the second time she had neglected her focus. Keep it up long enough and it will become a habit.

"Do you want to make another attempt at self-defense?" Nil offered in an attempt to get her mind off of the focus.

"Yeah, so I can kick your ass this time." Aloy challenged. The hunter licked his teeth at her cockiness. She was even more delightful when she made threats. Once more he took in the beautiful slenderness of her body as she stretched her limbs. He felt he could get used to seeing her awaken next to him every day to the light of the morning sun. They would make small challenges, wrestle in the wilds, commence a hunt, and then fall asleep beside each other underneath the stars.

Aloy noticed a small glimmer appear in Nil’s eyes, followed by smile slowly making its way onto his face. This expression was different than the typical ones that were influenced by malice or domination. This smile appeared almost tender.

Nil felt like kissing her again. He did not doubt that she would let him take her face in his hands once more. He wanted to feel her vermilion braids underneath his fingers. He wanted to finish what they started last night, even if she did not appear to recall anything, an effect of his drugging her.
Nil blinked into focus. *What am I doing?*

He had drugged her in order to resume his mission. The huntress is a conduit of information. She is an esteemed individual of importance, not the mate of a mercenary.

He then sat up and covered his face in hands. It was time to take that medication.

The spymaster walked past the guards and into the Sun-King’s own personal study. He was reading over recently submitted requests, organizing the matters from least pressing to top priority. The former stack stood significantly higher than the other.

“Knock, knock.” Vanasha said. Avad placed his quill in the inkwell and ceased his reading.

“It is good to see you return so soon.” Avad smiled respectfully as the spymaster placed herself on a nearby sofa. She let the Sun-King speak first.

“How fares our champion in the wilderness?” Avad asked with fondness in his eye.

Vanasha knew Aloy's situation was going to be his opening question. The first image that came to her mind was of Aloy lovingly resting in the arms of Nilead - Avad’s adopted brother and close friend. Vanasha managed to successfully smile the right way, and not the way her humor was telling her to. The slightest giggle could expose them.

“She’s safe.” Vanasha said gingerly. “And in good hands.”

“I hope Aloy does not feel slighted by the fact that I’m having Nilead keep guard over her.” Avad mused. “She’s such an independent spirit, she’ll probably try to shake him off before the week is over.”

Vanasha touched her tongue to the roof of her mouth at the irony in his assumptions. *This is what happens when you let women you like go to parties alone.*

“We’ll only know by the end of this week.” Vanasha answered. “Have you informed Erend at all of the council’s pressure for you to seal the deal with you and Aloy? Or are you going to wait for the last minute so you can catch him at a bad time?”

Avad removed his crown and released the curly locks on his head. The Oseram are blunt and vocal to a fault. If Avad told Erend of his plans to create a union to between the Nora and the Carja, he was likely to blow a hole in the side of the palace. Erend adored Aloy and felt as passionate for her as any other man whose heart she had won. For the Sun-King to proclaim the huntress’s hand in marriage was the equivalent of betrayal.

“There’s never a good time,” Avad replied miserably. Either way, the Sun-King would appear entitled in the eyes of his allies and followers.

“Sure there is!” Vanasha said. “Tell him over a pint of mead, he won’t remember, but you will have told him.”

“I give thanks to the sun that you’re not in charge of speech-related diplomacy.” Avad muttered. “And my brother? How does he fair alongside her? I know he has a tendency to unnerve others.”
“Itam- oh Nilead.” Vanasha thought for a moment on how to answer. From Vanasha’s perspective, mind games were being played. She saw the focus on his head and Aloy in his arms. It was highly unlikely he had failed to find at least one lead on the Dark Wanderer by now. But this was not for Avad to know.

“He’s fairing… well, if you could say that.” Vanasha said. “I was able to deliver the prescribed herbal remedy. It should help with his impulse control if that ever does pose a problem.”

Avad sighed morosely.

“By the sun, I hope he doesn’t abuse it.” Avad said, hoping the risk is worth the reward. “The side effects of that medicine are enough to steal a man’s soul.”

“Funny you speak so concerned about a man who literally relishes in taking lives.” Vanasha scoffed.

“It’s one thing to die, but it is often considered worse when you’re dead inside a living body.” Avad replied. “As for Nilead’s… tendencies, I will not scorn a fire that is properly maintained.”

He desperately wanted this week to be over. And the next week. And the next month, however long until he could find a settlement between the tribes and to have Aloy in his arms again.

He had not meant to startle her that night. They had gone to his royal bedchambers without speaking a word. Atop his bed, they kissed on end and Avad took that as the initiative to move forward, Aloy being more compliant than he had expected.

She eventually ceased the motions between them, profusely apologizing, stating that she will have an answer for his proposition when she returns. Avad did not want to rush her. He would hold off the council as long as he could in order to let her think clearly about this decision. It was her choice in the end, despite disgruntled council members believing that her special privileges in the Sundom have made her a liability. They wanted an explanation for the Eclipse and how she was the only one able to stabilize the spire. They wanted to know how and why the huntress even knew the spire’s true origins, being that she hails from a tribe that shuns technology.

Avad stood up to remove his royal garments as he concluded his discussion with the spymaster. It was time to train in the barracks and get his mind off of the demands of the Sundom.

Vanasha made her way through the corridors of the palace and was relieved to find Itamen reading glyphs alongside his mother Nasadi in the hanging gardens. She smiled at her queen and grinned at Itamen before scanning her surroundings. Guards aplenty were present, as was a subtle haze in her vision, making it clear to her that the threat was still active. She walked over to a dark corner and waited.

“Please, give me more time.” She whispered as she felt the knife at her back.

Aloy noticed a significant alteration in Nil’s behavior over the next three days. He had become quiet, almost to the point of becoming all but a shadow as he followed along the path of her footsteps. There were moments when she thought she was alone in the wilderness again, only for her solitude to be broken by an arrow whizzing past her ear and into the eye of a pouncing vagabond in the distance. She assumed his silence and efficiency was just another aspect of his line of work as an effective soldier. When the circumstances demanded it to be so, Nil was a
She found a small appreciation in his quickdraw for he would end every battle before it could begin, sparing Aloy’s hands from becoming dirty. But whenever he brought down a stray attacker, there was no prideful spark in his eye that was usually present. No thirst to be quenched because there appeared to be none to begin with. The hunter had become strangely tame, to where he seemed almost numb. There were a few occasions when she noticed a subtle twitching in his eyes. Whenever this occurred, he would mix a small dose of white powder into his flask and chug it down. His hands would shake after that but for only a brief amount of time. His eyes would grow dull, as if a light had been subdued.

That awkward moment when the plot takes over more than what I had accounted for.
“Who’s the special lady?” Nina asked as they fished in the river barehanded. She had forgotten to braid her back and now black silk strands constantly interrupted her vision. Nil half-smiled at her, not wanting to kiss and tell.

“I’ll talk to you about her as long as you don’t discuss any of this with our mother.” Nil said. Autumn leaves were falling into the water where the fish nibbled at them in curiosity.

“It’s a secret, huh? No problem there.” Nina assured him. “Dead women tell no tales. So, speak to me, what’s she like?”

The hunter had not talked openly how he felt about Aloy to with others. For him to speak freely with his sister enabled him some relief as she was the only person he could trust his feelings to.

“She’s a graceful mess and a beautiful force of nature.” Nil said. “She’s different, but you would appreciate it.”

“As long as she makes you happy, it’s fine.” Nina shrugged. “Even if she’s different.”

“Happy?” Nil scoffed. “She drives me up the wall.”

Nina laughed, finding amusement in how frank he was when describing the woman. She caught a fish in her hands and then released it as it no longer served her a purpose.

“You love her, don’t you?” Nina asked and pushed her dark hair out of her face again. “Don’t be shy and admit it.”

Nil shook his head in refusal.

“Come on.” Nina said. “Oh, I see it – you’re afraid.”

“Why would I be afraid?” He asked her. Nina looked at her brother as if the answer was obvious.

“This isn’t as simple as the love of war or bloodshed,” Nina said. “This love is the kind that leaves you without any control as you become to connected to something other than yourself. You know how you feel, but don’t understand why, and suddenly, all those little pieces of life that never mattered before now mean everything.”

“It’s unsettling.” Nil said, not wanting to openly agree with her.

“Well of course.”

Nearby, a three-sided flowerbed bloomed violet blossoms. The space in the middle was empty.

The hunter sighed and stepped out of the river and away from his sister, knowing what was going to happen next.

Nina gave him a confused look and stopped fishing.

“Why can’t I discuss this with mother?” Nina asked. “I’m sure she would approve.”

The hunter grew quiet as their surroundings dimmed. Nina tried to step out of the river to follow him but her feet were rooted down, unable to move.
“You can’t because you’re dead, Nina, and she is not.” Nil whispered.

His sister’s face paled with sadness as she had forgotten.

“I haven’t told her yet. I haven’t told her it was me.”

“If you talk with her, she will understand. All wounds have the potential to heal.” Nina said. Her crystal-colored eyes began to cloud over with death. The hunter bit down on his lip to keep from crying out as he saw blood spill from her gut, turning the river crimson.

“Then why didn’t yours?” Nil asked.

Aloy awoke to muttering beside her. The soldier shuddered in his sleep underneath her arms. His skin was drenched in sweat. He kept murmuring what sounded like someone’s name followed by words in a strange Carja dialect.

“Is he having another nightmare?” Aloy asked herself and rubbed her eyes. She first checked to see if he had any weapons within reach. She found two knives hidden on his belt and quickly removed them. She then placed a cautious hand on his shoulder and decided to shake him awake this time, and perhaps with too much force.

The soldier jolted upwards, grabbed Aloy’s wrist, and reached for his knife that wasn’t there, acting on reflex. His eyes were hazy, relaying to Aloy that he wasn’t aware of what he was doing. She needed to act fast before he snapped her wrist in half.

“Nil, wake up!” Aloy shrieked and slapped him across the face with her free hand. The hunter flinched awake and released her. His chest heaved up and down as he gained cognition of his settings. He tasted blood on his lip.

“Damn it,” Aloy hissed as she recovered. His grip was going to leave her bruised but at least she wasn’t going to die at the hands of a man who killed her in his sleep.

“Care to tell me what that was about?” Aloy demanded. Nil ignored her and reached around for his flask. It was not on his belt. The huntress revealed it in her hand and shook it in front of him.

“Hey – answer me first. What kind of nightmare were you having?” Aloy asked and stood up.

“I don’t remember.” He said and reached for his flask again. She pressed her foot up against his chest and pushed him back down into the dirt. The hunter grunted and scowled up at her.

“Aloy, I’m going to count to three and by the time I’m done, you’d better have taken your foot off of me.” Nil threatened. “One…”

“What is this stuff you’ve been putting into your flask? Some sort of medicine?” Aloy asked as she shook the container.

“Two…”

“Because you didn’t have this medicine on you the night we came here.”

“Three…”
“When and where did you get it?”

Aloy yelped as Nil grabbed her ankle and swung her off balance, making her fall to the ground.

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Evening the next day.

Aloy’s burns on her arms were aching. Word had spread throughout the Sundom of the huntress’s fancy for collecting distinguished objects. On an errand to retrieve a metal flower hidden within a ravine, Aloy encountered an elite raiding party who had laid traps throughout the path. Aloy had charged in despite Nil’s warning of the obvious danger awaiting her. She had successfully evaded the tripwire but was caught by surprise when four of them threw blaze-soaked rope around her body and threatened to ignite her on fire if she didn’t hand over her spear. Though she didn’t doubt that she would eventually find a way to escape on her own, Aloy had to admit she was slightly relieved when her companions caught up with her and sniped down each of the rogues with extreme prejudice, but not before one of the ropes had lit up in flames. The raiding parties have certainly become more creative ever since the battle of the spire. Aloy could only imagine what the daily traveler had to endure on the roads when unaccompanied by a guard. Militarization of the Sundom might be a necessity after all.

Nil and Aloy hadn’t spoken to each other since the ambush. He had taken a long, quiet look at the metal flower sitting in the triangle flowerbed and walked away, leaving Aloy to gather it for herself. If he was angry with her, Nil did not show it on his face, only evincing stoicism. Aloy didn’t apologize for going too far ahead of him and he didn’t bother lecturing her, seeing the nasty burns on her skin as a testament to her own foolish behavior.

The sun was setting and the hunters had taken refuge within an obscure cave, hidden away from searching eyes.

“Let me change your bandages.” Nil said finally. She was tempted to resist his treatment, dancing around the thought of letting herself get a deadly infection just to smite him. A part of Aloy still believed he liked seeing her this way – free spirited and brash to the point of stupidity. If she did happen to die, it was likely that Nil would shrug off her death as another one that bites the dust, as many had before.

Not wanting to let her pettiness to get the best of her, Aloy nodded and placed herself on a rock next to Nil. He began with her arms, unwrapping the cloth and exposing her skin to the brisk air. Nil’s fingers were calloused all over and toughened from years of battle, yet his hands were surprisingly gentle during the bandaging process.

“When is your guard duty over?” Aloy asked, not wanting the stalker’s patrolling growls to be the only sounds between them.

“When I return you to Meridian by the end of the week.” Nil answered. “That’s in about two and a half days.”

“What if I don’t want to go back?” Aloy asked, not certain if she was ready to brave the confrontations she’d surely have to face.

“I won’t force you to return.” Nil replied. “But there will be key meetings at the upcoming summit next week that you will want to be present for. If you won’t speak for yourself someone else will
and they may or may not have your best interests at heart. However, if you want to instead go rogue and be hunted by every person in the Sundom, including myself, that’s your choice.”

His persuasion lied in subtle threats and he wasn’t going to waste a shock arrow on her. She knew the hunter wanted to be free from his responsibility and her constant nagging. Aloy even felt slightly sympathetic towards him. She imagined he desired to return to the field without having to constantly check and see whether or not Aloy had stepped into any quicksand.

This entire situation seemed to keep them at odds with each other for their line of work revolved around the constant threat of death. To send a killer to protect a huntress was counterproductive. Aloy knew that Avad meant well when he commissioned his friend to keep her safe after learning of their previous cooperation, but they were partners in warfare, creating bonds over blood – not treading carefully around shards of glass that were bound to be stepped on. Everything about this was unnatural and Aloy could not help but imagine there was more to this. She felt like she was under observation.

The hunter had also made a fair point. Her return to Meridian was imperative. The last thing Aloy needed was for new decrees regarding her freedom in the Sundom to passed and without her input. Many out there might still believe that *she* was the one related to HADES’s awakening and was simply trying to cover up her tracks. Like Sylens.

Aloy sighed. Time away from the capital allowed her to see with a clearer vision of things to come. She wanted to make peace with Avad and clear up misunderstandings as he would be her key to having a voice in the region.

Thinking of the Sun-King made Aloy sweat. She no longer felt sick when remembering their last encounter, only overwhelmed. She was convinced that she had feelings for him, but whatever they amounted to, Aloy was unsure. Was it sympathy for his struggles? Admiration for his reform? Why did she allow him to touch her that night if she did not feel at least the slightest bit in love with him? Kissing and touching is what people do with those they are in love with, or so she would like to think. Then does that mean she loved Nil?

Aloy looked away from the hunter as she tried to clear her thoughts, as if pretending he wasn’t next to her would help keep her mind off of him. If Aloy was to ever choose a mate for herself, she’s have to deliberate wisely a person that would fit into her vision of life.

In terms of social pragmatism, Aloy began to think of Avad and the possibility of her place at his side. She imagined the benefits of their union, if she was willing to put away her pride for the sake of the world. She wondered if she could confess her unique origins to him, explain that she was created, not born, if he would believe her. She thought that perhaps if they developed a strong enough relationship, however long it took for that to happen, then she could trust this information with him.

The political benefits were obvious. With allegiances from the east and the north, peace would be not just a possibility, but within reach. The Nora may not be keen with the idea at first, but she could convince them otherwise as she was their idol of worship, much like the Sun-King is to the Carja. With the Sun-King and the Anointed One side by side, they could be united under one sky, distinguishable only by night and day. She could already imagine the relief on Avad’s face once she answered his question with “yes, we will do this together.” She said “yes” to an outlander she hardly knew, so why would she have a problem with giving the Sun-King the same answer?

She wondered if Avad would try to change her ways, insist that she conform to more Carja
 traditions, perhaps forbid her from traveling as frequently as she was used to, and that Nil’s protection was only the beginning of what would soon be a royal guard following her everywhere.

*Nil, her partner.*

Aloy found it strange to be thinking of another man in Nil’s presence. Even more peculiar was why she thought that in the first place, feeling guilt creep into her chest. Nil was the first Carja she had fought alongside with, the first man she said, “yes” to when he asked her to join him in purging Devil’s Thirst, albeit reluctantly. Varl came soon after, as did Erend. Each man was different in their styles of combat and were efficient enough, but Aloy held it quietly to herself that the Carja soldier worked best alongside her when it came to hunting. She didn’t have to worry about his safety because he embraced danger – a small comfort, knowing that he lived for those moments found between life and death, a line that had intertwined perfectly with the life Aloy lives. Nil is a hunter, just as she is.

Had Aloy stayed within The Embrace, it would likely be proposed that Aloy and Varl take each other as mates. As far as how Aloy felt about this, Varl’s matriarchal dogma stifled her feelings for him. She cared for his being and admired his courage, yet she could only feel so much for the young man beyond friendship as he is and always will be connected to something that she is not. Unlike with the soldier, Aloy distressed about Varl’s safety, despite him being the son of Warchief Sona. The Nora brave may have proudly claimed that by her side during wartime was where he belonged, however Aloy knew that Varl’s death would be another devastating loss to the tribe.

Then there was Erend – fair company, though a slob at times. Erend’s positive influence had not gone unnoticed by Aloy. His connection to the Oseram and his ability to calm a raging crowd were a necessity. Once he got his drinking under control, he could fill in the shoes of his late sister. And though they had become great friends, Aloy was not quite accepting of his straightforward request to take her to The Claim, drunken or not. She would have to discuss this with him personally as to why their relationship had to remain professional. She didn’t want to get his hopes up.

Aloy felt a slight sting as Nil wrapped her arms in fresh clothes, finishing up. His motions had been incredibly delicate this entire time to where her mind could drift freely. He used a salve from a plant that Aloy was not familiar with – its green leaves were thick and serrated and oozed a liquid when cut, which the hunter used to soak her bandages with, calming the burns.

“Aloy, I must say, you’re incredibly skilled at mending wounds.” Aloy commented. “Where did you learn this?”

“My mother was the medicine woman of our clan. I picked up a few skills from her.” Nil answered. The huntress tilted her head in surprise.

“A Carja Lady Shaman?” Aloy asked. “Isn’t that borderline heretical?”

Nil blinked once. Then again, as if he were waking up from a deep sleep and was trying to regain focus. The clouds in his eyes had been uncovered. The effects of his drugs had worn off.

“Yeah, that’s right.” Nil said and rubbed his eyes. “Which is why you shouldn’t tell anyone I told you that.”

He rose up to leave the conversation, finished with his task, temporarily finished with her. Aloy watched him unhook his flask and began to shake the entire contents of water mixed with crushed powder. The effects of whatever he was taking wore off quicker with increased usage. Nil was growing resistant to its effects, influencing him to take a greater dose each time. It both worried and annoyed the huntress that he had to find ways to shut off his mind when not hunting his quarry.
“Can’t put the bottle down, can you?” Aloy said accusingly, feeling the tugging sensation in her chest as she spoke. She hated the way he made her feel about him. Her cheeks burned. She thought that if she found enough contempt for his being, her original disdain could resurface itself and smother her misplaced affections for a man who claimed he wants nothing beyond a brief partnership yet takes everything from her, piece by piece.

“I’m allergic to alcohol and smoking shisha ruins my lungs.” Nil said, ever calm in the midst of her judgement.

“Always trying to find a way to satisfy your self-destructive behavior,” she says. “Is living so bad for you? I thought soldiers were supposed to practice self-preservation.”

Nil tilted his head curtly at her sassiness. His silver eyes glinted in the light as he looked her up and down.

“Says the Nora who goes to dangerous places alone, explores tombs of the old ones, and hunts combat level machines for trophies and praise.” Nil replied. “And when you’re not doing all those things, you’re running your mouth instead.”

Aloy wrinkled her nose at his slight. He never hesitated to call her out on her own pettiness. Nil reminded her of Sylens when he did this, as if Aloy had no right to judge them, understating her claims as trivial nonsense. There was always more to these men than what they were willing to admit. They wouldn’t lie, but they would shamelessly deny her the truth.

Aloy got up from her seat and grabbed his arm.

“Don’t try to turn this around on me, as if I’m the one who is acting strange here.” Aloy snapped. “The drug use, the apathy, the silence – all of those things make it very clear that there is something wrong. What are you hiding from me?”

Nil narrowed his eyes at her as she dug her nails into his arm while her viridian eyes bore into him. He should put the girl in her rightful place for vehemently accusing, disobeying, and disturbing his life. But Aloy’s intensity was more addictive than any drug he had experienced and more satisfying than crippling a foe with an arrow shot from a far distance. The daily denial of tasting her starved the feverously hungry animal inside of him. No matter how often they would step away from each other and attempt to create boundaries, each conversation they had would become increasingly interpersonal. She looked at him as if she were his wife who had stood beside the fire all night until the wood had all but broken down into cinders, waiting for him to return. What gives Avad the right to have her?

Aloy watched as the hunter’s face darkened above her. He couldn’t harm her – the rules of engagement didn’t allow for it, so she dared every day to test his patience, push him closer to the edge with her brazen behavior, reminding him that she was not to be ignored. The huntress smiled maliciously.

“The effects of whatever you’re taking has worn off, hasn’t it?” Aloy whispered to him as she drew closer. Nil’s silver eyes gleamed down at Aloy as he studied her soft lips.

“What makes you say that?” Nil asked in a low voice.

“I can tell because of the way you’re looking at me right now,” Aloy answered and placed her palms on his naked chest. One touch and the world beyond their space dissolved into nothingness. The stress of their previous conversation melted like steel in a forge as they became shamelessly distracted by each other’s being. It felt like they were standing outside a rogue’s fortress all over
again, planning the attack, only to be reminded that whenever the battle begins, thoughts became diluted and useless.

Nil allowed himself the gratification of feeling her jaw underneath his lips. It made Aloy’s bones sing to have him so close to her, the way a dangerous machine would place its muzzle in the grass overhead before she would override it.

“The rules of engagement for this mission – they don’t suit you at all this time around, do they?” Aloy asked him as he nuzzled her skin while growling like a sawtooth. She felt his hands at her waist, pulling her in. Even if he was larger and stronger than his prey, underestimating his target would lead to his downfall and Aloy is a professional when it comes to outwitting beasts.

“We’re all alone,” She whispered, wrapping her arms around his neck, holding his gaze. “You can talk to me. You can trust me.”

Damn this woman, Nil thought, knowing she had sensed weakness within him. He was tempted by the thought of deserting his mission and leaving the Sundom forever, taking the huntress for himself. If he did that, he wouldn’t have to keep anything from her, rendering any secrets or connections as obsolete. Irrational pondering, even for him. Avarice is any man’s undoing. The hunter had to remain a step ahead at all times.

“Careful how you look at me with those eyes of yours, my love.” Nil said, stepping away from her. “That beautiful gaze is better reserved for someone of higher esteem than myself.”

Nil did not like reminding himself of Avad’s stake on the huntress, but it was necessary. Aloy’s frustrated sigh let him know that his gesture had worked. Not wanting to be bothered with the subject matter any longer, Nil presented the flask to her, deciding to satisfy her questions before they became too physical.

“This medicine is called ‘Keepsake.’” Nil explained and pointed to his head “Herbalists prescribed it to those who endure pain long after the experience of injury. Not all wounds are quick to heal and the pain becomes a regular visitor when the environment becomes suitable. The medicine provides temporary relief.”

“Are you talking about post-war sickness of the mind?” Aloy asked, trying to understand him better.

Nil sighed. None of this mattered previous to him meeting Aloy. It was hard enough to explain a concept to someone who lacks shared experience.

“There’s more to it than that,” he said. “Live long enough on the wrong side of right and you’ll know what I mean.”

Resting in the vestiges of a robotics center, Sylens scanned the focus’s network and searched for any recent intruders. He did this compulsively throughout his days while HADES scorned him from within its lantern, its cage.

“QUARRY UNACCOUNTED FOR. ENTITY IS WITHIN QUARRY’S RANGE.”
MISCACULATED. HUMAN ERROR DETECTED.” raged the sub-function. Sylens could only hear his mockery while wearing the focus and while within range. That was every day. Sylens also could not ghost Aloy’s network without Hades tagging along for the ride. His cover was nearly blown when he connected to Aloy’s network the night she had foolishly shared the focus with that notorious headhunter. Hades had tried to hijack the network the moment he saw Aloy come into vision and identified the entity on screen, notifying the hunter as if he were another one of his Eclipse lackeys. Naturally, Aloy once again purged the sub-function from the focus upon making physical contact with the device’s user.

If Hades’s intrusion was not enough of an inconvenience, another person sought to interrupt Sylens’s studies. Once an acquaintance, now an adversary, as the tables of cooperation always turned.

“Though I do not aim to appease your goading with my admittance, I’ve realized my mistake by not warning Aloy of loose ends possibly making a disturbance.” Sylens muttered while he developed a new firewall for his focus’s network.

Uden was the name of Sylen’s old acquaintance who helped him form the Eclipse many years ago from within the Shadow Carja, disguised as a Sun-Priest. The man had taken well to recruiting kestrels into the cult, and introducing them to the focus’s functions. His main fascination was with having a mechanized army. He constantly searched for ways to harness the abilities of the new combat machines that had appeared during the derangement. With the corruptors recently discharged, Uden now wanted a machine tamer under his control.

It was no surprise that his recent fascination was with Aloy, since Sylens made a quick escape from the region. He wanted to place shackles over her hands and feet, but only in a metaphorical sense. Uden is a master manipulator and through careful deception, he was able to turn even the closest of allies on each other. Personal information was turned into leverage, which in change became means of blackmail. Worst of all, the man was equipped with a focus and Aloy had grown careless with hers. First, she placed it on a morally sociopathic headhunter, next a naive Sun-King, and finally Uden had been able to grasp the delicate information on her device, connecting the networks underneath the huntress’s nose. Now Sylens could not freely ghost Aloy’s network without the risk of opening himself up to Uden as well.

Sylens grunted angrily. Had Aloy been busying herself by studying the device’s interface and not fooling around with men of the Carja, all of this could have been avoided. Sylens had since then worked tirelessly to develop firewalls in order to prevent Uden from tapping into their focuses, but time was running out.

“QUARRY HAS BROKEN THROUGH ENTITY’S DEFENSES.”

“I’ve realized that already.” Sylens snapped as he saw the Uden’s line connecting to Aloy’s focus. At least his own device had become secure.
Aloy’s focus had picked up a signal in the direction of the southwest corner of the Southern Jewel. Nil prohibited them from investigating it as they needed to make way to the capital first thing in the morning. The area in which the signal directed was also a dangerous corner, a forsaken place, according to the hunter. He recommended she return only when the correct conditions were met, as in when he did not have her life as collateral.

In addition, Aloy’s burns prevented her from wearing her full armor, rendering her more vulnerable to future attacks. The huntress did not argue with him and instead quietly plotted to herself how she was going to slip away.

Fortunately for her, Nil decided to retire early for the night, going to sleep almost immediately.

“That’s a first,” Aloy said. “You usually stay up late into the night and right now the sun has barely gone down.”

Aloy hugged her knees to her chest and watched the fireflies dance around the trees outside of their refuge. She wanted to talk to Nil about important decisions to be made upon their return. The man had an eye and ear for weakness and his perspective would be appreciated. When Aloy glanced down at the serene expression on the hunter’s face as he slept, she decided to it was best to confide in herself. There were other questions, such as who the hell “Nina” is. A family member? Friend? Past lover?

As much as Aloy would like to know the answer, she was beginning to understand that perhaps Nil did not want his past resurfacing for good reason. Out of being a decent friend, respecting his privacy was the least she could do.

Aloy sighed and wished she could at least curl up next to him beside the fire with his arm around her waist and his lips against her neck. Even if he was unable to fully open himself up to her, she would still be satisfied in just feeling the rise of and fall of his chest against her back, completing the harmony that was created when their minds were more singularly oriented. Experiencing intimacy with another person was all new territory for her, a world that both daunted at her fears yet at the same time drew her in. Much like the nature of her company.

She felt like she is a moth and he is the flame, drawn in by danger and uncertainty. Such is the way Nil lived his life. Could she be more like the hunter than she had realized?

The huntress groaned. In two days, she would be in the palace with Avad discussing future prospects regarding the world they lived in. Whatever happened between her and the hunter would diminish into the winds of yesterday as the promises of a new life and its responsibilities awaited her. Wild her heart may be, Aloy felt she owed herself to the world who risked their lives against the Eclipse. She leaned forward, speaking once more without expecting a response. Sometimes it was easier that way and the current moment for honesty was as good as it was ever going to get.

“I thought about what you said a few days ago… when you told me about keeping parts of ourselves hidden away for the sake of others. Of all people, I should know by now how much danger I’ve put others in just by asking the right questions at the wrong time. And who knows? Maybe I don’t deserve all the answers anyway. I’ve just felt perhaps… entitled to knowing more
because knowledge and learning has always been a part of my identity. It’s how I find my center, my drive, my motivation. I know it’s selfish and almost greedy, and maybe those traits accurately define my being, kind of like you and the lust for battle, in a sense.

“As of now, I’ve decided it’s best just to leave you be. You don’t owe me any explanation or your life story. Once we return to the capital we’ll part ways like we always do. I’ll be starting a new life, more than likely. I’ll… visit the Nora and tell them my decisions to… possibly… that I’m going to unite the tribes. Together, Avad and I have potential to achieve great things for the future and I’m willing to reach for that, even if it means I have to leave a part of myself behind. I’ll talk to him, clear up some misunderstandings… and we’ll be fine in the end. I’m ready for this, or as ready as I’ll ever be.”

The huntress closed her eyes and wished that she were more confident in her words. There was much she had left unsaid, but perhaps enough had been spoken. She turned her focus on with the intent to read ancient poetry gathered from metal flowers, only to be distracted by the signal in the distance.

Once more intrigued by its call, Aloy got to her feet and gathered her weapons before glancing down at her sleeping partner. He had warned her against going beyond his reach due to safety precautions, she realized this. However, this might be the only chance she gets to investigate something for only her eyes to see. She has rights to having her own secrets just as he does.

“Stay with him,” Aloy whispered to the mechanical hound. “I can take care of myself out there.”

Aloy followed the signal, obsessively scanned her surroundings with her focus, ensuring that no one was lying in wait to attack. The signal was leading her to an area that was tucked away, almost hidden behind a thick forest with incredibly tall trees, their trunks reaching above several stories high. The world was dead silent around her as no sound could be heard save the light padding of her footsteps. A low fog hovered around her ankles, adding more eeriness to the already unsettling atmosphere. Knowing she was closing in on the signal allowed her to dismiss the groaning intuition in her gut that kept telling her to turn back.

After rappelling down two cliffs, Aloy hiked up an incline and found the source next to a mysterious metal module. On the ground beside it was a blinking homing device. The module had peaked her interest so she ignored the homing device for now.

“Maybe it’s part of one of the other sub-functions?” Aloy asked herself and scanned the module.

ALPHA CLEARANCE REQUIRED. DNA ENCRYP… TRANSFER…INCOMPL….

“Ah, alone at last.” Came a voice followed by a man's hologram. He was the court noble she had briefly encountered at the palace, wearing a focus hidden underneath the silk and metal adornments on his head.

“I see your company is not present at the moment.” He said, glancing around.

“You – you’re the one who sent assassins after my friend.” Aloy said.

“Your ‘friend’ – that of whom I’m sure you have many questions about,” he said, smiling. Aloy furrowed her brow in suspicion, and the stranger took notice.

“Allow me the honor of explaining. I believe you of all people deserve answers, after all you’ve
This had to be the first time anyone has offered to explain anything to her. There was nothing more she could do in this situation other than hear him out.

“Alright,” Aloy said. “Explain yourself.”

“Let me begin with who I am and how I am able to contact you through a focus.” He said. “My name is Uden. I am an intelligence advisor on Marad’s team. I tend to keep my workings very discreet, for reasons I’m sure you will be able to understand. You’ve met one of my colleagues before – Vanasha, Dowager Queen Nasadi’s handmaid. She has worked by my side for many years and has told me a number of great things about you. Her and I share the same endeavor, which is to completely end the threat of the Shadow Carja.

“As for my focus, it was retrieved over two and a half years ago from the body of a murdered Shadow Carja soldier, one of the Eclipse, to be specific. Now listen carefully to what I have to say as it pertains as much to your safety as it does everyone else’s. I have been shadowing your travels in the Southern Jewel and feel compelled to alert you that you are in grave danger.”

Aloy frowned at the statement but her interest became peaked when a projection of Nil came into view.

“This is the man you know as a wandering headhunter. But I happen to know him as Captain Nilead of the Western Raids, a soldier of remarkable skill and grit. He was born to a warrior clan of barbaric practices that used to dwell on the western borders of the Sundom. Fortunately, they are long gone due to the Red Raids. He’s the last of his kind, as one would say. When he was a child, the boy was delivered to the royal citadel in Sunfall as a gift to the old Sun-king from an esteemed merchant–”

“Slaver.” Aloy interjected.

“As the Nora would put it, yes,” replied the man. “Jiran could do whatever he pleased with the child – designate him as a slave, order he be thrown into the sun-ring with the rest of the captives, etc. But instead, the Sun shed a ray of mercy into Jiran’s heart the day he saw Nilead kneel beneath his throne. The Sun-King took him as his own and in secret.”

“Jiran adopted Nil as his son?” Aloy asked. “Like a Tenakth would?”

The mysterious man laughed.

“Like a Sun-King would,” He gently corrected. “The child thrived in Jiran’s vision of the Sundom, given his savage nature. At age seventeen, Nilead became captain of the Sun-King’s Finest, the antithesis of the current Sun-King’s Vanguard. If a general raid had proven unsuccessful, the death squad led by none other than Nilead himself would move in and slay the opposition with extreme prejudice, obeying every order without question. It was a killer’s dream. But everyone wakes up from dreams eventually.”

Nil’s eyes opened wide awake.

He immediately scoured the ground for Aloy’s tracks and eventually found an additional pair of
footprints of incredible size, confirming his suspicions. The huntress had been followed.

“You mean to tell me that Nil was upset that Avad usurped his father?” Aloy asked, incredulous to these claims.

“Of course. Any man faithful to the Sun-King would be. The soldier had been stripped of his position and demoted in rank when he switched sides. In addition, Nilead had inherited his surrogate father's madness - it drove him out of control to the point he sabotaged a mission that was key in defeating the Shadow Carja, and murdered an entire village of innocents in the process, burning them alive.” said Uden. “Avad’s court sentenced him to prison like a caged animal, the punishment being hardly equivalent to his actions. The Sun-King was doubtful of the accusations, saying there was not enough evidence to show that he was a traitor, letting their ties of brotherhood cloud his insight.”

“These things that you’re telling me,” Aloy began. “Though I don’t doubt that there is some truth to what your words, I don’t believe that Nil could ever be motivated by vengeance or be conniving enough to betray Avad. He does thirst for violent engagements, but Nil isn’t necessarily the kind to hold a grudge. I would need proof of this in order to believe it.”

“Then why don’t I show you a full recollection of the event?” the man offered. “This view was taken from the perspective of one of my own agents who was brutally murdered at the hands of your so-called friend.”

The hologram displayed a battle-torn area within a canyon. Fires were smoldering atop the remains of cabins. She doesn’t know the area but is soon distracted by a familiar figure approaching. It was Nil, adorned in formal Carja military armor, and covered in blood – a sight both familiar and unfamiliar to Aloy. Marked by violence and destruction, the man looked like the incarnation of calamity itself.

Nil turned to whoever was wearing the focus and approached them with intent to execute. His stride was intimidating, his expression was wicked.

Aloy became deathly still as she observed the soldier raise his blade towards the sky and impale his victim, looking them straight in the eyes with a cold stare, devoid of remorse. The video log ends as the person draws their last breath. Aloy began to feel shaken after viewing the victim’s perspective, as if she herself had been stabbed by the soldier.

“Why are you showing me this?” Aloy demanded. “Nil admitted to me that he had confessed to his crimes – “

“But did he ever confess that he drugged you to sleep three nights ago?”

“What?” Aloy said. “When -how?”

“See for yourself.” He answered. A static-ridden hologram projected a replay through Nil’s vision. She gasped in shock as she saw herself suddenly collapse against his body.

“Perhaps another time.” Said the Carja, unapologetically, sounding completely indifferent to his actions. The video cut out in static, but Aloy had seen enough.
“Why would he do this?” Aloy snapped. Her fists were clenched and her blood pounded in her veins.

“I believe you can infer as to why. He’s searching for leverage, for weakness,” said Uden. “the soldier is a skilled manipulator, my dear girl. He’s gathering every bit of sensitive information about you from your device so that he can eventually sell you out to the Shadow Carja. With you out of the way, he will be able to take revenge against the son who murdered the man who raised him as one of his own. He was never your ally nor a friend, Aloy – only a predator. As you can see beside this mysterious module is a homing device – a trap laid out by his fellow accomplices meant to lure you here.”

Uden pointed to the machine.

“Knowing you would be distracted by figuring out the origins of the module, he would easily dispatch you. Luckily, you arrived here alone and with enough time for me to warn you.”

Aloy tried to gain control over her emotions, to think rationally, but the inside of her head was a maelstrom of pain and confusion. It would make sense as to why Nil accepted the Sun-King’s request to personally oversee her “protection” - he had been spying on her this entire time with aims to sell her out, to betray the Sun-King, to turn sides again.

Aloy approached the module with wariness. Electricity pulsed visibly around it. The device was potentially dangerous.

“Here he comes, Aloy,” the man whispered. “You know what you need to do.”

Uden’s hologram dissolved in static.

Aloy turned to see the hunter standing fifteen feet away from her. She immediately notched an arrow and aimed it at his head.

“Ah, finally.” Sylens sighed in relief as he finished developing the additional firewall and applied it to the network, kicking Uden off of it. Sylens then entered Aloy’s focus and ghosted her vision. He groaned in frustration at what he was seeing - Uden had already gotten to her ears and underneath her skin. He hoped that the hunter could gain control over the situation before the researcher had to personally intervene.

“Traitorous bastard! How dare you lecture me about using others.” Aloy raged. Her body was trembling in anger. “You were using me this whole time.”

Nil’s hands gripped his bow but he didn’t aim it at her.

His voice was calm, “Aloy, I have no idea what is going on, but someone followed you here – you’re walking into a trap.”
“You would know all about that, wouldn’t you, soldier?” Aloy spat. “You set this up, just like you sabotaged that mission in the canyon two years ago and burned all those innocent people alive!”

Nil’s eyes widened at her statement.

“What did you learn any of this?” Nil demanded. The whole situation had suddenly become personal, something the hunter very much disapproved of.

“I’m not telling you a damn thing.” Aloy replied through her gritted teeth. “You’ve learned enough information the night you drugged me to sleep.”

Fuck me running. Nil felt the pressure now. No previous battle experience could fully prepare him for the huntress’s wrath. This was worse than being court-martialed for he was completely guilty of his actions, and he knew it. Nil’s next plan was to find out how she learned about that claim, if he happened to survive the next ten minutes.

“Listen to me, Aloy,” Nil said slowly. “I need to get you out of here. We can discuss all of this back at the capital where you’re safe.”

“I’ll go back to Meridian with you in chains.” Aloy declared. She equipped shock arrows and aimed to stun him, releasing three in his direction. Nil rolled out of the way and threw a flashbang, temporarily blinding her. The huntress turned on her focus and searched around for her target.

The thin of a hand slid across her throat and at once Nil’s bicep was around her neck, locking her in a chokehold. He placed another hand on her head to prevent her from knocking him back with it. Before Nil could tighten his grip, Aloy pulled her body down, stepped in between his legs, and dropped the hunter to the ground, just as he had taught her. She quickly placed herself over his torso, moving her feet around his ankles. Aloy quickly unsheathed his scimitar and raised it over his chest. The bladed weapon was much heavier than her spear, the weight being enough to where it would instantly relieve her to just drop it into his body. Aloy looked down at her prey.

The moment was upon her, yet she hesitated.

Nil stared calmly into her eyes as her chest heaved up and down above him. His hands were on her hips to hold her steady. Aloy choked back a melancholy sob. She was furious at what she had learned about him, yet perplexed as to why he was looking at her the way he was right now. He didn’t appear defeated or even try to fight for his life. He instead glanced at her with unprecedented patience.

“I’ve disappointed you.” Nil said to her.

I hope you’ll forgive me someday.

“Shut up!” Aloy cried out, devastated by the situation. He had spoken Rost’s last words to her before he left her outside Mother’s Heart. Aloy felt that he was again trying to manipulate her with sensitive memories he had found while looking through her focus. The familiar hurt of betrayal and abandonment flooded her chest. Tears mixed with rain dropped down her face and onto his skin. She was losing her hold on the scimitar, which scared her, knowing that was the only thing keeping him in place. She needed to slay the monster while she still had the chance.

Nil’s eyes were suddenly drawn to a looming figure standing behind Aloy. They held shock rope in one hand and a spear in the other. If Nil let her kill him now, it would be the end for the both of them.

The two predators raised their weapons in synchronization. The hunter quickly lurched Aloy off of
him and rolled her to safety, but not before the newcomer’s spear made a mark in Nil’s shoulder, breaking through his armor. He grunted in pain as he backed away from the predator.

Aloy jumped to her feet and gasped as lightning lit up the figure’s appearance. It was a large brute, plated in harshly designed metals, pale skin riddled with rugged piercings and stitches woven in and out of it. They charged at Aloy. She dropped the scimitar and leaped to the side and behind the module, a safe distance from both men. She then equipped her spear, preparing for a sneak attack.

Once the opportunity presented itself, Aloy thrusted her spear into her attacker’s gut. The brute uttered a growl as blood spilled from his body. He grabbed Aloy by the neck and began squeezing to render her unconscious. Nil leaped from behind the attacker with his scimitar in hand and hung the blade’s curved edge against their throat. It took two full seconds before the hunter finished decapitating the attacker, dropping his head to the dirt with a thud.

Aloy fell to the ground and furiously fought to relieve herself of the hand that was still wrapped around her throat. The moment she was free, she backed away from Nil and prepared herself for his next advancements. He was removing his pauldrons in order to take his vest off and put a hand to his wound to stop the bleeding. Nil’s chest was heaving as he squinted at Aloy through the pain. She fought back the urge to run to his side and bind his wounds. Even while maimed, the hunter still posed a threat to her.

He raised his scimitar at her and held it in a firm, bloody grip. Aloy stood beside the module as a warning.

“Get too close and I’ll electrocute the both of us.” Aloy threatened. The hunter held out a hand in protest.

“Aloy, I realize I fucked up.” Nil said.

“You’re only saying that because you were caught!” Aloy shrieked.

The hunter sighed and hung his head. Did she always have to state the obvious?

“There’s more to this than you understand,” Nil gasped and placed his scimitar on the ground and gestured to the corpse under his feet. “I know who these people are. There will be more where he came from.”

“I don’t trust a single thing you say.” Aloy declared and stepped closer to the module. She needed to gather the information on this device and lock it away before someone else comes along and tampers with it. If the hunter drew too close, he’d be ending his own life.

Nil’s eyes were drawn to the electricity surging through the strange machine, a statement of danger.

“Aloy, get away from the machine.” Nil ordered and stepped closer towards her, coming within reach of her body. He regretted not stunning her body with shock arrows earlier for she had proved more trouble than he had ever imagined, now threatening suicide.

“Get away from me!” Aloy screamed, half a warning of caution, half fueled by menace. Nil’s narrowed his eyes and moved forward, testing her bluff.

After the hunter had taken one step too many, Aloy reached out and pressed a hand to the metal casing. “Elizabet Sobeck: Alpha Prime requesting access.”

Once his hand touched her skin, the hunter was unable to pull away, caught in the binds of electric
Information once lost was now being uploaded across the established network. Sylens watched in delight as his focus simultaneously downloaded various files identified as life sciences and medicine.

“Well done, hunters!” he exclaimed.

Meanwhile, Aloy struggled to take in the incoming images and scenes that were not from her own mind while electricity coursed through her body. Each memory was accompanied by overwhelming emotions of foreign experiences.

*The prince stood over his father’s body, grieving his loss, despite obtaining victory.*

“I hope this is what you wanted.” Said the soldier.

*The prince turned around angrily to him.*

“Don’t think for a second that any of this is what I wanted. Whose side are you on, anyway?”

*The soldier approached the imposter with intent to kill, personally seeing the rules of engagement still applicable to the situation. “Maim no innocent” were his orders. But this man hardly qualifies as an innocent. After his target was slain, the soldier found a strange white object over their ear. The soldier picks it up to examine it. He places it over his head and hears the whispers of a metallic voice. Electricity shoots out from the device, burning his skin. The soldier quickly removes the object and drops it from his fingers.*

*The masked woman dashed left and right, dodging his every attack. She had laid waste to every one of his subordinates during the raid in the barbaric west. Any other day, the soldier would have challenged her personally to a battle.*

“I’ve had enough of this.” The soldier snapped and removed his helmet. The woman stopped in her tracks and dropped her weapon.

“Nile!” the woman cried as she was stabbed in her gut by the soldier’s scimitar. He ripped the mask off her face to watch death pass across her eyes, only to look in shock that they belonged to his sister. The soldier dropped his sword and gathered her in his arms. He placed his hand on the wound in a futile attempt to stop the bleeding.

“No, no. Nina.” He whispered as blood trickled out of her mouth.

“I missed you... everyday...” She gagged, trying to shake away death’s shadow for a moment longer. She closed her eyes and smiled, showing her bloody teeth.

“Father... he's waiting for me... by the riverbed...”
The soldier felt her body go limp in his arms and knew this was goodbye.

The shaman emerged from the hut. Her long black hair reached her knees. Translucent eyes hinted maternal warmth. She took the metal flower from her son’s hands and smiled. Her mate walked to her side holding his daughter’s hand. Together, the family examined the metal petals.

“They discovered it near the river as they were fishing,” he said. “It’s beautiful, though I am not certain you will be able to make medicine with it.”

The shaman disagreed. She placed a hand on her mate’s shoulder and said, “There’s more ways to heal someone’s wounds than with just medicine.”

“Gaia Prime systems offline. DNA decryption completed. Sub-routine sequence successful.”

“Wake up, wake up!” Aloy pleaded as she shook the hunter’s body.

He wasn’t breathing.

“Give me a revival procedure now!” she snapped to her focus. The interface displayed the procedure labeled as Cardiopulmonary Resuscitation, with holograms indicating the actions. She pressed her hands to his chest to do compressions, pumping quickly. She then tilted his chin upwards, closed his nose shut, and placed her mouth on the hunter’s, blowing until she saw his chest rise with air. She repeated the process several times, trying to stay calm amid the panic.

With what sounded like a gasp someone would utter after they narrowly escaped drowning; the hunter finally came to. Light of dawn entered between his eyelids. After pressing her ear to his chest and hearing his heartbeat, the huntress emitted a sigh of relief.

“No, no, no. Stay still.” Aloy said as the hunter tried to move underneath her. The electric shock had been less powerful than the one Hades delivered to her at the spire. Aloy was fine but Nil had been knocked unconscious from the jolt. Had he hung on any longer, he would have certainly died. Lucky for him, his burns were minimal.

“I am so sorry for everything I said.” Aloy wept over him.

Nil could barely muster a groan. He didn’t know whether or not he should feel relieved or violated.

Chapter End Notes

I swear if I did not post these last two chapters today, I would STILL be re-writing them.
Gonna do a lot of post-editing because... proof-reading.
Sit tight, things are gonna escalate in the next chapter.

Much love, y'all.
Aftershock

Chapter Summary

Avad is ushering change into the Sundom and perhaps at too quick of a pace. Aloy and Nil come to an agreement. A trail of bodies, both alive and dead follow their trail.

Chapter Notes

Gotta sew up these plot devices piece by piece. There are quite a few scene changes in this chapter, so here's a small whiplash warning ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Do we have an agreement?” Nil asked her, removing the rest of his armor. The burns on his body had made wearing his plates unbearable. Aloy pleaded for him to take more time to recover from his injuries, but Nil insisted they stay on the move.

Their individual demands had placed themselves into a stalemate, where neither person was willing to budge. Aloy attempted to kill the hunter twice before reviving him. When asked what changed her mind, Aloy denied him the answer, unwilling to explain her motives until Nil told her why he drugged her. Nil, in return, wanted to know who gave him away, how Aloy came across sensitive information regarding the canyon massacre, and why her perspective suddenly changed. The hunters discussed the terms of their armistice and perhaps for not long enough. But to argue endlessly with each other would only waste more time as it would result in a shouting match.

“Only if you refrain from using my focus without my consent or keepsake when in my presence.” Aloy said in regards to their agreement. Nil scowled in annoyance but said, “Fine, that’s a fair trade.”

Aloy eyed him with suspicion. “And get help the moment you can.”

“One thing at a time, girl.” Nil replied in a low voice, growing agitated at her demands. She looked at him with indignance, appearing as if she was about to deck him in the jaw. The friction in their relationship reappeared, threatening to start a fire that would consume and destroy the already wilting foundations of their trust.

“I'll give you my word, Aloy.” Nil said, his gaze locked onto hers. “Do I have yours?” Though he would not outwardly admit it, Nil was still aggravated about her disappearance last evening.

“You have this.” Aloy reached for her belt and unhooked a small object, pressing it into his uninjured hand. She had traded her mother’s globe charm for his keepsake pouch. Nil looked at her with slight concern.

“Are you sure?” He asked her, aware of its significance.
“As long as you have my mother’s charm, I will not stray from your side,” Aloy stated. “Consider it a promise.” She folded his fingers over the globe with finality. “I want the truth, Nil, every bit of it.” Her words were met with the hunter’s piercing gaze. She held him there, matching his intensity. Nil felt the ridges of the world under his fingertips. A precious charm as a promise of armistice – little did Aloy know that, in many tribal traditions, to place a literal keepsake in the hands of another person meant something else entirely. The hunter gripped the charm in his fingers.

“You’ll find there’s more despair than liberation,” Nil warned, despite knowing she wouldn’t give way.

“And what if that’s the case?” Aloy asked. “What’s another sorrow but an addition to the list of things I want to change in the world?” She gave him a small smile and Nil acknowledged it with his own, acting on reflex.

The sunrise’s light illuminated Aloy’s features, coloring her hair in flames while her eyes glowed like fierce embers in the heart of a fire, befitting of her spirit. Nil’s heart began to pound against his ribs at the sight of her morning glow. He could feel her thumb brush against his hand, sensing the attachment between the two of them reform like threads of silk woven to create an unbreakable tie. She looked at him once more with those precious eyes, trying to reawaken something inside of him that had died long ago.

Perhaps he would not need to bid her one last farewell in the end upon reaching the capital. Maybe she would forsake the Sundom and go beyond the snowy mountains of the north and traverse the plains of the west by his side, never to return.

*Hades must be destroyed.*

It took a greater effort for Nil to pull himself away from her.

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Much to Aloy’s relief, Nil had taken well to traveling on the back of striders, his rider’s posture being suspiciously well-composed. When asked about where he learned how to ride mounts, Nil denied that he had ever ridden one before, saying that he was of the Carja tribe, not Banuk. Yet, when she saw his robotic stallion stand on two feet with its front legs kicking in the air, and Nil shouting “hiyahh!” Aloy was certain he was lying to her.

Due to his shoulder wound, Nil was unable to climb up the cliffs to go back the way they came, forcing the hunters to take a less traveled, longer route. Their arrival at the capital would be delayed by a day, the thought bothering Nil more so than Aloy. Together, the hunters traveled along a trail going north that would eventually lead them to the river and eastward to Meridian. Upon their arrival, Nil gave his word to explain everything to Aloy in detail, prompting her to not take any more time exploring.

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Blameless Marad glanced over Avad’s shoulder in curiosity.

“I beg your pardon, Your Radiance,” Marad began. “But this would be the second decree you’ve written this month regarding new privileges in the Sundom.”

Avad was unbothered by his advisor’s concerns, finding criticism to be a necessity when it came to
decision making.

“Do you believe I’m moving things along too quickly?” Avad asked, resting the quill down on his desk.

Marad answered, “I’m from an older time and many of the changes you make will always be considered alien in convention. But that does not necessarily mean unwise.” He paused a moment to consider his next words, “I do believe, however, that the huntress’s council would be necessary on this decision as she has become more acquainted with Sundom’s various citizens than dare say you or I.”

“Aloy would be the first to tell me if I were acting out of foolishness,” Avad mused with a smile. Marad nodded in agreement.

“The huntress… I could only hope that she embraces what the Sundom has to offer,” Avad said.

“It’s not in her nature to do so.” Marad warned. “She’s compassionate about the lands but prefers to drift through them, as she is doing now.”

“Do you think that could be changed?” Avad asked.

“Not without first changing all that she is.” Marad answered. “And this decree would affect her actions as well. Many will have to change and adapt to new ways, but change is something you believe strongly in.”

“I do.” Avad replied, not willing to give up hope. Another subject of importance flashed across his mind. “The chain of murders – have you any additional information regarding this?”

“No, but I am trusting the intelligence corner to handle the situation.” Marad answered. “Until more is revealed, I believe it best if the citizens were left unaware as widespread panic and paranoia would not suit the air of the Sundom.”

Flames flickered in the campfire. The forest was in perpetual darkness, it seemed, as the sun’s rays were barely able to break through the thickness of the canopy, making it difficult to keep track of time. Aside from occasional noises made from the striders, the area was quiet, not even the sounds of birds nor tilling machines made themselves present, deeming this area truly forsaken. Shadows seemed to move out of the corner of Aloy’s eye, keeping her on edge. Nil rested one arm over a bent knee, his head propped up against a boulder, watching the fire dance around, seeming not unnerved by their surroundings. Typical.

Aloy sat across from him, trying to make sense of the new information she downloaded onto her focus. The data files contained a gargantuan amount of knowledge regarding health, medical treatment, and disease. She noticed that the further she read, the more convoluted the ancient terminology had become, rendering the information nearly useless without a thorough explanation.

A thought struck her as she looked through the files. All of this should have been destroyed when Apollo was purged. She thought about the module and wondered if it could be one of the broken pieces of The Odyssey that had found its way back to the earth. Or if it could have been one of Apollo’s 3,000 fail-safes designed by the Alpha Samina herself, scattered across the world, waiting to be collected by the new humans. Aloy felt a glint of hope blossom in her chest at the thought of possibly recovering Apollo. She wondered what Sylens could make of this, if either of them ever felt like sharing again. Then she believed it best that she didn’t get her hopes up. Apollo was
destroyed, Faro stated it himself. And Sylens had all but alienated himself from her, from everyone.

Aloy glanced at Nil. He appeared lost in thought, remaining as still as a wooden dummy. A moment passed and he let out a shiver as if he were chilled. Aloy found that to be strange, feeling the humidity surround them like a blanket. She squinted at him and asked, “Are you cold?”

Nil cracked his joints, placed himself closer to the fire, and answered, “Slightly.” He peered up at Aloy who had begun removing her leather armor and weapons. After doing so, she placed herself beside him, pressing her body against his skin using her body heat to warm him, mindful of his burns. Nil’s injuries were caused by her, so it was the least Aloy could do for him, regardless of whether he would thank her or not. She exhaled and rested her head on his shoulder, listening to the rhythm of his breathing.

Aloy found it interesting how Nil did not wreak of an unpleasant stench like he should after spending several days in the wilds. The scent of an Oseram could be found a mile away, wreaking of brew, tobacco, and sweat. Carja were known for their aroma of spice and incense while the Nora smelled of pine. Nil’s breath did smell of herbs, Aloy remembered, likely being a hygienic practice.

The silence tired her. Aloy began, “So you and Elida…”

Of course. Nil wrinkled his nose at her choice of gossip.

“No... not me and Elida.” Nil corrected and felt Aloy giggle beside him, knowing he did not want to touch that subject with a ten-foot pole.

“Maybe not anymore –“

“Ever.”

Aloy peered up at his eyes and asked “Did you two really not feel a thing for each other?” She saw Nil grimace and shake his head. “You are aware that she was secretly pining for a Shadow Carja soldier, right? If I were truly the loyal Carja soldier that everyone else made me out to be, I should have killed her in her sleep.”

Grim, Aloy thought. But at least he wasn’t what others made him out to be.

“I knew that, but what about you?” She asked, “How did any of this happen?”

“Word reached the ears of Lord Lahavis that I like it when women collect herbs and wildflowers,” Nil answered. “Seeing that as more of a deal-breaker than an admiration of a pragmatic skill, he introduced me to his daughter the next day at her flower garden. You know Elida – delicate as a porcelain doll. Not my type.”

Delicate only on the outside. Aloy remembered knowing how Elida had to bear the heartbreak of Atral’s death, searching out the strength to overcome her devastation. The expression of someone who’s lost the love of their life has been forever marked in Aloy’s memory – Elida and Avad, survivors of the raids. Love did not always end up in marriage, Aloy knew this. But what about the other way around?

“Do you think you two would have come to love each other in time had you accepted her? Or any other offers?” Aloy asked. “I mean, I don’t know how many else –“

“Wow, it is just like a girl to ask about other girls.” Nil groaned and rolled his silver eyes.
“I’m simply asking you about your past acquaintances, not who you’re voting for at the next council election,” Aloy stated. What is it with men and these kinds of subjects?

As if reading her mind, Nil replied dryly, “I know how these conversations go. The next question you’ll ask is if I’ve ever lied to you before.”

Shit. He looked down at Aloy and realized he had shot himself in the foot with his mutterings. He sighed and rested his face in a hand while Aloy straightened out her body to face him.

“Well?” She asked him, giving chase.

“So, there was this belly dancer at Sunfall who gave really great hea-“

“What, Nil, for crying out-loud, have you ever made love to anyone before?” Aloy asked. More like shrieked. Nil winced at the question, just like the time she asked him if he had ever considered hunting machines instead of humans.

“I’m pretty sure you have to be in love with the person for that to happen.” Nil answered plainly. Aloy could tell he was acting dodgier than a scrounger at a trash heap. “You can’t answer a simple question with a simple answer, can you?” She grumbled.

“Then why don’t you ask someone else these questions?” Nil growled “Someone like the Sun-.” He realized his mouth had gotten the better of him again when he saw her distressed expression. He paused for a moment before asking, “This is about Avad, isn’t it?”

Aloy nodded and said, “I remember you saying ‘worry about that when the time comes,’ but the moment is nearly upon me. He’s expecting my answer when I arrive at Meridian. The answer… to a proposal, if you know what I’m talking about…”

Aloy grew quiet when she saw the murderous glint in Nil’s eyes return for a moment before disappearing. Where had his snarky attitude from before run off to?

“Is everything alright?” Aloy asked him.

Nil chuckled, “I’m burned, wounded, and without armor, so no. You were saying?”

Aloy suddenly understood that what she had seen in Nil’s eyes wasn’t murderous at all, but reminiscent of the look he had on his face the night she saw him on the balcony, when Avad took her into his arms. It was jealousy.

So, the hunter was human after all, Aloy thought. The epiphany made her feel both relieved and sorrowful. Nil, though not yet admitting to it openly, likely had feelings for her. And here she was, casually talking about another man in front of him. But not just any man – the sun-king. A height only those born into the dynasty were able to reach.

The huntress decided to do what she always did in an uncomfortable situation – leave it. Aloy removed himself from Nil and said, “I’m going to collect some herbs - are there any in particular that you want?”

Nil grabbed her hand and eyed her with suspicion. Aloy grunted in annoyance.

She said to him, “Don’t give me that look. I’m not going far, okay?”

Nil was on his feet now, facing her with his glaring silver look, insinuating she was in no place to assert herself. The feeling of judgement made her stomach turn and she looked away from the
This is your fault, she wanted to say but refrained from doing so as she also carried the blame for his physical state. The thought made her wrinkle her nose in disgust.

Aloy felt Nil’s fingers at her chin return her to his gaze, making her face him again. She despised how he would look at her this way. But not just Nil, men in general – their look of conviction when they think they know everything. Her heart pounded harder against her chest the longer this interaction went on and she feared he could hear it, being so close, his senses unreasonably sharp. Even when he frustrated her, Aloy felt a weakness for the hunter – the appeal of his sculpted face and body was undiminished even when injured. And his bright eyes continuously caught hold of her breath in a way no other man was able to do, making her feel exposed, naked, but mostly vulnerable.

She glanced up at his eyes to view a glimpse of her own reflection and did not like what she could see – a woman more akin to a selfish child. Imagining this is what Nil saw too prompted her to turn away once more. His fingers caught her again, this time holding her there with a firmer grip. She bared her teeth at him angrily. The ex-soldier’s hand encircled her jaw, ensuring that she wouldn’t escape.

What do you want from me? She wanted to scream at him. Her fingers curled into a fist at her sides.

Closing the space between them, Nil kissed her lips slowly, lovingly. Aloy hummed a whine against his mouth as his unprecedented motions had caught her by surprise, making her short of breath.

Aloy was rendered dumbstruck by his motions. She was just speaking about Avad and now he was doing this. Did he really care about the proposition at all? That her lips were possibly planned for someone else? Perhaps that is why he kissed her so, his tender touch led her to believe that everything outside of their space was without importance, that neither the fight of yesterday nor the propositions of tomorrow had a place in their world today.

Aloy felt relieved to feel his lips at hers again and yet...

Did he consider her to be his mate? There had been a bit of fooling around in their relationship, but this kiss felt significantly different than any before, filled with sincerity. Where were words when she needed them? As if reading her mind, Nil’s now gentle eyes conveyed one message: be safe. To think that he might actually care about her well-being made her blink in surprise. Aloy suddenly felt a warm sensation growing in her chest blossoming outwards.

The fact that Nil understood that he had no control over her was liberating. His hands released her, grabbing his bow for he had also grown restless. With his current injuries, hunting would surely cause him pain so she silently questioned why he even bothered. Then she remembered that he appreciates the struggle because it added to the challenge.

As he began trekking through the woods, Aloy called after him and said, “I’m sorry for being a bitch.”

Nil smiled with one side of his face and replied, “You don’t need to apologize for being what you are.” She sighed and walked on.

Charming, in his own way.

Erend, Uthid, and Vanasha had made their way to the shut-down data module by noon. The
homing device had been smashed to pieces by a blunt weapon, likely Aloy’s spear. One large headless body was smoldering in ash, surrounded by three dead Shadow Carja. The hunters were nowhere in sight.

“By the Buried Shadow, we’re too late.” Uthid bemoaned as he saw the hunter’s bloody armor on the ground. Broken pauldrons and a torn vest.

They couldn’t have gone far, Vanasha thought. “Just what happened here?” She asked, examining the scene.

“A battle happened,” Uthid declared.

Erend was not so certain. “I’m no tracker,” he said, kneeling next to the Shadow Carja bodies. “But I don’t suppose these soldiers were encountered by either Aloy or whoever the big guy was. These bodies look freshly killed, they may have been dead for only a few hours, whereas that one looks… like it’s been smoldering since early morning.” Vanasha and Uthid knelt down beside him to examine the corpses more carefully.

“There are no arrows, leading me to believe that the fight must have been at close range.” Erend continued, pointing to the marks of fatality. “Aloy primarily fights with her spear, but these don’t look like spear thrusts to me. More like knife wounds.”

Vanasha nodded in agreement, impressed with his skills of deliberation.

“Or daggers.” Uthid added quietly. His company grew quiet at his suggestion, deeming the idea nearly unfathomable.

“Who uses a dagger to fight ranged enemies?” Erend asked. “It can’t be any Oseram clansman that I’m aware of. And the Carja mainly use pikes or scimitars.”

“I’m having a difficulty putting my finger on this one as well,” Vanasha admitted. “It could be a Tenakth reaver or Utaru, though I’m not betting much on the last one.”

The company peered at each other in thought, silently brainstorming who the mysterious attacker could have been until Uthid finally spoke again. “It might be… her.”

Vanasha frowned whereas Erend remained confused. “Her?” she asked, unamused. “That’s a ghost story. This is real life we are discussing, as real as the dead bodies in front of us.”

“Who’s her?” Erend asked.

“There’s a running rumor that the western forests are haunted by a vengeful witch,” Vanasha answered. “They say she kills anyone who trespasses on this land at night, takes their blood, and mixes it into her nighttime tea.”

What? Erend barked a laugh. “What is this a Tenakth cannibal or something?”

“No, no.” Uthid said, taking the matter seriously. “She used to be a Carja noblewoman that had gone wayward more than two decades ago, before the derangement.” He pointed north. “There used to be ferocious clans riddled throughout the forests that defended the western border. They had turned their backs on the sun, worshipping the shadow of darkness but not like the Shadow Carja. These clansmen worshipped death itself. And the woman, some say she was their blood priestess.”

“That… sounds just like the Shadow Carja.” Erend said flatly. “Minus the priestess part – the
Carja doesn’t allow that."

“Uthid, there is no such thing as a blood priestess in the Carja.” Vanasha asserted. “You’re thinking of the Sacred Lands and the Nora high priestesses that worship a mountain.”

“I am totally lost here,” Erend said for the Oseram do not partake in idol worship beyond their blacksmithing and brew. He gestured to the dead bodies at their feet. "So I take it the Shadow Carja are her choice of quarry?" He asks.

"Or just timely targets," Vanasha said.

"Hunters are her choice of targets. A hunter of hunters, which means our comrades might be in danger." Uthid's tone grew grimmer. "She takes their heads and -." 

“Look, the only person around for miles is an old herb gatherer that does trading with the Utaru to the west,” Vanasha stated.

“That’s only who she is when the sun is overhead,” Uthid said in a low voice. “But at night, she transforms into a wraith, a moving shadow. No Western Carja dares to travel here during that time.”

The spymaster rolled her eyes and left the conversation, venturing back to the trail. She knelt down to grab Nil’s right arm pauldrons that had been smashed through. He had also left behind his vest and headdress, which was odd. How badly had he been injured and why?

“Nil was wounded in the shoulder and not from arrows or a scimitar.” She said. “Knowing Aloy’s compassionate nature, she’d stay at his side, therefore I assume neither of them took to the cliffs. Look there - two pairs of strider hooves led north into the forests. The hunters had left in a hurry.”

“This uh… This Nil guy," Erend began. “Who is he exactly?"

“Not anyone you’d like to get to know personally,” Vanasha answered. “To do so might re-open wounds of the not so distant past, making you think less highly of Avad’s good conscience.”

“So, he was a raider, then?” Erend asked, growing a bad taste in his mouth. “Why would Avad want someone like that around Aloy?”

“Despite his off-putting demeanor, the man is functional whenever the situation calls for it,” Vanasha explained. “He is calculative, has a strong nose for danger, and is brutal enough in a fight, acting on intuition rather than conventions of the land, but not to the point of enacting chaos, thankfully. With all the sudden spikes of danger since the fall of the Eclipse, I suggested it to Avad that Nil oversee Aloy’s venture south, seeing as he’s the only one around with enough grit to keep up with her.”

Erend curled his lip at such high talk of the headhunter, feeling a sense of disgust rather than amazement in the description. It was of no surprise that Nil had Vanasha’s approval - the Carja were notoriously known for their unhealthy appetite for warfare and violence. They were a kill-first and then say “the sun-said-so” kind of people, a mangled sense of justice that reminded Erend why the tribes still had borders. Avad was at least trying to reform this unappetizing cultural identity.

Erend shifted his balance to the other leg and looked the spymaster in the eye. “You suggested he watch over Aloy. Which means that you trust him?”

Vanasha matched his gaze. **Only as far as my blade can reach him,** she thought to herself.
“Yes, I do,” Vanasha answered. Erend relaxed but only slightly, listening to what his senses were telling him – that spies were not to be trusted.

Vanasha placed the pauldrons into Erend’s hands. “But with as much big talk as I just gave about the man, mortality is still a factor.”

Erend glanced over the broken armor. The impact had been heavy and dried blood was found over the metal plates.

“The man still bleeds, huh?” Erend said softly to himself with smug satisfaction.

“Let’s keep moving,” Uthid ordered. “Heavy footprints lead north of here.”

Aloy dreamt of a man sitting on a rock beside her. Tied around his head was a crimson silk band, identifying him as a Carjan man, likely a soldier. He was well-struck in his figure and his facial features bore an uncanny resemblance to Nil. Unlike the hunter, however, Aloy did not see hints of madness in this man’s eyes, that were the color of onyx and warm as a hearth on a cold night.

He looked down at her and said, “These brief moments of peace couldn’t be more refreshing.” She understood the words and wanted to respond in agreement, but found that she was unable to speak his language. She responded instead by reaching for his hand. The man grinned and took her into his arms as if she were his own child and –

Helis stood in front of her, except not as the Eclipse general, but as a proud kestrel. His hands were on his wide hips, laughing maliciously. Beside him were two murdered slaves. At his feet was an auburn-haired adolescent girl, beaten, scraped, and bruised.

Helis kicked her across the polished floor.

“You have to be strong enough to defeat the Carja.” Helis cackled. “And you girl, you are nothing but an insect, groveling into the stone. Weak, just like the rest of the pathetic Oseram. And the strong take from the weak, such is the order of things.”

The girl pushed her hair off her face and ran towards him with her fists flying. Aloy placed herself between them, pushing the girl away from Jiran’s champion.

“Ersa, you are done here.” Aloy warned in a voice that didn’t belong to her. “The more blood you put on the floor, the more you will have to scrub out later.”

Ersa grimaced in anger and pushed Aloy away.

“Get away from me, you spoiled runt!” She cried. “You're just like the rest of them! A filthy murderer! Don’t act like I can’t see the monster inside of you. Once you’re old enough, you’ll be like the others, enslaving people, destroying homes –.”

Aloy grabbed her wrists and asked, “Is that who I am right now?”

Ersa shook her head and grunted, “No.”

“That’s right – I’m the one that’s going to help you clean up the blood because the other princes have too frail of stomachs.”

She gave a strong effort to stop crying, but after understanding that it was all but a futile effort,
Ersa wrapped her arms around her, sobbing angrily.

"Once we get this cleaned up, I'll take you to Avad, okay?" Aloy asked. Ersa nodded over her shoulder.

“Disgusting.” Helis muttered and stormed away.

The sound of thunder broke through the silence, jolting Aloy out of her nap. Nil placed a comforting hand on her shoulder.

“It’s the sound of thunder, not deathbringers.” Nil reassured her and brought his lips to her forehead. Aloy closed her eyes as she welcomed the brush of his beard against her skin and the sensation of his low voice rumble throughout his chest. She found his hand and laced her fingers into his, allowing the tangible sensations of the present to replace those of the past with acquiescence.

A roasted boar that Nil had hunted from earlier hung over the dying flames of the campfire, an example of productively remediating his bloodlust. He hadn’t eaten any of it. Or anything at all since yesterday, claiming he lacked an appetite, choosing to chew on herbs instead.

Aloy rested her head against his chest and whispered, “It feels like I’m back there sometimes. Like I’m standing over the palace balcony, watching the canyon crumble to the ground and seeing ancient machines crawl out from the rubble.”

“You’re having a flashback,” Nil says, “They’re a common repercussion of war. The ailments of the mind can take longer to heal than any physical injury.” If anyone could relate to the derangement of one’s mentality, it was Nil. He would be the last person to judge her weakness amidst her strength, allowing her a moment to breathe.

“If I try to ignore them will they keep persisting?” Aloy asked.

“Yes.” Nil warned. “Any wound, may it be outwards or internal, needs immediate treatment in order for it to heal properly. If left alone too long, an infection will likely set it.”

“Speaking of healing, how is your flesh wound?” Aloy asked him. “I cleaned it to the best of my abilities, but if you’re in need of anything else…”

“It’s fine,” Nil answered with a quick squeeze on her hand. “I’ll see that it gets proper treatment once I return you to the capital.” Aloy was too exhausted to fight against Nil’s obstinacy. All she could do was trust his life in his own hands. Doing even that made her feel as if she were walking on thin ice. Even so, she decided to leave that matter for now.

“You sound like a man of medicine, with the way you were talking earlier.” Aloy said and smiled slightly. “Not like a living weapon, not soldier-like.”

“My mother considered soldiers to be healers in their own right.” Nil said, unbothered by her words. “She looked at the world as if it were a garden. In order for the plants to flourish, culling of undesirables is a necessary task. Soldiers happened to be the perfect tools.”

*She would definitely be overjoyed knowing what you became,* thought Aloy.

“Describe your mother for me – was she kind and caring? Maybe even domesticated like the rest of the Carja mothers?” Aloy asked.
He laughs and answers, “My mother was the most terrifying person I’ve had the gift of knowing, despite our time together being brief. She was quick, quiet, and lethal. There was so much I could have learned from her...” His voice trailed off. He had grown tired.

“Sure, sure.” Aloy said, certain that Nil was just trying to scare her. The image of Nil’s mother came into mind – someone she had never met, yet the feeling of familiarity remained. Warmth, kindness, healing. She had so many questions for him, wanting to know her better, however she did not want to admit to what she had seen during the neural memory transfer just yet and instead desired for the hunter to open himself up to her willingly, piece by piece. That was how friendship works, right?

"Do you want to catch up on some sleep?" Aloy offered. Nil shook his head and removed himself from her.

“We’ve stayed stationary for too long and need to keep moving.” He said and slowly worked his way to standing up, struggling as if he was unsure of how to use his legs.

“Nil, are you –.” Before she could say anything else, the hunter fell to his knees, clutching his abdomen, dry heaving. Aloy hurried to his side, steadying him with her arms. Nil suddenly began coughing blood onto the ground before completely collapsing onto her. With a glance at his shoulder wound, Aloy grew frantic, seeing that it was inflamed and possibly infected.

Nil’s temperature was rising, yet he shivered as if he was laying bare-skinned in the middle of a blizzard. His breathing was rapid and irregular. The huntress had tended to the wound the best she could but it was now undeniable that Nil had gotten an infection.

She flipped on her focus and searched through the countless datafiles regarding human anatomy and physiology that were uploaded to the device last night. She imagined all of it would have been helpful had she been more versed in any of the terms.

“Sepsis, inflammation, bacteria – just tell me what I need to do!” Aloy said in desperation. Ancient medical procedures such as ventilation, fluid replacement, and antibiotics came into view. She was at a loss for what to do with any of this information. “Hospital? We don’t have these kinds of technological establishments in the thirtieth century! Give me something I can work with this instant!”

The huntress heard someone clear their throat behind her. Aloy quickly twisted around with her bow drawn, aiming an arrow at a woman standing nearby. She was covered in black and crimson silk robes from her head to her ankles, adorning a black veil that covered her face completely. Shadow Carja, but not quite. Around her waist was a gatherer’s satchel and in her hands was a large sack with a dark liquid dripping at the bottom.

“Who are you?” Aloy demanded.

The woman waved her free hand at the question, seeing it as of little importance. “That hunter you were holding in your hands – is he sick?” She asked.

Aloy slightly lowered her bow and asked, “Why don’t you first tell me who you are and what you are doing here?”
The woman sat the heavy bag down on the ground and walked slowly towards Aloy and Nil, examining the situation. Then she unequipped her satchel and revealed its contents to Aloy, showing various flasks of liquids and pouches of crushed powder were tucked away alongside collected valley brush and wildflowers.

“You’re an herb collector?” Aloy asked, lowering her bow. The woman knelt down beside Aloy, tucking in the folds of her robes underneath her knees.

“That’s a close enough description,” The woman said. “Turn him over so I can take a better look.”

Aloy tentatively did as the woman said. The ex-soldier exhaled a miserable groan as she struggled to move his body.

“I’m so sorry.” Aloy whispered and caressed his face. “Just breathe, okay?”

Aloy glanced at the woman whose body had grown stiff while she looked at him. She then reached for her sleeve, prompting the huntress to place herself between the soldier and the newcomer.

“Wait,” Aloy said, growing nervous. The woman tilted her head as if puzzled.

“I – I still don’t know who you are or if I can trust you,” Aloy said.

“Trust is a rare gem to find, isn’t it?” the woman replied, seeming unthreatened by Aloy’s caution. She glanced at Aloy and then at the hunter resting in her hands. She looked at both of their shock burns as if she were reading the events of last night like a scroll. Once more, Aloy felt like she was being silently probed. When the stranger spoke again, her voice was dark.

“This young man - what is he to you?” What is a dying Carja doing with a Nora so far from the east? Aloy could feel her suspicion radiating from underneath the layers of silk.

“He’s my –.” Aloy cut out as she tried to find the right words to say whilst still being honest with herself. Just who was Nil to her after all? An intruder, partner, friend, enemy.

Lover.

If the hunter died, essential information would be lost to her. If Nil died – Aloy winced in despair at the thought of possibly losing him again and said, “This man is very dear to me.” Whether or not the woman was convinced underneath her veil could not be revealed.

“If you truly mean what you say, then you have nothing to fear from me,” she replied.

Aloy chewed her lip, still unsure. Then She heard the woman laugh softly. “Now, if you and I work together, I will be able to save his life.” She shooed away Aloy’s hands and placed two fingers on the left side of his jaw. “Fluttering pulse, cold shivers, and fever. Did he catch a sickness?”

“He was recently injured,” Aloy said and revealed his shoulder. The woman carefully peeled away the bandages on Nil’s shoulder to examine the wound. The skin was swollen and agitated, with varying degrees of color.

“That was a filthy weapon. Its flint broke off on impact, small slivers finding places under his skin.” She said.

What weapon? Aloy wanted to ask. Had this woman been tracking them for miles?
“Delirium, shakiness, pale skin - he’s in the beginning stages of blood poisoning. I would assume a man of his physique would be able to stave off an infection on his own, but something must have attacked his body’s defenses, enabling an infection from the wound to take over.”

A thought passed through Aloy’s mind. She picked up the leather pouch and passed it to the medicine woman. “Do you think this powder has anything to do with it?” Aloy asked her.

“That’s…” The woman took the pouch in her hands and examined the contents. She gathered a pinch of powder, reached underneath her veil, and placed it on her tongue. A few seconds passed and the woman uttered a groan of disgust. “Keepsake, – this man has been taking this?”

“For almost four days now…” Aloy answered, growing confused. “He said the medicine was for pain, of what kind, I’m not sure.”

“Is he Depressed? Suicidal? Mentally unstable, perhaps?”

“I think so at times…” Aloy was not well versed in psychological ailments but was certain there were a few loose screws in his mind. “I’m sorry – I wish I could tell you more.”

The woman sighed, “It’s fine, child. Internal ailments prefer to remain hidden away from the rest of the world, not wanting to be revealed. To identify them, one must know what signs to watch out for.”

Aloy felt slightly relieved that the woman was understanding of her ignorance on the matter. Then the woman asked, “Did he mention to you that it had been laced with dreamwillow root?”

“What? No – he…” Aloy bit the inside of her lip. Someone had been slowly poisoning him. A list of invisible names was growing inside of Aloy’s mind. Once she arrived in Meridian, Uden and his cohorts were going to pay dearly.

The woman unsheathed a spotless knife and placed it on her lap next to wire thread.

Next to her were a pair of tweezers made from glinthawk talons and a small bottle of clear liquid.

“Is that alcohol?” Aloy asked upon removal of the lid.

The medicine woman nodded. “Of the purest form - I wouldn’t drink it. Shards of the blade are still embedded in his skin and need to be removed.” She placed the knife into the bottle, holding it there for ten seconds. Aloy grew anxious, her palms became sweaty. She could tackle the wires and rubber entrails of machinery any day. When it came to another’s flesh, however…

The woman ushered another order, “Take one of his hands. This is going to sting.”

Evening sun glimmered through the forest canopy as the medicine woman finalized her procedure. She had sewn in stitches and applied salve to both hunters’ burn wounds. Nil was finally sleeping peacefully at Aloy’s thighs while the medicine woman knelt beside her, cleaning her tools, the air of mystery never leaving her.

“What do you know about keepsake?” Aloy asked. Her focus labeled it as an “opiate,” but Aloy was unsure of what that meant.
“Its name is ironic.” The woman answered. “Keepsake dulls the part of our minds responsible for memory as well as impulse control.” Aloy curled her lip in disbelief and asked, “Why would someone want their memories dulled? For better or worse, they’re a part of our being, how we define ourselves.”

“Well yes, but tell me something, girl – have you ever experienced loss?” She asked Aloy.

“I have,” she answered promptly. “I recently lost the man who raised me. It was… difficult for me to overcome, but I still wouldn’t want to dilute my memory of him.”

“Of course, you wouldn’t because his passing doesn’t keep you awake at night. You’re at peace with it.” The woman replied as if it were a matter of fact. “Now answer me this – is there anything from your past that you wish could be undone, perhaps something you regret?”

Olin.

“I… prefer not to think about it.” Aloy answered quietly.

“Sometimes the memories don’t allow you that choice.” She said. “Though there are better alternatives than drug use when it comes to treating ailments of the mind. If needed, there’s a ritual that can be done to remove the harmful effects of the poison. I could oversee it if you’d like.”

That’s a relief, Aloy thought and nodded in agreement. It was time to address another issue however – why and how she was able to find them.

“So, you’re from around these parts?” Aloy asked her. “I haven’t seen anyone for miles.”

“I dwell further north west of our location,” she answered. “There used to be villages nearby but they’ve been abandoned in the last fifteen years, cleared of their inhabitants by constant raids, both Carja and foreign. Last night on a walk, I saw a flash of light to the south and decided to investigate its source.” She covered her flasks with their respective lids. “You two wouldn’t happen to know anything about that, would you?”

Before Aloy could make up an answer, she felt the hunter stir underneath her arms, awakening to the sound of their voices.

With an extraneous effort, Nil steadied himself with his hands on Aloy’s shoulders, grasping for whatever leverage he could find. His cheeks were flushed from the pain, but at least he was beginning to recover.

“Thank goodness.” Aloy brushed his hair out of his face and kissed him in relief. She was growing selfish for his being, she could feel it. Nil did not seem to object and even smiled at her eagerness, baring his teeth at her lips before falling against her once more, not quite operating at full capacity. Aloy reached around his body to give him support with her chest. The hunter was heavy, but Aloy was determined to shoulder his weight with all the strength she could find.

“Will there ever be a day you don’t pull me back from the abyss?” He mumbled into her neck. Aloy smiled and patted his back. “You can’t blame me for your recovery this time. A roaming gatherer happened this way and decided to give us assistance. We should thank her.”

The hunter sniffed the air, smelling old blood and lots of it. Nil slowly turned around at the woman sitting across from them, gathering her items, including the heavy sack nearby. Nil squinted his eyes in suspicion.

“Oh, how rude of me, I still haven’t introduced myself.” The woman removed her veil and
headdress, revealing her visage to the hunters.

Black silk hair, sparkling grey irises underneath lidded eyes, faded tattoos reminiscent of Avad. If Nil could go into cardiac arrest, he wished for it to happen at that very moment.

“Call me Jir –.” She was cut off at the sight of the approaching party in the distance. She reached for her sleeve and pulled out a long, silver weapon.

“Look!” Erend pointed towards a grove up ahead. “That’s Aloy!” He saw the back of her head, her bright red locks of hair shaking back in forth. She was holding something. Or someone.

“And Nil!” Vanasha exclaimed. “Who’s that she’s with?”

“By the shadow.” Uthid gasped as if he were encountering a legendary machine sighting. “I never thought I’d live to see the day.”

Chapter End Notes

Oh hey, so it's that kind of party!

BTW, I do plan on finishing this fanfic, sorry for the wait XD
Silver Shadow

Chapter Summary

Kinda spiraling down over here, huh?
Tensions arise and things start to get real petty between characters.

Exposition! Yay!

Chapter Notes

The wait turned out to be much longer than I had expected. I should stick to deadlines like a real adult.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Down a dimly lit marble corridor, young Itamen walked alone, exploring the dusty vestiges of the palace ignored by servants and advisors. Many of the rooms were old studies, containing brittle parchment and glyphs of the previous generations. Out-dated texts, jeweled trinkets, forgotten silks scattered the dusty dressers. Nothing caught the interest of young prince until he ventured towards the end of the hallway where the candles were no longer lit.

After spending many years in Sunfall at the mercy of his late father’s champion, Itamen learned there was more to fear in life than just darkness. Rather than shy away from the ambiguous dark, he instead found comfort in the shadows as they beckoned his curiosity like a quiet, welcoming gesture, completely unlike the blazing light of the Sun-ring’s arena and its scalding heat. One could look into darkness by the simple act of closing their eyes, something Itamen often would do when preparing to witness life vanish before him, covering his ears to muffle the screaming. There was sanctuary to be found in the lightless, encompassing dark, just as the ebony arms of his mother would surround him in a silk-woven embrace. Nasadi, his mother, the essence of love and safety.

Itamen found himself entering a room at the end of the dark hallway. He slowly opened the door, unsettling the old air that had remained undisturbed for ages. After lighting fires to what seemed to be decades old candles around the walls, Itamen found himself in a room with the appearance of an old bedchamber. But this one was unlike the others. It had a more feminine air to it, the essence of a young girl, - an atmosphere that was alien to the young prince. For a moment, Itamen began to feel as if he were intruding, as if he had walked somewhere he did not belong.

Itamen quickly shook away the feeling, remembering the words of his elder brother that he was free to do as he pleased within these walls, for the palace is his home just as it is the Sun-king’s. He was not intruding in his own domain.

Itamen gingerly placed the lantern on a cleared shelf and began to explore the forgotten chambers. Clay dolls with painted faces decorated the shelves. Feminine silks no longer used by the current generation hung on a rope tie ready to be used for the next day. There was not an abundance of jewelry around the room, no carved hair adornments from plates of machine armor, nor beads -items typically found in the rooms of Carja girls. Who lived here before? Itamen was curious to
“Your highness?”

The young prince jumped at the sound of his title being called. He turned around and saw a man of the court standing in the doorway with a smile.

“Is this where you’ve been for the last hour? All alone in here?” asked the man, his narrow blue-green eyes glinted in the candle-light. “I imagine your mother’s been worried sick. Why don’t we find her and put her fears to rest?”

Itamen nodded obediently and placed the silk scarves in his hand down where he originally found them.

The nobleman noticed the air of curiosity encircling the young prince, seeing he was not quite through with exploring the rest of the chambers.

“Do you want to know who previously resided here?” he offered. Itamen’s eyes instantly brightened and he nodded. The nobleman knelt down to meet his prince’s eyes.

“It’s a secret so you cannot tell anyone, even your brother,” the man said in a low voice. “Is that understood?”

Itamen nodded. “Yes.”

She was striking in appearance - high cheek bones, prominent lips, and lidded silver eyes - all too similar to the man resting at her feet. Unlike any other Carja woman Aloy has encountered, this woman held a quietness in her face, a subtlety to her expression that seemed to fully mask whoever was truly lying underneath. It was as if the veil had never been removed.

Aloy felt a buzzing sensation behind her eyes at the sight of the woman. For a moment, she could swear that the two of them had met before many years ago. When reflecting back far enough, all Aloy could see were the old ruins, her feet splashing around in the water.

*You can’t play with your father’s swords when he’s not around, darling.* Aloy blinked. She did not have a father. Was the voice a memory or just a figment of her imagination? She remembered Rost was pulling her back to the surface that day. Yet it felt as if she had been somewhere else, not within The Embrace.

“Stay here a moment.”

The medicine woman was standing beside the two hunters, facing the opposite direction of Aloy. How long the woman had been there, Aloy did not know and whoever she was looking at, Aloy could not turn and see with the languid hunter resting in her arms, his heavy body weighing her down. She heard the sound of metal scraping the ground and looked down to see the medicine woman armed with a strange lance-like weapon.

Before Aloy could inquire further, the Carja woman propelled herself forward faster than an enraged longleg.

“Oomph!” Aloy was instantly shoved into the ground, her shoulders colliding with Nil’s torso. He had thrown himself over her, reaching forward with one arm outstretched, barely clutching the trim
of the woman’s silk robes in a hand, holding her in place. The woman lurched backwards with a surprised grunt and quickly regained balance on both feet.

After rolling back her shoulders, the woman slowly turned around to face the hunter holding her back, as if not expecting such audacity. Her gray eyes were fixated on Nil, studying him closely with an unreadable gaze, which Aloy found to be unsettling.

Nil began to shake under the strain of keeping his body raised over Aloy while also maintaining his grip on the woman’s robes. In between their silence, one could hear the sounds of clasps unsnapping. He slowly glanced up to meet the woman’s gaze with bright eyes and paled skin.

The Carja woman’s lips parted in shock.

Aloy’s eyes opened in realization. “You’re…

She put an olive-skinned hand to her mouth. “…more than just the splitting image of him.”

The woman withdrew her weapon into her sleeve and dropped to her knees. She threw back her head and lamented a startling cry filled with anguish.

"What have you done?"

Aloy braced herself as Nil began to fall over her. He caught himself with a hand at the side of her head, pulling the silk robes down with him and onto the ground, revealing the woman’s body encased in stealth armor, woven together with crystal braiding.

“Aloy!” called a voice.

Vanasha.

The woman’s gray eyes suddenly blinked into angry daggers. She reached into her pocket and pulled out a small blade, clear in her intentions.

“Wait!” Aloy shouted, reaching a hand towards her. Words were of no use. There was a wicked snarl on the woman’s face now, a storm in her eyes that could not be calmed. Nil quickly reached into his belt and threw an object into the air as soon as the woman ejected her blade towards her target. His hands went to Aloy’s ears as he squeezed his eyes shut. A flash appeared, encompassing their surroundings in blinding light.

It took half an hour for their perception to be relieved of the disorientation caused by the flashbang. When the smoke cleared and their eyes readjusted to the dark surroundings, the Carja woman had fled the area, vanishing into the shadows, leaving behind her black outer robes.

The thundering storm above did not prevent Aloy from sprinting through the forest, following the trail of blood left behind by the woman’s dripping sack, the only lead she had as the light foot imprints had already been cleared away. Her surroundings were darkening and she would have to use the focus soon, slowing her movements. How far the woman had already gotten, Aloy did not know. She needed to hurry for the trail would be completely washed away by the heavy rain.

Vanasha’s neck was bounded by a cloth. The knife had grazed her skin, leaving a wound that was ironically in need of stitches in order to heal without leaving a nasty scar. Vanasha claimed she had never seen the woman before, deeming the attack as sudden and unprovoked.

Aloy squinted through the rain beating down on her face, remembering how comfortable she had
become in the woman’s presence. A person of healing one moment and a terrifying shade the next. Or perhaps there had been more to her than what the eye could see.

*It has to be her,* Aloy thought.

There was no denying the resemblance between the two silver-eyed Carja. Aloy had not bothered with asking Nil for a confirmation when he rolled off her body as she already knew the answer. Those images running through her mind of the medicine woman were not a figment of her imagination - they were memories encrypted into her mind by the focus, shared datafiles stored into her brain. The moment Aloy recognized the woman, she felt as if it had been Elizabet standing over her, feeling the same aching yearn a child would feel after years of separation. The mixed perceptions brewed a combination of emotions within her chest, confusing her.

It had not been just the hunters who had recognized the woman, however.

“The forsaken first-born daughter, Lady Jiranah.” Uthid said. There was a glint of nostalgia resting in his eyes. “And to think she has come back from the shadows after all these years. I can hardly believe it.”

Vanasha’s eyes flickered at the sound of the woman’s name. “Otherwise known as the 'The Silver-Shadow','” she murmured icily against her bandages. “So, she’s been alive all this time? I can only help but wonder as to what finally drew her out of hiding.”

Aloy wondered what brought the true killer inside the woman out of hiding. Perhaps she had been there all along, waiting for the right moment to strike, triggered into rage at the first sight of what appeared to be Shadow Carja. Without hesitation.

Meridian called her name and yet she ventured further away in the opposite direction with determination heating her steps, allowing her to shake away the exhaustion clawing at her eyes. No one attacks her comrades and gets away with it.

Avad would understand. She planned on telling him everything. The only person it seemed she could trust.

While the company investigated the woman’s whereabouts, Nil silently pulled Aloy off to the side and into the shadows.

“Where do you think you’re going?” He asks rhetorically with a hand on her bow.

Aloy angrily pushed him away from her. “Good to see you’re feeling better. Now get out of my way. I have a quarry to hunt.”

Nil took her by the shoulders and shoved her roughly against a tree, but without enough force to cause injury, and held her in place.

“That woman is not someone you want to find yourself alone with in the dark,” Nil said in a low growl. He pulled her bow from her hands and tossed it aside.

“That woman… who just so happens to be your own mother, right?” Aloy spat. “Or maybe I’m wrong? All you bloodthirsty Carja are starting to look the same to me.”

His lips curled into a slight snarl. “Well aren’t you a little miss know-it-all?”

“The resemblance was obvious.” Aloy declared before he asked her where she obtained the information. “And correct me if I’m wrong but she did not look very happy to see you.”
Nil pressed two hardened fingers to her lips.

“You will tell no one. Not a soul. Do you understand?” There was a severity in his voice, containing a sharpness that she had never before heard from him. Aloy could feel herself shake underneath his grip, nearly transfixed by his penetrating glare.

However, Aloy was determined not to submit to his intimidation. She pulled his hands away and stomped the ground with her foot. “I don’t care who she is to you! That woman tried to murder Vanasha and you made it possible for her to escape!”

Nil’s gray eyes suddenly deadened, appearing with the same lifelessness as the cold steel found in the remains of a corrupted machine. His fingers went around her neck and he pulled her towards him. He leaned in closer so she could hear every word, as if to give one final warning.

“Do you think I care?”

Aloy’s throat was sore from running for so long. She was sure she had traveled in the right direction, but the forest seemed endless, remaining unchanged in appearance the further she went.

“How far could she have gone?” Aloy asked herself and leaned back against the wet bark of a tree. The rain had finally ceased, leaving her drenched as she caught her breath.

“I wonder if Avad knew her.” Aloy mumbled. She reached into an inside pocket that lay atop her chest and drew a white silk cloth. He had pressed it into her hands the night she left him in a hurry. He held her wrist in a gentle grasp, needing to say one more farewell.

“...I patiently await your return, Aloy.” Avad said to her. “Always.”

Nil held her in place a while longer, making her stare once more into the cold eyes of a killer, reminding her of the man he used to be – the man he still is, in case she had forgotten. She began to wonder if the thought of murdering her had crossed his mind. It would be much easier to keep a secret between two people if the other person was dead.

Water dripped over her from the leaves. She wandered further into the forest at a slower pace, maintaining a watchful set of eyes and a warm bow in her hands. Perhaps it was not just the murderous Carja woman on the loose Aloy had to worry about. Uthid openly claimed these forests are haunted by spirits who are only calmed by the act of soaking the ground with blood. The oldest of Carja traditions.

Aloy had seen those eyes before. They reappear from the depths her memory, in the fears that tormented her in the silence of her mind. At moments like this, they resurface. He was not so much a dead man as he is the incarnation of madness wrought by depravity, found in the hearts of those whose souls have been marked for damnation. He was holding her in place, staring into her eyes, making her see him once more.

Helis.

To be unable to differentiate between the two men cut through Aloy deeper than any sharp blade that had sank into her skin.

Aloy felt something roll around at her feet. She peered down and saw several severed heads resting on the ground, each had their eyes and tongues removed.

“Who were these people?” Aloy asked herself. Foreign tattoos decorated their skin. To think this is what the woman was carrying in her bag this whole time made Aloy shudder in disgust. She had
been right to be suspicious the first moment she laid eyes on the woman.

*Perhaps the void of one’s being is not a place someone can crawl back from. Maybe the darkness born of killers was something that grew from within, consuming the light that was once found inside. Maybe she was nearing the edge of the abyss as well, waiting to fall into its pit of corruption weighed down by the blood carried on her own hands. Maybe someone was guiding her there.*

Aloy winced at him. “You’re hurting me.”

Nil’s eyes softened to its regular gray hue. He quietly released his hold over her body, and stepped away, turning his back towards her. Aloy fell against the tree to catch her breath, wiping the sweat off her brow with one trembling hand and the tears that threatened to fall from her eyes with the other. She huddled her face in her knees as she tried to shake away the sudden fright.

*People can easily change into something else at a moment’s notice, given the correct circumstances. Aloy was aware of this as the aching regret of past decisions reminded her every day. Despite the calm he carried with him like the silk red scarf draped around his neck, Nil was no different. Perhaps he was worse and Aloy had simply dismissed this notion with misguided lenience. Who or what would appear on the outside again, Aloy was not sure she wanted to know, so she squeezed her eyes shut and wrapped her arms tighter around her knees, forcing back the sobs that tried to escape her throat.*

The trail had ended at those heads. She ventured only a little further until deciding to check her surroundings one more time. After finding nothing, she leaned against a tree to cover her blind spot at the rear.

Her practical senses were telling her to turn back soon and join the rest of the company who were likely desperate to know where she had run off to. Exhaustion was telling her to sit down and rest.

*She was crying and Nil had taken notice. He looked at his hands and flexed them, puzzled. He didn’t think his grip over her had contained enough pressure to incite pain.*

Thunder cracked overhead, followed by the hiccup of a quiet sob. The source of conflict was finally made clear to him. Nil emitted an exasperated sigh while dragging a hand down his face. He lived to draw blood, not tears. After seeing her so often like this in his presence, however, Nil began to wonder.

*Slowly, he edged himself closer to Aloy in a manner similar to how one would move when nearing a freshly maimed animal, one that had been wounded by accident. Only three feet away from her, Nil hesitated to move further, sensing there was another presence about.*

“What’s all this?” Erend said, stepping into their space. He took one look at Aloy’s huddled figure and drew his hammer in Nil’s direction. “You son of a bitch. You tried to hurt her, didn’t you?”

“Mind you own damn business, Oseram.” Nil growled.

“That’s Vanguard Captain, to you, outlander.” Erend shot back.

“That title holds less weight out here than your brew-filled flask.” Nil huffed.

Erend grunted angrily, “We’ll see about that once I lay your sorry ass into the -.”

Aloy suddenly leaped to her feet, grabbed her bow, and darted past both men, following the track highlighted on her focus.
Initially overcome by vengeance, Aloy had lost herself on the trail, forgetting how unsettling of a place she was currently in. The silence of the forest was deafening. Visibility was limited through the fog. For a moment, Aloy thought fatigue had begun playing tricks on her vision, making her believe she saw figures moving in between the trees. But when she scanned the area with her focus, there was nothing detected.

Strange. Aloy thought, not sure if her senses were being entirely unreasonable. The longer she stood there, the more unsettling her surroundings became, seeming as if the shadows themselves were creeping into the edges of her vision.

“There’s nothing here.” Aloy said to herself. “There are no ghosts, just my mind telling me that I desperately need to sleep.” Or maybe not as she could hear whispering all around her, surging panic through her chest.

A light footstep broke through the air. She was not alone.

“Who’s there?” Aloy snapped and rose to her feet with an arrow notched and ready.

Calloused fingers encompassed her bow-hand.

“It’s just me.”

Aloy jumped at the sound of Nil’s voice at her neck. He held her bow-hand in a tight grip until she finally conceded her hold. With a growl, she stowed her bow, and stepped away from him, her previous feelings of panic instantly replaced with anguish and revulsion.

“Ah, so the long, lost prince returns?” Aloy hissed. She stood indignantly while Nil leaned back against a tree. “I always wondered where your sense of entitlement came from. It’s fitting.”

“Look underneath my eyes, Aloy,” Nil said, placing two slender fingers at his tattoos. “Do these look like the markings of royalty to you? The line of radiance isn’t passed on through its daughters. Her lineage holds no significance in the tribe.”

“Whether it’s marked on your face or woven into a silk tapestry doesn’t remove the fact that you’re related to the man who would shed blood at the slightest offense, even that of his own son.” Aloy said condemningly.

Nil crossed his arms as he usually would when the huntress flared up. “And your point?”

“Oh right, why should it matter to you anyway?” Aloy said. “I suppose bloodlust is just a running characteristic in the family. The nephew of an insane mass murderer and the son of a… I don’t even know what you would begin to call that woman.”

Her last comment made Nil stand up straight again. “Careful the path you tread, girl.” He warned her, the danger in his voice returning.

“Oh, so are you here to threaten me again?” Aloy demanded. “Or silence me once and for all while no one else is here to witness it, and then claim I deserved it for running off into the forest with
Shadow Carja about, or worse a silent killer roaming around?”

Nil shook his head. “I’m here to tell you that you’re wasting your time. If she wanted you to find her, she would have made an appearance by now.”

“Hmph, how lucky you are.” Aloy said. Nil’s eyes glinted slightly, the only break in his otherwise stoic expression. He was patiently waiting for her to completely speak her feelings of fury in order for her to find calmness again. This was becoming routine between the two of them and they both knew it. Realizing this is what he wanted, Aloy turned away and placed her hands at her hips, choosing to let the emotions fester inside while the silence lingered in the air for minutes on end.

“Whenever you’re ready.” Nil said quietly.

Aloy acknowledged his comment with a silent nod, still refusing to look his way.

“Tell the others I’ll be there shortly.” She said.

“May it be a revelation for you, your temper is not enough to shirk me of my duties.” Nil said.

“Which duties?” Aloy asked. “It seems they’re subject to change given the circumstances.”

“Ones of my own personal accord,” he replied. “…towards you.” His words were soft as if he were speaking to himself, one of the few ways she could tell when he was being sincere.

Aloy slowly turned around and met Nil’s eyes. They were moist from weariness, barely able to remain open. He appeared so much like Avad in this state, giving Aloy a feeling that did not sit well with her.

The two men are nothing alike, Aloy thought. Avad is trustworthy, compassionate, and sincere, a person Aloy could rely on to mend the wrongdoings of the world. Nil, however, was someone she had to maintain careful watch within his company as the man’s thoughts and nature were shrouded in ambivalence.

But perhaps the blame did not rest so easy on him?

No. Aloy thought. She did not want to feel pity for the man in front of her and ardently resisted doing so, knowing sympathy felt for the wrong person only led to toxic pitfalls.

Flaws in a person were not to be dismissed and Nil had too many to count.

This is what she kept telling herself.

Nil closed his eyes and took a moment’s rest against the rough bark of a willow tree.

That can’t be comfortable, Aloy thought. He must have felt his stitches in his shoulder by now.

Nil opened his eyes momentarily, glancing upwards. He swallowed and sighed heavily. “For what happened between us earlier, allow me to take full responsibility.”

Aloy blinked. Did he just apologize to her?

“I…” Aloy's voice began to crack.

She realized now that he had simply acted out of fear, anger, and distress - tangible emotions that all men experience.
Her throat suddenly ached. Why was it so hard for her to acknowledge his humanity?

She winced as she felt the threads of her chest be reopened, melting away the steel forged around her heart through heated anger while remorse came trickling through like water falling upon rocks at a stream. She wanted a reason to despise him all over again, not wanting to be further entangled by his being, and he does this.

*Focus, Aloy.* “Do you have any idea as to why she attacked Vanasha?” she asked, cutting to the chase.

Nil shook his head. “It’s been years since we last met but the woman I knew as a child would never attack unless provoked.”

Aloy squinted. His words somehow made sense. The medicine woman first offered assistance when coming across them and perhaps on purpose, after sensing something amiss in her domain. Additionally, Jiranah's sudden behavior reminded Aloy of Warchief Sona after the attack on the Proving. All it took was for her to realize who had been underneath her fingertips this entire time. She must have determined Vanasha, a Shadow Carja, as a legitimate threat to her son.

Aloy found it odd to think of the hunter being someone's child. It was another human aspect she did not grant so easily to those who live by the blade.

As for the spymaster, it seemed as though there might be more to this situation than what Vanasha knew or was willing to admit. How the three of them were able to track the hunters’ whereabouts so quickly was enough to raise suspicions.

Aloy sighed in frustration and ran a hand through her braided hair. She didn't want to imagine there being underlying interests and alterior motives between her comrades. The longer she thought about the possibility of two-sided interests, the more uneasy towards her company she became.

Had the woman's fury been justifiable?

That still poses a problem, however.

“Will she be back? Are the others in danger?” Aloy asked him.

Nil cleared his throat, “Who knows? However, I recommend you make an appearance before those three begin to wonder where you were dragged off to.”

Not once did Nil mention his own place in the company of the others and likely found their presence more as a nuisance than a surprise.

Did he expect her to go on ahead without him? She had already left his side again, despite their agreement. Despite this, Nil pursued her as expected, fulfilling his duty to the Sun-king and to her, remaining a man of his word. Of honor.

The man Aloy needed him to be.

*No, I can’t.*

Aloy felt a pang in her chest, a low sick feeling in her stomach. Her fingers twitched at her sides. These feelings she contained for the man in front of her were useless. She needed the walls to appear between them again. She tried to imagine herself somewhere else, with someone else. But nothing seemed to fit better than their waking reality. They were like two ends of an elastic band, pulling apart and snapping back together. She began to wonder if it was meant to be this way.
“Tell her to do one thing and she does the opposite.” Nil muttered while he felt Aloy graze over his arms with her fingertips. The burns on his body were making a quick recovery, despite being fresh from last night. What was in that medicine woman’s salve? Magic? Her craftsmanship was undeniably effective.

Did he miss her?

His head jerked slightly. He was falling asleep over her.

Aloy relieved herself of the spite, not allowing it to poison her from the inside.

“I’m sorry for earlier, too.” Aloy whispered. “I realize that I put you in a difficult situation. It wasn’t fair for me to do so.”

He was going to fall over at any moment.

“And as upset as I am with what happened with Vanasha, I will admit that I am… relieved that woman happened upon us when she did.” Aloy said, reaching through his arms and encircling his torso.

The others would have arrived no matter what. But had Jiranah not been there at all, Aloy would have found herself clutching the remains of another fallen comrade. She felt as if she were getting closer to losing him every day.

Just as those thoughts swept across her mind, Nil’s legs gave way underneath him. Aloy braced for their fall, hearing the sounds of wet sticks snap beneath her body as her back collided with the ground. He landed on top of her, driving the air out of her lungs. His face was resting beside her neck, exhaling exhausted breathes on her skin.

“Agh, you’re heavy,” Aloy grumbled as she wriggled her legs out from under his body and parted them around his hips before she lost all sensation. Her clothing had shifted around during their fall and Aloy could feel the cool air touch her exposed skin.

Sensitive areas of skin that were not supposed to be exposed.

Nil’s eyes fluttered open as he felt her soft flesh between his fingers. He glanced down and saw her left breast bare and grappled in his hand.

Aloy’s face reddened with embarrassment.

“Nilead!” She whined and slapped him.

Nil grunted in annoyance and propped himself over her on his elbows. “Why does my body keep doing this?”

She dragged her shirt upwards to cover her breast. “Doing what? Falling asleep const -” Aloy gasped. “The dreamwillow!”

“Come again?” He asked, his eyes closing once more.

“Nil, listen carefully.” She gathered his face in her hands, gingerly rubbing the area on his cheek where she had just marked him. “You need to tell me who gave you the keepsake. It’s been laced with -.”

“So… this is where you two have been all this time?” came a voice accompanied by the sound of
jangling ring-locked armor.

*Uh oh.* Aloy began to tense up. He stood over them with the demeanor of a scrapper ready to dismantle his target with its jaws. Or in this case a hammer.

Erend’s icy blue gaze was fully directed at the man who was naked from the waist up and holding himself over her body, her clothing in disarray. In a position that could not have been more suggestive.

Aloy grinned upwards nervously. *This is not what it looks like* or an *I can explain* came to her mind but no words escaped her mouth. She wasn’t surprised that Nil did not move from where he was. It felt as if there was some sort of spiteful game being played between the two men and she was in the middle of it. Nil raised an eyebrow at him, suggesting he was right where he was supposed to be.

“Good to see you’re both alive.” Erend said to them with an unconvincing smile. “For better or worse.”

“And not worse for wear,” spoke Vanasha. She lingered behind Erend, taking in what was presented before her eyes. Her bandage cloth was taut around her neck, stained with blood. Her expression held amusement, despite the current state of affairs.

“When you two are finished with whatever you’re doing, meet us back at camp. We have a lot to discuss.” Erend said and promptly trudged away.

“But only when you’re completely finished.” Vanasha said before leaving. She delivered a coy glance to the hunter which did not go unnoticed by Aloy.

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Dusk had completely settled in by the time the hunters made their way towards camp.

“…I suppose you have a point,” Erend said. “If we would have arrived a moment later the hunters would have been her next victims.”

“Are you saying she’s a suspect of the maiden murders?” Uthid asked, sounding slightly defensive.

“Maiden murders?” Aloy asked, taking a seat next to the fire while Nil rested a small distance behind her, away from everyone else.

“The reason we’re here, Aloy.” Vanasha said.

“Word got spread that you were one among the trail of bodies found throughout the land,” Erend said. “Needless to say, Avad became stricken with worry and sent us to find you.”


“This recent murder involved a young woman who bore a striking resemblance to you,” Vanasha said. “Especially in the way of fiery locks.”

“A red-haired woman gets killed and suddenly the world thinks I’m dead?” Aloy asked.

“The description was a very close match.” Erend said. “Same armor you’d wear, even the weapons
Aloy furrowed her brow. “Someone might have framed my death… Wait, Erend, this sounds a lot similar to what we went through with –.”

“Dervahl and Ersa, I know.” Erend said with heat in his voice. “However, this case was uh… a bit grim, if I can allow myself to say that.”

“What do you mean?” Aloy asked.

“These women were uh… murdered…” Erend was growing uncomfortable. “In an unsettling way.”

Aloy scowled at the response, not knowing what to do with such vague information.

“Describe the victims.” Nil said with unexpected command in his voice, capturing the attention of the company. Not only that, the hunter designated plural use.

Erend hesitated, glancing at Vanasha and Uthid for approval.

“The victims were all young women, kidnapped and tortured before death,” Vanasha answered gravely. “Their bodies were mutilated, limbs hung on display for their families to see. There have been four cases total.”

“That’s awful.” Aloy gasped. “Do you have any leads?”

Vanasha shook her head. “But Marad has the intelligence team on the case so you don’t need to worry about it.”

“Like hell I don’t.” Aloy said, gripped her spear. “I’m going to get to the bottom of this as soon as I arrive in Meridian.”

“No, you won’t.” Erend said.

Aloy glared at him. “Excuse me?”

“Let enforcement handle this,” Vanasha said. “You are needed on elsewhere, in higher places, answering a lot of questions from very important people.”

“What could be more important than this?” Aloy asked, aghast at the description of the crimes.

“Building connections through strong relationships is what we need from you right now, Aloy.” Erend said. “You have no idea how important you are to the people of this land. We can’t have you risking your life in the wilderness anymore when the Sundom needs your guidance.”

Aloy rose to her feet. “I’m one of the most skilled trackers any of you know and you all expect me to sit in a banquet hall appeasing lords and nobles?” She snapped. “This is hardly the most pressing matter!”

“It’s a matter of safety, Aloy!” Erend shouted back. “Prominent individuals like you are targeted every day by dangerous minds.”

“As if that’s something I haven’t already experienced firsthand,” Aloy said, gritting her teeth. “At the Proving, in the Sun-Ring, at the Spire. Any bastard who wants my blood will have to take it from me at their own risk.” Her words earned her a small smile from the Carja hunter.

“Huh, you know who you sound like?” Erend asked, his blue eyes going ablaze in the light of the
fire. “Ersa. Take a wild guess where she is if you’ve already forgotten.” Aloy dropped her arms at her side as the fury inside her eyes was washed away by remorse at her brash behavior.

“From what I hear, Ersa was betrayed by her own clansmen,” Nil spoke in her defense. “Try not to forget that when you lock the huntress behind the walls of the palace in an attempt to keep her safe.”

“What did you just say?” Erend asked with heat in his voice.

“Do I truly need to repeat myself?” Nil said and nodded to mug of ale in the captain’s hands. “Sobriety is your best friend.”

Erend snorted. “Better a pint of mead than a pool of blood.”

“That’s debatable.” Nil replied.

“Tell that to the stone cell you sat in at Sunstone Rock’s prison.” Erend said.

Nil’s eyes went dark.

“Uh oh.” Vanasha said.

“Erend…?” Aloy whispered nervously, feeling her feet grow cold.

“Gentlemen! That’s enough!” Uthid declared, pulling seniority.

Nil moved to his feet and gathered his weapons.

“I agree.” He said and left the camp.

Uthid was taking first watch. The borders had not been properly patrolled by the military for almost a decade, allowing immeasurable threats to wander through. If their night was left undisturbed, they would leave first thing in the morning. There was much arguing over which route was best to take. Vanasha recommended taking the trail north towards the river and aim for the dry mesas, but Uthid was opposed to this as neither hunters were in adequate physical shape to take arms in what is still enemy territory. Erend suggested he and Aloy split from the group and take to the cliffs, claiming they would be quicker on their own. Aloy reluctantly stated it be best if they stayed together.

Aloy found the Carja hunter in a small meadow kneeling alone underneath the stars. She silently moved over next to him, delicately carrying the black robes in her hands, placing them on his lap.

“Thank you.” He whispered to her, clutching the silk in his hands.

“It smells of roses.” Aloy said, tracing the collar with her fingers.

“She bathes her hair in rosewater in an attempt to mask the scent of death she carries on her robes,” Nil said. “That much has not changed.” His voice was monotone, which Aloy quietly assumed was an attempt to further disguise whatever genuine emotions that were flowing inside of him.

“Do you want to try and find her one more time before we leave?” Aloy asked, pointing to her focus.
Nil shook his head. “There’s no need.”

“But Nil, she’s your mo-.”

“I have a duty to fulfill,” Nil replied. “This takes precedence over anything else. Feel free to disagree if you wish but I have made my choice.” He lifted the globe charm in his fingertips to signify the sealing of their agreement.

“All I ever wanted…” Aloy whispered, seeing her mother’s charm before her eyes. “And yet you…” She closed her eyes. “I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to understand you.”

“Then don’t bother yourself with it.” Nil said.

“Then is it useless to ask how you’re feeling right now?” Aloy asked, placing the back of her hand to his forehead. Warm.

“The fact that you just asked that question should be an answer in itself.” He pointed out.

“I see.” said Aloy and leaned against him.

Then he politely said to her. “I appreciate you asking, nonetheless. Very soon, we will be free to talk and I will answer whatever questions you have for me.”

"Including why it sounds like we're never going to see each other again?" Aloy asked quietly.

Nil opened his mouth to speak but reconsidered.

He did not have to let her know. She could sense it herself when distance was being made.

="The two of them are not far,” Uthid said, returning to camp. “I’ll let them mingle for a bit longer before requesting they separate."

Erend nodded curtly.

"Can't let go of decorum, huh, soldier?” Vanasha asked as he strode passed her with heavy steps. Uthid grumbled words pertaining to traditional Carja customs regarding the proper proximity between two unwed persons. Other than that, he did not have much for either the vanguard captain or spymaster in way of words.

Erend leaned over to Vanasha and asked, "What do you think has come over him? He's been quiet ever since we saw Lady whatsurname."

"Oh. That." Vanasha sighed with an insincere expression of dismay. "Uthid and Jiranah actually knew each other many years ago as friends. According to him, she used to be a skilled healer once upon a time. Can you believe it?"

"Not really." Erend said. "When did that all go to hell?"

"Long story short, it happened when she faked her death and ran off with one of the most fearsome warriors of their generation.” Vanasha answered. "Who also happened to be his commanding officer and... close friend."
Erend's jaw slackened. "Damn, that's rough. Is that why he hesitated to draw his blade when he first caught sight of her?"

"Don't be so hard on Uthid," Vanasha said with a smirk. "She's a beautiful woman who happened to be his longtime friend. Kind of like you and Aloy... and Avad... or...?"

Erend frowned.

“You really don’t like him, do you?” Vanasha asked. “Nil?”

“I don’t like him around Aloy.” Erend answered. “That man has something wrong with him.”

“Nobody’s perfect.” Vanasha replied, shrugging.

"That's a bit of understatement in regards to him." Erend said flatly.

The spymaster began to giggle.

“What’s so funny?” Erend asked her.

“That look on your face when you saw them with each other!” Vanasha roared in laughter. “I thought you were going to tear him apart with your bare hands!”

Her teasing was rewarded with a disgusted expression held on the vanguard’s face. The spymaster had been lately enjoying his soreness a little too much for his liking and her sly remarks on this journey with him had reached its tipping off point.

“Covering something up behind all that laughter, aren’t you?” Erend said accusingly.

“Huh?” Vanasha asked, wiping the tears out from under her eyes.

“I hear you and the hunter are also longtime friends.” Erend said.

Vanasha’s smile immediately vanished, replaced by a subtle glare. She cocked her head at him and asked, “What are you talking about?”

“You’re the one who’s always taking his defense. You tell me.”

“We worked together many years back.” Vanasha said with heat in her voice.

“Yeah, that’s how it always is, isn’t it?” Erend said, insinuating more than what had been met with spoken words.

Vanasha glowered at him.

Erend smiled triumphantly in seeing that there still exists a sensitive woman underneath all that subterfuge. But it only lasted a brief moment as he realized his own bitterness had turned him petty. It was not the vanguard captain’s wish to make permanent enemies with the spymaster when they needed to form a strong alliance.

“Let’s… forget we had this conversation.” Erend said tentatively.

Vanasha nodded, in agreement, though the seething flames in her eyes had not completely died out. She gently readjusted the bandaged cloth around her neck.

“Huh, so I guess the story about a witch haunting these woods wasn’t a complete lie.” Erend said,
trying to change the subject.

“It’s much worse than that.” Vanasha said. “This woman happens to be one of the highest ranked blacklisted names in the Sundom.”

Erend’s eyes enlarged. “Wait, so there was - is a bounty on her?”

Vanasha nodded. “Oh yes. A huge one. In addition to being a brutal killer, this woman is highly detested by sun-priests of the old faith. To even speak of her existence is considered blaspheme.”

“Damn. What did that woman do to earn such infamy?” Erend asked.

"Sources say she was disowned from the royal family over two decades ago for being accused of witchcraft by the sun-priests," Vanasha answered. "After being banished from the Sundom and burned out of the tapestry, everyone had assumed her disappearance meant her death. They were evidently wrong. Apparently, she just ran off with one of the western border clan’s patriarchs and those people weren’t bothered by her practices. Go figure, half of them had a mind to kill intruders on the first offense and did so with earnest.”

“But I thought those people were all dead.” Erend said. “How come she’s still here and why has she taken to murdering people?”

“She’s probably tending to her garden of blood like any spiteful old widow would do.” Vanasha said and tugged at her bandage.

“What makes you say that? You have a lead or something?” Erend asked, jokingly.

“Maybe.” Vanasha answered. She reached down into her pocket and felt the Utaru seed bracelet at her fingertips. She had found it earlier while searching through the woman’s robes.

Vanasha smiled vengefully.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading!
Now please excuse me while I try to find out where the plot has ran off to.... >:D
After the tension subsided, Uthid decided to step outwards into the darkness of the forest for a moment of privacy. The party of three had traveled all the way to the edges of the Sundom, each tasked with different missions, and Uthid seemed no closer to his own quarry, despite what Vanasha thinks. If Lady Jiranah has been alive here this entire time, it would not make sense for her to suddenly leave the privacy of her own dwelling in order to torment the innocent. Sources claim that they, or whoever “they” are, entered through these woods, moving eastbound.

Uthid was determined to obtain answers from those of the land, preferably ones who were not reclusive and willing to speak openly with the old soldier. A small outpost village rested some ways east and Uthid had a feeling that taking a brief visit in order to ask questions from the townspeople would be worthwhile. It would take some convincing from his own company, however. Perhaps if the huntress would be willing to lend them a few broadheads it would cut their time shorter? Only the vanguard captain opposed the idea, assuming his ring-locked armor likely incompatible with the rough gallops made by the machines.

Erend had already drank one flask of brew, telling the old soldier not worry, “it’s just enough to take the edge off.” Uthid sighed and dropped his hands in defeat. There was plenty of friction in the air still left over from the heated words spoken earlier and he found himself ultimately agreeing that finding relief through a moderate amount of alcohol consumption posed less of a threat than two young hot-blooded males deciding to put each other’s masculinity to the test. Vanasha seemed profoundly amused by the spectacle whereas the young huntress appeared nothing short of a thin thread pulled taut and ready to snap.

“How she is ever going to handle life in the sun-court is beyond me.” Uthid muttered as he drifted from the light of the campfire. “Someone can adorn a stormbird with all the silk and metal jewelry to their hearts content and it will still throw lightning when angered.”

“I agree,” came a familiar low voice of a female sounding in the darkness. “Try to hold it down with wires of ropecasters and it will still struggle until it breaks free, taking its rightful place soaring through the skies, cleansing the air of impurities.”
Aloy squinted for a moment in a struggle to find something. “Damn – did I lose it?” She began to search around her pockets in a frantic manner.

“What did you lose?” Nil asked, rising up, having recently woken up from a brief nap while Aloy kept watch.

Aloy grew pale. “Alana’s necklace… I must have lost it at the data module during our…”

“Our disagreement.” Nil answered for her.

“Yeah, that.” Aloy whispered, feeling the dull ache in her chest set in by guilt.

Nil glanced at her for a moment. “I’m assuming it contains a degree of sentimental value?”

Aloy nodded solemnly. “It was a gift from Rost, my guardian. He gave me that necklace as a last farewell before The Proving.” She looked down at her hands. “And all I had to give him were my words of anger.” She hugged her knees to her chest at the memory. “And thanks to our ‘disagreement,’ you’re without your armor. That’s also on me.” For acting out of anger.

Nil shrugged. “That armor’s significance does not amount to the importance of fulfilling my obligations.”

Aloy doubted Nil’s spoken words contained the whole truth, as they hardly ever did when expressed nonchalantly. That heavy outlander armor was unique to his body, structured specifically to his combat prowess – deflecting panels on the limbs while his vitals were left vulnerable – designed with intention. She even assumed that the armor had been earned, not given, as she had never seen another copy on any other Carja. Feeling remorse at this, Aloy wanted to balance out the scale. She tapped her focus and began to type something.

“For whatever reason, I have a feeling that you’re on a journey to cut loose ends.” Aloy said as she ran her fingers across the interface.

Nil’s eyes flickered but he gave no reply.

“And if this is truly how you want it to be then don’t let me stop you,” Aloy sighed and scanned her surroundings before quietly removing her focus. “Rost always said to be patient,” she placed her device over the hunter’s ear. “But I think some things are better off taken care of sooner rather than later.”

Nil showed hardly any hint of surprise on his face as she guided his hand to turn on the device, as if he had been waiting for the inevitable knowing how impatient of a woman she is.

“Look for the file labeled under your name, written in the glyphs of the old ones,” Aloy said.

“Only three shapes?” Nil asked.

“That’s right.” Aloy said, smiling that she could share the use of ancient shapes with someone else, even under these less than pleasant circumstances.

Nil nodded and began sliding his hand across the invisible screen. He noticed that there were new additions to the holographic view which had quickly caught hold of his attention. They appeared to be some sort of screening options of the human body and its design. Intrigued by this, Nil tapped on an option to give it a try, as if he were testing the handle of a new blade. He glanced at Aloy through the focus and saw something that made him scratch his beard. He was no longer seeing just her blue silhouette.
Aloy stretched her arms towards the sky, ready to catch up on some sleep. When she turned back around, she noticed that Nil was studying her closely. He tapped something else on the invisible screen that made him blink twice and raise his eyebrows in surprise. Reminiscent of the moments he would drink her in after stepping through the leftover carnage of slain brigands, Nil’s silver eyes began to dance around her body as if she were on display.

“Um?” Aloy murmured, lowering her arms around her chest, suddenly feeling exposed. Her cheeks reddened as she looked down at herself to make sure she still had clothes on.

“Having racing thoughts, are we?”

Nil frowned at the sound of the Banuk researcher’s voice on the other line. Impeccable timing as always. The absurd yellow label had also reappeared over Aloy’s body, but at least now he understood why she had three different names, excluding the term, ENTITY. That is a new one.

Aloy eyed him in suspicion. “What are you looking at?”

“Sidestep her quickly in order to avoid an unnecessarily aggravating situation.” Sylens warned. Such a tactic the hunter couldn’t agree more with.

Nil cleared his throat. “I see a few things on your device’s…”

“Interface.”

“‘In-ter-face’ have changed.” Nil answered calm and slow as if he were an uneducated peon examining a written scroll for the first time.

“Oh, that’s right,” Aloy said with a shrug. “There was a large amount of ancient knowledge downloaded last night from the machine, all in regards to health management of the body and the preservation of life – nothing you’d likely be interested in.”

Nil shifted his tongue around in his mouth and shook his head. “Right you are, Nora. None of it would interest me. Not in the slightest…” he subtly rested his chin over a fist and exited the Human Anatomy & Physiology screening options, returning her body to its regular blue silhouette.

Aloy glowered at his referring to her as Nora. She rolled her eyes and tossed back her braids.

“Well-done, hunter.” Sylens was sardonic in his tone as he commended Nil’s conversational agility.

Aloy knew when Nil had found the file designated for him as he began to sit very still, the shifting of his pale eyes being the only movement for the duration of the recording.

“That was informative.” Nil said after he finished viewing the file’s contents. He was determined to apply this newfound knowledge quite soon.

“You don’t need to speak anymore on the matter until you’re ready to.” Aloy said in regards to their agreement. “I just want you to understand my reason for -.”

“There’s no need to apologize. And you should always consider what your instincts are saying to you.” Nil advised. “Even in regards to me.”

Aloy glanced up at him for a moment to see that his gaze was not meeting hers. He used to rarely break eye contact when they spoke to each other. Now it seemed more commonplace between the two of them when they interact.
“Why would you say that? Unless… you are trying to convince me to be weary of you?” Aloy asked. “Is that it?”

Nil finally lifted his eyes to meet hers.

“Maybe.”

Aloy shook her head at his cautioning of her. She knows that Nil is a reformed man, maintaining control over his violent urges, and found it absurd to think that he would ever aim to harm her without warning. Instead, she felt as if he were trying to give another reason as to why his existence should not be missed.

“Nil, look. I’ve worked beside you before this often enough to know that you won’t pose a threat to me unless invited.” Aloy replied. Nil’s solemn expression did not change at this, seeming more as though he thought she should reconsider what she had just said.

“If I do happen to be standing on the sharp end of your blade again, I’d prefer that you don’t allow your sentimentally to restrain your actions or let your guard down.” Nil said. His words did not pertain just to him. She could not let her guard down around anyone in the realm of politics, where the food and wine is laced with poison and sons are slain in their sleep. The Council, Sun-Court, chairs of the military - all were joined together in a lake filled with vicious, corrupted snapmaws ready to drag down anyone wandering too near the waters, or worse - pushed in. He had unintentionally drawn too close to the edge of the water already.

"But if or when there should ever come a time where I find a reason to see you as a genuine danger to me or someone else…” Aloy continued, "I don’t think it could ever change my belief that a part of you will come through, the part of you that knows better, despite what you may think.” She gave a kind smile that unknowingly killed him from the inside. “All you have to do is realize it’s there in order to set it free.”

Nil smiled half-heartedly. “A part of ourselves that we don’t want to admit to, huh? I suppose we both have that in common.” Aloy rolled her eyes at this.

“Oh please, your claims about there being some barbaric part of me that enjoys hunting people isn’t the same.” Aloy grumbled and reached over to wipe away the sweat off his brow with a silk white cloth.

“I don’t know why else you’d pursue the hunt with such vivacity and - Aloy, you know that’s not just a regular napkin, right?” Nil flinched away from the cloth, finding its close proximity to his face a ridiculous notion.

Aloy shrugged. “It looks like one, only fancier. Avad gave it to me and didn’t say anything so how am I supposed to know what it’s for?”

_It’s to ensure no bastard child wrongfully inherits the radiant line._ Nil frowned at the Nora outcast’s absurd amount of ignorance on the subject. Then again, a matriarchal hunter-gatherer tribe likely does not bother themselves with such a concept. He also found a sense of irony that they were even discussing this matter as both hunters were considered illegitimate at birth by their respective tribes – his mother having chosen a mate of lower caste and Aloy simply had no mother to begin with.

“Well, are you going to tell me?” Aloy demanded, tired of his condescending tone, and threw the cloth at him.
Nil picked it up apprehensively with two slender fingers, examining its tiny, intricately woven designs, wondering if he should advise her to throw it into the fire. Then he thought that such a token should not go unused.

“I could show you.” Nil said in a voice barely of a whisper, one that Aloy’s ears did not register. *In a more suitable area perhaps.* Not on the grounds of this forest and certainly not within walking distance of unwanted company – he still had standards, after all. The sun-king’s own bed was the first place that came to the hunter’s mind. He imagined her writhing underneath his body, her fingers clutching the silk sheets, the sound of her unsullied screams echoing against the marble ceiling, all the while he claimed her for himself.

Not a fitting way to return a favor.

“The cloth is a simple token granted by Carja formality and the significance of it rests between you and the person who gave it to you.” Nil handed her back the cloth and proceeded to douse himself with the cold contents of his water flask.

“If you say so.” Aloy mumbled as she set the cloth down at her leg, knowing he was choosing to be difficult again, refusing her any clear admission as to what specific importance the cloth held.

“Looks like the shift has rotated.” Nil said as the focus scanned an approaching silhouette.

“Then I better start heading back before someone says something.” Aloy rose to her feet and dusted the grass off her legs. “I guess it’s high time and Erend and I sort out this rift between us.” She stopped for a moment and looked at Nil. “… as long as it’s alright with you.”

“It is.” Nil confirmed. “Take these.” He handed her Jiranah’s black robes as if they were no more than a bundle of sticks.

“Can I have a minute with him alone?” Vanasha asked, gesturing to Nil.

When Aloy saw that it was the spymaster that had been walking towards them, Aloy grew hesitant to leave, unsure if she could trust the Carja hunter to be alone with someone else without her advisory, especially after showing him that Vanasha had connections to Uden. Would Nil be willing to overlook this information or simply deem her life as forfeit?

Nil’s eyes flashed towards her and whispered. “Aloy, I know you’re worried. But please, allow me to handle this.”

Aloy took the robes in her hands, not questioning him, and silently hoped he would heed the words she spoke to him earlier. Before leaving, she knelt down to give him a gentle kiss on the cheek and whispered. “Take care, hunter.”

Vanasha delivered Aloy her signature courtier smirk with, “Little huntress,” and received no reply from her. Aloy simply passed her by and quietly drifted away towards the light of the campfire, while the unsettling sensation tugged at her gut.

Nil rose to his feet and walked towards a further undisclosed location, his skin still tingling where Aloy’s lips touched him, the sensation warm and sweet like honey. He loosely positioned himself with his arms at his side while Vanasha slowly circled around him like a glinthawk to its prey.

“Hmm, I find it both odd and fascinating to hear Aloy ask for a man’s permission before doing something,” Vanasha said, licking the top of her teeth. “You know, hunter, Avad would be dying to hear how you did it, how you were able to tame her.” She reached upwards to feel the soft black strands under her fingers for the first time, rejoicing in its soft texture. “Is this what you let her do?
Run her little fingers through your thick, gorgeous hair?"

Upon seeing two silver eyes glinting in the light in the distant campfire, Uthid knew it to be unwise to place so much as a finger on his sword hilt. It was safe to assume that her ladyship had listened in on the party’s campfire discussion while hidden in the shadows, collecting intel, and considering her sources – the thought being enough to drain the color from his face.

“Lady Jiranah.” Uthid knelt to the ground, ignoring the screams of protest made by his joints.

“At ease, old friend.” Jiranah said gently and stepped forward, barely out of the shadows. He could catch a glimpse of her long, black, unadorned hair resting at her shoulders, the smell of roses tumbling off the swaying strands.

Uthid rose to his feet and took a cautious stance. “My I ask the reason for which I am graced with your presence?”

“Call it a shared interest,” Jiranah offered as if she were welcoming investors to the sun-court, never losing her noblewoman’s edge over the years. She placed three seed bracelets on a nearby rock. “Four young women of the Utaru went missing three nights ago and their charms were left behind by the kidnappers as a deliberate act to further torment their families. I need them found and rightfully returned before the week of Plainsong Harvest. In order for this process to be carried out resulting in minimal bloodshed, working in collaboration is necessary.” Jiranah was choosing her words carefully, knowing how to appeal to the agents of the Sundom with the knowledge that they were making an attempt to be discreet in their mission. Despite this, Uthid could sense the danger hiding beneath the woman’s otherwise pleasant tone, as if she were ultimately willing to go through any lengths necessary in order to accomplish this endeavor.

Then Jiranah lowered her voice to a more chilling note. “Agree to comply and I will consider excusing the trespasses committed by your associates on my estate.” And there it was: the threat.

“I’m here to bring you some information before I take my leave towards the capital tonight.” Vanasha said and smiled. “Good news: you’ve been absolved of your responsibilities towards the anointed one’s safety.”

Nil tilted his head to convey a look of surprise.

“Is that so?”

“Yes – Avad and I agreed it would be best that you and Erend switch tasks. He’ll see to our little huntress’s safe return to Meridian while you assist Uthid in investigating the Maiden Murders case,” Vanasha explained. “A better fit towards a man of your disposition, I believe.” She glanced quizzically at the hunter’s unchanged expression. “Hmm, I thought you would be overjoyed to hear this.”

“I might be, perhaps if the words came straight from the source.” Nil crossed his arms. Vanasha furrowed her brow at his apprehensiveness. She gathered a scroll from her belt, revealing the contents.

“Do you need me to read it to you?” Vanasha offered unkindly.
“No, I see his signature.” Nil said as the focus scanned the glyphs. “Is that all?”

“Feel free to leave with the old soldier whenever you want,” Her tone grew sultry. “But only after you and I tend to our business.”

She slid one ebony-skinned hand over his shoulder to test the waters. A deranged machine certainly would have gone into attack mode by now and the same would be expected from a man bearing similar qualities. However, there were no signs of protest from the hunter and Vanasha took that as a confirmation that the beast inside had been properly put to sleep with the medicine, just the way it was preferred. Now she needed to make sure that she was the one in control.

Uthid scratched his beard in thought while Jiranah patiently waited for him to consider her offer. Before either spoke, both Carja became momentarily distracted by seeing the Nora maiden take her position by the campfire, relieving herself of her weapons and setting down the black robes.

Jiranah rubbed a thumb across the cracked charm of a Nora necklace. “I never thought I would live to see the day when another Nora would wander this direction, much less imagine that I’d bear witness to one of their maidens finding herself alongside the company of a Carja hunter, one who I presume is ex-military.”

Uthid nodded his head in agreement. “Aloy happens to be a unique individual who lacks the tribal bias that would otherwise skew her judgement of others, and thankfully so.”

Jiranah stepped further out of the shadows momentarily to obtain a better view of the huntress, also allowing Uthid to drink in the woman’s alluring visage up close. Though the woman standing beside him happened to be several years his senior, her physical appearance somehow deceived this, denying her the marks and lines on her skin typically granted by time. It was only the steel in her eyes that held evidence signs of age, albeit subtle and likely wrought by life’s inevitably less than fortunate experiences. Upon a closer observation, Uthid could see that there was still a glimmer of light to be found there. Maintained by what, he wasn’t sure. His silent musings were interrupted when he heard Jiranah emit a pensive sigh.

“Forgive my ignorance in regards to the current tribal relationships between the Nora and the Carja,” Jiranah gestured to Aloy. “But I must inquire – is intertribal matrimony officially permitted in the Sundom?”

Uthid raised an eyebrow at her question, uncertain of where it sourced from. Some might have had their weddings done in secret, but officially recognized by law of the Sun? Hardly. Not even the Sun-King was allowed to openly pine for his previous Oseram captain due to the temperament of the non-loyalists. However, Uthid was aware that there were secretly new stakes placed on the table regarding the makings of an eternal covenant between the Sun-King and the Nora’s anointed one in order to bring the tribes closer to harmony. It was unlikely that Jiranah was aware of Aloy’s significance as she has been little more than reclusive for the past years. Perhaps the news of such a concept would please the ears of her ladyship?

“I suppose I should be more specific,” Jiranah continued. “The Carja hunter and the Nora maiden – are they married?”

Uthid’s jaw dropped. He grew quiet for a moment as a bead of sweat rolled down the side of his face.
“Not… that I am aware of.” He answered. Then his eyes widened in horror. “Why? Did you witness them act in a certain manner that lead you to believe that they were…?”

Jiranah grew quiet for a minute, glancing back at the fiery haired Nora. Her and the Oseram were speaking to each other in low voices, as if making amends during their conversation, holding apologetic gazes, exchanging nods. When he offered her a drink from his flask, she declined.

Jiranah took his silence as a negative response. “I see. And I suppose it would not bode well with her family.”

“Actually, Aloy’s lineage is rather… mysterious, having been orphaned at birth, or so the rumors of the Nora go.” Uthid explained. “She has no known relationship through blood.”

Jiranah’s silver eyes flickered. “A Nora maiden without any familial ties? No wonder she’s this far from the Sacred Lands.”

The Oseram whispered something to Aloy that made her sit up straight.

“Really?” Aloy asked. “That’s… unexpected. Is that what she’s talking to him about right now?” Jiranah emitted a hum of intrigue “A young red-haired maiden without ties to family… How convenient.” Her voice held a tone chilling enough to make the hair on the old soldier’s skin stand straight.

Then the Nora patted her head above the right side of her ear, finding the space empty of her ancient charm.

“Damn, I must have left it with him.” She said to her Oseram companion. “Hold the fort while I go back to get something.”

“Aye, aye!” He replied with a drunken cheer as Aloy gathered her weapons and took to the wilderness, watching her every step as she left.

The horrifying realization finally struck Uthid like a spear through the mind. “Hold on a minute, you’re not… You’re not thinking of using her as bait, are you?”

His answer was met with silence as the Silver-Shadow had all but disappeared without a trace.

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The nagging thirst residing within the spymaster has been left unquenched for too long. She was greedy for him, feeling the burning flame of desire that had been ignited that night she saw him cradling the Nora in his arms, creating a subtle spark behind her eyes. Vanasha thought this as she pulled the hunter down for a slow, passionate kiss, and smiled triumphantly when she felt his strong hands take her by the waist. When it all came down to it, this Carja hunter was just like any other man, still having the physical needs of one. Needs that she can best satisfy through her own experienced touch. The little Nora never stood a chance.

Vanasha held the hunter against the tree with her chest pressed against his body, her fingers gripping his hair while his face was buried in her neck, exploring her skin with hungry lips and sharp teeth. Reaching down towards his belt, she pulled his hips against hers, moving slowly against his body and was rewarded with a satisfying groan. A spark of pride came about at the thought of her being the only woman capable of drawing out such aching sounds from a man so infamously dangerous in battle and reserved when out of it. Why bother fighting when she could be doing this?
Vanasha looked up when she felt the hunter suddenly pull away from her, his colorless eyes glancing over her shoulder. She turned around and caught a view of Aloy standing complacently a few yards away with a hand at her hip and an eyebrow raised to the sky. She appeared hesitant to interrupt them, momentarily deciding to step away for she had seen enough.

“Oh, Aloy!” Vanasha gasped a laugh. “Don’t mind us, I was just in the middle of giving our hunter a proper thank you for all the work he’s done for me – for us.” She ran a palm down his chest as she said this. “As you can imagine, he’s become quite stressed by this previous mission and I’m trying to help him unwind.” She said this as if Aloy is the sole source of the Carja hunter’s strain. Aloy pursed her lips in curiosity at the explanation. After all that’s happened between her and Nil, the spymaster’s words might hold some truth to them.

Nil did not appear stricken at seeing Aloy there nor did he appear to have anything to say to her in the way of words. Rather, he maintained a detached expression on his face, calm and stoic. Almost emotionless.

“I can see that,” Aloy said with a shrug, preparing to leave. “Don’t let me stop you.”

“Wait a minute, you forgot something, didn’t you?” Vanasha asked and pulled the silk token from her belt. She walked over to the huntress and handed it her. “You left it on the ground as you were leaving.”

“Oh right. Thank you.” Aloy said and took it from the woman’s fingers.

“Keep that cloth clean and you’ll make a man very pleased one day.” Vanasha’s coy grin was nothing short of deliberate. Aloy made a sharp glance at Nil, now realizing the cloth’s significance. Her eyes flickered back and forth between the two steamy Carja, noticing Vanasha’s hand returning to its original position, pressed against Nil’s chest. The amount audacity of the spymaster was worth a shock arrow to the face.

“Pleasing a man with this, huh?” Aloy snorted at Vanasha. “I’m sure you’d know all about that, wouldn’t you?” The tone of her voice was nothing short of bitter. Vanasha raised her eyebrows at the sudden air of hostility.

“Actually, I was never granted the opportunity of having such a gift.” Vanasha replied coolly. Aloy snorted gain. “Well, no surprise there.” The sassy comment from the Nora prompted Vanasha to bite the inside of her cheek.

Nil cleared his throat, finally breaking his silence. “Is that all you came here for?” speaking to Aloy as if her presence had finally outstayed its welcome.

“Yes.” Aloy said curtly. “We’re done here. Or at least I am.”

Nil looked away as the Nora maiden returned to the camp, her initial expression seared into his mind. With the way she looked at him, it was safe to assume now that she regretted originally declining their duel to the death. Or killing him with his own scimitar. Either of those would have been for the best.

“If memory serves me right, you were the one who told me that you both were just fine with occasionally collaborating with each other.” Vanasha said as she repositioned herself against him. “I had to do something to remind her of Avad, anyway. You both know how we work, so what’s
with that sour look?"

Nil shrugged indifferently, despite knowing full and well that Vanasha’s actions towards Aloy a moment ago were not steeped in altruism. “It’s nothing.”

Vanasha tilted her head. “Hm, you just seem so… tense still.”

Nil expressed disregard towards the matter. “You were saying earlier?”

Vanasha pursed her lips in thought. “Well you know… now that we have some privacy, let’s say I remind you of what true pleasure feels like in order to get these strained muscles of yours to relax a bit?” Vanasha offered. “Then we can get back to business.” One final move to ensure that she was in the clear, that he was all in, so to speak.

Nil smiled sharply at her as he loosened away her belt with a hand, slipping off the outer parts of her skirt. “I always did like a bit of privacy between us.”

Vanasha grinned in response and claimed his neck with her lips, too distracted by her own confidence in the situation to notice Nil’s upper lip curling backwards into a snarl, his sharp canines reflecting against the light of the moon, a hand drifting towards his dagger. He suddenly stomped on the piece of her belt he had earlier scanned with Aloy’s focus and crushed the electrical components inside. “How’s that for privacy?”

Before the spymaster could reply, one hand went to her jaw while another pressed the flat steel of a dagger’s blade against her exposed vitals.

“You know, if we had slept with each other before it must not have been a very memorable experience.” Nil added pressure to his grip as he felt her take in a deep breath. “You dare try to scream for help and I promise you that Avad’s precious little brother will have one less person reading him to sleep every night.” The man’s low snarl resounded from his chest, comparable to that of a raging Sawtooth.

Vanasha’s eyes went ablaze at the hunter’s vulgarity but knew when she was severely outmatched. To think that Nil had successfully fooled her into thinking he had numbed himself when this entire time he had been the one pouncing - the notion infuriated her and he knew it.

“You have some nerve, hunter.” Vanasha grunted.

Nil narrowed his eyes coldly. “You’re one to talk.” The woman in his grip had allowed herself to go too long without maintaining a sharp edge towards carrying out protocol, having let her guard down too easily. The only real challenge to face was Aloy.

“What’s wrong, courtier?” Nil asked mockingly as he pressed the cold steel against her skin. “Were you expecting me to be medically castrated? Or induced into a vegetative state by the poison you delivered me nearly four nights ago? Or are you even more surprised to know that I retrieved the answers I needed from Aloy without fucking her?” The venom in his voice contained more potency than what had been laced in his medicine, meaning those words personally towards her and the assumption that he would stoop so low to as to use such dishonorable methods.

A better killer, actor, and spy. Now Vanasha could see why Nil became a target – a man so brazen in his actions and rightfully feared. She grimaced as he loosened his grip to allow her to properly breath.

“I came here to warn you that the medicine had been tampered with.” Vanasha hissed, tossing the bait.
“Don’t insult my intelligence,” Nil spat back. “You knew all along what was in there, having already sold out by the time we last met in the Green Jewel. Overridden machines won’t show alarm unless there is potential danger in the vicinity and the stalker growled at you on sight, a clear indication that you were a threat from that very moment.”

“So, the stalker was yours after all?” Vanasha whispered, remembering the blue light of the focus over his ear during their meeting. “What else did she show you after you?-?”

Nil shoved his forearm against her throat, pressing her jaw upwards.

“Don’t even try to change the subject,” he growled. “The mission you tasked me with has already been compromised last night by one of your superiors, which is why you didn’t mind showing up out of nowhere, knowing exactly where to find us. Good thing I was warned beforehand or else I might have actually trusted you.” Vanasha quietly declared that last sentence being hardly more than a cold joke, knowing the hunter trusted no one. “That’s right, spymaster, I have friends in high places, too.”

“The man did contact you! Traitorous bastard!” Vanasha snapped.

“It takes one to know one,” Nil replied callously. “Avad originally requested that I oversee the huntress’s safety. Now how am I supposed to accomplish that when I’m on the brink of death?”

“The package didn’t contain a dosage large enough in there to kill you had you been taking no more than the prescribed amount,” Vanasha replied. “But you became overindulged. I can see it now with the hunger in your eyes – the withdrawals have already begun.”

“Which only means that we’re both on limited time.” Nil said with a glare. “You know, instead of speaking down to Aloy like you did earlier, you should be thanking her that you still live.”

“Oh, she really knows how to bring out the best in you, doesn’t she?” Vanasha muttered.

“Cut the pettiness already.” Nil snapped. “I spared your life on a mere whim because of her and if I don’t finish you off here myself, I’ll leave you to the border fiends who will eagerly come and pick the skin off your bones. One of them almost caught Aloy last night and it’s a good thing I haven’t been sleeping well or else she would have become a casualty.” He placed the point of the dagger underneath her chin. “Now tell me what I need to know.”

“My associates predicted that you would double-cross me, which is why we’re in this mess of a situation.” Vanasha answered.

“Was that before or after the medicinal contents was spiked?” Nil asked.

“Maybe it was when your boss decided to place a homing device at a machine located on the edge of this sun-forsaken forest!” Vanasha’s claim made Nil raise an eyebrow in skepticism.

“Nearing kind of close to the border, don’t you think?” Vanasha mentioned, looking around.

Nil frowned. “They really assumed I’d kidnap her?”

“Either that or you two would try to make a joint escape into the hinterlands with the Dark Wanderer’s help.” Vanasha said. “Don’t act like the thought never crossed your mind.”

“That’s irrelevant.” Nil replied. “And here I thought the punishment came after the crime.”

“We can’t take chances with the huntress. And something had to be done in order to take hold of
your reins.” Vanasha muttered. “It’s funny. The apocatharist didn’t ask any questions at the prescription’s unique request. They were hardly willing to show their face or utter a word, remaining fully compliant - something you could learn from.”

Nil rolled his eyes at her sour opinion of him. “That may explain your presence here but not the Shadow Carja assassins Uthid informed me of.”

“I know the Shadow Carja don’t come near these woods, even if I didn’t initially believe their stories, so why would we send them to gather Aloy, especially when the council wants her alive now that the Dark Wanderer has all but severed connections?” Vanasha explained. “Think about it, hunter, use that mind of a killer you’ve been… blessed with. Who else do you think would want Aloy dead right now?”

Nil lifted his eyes upwards as he gave the spymaster’s words some thought. There were many possibilities, but he narrowed them down to those who are acting out of vengeance or those who find her challenge as good sport. Then he looked down at his own hands. Work together in collaboration and both sides win. He regretted putting the focus in his pocket, knowing the researcher would be quite chatty by now.

“We’re fighting the same threat here.” Vanasha said with eagerness. “Which is why Avad believes you’re more suited towards the Maiden Murders investigation – you’d help indirectly in ensuring Aloy’s safety by tracking down your own kind.”

Nil frowned not just at the poor comparison but in the inconvenient change in circumstances while still having his own obligations to fulfill aside from this. Then there was his agreement to Aloy and he could only imagine how she’ll react to putting off their talk. Avad is Sun-King, so there was no fighting the order that he and Erend switch places.

The logistics of the case itself were less than favorable. The targets are no ordinary outlanders and a capable team was required in order to fulfill this objective effectively. Uthid was a dedicated soldier, but the speed of his methods likely would not be up to par with that of the hunter’s. It frustrated Nil to know that the one person well equipped for tracking the killers had to be the same woman currently planted on a pedestal by society and they couldn’t collaborate with each other on the case if it meant putting Aloy’s life at risk. Erend already made it clear of his opposition towards the idea and he was the one now in charge of her safety.

However, there was someone else, a person who held previous experience with tracking outlanders such as these. Silent, quiet, and lethal - the emissary of death herself. Would she be willing to consider his request if he asked? It burned the hunter inside to think of asking for her assistance, especially when her scream still echoed in his mind, and to ponder this very thought only made him realize how desperate he has become, creating a bitter taste in his mouth.

“So, once I track and destroy -,”

“No, no.” Vanasha said. “Once you track and retrieve.”

Nil’s eyes fluttered in disbelief. “Excuse me?”

“We’re a civilized society, hunter.” Vanasha said. “Which means we don’t execute criminals without first attempting rehabilitation. Sound familiar?”

Nil had no patience at the moment to search for empathy. “When did Avad make the protection of all killers until trial official throughout the Sundom?” Would Aloy agree with this?

“You’re on a time limit if you want to do it the old-fashioned way. He plans to speak this over with Aloy before enacting the ordinance, knowing her experience with working alongside a reformed criminal such as yourself.” Vanasha said. “So, I’d act quickly if I were you.”

Perhaps Avad was trying to convince the people of the benefits of rehabilitation by using him as an example. Nil understood that Avad did not want to walk the same footsteps as father, yet Nil found this reign of righteousness as an example of overcompensation. When someone wants to commit good deeds it can't be helped that evil lurks underneath.

The hunter snorted. “Another reminder of why I’m trying to leave this miserable land and scatter the ideas of my own posterity to the wind.”

“Aw… and break our little huntress’s heart?” Vanasha asked, feigning sadness.

Nil’s expression immediately soured.

“You know, you could make it all up to her by staying awhile longer, even if it means you’re no more than a knife in the shadows.” Vanasha offered. “And we all know how girls are increasingly prone to saying ‘yes’ when they are happy. Think of this as an additional favor to the Sun-King, knowing how it would assist Avad immensely in his endeavors,” Vanasha saw Nil’s jaw tighten. “Just stay until the engagement is official or the conception of a new heir is announced – whichever comes first, just so you can leave on good terms.”

"Without being hunted, yeah I get it." Nil muttered. "Speaking of which, I expect that you are going to be very delicate in your report?"

"It's not like I have a choice." Vanasha tugged at her bandage. "Thankfully, I have enough intel on the Maiden Murder case that will distract from your lack thereof in regards to both machine tamers."

"I've enough information to know that anyone who wants to step through that door is in over their heads." Nil crossed his arms. "Might not be a satiable answer, but the truth never is."

"So is the truth that you're saying that for the benefit of someone else." Vanasha said, holding remorse in her eyes.

"Just as you are." Nil glanced at his dagger. "Kill to save a life, right?"

Vanasha nodded. "I never wanted it to come to this... but..." she looked at Nil in the eyes. "We don't have to be enemies. There would have been no need to see you as a potential threat from the beginning had you just shown an evident amount of loyalty towards the Sundom and not just yourself. But it's not too late to give this land another try. From a slave to a sole survivor, there's a chance that you'd find solace in knowing that no one else will have to go through either my hardship or your horrors."

"I think that if I were ever to find any semblance of solace it would be in the act of knowing better than to believe such a notion." Nil sheathed his weapon.

"Worth a shot, I suppose." Vanasha muttered and took her leave.
Aloy and Nil did not make eye contact with each other as the latter strode quietly into the camp. He noticed her sitting close to the vanguard captain with a mug of ale in her hands, her cheeks slightly rosy. Uthid was taking rest on the opposite side of the campfire, his sword sheathed and resting in his grasp.

For the next hour of the night, neither hunters were willing to acknowledge each other’s existence. Erend tried holding a conversation with Aloy, telling backwater Oseram jokes in order to make her laugh. Despite the buzz from the alcohol that would make any fool howl at the predictable punchlines, the most Erend was rewarded with had been a small smile every once in a while, likely done out of courtesy for his efforts. Aloy’s conscious attempt at socializing with others only seemed to remind her more of how she did not belong and alcohol did little to soothe this. After feeling she finally had enough, Aloy retired from the drinking and mingling after politely thanking Erend for sharing his supply with her.

“Any time, Aloy.” Erend hiccupped as he lazily leaned against a rock. “Any time.” He winked at her and Aloy could feel the alcohol turn around in her stomach.

Nil quietly walked over to her, reached into his pocket, and tossed Aloy back her focus.

She caught it in a hand, not saying anything, and quietly leaned back against a rock while Nil made his way towards a more isolated location. He stopped for a moment and turned towards her with a hardened expression in his pale eyes.

“Do we need to talk?”

Aloy shook her head and equipped her focus in its rightful place. “We’re saving that for Meridian, aren’t we?”

Knowing how women worked, Nil understood her reply should be taken with a grain of salt, so he knelt down opposite of her.

“I know you don’t like waiting for answers.” Nil said as Aloy tried to distract herself with datafiles on the focus, reading notes left behind by ghosts - the only source of interaction for the first nineteen years of her life and more pleasant to deal with than what was in front of her.

“Thanks for your consideration, but I’ve learned by now that I’d be spared a decent amount of trouble if I started waiting.” Aloy replied. Then she saw the hunter squint in puzzlement.

Nil pointed to her focus. “Does your ancient charm typically glow red?”

“Huh?” Aloy took off the device and examined it. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary. She shrugged and put it back in place. “It might be due to the downloaded modifications that I told you about earlier.”

“If you say so.” Nil said and furrowed his brow, feeling something was amiss, despite what the distraught Nora in front of him was willing to think.

Then he spoke sternly, “What you saw earlier between -.”

“It’s fine, really.” Aloy flicked her hands upwards and dropped them. She hated being reminded of what she had witnessed. “You didn’t wrongfully hurt or kill anyone.”

“Perhaps not in a literal sense.” Nil said softly. “But maybe it would have been easier on us both
had I done so instead.”

“Yeah, maybe – wait, no, Nil, just no.” Aloy caught ahold of herself and became agitated at her emotional state for momentarily allowing herself to agree with him on such vulgar matters. “It would have been better had I just trusted you to begin with.” Aloy sighed, knowing how this low kick to the stomach is what Erend felt when he witnessed her dive for Nil’s lips in the crowd, or when he caught them in what appeared to be fooling around during the hunt. Erend seemed the better person at the end of all this as he did not appear to hold any of this against her. Aloy wanted to try and continue with the grace given to her. “You were considerate in heeding my request and I am sincerely grateful for it.”

Nil gave her a long look, one a man would give to someone not containing the same number of years that allowed the maturity necessary to see through the cracks of what was spoken.

“You’re wounded, girl.” Nil said. “I can tell.”

Aloy frowned at his assumptions towards her emotional state and Nil returned her expression with a look that said you cannot fool me.

Aloy’s eyes became heavy with the emotional burden. At this point in the conversation, had their tides not been corrupted by pain and guilt, he would have taken her into his arms and she would have rested her face against his chest, comforted by the rumble of his voice, the sound of his vitality beating beneath his skin. Then Aloy remembered his hands around that wretched woman’s waist and his face buried in her neck, causing a flame to flicker in her eyes, planted by bitterness.

“Whether I am or not doesn’t matter, Nil.” Aloy replied. By now, she was just fidgeting across the screen, trying to keep her hands busy. So what if she was? Was discussing her inner turmoil with the person who caused it supposed to change anything?

The lingering red light on her device still bothered him, so Nil turned his gaze towards the black robes placed at a nearby rock. He imagined her sitting in the shadows while quietly observing each conversation held between the two of them that day, listening to every word, preparing her hand for a well-deserved slap for his appalling behavior. Though he understood that she was likely not going to appear before him again, he still found himself wishing that she would angrily pull him off to the side to remind him of what he already knows: that internal wounds take the longest to heal and leave the heaviest of scars, so one should first think carefully before they act because what you say or do to someone else always comes back around with a more vicious bite. Then she would continue to lecture him, saying that his father had taught him better than this when it came to the proper treatment of women.

Splitting image. Too bad he wasn't an exact copy. Nil tried to bring about his father's image in his memories, but they alluded him every time. Instead, all he could see was a barrel-chested Nora armed with a bow and spear, lecturing him about the importance of adhering to the laws of a mountain worshipping tribe and other absurdities.

Aloy put away the screen and laid herself on the ground, fidgeting with her braids. “I remember you saying before that you’re single-minded, which means you’re devoted to whatever it is you’re doing or otherwise trying to accomplish. I can relate to this myself and I can't hate you for it.”

“I wouldn’t begrudge you for it if you did by this point.” Nil replied and rested his head on his arms.

“But that wouldn’t be fair at all, would it?” Aloy asked in a voice empty of strength. She pulled her knees close to her chest while the campfire hissed and crackled as the combusting contents
slowly broke down into cinders before finally turning into ash that would separate and scatter. "I’m the one who shot the first arrow."

Chapter End Notes

Let me sink this blade in a little deeper...
Chapter Summary

A full day after Vanasha encounters Aloy in the woods, she plots to seek out the shadow and gets more than what she bargained for.

Chapter Notes

Hello there, everyone! No, I'm not dead.

It's been quite some time since my last update and I'm not very pleased with that. *Personal time* feel free to skip over.

It's been a wild year and I'll basically sum it up with: having dropped my old computer and saving up for a new one (losing all that I've written in the process), and a death in the family.
If you want a more detailed explanation, feel free to PM me. Otherwise, let's get on with the story!

Abandoned fishing communities were a common sight in this fog-filled mire, but Vanasha wondered if all them were creepy as the one she passed on her way to the first checkpoint. This territory that once buzzled with trade had been left to the wilds. Having grown up in the central area of Sundom, Vanasha had never been this to this area before, never knowing what life had been flourishing before the derangement had forced the tribe to retreat their borders.

All that remained were worn-out stone palisades that bordered the area, covered in a tangled mess of purple vines that crawled about the cracks like an infection of the skin. Empty cabins stood atop the tributary on decaying wooden stilts and rickety bridges connected each cabin to the other, likely to collapse with a gush of wind or the impact of a properly aimed disc launcher. Rumors claimed the vengeful witch decorated the interior cabins with the bones of her victims to ward off potential prospectors and treasure seekers. Not even the Utaru would not seek her out without a blessing. Blood and soil keeps memory, they whispered.

Unlike Uthid and the rest of those superstitious fanatics, Vanasha carried no fear of Jiranah, confident in her extensive training under the Blameless Marad. Assassinating Carjan nobles was as regular to her as it was for a tinker to dissemble a watcher carcass and if Jiranah was as menacing as the rumors claimed, she would have finished what she started instead of fleeing into the shadows. Leave it to a highborn to run and hide like a coward once they see what they're up against.

Other threats lay hidden in the dark. Vanasha tapped the wood of her bow almost wishing something would break the silence. “Despicable cretins,” she muttered to herself when she thought of encountering skin-reavers. Barbaric savages living on the fringes of civilization that served to remind everyone why civilized people had walls. Skin-reavers were rumored to be a tribe far south
of the great canyons that spoke a different tongue. Their rite of passage is to burn the skin so badly that all feeling is lost. Then they would dress themselves with the flayed remains of their victims and lie wait in the road posing as corpses until an unsuspecting traveler walked by. Rarely were they ever seen this far north and their recent presence serves as a testament to the Sundom’s apparent weakness.

Snapmaws drifting through the river proved the nearest danger. Vanasha tiptoed quietly over a bridge, past the glowing eyes and metal teeth glinting off the river water. The snap of a dry branch beneath her sandal was answered by an unwelcoming growl. She held her breath and waited for any signs of aggression. *Don't overthink it,* she told herself. The snapmaws were aware of a human presence, but they couldn’t see her beneath the midnight shroud. A few quiet steps later and she was out of range of their chillwater cannons.

She decided to turn around and check for the snapmaws' position one last time to see their angry red eyes locked on her body, following her every move. Watching, but not attacking. They remained in that eerie silence until she exited the wood. “It’s just a coincidence,” Vanasha muttered to herself as she found her way back to the beaten path, exhaling her shaken nerves. Fighting machines is a pain in the ass and Vanasha didn’t understand why her tribesmen of the Hunter’s Lodge pursued them with such zeal.

The stone path led her to Greywall, a small military outpost at the edge of the fog-filled mire, just as the sun was setting on the horizon. A Carjan dockyard withstood the test of time at the southern rim of the Daybrink where water traffic was closely monitored. Around the cliffs to the northwest stood Yellow Lantern, a village holding the gates to the Golden Corridor that served as a popular route used by traders when traveling to Plainsong. Due to this location’s strategic value, advisors in Meridian went great lengths to ensure Greywall never saw depletion of its garrison. Rumors went that the locals were less than happy with quartering troops. First part of running a kingdom is to understand it’s impossible to please everyone.

Once Vanasha signaled the men at the watchtower to lift the wooden gate, she entered the commons and gave the outpost a quick look around. Carjan guards patrolled the ramparts while disgruntled hunters sat around a fire complaining that the wood was too damp to keep the flames alight. A group of drifters lazily strummed their instruments and sang out of key. A dark-skinned Banuk shaman of some sort sat alone tinkering with ancient artifacts. Overall, nothing seemed out of the ordinary.

Vanasha checked in with the captain stationed there, Lidav. She trusted him knowing he had answered directly to the Blameless Marad for years. He nodded politely to her as she entered.

“Anything to report, soldier?” Vanasha asked.

“A trio of bandits were caught trying to sneak through the gates yesterday, but my unit apprehended him before they could make it around the cliffside,” Lidav answered. “Other than that, it’s been smooth as a sun-priest’s sleeve.”

Vanasha could sense the bragging tone in his voice and found it rather cute how his blue eyes lit up when talking about his little victory. High marks were everything to these men out here. “Did you by any chance see any Shadow Carja pass this way?”

Lidav straightened. “No ma’am. Did you?”

"Not any live ones. I assume they fell victim to machines when we happened upon them," Vanasha half-lied.
"Probably. Well, knowing you've got ears and eyes back home, how are things in Meridian?" Lidav asked.

"Rumors in Sun-court go that Yellow Lantern has been requesting autonomy," Vanasha grinned maliciously at him. "If that's the case, your position is in peril."

Lidav snorted as if that had been the most ridiculous thing he’d heard all night. “Not a day goes by when I don’t hear a complaint about tithes. Matter of fact, I’d like to see these grain-pickers try handle living out here for just a day without the Carjan military fronting them. While we’re on the subject, right after Meridian was invaded by the Shadow Carja, my men and I had a talk with the proprietor about what we should do in response. He eventually convinced the village elders into locking the gates shut until further notice. With armed patrols out on the water, any unauthorized persons traveling the Daybrink will either face the snapmaws or be blown to bits. The villagers haven’t been taking well to the new stipulations of course, but I think it works in everyone’s favor and Sun-king Avad has been making outreach to soften the blow done to trade."

“I think it’s a wonderful tactic. Our men back home are finally growing some teeth.” Vanasha said. She cleared her throat and spoke quietly. “Speaking of the proprietor, do you know him at all?”

“Lord Benivad?” Lidav scratched his chin. “Not really. He doesn’t come this far south probably because he doesn’t want the swamp stench on him. You know how nobles are. But the Utaru trust him enough to work for him. If you want to speak to Lord Benivad, I’d go through them first.”

Vanasha nodded. "Well, in any case, our Champion of Meridian was found alive and well about thirty arrow paces south of here. She’s in the vanguard captain’s hands now and should arrive within the next two dawns if all goes accordingly."

“Sounds like good news overall,” Lidav said. "A patrol will meet them upon arrival to escort them back. As for you, The Blameless Marad made arrangements for your safe departure at the fishing docks tonight. Look for Rolund, an Oseram ferryman transferring livestock to help with the relief effort out here.” He handed her a scroll cylinder locked tight with Oseram bolts. “Make sure you give that to him when you get there.”

“Wonderful,” Vanasha stashed the cylinder on her belt. She bid her farewell and made her way down the path to the dockyard.

Seeing tribesmen from distant lands was expected and Vanasha made it a point to stay on the lookout for any interesting faces. She took note of the tall, lean, spearmen who stood at every exit, their expression fixed like statues. Red paint dotted their face and body with the intent to cover prior tribal markings. Ex-military mercenaries are what Vanasha first assumed they were, judging by their rigid posture and uniform appearance. She counted four men total in the tavern. Some of them looked so similar that they could pass for brothers. Which nobleman they belonged to, she wasn’t sure.

A squat, chubby-faced Oseram ferryman looked up from inspecting his boat when she arrived. Vanasha ignored the pungent stench of sweat and tobacco and threw him a wink. “Are you my getaway man?”

“That depends,” Rolund answered. Vanasha waved the wooden cylinder his direction and he brightened like a gaslight. "Then that is a yes." He patted the large crate with an unusual amount of metal bracing. “I’m waiting in line to deliver this cargo here. Shouldn’t take but a few minutes and I’ll have you out on the water.”
“I’ll leave you to it then.” Vanasha handed him the cylinder and took a seat at a nearby wooden table.

Going out of her way to ensure someone else’s safe return to Meridian was just another typical day for Vanasha. Doesn’t matter that it nearly costed her neck. She knew better than to expect any ounce of gratitude from Aloy when the two women meet again. Vanasha had accepted that dry part of her career ever since she decided to be a Carja Shadow. There would be no award given, no ceremony held in her honor for all she’s sacrificed in the name of a better tomorrow.

Aloy? For defeating Dervahl, slaying Helis, and avenging her tribe? Her name and deeds will pass onto generations to come.

Vanasha tried to push those sore feelings aside and instead ponder the reason for coming all this way in the first place. Her mind drifted to the last time she had seen Prince Itamen smiling with his older brother at dinner, and Nasadi sitting quietly to the side, anxious despite her smiles.

Though the Sun Palace was a far cry from Sunfall, Vanasha fretted about leaving Nasadi alone for so long, especially when there have been increasing demands from the anti-loyalists and Oseram alike to enact justice on remnants of the fundamentalist regimes, particularly offering sums of shards and discounted weapons in exchange for the widow queen’s head. Those offers were enough to make council members ponder their options because between funding the military and rebuilding Meridian, the well was drying fast. She witnessed first hand the sacrifices that it took to lead Meridian to its liberation and wholesomely doubted Marad would bat an eye if Nasadi wound up fatally ill one night if it meant a having enough means to rebuild a third of what was lost to the Eclipse, which prompted Vanasha to act on her own. In a race against time, she had been tempted first by that mystical spear knowing it would sell for a fortune and then seeking out other bounties such as the Dark Wanderer.

Twice she had her plans foiled by Nil, a bad man in love with good woman, and the ridiculous contradiction burned her to no end. The moment Nil’s tribe needs him to uphold his cold-hearted reputation, the ice begins to melt.

And for what? Why would someone like him bother to change now? He knew there wasn’t enough water in the world to wash out all the blood he’s spilled. If he didn’t wise-up soon, there would be worse in store for him than a prison sentence.

Vanasha decided she couldn’t dwell on his betrayal now. Her initial plans may have backfired on her like a faulty firespitter, but Vanasha was not worried and it was all thanks to the angry wound on her neck. If the anti-regime wanted to pay for anyone's royal head, they could have Jiranah’s - a woman who stood aside and did nothing while her brother ordered the slaughter of thousands, who did nothing when Prince Itamen was kidnapped by power-hungry loyalists. Before departing, Uthid warned Vanasha against apprehending Jiranah without the sun-king’s permission as she is still Avad’s aunt by blood. But Vanasha was still determined to find her way around this. Even if Jiranah wasn’t responsible for the maiden murders, suspicion of trying to harm the Anointed One was all that was needed to lift the royal protections.

Living through the horrors of the Shadow Carja had brought enough punishment on Prince Itamen, a little boy who desperately needed his mother at his side. Vanasha would gladly trade in Jiranah for Nasadi. She just needed to draw the shadow out of hiding.

Vanasha decided to make use of her time by setting up a meeting with the proprietor. She didn’t know Lord Benivad personally and only saw him once at sun-court when he swore fealty to the Sun-king three years ago. She knew that he belonged to one of the old mercantile families and had a younger brother, Lubavad that deals with the Banuk northeast. Known to prioritize diplomacy
and forbearance, Avad assigned him to look after this region after the Liberation. She imagined he would know about the elusive herb gatherer and where she frequents.

After a few minutes of looking around, Vanasha found a middle-aged woman sweeping the floors. She was wearing a beaded boar choker around her neck and yellow and white paint caked on her skin. An Utaru. “Excuse me, is Lord Benivad around? I need to speak with him.”

“Oh!” The woman suddenly dropped her broom and defensively threw her hands over her face. “No, no, I don’t want any trouble with the Carja!”

Vanasha was not expecting such a hysterical response. “I’m not here to cause trouble,” she reassured her with a smile. “Actually, I’m the good kind of Carja and a friend of the Utaru.”

“Oh...” The woman tilted her head towards her, still doubtful. “Then... what do you want?”

“I found this along the trail,” Vanasha flashed the seed bracelet she found on Jiranah’s robes. “I know these are precious charms to your people, so I imagine its owner would like it promptly returned, if it could be arranged.”

The maid straightened. “Yes, of course. Lord Benivad can make summons, but he’s entertaining guests at the moment. I don’t think it’s a good time. After dawn he would be available after he’s completed his assigned appointments...” Like any good servant would, she was trying to deter visitors from bothering her employer.

Vanasha kept her voice firm. “Where is he?” The woman sighed and pointed to the tavern on mainland that was positioned just outside the village gates. Outside the establishment were a group of scantily clad women waved fingers at potential patrons. Vanasha donned her veil and made her way there.

Outside the door way stood a tall, copper-skinned man taking a hit from his pipe. His face was obscured in the darkness, much to Vanasha's annoyance. Desert sand had gathered on his loose, flowing clothing and it looked like he’d only just returned from the far-lands. His dark hair was pulled neatly into a strider's tail that fell past his shoulders. Transparent tattoos covered his body, none from a tribe that Vanasha recognized.

“Nice ink,” Vanasha said. The outlander said nothing towards her remark and looked away. Not finding him the warmest of folk, Vanasha moved along.

A fresh-faced young woman greeted her at the entryway and showed her to the bar. Patrons from different backgrounds spoke in hushed voices over tables filled with wine and bread. Beneath the shroud of smoke and music, taverns were of the few locations where Carjan nobles here freely mingled with outlanders to discuss contracts. Those who weren’t being entertained by hostesses had their eyes fixated on a blindfolded woman dancing on stage. Whispery vocals and mysterious flute notes put on an eerie atmosphere along with mysterious strummed chords and steady drum beats. Patrons watched her as if entranced.

Vanasha was never given the privilege of learning this dance. It was ceremonial in nature and rarely seen outside the silk curtains of sun-court. The movements were slow and meticulous, designed to entertain nobles and royals during dinner. If a woman was born in a suitable enough upbringing to learn the dance, a massive amount of patience was required to pull it off.

As the dance concluded, a chorus of musicians entered the stage and lit up the tavern in lively song, much to her approval. Nearby, a pretty blonde Nora huntress was giggling with a half-empty
pint of mead in her hand. Her partner was a handsome young outlander who wore his hair dressed in a desert head-scarf with dark, wavy locks peeking through. He communicated primarily with hand gestures leading Vanasha to believe he was mute.

“Me dance like that? Never!” The Nora exclaimed. The outlander nodded eagerly. “I can’t move like that!” she protested. He stuck out his thumb and little finger, waving his hand back and forth at his lips. *Drink more.*

“No, we have work in the morning, remember?” As the Nora playfully slapped him on the shoulder, Vanasha swore up and down that she had seen her before in Meridian. Her partner grinned and pulled her onto his lap where his hands frisked about her body, causing her to squeal in laughter. “Oh, stop it, Naji!” They set down their pints and teased each other on their way upstairs to the inn quarters.

“Young love, how nice,” Vanasha muttered into her pint. All the squealing and dumb smiles from the happy couple reminded her of Nil and Aloy enjoying each other at the festival. While the Nora tribe back east desperately needed to rebuild, this little huntress was drinking and acting like an animal in heat. It was probably in an effort to follow her Anointed One’s example, snogging the first outlander she saw and disappearing with him to the middle of nowhere.

All Vanasha could do was hope that with Aloy witnessing another woman locking lips with her handsome soldier was enough to serve as a wake-up call, to quit fooling around in the wilds and get her focus aligned where it needed to be. Their meeting in the woods hadn’t been pleasant, but Vanasha was doing her a favor. There was so much promise to be seen on the horizon if Aloy could properly align her focus. And what better opportunity could she find than to seal the deal with the sun-king? From there, she’d establish a life of luxury and secure the dying Nora’s future at once. Harmony between their tribes could finally be seen in this lifetime.

*What I would give to be in her place,* Vanasha thought. She felt a glare at her back and turned to see a flaxen-haired young woman dressed in opaque, green silks drifting by. Vanasha’s eyes followed her to a mahogany table where none other than Lord Benivad was sitting, with light-brown skin and amber eyes, wearing finely adorned garb. The years had granted him more grey hairs than she remembered.

The woman brought forth a wicker flask and presented it to the table. “The finest brew distilled from Plainsong’s fertile grain. I hope this will be enough to calm the nerves?”

“By the sun’s blessing, Ariah, Yellow Lantern is more than grateful for the assistance thus far,” He glanced around the inn. "I assume Shen won't be joining us for the discussion?"

Ariah shook her head. “You’ll have to excuse him for now. It’s been years since he’s been in the Sundom and he’s having difficulty adjusting to the Sun Carja’s more... mmm *civil* ways. Once his sister gets back, you’ll find him more at ease.” She spoke as if Sun-king Avad’s reforms that focused on maintaining the peace were a sign of weakness. *Go back to your gilded cage, you wench,* Vanasha thought.

"Then let's carry on, shall we?" Lord Benivad leaned over a scroll resting beneath his fingers. "You've mentioned before that you feel land travel is the better option, but are you certain of this? These corridors are prone to flooding this time of year."

“It’s speculation based on the information we've acquired thus far,” Ariah replied. “We haven’t made any decisions as of yet. When Sui is finished surveying the water, we’ll deliberate which route is the best option to take, once the scum is cleared out, of course.”
"The sooner we decide, the better," added the brown-haired woman who sat in the middle. Shianah was her name. Vanasha knew her from Sunfall where her gifted singing voice made her a popular presence in high-end saloons. She wore less make-up on her face, making her look paler than her stage persona, and her posture was more timid as if there were shards of glass beneath her feet. Vanasha assumed the performer had sought work elsewhere after losing her favorite patron, Queen Nasadi.

"And the means of safe travel?"

"All taken care of. Sui would never leave her clients unprotected. In fact, she's willing to let half her charges stay in the village while the others go on patrol. What do you make of that, my lord?"

"It's unexpected generosity coming from a wasteland pira- ," Lord Benivad caught himself. "Mercenary leader..." he cleared his throat and leaned forward. "How soon will she be here to discuss the matter?"

"Sui should have arrived at the docks by now..." Shianah murmured.

Alarm bells went off in Vanasha’s mind as she listened. She deduced they were discussing caravan travel, a dangerous profession for anyone amidst the civil war and derangement, and arrangements are done very carefully. But why would Lord Benivad consult with these women about safe routes instead of the Carjan guard? Most nobles their age were more fixated on their hair, skin, and nails, not with the outlook of the land. And Sui. That’s a strange name. Couldn’t be a Carjan or Oseram and if that’s the case, why would outside assistance be necessary when he’s in good standing with the Sun King? Vanasha needed to know more but with as softly as they spoke, trying to eavesdrop on their conversation was like grasping sand between her fingers.

Sniffing an easy target, a drunk Oseram fisherman stumbled forward and placed his hand on the Shianah's shoulder, mistaking her for a working girl. He licked his lips at her. "Hey beautiful, don't you think you're overburdened?" Shianah winced and tried to push him away but to no avail. "Come on, girl. No one dresses that nicely without asking for attention!"

Lord Benivad rose from his seat and raised his hand to the fisherman in protest. "Excuse me but improper conduct is not permitted in this establishment!"

"Sit your ass down, Lord Nobody. My shards pay for your upkeep!" the fisherman shot back. His outward display of aggression made Lord Benivad clam up like a beaten shellwalker. Vanasha now saw why he was assigned to oversee this location by Meridian's advisors - unlike his brother, Benivad was a toothless pushover. The drunk turned his eyes back to Shianah. "What's wrong? You got a man already? He doesn't have to know!" The continuing altercation was making Vanasha's hand tremble. It reminded her of enduring Sunfall's climate, with half of her tempted to sever the man's hand where it was and the other half conditioned by shadow training that told her she couldn't afford to blow her cover.

Half a heart-beat later, the dark-haired stranger from outside emerged from the crowd of dancers, his face kept obscured by his desert scarf. He grabbed the drunk fisherman's hand and twisted it back. "Don't. Touch. The girls," he growled.

"Ach! You wasteland son of a bitch!" As the drunk reached for a weapon, the outlander increased the pressure in his grip until bones were heard breaking. In two fluid movements, the outlander shoved the drunk fisherman's head onto the table and staked a knife in his hand. Vanasha winced in spite of her amazement. The outcry of pain from his victim drew the attention of everyone in the tavern. Ariah moved her head to be on eye level with the offender. "Apologize now and you might leave with your arm intact," she offered sing-song like as a pleasured smile curled at her lips. A
sadist.

“I’m sorry! I’m sorry!” the drunk cried. With a nod from Ariah, the warrior released his victim who then gathered what was left of his hand and fled the area. Servants rushed forward to clean the blood from the table and while onlookers whispered nervously amongst each other at what they had seen. It wasn’t until the music returned that everything seemed to flow rightly again.

Ariah’s green eyes flashed proudly at Lord Benivad. "Like I told you - it's all been taken care of."

"Yes... I see... I only wish that I didn't have to witness it myself." Lord Benivad sighed and wiped his brow with a handkerchief. Then he regarded the outlander with weariness. “Ah, Shen. If I may ask that less aggression would be preferred inside the premises whenever possible? Harmony is of upmost importance to us…"

Shen grumbled something Vanasha couldn’t comprehend and retreated into the shadows. Shaken from the assault, Shianah approached him with a bowed thank you then went on her way. Shen regarded her coolly with eyes that did not linger.

Aligned and focused, Vanasha thought. The Blameless Marad would find use for him no doubt.

A tap on her shoulder interrupted Vanasha’s focus, much to her aggravation. She turned around to see the Utaru housekeeper from before pointing to the doorway. “Excuse me, ma’am? Someone at the docks is calling for you.” Vanasha assumed it was Rolund saying the boat was ready. Though she had not spoken directly to Lord Benivad as she had hoped to, Marad would know what to do with the plethora of knowledge she had gained.

Vanasha paid for her drink and left the tavern. A cool breeze flowed her way upon stepping into the night air, signaling another storm on the front, likely a gift from the stormbird circling over the Dusk Mesas. Upon reaching the docks, Vanasha noticed something odd. Not a fisherman nor haggler were present in the area and the villagers had all but disappeared from sight.

“Rolund?” Vanasha called out into the dark. “Rolund, you useless pile of slag - where are you?” There was no answer while a distinct, pungent smell filled her nose. She looked down and saw traces of blaze over the wooden panels.

“I wouldn’t try to leave so soon if I were you. Storms make water travel a nasty ordeal, you see.”

Vanasha turned to her left to see a tall, stout woman leaning against dockyard’s outer western wall with her arms crossed. She appeared a brigand of some sort, or something more, wearing tattered rags draped over her torso and legs that saw years spent in the western wastes. A conical straw-hat obscured most of her face from view, only revealing a pipe between her lips from which she exhaled grey smoke.

“So I’ve heard,” Vanasha spied the Oseram cylinder stuffed in the woman’s belt with its bolt forced open. “Is that why we’re alone?”

“Work hazards aren’t something I like to share with innocent bystanders,” the woman replied. “It’s bad for the soul.”

“That’s so thoughtful of you,” Vanasha said. “Well stranger, I assume the Shadow Carja sent you to assassinate me. But I wonder if they mentioned in the contract that anyone who’s gotten in my way quickly saw their blood decorating the sand?”
“I could care less about the tribes and their political squabbles,” the woman said. “What matters right now is that bracelet in your right pocket that doesn’t belong to you. Hand it over.”

Vanasha drew her halberd. “You’ll have to pry it from my hands, first.”

The woman tossed aside her conical hat and cracked her knuckles. “Well alright then.”

Chapter End Notes

Feel free to tell me in the comments your thoughts, rage, and likes - including if waiting for an update has been excruciatingly painful. I welcome all tomatoes, stones, etc. It's the purest form of encouragement.
Blessed Springs

Chapter Summary

Forced to diverge from the path, Uthid brings Aloy and Erend to Blessed Springs, uncertain what will come of it.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Rain, thunder, and lightning. Uthid remembered his first taste of war. He remembered the blood in his mouth and the fire-arrows sailing overhead. He saw the barbaric savages brimming with bloodlust and their sharp, jagged-tooth smiles and maniacal laughter, striking terror into his heart.

Uthid narrowly dodged the swing of an axe. Not quick enough to retaliate, he was kicked by another into the narrow canyon path, the makings for an easy kill. A moment’s breath before the war-club fell upon his skull, a shadow passed over him.

"It’s the Sun Fang!" cried an infantryman.

A dark-haired warrior leaped from above and into the bloodbath. He slashed open Uthid’s attacker with his blade, killing him where he stood. Ink danced over copper skin and sinew. Beneath the helm were two obsidian eyes blazing with feral instinct. What wasn’t within reach of his scimitar was within range of his bow, felling targets arrow after arrow.

The earth began to shake, followed by the loud rumbling sound of machines. The warrior laughed. “Too young to die, my friend!” He pulled Uthid to his feet and off the ground, just as a thundering herd of behemoths stampeded through the canyon, trampling everything in their path.

The echoes of the past eventually fell silent and Uthid was left staring into the rushing water. Solemnly, he glanced up from the rabbit skin map in his hands, a single tool he was using to guide them through the territory. The memories held in the parchment seemed to leap out at him whenever he dared to unroll it. Strange glyphs were scattered about the page, some marked with blood. He remembered only what a few of them meant. The longer he struggled to remember, the more the past slipped away like smoke from a candle.

The path to Greywall had been flooded by torrential rain and he had spent the last hours of morning looking for a different route. The forest loomed in the distance with fog sweeping at the base of the trees and there it remained a constant presence in his mind. The path through the forest would have been shorter, but Erend claimed the common trails were safer since they were still patrolled. The journey over the last two days day hadn’t been smooth. The hunters shared a stifling silence between each other that Uthid hadn’t commented on, and Erend drank nearly as much as he complained. Between the constant downpour and the unsteady terrain, there hadn't been any progress.

The minor set back was fine as Uthid had no desire to return to Meridian so soon. Joining the Shadow Carja into insurgency had left a permanent stain on his reputation. The only information sought from him during council meetings were tactical details of Sunfall - an approximate number
of soldiers, hidden supply caches, and weaknesses in the city's foundation. Never mind the women and children still living off the land with barely enough to survive. Surely that's the reason wars were fought in the first place, to protect what was their own and lessen the casualties? To nobles and priests, the matter was much different. Ordinary people became pieces on a board of wood, moved around at leisure. This is what happened when men who never fought a battle in their life were enabled to make decisions in war.

Though no one would say outwardly that he was unwelcome in the Sun Palace, he could feel the eyes on his back everywhere he turned and caught unpleasant whispers in the dark when others thought he wasn't listening. More than once, he could have sworn that there were another set of footsteps following him to his quarters every night. But as he turned around to look, no one was there. He told no one of this occurrence, fearing that he would be expelled again for insanity.

Uthid tried setting his mind on higher matters, advising the Sun-King - another ordeal to face. While Avad was evidently capable of building relationships and mending past ones, no amount of charisma in the world could help him brave what lay before him. These vulnerabilities showed most in the war room when military officers and nobles confronted each other like scrappers and delvers facing off at a scrapheap. Whatever the case, winning a war was not about equality and peace for both sides. Winning a war meant ensuring one's survival at all costs. These were not the words Avad wanted to hear, often shaking his head when such a sentiment was spoken.

Slow to decide and quiet during meetings, the Sun-King was found more than once with his gaze lingering on the door or the window. Vanasha confided in Uthid as to why: he was waiting for Aloy. Uthid had no other choice but to accept this. Aloy had proven herself a vital asset to Meridian's survival more than once. If her wisdom alone was whom Avad sought for guidance then so be it.

Now, Aloy was standing beside Uthid with one hand over her ancient charm and another making strange gestures in the air. With a frustrated sigh, she put her hands down. "I need to find the nearest tallneck in the area, override it, and from there I can get an accurate view of the land."

Uthid didn't comprehend what Aloy had said. But thanks to her willingness to secure mounts, they had covered a great distance in their journey. Learning how to ride a charger hadn’t been as daunting a task as he expected and Aloy had proved herself a good instructor. The machine heeded his every command, stopping and going as he signaled. Never in his life did he expect to actually ride a machine and it was nice to not fight them for once. Still, there much to be desired from being jostled up and down on their metal hides.

A good distance away, Nilead occupied himself with feeding the chargers. Wound dressings covered his hands to his forearms and he would need to change them soon. Yet instead of resting, he crafted supplies and scouted in the rain. The constant need to occupy himself was a shadow of the loyal soldiers standing guard in Sunfall - starved for food, for sex, and for action. Uthid remembered him vaguely from the Carja wars, as a mid-ranking soldier and as one of the faces that didn’t flee for his life during Meridian’s rebellion two years ago. Either out of honor or sheer stupidity, he stayed and awaited his fate before the new sun-king. It was strange to think that his willingness to surrender was the reason he was still alive and untouched by the Shadow Carja influence. Otherwise, his decisions meant something else entirely.

Uthid wished Vanasha had given him the courtesy of describing what kind of personality would be accompanying him on his mission. Per agreement of his years in prison, nothing about Nileads' past had been revealed, not his former alias, nor his previous military designation. Glancing at his sinewy physique, Uthid determined he might have been part of a light-infantry unit. But what else? What skillset did he have aside from hunting bandits? Surely the sun-king wouldn’t assign
someone as a consultant without bearing the capabilities. That would be sending someone into a sawtooth’s den without fire arrows. Whoever he had been in his past life, Uthid planned to learn and soon.

Uthid approached him and nodded to the machines. “How are they looking?”

“Almost finished with their meal,” Nilead answered. He held one whole fruit to the muzzle of a machine. It responded with a loud whirring sound. Seconds later, the fruit was completely dissolved, leaving his hand intact.

“How old were you when the Derangement started?” Uthid asked.

“Five years.”

Uthid estimated that would make the boy around twenty-five years of age. “Just a child. You hardly remember the peace.”

“I have glimpses of their tranquility,” Nilead replied. “I couldn’t understand what made them different than regular animals until I snuck close enough to a strider and put my hand on its metal exterior. It was there I felt a thrum of life far different than an animal’s, one with a purpose predestined before its making.”

“They’re much similar to us soldiers in that regard, flesh and blood or not,” Uthid said. “The Sun forges our paths before we can comprehend what it is that blinds us.”

“So it is,” Nilead said quietly. By the look of his bloodshot eyes, the painkillers he consumed earlier had already worn off and the wound on his shoulder likely seared like a thousand suns. Uthid recognized the handiwork as Lady Jiranah's but didn't comment on it since mentioning the mad-king’s elder sister served to rile up Erend into a moody mess.

Erend groaned as he approached Aloy. “Do we have to keep riding machines? My skin is chaffed in weird places from riding all morning.”

“Then take off your armor,” Aloy said.

“That’s like telling a snapmaw to remove its teeth.”

Uthid didn't see the comparison.

“It’s like I told you before: sit straight, move your hips with the machine, and lead with your weight.” Aloy mounted her machine and demonstrated the process from trot to canter.

“Like this?” Erend gave the mount a rough squeeze on the sides. He yelped in surprise as the machine rushed forward into a gallop, splashing mud everywhere in the process. “Help me stop this thing!”

Aloy placed two fingers to her lips and whistled. The mount stopped suddenly and trotted towards her. Uthid rushed over and helped secure the mount, grabbing the reins and giving a slight pull. Erend grunted and dismounted ungracefully from the machine. His auburn hair was a mess beneath his helm and his clothes were stained with machine oil and other elements. Uthid felt he wasn't a much better sight. Not every man was etched to brave the wilderness for extended periods of time. Enough was enough.

"According my map, there's another village not far from here by the name of Blessed Springs,” Uthid said. Traveling with Aloy and Erend in tow wasn't what he had originally planned, but there
wasn't another feasible option. "If we take to the hike now, we can arrive before sundown."

"Good," Erend huffed as he began unbuckling his plates. "I could use a real bed for once."

"I've never been there before," Aloy said. "Is there something you're looking for in the village?"

"Information," Uthid said. "I'm well acquainted with the village elder, Iridiv. He’s a former prefect of the western hold, back when no one else wanted to set foot in the land."

Aloy’s face fell. "I hope he didn’t hear what I did to the last Carjan prefect."

"Not all Carjan fortresses hold the same bloody history as Day Tower," Uthid assured her. "Every location on the western border serve as lookout points. During the Civil war, Iridiv personally funded shelters for refugees and ran several orphanages. I’ve no doubt that he and Queen Nasadi secretly maintained correspondence during her stay in Sunfall. He’s a good man, that I am certain of. If there’s sensitive information to be found, they should trust me enough to share it."

"Sounds like a good plan," she said.

"Agreed," Erend said. "We gotta tell them to be on the lookout for Lady Whatsurname."

"What?" Aloy exclaimed.

"We’ll do no such thing," Uthid declared. "Announcing her presence will only cause unnecessary panic in the community. There’s nothing more dangerous than ignorance and fear combined."

"I can attest to that," Aloy added.

"And you think withholding information keeps them safer?" Erend demanded. "She tried to murder Vanasha!"

"But we don’t know why, Erend," Aloy said.

"I don’t plan to wait and find out," Erend said.

"The matter is as simple as this: As a former combat medic, self-preservation is an essential part of Lady Jiranah’s duty," Uthid said. "When the three of us appeared, she likely reasoned it to be an ambush and responded accordingly, attacking her closest target."

"Vanasha," Erend said. "Okay, I get that part."

"Know this, Captain Erend," Uthid said. "Not only has Lady Jiranah saved more lives than you’ve taken, she is Sun-King Avad’s aunt by blood. That means only His Radiance has the power to warrant her arrest. Neither you nor I. Is that clear?"

Aloy nodded.

Erend frowned. "If you say so."

Uthid knew it was a risky stance to take, especially in light of the Red Raids. But the royal family had suffered enough losses and couldn’t afford more. He only hoped that somewhere in Lady Jiranah’s icy heart was a similar sentiment.

The mounts miraculously survived the rough trail through the waterlogged forest. By early evening, Blessed Springs was barely visible through the trees. Small and quaint, the village lacked
the same eloquence that Carjans designs boasted. Modest huts with angled roofs stood on stilts to accommodate the flood region. Steam from hot ponds were a waking sight. Outside the palisades, traveling hunters, caravans, and wanderers came to trade.

Uthid dismounted his machine and approached Nilead as he slipped from his respective mount. "We're representing the Sun-King now, boy. Therefore, I suggest you make yourself decent." He handed him a portion of the royal stipend to use.

"As you command." Nilead took the shards and approached a merchant for barter. Before the transaction could finish, Aloy reached into her satchel and handed over a longleg lens and a handful of shards.

"That's not necessary," Nilead told her.

"Consider it a proper thank you," Aloy hissed. Then she stormed away to the fire pit.

Through a tight jaw, Nilead slipped the new vest onto his shoulder, careful not to snag the threads on his wound. Uthid glanced carefully at Aloy then back at Nilead. "Did something happen between the two of you that I’m not aware of?"

Nilead’s expression soured further. “The sun-king requested that I accompany the Anointed One on her exploration. Nothing more, nothing less.”

This strange young man had a way of answering questions without explaining himself at all. Uthid wondered for a moment if he were speaking to a soldier or a noble.

"Rumors say you hunt brigands for sport," Uthid said. "Your victims trail from the light of Daytower across the Sundom."

There was silence. Nilead glanced up as if unsure of how to correctly respond. “Old habits lay dormant within the mind."

“It’s not a criticism, young man,” Uthid said. “In fact, it's quite impressive for it seems you’ve not let your soldier’s edge to grow dull but kept it sharp ever since your discharge from the military. The sun-king is especially grateful that such vigilance remains alive in Carja sons in this time of need.”

“His Radiance has shown me generosity that exceeds any ruler before him," Nilead said. "I am truly in his debt."

“As we all are,” Uthid said. “Now, our primary concern is finding the lead to these murders. Once the village has been adequately secured against outside threats, only then will we be able to operate smoothly. I understand you are injured on top of being out of the field for two years, however, given the urgency of our mission, I can only extend a limited amount of leniency.”

Erend jumped into the conversation. “Yeah, we need to make sure this place is safe to stay for the night.” He looked to Nilead. “I’ll look it over with the village guard after dinner. I think you oughtta check over the outer wall. Can you handle that by yourself or should I come with you?”

Nilead gave the village walls one sweep with his colorless eyes and pointed upwards. “Stones protrude in a manner that any amateur thief could scale. In positions that require at least five archers there are only three. The lack of footprints imply that ground patrol routes have been neglected.” He glanced back at Erend. “For the record, I’m injured, not blind.”

It was Aloy’s turn to state her opinion. “Quit being an ass, Nil. Erend’s only trying to help.” She
turned to Uthid. “The village’s safety is a concern for me, too. I’ll go with Nil and look around the area then check back in with you.”

“What about meeting with the village elder?” Erend asked.

“Whoever said I was going to do that?” Aloy asked.

“And you’d rather waste precious time in the wilderness?” Erend demanded.

“What I do isn’t any of your business!” Aloy shouted.

Uthid felt control slipping away from him once more. “No one is doing anything until we’ve consulted with Iridiv! This is his freehold and he will see to it that its security is adequately maintained, not outsiders! Is that clear?”

“As you wish,” Nilead replied smoothly.

“That will be wasting time,” Aloy grumbled.

“Not our problem, Aloy,” Erend said.

The gates finally opened. Uthid noticed Nilead stiffen when an older woman came forward. He slinked back into the shadows like a stalker retreating from a hunt.

“Uthid! It has been so long!” she squawked.

Uthid didn’t recognize the old woman at first, as the years had weathered her skin and turned her hair grey. The silks she wore reflected her noble status, in spite of how the highly saturated dyes made her skin appear sickly pale. He silently lamented that this wasn’t Iridiv greeting him, but rather his wife, Ranadi. He nodded to her. “It is our honor, Ranadi. How is your tailoring keeping up?”

The woman’s eyes brightened. “You remember?”

“Of course,” Uthid chuckled. “No one can quite charm a needle as well as you.”

“How you flatter me!” Ranadi laughed. She glanced around the dirt-covered outlanders and smiled with chagrin. “I see you brought company. Who might they be?”

Uthid indicated to his travel-worn charges as if he were formally presenting them at a ceremony. “Behold, Captain Erend of the Sun-King’s Vanguard, and Aloy, Anointed of the Nora, Savior of Meridian and the Sun-King.”

Ranadi beamed at her. “The Savior of Meridian and the Sun-king! The land has been flooded with your marvelous deeds! How the Sun’s radiance blesses us with your presence!” Heads turned at the sound of the title. Seconds later, curious eyes settled on Aloy like a dust cloud. Aloy looked anxious, as if spears had been pointed at her.

Ranadi peered over at the chargers standing idly by the gates. “So, the rumors are true. Your spear is blessed by the sun itself, able to calm the machines’ fury and turn them peaceful.”

“That’s not exactly how it works,” Aloy replied.

“Just go with it, Aloy,” Erend said.

“May we proceed then?” Uthid asked quickly. “I must speak with Iridiv. It’s urgent.”
“Ah yes. I’m sure,” Ranadi said. “However, my husband is laying sick in bed. In his place, I would like to make sure you and your company are properly accommodated. Will that work?”

Uthid felt his stomach drop. This wasn’t good news at all. He cleared his throat and nodded. “Certainly.”

As Erend and Aloy went forward, Uthid walked over to the gate where Nilead was leading the chargers around to the other side. Aloy’s irritable mood was assuredly because of him. Knowing that, Uthid knew how to solve the issue and this time he would give orders without interruption.

“Look over the perimeter,” Uthid said. “Once you’re through, meet me at the gates when the sun falls upon the tree line. Remember to observe and report back only. Tribal relations are tense enough as it is. I’m certain you’re at least capable of that.”

“As you command,” Nilead said. Without another word, he reached into his pocket and took out a shiny object. Then he turned to Aloy who looked as if she was trying to incinerate him with her eyes.

“Can I trust you to stay alive out there?” she asked.

“That all depends if you’re willing to behave yourself in here,” Nilead said coolly.

Aloy shoved his hand away. “Keep it. That means you have to come back alive.”

Nil inclined his head with respect. “As you wish.”

Ranadi made off like a clucking chicken as she guided them through the village. By the sun, the woman could speak a meter a minute and was eager to verbalize the tales of Aloy’s deeds throughout the land as if reciting her own life story back to her. For one to rejoice in another’s heroic actions, despite not taking part of the dangerous action at all, seemed to allow them to share a piece of the glory. It was an outrageous sentiment that nobles seemed to share. Aloy looked like she was barely stomaching the constant chatter. Luckily, Erend Vanguardsman knew the importance of public relations. Every now and then, he would encourage the excitement with comments of his own.

- “Yeah, I remember that!”
- “Hmph, that’s only a smidgeon of the real truth. They’re leaving out the part where…”
- “Words don’t do it justice. You ought to have been there, right Aloy?”

Aloy nodded and walked on, sometimes slowly while pushing at something invisible with her hands. These idiosyncrasies of hers were strange, but if that was needed to keep her from biting back like a snapmaw, Uthid was willing to overlook it.

Just beyond the orphanage was a stone wall that had been erected as a secondary palisade around the lord’s residence and the sun temple. Pious priests and Carjan travelers paid their respects next to burning incense. On a hill, looming over the monastery was Iridiv’s keep, a three-story building with a wing flanking each side. Ranadi led them to the gate and into her husband’s property. Carjan banners tapered down the sides of the keep. Cushions and chairs were thrown about the balcony, unused. Servants went about the residence, wiping their brows, planting flowers, and sweeping the porches clean.

“Quickly inside before the rain drenches us all,” Ranadi said. An elderly steward opened the door
and led them into the keep.

"I informed the Blameless Marad that I would be heading this direction." Uthid said. "You should expect another team arriving within a few days. They’ll be carrying mission critical information."

"Then I'll make sure we'll be prepared to receive them," Ranadi said with a cheer. "I’m certain you’re famished from your travels. Let us enjoy the evening meal together."

"Yes," Uthid said before Aloy could protest that she wasn’t hungry. He drew his handkerchief and wiped the sweat from his brow. Had Iridiv met with him as hoped, their business would have been conducted in a smoother manner. He had no choice but to tolerate the rituals for now.

Dinner began in awkward silence. Servants rushed forward from the kitchen with trays of food. Maize bread beside fruit preserves and an assortment of nuts, steamed squash decorated with flavorful garnish. Slow-roasted turkey legs were placed in the center. Uthid felt his stomach rumble. A traditional food platter for nobility, meaning that it was enough to feed an entire barracks. Erend scarfed down his food and spoke between the bits while Aloy hardly touched her plate.

Uthid quietly marveled at how well Erend was able to maintain a cordial conversation, filling the room with easy laughs and genuine smiles. He was a standup kind of man that was able to represent his own tribe and the Carja simultaneously, which fit well with the Sun-King's idea of a progressive civilization. It was only Erend's joking commentary that walked a dangerous line between humorous and outright offensive. Like a general making risks on the battlefield, Erend did the same among strangers, and it seemed to be serving them well.

Another tapestry hung in the dining room depicting two dark-skinned gentlemen. Ranadi introduced them accordingly. "Our lovely neighbors to the north west, Benivad and Lubavad, self-appointed princes of mercantilism. The economy has benefited from their dealings with outsiders, though Sun keep at the back."

Aloy glanced upwards. "The tapestry has a mistake. Lubavad’s birthmark is on the left side of his cheek, not the right one."

Erend spoke over her comment. "If the man wants to step up his trade, he oughtta pay a visit to Pitchcliff. The Oseram sell more metal than what the Banuk will give you in a winter at a better price and with less ritual mumbo-jumbo carved into it."

Aloy frowned at him. "Is it possible for you to not be disrespectful for one minute?"

"I wasn’t being disrespectful."

"Yes, you were."

"Everyone knows that the Banuk claim this weapon or that armor is blessed with some fraud protection ward so they can hike up the prices on their merchandise," Erend said. "That’s why the Oseram don’t bother with them. We try to spread the word to other tribes so they don’t end up getting tricked out of shards."

"Those so-called fraudulent materials happen to be priceless artifacts to the Banuk," Aloy said. "They wouldn’t give them up unless they were completely desperate."

"I’m just saying, if you want to purchase well-made material that isn’t going to come apart after the first fight, go with Oseram," Erend said.
"Of course, of course," Ranadi said.

“I need to refill my flask,” Aloy said, despite her cup being full of water.

Ranadi snapped her fingers and a servant girl stepped forward. “This one will show you to the fountain.” Aloy quietly left the table with the servant in pursuit.

Erend grinned at Ranadi. “Not what you expected, huh?”

“Oh, the rumors don’t do her justice at all,” Ranadi said. "Aloy of the Nora is beyond what anyone could imagine."

“Wait until you see her fight. With her at our side, we were able to take down an entire full mercenary base.”

"That sounds dangerous."

"We call it a regular day."

"Have you known her long?"

"You could say that," Erend leaned back in his chair. "Actually, I met Aloy awhile back at one of those Proving ceremonies, right in Mother's Heart, the Nora capital."

Ranadi smiled uneasily. “You've witnessed the Nora rituals in person?”

“Yes indeed,” Erend said.

“Do they really worship that mountain?”

“They do.”

One of the guards behind Uthid sniggered. “A mountain… No wonder they’re in trouble…” He was ashamed that he used to share the same sentiments.

“And is it true that both men and women lodge together?” Ranadi asked.

“Yeah, kind of like a barracks,” Erend said.

“Oh dear,” Ranadi murmured. She glanced at Uthid for guidance. “As the Sun-King's military expert, what do you make of that?”

“How the Nora govern themselves is none of my concern,” Uthid said. “They’re a different people who fight to protect what's theirs as anyone else would. That’s all.” He didn't want to give any details about his firsthand experience with the Nora.

“Yeah, but anyone can see that Aloy's different,” Erend continued. "From the moment I met her, I could see she stood out from the Nora in every way possible. To be honest I don’t know how she keeps herself so maintained out there in those sticks.” The dining room erupted in hearty laughter, servants and guards alike. Ranadi’s eyes gleamed humorously from the other end of the table.

Aloy came around the corner just in time to hear the remark. “You mean the natural world where not everything’s been overturned by scroungers and delvers? Where I’m allowed proper sleep because there’s no constant noise from metal clanging all through the night?”

Erend looked at her as if she had struck him with a rock. “Easy there. I was only saying your
“Then don’t do it at nature’s expense!” Aloy snapped. Her voice cracked and she looked ready to cry. “Did you forget that countless lives were lost to protect these sticks we sleep on?” She stormed out of the dining room without any intent to return.

Ranadi glanced puzzedly at Uthid. "You must forgive her," he said quickly. "We've traveled a great deal and Aloy is weary from the journey."

"I understand," Ranadi said. "Then I plead you stay in the village a while longer. There is no need to rush yourselves."

"We will not take the gesture for granted," Uthid said.

Ranadi set aside her napkin and stood. "I must retire for the night. I will send for you as soon as my husband is fit for conversation." She departed the room with two guardsmen accompanying her to the residential quarters. Servants moved to gather dishes and uneaten meal portions. Once they were gone, the dining room fell silent except for the lingering tension and clinging sounds of ring-locked armor.

Erend stopped fidgeting and began to leave his seat. “I guess I ought to apologize.”

“I doubt that will be any consolation,” Uthid said. “Leave her be.”

“Allright then,” Erend sighed. He began tapping his foot anxiously on the rug. "Say... how exactly did you and Aloy meet? The Blameless Marad told me it had something to do with mercenaries chasing after you."

Uthid found his question abnormal since it wasn't like Captain Erend to talk about anyone but himself. “Blind stupidity,” he answered. “After serving hands of corruption in Sunfall, I was sentenced to death for a crime I did not commit. Instead of perishing that day along with my reputation, I was found by a young girl on the search for truth instead of reward. That is Aloy. And before her, any Nora I came across met their end at my spear.”

Erend nodded. "Yeah, that's Aloy alright." He had completely overlooked the sentiment of shame Uthid had shared with him.

The sun was setting below the tree-canopy as Uthid made his way into the courtyard. Jewel-Green and blue creepers dotted the standing flowerbeds. Much of the foliage was wilted and unkept. Uthid wondered if the gardener in residence was sick in bed too. Down the winding path, a flash of red hair was seen glimmering in the firelight. He found Aloy sitting beneath a tarp waiving her hands in the air.

"You ought to rest and preserve your strength," Uthid said.

“I’m not sleeping until Nil gets back from the patrol,” Aloy said stubbornly.

Uthid stood in disbelief. She was fussing now that he was away?

"That’s not necessary," he said. “As a Carjan soldier, it is his sworn duty to sacrifice his own comfort so that you don’t have to.”

“And as a Brave, it’s my duty to make sure that the war party is all accounted for,” Aloy retorted. Then she began massaging her wrist. “I'm worried, Uthid. He has these nightmares."
“Every soldier has nightmares. Our own peace is the price we pay for the tribe’s victory.”

“I’m sure it is. Sometimes this peace he’s lived without for so long causes him to turn violent in his sleep. Something could happen if I’m not there. But even then I don’t know what to do.”

“Does he tell you what these nightmares are about?”

“No,” Aloy said flatly. “Asking Nil to share anything personal is like prying a crate from a shell-walker.”

“Because to speak of it is to relive it,” Uthid said.

Aloy lifted her head, now curious. “Did you two serve together in the Carja wars?”

“Not in the same company,” Uthid said. “But if I remember correctly, this one served west of Sunfall and near the Daunt. Because of that, it’s probably best that he didn’t openly show his face around the village.” Aloy looked away with quiet dissatisfaction. “I’m starting to see that it’s not just faith you take issue with, is it? It’s abiding by the rules of others, which explains why you were found in a place you shouldn’t have been.”

“Rules and boundaries kept me excluded from the tribe since the day I was born,” Aloy said. “Since the Nora weren’t going to give me the answers, I decided to search them out myself.”

“And I am very grateful for your need to satiate your curiosity,” Uthid said. “Without it, I’m not certain I’d still be here to have this conversation with you.”

Aloy smiled at that, though her mind was in another place now, examining the intricate silk brocade that fell like water around her fingers. She gazed at the robes as if searching for secrets that had been overlooked. “Not long ago I met a Banuk wanderer who told me what the Carja did to the shamans during the Red Raids. What’s going to happen to her? Now?”

“As advisor to the sun-king, I am obligated to inform the council of our encounter,” Uthid answered. “Captain Erend was trailing behind the group, so he didn’t get a clear glimpse of her. Nilead had barely gained consciousness and Vanasha’s neck was promptly lacerated. That leaves only you and I who got a clear look at Lady Jiranah before she disappeared into the shadows. With very few clues to go on, The Blameless Marad’s agents will rely on us for a detailed witness account of what we saw. After that, they’ll put forth an investigation of her whereabouts and recent dealings, especially her former ties to assassin clans. On top of being the Mad Sun-king’s elder sister, Marad isn’t going to take this lightly.”

“Like you said before, she’s Sun-King Avad’s aunt,” Aloy said. “That should matter, shouldn’t it?”

“Sun-King Avad also slew someone very dear to her,” Uthid said. “If she was aware of your allegiance to the sun-king, there’s no telling what she would have done to you. Until we can be certain of her motives, I’d prefer that you didn’t put yourself at risk by pursuing her, or until I know where she stands.”

Aloy huffed. “More wait and see. What else did I expect?”

“I understand your frustration, Aloy,” Uthid said. “As a youth serving in the infantry, I watched her spend sleepless nights tending to her patients doing all she could to ensure their survival, even if it meant driving herself into the ground. To condemn someone with her level of medical expertise would be a waste.”

“How did someone that dedicated fall out of favor with her own tribe in the first place?” Aloy
asked.

Uthid shook his head. “The politics of my tribe are fickle.”

“That’s an understatement,” Aloy said. "If that’s how quickly the tribe is willing to condemn someone, it’s no wonder she’s so hostile."

A rush of wind swept through the trees like an exhale of life into the forest. His mind was taken back to the frozen north near the Icerasps. An entire patrol laid massacred at his feet, ripped limb from limb. As his fingers went numb, Uthid wondered aloud what kind of heartless beast would commit such a crime.

*Not a man or a beast.* The Sun Fang’s dark eyes looked beyond icy valley. Later he would learn, the truth was sadder than they knew.

“It’s fear, Aloy,” Uthid said. “Fear isn’t based in reason and because of that there is no reasoning with someone who is afraid. Think of Captain Erend. He is anxious because he cannot defend you against what he can’t see or understand. Putting a name to what he fears helps to ease his mind for the time being.”

Aloy leaned over her knees and gazed sourly at the ground. "He and the Nora have a lot in common then." She stroked the silk robes one more time and took her hand away. “Well… How are things in Meridian?”

Uthid was relieved she finally asked. “Ah, Sun-King Avad mentioned you showed interest in the Sundom’s politics. Meridian is making a slow recovery. Rebuilding all that’s been destroyed in the attack is a costly effort and what concerns many people is how Sun-King Avad is going to deal with the new prisoners, how to punish them or if any punishment is going to come at all. Feeding grain to those responsible for its limited supply doesn’t sit well with Meridian’s populace.”

“What else would Avad do with the prisoners?”

“He’s spoken of pressing them into the military and replenish what numbers were lost. We were a single tribe once upon a time and he wishes for his subjects to remember that.”

Aloy snorted. “I’m sure that opinion’s popular after everything’s that happened.”

“Certainly not when the majority of his personal vanguard happen to be Oseram.”

“Sounds like they don’t have your approval.”

“Not their existence. Only their methods of execution, so to speak,” Uthid said. His eyes glanced at Erend who was on route to the tavern.

“He just lost his sister and taking on her responsibilities hasn’t been easy on him.” Aloy said. "He just needs time to get used to it."

“It’s the culture, Aloy,” Uthid said. “Freebooters think they can brute force their way through any situation. Rather than hold meetings in an organized fashion, they shout over one another and shove each other around. But because they’re a large faction of the military, Sun-King Avad lets them do as they please. And the more Sun-King Avad is willing to give in reparations for actions that were not his own, the more they demand. There is simply no appeasing them.” He paused and glanced cautiously to Aloy. “Please don’t share these personal sentiments with others.”

Aloy shrugged. “I’m not against unpopular opinions, as long as they’re from honest lips.”
Uthid smiled at that. After talking to her more, he saw how easily she captured Avad’s admiration. “Pray tell what the Nora think of the Carja?”

Aloy placed her chin over her fists and gazed into the firelight. “Truth be told, there’s not many Nora left to hold an opinion worth valuing.”

“I apologize, Aloy.”

“What’s done is done. With Avad’s help, hopefully the tribes can rebuild and prosper.”

Uthid grew curious. “Has the Sun-King been on your mind lately?”

She nodded. “He has. There’s so much we need to talk about once we return to Meridian. Maybe the issues with the vanguard can be addressed?”

“Sun-king Avad is a benevolent ruler, and he holds a high opinion of you. Whatever you have to say, I’m sure he’ll take time to listen.”

Aloy then smiled, giving Uthid the assurance he needed.

Chapter End Notes

Another long break, another long chapter! Sorry for any editing mistakes I've overlooked. *dies internally*

I’m sooo grateful for the wonderful comments you readers have left me! Do not fear, I have not abandoned this story. Thank you for your patience and supportive words :D

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!