Stormbirds and Stalkers: A Tale of Aloy and Nil

by queenofkadara

Summary

The silver-eyed Carja soldier was the most unusual person Aloy had ever met: strange and dangerous, with an off-putting lust for blood. As Aloy travelled from the Sacred Lands to the Sundom, the silver-eyed killer kept appearing... and Aloy soon found herself with a travelling companion she'd never expected.

The flame-haired huntress was skilled with bow and spear, but her talents were wasted on the machines. If only Nil could convince her to bring those talents to bear on a more... tantalizing genre of prey.

*****

This love story tells the tale of Aloy and Nil getting together over the course of the game. Perfect for serious Niloy shippers who want more Nil backstory!

Eventual super-NSFW Smut, with a capital S. But I meant it when I tagged this as Slow Burn/Slow Build. Impatient shippers can skip to Chap 9 (Heartbroken) to get more pure
Niloy time... and SUPER impatient smut lovers, Chap 11 (Waterfall) onwards.
"There was a foolish and yet delicious sense of knowing himself as an animal come from the forest, drawn by the fire. He was a thing of brush and liquid and eye, of fur, and muzzle and hoof. He was a thing of horn and blood that would smell like autumn if you bled it out on the ground." - Fahrenheit 451, by Ray Bradbury

Nil crouched by the river’s edge, listening to the rushing water, watching the ebb and flow of the delicate rivulets as they danced and slithered over stones and pebbles in their unerring path.

It reminded him of blood.

Oh, the flow of blood was certainly more sluggish, more languorous than the impatient rush of the river. He reminisced about crimson droplets dripping stickily, soaking into the dusty earth, their presence as fleeting as the joy that had heralded their release.

He sighed with bored resignation. His partner wasn’t coming back.

Bajar had slunk away some time ago to “check out the camp”, just before the sun had fully set. The final glow of its rays had long since faded, and Bajar still hadn’t returned.

The moment Bajar had gone off on his own, Nil had suspected that this would happen. Both he and Bajar were hungry for the thrill of death, for the coppery scent of blood in their nostrils, but Bajar had no patience and too much to prove.

Nil rose and brushed the riverbank dust from his knees, then headed towards the hillside to find shelter for the night. Then he heard the sound.

It was impossible to miss, really: a loud rustling of tall grass, laboured breathing, the occasional groan of pain. Bajar, finally returned from his ill-fated explorations, he thought. Regardless, he crouched in the grass to camouflage himself, in case he was wrong.

He wasn’t wrong. Bajar burst from the grass, one arm clasped across his abdomen, and collapsed clumsily on all fours before dragging himself painfully towards the river. The wounded man left a heavy dark trail on the road as he slithered over grass and rock.

Nil sighed. He wanted blood, yes, but not like this. There was no satisfaction in this. He stood and walked towards Bajar.

Bajar turned his head in panic at the sound, then relaxed somewhat with recognition. “Nil! I... The camp was too many men-” His anxious yammering trailed off as a cough wracked his body, and a gobbet of dark blood dribbled from his chin. “... too many men to take alone. I shouldn’t have…”

Nil crouched at Bajar’s side. “Did any follow you back?” he asked, his voice gentle and soothing.

“No,” Bajar gasped. “I waited in the grass until they thought I was dead. It took so long…” He coughed again, and spat another gob of bloody phlegm. Cautiously, Bajar lifted his arm from his abdomen. Viscous, half-clotted blood continued to leak from a large, ugly wound that crossed from the base of his ribs almost to his opposite hip.

Bajar looked up at Nil pleadingly. “Will you help me pack the wound?”
“No.”

Nil’s hand moved faster than an enraged Snapmaw. Fresh, hot blood splashed in the dirt at his feet as Bajar’s silenced body slumped nervelessly on the ground.

Nil sighed and watched the blood soak into the ground. It was like the Sun Ring… but there was no satisfaction in this.

He wiped his knife on Bajar’s clothes and sheathed it. With the ease of long practice, he rolled Bajar’s body away from the river; no sense letting Bajar’s blood taint the river.

Then, with heavy resignation, Nil walked back towards the hill to settle down for the night. It looked like the bandit camp would have to wait until he could figure out the best way to take it down on his own.

It wasn’t impossible to exterminate a bandit camp alone, but it was considerably more dangerous. And Nil wasn’t ready or willing to give up his own lifeblood. Not just yet, not when there was so much sport to be had, and so many filthy bandits to hunt.

Soon, he consoled himself. *Good things come to those who lie in wait.*

**********

Dawn was breaking across Nora land.

The air was fresh and cool without being cold, and the breeze became a rejuvenating wind as it rushed through Aloy’s hair. Her Strider bolted through the long grass and trees, and Aloy lay low along its wiry back to minimize the drag of the wind on her clothes.

Dawn was Aloy’s favourite time of day. She always felt invigorated by the promise of a new day, and there was nothing quite like the peace and quiet before animals - and people - started their daily activities.

As Aloy rounded a low grassy rise, a campfire site loomed into view. She leapt off of her Strider and rolled into position beside the fire, then tossed her hair impatiently out of her face and lit a fire. She sat for a few minutes and warmed her hands by the fire’s merry glow; her fingers were thoroughly chilled from her brisk morning ride.

Aloy’s body was thrumming with impatience to move on, to continue forward, but she forced herself to take a few minutes’ respite. With everything that had happened over the past few weeks while she was unconscious - the war party massacre, the Corruptor attack on the village, Rost being buried without her presence… Aloy had felt compelled to act, compelled to help as soon as she had stepped out of Mother’s Mountain. But she also knew she couldn’t push herself too hard without feeling the consequences later. After all, she was still recovering from some of the deeper bruises from her tumble down the cliff, after Rost had saved her…

Aloy took a deep breath through her nose to fight back the sudden burn of tears that accompanied the thought of Rost. *Stubborn, boarheaded, too honorouble for his own good,* she thought furiously, even as her chest ached with sadness. Deep down, Aloy knew that anger was just another facet of her grief, but she couldn’t help but feel sorry for herself sometimes, now that she was completely alone.

A sudden movement to her right grabbed her attention. Slowly, she rose to an alert crouching
position. About twenty paces away, a tuft of bright red feathers caught her eye. It was too bright and too plentiful to belong to any kind of bird Aloy had ever seen in the Embrace.

The most logical conclusion was this: she was looking at a human’s hat or headdress.

*What kind of careless idiot would wear a bright red headdress while hunting?* she thought. Slowly, she crept into the long grass and made her way towards the wearer of the headdress.

It belonged to a man, old enough to be an experienced Brave; perhaps a few years older than Aloy. But he was most certainly not Nora. His clothing was completely foreign, the likes of which Aloy had never seen: a red scarf and a red vest trimmed in gold; loose purple trousers; sleek, well-made greaves and vambraces of machine metal; and that ridiculously impractical headdress. Erend, Olin and the other outlanders who’d attended the Blessing hadn't dressed like this.

Aloy paused in the grass and observed the man for a couple of minutes. He crouched close to the river, his gaze on a dead body beside him.

A small chill ran up Aloy’s back. There were three dead bodies in the man’s vicinity, and he seemed to be examining one of them at leisure. His body language looked completely at ease. *A murderer?* she wondered. Perhaps he needed to be escorted off Nora land… forcibly, if need be.

Aloy slowly crept back towards her campfire so as not to be seen. In the cover a tall boulder, she rose to full height and then slowly approached the man head-on, leaving her Strider at the campfire so as not to alarm. If Varl’s reaction was anything to go by, seeing a Strider plowing towards oneself - even a tamed Strider - was… unnerving.

The man looked up as he saw her approach and nodded a casual greeting. He seemed utterly unperturbed by the fact that she was now witness to the bodies scattered around him. Aloy narrowed her eyes, partly with suspicion, but more with a growing curiosity. Who would just crouch among dead bodies with such a lack of concern or guilt? Perhaps he had just happened upon the bodies while passing?

Yeah, right. And Lansra will welcome me with open arms and offer to braid my hair next time I’m in Mother’s Heart. She smirked sarcastically to herself at the thought.

As Aloy drew level with the man, he stood to full height, and Aloy got her first good look at him. He was tall, about half a head taller than her. His skin had a golden tinge, but was unexpectedly pale for someone who wore so little clothing. And his eyes… Aloy forced herself not to stare at them, but they were the oddest-coloured eyes she’d ever seen: a pale silvery-grey that reminded her of machine steel.

The man loomed over her unsmiling, but there was a hint of humour dancing in his unusual silver eyes. “There’s danger ahead, girl,” he said, and his voice was deep and matter-of-fact.

“Danger for you, Outlander. This is Nora land,” Aloy warned, but with no real heat. She couldn’t help but be curious. Up close, the red-and-gold fabric and geometric patterns of his clothes were reminiscent of the priest Irid’s gown, but with no other examples of Carja for comparison, Aloy couldn't be sure this man was from that tribe. But the bareness of his chest was certainly not Nora.

It was on the tip of Aloy’s tongue to ask him if he wasn't cold, but he spoke again in a dismissive voice. “Yes yes, trespass is forbidden on pain of death…”

His face took on a pensive look. “Strange phrase, ‘the pain of death.’” He gestured to the dead body he’d been examining. “See, this one’s in no pain at all.”
Aloy narrowed her eyes slightly. “Who was he?”

The man shrugged dismissively. “A thief, a slaver, a killer… the kind that gives honest killers a bad
name.” He smiled, but the expression only made his face look predatory.

Aloy sighed and looked down at the bodies. She may never have seen a bandit before, but these men
were very heavily armed… and the valuable shards and scrap littered around their bodies was a sharp
contrast to the ragged clothing they wore. “Varl told me there would be bandit ambushes on the
road,” she muttered, mostly to herself.

The man replied, his voice sounding oddly apologetic. “Well, it’s not all good news. They don’t
always come to you. Most dig out a camp, and there they’ll sit like spoil on meat.”

Aloy glanced at him sharply, one eyebrow unconsciously raised in puzzlement. Why would bandits
attacking ever be good news? And why does he talk like that? Like he’s coming up with poetry on
the fly?

Then she caught his expression. His eyebrows were raised expectantly as he watched her.
Oh. He
wants something from me, she thought with a touch of resignation. It seemed that everyone she met
along the road needed something from her. At this rate, it could be weeks before she left the Sacred
Lands. “Unless… someone does something about it?” she guessed.

The man smiled again, and this time the expression lit his face with warmth. A strange, irrelevant
thought entered Aloy’s mind: He’s handsome. She wasn’t sure why she hadn’t noticed it the first
time she looked at him. More importantly, she wasn’t sure why she even noticed it at all.

“I like you,” the man said, and his voice was tinged with approval. “Follow the trail of smoke on the
other side of the ruins. I’ll be there.” Apparently he was finished with their conversation, because he
crouched down again, his attention back on the body beside him.

Aloy shrugged. She was heading in the direction of Devil’s Thirst anyway; her Focus was picking
up a signal in that direction, not too far from here, and she intended to check it out. Meeting this
mystery outlander wouldn’t take her very far out of her way.

She looked at the other two dead bandits. There were a lot of resources littered around them, and
Aloy was a strong believer in waste-not, want-not. “Do you… mind if I search these bodies?” she
asked tentatively. After all, they were his kills.

He waved a magnanimous hand towards the bodies, then watched Aloy while she gingerly patted
the bodies down and divested them of their riches. When she was finished, she looked up at him; his
eyes were still on her, and there was a tiny smirk playing across his lips.

“What are you waiting for?” Aloy blurted. His watchful silver eyes were unnerving her, making her
feel the need to break the awkward silence.

The man nodded his head at the body beside him. “This one and I just need a moment longer. To
reflect on all we’ve been through.”

Aloy wrinkled her nose in confusion and a bit of disgust. “What does that even mean?” she asked
bluntly. Did it mean he was praying? He didn’t seem to be; he looked far too content.

The man smiled up at her, but didn’t answer her question. Instead, all he said was, “We’ll see each
other again.”

Aloy frowned. “Well… I’m heading there now. When will you be finished your… reflection?”
“Soon, soon. Good things come to those who lie in wait,” he replied calmly. Then he smiled slightly to himself.

Aloy stared at him. *But we’re heading to a bandit camp. How is that a good thing?* she wondered with deepening bemusement. Of all the people she’d met in the Sacred Lands so far, this odd man with his predatory smile and his lilting, mocking voice was the strangest.

“Fine,” she said finally. “I’ll be going.” Without waiting for a reply - she was fairly sure it would be nonsensical anyway - she jogged back over to her Strider, hopped on its back, and rode away.

************************

Nil stood slowly, his silvery eyes tracing the path of the red-haired girl as she rode away on her Strider. *A demon of fire, riding away on her metal beast,* he mused. For the first time in years, he was feeling the thrill of surprise.

He’d never seen a tamed machine before - that is, a tamed and *non-hostile* machine. He and his erstwhile partner had had to avoid numerous pockets of corrupted machines on their way into the Nora’s lands. But a tamed, *friendly* machine whose purpose was not to kill?

Nil was a learned man, knowledgeable about the world and the wonderful horrors it held. But this flame-haired girl must have charms or talents beyond any that Nil had ever heard of.

*I wonder if her prowess with bow and spear will match her prowess with the machines.* If so, she could be a valuable partner indeed… and a formidable opponent.

He smiled to himself as a flash of excitement rushed through his body. Finally he stood, then dispassionately kicked the dead body into the long grass before setting off towards Devil’s Thirst.

************************

Late that night, Aloy crept up the hill towards the strange man. He was crouched on the grass, looking completely at ease as he surveyed the rough-looking camp across the hill. The camp was a messy sprawl surrounded by a crude, jutting barbican that pierced the sky in cruel jags and peaks. A rickety bridge connected the hill on which they stood to the hill where the camp lay.

As Aloy approached the strange man, he turned his red-feathered head towards her and beckoned her over. She crept close so she could see his face in the light of the moon.

“I’m glad you came,” he greeted her.

Aloy was surprised by this warm greeting. “You’re glad? Why?”

“Call it a shared interest. And call me Nil.” He smirked, his silver eyes eerily reflecting the silver light of the moon.

He pointed across the hill to the camp. “See those old rocks? A bandit clan squats under them. Disturb the rocks, and they’ll come wriggling out, worms that they are.”

*Bandits. Just as I thought,* Aloy brooded. She’d thought the three he’d dealt with this morning was bad enough, but a whole camp of them? “Why have they come here?” she wondered.

Nil’s mouth twisted ruefully. “The Nora are in trouble, and rumours spread like blood. With no braves to guard the border, killers hungry for sport slip right through.”
He shifted slightly, then continued, “My partner and I shadowed these scum for days. Good tracker, but he went on ahead without me. We’d talked about this kind of behaviour.” He gave a glib, mock-sad sigh that made Aloy frown. “Still, I understand. Leave it too long, and your fingers itch for the bowstring.”

Nil threw her a sly look. “Say, how about you and I work together, kill them all?” Nil raised his eyebrows and smiled at her as though he was offering her a delicious piece of winterberry cake.

Aloy frowned deeply. “I don’t know you. And I have no reason to trust you.” Especially since you seem to actually enjoy killing people, she added silently. Aloy was a Brave and a warrior, and she would kill an enemy without batting an eye, but she certainly didn’t actively search for people to kill. Truth be told, what Aloy enjoyed most was the thrill of exploration and discovery, followed closely by the skillful hunt for machines. She wasn’t a warrior at heart.

Nil nodded understandingly at her, as though he could hear her thoughts. “Trust is a rare egg to find, isn’t it?” he said sympathetically. “I’m just a traveler with a bow, a concern about the state of these lands, and a missing partner.” He blinked benignly at her.

Despite herself, Aloy felt a flash of amusement. “I don’t think you’re ‘just’ anything at all,” she retorted.

Nil grinned, an unguarded expression of amusement that jolted something in Aloy’s belly. “Hmm,” he murmured. “Let me put it another way. Are you a bandit?”

Aloy rolled her eyes. “Of course not!”

“Then you have nothing to fear from me,” he replied. Another benign blink of those metal-grey eyes.

Aloy pursed her lips and gave Nil an assessing look. He gave her a closed-lipped smile and tilted his head winningly. Finally Aloy sighed. “All right. Someone has to stop them from hurting others,” she conceded.

“And we will,” Nil reassured her. “We’ll stop them from doing anything… save screaming a while.”

Aloy wrinkled her nose with distaste, but Nil didn't seem to notice. “Go ahead and take the lead,” he said. “I look forward to seeing what you’re capable of.” He briefly pointed out the alarm and some cages with Nora captives, then stood and looked at her expectantly.

Without hesitation, Aloy scurried towards the bandit camp, her footsteps quick and silent. She slid swiftly into some long grass and tapped her Focus. Fifteen… no, sixteen bandits. And two captives, she thought, her mind sinking swiftly into strategy. If I focus on the people on the ramparts, Nil can keep an eye on the ones on the ground, make sure none approach or catch sight of me while I’m aiming. We should be able to do this completely silently, she thought, then turned to tell Nil her plan… and realized he wasn’t there.

What the…? Aloy frowned and looked around, her Focus still on… and then she saw him sauntering towards her without a care in the world, walking fully upright and not bothering to hide the sound of his steps. When he drew level with her, he crouched, then noticed her scowl. “What?” he said, surprised.

“You’re going to give our position away,” she hissed. “Do you want them to see us and start shooting?”

Nil frowned at her like she was the unreasonable one. “Yes,” he replied, and his voice dripped with isn’t-it-obvious? “The possibility of bloodshed, both mine and theirs, is part of the thrill.”
Aloy pursed her lips and looked pointedly at the armour plates protecting Nil’s limbs. His gear was a stark contrast with Aloy’s tunic and trousers. Teb had sewn them beautifully, but they were hardly what Aloy would call protective. “Well, some of us don’t have fancy armour. We’re doing this my way or not at all,” she commanded.

Nil nodded affably. “All right. I did tell you to take the lead, after all. I stand humbled, awaiting your command.”

Aloy relaxed slightly. At least he was willing to listen to a younger woman. Too bad the same can’t be said for everyone, she thought, thinking bitterly of Resh. She whispered her plan to Nil, who agreed without hesitation. Then, on Aloy’s cue, he slunk off towards the right so they could spread their fire.

Aloy watched him out of the corner of her eye as he slipped away. He was clearly skilled in subtlety; his noisy tromping from earlier was, as he had implied, a choice. But what kind of idiot would want to be shot at? Did he have a death wish or something?

Aloy put the thought out of her mind, then nocked an arrow and aimed. No time for that now. Time to focus.

******************

Some time later, sixteen bandits lay dead and a small group of Nora were tentatively entering the camp. Their leader, a kind, shy outcast named Jom, had explained to Aloy that he and his compatriots were outcasts who simply wanted to survive together in the wild. Aloy had happily given her blessing (such as it was) to their remaining here, even though it flew in the face of the Matriarchs’ wishes - perhaps because it would fly in the face of the Matriarchs’ wishes, if she was honest with herself.

As Aloy headed towards the rickety bridge, she realized that she hadn’t seen Nil since the last bandit had fallen. He’d disappeared when Jom and the other outcasts had started filtering in. Then she spotted him: he was standing on the hill where they’d met earlier that evening, his bow held loosely in his hand.

Slowly she approached him. His face was relaxed and complacent, and he grinned at her as she drew close. “Feels good, doesn’t it?” he said cheerfully. “Hold it inside you one last breath, then let it out.” He sighed happily.

Aloy made a noise of disgust. His bloodthirstiness was so… off-putting, and so contrastive with his mild-mannered politeness. “I didn’t find your partner,” she said.

Nil shrugged. “They killed him,” he said with an unnerving lack of concern. “I hardly feel surprised. He was already getting cocky when we carved through the last bandit camp.” He shook his head with mock-pity. “I thought he and I were agreed: only enjoy the killing as much as the challenge.”

Aloy frowned. She was starting to feel uncomfortable with his constant reference to how much he enjoyed killing.

Nil seemed to interpret her frown as concern as he assured her, “No great loss. Nothing in the wilds I can’t handle, just me and the Voice of Our Teeth here.” He raised his bow slightly.

Aloy was distracted from her distaste by surprise. “Your bow has a name?” she asked.

Nil looked at her like she was nuts. “Yours doesn’t?”
Aloy stared carefully at him. His manner was so glib, but his politeness and his sing-song way of talking hinted at hidden depths. “You’re not just a traveller,” she said. It was a statement, not a question. “That armour was fitted for you. And the way you hold your bow…” Indeed, the skill he’d shown in taking out the bandit camp was undeniable. Aloy knew she had fast reflexes - after all, she had won the Proving despite a terrible start - but Nil’s seemed to be just as fast.

Nil held up an admonishing finger. “I said a concerned traveller. I was a soldier… but I was a soldier for longer than there was a war, if you follow.”

He looked off towards the former bandit camp, his face softening slightly with wistfulness. “Where the arrowhead passes between armour and skin: that’s the place I belong. So I make opportunities to find it.” He turned back to look at her and smiled. “It’s like coming home.”

Aloy crossed her arms and frowned. “Have you ever thought about hunting machines?”

Nil pursed his lips and shook his head. “Nah. They don’t get that look in their eyes.”

A chill shivered down Aloy’s back at his words. He’s dangerous, her instincts screamed at her; not just because of his skill at violence, but because he relished it instead of considering it a last recourse. And yet, he had teamed up with her easily and gone along with her plan wholeheartedly, with no hint of betrayal or mutiny.

She stared at him a moment longer, and he gazed back at her, his face open and guileless. I guess I can say that much for him: he seems… honest, in his own way, she thought grudgingly.

“Did bandits wrong you somehow?” she asked. Maybe there was a good reason he hated them so much.

“They wrong us all,” Nil replied briskly. “They live filthy lives, so they have to die that way too.”

Aloy breathed a tiny sigh of relief. Well, that’s more normal, she thought. “So you hunt them down to help others?”

Nil frowned at her suddenly. “No, no. For sport,” he corrected, as though this was obvious. “I can’t wait for wars anymore. Life’s too short, and the thrill of death too sharp. If you kill a tribesman, there’ll be retribution. Hunt a boar, and they’ll complain if you waste the meat.

“But bandits?” He smiled slowly, and his face reminded Aloy of a thirsty man enjoying the first sip of honey mead. “They’re vicious; they always put up a fight; and no one cares if you kill them!” He nodded at her brightly, clearly under the impression that she would be impressed with his reasoning.

But Aloy was not impressed. What if one day, his fingers ‘itched for the bowstring’, as he had said earlier, and there was no bandit around to take the hit?

“I’m not sure who’s worse: you or them,” she scolded.

Nil smirked at her and tilted his head charmingly. “We’re standing, they’re not,” he explained. “Clearly we were better.”

That’s not what I mean and he knows it, Aloy thought in annoyance. A dangerous man indeed: a love for killing, the skill to do it well, and cleverness to talk his way out of trouble. Aloy wasn’t sure whether it would be best to avoid him, or keep tabs on him to make sure he didn’t hurt anyone who didn’t deserve it.
But for now, she had other things to do. She would revisit thoughts of this Nil person later. “We’re done here,” she said shortly, then whistled for a Strider.

“She? I’m afraid so,” Nil replied in his musical way. “But we live in a world of ruins. Bandits are drawn to them like infection to a wound.”

He leaned in close to her, lowering his voice conspiratorially. “You wouldn’t let that infection set in, would you? I’m sure we’ll meet again.”

Aloy stepped away from him, but not before the breeze wafted his scent towards her: a warm, masculine smell that reminded her somewhat of Rost, layered with an exotic, tangy, unexpectedly fresh scent that Aloy had never smelled before. Some kind of perfume?

*How can someone so rotten smell so nice?* she wondered, feeling slightly offended by how much she appreciated his scent. “Maybe,” she replied grudgingly. “If it can’t be helped.” She vaulted onto her Strider’s back.

Nil’s gaze swept over the tamed Strider with open admiration, then fixed on her face again. “If we pass each other by, we’ll know it by our work,” he said mildly.

Aloy pursed her lips, then pressed the Strider’s sides with her heels and rode away without another word.

*Scary and strange.* Those were two words that summed Nil up in a nutshell.

But *strange* was never something that had bothered Aloy. And for whatever reason, she just didn't feel scared of Nil...
Aloy continues her travel across the Sacred Lands, and finds signs of Nil's presence.

Well, he *had* said they would know each other by their work...

Marea nodded respectfully to Aloy, her light golden eyes catching the evening sun. “Be careful out there, Aloy. I hope you find whatever it is you’re after.”

Aloy gave the Nora brave a small smile, then headed towards the edge of the camp. It was late afternoon, and if she was quick, she might make it to the forsaken village Marea had mentioned before nightfall.

“Aloy!” a voice called. Aloy turned to see Varl jogging towards her. He slowed down as he reached her. “You’re leaving already?” he asked, disappointment evident in his voice. “You won’t stay for a meal and rest? I’d have thought you would be exhausted.”

Aloy smiled at her friend. He and the rest of Sona’s war party had good reason to be exhausted; they had eliminated the killers at Devil’s Grief just that afternoon. Aloy could still smell the lingering scent of burning blaze in Varl’s clothes. But she’d already rested and eaten, and she was eager to be on her way. Privately, she was also not entirely comfortable yet in the company of the other Nora.

She knew that Rost would have wanted her to be grateful that most of the tribe had accepted her so readily after the Proving, but their quick acceptance had only made her more cynical about the practice of shunning. *If shunning me was so important to them for eighteen years, what could be going through their minds to just decide it doesn’t matter anymore after a single day?*

Varl, on the other hand, had only ever been kind and helpful. He was also a fierce warrior, for which Aloy respected him. But much as she liked him, she found it difficult to talk to him sometimes, for the same reason that it was difficult to connect with most of the Nora: he had no interest in the world outside their lands.

And Aloy was itching to stretch her wings and fly to the west.

“I’m sorry, but I have to be on my way,” she told Varl. Then she remembered something… and a certain red-headdressed someone. “Varl, you mentioned bandit camps to me back when we first met. I… cleared one out some time ago, shortly after I left Mother’s Heart. Do you know of any others on Nora lands that need to be taken care of before I leave?”

Varl’s eyebrows jumped high on his forehead with surprise. “You cleared a bandit camp? All on your own?”

“I had help,” she replied carefully. It wouldn’t do to tell anyone about Nil’s presence in the Sacred Lands, since he had all but admitted he was a trespasser here. When Varl tilted his head to the side quizzically, Aloy vaguely waved her spear.
Varl’s face cleared. “Ah. You had machines to help you? That’s… incredible.” He stared at her with a blatant admiration that made Aloy’s ears burn with embarrassment, but she kept her face neutral. Varl continued, “Yes, some of the War Chief’s scouts reported another bandit camp to the northeast, at Hollow’s Gate. But… Aloy, please be careful. We can’t lose a Seeker in these times of danger. And… I don’t want to lose another friend.” His eyes dropped to his feet and he scratched the back of his head awkwardly.

Aloy felt a pang of sympathy, and she squeezed Varl’s shoulder in reassurance. “Don’t worry about me. There are enough people here to worry about. Focus on them, and keep making the War Chief proud.” He raised his eyes and smiled at her, and she grinned back, slapped him on the shoulder in a comradely manner, and left without further ado.

As soon as the firelight of Mother’s Crown was out of sight, Aloy whistled, and the blue headlight of a nearby Strider flared. Aloy ran towards the Strider and vaulted onto its back in a smooth motion. She kicked its sides and turned the metal beast northeast.

She might be aching to stretch her wings and fly out west, but she had time for one last errand in Nora land.

***************

The sun was hidden behind the mountains and its last glowing rays were fading when Aloy pulled her Strider to a stop in the shelter of some ancient ruins. She hopped off the Strider and tiptoed softly through the grass; there were corrupted machines nearby, two Watchers and a Sawtooth, and Aloy wanted a moment to take a drink of water and stretch her muscles before tackling the corrupted machines and then continuing on to Hollow Fort.

She spotted a small clearing with the remains of an old campfire: just a patch of flattened grass with a circle of large stones and some half-burnt wood. As she crept towards it, she suddenly stopped: four human corpses were arranged around the fire. Aloy quickly tapped her Focus and scoped the area: no living humans were nearby.

She crept close to the fire and inspected the bodies. They were all bandits. Two of them had fatal knife wounds: one with his throat slit almost ear to ear, the other with a stab wound to the underside of the chin and a gaping, bloody hole where his right eye should be. The other two had been killed by perfectly placed arrows, one to the throat and the other to the chest. One of the arrows was broken off, but the other was fletched with bright red feathers.

Nil had been here.

We’ll know each other by our work, he’d said, and it looked like he had been right. Aloy gazed down at the one-eyed bandit corpse with distaste. She couldn’t think of anyone else who would kill a person in such a vicious manner.

On the plus side, Nil’s recent presence here meant she would likely have his company once she hit Hollow Fort. Even if she disliked his methods, his combat skills were undeniable.

Regardless, this small campfire was no fit place to relax with all the dead bodies sprinkled around it. Aloy quietly snuck back to her Strider and sat in the grass, leaning back against its legs as she drank deeply from her boarskin water-flask. As soon as the flask was half-empty, she tied it back to her belt and crept towards the corrupted machines without hesitation.

All thoughts of taking a break were gone. She would need to be quick if she wanted to get to Hollow Fort before Nil.
Is it just me, or do all bandit camps look the same? Aloy wondered, staring at the ugly jutting spears and Watcher corpses that decorated Hollow Fort. She was lying flat on her belly in a patch of long grass as she scoped out the camp with her Focus. This one would be a challenge; there were twice as many bandits here as there had been at Devil’s Thirst, including one guy who appeared to have a large machine-powered gun that Aloy would not want to get hit by.

And Nil hadn’t appeared.

Aloy was more annoyed than disappointed. “So much for a shared interest,” she muttered to herself. She supposed she could wait and see if he’d show up, but from the slight dimming of the stars at the eastern horizon, dawn would be breaking soon, and Aloy wanted to attack the camp while it was still dark. It looked like she’d be going in solo.

She rose slowly to her knees and crafted as many arrows and blast bombs as she could carry. Thus prepared, she took a deep breath - here we go! - and set off towards the camp.

She could only hope that her swift and silent hunter skills would prevent her from suffering the same fate as Nil’s partner.

The sun had long risen like a drop of blood in reverse by the time Nil stood in the shadow of the ancient ruins, overlooking what used to be the finest, largest bandit camp in Nora territory.

Now, Hollow Fort was… a happy little village, it seemed. A large pile of bodies was burning merrily in the ditches outside the gates, supervised by a small group of Nora, and he could hear singing from inside the camp.

The flame-haired machine whisperer had gotten here before him.

Nil gave a little sigh of disappointment. He’d been so looking forward to destroying this particular camp. It had presented such a delicious challenge: some thirty-odd bandits, scum of the earth whose sneering faces would slacken in delightful fear when he cut them down… and the flame-haired girl had taken that away from him.

And yet, overlaid on his disappointment was a ribbon of satisfaction… and excitement. She’s good, this Nora huntress. Very good. She may prefer hunting machines, but she has a talent for my kind of hunt as well, he thought. From this vantage point, he could see that she had used her same sneaking approach as before; the camp looked pristine (or as pristine as a filthy bandit camp could ever be), with no signs of the damage that indicated a head-on battle.

So quiet, so clean. No celebration, no savouring the taste of the kill on her tongue. She’s missing out, he thought, and a slow smile lit his face.

Nil needed to catch up to her before she took away all his quarry. But more than that… he needed to find her so he could see her in action again. While watching her at Devil’s Thirst, he had felt a thrill that he hadn’t felt in years.

He knew the flame-haired girl was a Seeker, leaving the Nora lands… and leaving the Nora lands means only one thing: heading to Carja territory.

Nil shouldered the Voice of Our Teeth, turned on his heel, and headed due west.
Aloy lowered her bow, panting with exertion. Her feet were freezing from the snow, but sweat dripped from her temples.

“Truly, the sun shines upon us this day!” The joyful voice of a Carja guard floated down to Aloy’s ears from the ramparts of Daytower Fort.

Aloy slung her bow over her shoulder. “It wasn’t the Sun risking its ass down here,” she muttered to herself. What was it with everyone always thanking some unknown entity for the hard work of a normal human? When she brought rabbits to Odd Grata, she thanked the All-Mother. When she took out a legion of corrupted machines, this idiot guard thanked the Sun. Aloy shook her head in disgust, then jogged towards the gate.

She slowed as she reached the gate, and craned her neck up to scowl at the guard. “Will you open the gate for me now?” she demanded.

The guard laughed heartily. His mood had exponentially improved now that she’d done all the hard work of getting rid of the corrupted machines. He turned and called over his shoulder, “You heard her! Open the gates. And send word to Captain Balahn!”

Finally, at long last, the huge wooden doors began to slide open. The guard called down to her again. “Where are you headed, girl?”

“West, to Meridian!” she replied. She couldn’t help but stare at the doors as she approached them. This brickstone Carja fort was unlike anything Aloy had ever seen. Even these doors were of foreign make: they slid into the walls smoothly, as though they were on wheels. Aloy wondered if she’d get a chance to ask someone about how they had come up with that design.

She gazed around with open curiosity as she stepped through the gate. A nearby Carja guard stood at attention as she approached him. “The Way of Broken Stones is a hard run, even in the best of times,” he told her. “You might want to have a word with Captain Balahn. He came from Meridian not long ago.”

Aloy smiled at him politely. “Thank you,” she said. See, at least one of us knows how to thank another human instead of the sun, she thought with rueful humour.

Funnily enough, the guard seemed to agree. “We’re the ones who should be thanking you for taking down those machines. Walk in light, Nora.”

Aloy gave him a more genuine smile, then headed in the direction he indicated. But she couldn’t resist stopping at the small market to make some purchases. Her pouches were heavy with shards, lenses and machine hearts, and this was the first time she had ever been in a Carja market. I wonder what kinds of wares they’ll have here?

As it turned out, the selection of weapons and clothing was excellent, with many things Aloy had never seen before. She peppered the merchants with questions, eliciting an amused smile from a nearby guard, and purchased a shadow sling and two new sets of clothing: a traditional Carja noble outfit that protected from fire damage, and an outfit of Oseram make that would protect from shock. Hopefully these will also help me blend in as I move west, she thought, but she hadn’t much hope; everywhere she had gone so far, someone had made a comment about her bright red hair. Maybe she could find a way to darken it, with dyes or pigments perhaps?
Finally she approached the Carja captain. “Captain Balahn?” she said, and the captain turned, his expression polite but stern. “The guard at the gate said you’d been to Meridian recently. What can I expect on the trail?” she asked.

The captain twisted his lips in sympathy. “Nothing good. More machines all the time, and our scouts report corruption that way as well.” He sighed. “So much for sealing things off. Keep to the roads: they’re safe enough. Though after what you did at the gate, I’ll wager you don’t scare easy.” He gave her an assessing once-over, his eyes pausing on the override device on her spear and the sogginess of her boots. He gave a tiny smile of approval. “That’s a good quality in a person.”

Aloy smiled politely at the compliment, then gave a tiny internal sigh as Captain Balahn - like almost everyone else so far - asked her assistance in going back east to find some of his missing men. But ultimately she agreed. Over the past moon cycle of travelling through the Sacred Lands, Aloy had realized that Rost had been right in his last lesson to her: she may not need the Nora, but that didn’t mean that the Nora didn’t need her.

From the good Captain’s request, it seemed that the Carja did too.

She chatted with Balahn a while longer, and learned more about the history of the Nora and the Carja. She listened with fascination as Balahn told her about the alliance between the Oseram and the Carja and their takedown of the Mad Sun King, and smirked at Balahn’s assessment that the Oseram “sure do bicker a lot”. Aloy hadn’t yet met many Oseram, but she had spoken to one Oseram woman at Hunter’s Gathering - a round-cheeked woman named Gera - and had liked her very much.

Finally, Aloy asked Balahn whether he had seen Nakoa, and was shocked to discover that Zaid, the Carja captain Nakoa was hunting, was actually posted here at Daytower.

*This is getting complicated,* Aloy thought to herself worriedly as she went to speak to Zaid. But this entire journey was more complicated than she had imagined it would be. In some part of her mind, she had imagined running straight to Meridian without stopping, her heart bursting with the desire to find answers. But it seemed that Rost’s last lesson had left more of an impression on her than she had thought: she hadn’t had the heart to turn down anyone who had needed help along the way. And to her great surprise, she was actually… happy to help.

Aloy was doing exactly what she had always wanted to do: explore and discover. And she was helping people along the way.

And despite her lingering sadness for Rost, her concerns about her wounded tribe, and the dangers that she would inevitably meet out west, Aloy couldn’t deny that she was feeling more free - and more happy - than she ever had before.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: I hope this chapter wasn't too boring for anyone! I just had to get Aloy to the borders of Nora land somehow. ;)

Comments always, always appreciated! ;)
Partners

Chapter Summary

Aloy and Nil meet again on his home turf and share a meal. Then Aloy goes and meets an earthy, friendly Oseram forgewoman.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Aloy jogged round the edge of the mesa and popped some salvebrush berries into her mouth. *That should take the edge off,* she thought as she rubbed absently at the bruise just below her left shoulder. It was the result of a careless mistake; she’d ridden her Strider straight into a herd of Chargers, and considered herself lucky that she’d escaped with nothing more serious than some scrapes on her knees and a couple of bruises.

Aloy was seeing so many new machines that she’d never seen before, and in greater abundance than she’d ever seen. She could hardly run fifty paces before her Focus picked up a new group of Broadheads, or a pair of those horrific Longlegs, or a monstrous Thunderjaw. She had decided, with some regret, to forgo riding for a while until she got her bearings, since the sound of metal hooves attracted way too much machine attention.

Aloy had only been in Carja territory for eight days, but already she felt like her body and mind were toughening up from the new land and its myriad dangers. She’d been wearing her sleeveless Carja armour constantly in an attempt to acclimatize to the heat, and she’d lost track of how many times she’d congratulated herself for investing in a Carja bow and fire arrows.

Despite the discomfort and danger, Aloy was happy. There was so much strangeness, so much newness in the western world, that she had trouble settling down to sleep each night; she was far too driven and excited to keep moving, to fill her senses with new sights and sounds and smells.

But tonight she was forgoing sleep, as she was nearing another bandit camp. And there he was, just as she’d expected he would be: Nil, the renegade Carja bandit stalker, crouching in the grass as though he was, indeed, waiting for her.

He stood slowly as she approached. “I saw some of the places you’d been,” he greeted her with a reptilian grin. “The new settlers have no appreciation of craft. They’d already piled your work in a ditch… but I knew the signs to look for. The scrabble in the dirt… those surprised splashes…”

He looked off into the middle distance happily, as though recalling a favoured memory. Then his eerie silver eyes drifted back to hers. “I did tell you we’d meet again.”

Aloy nodded politely to him. *Just as weird as ever,* she thought, with a tiny tug of amusement. She supposed he wasn’t so bad, once you got used to his… well, love of killing. “Nil. Still hunting bandits?”

“Oh yes,” he said, with a happy nod. “I’ve been sharpening my blade anticipating the scent of the fight.” He unsheathed a wickedly sharp, slightly curved blade and gave it a jaunty toss, then caught it expertly with a grin. “Don’t get me wrong, these scum are odorous,” he assured her, with a tilt of his
head. “A little panic and desperation really sets it off, though. Like an incense.” He took a deep, dramatic breath in through his nose, and Aloy couldn’t help but imitate him… then immediately regretted it, as the smell of burning wood and unwashed bodies drifted downwind from the bandit camp.

She coughed and recoiled slightly from the smell, then turned back to Nil. “So… what’s your knife called?” she asked, remembering that he had so colourfully named his bow.

Nil looked at her like she was nuts. “Why would someone name a knife?”

Aloy almost laughed. Almost. “So much for small talk,” she muttered to herself.

“Are you ready?” Nil demanded impatiently. He gave her a slow smile, his eyes glowing with excitement and bloodlust.

Aloy shot him a hard look. “Just don’t think this means I enjoy it,” she warned him. No matter what he might want to think, she was doing this for the safety of the populace, not for the joy of the kill.

Nil shot her a cheeky smile and jerked his chin towards the path that led into the camp. “Don’t worry. We’ll take your secret to their graves.”

Aloy shook her head in exasperation. “Incorrigible,” she muttered to herself, then crept into the grass with Nil close behind.

As before at Devil’s Thirst, Aloy and Nil worked their way through the camp expertly, moving as one like a silent and deadly Stalker. She took out the more distant sentries, with Nil warning her of nearby patrollers and taking them out with a single slice of his curved knife.

Eventually there were only a handful of bandits left. Unfortunately, it was impossible to eliminate them without risking the lives of the prisoners that they were guarding. Aloy regretfully concluded that they would have to approach head-on in hand-to-hand combat.

She shouldered her bow, then leaned in close to Nil to discuss the plan. Somehow, despite his proclivity for messy murders, Nil still smelled of that exotic tangy scent she had noticed before. Aloy frowned in annoyance - focus, Aloy! - and whispered, “We have to go in bows blazing to distract them from the prisoners. Do you want to focus on the leader with the heavy weapon, or those three with the bows?”

“The bows,” Nil whispered back immediately. “More bandits, more blood.”

Aloy rolled her eyes in disgust. “Of course. Okay, on my count…” She waited until three of the four bandits were looking in different directions, then tapped his shoulder to indicate go.

Nil burst from the long grass with the speed and ferocity of an angry Sawtooth. One of the bandits went down before he even had a chance to cry out; then Nil was on the second one, stabbing viciously in the chest and abdomen, while the third stared in astonishment.

Aloy felt quite astonished herself at the sight of his vicious, quicksilver violence, but she joined in with only a moment’s hesitation. She stealth-struck the leader with a stab-and-twist of her spear to the leader’s back, then knocked the leader onto her back and stabbed her spear through the leader’s throat, ending her cry of pain abruptly.

“Wait… I know you. Wait! Don’t.” The final bandit victim’s words died along with him in a horrible gurgling as his own blood trickled into his carved trachea. Aloy stared at Nil, crouched on one knee over the victim, blood trickling down the blade of the knife onto his hand. Nil slowly raised his eyes
to Aloy’s, and a chill rippled over her bare arms at the look on his face: his teeth were bared, like some kind of animal, and his eyes were practically incandescent in the light of the moon.

Then he rose to his feet, and the animalistic expression on his face disappeared abruptly to be replaced by his usual mild-mannered, ironic smirk. Aloy couldn’t decide what was more unnerving: his bloodlust, or the speed with which he masked it. “Meet me at the end of the path,” he said as he sheathed his knife. Then he ran away.

“What-” Aloy was confused by his sudden departure, but she didn’t have long to think about it; the prisoners she had freed were cheering and patting her arms, excitedly asking questions about her journey, her unusual hair, her unusual spear, how it felt for her to wear ‘civilized’ clothing after so long…

Some time later, when Aloy had excused herself from the thankful ex-prisoners, she rejoined Nil at the end of the path where they had met earlier that evening. He was standing by a merrily crackling fire, with a spitted hare roasting overtop. He grinned at her, his face chillingly benign and his hands somehow clean of blood, though Aloy hadn’t seen a curve of river nearby.

“Remember how the blood pounded in your ears? They’ll ring later, in the calm,” he told her wisely. “It’s a call to arms from your inner desires.” He tapped his chest and smirked knowingly at her.


“I can tell,” she replied acidly. He was such a weird man. “So… you used to be a soldier. For the Carja?” Maybe she would understand him better if she knew more about his history.

Nil shrugged casually. “For them, against them… an empire always finds its wars. You can’t be picky.”

He sat in the grass, and wordlessly invited her to join him with a wave of his hand. Reluctantly, Aloy crouched beside him. He turned the hare on its spit, then pulled out an unusually ornate rectangular drinking vessel from the small sporran-like pouch around his waist and took a sip. He offered it to Aloy, and she took the vessel and examined it with growing curiosity. Though it was dented in a few places, it was clearly valuable: gilded, or even made of gold, as it glowed a burnished yellow hue even in the low light of the moon. She wondered where he’d gotten it from. It seemed… luxurious, for a soldier.

Aloy took a cautious sip and almost choked: Scrappersap. She thrust the vessel back at Nil, who took it with an amused smirk.

Then he continued his tale. “The new king, Avad, saw things differently. Called an investigation into ‘war crimes’. He took another sip from the vessel, then threw her an ironic sidelong glance. “Aren’t all wars a crime to someone? Still, I raised my hand and volunteered.”

Aloy finally settled on the grass, her legs crossed. “You volunteered to investigate?”

Nil shook his head. “No, I volunteered my confession. No sense wasting time with an investigation,” he said mildly, without even a hint of resentment. “I was sent to Sunstone Rock for two years. The trade was fair.”

Aloy frowned, then reached for his drinking vessel again. He handed it over with an appreciative smile, then turned the hare again. Aloy took a tiny sip, winced, then said, “They sent you to a rock for two years? Is this some kind of Carja ritual?”
Nil laughed. “No no, Sunstone Rock is a prison. South of Meridian, south of the Raingathers. Our new Sun King is a believer in rehabilitation. As am I: in the heat of a stone cell, in the dark, I learned to focus on what was truly important to me.”

*Like what?* Aloy wondered. What kinds of things, what ideals or motivations, would be important to this strange and bloodthirsty killer? She waited for him to continue, but he was gazing into the middle distance now, his face serious and his eyes unfocused. *Maybe it would be rude to prod,* Aloy thought. She was eternally curious, but also wary of prying, perhaps because so many people along this journey thought it appropriate to pry at her, which she disliked. So she changed the subject slightly. “What were these… things you did, Nil?”

He took back the vessel and took a hearty gulp, as though it contained nothing harder than water. “Acceptable things, under the circumstances,” he replied.

Aloy frowned. “Acceptable to whom?”

Nil gave a lazy shrug of one shoulder, then removed the cooked hare from the fire and set it on a nearby rock to cool. Aloy noticed that he wouldn’t look her in the face. “I don’t make decisions. Let’s just say the rules of engagement suited me. But rules are important. A structure… a cage.” His gaze was back on the middle distance, as though his mind was in the past.

“Otherwise… you know of those places, lonely places where people once were, but now just a hole cut in the world?” His voice was quiet, musing and thoughtful, as though he was talking to himself. “Chances are… I was there before.” He trailed off and said nothing more for a time, his hands busy with cutting the hare into pieces.

Aloy sat quietly as well, her gaze drifting idly to the shining white moon. Despite the grim topic of conversation, she was enjoying this quiet moment of peace. As much as she loved exploring these new lands, she hadn’t quite realized until now that she hadn’t really stopped to take in the sights and sounds over the last few days. She gazed up at the moon and inhaled cautiously, and was rewarded by the smell of dry grass, roasted meat, unfamiliar soil, and Nil’s incongruously fresh scent.

He handed her a generous piece of hare, which she took with a grateful nod. They both ate their food, their munching the only sound for a few minutes.

Once she had finished her meal, Aloy broke the silence. “Have you found a new partner yet?”

Nil finally turned to look at her, one eyebrow raised quizzically. “I thought *we* were partners.”

Aloy recoiled slightly with surprise. “Uh… I have my own roads to follow, Nil.”

“And they seem to lead back to bandits,” he replied reasonably. “That works for me. I’m not suggesting a Carja wedding.” Aloy’s cheeks warmed at the mention of a wedding, much to her annoyance.

Nil nudged her shoulder slightly with his own. “I’m never lonely when there’s killing to be done.”

*Like I was worried about you,* she thought acidly, but declined to comment. Perhaps it was best to let him think they were a partnership; maybe it would keep his viciousness on a leash if he knew she would be keeping tabs on his activities. She gave a reluctant nod, then rose to her feet, brushing dust and grass from her legs. “Time to move on,” she told him. “And… thank you. For the meal.”

He nodded, but made no move to rise. “A brief encounter for us, but the end for them,” he said, with a nod of his head towards the camp. “They were squalid lives anyway. Until next time, Suntress.”
Aloy gave him a funny look as she readjusted her weapons on her shoulders. “Sorry? Did you say ‘hun...
Aloy looked at the weapon with wonder. It was a complicated piece of machinery, nearly as complex-looking as the inner workings of a Watcher. “This weapon you’re working on… I’ve never seen anything like it. Your design?”

Petra gave a small grunt of approval. “Mm. See my face in it, can you? This one’s mother helped reclaim Meridian, back in the day. A job like that isn’t done with strategy. They needed to shake the walls, turn the Mad Sun-King’s army to blood and feathers…” Petra frowned slightly at Aloy. “What’s that face for?”

Aloy hadn’t realized her feelings were showing in her face. She had been imagining if Petra’s weapon made its way to Nora land, the kind of damage it could have done at the Proving… at Mother’s Heart. “Weapons of such power…” She trailed off.

“It’s not the weapon, flame-hair, it’s the wielder,” Petra said, her words unconsciously addressing Aloy’s thoughts. “If that siege had touched the great elevator, they’d have answered to me.

“Good work, that elevator. There’s a story in every chain-link. I’ll make you suffer them one day, if you like.” She smiled at Aloy, and Aloy smiled back; she would love to hear Petra’s stories someday. When she didn’t have a million things to do, that is.

“What is this place, Petra?” she asked, with another curious look around.

“The Free Heap,” Petra announced with a grand gesture of her arms. “Free because we answer to no one but ourselves, the metal, and the dust storms.” She pointed off to the east. “The heap’s back there: a scrapyard, piled by Oseram past from the leavings of the Old Ones.”

Aloy walked to the edge of the tower and squinted towards the scrapyard. She could see sparks rising from a few locations in the yard. Sure enough, a tap of her Focus showed her a pack of Scrappers hard at work doing… whatever it was they did. “So all this scrap was left by the ancients? Was it a battlefield?” she asked Petra.

Petra made a disinterested noise. “A stockpile, maybe. Or a rubbish heap. Packed so tight it all fused together. Those Old Ones tossed away more than we’ll ever know.” She chuckled.

Aloy turned to look at Petra, the ever-present thread of curiosity in her body being pulled tight by yet another mystery. “But don’t you want to know? To understand what it all meant?” she asked wistfully.

Petra shrugged dismissively. “Nah. Some delvers spend their whole lives trying to make sense of it. Not me. What it means is that there’s good smelting here. You don’t need to understand a forest to chop the trees for your arrows,” she reasoned.

Aloy raised her eyebrows and folded her arms. “If you did, you’d know ridgewood makes better shafts.”

Petra gave a loud, appreciative laugh. “Careful! You’ll scald your tongue with that fire.”

Despite her mild dismay at Petra’s dismissal of the Old Ones, Aloy couldn’t help but smile. And she couldn’t blame Petra; Aloy had yet to meet anyone who was as deeply interested in figuring out the ways of the Old Ones as she was. She thought back to what Varl had said before she’d left the Sacred Lands: “You’re not like other Nora, are you?”

*Seems like I’m not like anyone, really,* Aloy thought to herself with a small internal sigh. But even if it was a lonely road sometimes, she would still choose to discover, to learn and to forge new paths, over a complacent village life any day.
She smiled at Petra, who was still chuckling at Aloy’s bolshiness. “You said you’re being pushed out of your territory. How can I help?”

**************

Aloy sprinted back to Free Heap, two pouches of weapon parts and power cells clanking around her waist and a campful of dead bandits in her wake. She had to warn Petra about that one cursed bandit who had escaped to rally his comrades. She couldn't help but imagine what Nil would say if he knew she'd missed one bandit while clearing out the camp. She couldn't decide if he'd be disappointed at her moment of sloppiness or if he'd gloat.

She ignored the other Oseram’s startled exclamations as she pelted past them and up the tower, then skidded to a stop at Petra’s feet. Petra looked at her in surprise. “Flame-hair! Back already? You sure work fast—”

“Petra, I have the parts you wanted,” Aloy panted. “But there are more bandits coming - the rest of their clan. They want to take the town.”

To Aloy’s surprise, Petra smiled. There was something in her grin that reminded Aloy suddenly of Nil: something… bloodthirsty. “Do they, now?” She turned to her workbench and jerked her head for Aloy to come around the table.

“Hold this thing steady while I give it a voice. Then we’ll let it talk terms for us,” Petra said cheerfully as she held out her hand for the weapon parts Aloy had scrounged. Aloy followed Petra’s directions as the forgewoman leaned down and tinkered with the inner workings of the canon. Moments later, Petra stood back and dusted her hands off with satisfaction.

“Now take it up and brace yourself. Don’t press it against your hips, if you ever want to use those for…” She wiggled her eyebrows salaciously.

“All right, all right, I got it!” Aloy snapped, her ears warming with embarrassment, and Petra’s eyes twinkled with mischief. Aloy rolled her eyes and hefted the weapon… then had to immediately shift her weight onto her back leg to accommodate Petra’s canon. This thing really puts the ‘heavy’ in ‘heavy weapon’, she thought to herself with surprise. It had significantly more weight than a bandit’s deathbringer gun.

“Come on then, if you’re coming!” she bellowed out into the gorge, and the approving shouts and cheers of the townspeople rose in response to her taunt. Right on cue, the bandits started trickling in, first two from under the bridge to the right, then three, then a small group from the left…

All right, Petra Forgewoman, let’s see what your beast can do, Aloy thought with a hint of bloodthirsty joy herself. The Oseram’s enthusiasm for a brawl was infectious. She pulled the trigger… and as the first flaming projectiles streaked out into the gorge, Aloy could feel the vibrations of the machine from her toes all the way up to her teeth.

The canon’s projectiles brought down towers of stone and rock, and the rumbling echoes - and screams of dying bandits - echoed through the gorge. “She’s working well so far!” Petra called out with satisfaction. Aloy didn’t have time to respond; another group of bandits, a big one, was collecting under the bridge to the right.

Petra had noticed it too. “Aloy, they’re gathering under the bridge. Bring it down on ‘em.”


“Bridges come and go,” Petra replied. Aloy supposed this was true, especially if you were an
Oseram master builder who had worked on Meridian’s famous elevator. “Shoot it down!”

“If you say so,” Aloy muttered, then aimed the cannon at the bridge’s abutment, just above the bandit’s heads. With a huge rumble, the entire bridge collapsed.

“Woah!” Petra cried, then started laughing with huge guffaws. “Might have overdone it a little!”

Aloy couldn’t help but laugh as well. “You told me to!” she panted breathlessly, then hefted the cannon back to the workbench. “My teeth hurt from all that,” she told Petra with a smile, then grimaced as she stretched to work the kinks from her back.

“That’s interesting,” Petra replied, patting the weapon fondly. “Need a leather strap to bite down on, perhaps.”

Petra turned back to Aloy, and her smile was soft, her gaze fond. “Saying goes, you can only trust metal… but my trust was placed well in you. You’re owed, Aloy Machine-Hunter. I won’t forget it.” She slapped Aloy on the back affectionately, and Aloy stumbled slightly with the impact.

“Neither will I, Petra,” she replied with a smile. “I still feel the lightning snap in my hair.”

Petra laughed and patted Aloy more gently on the shoulder. “Join us for a meal, won’t you? I’ve got a little something in mind for you. Stick around.” Aloy opened her mouth, unsure if she was going to protest or accept - after all, she’d already stayed here longer than she’d intended and had hoped to be on her way hours ago - but Petra was already pulling her down the stairs towards the campfire with a strong arm around her shoulders. She called out to the townspeople as she thrust Aloy towards them. “Boys, make our Nora guest comfortable! Get her some Scrappersap! Not that garbage that Rory makes - the good stuff from Kendert. Have a seat, Aloy. I’ll join you soon.”

Aloy nodded mutely, unable to resist the force of Petra’s hospitality. She reluctantly accepted a cup of Scrappersap - ugh, this stuff again - and a joint of roasted turkey with much more enthusiasm. She listened to the townspeople’s gossip and laughed as they sang boisterous songs, but tactfully deflected attention from herself when the Oseram asked questions about her journey. Aloy knew that she was going to have to get used to all this attention, but she couldn’t help but feel uncomfortable. She supposed it was a result of growing up in isolation with Rost.

Some time later, when the dim evening light had deepened into darkness and the sky was sprinkled with stars, Petra approached and sat beside Aloy. “Here,” she said, and thrust an object into Aloy’s hands.

Aloy looked down at it; it was a rounded, hollow container with a screw-on cap, made of a silvery metal and decorated with round grommets on the edges and a beautiful, wavy flame-like design on the front and back. It was beautifully light, almost weightless. Aloy looked up at Petra questioningly.

Petra smiled down at her, hands on her hips. “It’s a canteen, for your travels. Use this instead of that boarskin bottle. It’s much lighter, and rustproof, of the finest Oseram make.”

“Thank you, Petra - it’s lovely. Is it from the Claim?” Aloy asked, running her fingers referently over the smooth flame pattern. Petra gave a short bark of laughter. “Hammer to steel, no! I made it. Just now.”

Aloy stared at her. The metal canteen was perfect, without a single rough edge or dent. “You made this? Just now?”

Petra smiled down at her like she was a naive child - which, when it came to the ways of the Oseram, Aloy suppose she was. “Yes, just now. I told you, you earned it. Don’t get me wrong, this
is a gift, not a payment - you need anything else from us, you let me know, you hear? This canteen marks you as a friend of the Oseram. I don’t give such tokens out lightly.”

As Aloy stammered an awkward but heartfelt thanks, Petra patted Aloy on the back again, then sat next to her on the wooden bench. “Now, I believe I promised you a story or two about that elevator. On our very first day of work, what should happen but our foreman Herkel drops a hammer on his toe…”

Dawn was but a few hours away by the time Aloy finally left Free Heap. She had thoroughly enjoyed Petra’s stories, had drunk enough Scrappersap to feel a tingling in her fingers and toes, and had taken a small nap by the fireside in the dual warmth of friends and fire. Refreshed and happy, she was ready to continue her journey.

Aloy was totally surprised when she reached the edge of the gorge to find Nil leaning against the sheer cliffside of a mesa, his arms folded. “You stole my glory,” he told her reproachfully as she drew near. “I’ve been watching this camp for days. I had it all plotted out: how to optimize their fear, drive them wild like animals before taking their breath with a slice of my blade…” He sighed mournfully. “And then you snuck in like a thief in the night and stole their screams from me.”

Aloy sighed heavily. “Hello, Nil. It’s good to see you too.”

Nil tiled his head. “Could have fooled me. You got started without me. I thought we were partners.” He gave her wounded look.

Aloy stared at him in exasperation. “Nil, there are bandits everywhere. I see them literally every day. What was so special about this camp? Just go find another one.”

“This one was so well fortified,” he replied petulantly. “It was a special challenge. Which you should know, seeing as you finished it off. Without me,” he repeated pointedly.

Aloy scowled at him. “If you’re looking for a challenge, the machines I’ve come across have been a solid match for me. I’ve even seen machines taking out bandit camps. What could be more challenging than taking out the machines that take out bandit camps?” She tilted her head at Nil and raised her eyebrows in a wheedling manner.

Nil yawned and looked disinterestedly to the left, where a pack of Grazers was peacefully whirring the red soil into a dusty cloud. He looked back at Aloy with a sardonically raised eyebrow. “Where’s the challenge in that? There’s a reason I never joined the Hunter’s Lodge,” he drawled.

Aloy opened her mouth to argue… but then she had an idea. She shrugged dismissively. “Fine, you’re not interested in machine hunting. I’ll go on my own,” she said casually, then whistled. In the distance, a cloud of dust heralded the approach of a machine, inexorably summoned by Aloy’s call.

Nil raised an eyebrow at her. “You always go alone. Why would this be any different?”

She looked at him innocently. “It’s not. That’s why I’m going on my own. Besides, you would just get in the way. I need to be quick.” She leapedfrogged into the Broadhead’s back and kicked its sides, immediately relishing the wind on her sweaty forehead as the Broadhead took off.

Truth be told, Aloy was mildly confused with herself. Nil was correct in saying she went everywhere alone; she did prefer to make her own path without hindrance. So why was she taunting him into going somewhere with her? It must have been the Scrappersap.
Seconds later, she heard him call out. “Suntress!” he yelled, and then he was catching up to her Broadhead with broad, quick strides. “I’m coming with you,” he bellowed over the noise of her steed’s metal hooves. Aloy bit the inside of her cheek to stop from smiling. “Keep up!” She yelled back. Nil snarled - actually *snarled* - and grabbed her Broadhead’s thick blue wire.

“Woah!” Aloy called, pulling back on the wire to stop the metal beast. Once her Broadhead came to a stop, she looked down at Nil with a smug smirk. “What?”

He raised his eyebrows at her and folded his arms, panting for breath. “You wouldn’t make me run behind you the whole way there like a pet, would you? I didn’t take you for the savage that the other Carja say you are.” He smirked, his eyes glinting devilishly at the taunt.

Aloy raised her own eyebrow, but didn’t rise to the bait. “Maybe you *should* run the whole way there. Then you won’t have any breath left to say stupid things,” she retorted, making him chuckle.

She tapped her Focus to look for a second machine to ride. Unfortunately, there were only Grazers, Watchers, and a Ravager nearby. She sighed, then looked down at Nil reluctantly. It looked like there was only one way.

“Fine. You can ride with me. You’re lucky this isn’t a Strider,” she grumbled. “I don’t know if they’d carry both our weight.” She jerked her thumb impatiently over her shoulder for him to get on behind her.

Nil slowly approached the Broadhead, eyeing it uncertainly. Then he smoothly vaulted into it, his body sliding flush to her back from his chest to his groin.

Aloy shifted somewhat awkwardly. She had never had anyone pressed this closely against her before. The only person who has ever held her close was Rost, and his fatherly hugs had been few and far-between, especially as she got older and her focus on training became more single-minded. Petra’s joking words rose unbidden to her mind: *If you want to use those hips for…*

Aloy gave her head a brisk little shake to make the errant thought go away, her cheeks warming at the unwelcome thought. Just then, Nil’s deep, sardonic voice floated into her ear: “I hope this ‘challenge’ of yours is worth the effort. Or else I might make you pay. In blood.” She could practically hear his bloodthirsty grin as he tried to get a rise from her.

Aloy threw him a dirty look over her shoulder. “I’d like to see you try,” she replied smoothly, and was rewarded by his appreciative chuckle.

Aloy kicked the Broadhead’s Sides, and Nil’s hands suddenly grabbed her hips as the machine jolted forward. She ignored the heat of his fingers through her thin Oseram shirt as she bent forward over her steed, kicking it again to go faster. *Let’s see how a Carja soldier deals with a little speed.*

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Anyone else a HUGE fan of Petra? What about Gera? I love those two so much! <3
Aloy takes Nil on a wild ride to show him the excitement of machine hunting, and Nil gets (minorly) injured along the way... and catches some weird feelings.

Dawn was breaking to Nil’s left as he and Suntress rode south. They’d been riding for a long time; Nil already knew his back and his butt would be sore by the time they stopped, and he got the distinct impression that Suntress was pushing their speed on purpose.

It had taken him some time to get used to the rollicking speed of the metal beast, but eventually he felt comfortable enough to release his firm hold on her hips and look around at their surroundings. They weren’t far from Daytower, only two or three days by foot, and these were lands that Nil had crossed many times, but things looked very different when riding on a machine. He could see patterns in the ebb and flow of the land, in the growth of cacti and shrubs, that he had never really noticed before.

But as Suntress continued riding hard, Nil suddenly recognized the clearing they were about to enter. It was an area that looked unusually scorched and bare of plant life. Nil knew of one particular metal beast whose wrath had such a wide-ranging effect: a Stormbird.

He placed a hand on Suntress’s waist and squeezed to get her attention. She pulled up on the Broadhead’s wires to slow its pace and leaned back, turning her head towards him. “What?” she said.

“We need to find cover. Now. A Stormbird patrols this area,” he told her. He raised his face to the sky; sure enough, the metal bird was there, majestic but deadly. It was flying away from them at the moment, but there was no guarantee it wouldn’t alter its trajectory at any second and spot them.

Nil had never faced a Stormbird, but he’d seen the remains of people who had tried: blackened bones cracked by electric shock so the marrow spilled out; skin melted and fused with muscle. It was beautifully macabre, but Nil had no desire to become one of these deathly works of art. “This place is particularly dangerous,” he said with growing urgency.

To his surprise, Suntress smirked at him, one eyebrow raised. “I know. That’s why we’re here.” She tapped her Focus, and a ring of blue light glowed around it as she looked up at the Stormbird. “It’ll be turning back this way shortly.”

Nil stared at her, his silvery eyes wide. “You brought us here on purpose?”

_She must be addled_, Nil thought in dismay, for the flame-haired Suntress was suddenly grinning at him. She swung her left leg over the machine and slid off its back. “I’m surprised at you, Nil! I thought you of all people would be all, ‘I laugh in the face of danger! Ha-ha-ha - woah!’” Suntress rolled in a swift dodge to the right, and Nil barely had time to fling himself off the Broadhead and into the cover of a huge boulder before an enormous electric shock slammed into the Broadhead,
destroying their unfortunate steed in a cacophony of twisting metal.

Nil could feel the electricity raising the hairs on his arms as he peeked over the edge of the boulder at Suntress, who was crouching, her eyes still on the Stormbird. “I did tell you,” he called out in a matter-of-fact tone.

Suntress threw him a dirty look, then slung a Carja ropecaster from her back. Nil stared at her in growing amazement. “How do you know how to use that?” he demanded. The only people he’d ever seen with ropecasters were Carja Hunters of the Lodge.

She grinned at him again, her eyes shining with excitement. “I’ve got Blazing Suns at every trial at three Hunting Grounds so far,” she yelled. She checked that the ropecaster was loaded, then hung it handily from her hip and grabbed a sharpshot bow from her back. Without another word to Nil, she began shooting tearblast arrows at the Stormbird.

*She’s insane. Must be,* Nil thought with a mix of horror and wonder. Canisters and pieces of metal showered from the Stormbird in bursts and its metallic cry of fury rent the air, but Suntress stood tall, shooting arrow after arrow at it. The bird’s lightning gun began to glow and Nil opened his mouth to yell out a warning, but Suntress was too quick; she dodged and rolled briskly, over and over in seemingly random patterns, but always avoiding the bird’s lightning strikes.

Finally the Stormbird swooped low with another metallic shriek, and Suntress slung her bow onto her back while simultaneously grabbing the ropecaster and tethered the bird with one, two, three… a dozen ropes, while running in a half-circle around it. Finally, the Stormbird toppled onto its side with an earth-shattering crash.

“You’re down!” Suntress cried in exultation, then looked over at Nil, still crouched behind the boulder like a child playing hide-and-seek. “Nil! Get in there and stab it!” She waved impatiently for him to come close.

Nil didn’t hesitate. She looked like a Sun Goddess, with the snap of lightning at the edges of her flame-red hair and her face blazing with joy. He couldn't have refused her even if he wanted to. He ran forward, his knife in hand, and plunged his knife into the Stormbird’s lightning gun, destroying the component in a burst of blue sparks.

Suntress laughed raucously, reminding him of an Oseram forgewoman. “All right, you amateur, that'll do. Now get out of the way and let a real hunter do her job.” She ushered him out of the way, then slammed the tip of her spear into a glowing orange panel in the bird’s side. The Stormbird gave a squall that sounded distinctly distressed - can a metal beast be distressed? Nil wondered briefly - then flapped its great metal wings and broke free of the rope cables one by one.

The tether nearest to Nil snapped free, and he felt a sudden sharp, blinding pain across his left cheek as the broken rope whipped him across the face.

“Nil!” Suntress’s alarmed voice cried out. “Get back under cover! Go!” He dodged back behind his boulder just as a huge wave of air from the bird’s wings flung up a dustcloud. He coughed and pulled his scarf up over his mouth and nose, but couldn’t resist watching Suntress through gritty eyes as she shot hardpoint arrows at the Stormbird, her teeth now bared in a ferocious snarl as she let fly arrow after arrow.

The bird swooped low again, and Suntress rolled to her knees, ropecaster in hand, and tethered the bird a second time. The Stormbird collapsed again, and Suntress launched herself into the air and slammed the spear home in the bird’s side. The huge metal bird gave one last ear-splitting shriek, and a shower of sparks danced over its body as it died.
Suntress stood slowly, spinning her spear with a neat flourish before she slid it into its holder on her back. She turned to face him, and her eyes were blazing with a fierce joy, a grin on her lips. “You going to try and tell me that’s not a thrill?” she panted, then tossed her braids confidently over her shoulder. Then she wheezed a laugh and bent over, her hands on her knees as she caught her breath.

Nil rose from behind the boulder and walked slowly towards her, speechless for once. He felt something. A sensation he’d never felt before. It felt like a pressure in his chest and throat, a jolting feeling in his belly. Maybe the electric shock was making him sick.

Suntress looked up at him as he approached. Her forehead glowing with sweat, her cheeks and lips pink with heat. Nil felt another of those strange jolts in his belly as he looked into her hazel eyes.

He wasn’t sure what she saw in his face, but suddenly she was laughing, laughing so hard she couldn’t catch her breath, and she sat abruptly in the metal guts of the dead Stormbird and leaned back, clutching her abdomen with mirth. Nil had never seen her laugh before.

It was glorious.

A reluctant smile pulled at his face as he crouched beside her. “I think the Sun’s rays have addled your mind,” he told her as she fought to control her laughter. “Only a madwoman would fly towards a Stormbird with that kind of unbridled enthusiasm. Make sure you get a priest to exorcise you when you arrive in the City of the Sun.”

Suntress looked up at him, a spark of humour in her eyes as she opened her mouth to retort - then suddenly her eyebrows creased in concern and she reached up, turning his face with a finger to his chin so she could look at his left cheek. “Oh, Nil. Your face.”

Nil ducked away from her and waved a hand dismissively. “Not to worry. It will heal in time, leaving a scar in its wake. A memory of the only exciting machine kill I’ve ever witnessed.” He smiled tauntingly at her, but she continued to frown.

“You want to just leave that wound open? It’ll get infected,” she told him sternly. Then her eyes landed on his hand. She grabbed his wrist and inspected his palm. Her eyes widened as she took in the angry red blisters on his palms. “Nil! When did this happen?”

Nil looked at his palms with surprise. He hadn’t even felt the pain. To be fair, Nil was well practiced in shunting aside physical aches and pains; it was part of what made him such a good soldier.

But Suntress was shaking her head and huffing with disdain. “It’s because you don’t have gloves,” she told him, and released his hand to rifle through one of the pouches around her waist. “The Oseram make some fantastic shockproof gloves. You should get a pair.”

Nil shrugged carelessly. “My preferred prey sprays blood, not sparks,” he replied. “I have no need for Oseram gloves.” The truth was that even if Nil wanted to buy some Oseram goods, he couldn’t go into any villages to do so. Although he had been in prison for two years, his face was far too recognizable.

Suntress snorted and looked pointedly at his blistered hands. “Clearly, no need at all. Now shut up and eat this.” She placed a handful of small purple berries in his hand.

He frowned at the salvebrush berries, then reluctantly put them in his mouth and chewed them, wrinkling his nose in disgust as their bitter juice filled his mouth. Suntress smirked at his face as she removed some hintergold leaves from her pouch and laid them on a flat, clean rock. She’s enjoying my discomfort. How very rude, he thought with amusement.
He watched quietly as Suntress used a small rock to crush the leaves into a paste, then mixed the paste with a small measure of water from an Oseram metal flask. Wordlessly, she gestured for Nil to hold out his palms; he complied quietly, his eyes on her face. She ignored his gaze, frowning in concentration as she smeared the leaf paste on his palms, then wrapped them securely with linen strips from another pouch. Her brisk ministrations felt oddly soothing, and Nil realized that the last time he’d had someone gently tend to a wound was when he was a child.

Suntress sat back with a tiny sigh of satisfaction, then looked at the cut on his face. “It might need stitches,” she told him, then bit her lower lip uncertainly. “I’ve never stitched a wound before. We could go back to Free Heap. Someone there could-”

“No,” Nil interrupted. “No villages.”

Suntress frowned suddenly at him. “Why not? They must have a healer. They’ll patch you up more cleanly than-”

“No,” Nil said, more forcefully, his face assuming a closed expression. Suntress scowled at his obstinacy, then sighed loudly. “Fine. If your face gets filled with infected pus because my stitches are bad, don’t you dare blame me.” She rose to her knees and tilted his head to the side with a gentle hand on his jaw.

Nil’s eyes remained on her face as she tilted his head. For a girl who was usually so curious, he was surprised that she hadn’t asked why he wouldn’t go into the villages. Then he wondered if he would tell her, if she did ask. Nil couldn’t remember ever spending this much time in the company of someone who actually wanted to talk to him; it was hard to know what was normal to say and what was not.

A sudden stinging pain to his left cheek made him flinch away from her touch. He smelled the distinct acrid smell of Scrappersap. “Ow! Did you just pour Scrappersap into my wound?” he demanded, his hand unconsciously rising to cradle his cheek.

Suntress grabbed his wrist before he could touch his bandaged hand to his face. “Hold still! The Scrappersap will clean your wound. If it can clean gearshafts, it can clean wounds.” She gave a small laugh and Nil scowled at her, then reluctantly turned back to allow her access to his face.

She was busily rifling through her pouches again. Finally she pulled out a finely made needle and a small spool of thread. Nil eyed the needle. “A bone needle? Really? You really are a Nora,” he teased. His mocking smile made his cheek hurt.

Suntress narrowed her eyes at him. “Watch your mouth, Carja. This Nora is going to be poking a bone needle into your face.” She demanded, his hand unconsciously rising to cradle his cheek.

Suntress grabbed his wrist before he could touch his bandaged hand to his face. “Hold still! The Scrappersap will clean your wound. If it can clean gearshafts, it can clean wounds.” She gave a small laugh and Nil scowled at her, then reluctantly turned back to allow her access to his face.

She was busily rifling through her pouches again. Finally she pulled out a finely made needle and a small spool of thread. Nil eyed the needle. “A bone needle? Really? You really are a Nora,” he teased. His mocking smile made his cheek hurt.

Suntress narrowed her eyes at him. “Watch your mouth, Carja. This Nora is going to be poking a bone needle into your face.” She briskly threaded the needle into his skin.

Nil hissed in pain, but remained still; the threat of that needle in the wrong place was enough to still him. She ignored him, her attention fully focused on her task: as one hand sewed his skin, the fingers of her other hand delicately held the skin taut.

Nil watched her out of the corner of his eye. They were both silent, but he was becoming painfully aware of the sound of his own heartbeat. Her lips were parted slightly and her eyebrows contracted with concentration. He could see tiny streaks of sun-kissed gold in her red hair. His eyes fell on the easy beat of the pulse in her neck, and a cool, fresh scent wafted into his nose from her shallow breath on his face.

“What’s that scent on your breath?” he asked lazily. Despite the pinpricks of pain in his face, he was feeling very relaxed. A herd of Tramplers could stampede them right now, and Nil wasn’t sure he
“Huh? Oh. Um. A plant called winterfresh,” Suntress muttered, and Nil watched with lazy interest as her ears went pink. “We crush it into a paste and clean our teeth with it. But you can chew and swallow it as well. It’s, um, it can keep you from feeling thirsty.” She cleared her throat and jabbed the next stitch into his cheek a bit too forcefully.

Nil winced slightly, then said, “I like it. It smells fresh, like a winter morning. A very aptly-named plant.”

Suntress’s ears turned a deeper red, but her reply was teasing. “What do you know about winter mornings?” she asked.

Nil didn’t answer. He wasn’t sure how to frame such a complicated answer. His gaze flew up to her face and his silver eyes locked onto her hazel ones for a long, tense moment. All traces of amusement fell slowly from her face, leaving a suspicious wariness in its place.

She finished the last few stitches in silence, then frowned critically at her work, tracing her thumb gently along the line of the wound. She sat back on her heels and gazed at him, her expression pensive.

Nil gazed back at her, his heart pounding again. He was confused, and suddenly he wanted to be on his own. Maybe he’d been spending too much time in Suntress’s company, and that’s why he felt this strange jumpy sensation in his gut.

For once, Suntress seemed to agree with him. “I should go,” she said abruptly, then rose to her feet. She adjusted her pouches, then finally met his eye. “Don’t touch the wound on your face. It should be healed by the next time we see each other.”

Despite his sudden desire for space, Nil felt a twinge of relief that she was willing to meet him again. After all, there were still bandit camps to attack, and two killers was better than one. “Don’t attack any more Stormbirds,” he retorted. “Or you may be dead by the next time we see each other.”

She laughed cockily, and Nil grinned at the friendly sound, some of his uneasiness melting away. “Not a chance,” she said confidently, then with a quick wave, she sprinted away to the south.

Nil rose slowly to his feet and watched her go, her red hair streaming behind her like a victory banner. Being around her made him feel alive, as alive as the spilling of blood in the battlefield. She was… passionate. Yes, that was the word, passionate. A Nora warrior-hunter who laughed like an Oseram and argued with the clever tongue of a Carja academic.

And without knowing it, she was shaking the foundations of what he thought he knew about himself, and what was important to him. It was deeply unsettling.

So until he saw her again, he would go back to what he knew: bringing swift but painful death to those that deserved it.

And he’d wring out every drop of joy from the killing that he could.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: I hope Nil’s nickname for Aloy isn’t too annoying for you readers! I just think it’s
so fascinating that he actually didn't know her name until right before the final battle (Aloy never introduced herself to him). I have plans for how he finally learns her name.... PLANS....

:)

Also, um, I snuck a line from the Lion King in here. I couldn't resist. HAHA.
Erend and Olin

Chapter Summary

Aloy finally arrives in Meridian, and gets answers to some of her burning questions. Meanwhile, Nil doesn't understand feelings.

A/N: This chapter is very heavy on main storyline dialogue, with my own interpretation of Aloy's thoughts and feelings. Hope you readers don't mind!

EDIT: It seemed that this chapter wasn't well liked by readers, so I recently edited it to pare down the amount of main story focus. I'll do my best in the later chapters to keep it tight and more focused on Nil and Aloy. THANKS for any readers who have stuck around, and I really appreciate your patience as I get into my groove with this story!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Aloy smiled wanly at the quarry foreman as he shook her hand in thanks, his enthusiasm such that he was practically shaking her whole arm. She hadn't set out this morning with the plan to face a Rockbreaker, but when during this journey had anything ever been straightforward?

Not that Aloy was complaining; far from it. Though she was exhausted from rolling out of the Rockbreaker’s wrathful path, she couldn't imagine anything else she'd rather be doing than exactly as she was doing now: journeying across the known world and expanding her horizons.

Speaking of expansive horizons...

In the distance, semi-obscured by the early morning haze of the jungle, Meridian’s famous Spire pierced the sky majestically. Aloy narrowed her eyes in an attempt to see the Spire more clearly; it seemed to be semi-reflective, but there was something else about it that gave her a strange feeling of familiarity. She couldn't put her finger on what, though.

Aloy drifted from the quarry foreman’s station over to a nearby market stall boasting a range of fruits and vegetables, all of which were unfamiliar to her. She asked the merchant for a refreshing juice made of whatever he recommended, and was delighted when the merchant handed her a large, ovaloid object - presumably a fruit? - with a rough, diamond-patterned skin. The top of the fruit was sliced off, and it contained a pulpy, bright yellow juice that smelled heavenly.

“What is this?” Aloy asked with great interest. The merchant smiled at her enthusiasm. “It is called a pineapple, huntress.”

Clever, she thought with some amusement. It did rather resemble a pinecone. Aloy took a delicate sip from the thick edge of the fruit, and a smile spread across her face. The juice was delicious: very sweet with a very tangy bite, and so strange to Aloy’s palate. “How much do I owe you?” she asked the merchant as she took a second sip.

“Twenty shards,” the merchant replied promptly. “Or five and a Watcher’s lens. I’ll happily accept either.”
Aloy almost choked on her juice. *Twenty shards! For juice? “You must be joking,”* she said bluntly. The merchant shifted awkwardly, and Aloy pressed her lips together as a few nearby Carja villagers snickered. *Great. Now they're really going to think I'm a savage,* she thought, but then she decided to own it. Aloy had never been ashamed of who she was. *Why start now?*

“I’ll give you a Watcher’s lens and no more,” she retorted boldly, and felt a flare of satisfaction when the merchant actually gave her a small smile and a nod of respect. “I accept your trade, huntress.”

Aloy fished a pristine Watcher’s lens from one of her pouches (with some difficulty, as the pineapple was difficult to hold in one hand) and handed it over, then gave the merchant her best polite smile as she walked away, her head held high as she ignored the whispers and giggles of the other shoppers.

Aloy made her leisurely way along the path towards Meridian City proper, sipping happily at her juice as she took in the sights and sounds. From what she could tell, the clothing of the Carja artisans was considerably different from that of the nobles; the few nobles she’d seen tended to wear luxurious silks and decorated themselves with jewelry made of gold wire and machine parts. *Not a wooden bead or fringe of fur in sight,* she thought with interest as she mentally compared Carja and Nora traditional attire. And yet, none of the people she’d yet seen, including the Carja soldiers, wore armour quite like Nil’s.

Nil... now he remained a mystery she had yet to solve. She kept puzzling at why he refused point-blank to go into villages. She assumed it had something to do with his past, but what?

Aloy swished a small mouthful of juice around in her mouth as she frowned and thought about all the things she still didn’t know about him. Where had he gotten that ornate flask from? Was he of noble blood? She was fairly sure he was; from what she understood, only nobles could belong to the Hunter’s Lodge before Sun-King Avad had come into power, and if he had turned down the chance to join the Lodge before that, he must be a noble. It would explain the flask, and maybe his way of talking. *Although no one else I’ve met seems to talk in gruesome rhymes,* she thought with a touch of rueful amusement. *Why in the Metal Devil was he so obsessed with killing?*

But most of all, *why* was Nil on her mind so much? She had so many more important things to think about. Why was that gunmetal grey-eyed killer taking up her mental space, making her feel a strange fluttery sensation in her chest when she thought of him?

Then Aloy crested the rise of a short hill, and a cacophony of colour and noise and *people* drove all thoughts of Nil from her mind.

Straight ahead was a bridge stretching to Meridian - the longest, most sophisticated bridge Aloy had ever seen. And spread in front of the bridge was a crowd of angry merchants and citizens, shouting and complaining. Over the noise of the crowd, a Carja guard was yelling: “All goods entering the city are subject to search!”

The crowd was clearly not pleased. “This is outrageous! We’re loyal citizens!”

“How long do we have to wait?”

“What am I supposed to do, just sit here and let everything spoil?”

*What’s going on here? Aloy wondered. As a single traveller on foot with no goods, Aloy was permitted to pass the guard and make her way along the bridge, but as she eased past the guard, he spoke to her. “Good luck getting through, outlander,” he muttered in a world-weary tone. Aloy gave him a perplexed half-smile as she ran along the bridge, her energy pumping up again now that she was here.*
She had made it to Meridian.

_Olin’s in there somewhere_, she thought with a renewed sense of determination. _And so is Erend, that other Oseram I talked to the night before the Proving. Erend said he’d introduce me to his sister if I came to Meridian… said she was captain of the Vanguard._ Aloy only hoped that Erend wasn’t all mouth and no trousers.

As Aloy reached the end of the bridge, a contingent of about ten Carja guards stood at attention and one of them held out a beefy hand. “Stop right there!” He placed both hands on his hips and glowered at her. “In light of the recent attack, no stranger passes into Meridian without submitting to search.”

“Recent attack?” Aloy frowned. “What are you talking about?” How had she missed hearing about this? She hadn’t been _that_ preoccupied, had she?

“The murder of Captain Ersa and her Vanguards, of course!” the guard snapped. “Ambushed by Shadow Carja forces in Red Ridge Pass.”

Aloy’s eyebrows jumped high on her forehead with surprise - and dismay. “You mean Erend’s sister is dead?”

Now it was the guard’s turn to be surprised. “How would _you_ know his name?”

Aloy was beginning to get annoyed with the guard’s condescending tone. Besides, the story was too long and too personal to get into with a guard. “I know Erend,” she said with firm finality. “Summon him. I need to speak to him.”

The guard snorted and gave Aloy a scathing once-over that had her bristling. “I doubt that Erend, the new Captain of the Vanguard and a man in grief, is going to waste his time on a grimy outlander—”

“Aloy?!”

Erend’s loud, unmistakable voice interrupted the guard’s snide tone. “You’re alive? I thought you were dead! Hey, make way - make way!”

Erend shoved his way through the guards and stood before her, a huge grin on his face, but his eyes drooping at half-mast. “You came all the way to Meridian, just to see me?” he slurred.

Aloy stared at him in shock. “Have you been drinking?” she demanded in a low voice. It was hardly a question; she could smell the fumes of Scrappersap on his breath from three paces away.

He waved his hand in a sloppy gesture of dismissal that could not more clearly have been a _yes_. “Ah, not really. A lil’. So - so you’re alive! This is - we should celebrate!” He spread his arms wide, swaying slightly backwards, and beamed at her. “Drinks on me!” He looked at her again, and his eyes fell on the empty pineapple still in her hand. He frowned slightly with puzzlement. “Why do you have a pineapple?”

Aloy impatiently threw the empty pineapple over the edge of the bridge and gave him a stern look. “We need to talk. Alone.” She lowered her voice. “And _you_ need to pull it together.”

His face fell slightly at her cold tone, but he began to follow her over to a quiet part of the bridge. The condescending guard suddenly blurted, “So you approve-?”

Erend turned back towards the guard with a swift aggression that would have been impressive if it wasn’t alarming, given his drunken state. “Of _course_ I approve!” Erend growled, his face inches
from the guard’s. “From now on she comes and goes from this city as she pleases!”

“As you wish, sir,” the guard replied hastily.

Aloy carefully controlled her face to stop herself from wincing. This would make things easier for her, but she didn’t think that Erend should be so trusting with people who were essentially strangers. She hoped that she was the only one getting preferential treatment, for his sake and the Sun-King’s.

He swung back towards her and gallantly gestured towards the railing of the bridge, then faced her with a slight sway. “There! Alone as you asked. Now, what’d you wanna tell me?”

Aloy gazed at him in concern. How much Scrappersap has he had? she wondered. However, she wasn’t sure how helpful it would be to draw further attention to it… not yet, anyway. “A lot has happened since we last spoke,” she said. “The Proving was attacked by a group of killers. Not many of us survived.” Aloy swallowed a sudden pang of grief… and guilt. She’d been enjoying her journey so much that in the past couple of weeks, she’d barely thought of Vala or Bast… or Rost.

Erend gazed at her, his eyebrows contracted in sympathy. “We were in the village when we heard the explosions up on the mountain. Some of your braves came back, said most of the contestants were dead. How did you survive?”

Rost. Then he did as he said he would… went somewhere I couldn’t follow. She swallowed hard to master her grief. “How I survived is less important than how I was targeted,” she said briskly.


“The killers came for me because of Olin,” she said gently. She knew this would be hard for Erend to hear.


Aloy gazed back at him, her gaze sympathetic but implacable. “I need to find Olin. I need to know what he knows.”

Erend’s scowl crumbled into uncertainty at Aloy’s conviction. “B-but… he’s a friend!”

Aloy gently shook her head. “No. He’s a traitor. I don’t know who the killers are, or what they want, but I do know that Olin is working with them.”

Erend shifted his weight in agitation, seeming more helpless by the moment. “But… I don’t… this-”

“I don’t need you to understand, Erend,” Aloy finally snapped in firm tone. The gentle approach wasn’t working; the kinder she was, the more Erend seemed to crumble. “I just need you to take me to him.”

Miraculously, Aloy’s guess was correct; Erend’s posture immediately straightened at the hardness of her tone. Possibly the result of having such a strong woman for an older sister? Aloy wondered thoughtfully.

But Erend’s reply was less than amusing. “Olin’s not here. He went scrounging for scrap and relics days ago. He could be anywhere.”

Aloy pursed her lips in frustration. She couldn’t have come this far to lose the trail now. “Are there any places he frequents? Places he returns to?”
Erend nodded. “A house, here in Meridian.”

“Okay, then take me there. I need to search it.”

Erend pursed his lips uncertainly, then shrugged acquiescence. “I guess. As long as I’m there to witness the search.”

Aloy gave him a small smile and a nod of thanks, then in a soft tone, she said, “I… heard what happened to Ersa. I’m sorry. I know she was special to you.”

Erend gave a small huff of humourless laughter. “Special to me? Hah! She was special to everyone. She always knew what to do… bossed everyone around… she kept me in line.” To Aloy’s dismay, his bottom lip trembled. “Now I’m supposed to fill her shoes. And instead here I am… stumbling around in them.” He lowered his head in shame.

Aloy felt a pang of sympathy. She had no siblings - she didn’t even know if she had a mother - but she could imagine what it must feel like to live in the shadow of a beloved but celebrated older sibling. “Give yourself some time,” she said. “You’ll find your footing.”

“No at the rate I’ve been drinking,” Erend muttered petulantly.

Aloy raised her eyebrows. “And what would your sister have said about that?” she said pointedly.

“I know, you’re right… I should expect more of myself.” Erend sighed, then rubbed a hand over the back of his scalp. “She always did.”

Aloy gave him a small smile, but resumed her brisk tone of voice. It seemed to be the best way to kick Erend’s butt into action. “I need to see Olin’s place. Now.”

“Okay, okay. Come on,” he said, then turned and jogged into the city, with Aloy close behind.

Despite the tension of the moment, Aloy couldn’t help but stare curiously at everything. The city was huge, built of smooth golden stone with graceful curved archways and candle brackets everywhere, giving the city a golden glow even as the sun was setting. And there was so much noise: chatting, gossip, merchants yelling, children screaming and laughing, music from multiple sources floating through the air…

“So many people here, all talking at once. How does anyone think? she wondered.

“I don’t,” Erend said, and Aloy realized with a twinge of embarrassment that she’d spoken her thoughts aloud. “I just drink.”

Aloy frowned at him with concern. We’re going to need to do something about that, she thought, but that was a concern for another day.

Finally they came upon a huge, ornate door. Aloy stared at it. This door was more ornate than the gates of Daytower. All of this, for one man? she thought with mild disgust. The Nora slept twelve braves in lodges smaller than this. Out loud, she asked, “How are we going to get in?”

Erend snarled, lifted a huge booted foot, and kicked the door in. Then he strode inside like a Trampler in a Carja pottery shop.

Aloy gazed at him, nonplussed. “That was… subtle.” She stepped delicately over the busted door.

“Okay. Go ahead. Try not to break anything. Err, other than the door.” He rubbed the back of his
head sheepishly, his aggression seemingly spent on the innocent door.

Aloy raised one eyebrow at him, then stepped past him and put her Focus to work. Almost immediately, she found an Oseram hatch under the main room’s carpet. Erend eyed it with a funny mixture of suspicion and pride. “You’ll need a key to get through that. That’s a Vault Hatch of Oseram make! Nothing gets through.”

*Challenge accepted,* Aloy thought. “We’ll see about that,” she quipped with a smirk, then ran up the stairs.

“Call it a day, girl. You’re wasting time,” Erend called up to her, but she ignored him. It didn’t take long to find an optimally positioned pallet of heavy ingots… then to shove them over the ledge onto the hatch.

**CRASH.** Aloy peered over the edge and smiled with satisfaction at the shattered hatch door that led into a hidden basement. Erend peered up at her through the dust, annoyance written on his face. “I *did* say not to break anything, didn’t I?”

Aloy gave him a cheeky smile and a shrug, then ran back down the stairs. *All right, Olin, let’s see what you’re hiding…*

****************

For the first time in years, Nil was stalking prey that didn’t bleed.

After Suntress had left him with the dead Stormbird, he’d continued travelling west at a leisurely pace. He’d gotten in a few decent kills with some straggling bandits, including one who’d bled out from the thigh in a most satisfying manner.

But somehow, things felt different. Nil wasn’t getting quite the same heady rush of euphoria from these deaths as he used to.

He blamed Suntress. It had been about seven days since they’d parted ways, and he still felt unsettled when he thought of her. Nil had decided that perhaps she’d given him a new taste for machine hunting, and he just needed to savour that new hunt on his tongue. Then maybe he could relax, and the strange pressure in his chest when he thought of her would go away.

So here he was, crouching in the long grass, watching a Sawtooth’s sinuous pacing with some trepidation. He’d realized quite quickly that Suntress’s spear gave her an advantage when it came to close-quarters combat with the machines. Nil’s knife, though wickedly sharp, just didn’t have the reach or blunt-force damage capability, so he would have been safest shooting the Sawtooth from a distance… but where was the thrill or the challenge in that?

Nil needed to get his blood pumping. He needed the thrill. Otherwise what was the point?

Finally he just burst out of the grass at the Sawtooth, slamming his shoulder against its middle with all the force he could muster. The Sawtooth collapsed sideways as Nil had intended, and he slammed his dagger into its side and its metallic neck as many times as he could before the beast found its feet. Nil rolled away briskly as he had watched Suntress do, and grabbed the Voice of Our Teeth… but not fast enough. Nil barely had time to dodge the Sawtooth’s enormous metal claws as it lunged at him with a grating metallic shriek.

In the end, Nil took down the Sawtooth but earned himself three shallow but long claw gashes to the chest, bruises all over his shins, and fresh blood trickling from the almost-healed wound on his face… and he didn’t even get to stick around to enjoy the spoils of his hunt, as two watchers and a
pack of Glinthawks had descended on him, forcing him to run away.

Nil was never the one who ran away. But he was now.

As he sat broodily at the top of a small deserted mesa, dabbing Scrappersap on his scratched chest by a small campfire, he grumbled to himself. This was why I didn’t join the Hunter’s Lodge. Possible death, but no payoff? No desperate scrabbling for life, no fading of fear in their eyes… It’s utterly devoid of pleasure.

Nil lay down on his back in the grass with a groan and closed his eyes. He had hoped this little machine hunt would make him feel more like himself, but all he had were more wounds and no clarification.

I’ll just go back to hunting more bandits. A lot more bandits. I’ll scour my mind into clarity by scouring those scum from the earth. One of the last ones he’d killed had mentioned another well-fortified camp out west, at Shattered Kiln. That was where he would go.

And Suntress would probably find him there. She always did.

Nil smiled to himself. Bandits. That’s the cure. With that happy thought, he drifted off to sleep.

********************

Aloy stood over Olin, her spear inches from his throat. “I’ve heard enough. It’s time to finish this,” she told him angrily.

Olin looked back up at her with an admirably stoic resignation. He’d told her everything he knew about the Eclipse, Helis, and the woman who looked like her, and still he gazed up at her with nothing but apology in his eyes. “I won’t beg for my life. But if there’s any mercy left in you, free my family. Please.”

Aloy stared down at him, her jaw clenched with indecision. Whenever she’d thought of Olin during this journey, all she’d thought of was learning from him… and of retribution. But now, knowing that he’d been coerced into cooperation at risk of his wife and child…. I can see why he would do what he did. I don’t condone it, but I understand it.

She stared down at him for another moment, then abruptly spun her spear and sheathed it on her back. “It will take many good deeds to make up for the crimes you’ve committed,” she snapped, and stood back, allowing him to stand.

He gaped at her, then slowly rose to his feet as if he didn’t quite believe her. “You’re… sparing me? After all I’ve done?”

Aloy turned away, a knot of grief in her throat. If not for him, Rost would still be alive… But there was no point ruminating on what could have been. And Olin’s willingness to accept his punishment had softened her rage. She turned back to him, with steel in her eyes. “Yes. Forge a new life, Olin. One of better make.”

His eyes widened at the distinctly Oseram imagery in her words. He gave an unconscious half-bow. “Then the rest of my life will be lived in your debt.”

She nodded briskly to him. “Go to the place where your family is being held and wait for me. We’ll make their lives the first ones you save.”

Olin’s brown eyes shone with grateful tears. “I didn’t earn this mercy, but I will die to make myself
worthy of it. I will be waiting for you.”

Aloy nodded once again, then turned on her heel to head for Red Ridge Pass. As she climbed up the scaffolding, the dam holding back her grief finally burst, and hot tears scalded her cheeks as she ran along the scaffolding to the edge of the excavation pit.

Aloy pressed her lips together as the silent tears tracked down her face. She wondered what Rost would have thought of her decision to spare Olin’s life. She was fairly sure he would have understood, but he had been a man of traditional honour and rules; perhaps he would have thought Olin should die for his crimes. Would Rost have been disappointed in her, for letting the person responsible for his death to go free? She didn’t think so... but now she would never know.

As Aloy reached the edge of the excavation pit, she felt a throb of grief in her throat so painful that she sobbed out loud. She sat heavily on a boulder and gazed forlornly out at the rocky landscape. For the first time since leaving the Sacred Lands, she felt homesick… not for the Nora’s lands or for her childhood home, now empty and abandoned, but for that feeling of security and safety that Rost’s presence had always meant.

Some time later, Aloy wiped her face on her bare arm and stood slowly. “Rost, I’ll avenge you. I promise,” she whispered into the wind. “But I won’t kill everyone in my path to do it. It’s not… what I believe in.” She sighed.

Then her thoughts returned, at long last, to Nil. If Aloy’s revenge was up to him, she was sure he would be of a different mind.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: More Nil in the next chapter! I promise. :)}
Aloy made her way through Meridian to meet Erend. She'd run back from Red Ridge Pass as quickly as possible, with only one pit stop to hunt some Grazers for blaze canisters. Erend had just been so excited by the possibility of his sister still being alive that his enthusiasm was infectious. Besides, Aloy wanted to know if her theory was right.

But as she neared the gates at the meeting spot Erend had described, she frowned. The larger-than-life Vanguardsman was nowhere to be found. Instead, she saw a distinguished-looking older Carja gentleman whose benign facial expression did nothing to hide the shrewdness in his eyes.

Aloy slowed uncertainly as she approached the gentleman, but he smiled at her as though he knew exactly who she was. Sure enough, he greeted her by name: “Greetings, Aloy. I am known as Blameless Marad. Please come with me; you’re needed for an important consultation.” He gestured gallantly for her to walk with him, but she narrowed her eyes suspiciously. The combination of his bland politeness and firm authority told her that this man was much more than he seemed.

“What do you mean, a consultation?” Aloy asked. “Where’s Erend?”

“He’s inside, attending the Sun-King. Where we should be, without further delay,” Marad replied, and his voice was still warm but very slightly pointed. “Follow me, please.” He ushered her forward with another genteel wave, and Aloy finally fell into step beside him.

Marad gave her a sly little smile as they walked up the broad winding stairs. “The Sun-King is eager to meet you. The machine tamer with a curious eye for detail: it’s all very intriguing.”

“I’m not here to intrigue you,” Aloy said bluntly. She wanted that to be clear: she was not some freakish Nora outlander here to entertain the royalty.

“Too late,” Marad replied with a broad smile. He seemed to like her assertiveness.

Finally they reached the top of the stairs, and Aloy saw a sumptuous pagoda constructed of beautifully carved and polished wooden beams, topped with yellow and red silks.

Aloy looked at Marad curiously. “What’s the Sun-King like?” Nobody had been able to tell her
much; it seemed that almost everyone she had met was ‘too far beneath’ the Sun-King to even lay eyes on him.

Marad gestured politely for her to walk before him towards the pagoda. “The most important thing is what he isn’t like: his father. I think you’ll find him to be a reasonable man.”

Aloy walked around the back of the pagoda and spotted Erend talking animatedly to a man who was sitting on a bench at the front of the pagoda. The man rose from his bench as he spotted Aloy, and she finally got her first look at the Almighty and Radiant Sun-King Avad.

From the priest Irid’s reverent speech and the tales of heroism and patricide that she’d heard from Carja and Oseram alike, Aloy had expected an imposing warrior, stern and forceful, like a sun-burnished version of Helis. She knew it was ridiculous, but the Sun-King’s reputation was such that he’d grown into something of a myth in her mind, a giant warrior-prince with a halo of sunlight around his head.

Instead, the Sun-King who greeted her was… a normal-looking man. He was around the same height as Erend. His half-clad body was as well-muscled as Nil’s, but more slender. And despite his impossibly ornate heavy collar, headdress and stole, he had the kindest face, with golden-brown eyes that exuded warmth.

Not at all what I expected. Though he is bronzed by the sun, Aloy thought to herself, as a genuine smile creased Avad’s handsome face.

“Aloy of the Nora,” Avad greeted her, and his voice was just as warm and gentle as his eyes. “She who sees the unseen. Welcome. It would seem you have done me a great service.”

Aloy gave him a small smile and a respectful nod, and Avad turned to Erend, gesturing him forward with a gracious wave. “Erend, tell her what you found.”

Erend stepped forward eagerly. “I checked Ersa’s tomb. You were right, Aloy!” His face was brimming with excitement, and Aloy couldn’t help but smile. “The body is missing a scar below her right knee. I gave it to Ersa when we were kids, fighting over a toy sword.”

Avad turned to Aloy, his face grave. “If the body is not Ersa’s, then we must assume she is still alive. And I will not abandon her.”

Aloy was slightly surprised by his fervency. But she supposed Ersa was his most trusted military commander. “We only know she was taken, not who took her,” she said.

Marad stepped forward, his hands clasped modestly behind his back. “I can help with that. Ersa has an enemy among the Oseram: a warlord named Dervahl.”

“Impossible!” Erend interrupted. “Every clan in the Claim has been hunting him since the Liberation! He has to be dead by now.”

But Marad shook his head regretfully. “No other Oseram had the motive and ingenuity to lure Ersa into a trap. I expect to find him lurking near the border. I’ve already sent an agent to investigate. He’ll be waiting for word from us in the marketplace at Pitchcliff.”

Wow, Aloy thought, impressed both by Marad’s quick action, as well as by the fact that he had agents in the first place. Information agents? Like spies? she wondered, narrowing her eyes slightly at the shrewd, mild-mannered advisor.

Avad pursed his lips thoughtfully. “I can’t move troops towards the border without provoking the
Oseram. But I could send a few Vanguardsmen.” He looked at Erend, who nodded eagerly. Then Avad turned to Aloy, his eyebrows raised quizzically. “And… perhaps an exceptionally gifted Nora as well?’”

His brown eyes were brimming with hope, but his face was taut with anxiety. Aloy didn’t think he was older than Nil, but she suddenly noticed the dark circles under his eyes. Lines on his forehead and bracketing his mouth made him look older than he probably was. *This has taken a toll on him,* Aloy thought, her heart squeezing with pity. It seemed like Ersa’s presumed death-now-kidnapping had been as hard on Avad as it had been on Erend. She nodded agreement to Avad’s request.

Avad’s shoulders relaxed, and he turned to the two other men. “Erend. Marad. Let me discuss it with her privately.” Erend and Marad nodded and left, and Avad turned back to Aloy.

“I hate to impose further after all you’ve done… but this is a matter of great importance to me.”

“It sounds like Ersa means a lot to you,” Aloy said gently. She didn’t mean to pry, but she was getting the distinct sense that Ersa was more to Avad than the Captain of the Guard.

Avad took a deep fortifying breath, confirming Aloy’s suspicions, but his response was professional. “Without her Oseram vanguard, I wouldn’t have been able to liberate Meridian and end my father’s brutal reign. Since then, it has been difficult to maintain the peace between our tribes, but Ersa has a way of making her people see reason. So you see, I need her back at my side, and quickly.”

Aloy nodded thoughtfully. She was sure now that Avad had an attachment to Ersa that was more than king-and-guard, but it didn’t seem important in the grand scheme of things. She asked him a few more questions about Dervahl and the Oseram’s past with the Carja; after all, the more she knew, the better prepared she would be for the inevitable conflict to come.

Then Aloy’s curiosity got the best of her. She wanted to know more about the One True Sun-King who seemed, despite his unexpected kindness, to be a mere mortal like anyone else. “I’d like to ask you something about the Sundom and its politics,” she said.

Avad nodded graciously. “By all means.”

Aloy cocked her head to the side. “They call you a Sun God who killed his own father in order to unite the tribes in harmony. Is any of it true?”

Avad’s grin was sudden and genuine, and it made his face look ten years younger. “They say you can see the invisible, split an arrow at fifty paces, and tame machines at a glance. How much of *that* is true?”

Aloy grinned back and raised one eyebrow cockily. “It’s not too far off.”

Avad’s eyes twinkled. “Well, *I would* like to unite the tribes in harmony. But you saw how many courtiers I have to deal with first.” His smile turned cheeky. “Maybe next week.”

Aloy huffed out a laugh, then turned to the balcony. From this height, she could see over the whole city, all the way down to Meridian Village. It was an undeniably beautiful view.

Avad joined her at the balcony, and she shot him a sidelong glance. “Quite a place you’ve got here. You can almost see the little people below the mesa.” Aloy was almost shocked at herself for the things she was saying. She’d never really been one to mince her words, but to speak so casually to the Sun-King, whom she’d just met? *But he just doesn’t seem like a king,* she thought to herself. *He seems… like a nice person. Who just happens to rule a vast territory and its people.*
Fortunately, Avad seemed to find her boldness refreshing. He rested his elbows on the balcony and looked out over his city. “You don’t approve? Well, I have a secret for you.” He leaned in closer and lowered his voice. “Neither do I. But we must be patient. Change won’t happen in a single sunrise.” He leaned away from her, his eyes on the horizon.

Aloy frowned slightly. “But will it happen at all, while men live in palaces?”

Avad looked at her thoughtfully. “It might. Eventually. If people like you help me bring it about.”

Aloy gazed back at him as his golden-brown eyes traced her face. Suddenly she felt awkward under the scrutiny of his stare, and inexplicably, an image of Nil’s intense silver-eyed gaze flashed through her mind. She cleared her throat quietly and abruptly changed the subject.

“Erend probably told you about the killers who attacked the Nora. I’ve discovered that they’re a faction of the Shadow Carja called the Eclipse. They’re digging up ancient weapons - machines that corrupt and control other machines. They want to use them to strike Meridian.”

Avad frowned, his mien suddenly serious and kingly again. “This echoes the reports I’ve received from Marad. A Shadow Carja splinter group... corrupted machines across the land…” He looked at her intently. “When will this attack come? Do you know?”

Aloy shook her head regretfully. “I’m not exactly sure.”

Avad nodded, his lips pressed together resolutely. “Then we will do what we can to prepare.”

“What can you tell me about the Shadow Carja?” Aloy prodded. “I’ve only heard of them recently. I wasn’t aware there were two types of Carja.”

“They are remnants of my father’s regime, holding out at the fortress of Sunfall to the west,” Avad replied. “They care only for domination and seek to draw upon the power of the Sun by spilling blood in its name.”

Goosebumps ran along Aloy’s arms. Spilling blood... that was what Nil enjoyed so much. I wonder...

Finally she nodded respectfully to Avad. “Thank you for your time. I need to get going.”

Avad grinned his youthful grin. “Marad, for one. Don’t hesitate to ask him or Erend if you have further questions. And please, enjoy the city while we wait for Marad’s agent. It may be some time before he has the intelligence we require.” Avad sighed, then gave Aloy a small wan smile. “Waiting is the hardest part, don’t you think? But alas... good things come to those who lie in wait.”

Aloy looked at him sharply. That’s exactly what Nil said the first time we met, she thought, with a jolt of recognition. She opened her mouth to question him, but suddenly a harried-looking attendant hurried up to Avad’s bench. “Your Radiance! The courtiers are becoming restless. The line is stretching through the gates. If I may-”

Avad raised his hand, interrupting the attendant’s babble. “Thank you. Bring them in.” The attendant nodded and ran off, his face shining with relief and sweat.
Avad turned back to Aloy, his face creased with apology. “I am sorry, Aloy. I must return to my duties. I hope we will speak further in the future.”

“I’m sure we will,” Aloy agreed, then left him to explore the City of the Sun at long last.

For the first time in almost two months, Aloy was forced to wait for news, and she was ready to take full advantage of it to explore everything Meridian had to offer.

She was determined to get accustomed to the noise and press of people, so she headed straight for the central market square. She lightened her pouches of machine parts and weighed them down with shards in exchange, then lightened her stock of shards as well by upgrading all her weapons and buying two exotic Banuk outfits: a thick and heavy coat-and-trousers combination that would keep her warm in the northlands, and a thinner set of clothing imbued with a herbal remedy that was supposed to protect her from the corruption machines’ poison. She stood for a long time and watched in fascination as a trio of musicians played traditional Carja tunes, then went to another fruit stall and asked for an inexpensive fruit recommendation.

The fruit seller snapped her fingers. “I’ve got just the thing for an adventurous outlander! Freshly picked just yesterday. And they’re in season.” She reached over and plucked a round orange fruit from her display, then presented it to Aloy with a flourish. “This is an orange.”

Aloy snorted, then coughed to hide her mirth. These Carja fruit names are so literal, she thought with amusement. The seller smiled uncertainly at Aloy’s snort-cough, then picked up a small sharp blade. “Shall I slice it for you, huntress?”

Aloy nodded, and the fruit seller sliced into the orange. A fine spray of oils was released from the skin, and Aloy inhaled… and recognition slammed into her like an Oseram sledgehammer.

Nil. This is what Nil smells like. A wave of dizziness overcame her for a moment. A mystery solved, she thought as she dumbly held out her hand to accept the slice of fruit. She held it to her nose and inhaled again. That’s it, she thought, as the tangy, fresh scent filled her nostrils. Rost’s masculine warmth mixed with orange oils… that was the aggravatingly pleasant scent of Nil.

“You’ve answered a question I didn’t even know I had,” the seller told her helpfully. Aloy opened her eyes and smiled at the seller, then followed her instructions and bit into the curiously cellular flesh. Like the pineapple, it was very sweet and tangy, the tiny pockets of flesh bursting with juice. It was exotic and new, and Aloy relished every bite, then licked the juice from her fingers.

“How much?” she asked, and the seller held up two fingers. “Two shards, huntress.”

Aloy dug into her pouch and pulled out a handful of shards. She handed all the shards to the seller, who protested feebly. “No, I insist,” Aloy said. You’ve answered a question I didn’t even know I had.

The seller smiled, her eyes shining as she pocketed the shards. “Then I’ll at least slice the rest of this orange for you, for convenience. And take one more for the road. I insist.”

Aloy finally left the stall clutching her sliced oranges in a waxed paper sack, and continued her wander through the city. She felt lightheaded with discovery, as though she’d uncovered something more than just a fruit. The tangy, intoxicating smell of oranges seemed to have ripped something wide inside of her and she felt strangely vulnerable, but also oddly excited and jittery. And she
suddenly couldn’t stop thinking about Nil.

Aloy had never been interested in relationships. She was sure it was partly related to being raised in isolation; she’d had neither platonic nor romantic relationships growing up, and she’d been so single-minded in training for the Proving that she’d had little interest in anything else. Then, when she’d joined the tribe, she’d had barely any time to get to know the other Nora before leaving the Sacred Lands as a Seeker. Now that she had the opportunities to forge relationships, she still hadn’t bothered; she enjoyed learning more about the people she met and liked many of them, and she was enjoying lending a helping hand, but she couldn’t imagine sticking to one place long enough to foster the kind of closeness that she and Rost had shared. She hadn’t understood Gera’s willingness to take Kendert back, even though he’d initially chosen the Ealdormen’s rules over her. And she’d been annoyed at Erend’s obvious attraction to her the first time they’d met, wondering why people were always so fixated on romance.

But then Nil had arrived unexpectedly in her life. He’d started as just some weird murderer trespassing on Nora land. But ever since she’d taken down that Stormbird, and he’d stared at her with those intense silver eyes… Aloy thought that maybe she was starting to understand what all the fuss was about.

“Careful! Watch your step, Nora!”

“Sorry,” Aloy muttered, then stepped back; she’d almost bumped into a group of young Carja wearing a striking mixture of silks and armour, with metal stitched into their clothing in a way that was both stylish and functional.

It can’t be, Aloy thought in disbelief. Their clothing looked like Nil’s.

Aloy watched the Carja walk into a tall, grand building… then suddenly recognized where she’d found herself.

The Hunter’s Lodge.

Aloy gazed at Talanah with determination. She may have been curious about the Hunter’s Lodge before, but now that she’d talked to that asshole Ahsis, she was determined to become a thrush just to piss him off. “I’m ready to hunt. What do I have to do?”

Talanah smirked at her with complicity. “You want them to regret looking down on you? Then speak to them in their language. Kill three Sawtooths, two Ravagers and a Stalker. Deliver the trophies directly to Ahsis. That should shut them all up.”

“So if I do that, you’ll sponsor me?” Aloy clarified.

Talanah quirked an eyebrow and folded her arms. “I’ll consider it. Just to make Ahsis boil.” Her eyes twinkled with mischief, and Aloy couldn’t help but smile. Talanah was one cool girl.

Aloy nodded. “Consider it done.” She left Talanah with a businesslike wave and headed for the northern bridge out of the city.

She had a few days before she’d want to head to Pitchcliff to meet Erend, and she planned to make the most of them.

************
Two days later, Aloy was coming up on another bandit camp at Shattered Kiln. Earlier that day, she had finally freed Nakoa from a basement prison where she’d been locked up with a few other outlanders that Zaid had been planning to sell as slaves. It had been nothing short of satisfying to watch Nakoa slam her spear into Zaid’s treacherous chest.

Slaves! In this time! Aloy thought, with a fresh wave of disgust. She knew the Mad Sun-King had taken outlanders as slaves, but she couldn’t believe some of his people were still continuing the practice… and that Zaid had managed to hide it so well from his superiors. Aloy made a mental note to go back to Captain Balahn at Daytower and tell him when she had a chance. He would probably have a fit.

The dull orange torchlights of Shattered Kiln finally reached her eyes, and she slowed to a walk and looked around for Nil. This was the biggest bandit camp in the northern Sundom, and she would be shocked if he wasn’t here… and okay, Aloy admitted to herself, maybe I’m looking forward to seeing him again. Maybe. She still wasn’t entirely comfortable with the new feelings she had when she thought of him.

And there he was, sitting in the cover of a tree and hidden from the camp by some nearby boulders, looking totally at ease. He turned his head at her approach, then stood and stretched leisurely.

“I waited for you,” Nil said with a yawn. He scratched the back of his head sleepily as though he’d been napping. “Time passing pulls the anticipation tight as wire.” He smiled, and his eyes glittered like shards of metal and ice. “How many has it been now?”

Aloy raised an eyebrow. “I don’t keep count, Nil.”

“Don’t keep count?” Nil gave a huge exasperated sigh and stared at her like she was a disobedient child. “Sometimes I just don’t get you. Are you like us, or a little different?”

Aloy bit the inside of her cheek to stop from smiling. Imagine Nil, of all people, accusing her of being different! “Hopefully a little different,” she retorted with a graceful lift of one eyebrow.

Nil gave her a skeptical look. “Hmm, if that’s what you’re going to tell yourself. Shall we get started?”

Aloy nodded, then frowned at him. He’d winced suddenly and shrugged his left arm as though it had a kink. “Are you okay?”

“Yes. Come now, we’re wasting time,” he said eagerly. Too eagerly.

“Nil. Are you hurt?” Aloy placed a stern hand on his left shoulder to stop him, but he shied away from her touch defensively.

“Just my pride,” he quipped with a pained smile. Then finally he pulled back the left side of his vest to reveal three long, shallow, angry-looking scratches along his left pec. One scratch had narrowly missed his nipple. The skin around the scratches was red and inflamed-looking, and the scratches were weeping serum.

Aloy’s eyes widened. “Nil, you lunkhead! Why didn’t you bandage these?”

He shrugged. “Suntress, it’s but a scratch. I’ve seen far worse. I’ve given far worse.”

Aloy sighed loudly. “That’s not the point. It could be infected.” She knelt in the grass and brusquely grabbed his arm, forcing him to kneel beside her as she rifled through her medicine pouch. “Why didn’t you just bandage it?”
He gave her a pointed look. “How?”

She pursed her lips in resignation. He had a point; the scratches were quite long, and she was going to need a lot of cloth strips to bandage the wound, and to keep the bandages secured. She eyed him with mounting frustration. A *lot* of cloth strips, indeed.

“How did this happen?” she demanded as she thrust some salvebrush berries into his hand and started crushing hintergold leaves, as she has done the last time he was wounded. She had never known him to get this kind of injury when fighting bandits before.

“I hunted a Sawtooth. It wasn't a particularly clean kill,” he admitted grudgingly.

Aloy gaped at him in surprise and confusion. “*You* hunted a machine? Why?”

“You know, I'm not sure,” he mused. “When you hunted that Stormbird, I felt... something. An unusual thrill. I had hoped to capture that again if I hunted a machine.” His eyes slid to her face, and his expression was thoughtful. “It wasn't the same without you.”

Aloy paused in her leaf-crushing to look at him and felt a fluttery sensation in her chest: he was looking at her the same way Avad had looked at her. But with Nil, it felt different; it wasn’t awkward. It felt… good.

Uncertain how to respond, she returned her attention to the hintergold leaves. As before, Nil watched her work with quiet patience.

Finally her hintergold paste was ready, and she turned to Nil. “Take off your vest.”

Wordlessly he complied, shedding his quiver and his bow before pulling off his vest. Aloy noticed that his formerly-pale skin was becoming a burnished gold where it saw more of the sun.

As before, she dabbed his flesh with Scrappersap, then gently spread the hintergold paste on his scratches. She forced herself to focus on the sound of her own breath as she did so: Nil’s eyes were on her face and he smelled of sweat and orange oil, and Aloy felt jittery, her thoughts scrambled.

The bandaging was going to be the tricky part; she would have to actually wind the bandages around his body for them to have a hope of staying secure. She sighed. “Lift your arm,” she said briskly. He obeyed silently, and Aloy wrapped strips of clean cloth around his upper body until the scratches were covered… and most of his upper chest as well.

Nil looked at her as she tied the bandages tight. “Come on, Suntress. This looks ridiculous.”

Aloy’s ears warmed with embarrassment, but she packed up her healing kit with her chin held high. *He* couldn’t have done better. “Just leave it while we deal with these bandits. Then you can be as vain as you want and go enjoy your infection somewhere else where I don’t have to look at it.”

Nil snickered as he stood and pulled his vest and quiver back on. “All right, flame-tongue, consider me burned. Let’s *do* this already.”

“All right, flame-tongue, consider me burned. Let’s *do* this already.”

“Okay, okay,” Aloy muttered, and they set off in a crouch. She and Nil didn’t even need to confer anymore; they worked together smoothly, like a well-oiled Oseram forge, sniping bandits and striking silently. Nil shot out the alarm before it could be raised, and then they launched into a quick bout of head-on combat with the straggling remainders.

One bandit at the edge of the camp tried to run, but Aloy and Nil saw him at the same time. “Mine,” Nil called out, but Aloy’s bow was already raised, her arrow notched.
Too late," she called back, and the hardpoint arrow struck home in the base of the bandit's skull. She turned to Nil with a triumphant smirk.

He grinned at her, his pale grey eyes blazing with heat. "You're cruel, Suntress. Stealing that last lap of victory from my plate." Then he jerked his head back towards the hill where they had met that evening. "Come, before the little villagers arrive to stake their claim."

Aloy followed him in a brisk jog. Once they were back at the top of the hill, Nil turned to look at her. "These little moments are refreshing, aren't they?"

Aloy raised her eyebrows. "That could be the least creepy thing you've said to me."

Nil smirked at her. "I can see what you're thinking, Suntress. But I've had my hands full with purging the lands of these scum, ambushing wandering bandit clans, the wounds just kept on coming."

Aloy smiled, then looked back at the camp wistfully. "That glimpse of yourself in their eyes, just as the cloud of death passes across them…"

"Never mind. There it goes." Aloy shook her head in exasperation, then gave him a shrewd look. "You know, Nil, if you get tired of bandits, there's this group called the Eclipse…"

Nil frowned. "That's a political situation."

Aloy frowned back. "They're murderers and they're raising an army of machines. That's a little more than politics."

Nil tilted his head quizzically. "But you're still standing. That's a victory in itself, isn't it?"

"This isn't a true sign of victory. Nil spoke, and his voice was low, deep, and intimate. "This is a true sign of victory."

Aloy frowned back. "They're murderers and they're raising an army of machines. That's a little more than politics."

Nil tilted his head and shot her a beguiling smile. "Don't hate me for being single-minded. Besides, I wouldn't bet on how long the Shadow Carja are going to last if you're in for the kill."

Aloy shook her head. He was resorting to cheap flattery as an evasion technique. But the more Aloy thought about it, the more useful she could imagine him being in a fight against the Eclipse. He was an exceptional fighter. She'd have to keep that in mind for the future.

Nil smiled, then looked back at the camp wistfully. "Now this scar... That's a true sign of victory."

Aloy raised her eyebrows. "That could be the least creepy thing you've said to me."

"Nothing mind. There it goes." Aloy shook her head in exasperation, then gave him a shrewd look. "You know, Nil, if you get tired of bandits, there's this group called the Eclipse…"

"Never mind. There it goes." Aloy shook her head in exasperation, then gave him a shrewd look. "You know, Nil, if you get tired of bandits, there's this group called the Eclipse…"

"These little moments are refreshing, aren't they?"

Aloy followed him in a brisk jog. Once they were back at the top of the hill, Nil turned to look at her. "I can see what you're thinking, Suntress. But I've had my hands full with purging the lands of these scum, ambushing wandering bandit clans, the wounds just kept on coming."

She turned to Nil with a triumphant smirk. He grinned at her, his pale grey eyes blazing with heat. "You're cruel, Suntress. Stealing that last lap of victory from my plate." Then he jerked his head back towards the hill where they had met that evening. "Come before the little villagers arrive to stake their claim."

"These little moments are refreshing, aren't they?"

Aloy followed him in a brisk jog. Once they were back at the top of the hill, Nil turned to look at her. "I can see what you're thinking, Suntress. But I've had my hands full with purging the lands of these scum, ambushing wandering bandit clans, the wounds just kept on coming."

She turned to Nil with a triumphant smirk. He grinned at her, his pale grey eyes blazing with heat. "You're cruel, Suntress. Stealing that last lap of victory from my plate." Then he jerked his head back towards the hill where they had met that evening. "Come before the little villagers arrive to stake their claim."

"These little moments are refreshing, aren't they?"

"Nothing mind. There it goes." Aloy shook her head in exasperation, then gave him a shrewd look. "You know, Nil, if you get tired of bandits, there's this group called the Eclipse…"

"Never mind. There it goes." Aloy shook her head in exasperation, then gave him a shrewd look. "You know, Nil, if you get tired of bandits, there's this group called the Eclipse…"

"Nothing mind. There it goes." Aloy shook her head in exasperation, then gave him a shrewd look. "You know, Nil, if you get tired of bandits, there's this group called the Eclipse…"
She and Nil were silent for a moment; the only sounds in the deepening evening were the scraping of insects. Then he spoke again in a low voice. “How did you get that scar?”

Aloy took a deep breath. “Do you know of Helis?” she asked, and Nil’s eyebrows rose. “Every man and woman in the Sundom knows of Helis,” he replied, and Aloy nodded, then looked out towards the bandit camp. “He came to the Nora’s land. He tried to kill me. Would have, if Rost… the man who raised me… hadn’t stopped him.” She swallowed hard, then looked at Nil, her eyes hard and unyielding. “Helis is the leader of the Eclipse. So don’t tell me it’s a political situation. It's not political to me.”

To his credit, Nil didn’t flinch from the anger in her gaze. He stared back at her, and the intensity of his gaze was such that Aloy finally looked away first, her eyes on the horizon but her thoughts far away.

Then Nil took her arm in a gentle grip and she looked at him, surprised. “You’ll have your vengeance, Suntress. Helis’s death is written in your eyes. I can see it.”

Despite herself, Aloy smiled. He was always so bloody, but she appreciated the sentiment. “Thank you.” She took a deep breath, then a step away from him. “Well… I should go. Goodbye, Nil.” With a pang of regret, she turned away from him.

He called to her as she started to walk away. “I don’t want to alarm you, but the bandits are thinning out. Makes you wish you could kill them more than once, doesn’t it?”

Aloy threw him a exasperated look over her shoulder. He was the only person who would be alarmed by a lack of bandits. “No, once is enough.”

 Nil tilted his head thoughtfully. “You’re right, of course. One is enough...when you really make it count.” He smiled a slow, predatory grin.

“Okay, goodbye Nil!” Aloy snapped, turning her back firmly to him as she strode down the hill. He really was unhinged. And yet… also oddly comforting.

“Suntress!” he shouted. She turned to look at him with mild exasperation. “Where are you headed?”

“To Pitchcliff!” she called back. “I have to help a… friend.” She felt a twinge of amusement at the thought of Avad, the Almighty Sun-King, as a friend.

“I’m going south. There’s a most fearsome bandit camp at Blackwing Snag. Their screams will be so satisfying. Will I see you there?”

She couldn’t help but smile at his gruesome enthusiasm. Yep, definitely unhinged. “It’s not high on my list of priorities,” she replied. “But I’ll do what I can.”

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Seems like Nil isn't the only one who doesn't quite understand feelings! ;)

Dear readers, what do you think of my incorporation of the main story line dialogue? Is it too much, or do you find it interesting? Would you prefer a stronger focus on Niloy? I mainly want to do justice to the amazing characters and friends that Aloy makes along the way, but I'm open to suggestions.
Is the amount of main story too much, too little, just right?

Much thanks and love to everyone who has read and commented already! <3
Nil remains misguided about his feelings. Meanwhile, Aloy saves Meridian and has an interesting conversation with Warden Janeva.

A/N: This chapter will be the last one for a while that's main-story heavy... LOTS and LOTS of pure Niloy coming up!

Nil made his leisurely way south towards Blackwing Snag. As always when travelling in the Sundom, he planned to give Meridian and its villages a wide berth; the fewer people he met during his travels, the better. Nil usually got his news from his victims before killing them, and he couldn't remember the last time he'd bought anything from a merchant. He hunted all his meals, and dead bandits always yielded more resources than a simple traveller like Nil could use.

Nil enjoyed travelling alone. He'd lived most of his life in a comfortable bubble of isolation. Ever since he'd been old enough to be self-aware, he'd known he just didn't connect with other people, but he had never minded his solitary life.

But now, Nil had someone to travel to. He knew he would likely get to Blackwing Snag before Suntress, but just knowing she would show up eventually was... nice.

Nil was still perplexed by the strange feelings he had when Suntress was nearby. Watching her in action gave him the same feeling as killing bandits, like a ripple of excitement across his skin. But the joy of a kill was fleeting, like a sharp arrow to the eye. In contrast, being with Suntress gave Nil a an unfamiliar, sustained feeling of satisfaction. And that good feeling was there even when he wasn’t watching her kill people, when he was answering her curious questions.

It made him uneasy.

Nil had only ever been sure of one thing: killing felt good. In a world where people saw emotions in each other’s faces that drew them together, Nil had felt nothing. He’d learned to imitate people’s facial expressions to put them at ease, after his father had berated him for scaring the other nobles. But killing had been the only thing that made him feel something.

Then the flame-haired machine tamer had appeared in his life.

Now he had all kinds of feelings, and to his disbelief, the interest in seeing Suntress again seemed to be taking precedence over his drive to hunt. She was imbalancing the way he understood himself, and he couldn’t have that.

He could only think of one solution, the same one he had for everything: he’d have to kill her.

He could already imagine it. It would be the best moment of his life, because she was the finest opponent he would ever face. Nil knew she would show no fear; she would cling to her life tenaciously, relinquishing it only when he forcefully tore her last breath from her lungs. That would just make the fight more interesting.

Nil smiled to himself as he imagined her raising her bow and pointing an arrow at his face, a snarl on
her delicate lips. Sure, there was a chance she could beat him, but he was quite sure he could take
her.

Then he would be free of this uncertainty. He could go back to his life as he knew it, a simple
traveller leaving a trail of death in his wake.

Fifty paces away, he spotted a faint trail of smoke from a campfire. Slowly and silently he eased
closer until he could see the occupants of the fire: two men and a woman, all shabbily dressed, but
the woman and one man wore well-made Carja weapons. One man’s voice floated over to him on
the gentle jungle breeze. “... took a whole sack of slagshine glass from that last merchant. The poor
slag wasn’t going to let it go, but I persuaded him otherwise.” The man gave a nasty laugh and
tossed a dagger in the air, then caught it (rather clumsily, Nil thought).

He smiled to himself. Bandits. How perfect. Just the thing he needed to get his mind back in the right
place and away from Suntress. With no further ado, he walked over to the fire noisily, his steps
crashing through the foliage.

All three bandits pulled their weapons as he approached, then stared dumbly at him as he sat on a log
next to one man, then picked up the man’s ceramic drinking flask.

Nil sniffed the flask - ah, Scrappersap - as the woman snarled at him. “Who the blazes are you?”

The slagshine glass bandit suddenly gave a tiny gasp. “I know you from the war! Why aren’t you out
west with the rest of your cronies?” he taunted.

Nil took a sip from the Scrappersap flask, then capped it and smiled at the bandits. “I have no
cronies, ” he said. “Just a partner.” Then he flung the heavy flask at the woman’s head. It slammed
into her face, and her hands flew to her bloody nose with a yell of shock. She fell silent a moment
later as Nil’s trusty knife slammed up into her ribs.

He pulled his knife from her chest and ducked under the slagshine bandit’s wild dagger stab. Nil’s
knife sliced into the slagshine bandit’s thigh, dropping him to his knees so Nil could slam his knife
into the man’s eye.

Nil pulled his knife free and advanced on the last bandit, who had shakily raised a bow. Nil smiled at
the bandit’s pathetic aim; indeed, when the bandit loosed the arrow, Nil stepped casually to the side
to avoid the weakly shot projectile. The bandit stepped backwards, his bow falling from nerveless
fingers as he raised his hands in supplication. “P-please,” he whimpered. “I didn’t kill anyone. I just
stole, that’s all.”

Nil didn’t bother to reply. His hand darted forward to grab the bandit’s throat and drag him close. Nil
squeezed firmly, savouring the man’s desperate gasps as his fingernails scrabbled fruitlessly at Nil’s
vambraces. Finally, Nil raised his knife and sliced the bandit’s throat lovingly from ear to ear, then
dropped him on the ground. With great satisfaction, he watched the panic fade from the bandit’s eyes
as his blood leached into the earth.

Nil sighed happily. This is what life is about, he thought to himself. That surge of panic fading into
quiet, that last desperate gasp. That’s all I need.

He picked up the Scrappersap flask and decanted it into his golden flask, then tamped out the fire and
continued his way south. And when his mind wandered back to the memory of a certain red-haired
Nora laughing up at him from the butchered remains of a Stormbird, he told himself it was just
anticipation.
Anticipation of the greatest fight of his life.

***************

Aloy winced and shook the chillwater from her hand, then rubbed her hands together to warm them. *Glinthawks. Why is it always Glinthawks?* she wondered in frustration. They were the machines she hated the most.

She picked her way past the multitude of Glinthawk corpses towards Dervahl’s supine form. Just then, Erend bowled past her, almost knocking her over in his haste.

Erend glared down at the Oseram master tinker. “As much as I wish Ersa was here to kill you, I don’t mind doing it for her,” he growled, raising his Oseram warhammer threateningly.

Dervahl sneered up at him. “Go ahead! I’m not afraid. Except knowing you, Erend, you’ll screw it up!”

Erend’s lip curled with rage, and he lifted his hammer high. Alarmed, Aloy held out her hand to try and stop him, but suddenly Erend looked up, his hammer stilled.

Aloy turned, and there was Avad, standing tall and strong with two Oseram Vanguardsmen at his sides. His brown eyes were stern, his mouth set in a determined line as he stared at Erend.

Erend looked back at him for a long moment, then lowered his hammer. Aloy gave a small sigh of relief as Erend looked back down at Dervahl, a condescending smirk on his face.

“I know what you *are* afraid of: going back to Mainspring in chains,” he said. “Every clan from the claim wants you dead, and they know how to make it hurt. They’ll even bid for the privilege.” He grinned slowly.

Dervahl glared at him. “It’s just like you to get someone else to do your killing!” he squawked, and Aloy raised one eyebrow with amusement. He must really be grasping at straws to piss Erend off, she thought. She may not have known Erend for long, but even she knew that the young Vanguardsmen would never leave his dirty work for someone else.

“Shut up,” Erend told him coldly. “You’re at the Sun-King’s mercy now.” Then he abruptly slammed the butt of his warhammer into Dervahl’s face, knocking the tinker out cold.

Avad gave Erend a nod of approval, his face softening with approval. Erend nodded back, a small smile on his lips, and Aloy smiled at Erend as well, proud of his restraint. Avad waved a hand, and the two guards grabbed the unconscious Dervahl’s arms and dragged him away.

Avad turned to Aloy, and his face was lit with that signature grin that transformed his face into that of a younger, more carefree man. “Aloy. May we speak?”

Erend caught Aloy’s eye, then nodded towards a balcony to the left and jogged away. Aloy turned to Avad, and he graciously lifted an arm and ushered her towards his pagoda overlooking the city.

Once at the balcony, Avad turned to her, his hands clasped humbly behind his back. “Aloy… To say you have my gratitude feels woefully insufficient. You saved my life. You saved Meridian. And because of you, there will be justice for Ersa’s murder. We can mourn her knowing the truth, without painful uncertainty.” He paused and bowed his head briefly. When Avad lifted his eyes to hers again, his expression was oddly shy. “It’s hard to imagine where we would be without you… and I don’t want to try. I hope you will consider staying in Meridian.”
Aloy drew back slightly with surprise. “Why do you want me to stay in Meridian?”

Avad smiled, amused. “I would think that would be obvious.”

Aloy frowned slightly. “Not to me,” she said cautiously. She was no politician or courtier. She didn’t consider herself beneath anyone, but she knew her strengths, and politics was not one of them.

Avad tilted his head and gazed at her. “Well, to start with, you kept the city from going up in flames. You’re strong, shrewd, and capable.” He paused, and Aloy eyed him apprehensively. His eyes were warm and tender, his smile gentle. “I... could use someone like you at my side.” He shifted his weight awkwardly from one foot to the other as he waited for her to respond.

Aloy stared back at him, suddenly feeling a bit worried. She wasn’t sure if Avad had thought this through. He’d just gone through a major upheaval: first thinking his most trusted advisor - and lover - was dead, then discovering she was alive, then having his hopes crushed upon learning that she had finally passed away. Aloy knew she was skilled, but it was clear to her that Avad was making a hasty decision because of her clear similarities to his beloved Ersa.

Aloy bit her lip. She knew he was a man in pain, but he was also the Sun-King, and he needed to be objective. “It might be worth taking a moment to examine what you just said,” she said gently. “You just lost Ersa, a woman who stood at your side and could easily be described as strong, shrewd, and capable. It’s pretty clear how you felt about her. And now you’re asking me to take her place.” Aloy hesitated before saying her last thought.

I hope this won’t push him too far.

“Is this a job offer, or a proposition?”

Avad froze for a moment, and Aloy held her breath. Then suddenly he sighed and shook his head ruefully. “By the Sun, you do indeed share much with Ersa... including a withering eye for foolishness.” He gave a small laugh, then gave her a resigned smile. “Please, accept my apologies. It seems I’m getting ahead of myself. I need some time to... resolve my feelings.”

He rubbed a hand over his face, then straightened up in a visible effort to collect himself. “I will be forever grateful to you, Aloy. And in time, I... would like to get to know you better. Shall we leave it at that, then?”

Aloy smiled at him. She could see how hard he was trying to do the right thing, and she respected him for it. “I would like that. But for now, I have to go.”

Avad nodded. “I understand. But please know that you are welcome here, in Meridian and in the Palace of the Sun, whenever you wish.”

*************

Aloy slowly approached Erend and leaned her elbows on the balcony next to him to admire the setting sun. He smiled at her, then returned his gaze to the sunset.

“I was just thinking about Ersa,” he told her. “She would have killed Dervahl on the spot, I know it. That’s why she went out to meet him in the first place - to put him down.”

Erend sighed. “But she also told me to grow up. I gotta admit, it burned a little when she said that, but I’m trying to take it to heart.” He turned to look at her with a sad little smile. “And I guess growing up means putting what you should do in front of what you wanna do, right?”

Aloy smirked at him. “You’re asking me? I’m pretty sure you’re older.”

Erend twisted his lips ruefully. “Yeah, but I don’t act like it, do I?”
Aloy looked at him seriously. “You did with Dervahl.” *He doesn’t give himself enough credit,* she thought to herself. Erend spent too much time beating himself up and not enough time recognizing when he did something right. Aloy suspected that if he could reverse that pattern, he could reverse his drinking habits as well.

But that was a conversation for another day.

Erend snorted. “Don’t give me too much credit. Part of me still wants to wait for a quiet moment and wring his neck.”

“Yeah, but you won’t, because you’re a good Captain,” Aloy said, and gave him a friendly punch in the arm.

Erend’s cheeks pinkened and he rubbed the back of his head shyly. “Come on, stop. You’re going to make me tear up.”

They grinned at each other, and Aloy suddenly realized that somewhere along the way, her perception of Erend had shifted. He’d started as some cocky outlander trying to win a Nora conquest. Then he’d shifted into the hapless Vanguard Captain… and now he’d evolved into a man she’d be proud to call an ally.

And a friend.

She tilted her head and gazed at him fondly. “Well…”

Erend waved his hand haphazardly. “I know, I know, you’ve got to go. Killers to track, machines to master… all before breakfast.” He gazed at her, and his blue eyes were bright and earnest. “You know what? When we met, I thought I was a bigshot talking to a pretty girl hidden away in the middle of nowhere. Now I see that I was just lucky to get a minute of your time.”

His lower lip trembled slightly and he sniffed, then gave a manly clear of his throat. “Try not to forget about me when you’re out there changing the world,” he said gruffly.

Aloy grinned at him. He might be a lunkhead sometimes, but he was a very sweet one. “I’ll always have a minute for you. Maybe even two,” she quipped.

“Two!” Erend laughed. “She likes me.”

*************************

Aloy knelt by the river and splashed cool water on her face, then greedily slurped some water from her hands. She’d been travelling around the southernmost border of the Sundom for the past week searching for a cauldron that an Oseram delver in Meridian village had mentioned to her. She’d finally found it this morning, and had emerged tired but brimming with accomplishment: she could now override Thunderjaws, Stormbirds, and Stalkers.

She sucked down another handful of water, then grinned. *I wonder if I could ride on a Stormbird?* She chuckled to herself at the thrilling thought, then filled Petra’s flask with water and climbed back onto her Broadhead.

She was riding west along the coast with the intention of scoping out a vantage point when she heard the screams. Aloy frowned; she hadn’t been aware that there was a settlement nearby. She tugged her Broadhead’s wires and headed in the direction of the commotion.

As she bolted forward, a couple of travelling outlanders ran past, away from the direction of the
screaming. A Carja guard yelled out to her as she sped past him. “Stop! It’s not safe!”

*Obviously,* Aloy thought as she laid almost flat against the Broadhead’s back for increased speed. *But what’s going on here?*

The jungle opened into a large grassy plains, with an imposing stone fortress to the left and a short ledge that dropped to more grass on the right. Aloy leapt off her Broadhead’s back and raced over to the ledge… and gaped in astonished horror. She tapped her Focus, and immediately the name for these monstrous foreign machines was revealed to her.

*Behemoths.*

Two Behemoths were wreaking havoc on a group of five or six Carja guards. Aloy stared as the ground around one Behemoth trembled with sparks… then suddenly, the rocks and boulders around the Behemoth began to *float.*

*Wait. It’s… levitating the rocks?* Aloy couldn’t believe her eyes. As she watched, the floating rocks suddenly flew in all directions away from the Behemoth. One small boulder slammed directly into a guard’s shoulder, and the guard flew backwards with a scream of pain, his arm dangling useless and dislocated from its socket.

There was no time to waste. Aloy whipped out her sharpshot bow and shot a well-aimed tearblast arrow at the Behemoth’s levitation unit, then pelted its chill canister with freeze arrows. When the canister exploded, freezing both Behemoths, she switched bows and fired hardpoint arrow after hardpoint arrow at both machines. Encouraged, the Carja guards regrouped and attacked the Behemoths with their spears.

Many long minutes later, the Behemoths were down in a mess of sparks and rubble. One of the guards limped over to her as she sheathed her spear on her back. “You pulled us out of a tight spot, outlander,” he panted, and gave her an exhausted smile. “Welcome to Sunstone Rock.”

Aloy felt a jolt of surprise. Sunstone Rock was the prison where Nil had been for two years after the war.

The guard jerked his head towards the fortress, then turned to join his brethren who were looting the Behemoth carcasses. “You should talk to Warden Janeva inside.” Aloy nodded her thanks, then jogged towards the prison.

As Aloy walked through the entryway into the prison courtyard, the guard raised a hand to usher her close. “Warden Janeva, this is the one who defeated the Behemoths.”

The warden turned to Aloy and scanned her approvingly. “Outlander! I’m impressed. I don’t impress easily,” Janeva said briskly. “Tell me, how do you fare with hunting living prey?”

*Right to it, then,* Aloy thought. She appreciated Janeva’s pragmatic manner. “Haven’t had any complaints. Why?”

“Three dangerous prisoners have escaped. I need my men here getting the others back in line.” Janeva's lips thinned into a skeptical pout. “None of this would have happened if we dealt with prisoners the old way, but…” The warden shrugged. “I’ve clashed that gong before, and here I am. And here you are.” Janeva looked expectantly at her.

“What’s the old way?” Aloy asked curiously, though she had a feeling she could guess.

“To be buried up to the neck and left for the Sun’s judgment,” Janeva replied without batting an
Aloy’s eyebrows jumped high with surprise and dismay. *I expected death, but that’s… torture*, she thought. “Seems to me like the judgment’s already been made.”

Janeva stared back at her matter-of-factly. “Not one of them committed another crime.”

Aloy pulled a tiny face. It seemed that this was another way that Avad’s regime was improving on barbarous practices from the past. Aloy delicately changed the subject and asked a few more questions about the prisoners, and Janeva briskly supplied the answers.

Then Aloy couldn’t resist; she was too curious about this place, and about her bloodthirsty bandit-killing partner. “Do you know a… er, hunter… named Nil? He told me about this place.”

Janeva raised one eyebrow in confusion, and Aloy went on. “He’s Carja. A former soldier. Pale grey eyes, probably around your age, two single-circle tattoos under his eyes…”

Janeva’s face suddenly lit with recognition. “Nil. *That’s* what he calls himself now?”

Aloy’s jaw almost dropped. *That’s not his name?* She hadn’t even suspected that he was using an alias. Her mind felt fuzzy with shock for a moment. Did she know anything about him?

Janeva’s next question surprised her further, for the warden suddenly looked concerned. “Is he… well?”

Aloy hesitated. “I maybe wouldn’t say ‘well,’” she hedged, surprised that Janeva would care.

Janeva gave a regretful little grimace. “He was born under a long and dark shadow. But he wasn’t a knife without a thought behind it, like the butchers of the Sun-Ring. He had honour. Old-fashioned. His time here… boiled it to the surface.”

Aloy pondered this interesting description of Nil. Funnily enough, it reminded her in some way of Rost: old-fashioned and honourable, even if that honour didn’t suit Aloy’s perception of the modern world. Maybe that was why she felt comfortable around Nil, despite his proclivity for killing.

“I didn’t realize that Nil wasn’t his real name,” Aloy confessed to Janeva. “I’ve... travelled with him a few times over the past months, and he never let on. What is his real name? Why doesn’t he use it?”

Janeva lifted one rueful eyebrow. “Ask him yourself. It sounds like you’re the only person he’s talked to since he was released.” The warden leaned back and gave Aloy another appraising look. “You’ve travelled with him a few times, you say? That’s interesting. You’re lucky to be alive.”

A chill passed down Aloy’s back. *What does she mean by that?* she wondered. Did Janeva think Nil was a danger to her, or was the warden just familiar with Nil’s favourite yet dangerous pastime? Nil had never given any indication of wanting to kill her. He’d always insisted that he only killed bandits. But Janeva had known him longer than Aloy had…

She gave her head a small shake. This wasn’t important. Three dangerous prisoners were loose, and Aloy had a new errand to run.
Aloy finally finds some time to meet Nil at the last bandit camp, and learns a bit more about Nil's mysterious history.

A/N: A bit of a shorter chapter, but not to worry, the next is already in the making... and you all know what comes next!

“I'm here, I'm here!” Aloy panted as she slid into the grass beside Nil.

“Suntress. Nice of you to show up,” Nil drawled. He’d been lying flat on his stomach in the grass, his chin rested on his folded arms, but he slowly rose to a crouching position at Aloy’s appearance.

“Sorry for the delay. Sawtooths to override, Behemoths to kill, you know how it is. Ready?” She started to sneak quietly towards the camp.

Nil sighed loudly as he started to follow her. Aloy frowned at him. “What?”

“We do every bandit camp this way,” Nil complained. “Don't you want a little variety? Even the taste of death becomes wearisome if you always serve it the same way.”

Aloy bristled. “You might want to remember that we’ve disassembled every bandit camp so far without a scratch on either of us,” she told him with a pointed look at his now-healed chest.

Nil didn't rise to the bait; instead, he sighed again. “Yes yes, you're an excellent thief, stealing the breath from their lungs and the beat from their hearts. But you never squeeze the fear from their eyes. You leave them sodden like an old wineskin left too long.” He gave her a reproachful look. “You ought to savour it.”

Aloy glared at him. She’d rushed here from Sunstone Rock to meet him, and now he was going to complain? “Fine. Then you lead the way this time,” she said testily… and immediately regretted it when his eyes lit up like an exploded canister of blaze.

“Excellent. Let's go,” he said, then stood upright and began walking confidently towards the camp.

What in the name of the All-Mother’s left tit is he thinking? Aloy thought, pelting after him as quickly as she could while still crouching in the long grass. But as she reached Nil’s side, he hauled her up with a hand on her arm, then tugged one of her braids teasingly. “You follow my lead this time, remember?”

Aloy swatted his hand away, trying to ignore the buzzy feeling in her chest at his teasing tug of her braid. “Nil, don’t be stupid. This camp is huge. And there’s an escaped Tenakth warrior inside.” Suddenly, it occurred to her that maybe Nil knew her. “When you were at Sunstone Rock, did you know a prisoner named Ullia?”

Nil looked at Aloy quickly, a look of unguarded startlement in his eyes. Then he smirked. “Yes. She’s crazy.”
Aloy couldn’t help it. She laughed. Nil the obsessive bandit-killer was calling someone else crazy? “Well, she’s in there. You really want to go up against a notorious, murderous ex-prisoner head-on?”

Nil frowned quizzically at her. “Don’t you know me at all? Of course I do. After all, that’s what she’ll be going up against as well.” He shot her one last cocky, bloodthirsty grin, then ran off towards the camp, his bow already in his hands and half-cocked.

Aloy heaved a heavy sigh, then decided against following him directly. She could at least pick off a few of the bandit snipers from the fortress’s towers before they could get their sights on him. She ran towards the gate that was closest to a tower and scaled the gate quickly, then leapt from the top of the gate onto a tower, killing the sentry with a swift and silent stab of her spear.

Already she could hear the sounds of infuriated shouting and some screams of pain. She peered down into the camp, and there was Nil, swiftly shooting arrow after arrow at the bandit archers that were farther from him. A handful of bandit thugs were pelting towards him, spears and knives drawn, but Nil ignored them as he concentrated on taking out the archers.

Aloy shook her head in exasperation. He asked for this, she thought. He can take care of those thugs himself. In the meantime, she swiftly sniped the other tower sentries who were within range so he at least wouldn’t be shot at from above.

Suddenly she heard a blood-curdling, almost unearthly shriek that raised the hairs on her arms. It had come from a tall woman with intricate face and body paint carrying an unusually long spear. She was pelting towards Nil, an animalistic snarl on her face.

That must be Ullia, Aloy thought. Anxiously she glanced over at Nil; he was fully occupied with fighting four thugs at once, dodging smoothly and stabbing viciously with his knife. He punched one thug in the face and tore the thug’s battleax from his hands as he stumbled back, then raised the axe and slammed it into the thug’s chest with a roar of pure aggression.

Aloy took a deep breath, then clambered down the tower and ran towards Ullia. If Nil didn’t notice she was coming, he would be in serious trouble. Aloy skidded into the grass and began shooting arrows at the Tenakth woman.

The first three arrows hit Ullia in the thigh, abdomen, and chest. She flinched, her armour protecting her somewhat from the impact, then crouched defensively like a suspicious Sawtooth. “Reveal yourself to me, sniper!” she roared, her eyes casting around to look for the source of the offending arrows.

Aloy glanced briefly at Nil; he had finally looked up and noticed Ullia, but three more bandits were attacking him. Aloy bit her lip. I guess this is what partners are for, she thought, then stood from the grass.

“Ullia!” she called, pulling Ullia’s roving gaze away from Nil. The Tenakth warrior smiled a slow, feral smile as her eyes lit on Aloy, then twirled her long spear and approached Aloy slowly. “A Nora. I’ve not killed one of your tribe before,” she purred. “Prove yourself worthy of a mark on my skin!”

Without further ado, Ullia charged at Aloy. Aloy held her position, then blocked Ullia’s first spear thrust with her own spear and slammed the end of her spear against Ullia’s thigh to bring the taller woman to her knees.

Ullia grunted as she fell to her knees, but then rolled across the ground smoothly and jabbed at Aloy a second time. Aloy dodged and tried to slam her spear down on Ullia, but the Tenakth woman was
already on her feet again.

The fight was intense and bloody, with Aloy sustaining multiple bruises to her arms and legs and a shallow graze from Ullia’s spear to her left shoulder before finally tripping Ullia onto her back and slamming her spear into Ullia’s belly. The Tenakth woman gave a grunt of pain as the force of Aloy’s spear thrust pinned her to the ground.

Aloy fell to her knees beside the dying woman and gasped for breath. Her whole body was aching from the fight. *If the rest of the Tenakth are as fierce as her, I can see why the Carja are so wary of them,* she thought with exhaustion. Aloy took a moment to glance around at the camp again; miraculously, Nil had managed to take out every other bandit, and he was slowly approaching her and Ullia. Aloy could see that he was favouring his left leg as he limped over to them.

She turned back to Ullia, whose breathing was distinctly shallow, though her eyes still burned with violence. “No way we could have talked about this, huh?” Aloy asked.

Ullia bared her teeth at Aloy, then grimaced in pain. “All the Carja did was talk. Talk and bleed. Talk and shackle me. But you… you fought like a Tenakth.” Ullia weakly raised a hand towards Aloy’s face, and to Aloy’s surprise, Ullia smiled at her. “I’d have taken you for my child.”

Aloy glared at Ullia with censure. “You can’t just take a child.”

“The strong take from the weak, and in the taking are made stronger,” Ullia interrupted loudly, then grimaced as her breath ran out. She took a second slow, painful breath. “These stories pricked into my skin, look: children, riches, lives and land… all of these have been mine.”

Aloy’s ever-curious eyes scanned over Ullia’s skin. It was hard to see the patterns she mentioned underneath her elaborate body paint, but it was true: she had intricate lines and dots across her arms and shoulders, and it seemed that they extended onto her chest, from what Aloy could see.

Then Ullia spoke again. “Drink of my blood, and my stories will… live on.” She coughed again, a wet, rattling cough that heralded her impending death.

Aloy recoiled in disgust, her stomach roiling. *Drink another person’s blood?* she thought with horror. This must be where the rumours of cannibalism came from. Did all the Tenakth do that?

But somehow, despite her disgust, Aloy still felt that she had to be polite. Ullia was dying, after all. “No, Ullia. I can’t. I have enough stories to carry,” she said. Ullia’s face crumpled into a hateful snarl, then she coughed again, a prolonged, hacking cough that forced her to lay her head back on the ground.

Finally, Nil reached Aloy’s side and kneeled beside her. “The Tenakth warrioress laid low,” he taunted in his musical voice, and Ullia’s closed eyes flew open to glare at Nil venomously.

“You!” she hissed at Nil, and Aloy leaned back in surprise at the poisonous rage in her tone. “Your blood was meant to be mine. You interloper, you filthy trespasser—” Ullia’s vitriol was interrupted by another wracking cough, and the ability to speak left her as she began to choke fitfully on her own blood.

“May your story crumble to ashes and your blood be lost to the oceans of time,” Nil purred vindictively, and Ullia’s eyes snapped open to glare at him one last time before she finally spasmed painfully and then relaxed, the life leaving her body at last.

Aloy stared at Nil. His last words to Ullia were particularly poetic-sounding, even for him. “That sounded… personal,” she said. “Did you know her well?”
Nil stood slowly and winced slightly as he shifted his weight to his right leg. “No. Only when we were at Sunstone Rock at the same time. But she knew of me,” he added cryptically, and Aloy frowned quizzically at him as they began to slowly walk towards the camp’s exit together.

“What do you mean?” Aloy asked, and Nil shrugged casually. “Oh, she had a vendetta against me. I have to admit I provoked her frequently in prison. She was in isolation, but I wasn’t. Whenever I had the chance, I taunted her.” He shrugged again. “She didn’t like me much.”

“I could tell,” Aloy muttered. As they walked, she couldn’t help but notice that he was unusually quiet. After finishing off a bandit camp, he normally made sly little comments about particularly good kills he’d made. One time she’d even caught him humming to himself while he looted corpses.

Finally they made it to the edge of the jungle, and to her surprise, Nil’s face looked downcast. “It’s so… bittersweet. Like a smile through bloodied teeth,” he said.

Aloy frowned. “What’s the matter? You look disappointed.”

Nil sighed. “The bandit clans are gone. I hear another turned back at the southern plains, just at a sniff of the legend we carved.”

Aloy gazed at him with a now-familiar feeling of exasperation. “That’s what all this bloodshed was for. To end the bandit threat,” she explained.

Nil gazed back at her with a distinctly hangdog expression. “But now there’s nothing left to kill. Unless…” He trailed off, his silver-and-ice eyes intense on her face, and a ripple of goosebumps ran down her back.

“I guess this is our last farewell,” she said hastily, and with a pang of sadness. Somehow Nil had become her most constant companion during her journey. Their paths had run relatively parallel from the Sacred Lands to the Sundom, and he was the only one who had, in some way, been with her the whole time. But Aloy felt distinctly uncomfortable with the way he was looking at her right now: not with an intense admiration, like he had after she’d downed the Stormbird, but with a kind of… hunger.

Nil shook his head. “After all we’ve been through, Suntress? This isn’t the place for that. There’s a mesa south of Meridian, with a view of the Spearshafts. Meet me there?” He tilted his head questioningly.

Aloy gave Nil a searching look, her eyes narrowed. The hunger was gone from his gaze, and he blinked at her benignly… but she knew him well enough to not entirely trust benign on his face. She swallowed, uncertain, but then finally nodded. “I’ll meet you in a week. We both need some time to heal.”

Nil nodded agreement, his eyes lighting up. “You’re right. A fresh mind and strong body are key. Don’t come until you’re at your best.” Then for the first time since she’d known him, he walked away first, leaving Aloy to stand alone at the mouth of the jungle, staring after him with bemusement.

Why does he specifically want me at my best? she thought in puzzlement.

Aloy didn’t like the sound of this.
Heartbroken

Chapter Summary

Aloy and Nil face off on the mesa overlooking the Spearshafts.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Nil stood patiently at the top of the mesa overlooking the Spearshafts. It was a week since he’d seen Suntress, and anticipation made his chest feel tight as he waited for her to come.

With every day that had passed since he’d seen her, he’d felt more excited for this ultimate meeting, this moment when their partnership would culminate in a whirl of arrows and spears, of sweat and blood. Nil was convinced that this would make the uncomfortable jittery feeling in his chest go away, that it would bring him back to himself.

But Nil had started to become aware of a nigling uncertainty about his plan, now that the bandit clans were gone with only stragglers left to hunt. What would he do once he’d killed every bandit he could find? When all the appropriate victims were gone, what would be the point?

Nil mentally shook off his uncomfortable uncertainty and continued to listen carefully for the sounds of climbing. One thing at a time, he assured himself. The first priority was to experience the greatest rush he would ever feel.

And if Suntress won their fight? Well, Nil thought that was unlikely. She was good, but she didn’t have his training. But if, if she did win, well… Nil had thought it through, and he’d decided that dying would be all right. Nil had never really thought about what his future would hold; he had no plans really, no ambitions. If he died during a great fight, he supposed that would be fitting end for a man like him.

Finally, he heard the soft sound of feet on rocks, and Suntress hoisted herself up over the edge of the mesa. Nil smiled. Just seeing her made him feel excited. Oh yes, this will be a good fight, he thought happily.

She immediately crouched in a defensive position, her eyes narrowed and alert, then relaxed her stance as she spotted him. “Nil. I did wonder on my way here if you were luring me into an ambush,” she greeted him as she drew close.

Nil gave her a chiding look. “Where’s the fun in that? The sneaking, the silent strikes… that's your style, Suntress, not mine.”

Suntress raised an eyebrow skeptically, one hand on her hip. “Uh-huh. What do you want, then?”

Nil opened his arms expansively to take in their lovely surroundings. “Some bandit sprawl would never have done for our arena. But this? Much better. There’s a sense of drama.” He lowered his arms, then smiled enticingly at her. “So. What do you say? How about we try to kill each other?”

Suntress stared at him. Nil stared back, his fingers itching for his knife and bow, for that sweet moment he’d fantasized about when she would grab her own bow and point it at his face…
Then Suntress tilted her head to the side, and Nil realized he didn’t recognize the expression on her face. It was… sad? Something like sad, but more complex. He hadn’t seen anyone’s face look this way before.

Then she spoke, and her voice was strangely flat and emotionless. “You brought me out here to ask if I want to fight you?”

Nil nodded helpfully. Perhaps she just didn’t understand his great plan. “To the death. We’ll savour it because we only get this one time.”

Suntress stared at him for another long moment with that complicated look on her face, and Nil started to feel a touch concerned. **Is she going to refuse?** Somehow, he hadn’t planned for that possibility. Finally Suntress looked away and shook her head. “Actually, I don’t know what else I expected,” she muttered quietly. Then she raised her face to frown at him.

Oh no. Nil knew what that frown meant. Sure enough, she said, “I’m… flattered that you think of me this way, but I don’t want to kill you.”

“Don’t be hasty,” Nil said quickly. She just needed to understand. He **needed** this fight. He had nothing else to hold on to but this fight. “When it’s life against death, hunter against hunter, I know it’ll come to you.”

Suntress tilted her head again, and her face had that complex look again. “Is that really what you want, Nil? You know, I don’t think you have a death wish. What you have might be worse. But…” Suntress paused, then in a quiet voice, she said, “I see there might be a need for you in this world.”

Nil frowned. Not only was she refusing him, but now she was spouting nonsense? Nobody in the world was **needed**. They just **were**. “I don’t understand,” he said.

Suntress took a deep breath and raised her chin, then crushed all his hopes under her sandaled foot. “I won’t fight you. That’s my decision. You can respect it or try to shoot me in the back as I go,” she said firmly, and there was a fierce determination in her face.

Nil stared at her, dumbfounded. How cruel she was, to turn his own fighting style against him! Suntress knew he would never shoot her in the back. There was no honour in that.

They stared at each other for a long, tense moment, then finally Nil bowed his head. “Then it’s over. Your last arrow is the cruelest.” He raised his eyes to her face once more. “It’s true I offered you the choice, but my heart is broken.”

Suntress’s fierce expression softened, and suddenly her eyes shone more brightly in the fading light of day. “Goodbye, Nil,” she said. Then without another word she was running away.

Nil watched her longingly as she flung herself from a rappel point at the edge of the mesa with graceful abandon. Slowly he walked to the edge and watched her as she landed gracefully on the ground, then mounted a machine and rode away at full speed. He watched her go until he could no longer detect her by the crashing of foliage or her parting cloud of dust.

Then slowly he made his way back to the abandoned camp at the centre of the mesa and sat down. He felt… sad. No, more than sad. Sad was how he’d felt that time years ago, when his mother had died. This was… Nil wasn’t sure he had the right word for this. He felt like his chest had been crushed. Like the guiding flame at the end of his path had been extinguished. Like Suntress had stolen something from inside of him, leaving him emptier than he was before.

He had no bandits. And now he had no Suntress.
Nil sat alone in the darkness for a long time. He briefly considered killing himself, then discarded the thought almost immediately; that idea didn’t feel… right. And Suntress had said something about the world needing him… He snorted to himself and shook his head. It was nonsense, he was sure. But maybe…

Maybe she could explain to him what she’d meant.

Nil pondered her words: *Is that really what you want, Nil?* When all was said and done, if Suntress was gone, leaving him in a world with no kills to be had, what *did* he want?

A long time later, he stood. He thought maybe he was starting to understand what he'd been feeling all this time. Maybe it wasn't just her skill at killing that he admired.

She had mentioned something about finishing three Hunting Grounds so far. Maybe she hadn’t yet hit the last two, and she had been headed east. So Nil walked to the edge of the mesa, rappelled down to its base, and headed out towards the Spurflints Hunting Grounds.

********************

Aloy sat by her campfire, compulsively breaking twigs into pieces and throwing them into the fire. She hadn’t felt this kind of anger and rejection since she’d been a child and that Nora mother had rejected her offering of berries. A great pang of hurt welled in her chest for a moment, and she swallowed hard to beat it back.

On top of her hurt feelings, she was angry at herself. What else had she been expecting from Nil? When she’d first reached the top of the mesa, she couldn’t help but notice that Nil had found a truly beautiful spot. The evening sun had been setting, casting his handsome features in a warm reddish glow, and from the height of the mesa she could see across the jungle to Avad’s palace. Aloy had wondered if maybe he had some kind of normal farewell in mind. *Come on, Aloy, be honest,* she scolded herself. *Part of you was hoping he wasn’t going to say goodbye at all.*

As much as she was angry at Nil for having a desire to kill her, she was more angry at herself for feeling so upset. Actual, *serious* tragedies had happened. Ersa was dead; Erend had lost his beloved older sister, and Avad had loved her for a long time, much longer than Aloy had known Nil. The Nora has lost most of their finest braves, and Aloy herself had lost Rost. So why did she care so much about stupid Nil?

But much to Aloy’s own dismay, she now understood why her mind had kept returning to him, why his citrusy scent and the occasional touch of his hands made her tingle: somehow the first person she’d ever developed… ugh, *romantic* feelings for… had to be a weird, poetic ex-prisoner who wanted to kill her. She sighed gustily, then swallowed back another pang of sadness as she wondered what Rost would have thought.

Aloy roughly rubbed her eyes on her wrist, then sniffed and shook back her hair. *Forget about all this,* she told herself firmly. *I travel faster alone anyway. I don’t need anyone else slowing me down.* A wave of loneliness washed over her, and she breathed deeply once more and repeated her new mantra - *I’m faster and better on my own* - until she felt calmer and more like herself.

Just then, she heard a rustle in the bushes behind her. Suddenly alert, she rose from her relaxed sitting position into a prepared crouch and scanned the jungle behind her, but her eyes were struggling to adjust to the sudden change from firelight to darkness. She heard the rustle again - *heavier than just a boar in the grass* - and she stood, then swiftly pulled her bow from her back and nocked an arrow.

“Suntress.”
Nil stepped forward from the jungle, and Aloy’s brain stuttered with shock for a moment. “Nil?” she said incredulously, but didn’t lower her weapon. What is he doing here? she thought incredulously, and not a little angrily.

“What do you want?” she demanded. “I told you I don’t want to kill you, and I meant it. I thought you had more honour than to sneak up on me like an underhanded assassin.”

Nil’s eyes were fixated on the arrow pointed at his face. He licked his lips, then lifted his silvery eyes to hers. “I'm not here to kill you,” he said. “I want to come machine hunting with you.”


Nil gazed at her, and the look in his silvery eyes made her feel like an electric shock was running through her body. He had the same look of admiration, of… longing, as he’d had that day with the Stormbird. “I want to come machine hunting with you,” he repeated.

Nope, it doesn’t make any more sense when he says it a second time, Aloy thought to herself. But finally she lowered her bow. “Why?” she asked, still feeling angry at him. “You hate machine hunting. And you’re bad at it,” she added spitefully.

Nil suddenly grinned at her uncharacteristic spite, and Aloy couldn’t stop herself; she gave him a tiny smile in return, then immediately forced herself to scowl. She refused to let him off the hook that easily. “First you want to be partners. Then you want to kill me in a fight to the death. And now you want to go machine hunting with me, even though you don’t like it? Nil, what do you want? Really?” She glared at him, arms folded across her chest.

The smile faded from Nil’s face as he stepped forward. Suddenly he was standing right in front of her, so close she had to tilt her chin up to look into his face, and his hypnotizing smell of orange oil and man was confusing the anger out of her.

“You ask so many questions, Suntress. And I don’t know all the answers,” Nil said as he looked down into her hazel eyes. “For now, I just want... to travel. With you. And I promise I won’t kill you.” He tilted his head and narrowed his eyes at her questioningly. “Can we do that? Will you be my partner again?”

Aloy took a small step away from him; his closeness was making her dizzy. “I travel faster on my own. And I have important things I need to do,” she told Nil firmly.

But he just smirked at her. “Come now. We both know I can move as fast as you. I won’t hold you back.”

Aloy tutted in annoyance, then gave him a hard look. “Fine. But if you cross me, we’re done. You’ll leave and you won’t come back,” she threatened.

Nil smiled at her. “I understand the rules, Suntress.” He walked around to the opposite side of the fire from her and settled down comfortably on a log.

Aloy shook her head in exasperation. “I’m going to sleep. You take first watch,” she ordered, and Nil nodded his head agreeably.

Aloy lay down with her back to Nil and closed her eyes, and finally allowed a little smile to curl her lips.

It looked like she’d be stuck with her death-obsessed Carja partner for a little longer after all.
Chapter End Notes

A/N: Okay, friends, we're going off-book now - 99% of the canon dialogue with Nil is done!

What's going to come next?? I hope you all stay tuned! Lots of love to any readers and commenters so far! ^_^
The Keeper and the Companion

Chapter Summary

Aloy takes Nil to the Spurflints Hunting Ground, then on a second machine hunt... and Nil finally understands some feelings.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Tendrils of sunlight drifted across Aloy’s eyelids and she snapped awake, suddenly and completely alert. She always woke this way; an ingrained habit of being a solo traveller, perhaps, but for the first time in months, she wasn't alone when she woke.

Nil was watching her from the opposite side of the extinguished campfire. The corner of his lip lifted in a half smile as she sat up and stretched. “Good morning, Suntress. A new day dawns bright for us, but it'll end in darkness for any bandit scum we find.”

Aloy shot him a look that was half-exasperated, half-amused. She wasn’t sure when his bloodthirstiness had stopped being gross and had become endearing, but she was coming to accept it as just part and parcel of having Nil as a friend. “We’re not hunting bandits today, remember? You wanted machine hunting, that’s what we’re doing. I want to go to the Spurflints Hunting Ground. It's the second last... what?” She trailed off and frowned at Nil. He was smirking to himself, as though at a private joke.

He shook his head. “Nothing,” he said, but his self-satisfied smirk remained. “Eat something first. I have dried boar meat.”

Aloy raised an eyebrow, but decided not to press the issue. “I’ve got some maize-bread and dried figs,” she said, and pulled the goods from her pouches. She and Nil broke their fast in companionable silence, and Aloy surreptitiously watched him as he ate.

He gazed absently at the burnt logs of the fire as he munched his food, and Aloy noticed that his face was oddly empty of expression. She took a sip of water from Petra’s flask, then wordlessly offered him the flask. As soon as he turned to look at her, his face animated with a half-smile. But though his smile seemed genuine, Aloy couldn’t help but feel strangely like it was a mask, adopted for her benefit.

Nil accepted the flask and took a long drink, then handed her back the flask with a nod of thanks. He popped the last bite of maize-bread into his mouth, then leaned forward and rubbed two fingers on the charcoal from last night’s fire.

Aloy chewed a fig and watched him curiously as he raised his fingers to his face and delicately swiped the soot under one eye, then the other. Aloy swallowed her fig, then asked, “Why do you do that?”

Nil wiped the residual charcoal off on his pants. “The black of the soot attracts the Sun’s rays. Then the hunter absorbs the light of the Sun so they can see their prey more clearly.”
Aloy frowned slightly. It sounded kind of plausible, but kind of… not? “That doesn’t sound right,” she said.

Nil shrugged easily. “Try it, Suntress.” He grinned slowly at her. “If your kill count goes up, you’ll only have me to thank.”

No thanks, Aloy thought. She was pretty sure the charcoal under his eyes didn’t work that way. But her mouth had different ideas. “Sure, why not,” she said.

Nil swiped his fingers on the charcoal again, then crouched in front of her, his pale grey eyes intense on hers. Aloy swallowed; her throat suddenly felt dry. Nil leaned forward and gently swiped the soot under her left eye, then her right.

Aloy’s heart was fluttering. Unconsciously she bit her lip, then said, “You smell like orange oil.”

Aloy! What in the Metal Devil? she mentally berated herself. Her stupid mouth seemed to be running away without her mind’s permission today. But Nil only looked mildly surprised as he leaned back to look at her. “Yes. It’s in the oil I use in my hair.”

Aloy smirked at him. “You have hair under that headdress? I was starting to wonder if all Carja men were bald,” she joked. But in truth, so many Carja wore headgear of some kind that it was quite hard to tell. The only Carja noble or soldier that she’d seen without headgear was Captain Balahn.

Nil raised one eyebrow and smirked at her. “Yes, Suntress, I have hair. If you’re lucky you’ll even see it someday.” Then he raised a hand and lightly smudged his thumb across her cheekbone to wipe away a stray streak of charcoal, and the touch of his warm hand drove any further clever retorts from her mind.

“Thanks,” she muttered, then they stood to pick up their gear and head out for the day.

Spurflints wasn’t far, so Aloy decided they would just make their way on foot instead of summoning a metal steed. She set a brisk pace with Nil close on her heels. While she ran, she reflected on the obnoxiousness of having a crush on Nil. I’m glad I never had feelings for anyone before, she thought with disgruntlement as she ran through the jungle, stopping occasionally to replenish her medicine pouch. It’s so damn distracting. And it makes you say the stupidest things. The worst part, Aloy thought, was that she didn’t know how Nil would react if he knew. Did she want him to know? Would she be embarrassed? Would he be embarrassed? He was so hard to read sometimes.

Of all the new things she was discovering, infatuation was the worst so far.

It was late morning by the time they reached the Spurflints. Aloy slowed down as they reached the Hunting Grounds, and as they walked up the slope towards the Keeper, Nil suddenly gave a quiet huff of amusement.

“What?” Aloy asked, and Nil smirked at her. “You’ll like these trials, Suntress. It’s your specialty.”

She gave him a speculative look as they approached the Keeper, but as soon as Aloy opened her mouth to speak, the Keeper said, “Shhhh….”

Aloy raised her eyebrows, but lowered her voice. “What are you doing?”

The Keeper gave her a calm, gentle smile. In an equally calm voice, he said, “I was listening to the herd. Have you come for the Stealth Trials?”

“She’s come to make a mockery of your Stealth Trials,” Nil replied before Aloy could speak, and the
Keeper shot Nil a warning look… then the Keeper’s face transformed into a look of deep suspicion and hostility. He returned his gaze to Aloy without speaking to Nil. “Choose a trial, and I will explain it to you.”

What Aloy really wanted now was for the Keeper to explain to her why he seemed to know - and dislike - Nil, but this was not the time. She’d come for trials, and her blood was already pumping. The Keeper explained the trials to her, and she eagerly chose the Watch Out trial. Easy peasy, she thought as she peeked over the edge of the mesa to strategically choose the best rope to slide down. Just before she slid, she glanced back at Nil and grinned. “Watch carefully, Carja. You might learn something,” she teased. Then she winked at him confidently and leapt onto the rope.

She might be a novice in the world of feelings, but she was in her element during the hunt.

***************

Nil strolled to the edge of the mesa to watch Suntress. He had no doubt she would get at a Blazing Sun on her first try. Watchers? he thought with derision. Even he could probably excel at this trial on the first try.

“Why are you here?”

Nil turned to look at the Keeper, who was staring at him with quiet menace. “I go where she goes,” Nil replied, jerking his head towards the hunting ground.

“Does the Nora know who you are and what you have done?” the Keeper asked, his voice as quiet as a whisper but filled with a scream’s worth of hostility.

Nil returned his gaze to the hunting ground. “No,” he said dismissively. Frankly, Nil was surprised that the curious Suntress hadn’t asked him more questions about his history. If she’d spoken to Warden Janeva, she must know that he didn’t go by his birth name anymore. And yet she hadn’t asked him why.

To be fair, he hadn’t asked her much about herself either. Maybe if they were spending time together, he should do that. Companionship was an utter mystery to him.

Nil could feel the Keeper’s contempt on the back of his neck like the burn of the Sun’s rays, but he ignored it. He was used to people’s scorn, disgust, and fear. All he was interested in was watching Suntress.

As it turned out, he’d entirely missed her first trial. She was already scrabbling back up the rocks to the Keeper’s mesa, a huge grin on her face. She showed the four Watcher’s lenses to the Keeper, who gave her a tiny enigmatic smile and sent her to do the next trial.

The only trial that gave Suntress any difficulty was the Sleight of Crate. She had to do it twice before she earned her Blazing Sun. When she climbed back up the keeper’s mesa looking mildly disgruntled, Nil noticed that her gaze darted between him and the Keeper and her eyes narrowed suspiciously, but she said nothing.

Her trials now completed, Suntress turned to him. “I just got an idea while I was down there. You can’t kill me, but I can offer you the next best thing: we can go hunting a Stalker.”

“My apologies, outlander, but - he threatened to kill you?” The Keeper was staring at Suntress with concern, and he suddenly looked considerably less than calm.

Suntress turned to him. “No, he asked if he could fight me to the death. But don’t worry,” Suntress
reassured the Keeper, who looked positively aghast. “I said no.”

The Keeper closed his mouth and seemed to wrestle internally with himself, then finally he responded, his voice back to being quiet and calm. “As you say. Your travelling companion is your choice.” His eyes cut back to Nil, and the venom in them would have been alarming if Nil gave a shit.

“That’s right, he is,” Suntress replied, and her face and voice were suddenly hard. “Thank you for your time.” She turned on her heel and strode away, and Nil followed.

As soon as they were out of earshot of the Keeper, Suntress turned to him, her eyes bright with anger. “Will people ever stop giving me a hard time because I’m a ‘savage Nora’ or a young woman?” she demanded. “I can take care of myself.”

Nil shrugged. “People’s judgments are like a fly buzzing at your ear: it’s only as significant as you allow it to be. Besides, you know you can crush the fly under your foot if you wish. Let that knowledge warm your blood.”

Suntress gazed at him for a moment, the anger fading from her face and posture. Finally she smiled. “Thank you, Nil. That’s actually… nice.” She continued along the path at a more leisurely rate, and Nil fell into step beside her.

Some time later as they picked their way through the jungle, Suntress spoke again. “Nil… why won’t you go into any villages? Why do you try so hard to avoid people? Aside from your… you know… creepiness.” She smirked at him to soften her words.

Nil gave a half-smile back. He knew the impression he had on everyone - everyone except her, that was - and he didn’t care. “I fought under the Mad King’s banner during the war,” he said. “I killed people from every tribe. My face is like a death mask for many families.” He smiled reminiscently. Cognitively, he understood why the Sun-King hadn’t approved of the things he had done during the war, and he understood that it wasn’t acceptable to repeat those actions again, but the buffet of fear during those days had been undeniably delicious.

He looked down at Suntress, who was watching him with a small frown. “I’m too recognizable in the villages,” he clarified. “I make people uncomfortable. That’s why that Keeper didn’t approve of your choice of travelling companion.”

“But you can’t be the only former soldier of the Mad King who roams the Sundom,” Suntress argued in that endearingly skeptical way of hers. “Are you really that recognizable?”

“I might be the only one,” Nil reasoned. “Most of the Shadow Carja are in Sunfall.” He looked at her. “I told you,” he said mildly. “I approve of rehabilitation. And why wouldn’t I? I’m the only former Shadow Carja who can freely roam in the light of the Sun.” He grinned.

“Hmm,” Suntress murmured noncommittally. Her face was thoughtful, and she said no more for some time.

Eventually, she slowed her pace and quietly made her way into some long grass. Nil crouched beside her and she turned to him, her lips close to his ear. “We’re in Stalker territory,” she whispered. “You’ll have to hunt this machine as though you were hunting me. I’m very stealthy, as you just saw.” She smiled mischievously.

Her breath smelt of winterfresh. Nil wanted to taste her mouth. The sudden desire to kiss her threw him off; he’d never wanted to kiss any woman before, not even the courtesans he’d bedded during
his teenage years. But from the forbidden glyphs he’d read when he was young, he didn’t think this was the right setting to act on such a sudden impulse.

He pushed the thought aside. “If you insist. Are you going to let me die if the Stalker gets the best of me?” he asked, with a raise of one eyebrow.

Suntress smiled, and the wicked look in her eyes made his chest feel that strange but not unpleasant writhing sensation. “Tempting, but no. I meant it when I said I don’t want you to die.” She tapped her Focus, her face sinking into concentration for a moment, then her eyes darted to the left slightly. “There. A Stalker, in that long grass. Watch for the motion-triggered mines,” she murmured, pointing them out to him. Then she jerked her chin towards the Stalker. “Go.”

Nil went. He had no idea what Suntress had seen, but then suddenly the air shimmered slightly just five paces in front of him. Stalker, he thought as he noted its location and swiftly moved forward, then attacked it abruptly with a stab to its metal neck. The Stalker let out a high-pitched, shearing keen then lashed at him, but he had rolled away already. He rose to his feet… and the Stalker was gone.

Nil whipped around, his teeth bared in a snarl, his eyes and ears pricked for any movement, any sound. He detected nothing… but there, right behind him, a subtle whirring-

He was slammed onto his back as the Stalker pounced on him. He hit the ground with an impact that knocked the breath from his lungs, but he didn’t let that stop him; he rolled flat on the ground from the Stalker’s reach, then forced himself to inhale wheezily as he yanked the Voice of Our Teeth from his back. Without hesitating, he shot arrow after arrow into the metal beast until it went invisible again.

But this time Nil knew what to listen for. When the subtle whirring noise sounded again, he whipped around with his bow, using it as a staff to strike the Stalker before dodging away and pelting it with arrows again. One arrow hit a particular component and triggered a shower of sparks and electricity, and he felt a surge of satisfaction.

Then, as he pulled out another arrow, the Stalker moved faster than he imagined possible and Nil was on his back, pinned by the Stalker and barely holding it back with his hands on its metal shoulders. The Stalker’s sharp metal face was inches from his own. Nil snarled viciously and with no small amount of frustration. He would have headbutted a human in this situation, but that would have no effect on this beast.

Nil scrabbled with one hand for something to pull on - didn’t Suntress’s tamed beasts usually have exposed wires? - and finally managed to sneak his hand between two armoured plates to grab a wire. With an enormous amount of force, he pulled - and the Stalker keened, sparks showering over them both, then collapsed on top of him, defeated.

Nil lay under the Stalker’s weight, panting with exertion but triumphant… for about one second. Then he heard a subtle whirring noise…

A flash of red hair, a crunch of spear in metal and a machine’s keen, a shower of sparks. The second Stalker that had appeared was whirling, its great metal head whipping back and forth as it tried to detect Suntress, but she was hiding somewhere, undetectable. She truly was as good as a Stalker. The Stalker continued to spit sparks and remained visible; it seemed that Suntress had disabled its stealth generator.

Nil slowly and laboriously eased himself out from under the dead Stalker, still watching the second Stalker as it tried to detect Suntress. Then she stepped from the grass behind it, a wraith with flaming
red hair, and struck the unsuspecting Stalker in its metal flank with her spear. The Stalker collapsed onto its side and Suntress slid into place beside it, her face a picture of concentration as she spun her spear and slotted the non-pointed side into a port near the machine’s flank.

“Come on, come on,” she muttered, then suddenly smiled and dislodged her spear. She stood, completely at ease, and offered Nil a hand as the metal beast struggled back to its feet, its neck glowing blue.

Suntress had overridden the Stalker.

He took Suntress’s proffered hand and allowed her to help him to his feet. Then she turned back to the Stalker and stroked its metal neck, for all the world like it was a big pet.

Nil stared at her as she murmured something to the tamed Stalker and patted its rump fondly as it stalked away into the jungle. She flicked back her braids and wiped her sweaty forehead on her arm, then propped one hand on her hip and grinned at him.

He felt **alive** as he watched her. His body was buzzing with the thrill of excitement, a rush of pleasure and joy… but he realized now with perfect clarity that it wasn’t because of the hunt or the thrill of victory. It was her. It was Suntress. *She* made him feel alive, not the hunt. The realization slammed into him like a well-placed boot to the face.

For the first time that he could remember, Nil had feelings for someone.

“So?” Suntress said, and her brilliant hazel eyes were bright with anticipation. “What did you think? Is that what you imagined it would be to fight me?”

Nil realized then that she had done this for him. Without judging him for wanting to fight her, she had set up this little hunting scenario just for him. He felt an unfamiliar ache in his chest, but it felt... strangely good.

“Not really,” he answered. “You’re not a Stalker. You’re a Stormbird. A force of nature, inescapable and unwavering as death itself. A challenge that’s just out of reach, stunning everything and everyone you see, beautiful but deadly.”

Suntress’s face had turned bright red. “Nil. I... That’s so nice. Stormbirds are the most challenging and satisfying machines to take down.” She beamed at him. “That might be the nicest thing anyone’s ever said to me.”

Nil shrugged casually, secretly pleased with himself. He had no experience with pleasing anyone - very much the opposite, in fact - but unless he was mistaken, Suntress looked very happy indeed.

“Did you enjoy the hunt a bit more this time, though?” Suntress asked as she began to loot the dead Stalker. Nil knelt beside her, taking the resources as she pulled them from the beast’s corpse.

“Honestly, no. But I enjoyed watching you. There’s a special place in my heart for that demoness of death who spreads blood on the burning bodies of bandit foes… but I’ll admit, this is a close second.” She wrinkled her nose at him, and he smiled conspiratorially at her as he leaned close. “The machine whisperer, whispering metal secrets and metal death.”

Suntress laughed and shook her head, but her cheeks remained pink. She resumed looting the Stalker corpse, a tiny smile on her lips.

Nil smiled to himself, then continued rearranging his pouches and packing away the resources she handed him. His feelings for Suntress were novel and confusing, but he was starting to enjoy them.
I wouldn’t fight it, he thought to himself.

Chapter End Notes

Three things:

1) That super-chill Keeper at the Stealth Trials? Hot. I’d hit that.
2) Anyone else notice that Nil seems to be bald underneath his headdress? Has anyone else seen that during photomode? No? It’s just me trying to take a million creeper photos of Nil from every angle? Okay then. *goes and curls up in corner holding PS4 controller*
3) Also, seriously, the Sleight of Crate trial. Still trying to get my Blazing Sun in that motherfucker.
**Waterfall**

Chapter Summary

Aloy and Nil continue to travel, and their feelings for each other become plain.

***ALERT ALERT: the rating for this fic just went from Mature to Explicit.***

NSFW. Pre-smut, if that makes sense. (It will.)

Did anyone find this fucking gorgeous waterfall? This is the inspiration for this chapter.

Also, I know the metal flowers are gigantic in the game but in this fic I pretend they are small/palm-sized because how the hell else is Aloy supposed to carry like 15 of them to Meridian? A little creative licence taken here.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Nil and Suntress passed the rest of their day machine hunting. Suntress told him she had to collect trophies for the Lodge so a Hawk would sponsor her, so Nil waited patiently (and safely out of reach) as she hunted and killed three Sawtooths, two Ravagers, and another Stalker over the course of the day. By the time she’d collected her last trophy, sweaty but triumphant, the day was winding down and the sky was turning the deep pink of twilight.

They settled down at campfire a couple of kilometres north of Sunstone Rock. Suntress had asked him if he wanted to settle somewhere farther from the prison for the night, but Nil had told her honestly that he didn't care. Now, as twilight faded into evening, they sat comfortably at their fire, Nil supervising half a hare roasting while Suntress boiled the rest into a protein-rich broth.

“Why do some Carja have tattoos around their eyes? What’s the significance of your tattoos, for example?” Suntress, as always, was irrepressibly curious, and had begun peppering him with questions.

“They were once a way of marking family lines for noble men. But they’re just decorative now,” Nil told her as he turned the hare. “We don't all have them anymore, and women get them too. But it’s still only nobles that have them.”

“So you are from a noble family!” Suntress interrupted. “I thought so. But why don’t the non-noble Carja get the tattoos?”

Nil shrugged. “It’s a prestige thing. You have to hire a finely trained tattoo artist, and they only work in Meridian. It’s a costly mark.”

Suntress frowned. “What if an artisan had the money? Could they get the tattoos?”

Nil tilted his head thoughtfully. “I don’t know. Maybe if they could afford it? But they wouldn’t.” He poked at the logs in the fire to optimize the flames under the meat.

“Why?” Suntress pressed, her frown deepening, and Nil shrugged again. “I don’t know, Suntress.
They just wouldn’t.”

Suntress narrowed her eyes. “That’s all you have to say about it? It doesn’t bother you that some people wouldn’t get tattoos just because it’s a noble tradition?”

Nil turned to face her, feeling genuinely amused by her passion, and she scowled more deeply at his grin. “I find it interesting that you’re so bothered. You’re a Nora. What do you care about the fairness of Carja traditions?”

Suntress stared at him, then shook her head slightly and looked away. “Carja, Nora, Oseram… Tribe doesn’t matter. We’re all people. What does it matter what tribe I’m from? You don’t have to be from a particular tribe to notice a problem. Or to want to do something about it.” Suntress went quiet, her eyes on her hands as she idly broke twigs into pieces and threw the pieces into the fire.

Nil was quiet as well. He supposed she was correct about all the tribes just being people. Funnily enough, in some ways he treated people indiscriminately: during the war he happily killed anyone from anywhere, and now he would do the same as long as they were a bandit. But from Suntress’s words, it seemed that he took more for granted as a result of his Carja nobility than he had thought.

He sipped some Scrappersap from his gold flask, then offered her the flask wordlessly. She shook her head, still not looking at him.

Then Nil remembered his thought from earlier - that he should ask her about herself. “You wear no makeup, Suntress. Your face is always bare. Most of the Nora wear face paint. Why don’t you?”

Suntress threw another twig into the fire. Her face was hard and set, and when she replied, her voice was cold. “Nora face paint indicates maternal lineages. I don’t wear face paint because I have no mother.”

“She died in childbirth?” Nil asked, and Suntress shook her head, her lips pressed together in a thin line. “No. I just… have no mother. Apparently I was born from a mountain.” She gave a bitter little laugh, and even Nil could detect the disgust in it.

Nil frowned, his curiosity piqued. He’d started this conversation because he thought he should, but her answer was… intriguing. “‘Born from a mountain’? I don’t understand.”

“Neither do I!” Suntress burst out, and raked her hair back from her face with her hands. “It’s a question that’s haunted me my whole life. But there’s this… mysterious woman. She looks like me, but older. Maybe she’s my mother? I… I don’t know. But she was the reason I was targeted at the Proving.”

Nil raised his eyebrows. “I heard there was trouble among the Nora. I didn’t know it revolved around you.” He smirked. “But somehow I’m not surprised.”

Suntress looked at him and finally she smiled, though her green-and-golden eyes still shone with residual anger. “Well, you didn’t ask.”

Nil twisted his lips ruefully. Her words echoed the thoughts he’d had from earlier, how he never asked her anything about herself. “Then tell me now,” he said, and removed the roasted hare from the fire and laid it aside to cool. He raised his eyes to her face.

She was watching him warily, her eyes narrowed with uncertainty. Nil looked back at her unflinchingly, and eventually her face relaxed. “Okay. But… it’s a long story.”
The roasted hare was eaten, half of Nil’s flask of Scrappersap was drunk, and Aloy was wrapping up her story as Nil listened carefully, his head tilted towards her and his silver eyes narrowed and serious.

“... So my next lead is a ruin of the Old Ones called Maker’s End. Olin said he saw an image of the mysterious woman there. I need to know who she is, and that’s the next clue.” Aloy sighed as she gazed up at the stars through the canopy of trees; she was lying on her back, and Nil was sitting next to the fire crafting arrows as he listened to her tale.

Aloy had been so busy with local errands and with Avad and Erend that she hadn’t thought about going out to Maker’s End in some time. But now that it was on her mind again, she felt that longing for knowledge, to find out the truth. Is my mother at Maker’s End? If she even is my mother. But if the mysterious woman wasn’t Aloy’s mother, then who was she?

She turned her head to look at Nil. “You know what bothers me? The All-Mother Mountain is obviously a door into one of the Old Ones’ ruins. I went into one of the ruins when I was a kid, and it looks the same, and now I also know it looks like a Cauldron. But the Matriarchs insist that it’s some kind of mysterious goddess. How can they be so blind?”

Nil shaved a splinter from his arrow, then smoothed his thumb along it and nodded with satisfaction. Aloy couldn’t help but appreciate the skillful movements of his hands. She found his hands oddly… attractive. They were tanned from the sun, and scars marred their smooth bronze colour, giving them character. His fingers moved so surely over the arrowhead, and Aloy felt an involuntary shiver in her core as his thumb stroked the shaft of the arrow. Was it normal to be attracted to someone’s hands?

Then his deep, sardonic voice reclaimed her attention. “Beliefs are like muscle on bone, aren’t they? They’re hard to tear away, and they always seem to leave a little bit behind, no matter how hard you scrape.”

Aloy snorted with laughter. “That’s really creepy, Nil.”

He only smirked and shrugged. “Creepy to one person is honest to another. I’ve never denied that I toe the fine line of both.”

Aloy smirked. She supposed he made sense, in his own way. She shifted slightly and folded her arms behind her head, then closed her eyes, feeling relaxed and light. She listened to the gentle scraping sound of Nil’s knife on ridgewood until she drifted off to sleep.

****************

The next morning, Aloy woke to find herself alone, but with Nil’s flask tucked under her cheek. She supposed that was his way of saying he’d be back, so she sipped some cold broth and munched on some dried figs while she waited.

She was considering going to the river to wash her face when she heard his approach. “Suntress,” he greeted her. Then he held out his hand. In his palm was a metal flower.

Aloy perked up. “That’s great! Where did you find this?” she asked, taking the flower from his hand to inspect it. Aloy was deeply intrigued by these intricate metal contraptions.

“On that mesa overlooking the Spearshafts. I noticed that you collect them.”

Aloy looked at him in surprise. “You did? When?”

“At the Gatelands. You dropped one while you were looting corpses, but you handled it carefully
when you picked it up.’’ He crouched beside her and took a fig from the open wax-cloth on the grass beside her. ‘‘You like these flowers, don’t you?’’

‘‘I do,’’ Aloy confirmed as she resumed her inspection of the metal flower. ‘‘Each of these contains a poem. I’ll show you,’’ she said eagerly, then scanned the flower with her Focus and read the poem out loud:

When dawn hennas her hands with the blood of the horizon
Let the new bride of the golden veil uncover her shining face.

A shiver ran down Aloy’s back. She never really understood the deeper meanings of the metal flowers’ poems, but this one… it spoke to her in a way the others hadn’t. She wasn’t sure why.

She lifted her eyes to Nil’s, and warm heat ran through her body at the intensity of his silver stare. ‘‘The verse is fitting,’’ he murmured, his voice low and intimate.

Suddenly Aloy couldn’t look away from him; she felt tethered to his gaze, her heart a Glinthawk snared by his pale grey eyes. Hesitantly Nil reached forward and tucked one of her braids behind her ear, his gesture slow and careful as though he was trying something for the first time. Then he tilted his head and spoke, and his voice was deep and thoughtful.

‘‘Suntress, I like you. Your smile is like a knife across the skin: sharp and exquisite. I never thought a person’s company could be more exhilarating than the wash of blood across my hands, but now I know differently.’’

Aloy couldn’t breathe. Her heart was pounding in her ears. His orange-oil scent was making her feel light-headed. Finally she managed to find her voice. ‘‘I like you too. And I’ve never liked anyone before. Not… like this, anyway.’’ She swallowed. She felt incredibly vulnerable admitting this to him; she’d only just admitted this truth to herself, after all. But he had said it first. Maybe that meant they were safe with each other.

Nil smiled slowly at her. ‘‘We’re well-matched then, as more than just fighters. The spear and the knife together, seeking new blood.’’ Then he sat back and popped a fig in his mouth, as though he hadn’t just said the most intimate words to her that had shaken her to the core.

Aloy forced herself to sit back and look relaxed as well, even though her hands were trembling. She busied them by stroking the metal flower’s delicate petals, then carefully folding it shut and packing it with the others in one of her pouches. She glanced at Nil shyly, uncertain what to say now that they’d shared such feelings.

Nil swallowed his fig, then raised his eyebrows at her. ‘‘Where are you taking us today then, Suntress?’’

She smiled, finally feeling herself relax. Leave it to him to act like this is no big deal, she thought fondly. ‘‘Actually, there’s another metal flower northwest of here, less than a day’s walk.’’ She tilted her head. ‘‘Maybe we’ll be lucky and find some bandits to hunt along the way.’’

Nil grinned slowly at her. ‘‘Are you flirting with me? Because it’s working.’’

Aloy laughed, and the last of her awkward tension left her body. She picked up a twig and threw it at him playfully. ‘‘Uh-huh. Come on, let’s go.’’
Aloy stood from the long grass and jogged triumphantly over to the metal flower, ignoring the twisted, sparking piles of metal that used to be two Longlegs. She’d swiftly overridden one of the metal birds, then she and Nil had sat back in the grass and watched the two of them destroy each other.

She picked up the metal flower tenderly and scanned it with her Focus; it contained a poem about clouds and oats, but somehow Aloy couldn’t appreciate it as much as the poem from the flower Nil had found.

“Is there a big river near here? I hear water,” Aloy called over her shoulder to Nil, who was looting the Longlegs corpses.

“There’s a waterfall nearby. Just round this cliff,” Nil replied, and Aloy smiled.

“Great. I could use a swim.” She was largely accustomed to the Sundom’s heat by now, but today felt particularly humid, and Aloy hadn’t had a chance to wash her clothes in days.

By the time she and Nil reached the waterfall, the midday sun was blazing overhead and Aloy was fantasizing about flinging herself in the water. But as they reached the pool’s edge, she stood staring up at the waterfall, her mouth open in wonder.

It was an absolutely stunning waterfall, tumbling powerfully in clear sheets down a sheer cliff into a deep pool studded sparsely with flat-ish boulders - perfect spots for laying out her clothes to dry. The sun was positioned right at the crest of one cliff, making the water sparkle and dance as it tumbled.

She turned to Nil, her eyes wide with excitement. “I bet you could see all the way to Daytower from the top of this waterfall! Come on, let’s go!” Without further ado, she dove into the pool and swam smoothly to the edge of the waterfall, where she had spotted some jutting rocks that would make decent handholds.

She surfaced to see Nil on the other side of the waterfall, just across from her. “We’ll never know which of us is the better killer, but let’s see who’s the more skilled climber,” he bellowed, then lifted himself powerfully from the water and started scaling the cliff.

Aloy laughed, her competitive juices already flowing. “Cheater! I thought you were a man of honour!” she shouted, then began quickly climbing, her fingers and feet nimble with practice.

She reached the top of the waterfall mere seconds before he did, and punched the air with her fist in victory. Nil walked slowly through the rushing water to stand beside her. “You won because you’re smaller and lighter,” he panted as he smirked at her.

“Nil, I didn’t take you for a spoilsport! You said it yourself - clearly I’m the more skilled climber.” She planted her hands on her hips and gazed happily out at the view. Obviously she couldn’t see to Daytower, but she could see Avad’s palace and the Spire.

She and Nil stood quietly for a long moment, until Aloy’s attention slowly floated from the scenery back to Nil’s silent, strong presence beside her. His skin was dappled with beads of water, and the feathers on his headdress were soaked, making them dark and floppy. Aloy bit back a smirk, then turned to him. “Now let’s see who can get down to the bottom the fastest.” Her eyes sparkled mischievously.

Nil turned to look at her slowly, his eyebrows high on his forehead. “Are you saying what I think you are? I didn’t take you for a woman with a death wish,” he said.

“It’s a deep pool. Come on, I dare you to jump,” she taunted.
A slow, feral smile lit Nil’s face. “You first.”

Aloy laughed. But before she could say anything else, a deep, enraged snarl sounded behind them.

*Oh no. I’d know that snarl anywhere,* Aloy thought with sudden dread. Sure enough, she and Nil whipped around to see an angry Sawtooth pounding through the jungle towards them.

On dry ground, Aloy would have stood and fought. In the knee-deep water of the river, there was no chance. “Jump!” she screamed at Nil.

He grabbed her hand and they flung themselves off the edge of the waterfall. Aloy’s stomach was flying up towards her throat at the sudden drop, and she could faintly hear her own shriek of mixed terror and laughter as the pool rushed towards them. She instinctively let go of his hand to tuck her arms in as she entered the water feet-first with a huge splash.

Seconds later, Aloy surfaced with a huge gasp and a grin. A moment later, Nil surfaced as well with a leonine toss of his bare head. His headdress had been torn from his head by the impact and was floating off towards the pool’s edge.

Aloy gazed at him and felt a fresh surge of attraction. He was even more handsome without his headdress. His black hair was cut in a mohawk: close-cut on the sides, and about the length of her palm in the middle. The sodden hair was flopping into his eyes, and he shoved it back impatiently with one hand, his lips pursed with annoyance.

His annoyed look, plus the near-disastrous encounter with the Sawtooth and the rush from jumping off the waterfall, combined to make Aloy suddenly start laughing hysterically. She managed to haul herself onto a flat boulder before collapsing onto her back in breathless laughter.

Nil swam slowly over to her boulder and hauled himself onto it, then settled onto his knees beside her as he waited patiently for her to catch her breath. When she finally sat up on her elbows, a mirth-filled grin still on her face, he was staring at her with that unnerving intensity that she still associated with their Stormbird hunt.

*I want to kiss him.*

The sudden thought came spiralling up from her body, which was tingling nervously as she gazed back at him. Those light grey eyes were boring holes into her, their eerie paleness leaving a burning warmth behind that seemed to start in her chest and emanate outwards to her limbs until she felt boneless with the desire to lift herself just a bit higher, press her lips to his….

She couldn’t. Could she? No, she couldn’t.

Aloy, Machine Hunter, Tamer of Thunderjaws and Stormbirds, was afraid to kiss the silver-eyed Carja killer.

“Was that refreshing enough for you?” Nil finally broke the tense silence, his voice garnished with a sarcastic lilt, and Aloy smiled, grateful for the rescue despite the butterflies wreaking havoc in her belly. “Yep,” she replied pertly. “But this is going to take forever to dry in this humidity.” She plucked at her light Carja armour. It might be semi-fireproof, but it certainly wasn’t waterproof.

Nil huffed. “I’ll try to be grateful that silks dry quickly.” He slid back into the water and swam to the edge of the pool to retrieve his headdress, then hoisted himself out of the water and removed his bow and quiver. Then he stood and began shedding his clothes with a complete lack of modesty.

Aloy watched him with sudden anxiety and guilty excitement as his vambraces came off, then his
shoulder guards, vest and scarf. Lazily he crouched and unlaced his sandals. Then his strong hands began to work at his belt buckle, and Aloy opened her mouth to say… what exactly?

During her travels, she'd learned that the Carja and the Oseram had few qualms about nudity. She'd seen outlanders washing half- or fully-naked in streams and rivers without a care, and Oseram and Carja clothing were considerably more revealing than Nora garb. Aloy had never exposed as much of her midriff and legs at home as she did now. The acceptance of nudity made sense given how much warmer most of the Sundom was compared to the Sacred Lands, and though she'd found it a bit startling at the beginning of her travels, it no longer fazed her when a bare-breasted traveler waved casually to her from a river.

And Nil, in characteristic Carja fashion, seemed not to have any qualms either as his belt came off along with his tassets.

But watching Nil undress felt very different than seeing random naked villagers bathing. An unfamiliar tingling warmth was starting to build in parts of Aloy’s body that she had never given much thought to.

Nil’s strong, masculine hands began to tug at the laces of his purple silk trousers, and Aloy squeaked involuntarily, then cringed internally at herself. A squeak. Like a rat. Really, Aloy? she berated herself as Nil looked up at her. He raised his eyebrows, his fingers still on the laces of his trousers. “Aren't you going to take off your clothes and let them dry?”

She opened her mouth, but no sound came out. Great. A stupid noise when I shouldn't talk, and no noise at all when I should, she lamented.

But while she had watched Nil shed his clothes, that sizzling, tingling heat in her body had continued to build at the juncture of her thighs. She could hear her own breaths coming more rapidly, and she felt… a little reckless. When in Carja lands, do as the Carja do, she thought boldly.

“Yeah, I am,” she said, and slid off her own vambraces, then pulled off her boots. She glanced quickly at Nil; he had returned his attention to the laces of his trousers and was loosening them with easy tugs of his nimble fingers.

She felt reassured by his lack of attention; it made her feel less strange about stripping down. She unfastened her belt with its myriad pouches, then slid off her tassets and laid them on the boulder to dry. She unbuckled the crossed front straps of her navy-and-gold Carja vest, then involuntarily glanced at Nil again as she peeled her vest off.

He was watching her.

Sudden excitement like a shock from a Stormbird’s lightning gun ran through Aloy’s body as she met Nil’s bold silvery stare. He had stopped removing his purple trousers, and they hung loose around his hips as he gazed at her, his arms relaxed at his sides but his stance somehow… predatory.

Aloy bit the inside of her cheek, confused but intrigued by the sensations flooding her body. She could feel her heartbeat throbbing in her throat, but also between her legs, resulting in a peculiar feeling of pleasure.

Boldly Aloy stared back at him as she pulled her cropped blue silk blouse over her head in one smooth movement, revealing her bare breasts. She wasn't sure where her unexpected courage was coming from, and she didn't care.

Nudity might be commonplace for other tribes, but Aloy had never bared herself in front of anyone
before. There had never been any reason or need to do so. But now, with Nil’s eyes sweeping over her skin, she wanted to. She liked the way his eyes fixated on her nipples, the way his pupils dilated to make his eyes look darker than their usual eerie grey. She liked how his hungry stare made her feel: like a yawning pit of desire had opened inside her core, a blooming of something unfamiliar and unnameable that she suddenly wanted to feed.

When Nil’s eyes slid from her breasts back to her face, she raised one eyebrow, then unlaced her Carja leggings - her last piece of clothing - then pushed them off. She stood on her boulder, completely nude, and tossed her hair back over her shoulder as she faced him proudly.

Nil’s lips curved slightly in a faint smile, then his eyes slid slowly down her body, triggering a warmth like a caress beneath her skin. When his gaze reached that most intimate part of her, he wet his lips unconsciously. And when his eyes reluctantly returned to her face, he wasn’t smiling anymore.

Aloy saw the hunger blazing in his face, his admiration of the Stormbird, and suddenly she couldn’t breathe, couldn’t think about anything but the building pleasure at the apex of her thighs. She couldn’t break from his gaze, and the tension stretched between them, taut and electric like a tripwire.

Aloy wanted. Desire. Lust. Words she’d known but had never felt before Nil, these words were alive inside of her, making demands she didn’t yet know how to fill. A heady mix of terror and excitement made her feel dizzy, and suddenly she couldn’t bear the tension of the moment anymore. Everything she felt was so new and thrilling, but also felt so foreign and unmasterable that she suddenly felt hysterical. A sudden, inexplicable grin swept over her face, and before she could break out into panicked laughter, she turned away from Nil’s burning silver eyes and dove into the water.

********************

Nil watched as Suntress’s body disappeared into the waterfall’s pool with barely a splash. Then he slowly sat on the edge of the pool beside his clothes, his arms resting loosely on his knees as he waited for his clothes to dry.

Nil felt fucking fantastic. He didn’t know if he’d ever felt this good in his life. His body felt strung tight, his cock was hard and pounding in time with his pulse, and the lust he felt was so sharp it was almost painful. He savoured the feeling, and mused at how it made him feel both powerful and oddly protective of the naked woman swimming in the pool before him.

As with everything else requiring human connection, Nil had resisted sex until his father had berated him during his teenage years into visiting the courtesans. Nil had faked his way through these dalliances, going through the motions of arousal and sex without caring one way or another about the outcome. The forbidden tomes he’d read as a child snooping in his father’s study had contained thorough instructions in women’s pleasure, so Nil had followed these instructions thoroughly, more curious about whether the glyphs were true than interested in the courtesans’ reactions. As a result, none of them had noticed that Nil never finished. He had never spilled his seed inside any of the numerous women he’d bedded. This fact didn’t bother him; emotional connection, sexual pleasure, all of these ideas were difficult and boring, and he stopped visiting the pleasure quarters as soon as he could do so without appearing suspicious to his father.

But now, looking at Suntress’s naked curves, Nil finally understood what had been missing from the sexual liaisons of his youth. He wanted Suntress, and badly. He wanted to fill his palms with the globes of her cream-and-rose breasts, to pull her close and taste the centre of her that was coyly hidden by reddish-gold curls.

But Suntress was no courtesan. Nil could tell that she’d never known any man or woman. As the
Carja would say, she was unhusked, and Nil could see it in the hesitancy of her movements as she’d begun to strip off her clothes. But he could also see the signs of her desire: the way she licked her lips as she pulled off her vest, the way her nipples pearled into pink buds as she showed them off, and between her legs, that unmistakable sheen of moisture that Suntress didn’t seem aware of.

Nil had always thought the term *unhusked* was stupid. But as he’d watched Suntress stripping, he suddenly realized the word was apt. She was ripe for the plucking, and even her skin was like ripe corn, shimmering cream where her armour covered her and golden where it did not.

Nil shifted restlessly. His silk trousers were loose, but they felt tighter than usual around the hardness of his cock. He told himself to be patient, to enjoy the novel feeling of actual lust. This lust, like his feelings for her and his need to be by her side, was novel to him and it felt fucking *good*, and Nil intended to milk it for all it was worth.

He lay back in a more relaxed position, his weight on one elbow, and lazily enjoyed the sight of Suntress splashing with abandon in the pool. At one point she swam to the bottom of the waterfall and clambered onto a boulder, and Nil drank in the sight of her, water sheeting down over her naked curves, his whole body feeling strung deliciously taut like a bow.

Finally Suntress dove back into the pool and swam towards him. She stopped in the water about two metres away from him and treader, and the ripples of water blurring his view of her body only served to tantalize him more. They gazed at each other silently for a moment, and Nil examined her face with interest; her hazel eyes were roaming over his reclined body, taking liberties to stop on his arms, his abdomen, his crotch.

Finally Nil spoke, breaking the tension with the only thing he could think of to say. “Ready to move on, Suntress?”

She lifted her eyes back to his face and smiled, and he could tell that his words had relaxed her somehow. “Yes. Let’s go.”

He nodded, then slowly rose and began pulling on his armour and weapons as Suntress swam back to her boulder and did the same.

She hadn’t said where they were headed next, but Nil didn’t care.

He’d follow this woman anywhere.

Chapter End Notes

SEXUAL AWAKENING!!! Be aware: Smut is Coming. *doing my best Ned Stark impression*

To those who have commented and kudos'ed and continued coming back for more: THANK YOU. I LOVE YOU. YOU COMPLETE ME.
Chapter Summary

Aloy and Nil discuss religion, get into an argument, and tiptoe slowly closer to satisfying their lust.

A/N: Mild angst, heavy romance, and a hint of smut. A lil' bit NSFW.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Aloy stretched her legs out and flexed her toes leisurely, then rested her feet close to the fire, enjoying the warmth that washed over them.

The day’s humidity had broken, and it had begun raining hard shortly after they left the waterfall. As the rain had begun pouring down, she and Nil had looked at each other with identical half-smirks at the irony of having spent an hour drying their clothes only to get soaked again.

The deluge had tapered off after a short while but had brought an early darkness with it, so Aloy had decided to pack it in early and set up camp under the cover of some heavy foliage. They had already eaten their evening meal of soup, maize-bread and berries in their usual companionable silence, and now they sat side by side in front of the fire, listening to the pitter-patter of light rain on the canopy above.

Nil’s headdress was drying by the fire, and Aloy was having a hard time keeping her eyes off him. His midnight-black hair was slicked back in a smooth line along the middle of his skull, and he smelled deliciously of oranges from the oil he’d reapplied to his hair.

Her eyes weren't the only things she was fighting to keep off of Nil. Her newly-discovered desire was clamouring to be fed, ignoring Aloy’s reasoned attempts to tell herself that she didn't know how to feed it.

Like any good father, Rost had dutifully taught Aloy about the mechanics of sex and reproduction. But that knowledge didn't help her much when it came to the roaring pit of lust inside of her that was begging for Nil. Her earlier boldness had fled her, washed away by the rain and the resumption of their clothing; she felt nervous and uncertain, not just about how to proceed, but whether she was ready to.

To her relief (and perhaps a bit of disappointment), the issue of their mutual desire hadn’t come up again. She and Nil had been passing the evening comparing their tribes’ various ways of life. He had told her how most aspects of Carja life followed the cycle of the Sun, from the changing of the seasons down to the destinies of children born at different times of the day. Aloy had been reminded of Janeva mentioning that Nil was born under a long and dark shadow. Aloy rejected the idea that people’s daily behaviour was influenced by the movements of the sun, but she found it funny that Nil did seem to have the darkness that the Carja believed of a child born in shadow.

She had just finished telling Nil the tale of the Metal Devil and the All-Mother, and now she expressed her skepticism about the All-Mother’s existence. “An all-powerful goddess that lets its
faithful be massacred by heathen outlanders? What kind of goddess is that?” Aloy sniffed scornfully as she crossed her legs.

Nil smirked at her. “You don’t believe the Sun governs people’s destinies. You don’t believe in the magical All-Mother. What do you believe in, Suntress?”

“I believe that people make decisions of their own free will, and should use their brains to decide the right or wrong thing to do,” she replied forcefully. “And if bad things happen, it’s not because of some vague deity’s trickery or plan. It’s because of other people’s decisions, or… chance.” She was quiet for a moment, thinking of Rost. His passing remained the darkest mark in her life to date. Could she really reduce his death down to others’ bad decisions or chance?

Yes, she decided finally. Yes, I can. Helis’s decisions led to this. He and his men attacked the Proving. And taking Rost from me was the worst decision he’ll ever make. Aloy stared into the fire, only realizing that her hand was clenched in a fist when it began to hurt.

She relaxed her hand, then tucked her legs up and wrapped her arms around them as she stared into the fire, her mind still on Rost and his last lesson to her: The strength to stand alone is the strength to take a stand. Aloy had told him that if she was going to take a stand, it would have to be for something she believed in. Would Rost have thought revenge was a good enough reason to take a stand? He’d always been a man of honour; old, outdated honour perhaps, but honour nonetheless. Would he have been disappointed in her?

Eventually she turned to look at Nil, who was also staring into the fire. “What about you? Do you believe the teachings of the Sun Faith?”

Nil shrugged. “No,” he said casually. Then he said nothing more.

Aloy raised an eyebrow at him, amused. “Well? What do you believe in, then?”

Nil opened his mouth, but nothing came out. For the first time ever, he seemed to be at a loss for words. Aloy watched him with growing intrigue, and found that she was deeply interested to know what his answer would be. He was so often hidden behind a veil of poetry and blood or a mask of sarcasm. She was used to it now, picking meaning from his metaphors or rolling her eyes good-naturedly at his grisliness. But his rare moments of blunt honesty, deeply imbued with feeling despite his sardonic voice, always took her breath away.

Finally Nil shifted, stretching his legs out in front of him and resting his weight behind him on his hands. “I believe in second chances,” he said quietly, his eyes on the fire.

Aloy stared at him, impressed and touched by his answer. It made perfect sense given what she knew about him; if he hadn’t been given a second chance by the Sun-King, he would have been executed or rotting in a cell at Sunstone Rock until he died. But his answer resonated with Aloy for more personal reasons: she realized that she believed in second chances too. She’d given Olin a second chance, sparing his life so he could be reunited with his family. She would have been willing to give Bast a second chance, had he survived the Proving.

She glanced at Nil’s strong, handsome profile out of the corner of her eye, and something in her chest throbbed with a sudden rush of affection. “Me too,” she said softly. He didn’t look at her, but the corner of his lips lifted in a tiny half-smile.

Slowly, tentatively, Aloy leaned her weight towards him until their shoulders were touching. When Nil didn’t move away, she leaned closer still and rested her head on his shoulder.
Her heart was pounding with nerves. Obviously she had touched Nil before, when she was stitching his face and bandaging his chest, but that was clinical. This touch was different, born not from perfunctory necessity, but from a sheer desire for contact.

Nil didn’t look at her, but he shifted back slightly and gently leaned into her weight until her head was nestled into the crook of his neck. Aloy’s chest burst into a flurry of butterflies, and she bit her lips to hide the stupid grin that was threatening to break across her face. It was such a small thing, sitting close to this man that she felt so strongly tied to, but suddenly she felt incredibly happy.

They sat quietly for some time, and Aloy enjoyed the sweet warmth of his neck and the quiet sound of his breathing. Then Nil gave a little sigh, and she could feel the rumble of his voice in his chest as it reached her ears. “I have to say, I’m glad I killed my last partner. The Sundom is much more interesting through your eyes.”

Aloy froze, feeling suddenly as though she’d swallowed a canister of chillwater. She pulled away from Nil abruptly. “You told me your last partner was killed by bandits.”

Nil looked at her, his face as relaxed as ever. “I did say that, didn’t I? Well, you were a young Nora woman travelling alone, facing an outlander for the first time. I’m sure the truth would have alarmed you.” He tilted his head as he looked at her, a tiny frown creasing his forehead. “Things have worked out for both our benefits. Am I wrong?”

Aloy sat up on her knees, suddenly feeling tense and angry. “How many times- yes, I’m a woman, but I can look after myself,” she snapped. “Why didn’t you tell me the truth before this?”

Nil frowned more deeply, looking genuinely confused. “When should I have told you? And why is it important?”

Aloy glared at him. She felt betrayed by Nil, but also angry because she couldn’t answer his question. Why was it important? She’d always known Nil was a killer. He had never tried to hide it from her. She’d continued to work with him anyway, had agreed to let him travel with her anyway… was developing more intense feelings for him than she had ever had for anyone anyway. “I thought you only killed bandits,” she finally said, and was startled by the hardness of her own voice. “Was your partner a bandit?”

“No,” Nil said.

“So why did you kill him? Do you go around offering death matches to all your partners?” she demanded. Then she mentally checked herself. With horror, she wondered if some her unexpected anger was jealousy. Am I jealous of Nil offering to kill someone else? she wondered. And if so, am I crazy?

Aloy stood up abruptly. Her anger was confusing her, and the matching confusion on Nil’s face was making her chest ache. “I’m going for a walk,” she said bluntly, then strode away into the jungle without another word.

*******************

Nil watched Suntress disappear into the trees, then turned back to the fire. But though his eyes were on the dancing flames, he wasn’t really watching them; he replayed the last few minutes in his mind, trying to find the key, the thing that he’d done to make Suntress angry.

As much as Nil tried, he couldn’t understand what the problem was. Suntress knew he enjoyed killing. She knew he had killed people who weren’t bandits in the past. Why was she so disturbed
about this one particular death?

This kind of aggravation, the navigation of social norms, was something that Nil distinctly remembered hating about his former life in Meridian. It was one of the best things about travelling solo. Nil sighed heavily.

Maybe he should leave, let Suntress continue her journey on her own. But as soon as the idea crossed his mind, he rejected it outright. He couldn’t leave her. He felt no shame in admitting that he had nothing without her.

The most perplexing part was that Nil never lied, not once since he’d left Sunstone Rock. Lying was useful for making people feel comfortable, for blending in. But his time in prison had made him see that social niceties weren’t something he cared about anymore. So his decision to lie to Suntress about his partner’s death had been… out of character.

Nil worked those facts over in his mind. He didn’t give a shit what people thought of him, so he never lied. But he had lied to Suntress… So he must have cared what she thought of him even then, even back when he had only just met her.

That thought stilled him. The idea that some insidious part of his mind had wanted Suntress to like him, even before he consciously knew it, made him feel oddly resentful. How dare a part of his mind make decisions without his express permission?

Eventually Nil stood and walked into the jungle to find Suntress. He still didn’t understand why she was mad, but he knew enough about people to know that he’d have to fix it somehow if he wanted to stay with her.

He found her crouched by the river, skipping rocks off of its sluggishly moving surface. He knew she could hear his approach, but she didn’t acknowledge him as he came to stand beside her.

Nil stood quietly for a few moments, and she continued skipping rocks on the river, her face hard and set. Finally he figured he’d better say something. She’d asked him why he’d killed his partner, so he could start there. “My partner was sorely wounded by bandits. He was a reckless man, a glory-seeker without the skill to back it up. He escaped with his life, but barely. His guts were almost spilling through his fingers when I found him.” He shrugged. “It was a mercy killing. Not my style, I’ll admit, and it was far from satisfying. But it stopped his pitiful cries of pain. The bandits might have found me otherwise.”

Suntress had stopped skipping rocks while he was talking. He waited for her to speak, but she remained crouched and motionless, her eyes on the slow-moving river. Finally Nil crouched beside her and turned her face to his with two fingers on her chin. “I’m a killer. I like killing people,” he said plainly. “You know this, Suntress. I thought you had accepted it. Otherwise why would you keep company with me?”

Suntress stood abruptly and shoved her hair from her face, and Nil stood slowly to face her as she glared at him. “I do!” she yelled. “I have accepted it. Well, mostly.” Nil smirked at her honesty, but she continued to stare angrily at him. “I don’t like that you lied to me. I’ve done nothing but accept you. You’re…” She paused and took a deep breath before continuing. “I like that you are who you say you are, and you don’t try to hide it. I don’t like thinking that you’ve hidden something from me.”

Nil thought this over. He was mildly surprised that she had told him so openly why she was angry. His former life in Meridian had led him to believe that open communication was taboo. Maybe this was part of the reason he liked Suntress so much.
So Nil gave her an open and honest reply. “I haven’t lied for years, Suntress, not since Sunstone Rock. When one dances at the edge of decent society, one stops caring what people think. Lies are a balm for hurt feelings, a honeyed wine to hide the poison of truth. That’s something I don’t bother with anymore. Then you stopped to talk to me at the side of a river your Sacred Lands, and lies dripped from my tongue, unstoppable as an unstaunched wound.”

Suntress opened her mouth to argue, but Nil stopped her with an upraised hand. “I lied because I cared what you thought of me. I didn’t know you yet, didn’t know the Stormbird that surges inside your breast, but I cared what you thought. But if you prefer, I won’t lie to you again.” He smiled at her. “Lying is hard work anyway. The truth is always easier, I think.”

Suntress stared at him, her eyes suddenly shining in the moonlight. Nil noticed with relief that the anger was gone from her face, but his relief was replaced with fresh concern when a tear slid down her face. Incongruently, she laughed suddenly and rubbed her face roughly with both hands. “I don’t know if that even makes sense, Nil. But I… I think I understand. I think I do.”

Nil watched her warily until she lowered her hands and looked at him again, a tentative smile on her lips. He relaxed a bit. A smile was good. “So. No more lying, then?” he confirmed.

Suntress took a deep breath and nodded. “No more lies.”

“Then I can tell you one other truth I know. I’ll follow you to the ends of the earth, from the Forbidden West to the Frozen North, from Plainsong to Mainspring. Anywhere you want to go, you’ll have a Carja killer as your shadow, if that’s your wish.”

To Nil’s alarm, another tear slipped down Suntress’s cheek. Had he said something wrong again? Then suddenly her arms were around his neck, her face pressed into his shoulder as she held him tight.

She was hugging him. Nobody had hugged him as long as he could remember. He had hazy memories of a mother’s embrace, but nothing that felt like this. He hugged her back, hesitantly at first but then more firmly, one arm tight around her waist as his other arm slipped up to her shoulders, his fingers tangling in the flames of her hair. He breathed in her scent, and a feeling of warmth bloomed in his chest, a sense of wellbeing that he couldn’t remember ever feeling before.

A long moment later (but not quite long enough for Nil), Suntress gently disentangled herself from his arms and looked into his eyes. “There are some things I have to do alone,” she warned him gently. “In some ways I’ve been alone for a long time, Nil. I need answers, and I need to find them on my own. But…” She paused, her face serious but her eyes glowing warmly. “If you can accept that I need to do some things alone, then… I would love to have a Carja killer as my shadow.” She smiled at him cheekily.

Nil grinned slowly at her. “Suntress, I’ll happily accept your rules.”

She grinned back. “Then I have something great to show you, if you’ll follow me now.”

Nil nodded. “Lead the way.”

***************

Aloy ran through the jungle back towards the Spearshafts with Nil hot on her heels. She was grinning, exhilarated by the wind in her face and the freshness of new rain in the air, but above all by the man following in her wake.

Without knowing it, Nil had offered her everything she’d been missing since Rost’s death:
acceptance and companionship, but also independence and confidence in her abilities.

Aloy truly believed that she didn’t need anybody else. If she had lived the rest of her life alone, she would have been just fine. But with Nil, she knew she could be better than fine. She felt stronger, more powerful, happier.

Love. Another word Aloy had only ever known in a limited sense, from Rost’s paternal affections. Was it too early to think this word applied to her and Nil?

Who cares what it’s called? Aloy thought cheerfully. She felt wonderful, and that was what mattered.

Finally they reached the edge of the jungle, and Aloy heard the loud, slow, echoing footsteps of her quarry. She stopped at the edge of the jungle and tapped her Focus to check for nearby machines or bandits; none within close ear- or eyeshot, so she stepped out into the clearing and looked up.

Nil stepped out beside her, his silvery gaze following hers up to the Tallneck. It was about to pass in front of them, and Nil stepped back involuntarily from the Tallneck’s huge foot. Aloy held her ground and laughed at him; she knew the Tallneck’s raised foot would pass her by. She had spent a silly amount of time just following the Tallnecks around to see whether their paces ever varied, and was amazed to discover that their tracks remained completely unchanged during every cycle.

Nil smirked at her laughter. “If you don’t want me to follow you, you can just say so. No need to get your metal friends to crush me underfoot.”

Aloy laughed again, then began running after the Tallneck. “Come on, we have to get to that peak! We can jump onto it before it goes past.” She pelted off in the direction she’d indicated.

They reached the top of the peak just as the Tallneck drew level with them, and Aloy didn’t hesitate; she leapt from the peak and landed in perfect balance on one of the struts jutting from the Tallneck’s neck, then hopped to the adjacent strut so Nil would have a place to land. She turned to look at him; if he didn’t hurry, he would miss his chance during this round. “Come on, Nil, quickly!”

Nil shook his head with disbelief, then bolted towards the Tallneck and grabbed the strut… just barely. One of his hands slipped, and Aloy’s heart skipped an anxious beat. Then he swung his arm up and caught hold of the strut, hoisting himself up until he was crouched facing her.

“You must have a death wish. It’s the only explanation for this ongoing insanity,” he deadpanned, and Aloy grinned at him. “Trust me, it’s worth it. Follow!” She leapt for the next handhold and nimbly clambered up to the Tallneck’s head, then walked over to its rightmost edge.

She waited impatiently for Nil to join her, then flung her arms out as he hefted himself onto the Tallneck’s head. “The best travelling viewpoint in the southern Sundom!” she announced.

Nil slowly padded over to Aloy’s side and followed her gaze out towards the horizon. Aloy watched his face eagerly as he looked at the view. She knew it wasn’t the best view in the Sundom, but the changing nature of the view was undeniably interesting. And actually, Aloy’s favourite part of climbing these Tallnecks was watching the sky. It was close to sunrise, and the inky shadows of night were starting to be chased away by the first hesitant rays of the sun, tinting the sparse clouds with pomegranate pink.

After a moment, Nil looked down at her with that enigmatic half-smile that made her heart thump. “I always forget how mercurial these lands are. This is an interesting reminder.” He looked down toward the ground, his eyes narrowed with concentration. “I bet I could spot any number of
Aloy elbowed him. “Leave it to you to see a beautiful view and think only of bandits,” she chided playfully.

He looked back at her, his eyebrow raised and a tiny smirk on his lips. “I can see beauty in any number of things. Not just in the bloody work of my hands, but also in the sparks of your felled machines. Among other things.” His eyes traced over her face carefully, and in the darkness his pupils were large, making his stare more intense than usual.

Aloy blushed, glad that he wouldn’t be able to detect it in the low light. She turned back out towards the view and tilted her face up to the sky. “It’s almost sunrise,” she murmured, and Nil mirrored her, his gaze on the sky.

They stood side by side as the Tallneck roamed in its infinite circle, admiring the sky from every angle. Occasionally their relaxed hands brushed together thanks to the Tallneck’s swaying stride, and Aloy felt a tingling thrill with every brief touch.

As they continued to stare into the sky together, Aloy felt that delicious tension rise anew between them. Her heart was pounding in her throat again, and her fingertips were tingling with nervousness. The whole situation was so painfully romantic that an intense anticipation bordering on terror was rising in her chest. She could see Nil’s profile from the corner of her eye, his gaze intense on the sky, and she wanted so badly to face him, to look into his strange silver eyes, to take that first small, monumental step towards fulfilling the aching want in her body.

She just wanted to kiss him. Why was this so hard?

Then Nil dropped his gaze and slowly turned his head towards her. His silver eyes were an urgent question inexorably pulling her attention, but she kept her cowardly eyes on the sky. She swallowed hard; nerves and desire were warring in her belly, making her feel slightly sick.

The Tallneck turned slowly and started walking north, giving Aloy a perfect view of the east. At that moment, the first rays of sun broke over the horizon, and blazing orange light washed over her face, making her narrow her eyes.

Then Nil’s left hand was on her arm. “Suntress,” he said, his voice low and insistent, and finally Aloy looked at him. Slowly he pulled her to face him and took a small step closer to her, his warm breath fanning her face. Then he reached up with his right hand and tucked a braid behind her ear, just the way he’d done before he’d told her that he liked her.

Aloy swallowed hard, her eyes locked on his, her heart now pounding so hard she was surprised he couldn’t hear it. He slid his fingers along the side of her neck and cupped her neck in his palm, and Aloy’s lips parted involuntarily at the intimacy of his touch. He was so close, close enough that she could feel the heat emanating from his bare chest, close enough that she had to tilt her head back to look at him.

He slid his hand around her neck to cradle the back of her head, and suddenly Aloy didn’t need any more prompting. She followed the cues her body was screaming and closed the infinitesimal gap between their faces, and brushed her lips gently against his.

Immediately Nil cradled the back of her head more firmly, pulling her closer to his body and kissing her more firmly. He tilted his head slightly, and the velvety softness of his lips gently coaxed hers open. Then he gently licked her bottom lip with the tip of his tongue.
Aloy gave a tiny gasp and her body arched gracefully towards his, her hands instinctively rising to press against the heat of his abdomen, the rest of her body following suit until she was pressed against him from breast to thigh. Nil growled against her ear, and the animalistic sound of hunger ripped through her, making her nipples ache and that strange, exquisite sensation of pleasure flare into life between her thighs.

His left hand slid from her arm to her bare waist. Carefully he fisted his right hand in her hair and gently tugged her head back, then skimmed his lips along her cheekbone to kiss her lips before slipping his tongue into her mouth.

Aloy eagerly yielded to the exploration of his hot tongue, then slid her own tongue against his. She was breathless, weightless with desire, and delighted to find that kissing was so natural. How was it that something so easy could feel so damn good?

When Nil gently pulled away to look at her, she arched towards him again, her hands sliding insistently down to his waist. “More,” she breathed.

Nil smiled slowly at her. “How could I refuse such a demand from a Stormbird?” he whispered, then claimed her lips again. He pulled her hips against his with the hand on her waist, and Aloy felt a shock of thrill at the firmness at his groin.

There was so much more to learn, to discover. And Aloy was ready.

******************************************************************************

Nil savoured the taste of winterfresh as he delved his tongue gently into his Suntress’s mouth. The yielding softness of her lips was achingly sweet, but the liquid sensuality of her body tore through him like an electric shock, leaving him edgy and charged with desire.

At first he hadn’t been certain if he should kiss her. The situation was definitely more appropriate than it had been before, when they’d been sizing up the Stalker. But Suntress had been staring so intently at the sky, refusing to meet his gaze, that he’d almost wondered whether she was angry again. But then he’d noticed the fluttering pulse at her neck, the way her fingers were clenching nervously, and he’d figured it out. She wanted him, but she was nervous.

How strange it was for Nil to be more knowledgeable about anything involving human connection!

When the first rays of the Sun had graced her face, lighting her hazel eyes and hair with the orange of a dancing flame, she was so fucking beautiful, he’d felt a longing ache in his chest so strong that there was no choice but to pull her close.

Now, as she arched against him begging for more, he felt a surge of pride that he’d never experienced with any other woman. He kissed Suntress with the utmost care, listening attentively for every tiny gasp and moan. But rather than collecting this information with bland curiosity as he’d done in the past, he absorbed the sounds of her pleasure greedily, his own lust amplifying with every sound she made.

His cock was throbbing with desire, and he hissed in a rough breath as she undulated against him, her groin sliding against his and causing an exquisite pleasure verging on torture. But this was a torture he would happily submit to.

He nipped Suntress’s bottom lip gently with his teeth. She whimpered and involuntarily clenched her fists, her nails biting into his hips. Nil gasped as the pain from her nails was followed immediately by a surprising shockwave of pleasure. He growled involuntarily, baring his teeth in a slight snarl.
Suntress leaned back, looking into his face with sudden anxiety. “I’m sorry. Are you hurt?” she asked, her voice husky with lust.

Nil shook his head emphatically. “No. I like it,” he replied, and Suntress’s answering smile was better than the dawn breaking. “Of course you do,” she teased, and Nil thought to himself that her low, breathy voice was his favourite sound in the world.

But right now, he didn’t want to talk. He wanted to taste. “Stop talking and just kiss me,” he said, and she grinned brilliantly.

But just as their lips were about to touch again, Nil heard a distant voice from the ground. “Hey. Who’s that up there?”

Suntress groaned in frustration as a second voice joined the first. “Hey, you! Throw down your shards or you’re dead!”

Nil couldn’t decide whether to be delighted or disgusted. This might be the only time he didn’t want to kill bandits. But alas, he was never one to ignore a call to arms.

And besides, those forbidden tomes had said something about anticipation heightening the pleasure…

He pulled Suntress towards him and kissed her firmly one more time, then broke away and strode towards the rappel point, his knife already in hand. “Duty and bloodlust are calling, Suntress. Are you ready?”

She ran a hand through her hair, then bolted past him and flung herself from the rappel point. “I’ve never been more ready!” she hollered.

Nil grinned. That's my woman, he thought smugly, then rappelled down after her.

Chapter End Notes


Your kudoses and comments on the last chapter gave me so much life. But also I was like "OMG DO THEY THINK I HAVE AN UPDATE SCHEDULE BECAUSE I DO NOT" bahahaha........ O_o

Seriously though, I'm posting chapters as I write them, and this week has been an excellent week for writing... but a terrible week for everything else - my sink is full of dishes, my cat's litter box is stinky, and my fiance must think I hate him because I've barely talked to him all week. BAHaha. Also... and this is the worst part... I have to work all weekend so I might be too tired to write. FUUUUUUUUUUUUU

All this to say: the next update after this will probably not be until Monday. SORRY GUYS!!! But don't leave me I love youuuuu XD
Nil and Aloy spent the next two days travelling northwest towards the coastline, hunting any machines and bandits that crossed their path. Aloy was intent now to get to Maker’s End, and she knew there was a settlement called Brightmarket along the coastline. She planned to resupply in the village, then cross the channel - either by boat or by swimming, Aloy had no preference - and then make their way north to Maker’s End.

They’d settled for the night at a campfire five kilometres from Brightmarket. Aloy would visit the village alone the next morning, and Nil would meet her on the coastline around midday.

The morning of her planned trip to Brightmarket, Aloy woke earlier than Nil for once. She sat up quietly, loathe to wake him; she didn’t think he slept very much. Every day that they’d been travelling together, she’d fallen asleep first and woken after him.

For a moment she fondly watched his sleeping face. He seemed to have fallen asleep sitting up; his back was propped against a boulder, his arms folded and his chin resting on his chest. In the early half-light of morning, Aloy admired his profile: the black slashes of his forbidding eyebrows, his sharp cheekbones and surprisingly long eyelashes, the slight pout of his lips in sleep.

But her early rising had also given her an opportunity she didn’t want to waste. Silently she stood, lifted her bow and spear onto her back, and left her beloved flask from Petra at his side so he’d know she would return soon. Then she silently slipped away from the campfire and into the jungle.

There was a medicinal herb Aloy wanted to collect, a herb that Rost had told her about when she was around thirteen years old. As she crept through the jungle now, she replayed her conversation with him in her head.

“Aloy, this herb is called mother’s bane. You must learn to recognize it. Examine the leaves; smell them. This is a dangerous herb. It interferes with a woman’s time of the moon. As long as this poison is in a woman’s blood, it makes it impossible for her to have children.”

Thirteen-year-old Aloy had scoffed. “Who cares? I’m never going to have children anyway.”

Rost had stood straight and looked down at her forbiddingly. “Aloy, listen and pay attention. When you win the Proving and join the tribe, you will want to contribute to village life. You might tire of being a brave, and you might want to change certain things about the Nora’s way of life.” Rost had given her a small resigned smile; he had long since accepted his foster daughter’s disagreements with him about Nora law. “A woman gains influence in the tribe by having children. The more
children you have, the more influence you gain over tribal matters. This is the Nora way.”

“That’s so stupid!” Aloy had interrupted. “Why would having children make you a better leader? And what if you don’t want children?”

“Aloy, listen to me,” Rost had said, his gentle voice firm and unshakeable. “This is the way of things. This herb, this mother’s bane, would diminish your influence and your ability to make the changes you wish for. I want you to recognize this poison, so you know never to take it.”

Now, Aloy bit her lip as she kept her eyes peeled for the telltale pointed leaves and purple stems of mother’s bane. She knew Rost wouldn’t have approved of this, but Aloy didn’t care this time. She needed the freedom to travel unhindered across the world, to seek her answers and help people.

And now that she had met Nil, and their passion was clearly leading in a certain direction, Aloy needed the assurance that she wouldn’t fall pregnant. To be sure, Aloy had nothing against kids per se; being a mother was a perfect role for some. But it was absolutely not for Aloy, and she wasn’t sure it ever would be.

Eventually she spotted a small patch of mother’s bane. She collected a neat bundle of the herb, including the stems and roots, and carefully wrapped them in wax-cloth before tucking them into one of her pouches. She knew what the herb was for, but she didn’t know how to use it. One of her errands in Brightmarket would be to visit a healer and find out.

When she returned to the campfire, Nil was awake and carefully sharpening his knife with a small whetstone that he carried in one of his pouches. He greeted her with his customary half-smile. “Suntress. You’re up early. Excited to go listen to the idle nattering of the little people?”

Aloy shook her head, exasperated. He was such a noble. “Okay, I get it, you hate everyone.”

“Except you,” Nil interrupted lazily, as he peered at the edge of his knife and tested it with his thumb.

Aloy’s ears warmed with pleasure, but she continued as though he hadn’t spoken. “I, on the other hand, find people interesting.” She sat cross-legged and pulled some maize-bread from her pouch. “Have you eaten?”

Nil shook his head, and Aloy passed him the wax-cloth of maize-bread. They munched quietly for a moment. Then Aloy swallowed her bite of maize-bread and said, “Nil, have you heard of mother’s bane?”

Oops. As soon as she said it, she almost wanted to take it back. She had asked out of curiosity about the Carja’s views on preventing pregnancies, but she immediately realized that Nil’s sharp mind might put two and two together. And although Aloy was certain what she wanted from Nil, she wondered whether it was presumptuous to start taking mother’s bane before she’d even seen… before they’d even…

Aloy cleared her throat, her cheeks feeling embarrassingly warm, but Nil looked at her like she’d asked something completely innocuous. “Mother’s bane. No. Is that a plant?”

Aloy nodded, feeling a bit shy. “It’s a medicinal plant. It, uh… well, Rost always said it was a poison. But it sounds useful to me. It’s said to stop women from getting pregnant.”

Nil’s face cleared with comprehension, and he smiled at her in high humour. “Mother’s bane? Of course the Nora would call it that. We call it maiden’s jape.”
Maiden’s jape? Aloy stared at him for a moment, then gave a short bark of laughter as she understood. “That’s so… cheeky,” she replied with a smile.

Nil smirked, then picked up his whetstone again and slid it smoothly along his knife. “Yes, it is. A very playful name.”

Aloy watched him sharpen his knife. The smooth, sure motions of his hand stroking the stone along the knife made her imagine his hands stroking other more pleasurable things. She shook her head slightly, feeling emboldened by his casual response. “Do you know how it’s prepared?” she asked.

Nil lifted his eyes to hers and gave her a slow, feral smile. “I don’t. But I find myself enjoying the line of questioning that you’re following here.”

Aloy smiled at his tone and lowered her eyes coyly to fiddle idly with her pouches for a moment. But then she thought, why be coy? Nil was obviously receptive. And the look on his face was enough to make her want to discard her clothes right here and now.

So she lifted her eyes proudly and met his bold gaze. “I’m going to start taking it. A healer at Brightmarket can show me how it’s used. Then I don’t have to worry about… stuff.”

“How?” Nil repeated, that hot feral smile still on his face. He put his whetstone away and slowly rose to his feet, then stepped over to her. “What kind of stuff did you have in mind?”

Aloy’s lips parted slightly as he crouched in front of her. His movements were predatory, powerful but controlled, and the heat in his eyes was stoking an answering warmth in her core. He was so close that she had to lean back on her hands to look at him.

“I want you,” she blurted out bluntly. Hearing the words on her own lips made her realize how true they were. Her skin was itching to be caressed by his hands, and her back was arching unconsciously to press her breasts closer to him. He smiled more widely still at her words, but she put a warning hand on his chest to get his attention. “But I don’t want to get pregnant. So I’m taking the mother’s bane.”

Nil pushed his chest against her resisting hand, then swiftly wrapped one strong arm around her waist and lifted her to her feet. “Such a level-headed woman, even with your mind filled with lust and your body blooming with it. How did I get so lucky?” Nil purred.

Aloy wasn’t sure how to answer, so she didn’t bother. Eagerly she pressed herself against him and tilted her face back, and Nil took his cue immediately. He cupped her neck with his hand, kissing her gently at first until she whimpered with need, then sliding his tongue firmly to tangle with hers.

Nil broke the kiss just as Aloy was getting really excited. He stepped away from her and she stared at him, panting, her whole body feeling electric with desire.

Nil’s gaze skimmed over her and he smiled slowly with satisfaction. Then he bent and picked up his weapons, slinging the bow over his back. He turned to face her, and she could swear his silver eyes were laughing silently at her. “Ready, Suntress? You have a lot of interesting conversations waiting for you in Brightmarket.”

Cheeky, insufferable slag, Aloy thought with a combination of amusement and lust-fueled irritation. He was purposely throwing her own words back in her face. She wouldn’t give him the satisfaction of knowing his taunts were effective. “That’s right, I do,” she replied primly, tossing her hair back. “I’ll meet you on the coast.” Without another word, she ran off towards Brightmarket, leaving Nil’s darkly amused smirk behind.
Nil crouched by the coastline and splashed a handful of water on his face. The cool water was a necessary refreshment; even with the breeze coming off of the channel, it was roasting hot down by the coast thanks to the lack of trees in the area.

As Nil waited, he reflected on Suntress. It was fascinating to see that withholding pleasure was heightening her desire so effectively. And even more fascinating to realize that the more frustrated Suntress became, the more he wanted her in return.

He stood and stretched, then gazed out across the channel towards Kestrel’s Perch. It would be interesting to cross the channel; he had actually never traveled that far west. He wondered if that would surprise her.

Nil had been honest when he'd told Suntress he'd fought both for and against the Carja, but he wasn't sure if she knew he meant within the same war. He'd fought under the 13th Sun-King’s banner until Avad had killed him, then Nil had peaceably given himself up to Avad. If he'd fought under Jiran prior to Jiran’s defeat, did that make him a Carja or Shadow Carja? If the definition of a Shadow Carja was one who had fled to Sunfall, had Nil ever really been one?

Not that he cared, really. It was a purely academic argument. All that mattered was that he'd gotten his share of bloodshed.

Just then, Suntress showed up, a frown on her face. “There's a girl missing from the village,” she told him. “I have to find her. My Focus showed that she's taken a boat to that island.” Suntress pointed to a smallish island in the middle of the channel; the island was made up of tall sharp hills and mesas, which meant it likely had a valley on the far side that they couldn't see.

Nil stood. “All right, let's go,” he said.

Suntress looked at him with surprise. “You want to come? You might have to talk to another person who isn't me,” she joked.

Nil shrugged easily. He'd meant it when he'd said he'd follow her anywhere. “I'm sure that won't be necessary. I'll let you do the talking.”

Suntress snorted. “Of course. Why would I expect anything else?” Without further delay she waded into the channel and began swimming towards the island in smooth strokes, and Nil followed her without hesitation.

Ten metres out from the edge of the island, Suntress suddenly stopped swimming and stilled, treading as quietly as possible, her face alert and serious.

Nil stopped and treaded too. She had her hunter’s face on. “What do you see?” he asked in a low voice.

“Snapmaws,” she murmured. “Two… no, three of them.” She tapped her Focus off and sighed. “Let's backtrack a bit, get onto the coast and sneak up on them. This might be a messy one,” she warned him.

“I'll follow your lead. The glory will be yours… or the defeat, if we're unlucky.” His cheeky grin clearly indicated that he didn't expect defeat by any stretch of the imagination.

Suntress smirked at him. “Okay, Carja, that's a challenge if ever I heard one.” Silently they swam to the coastline and lifted themselves from the water. Suntress absently lifted her arms to smoothe the
water from her hair, and Nil couldn’t help but appreciate the beads of water trickling over her taut midriff.

They crept around the coastline, but Nil could only spot two of the Snapmaws. Then, as they rounded the edge of a mesa that led along a path into a small valley, Suntress suddenly hissed.

“There’s the boat. And… fire and spit.”

There was the third Snapmaw, its glowing red eyes focused on a teenaged girl cowering on a rock outcropping.

Suntress clicked her tongue in frustration, then dug into her quiver and thrust a handful of arrows at him. “Here. Fire arrows. Shoot the blaze canisters on those two, then just… keep them busy. I’ll take care of that one.” She jerked her head towards the girl and the enraged Snapmaw. “I’ll come help you when that one is done.” She didn’t wait for his reply before slipping down the pathway towards the girl.

Nil twisted his lips in annoyance. Machine hunting. So little gain for so much aggravation. But it wasn’t lost on him that Suntress had trusted him with this task, despite knowing that he wasn’t the best machine hunter in the Sundom.

It was time to prove his worth.

So he followed her instructions, hitting the blaze canisters deftly (and imagining that each canister was a bandit’s head, to make the task more fun). Then he swiftly shot arrow after arrow at the beasts, aiming for their vulnerable underbellies.

Then one of the Snapmaws suddenly launched itself at him, and he had to do a desperate roll to avoid it. He felt a spike of annoyance as he rolled to his feet, and just managed to hit the lunging Snapmaw with another arrow before the second one attacked. Human targets were never this fast. When he was hunting humans, Nil was the fast one.

He continued a series of exhausting dodges interspersed with rapid-fire and slightly desperate arrow shots. Then, just as one of the Snapmaws flung itself at him again, its body was suddenly overtaken by sparks and it slammed to the ground, sliding to his feet in a pitiful pile of shards and wire.

Suntress skidded into place beside him, simultaneously storing her bow and pulling her spear from her back. Then she leapt into the air and landed on the second Snapmaw’s back, and destroyed it with a forceful thrust of her spear into its metal neck.

She stood, panting, and tossed her hair back with an impatient shake of her head, and Nil had to forcibly remind himself that this was not an appropriate time to grab her, wrap those strong legs around his waist-

She stepped off the Snapmaw and jerked her head towards the teenage girl, and Nil nodded reluctantly. They walked back to where she stood on her rock, still looking scared. Nil hung back a good six or seven paces while Suntress approached the girl.

“Elida?” Suntress said gently, and the girl nodded.

“Who are you?” she asked. “How did you learn to fight like that? What are you even doing here?”

Suntress pursed her lips. “Maybe you can start by answering a few of my questions.” Nil waited patiently while Suntress spoke to the girl, then examined the impromptu campsite. He amused himself by reading every fleeting emotion on Suntress’s face: curiosity, annoyance, concern. He
ignored the wary looks that the girl was throwing his way.

Finally Suntress returned to the girl, a stern frown on her face. “Elida, if you came here to be alone, why are there two bedrolls? And don’t lie to me this time.”

The girl bit her lip, then wailed, “By the Sun, I don’t know where he is!”

Nil looked off towards Kestrel’s Perch, bored. Some kind of relationship thing, he thought to himself disinterestedly.

Suntress frowned more deeply. “Who?”

“Astral!” the girl cried. “He lights a fire signal when it’s safe to meet him, but he’s not here!”

Suntress held up a hand in confusion. “Who is Astral?”

“A friend I’ve known since childhood. He’s a soldier with the Carja in shadow. But the last few months we’d meet here and… everything was different. We’d talk for hours. I couldn’t wait to see him again. It’s like… I’m dead and only come alive when I’m here with him. Do you know what that’s like?”

“Yes,” Nil said suddenly, his attention actually captured for once. What she described was how he was around Suntress. He’d felt nothing before her, unless he was spilling blood. Suntress brought him to life in ways he hadn’t thought possible. Interesting that these feelings he had were similar to those of other people. Maybe this made him… normal in some small way? That was a strange thought.

The noble girl looked at him in surprise, and Suntress did as well, her cheeks flushing pink. Nil tilted his head at Suntress quizzically. It’s not like his feelings for her were a surprise. Flustered, she turned back to the noble girl. “Enough of this. You have to go back. Your father is worried about you,” she insisted.

The girl wrung her hands in distress, looking at Suntress pleadingly. “Please, if you came all this way, will you look for Astral? He lit the fire on that island not far from here. If I go… he could be killed. We would break the cease-fire. But a Nora wouldn’t… I- I didn’t mean for any of this to happen, I’m so sorry!”

Suntress took the younger girl’s arm and gently pushed her back towards her boat. “I’ll find him if I can, as long as you go home to your father.”

Once the girl was gone, Suntress turned to Nil and huffed out a weary breath. “Looks like I’m going for another swim. Her lover is usually stationed at that fortress there, Kestrel’s Perch.”

Nil nodded and stepped towards the water, ready to follow her lead, but she stopped him with a hand on his chest. “Wait. I’m going alone. You wait here,” she said.

Nil frowned. “Why?” he asked. Had he disappointed her with his lack of Snapmaw kills?

But Suntress didn’t look disappointed; she looked worried. “What if the Shadow Carja recognize you? They might think you’re a traitor. Elida said it could break the cease-fire.”

Nil raised an eyebrow and smirked confidently. “They can’t break a cease-fire if they’re dead,” he quipped, but followed her wishes and subsided. “I’ll wait on top of the mesa. Shoot a fire arrow over the parapet if you need a hand.”
It was Suntress’s turn to smile cockily. “You’d better settle in and get comfy, because that's not going to happen.” She threw him a brief wave, then eased into the water and swam away.

Nil turned and climbed to the top of the mesa, reaching the top just in time to spot Suntress’s sleek form slip out of the water and up towards the fortress. He settled into a relaxed crouch and waited.

Some time later, when the sun’s position in the sky marked mid-afternoon, he spotted her distinctive red hair as she clambered onto the edge of a parapet and rapelled down. But she was alone. *The girl’s lover is probably dead*, Nil thought idly. That was the only way the formidable Suntress would have left him behind.

Then Nil narrowed his eyes slightly; Suntress was moving a bit more slowly than usual, her left arm curled slightly towards her side as she walked down to the mouth of the channel. Was she hurt?

Nil stood quickly, his eyes following her path. When she dove into the water and began swimming back to the island with easy, unhesitant strokes, Nil relaxed slightly. He climbed down the mesa to meet her at the shore.

She winced as she stepped out of the water, bracing her left arm against her side. “Atral’s dead,” she gritted.

Nil didn’t care. “Are you injured?” Gingerly he touched her left arm and peered at her bare midriff.

She lifted her arm to reveal the beginnings of what would soon be a large bruise just below her ribs. “Got slammed with the butt end of a Firespitter,” she admitted. Then she managed to give him a smirk. “Those Shadow Carja types really pack some rage behind their strikes, don’t they?”

“They’re desperate. Their blood rage borders on hysteria,” Nil replied absently as he skimmed his fingers tenderly over the blooming bruise. “It’s distasteful, really. There’s no sense of control.” He shook his head disparagingly, then lifted his eyes to her face. “Suntress, you should rest.”

She smiled slightly at him. “Trust you to think there’s a good and bad kind of bloodlust.” Then she shook her head and started towards the path that led to the Sundom side of the island. “Can’t rest yet. I have to tell Elida what happened.”

Nil took hold of her arm. “Stop for a moment. Catch your breath,” he warned.

She frowned and gently pulled her arm from his grip. “Nil, don’t coddle me. I know my limits. I can take care of myself.” She jogged off down the path and called over her shoulder, “I’ll be back soon.”

Nil clenched his jaw, then slowly climbed back up to the top of the mesa. He’d never realized that she could be so stubborn. But then, this was the first time he’d disagreed with her about anything.

He pulled out his flask of Scrappersap and took a large gulp to try and settle the roiling of his gut. He wasn’t sure why he felt nauseous suddenly; he hadn’t eaten since that morning. Maybe that was why. He removed his headdress - it was hot on the top of this mesa - then chewed slowly on a strip of boar meat as he settled down to wait.

It was late afternoon by the time Nil heard the distinctive soft scrabbling of someone climbing up the mesa. When Suntress appeared, her face looked troubled but no longer in pain, though she winced slightly as she sat crosslegged across from him on the grass.

His eyes automatically went to her midriff. The skin around the impact site was no longer acutely red from the strike, but the bruise was starting to purple already.
Suntress followed his gaze. “I had a healer look at it. Just a normal bruise,” she reassured him, but she leaned back on her hands anyway so he could see it more clearly. Immediately he knelt beside her and traced the bruise delicately with his fingers, vaguely noticing her sharp little intake of breath at his touch. The skin didn't feel hot. Or cold. Not that Nil would have known what that meant anyway.

Without thinking about it, Nil bent over her and placed a gentle kiss on the centre of the developing bruise, to the left of her navel, and Suntress gasped, the muscles of her toned midriff going rigid under his fingers.

He lifted his eyes to her face, wondering if he'd hurt her... and was surprised, and pleased, to see her looking at him with distinct hunger. “What was that for?” she asked breathlessly.

Nil hesitated. He actually wasn't sure why he'd kissed her injury; it had been an instinctive gesture. Had he seen someone do that before? He wasn't sure. Something vague tugged at his memory, but it slipped away before he could grasp it.

Finally he shrugged. “I just felt like tasting your skin. It could encourage you to dodge faster next time,” he teased.

Suntress smirked as she stretched her legs out in front of her on the grass. “Yeah right. I'll be sure to add that to my training regime.” She plucked a blade of grass and flicked it away idly, then shot him a sly look.

Nil knew that look on her face. It screamed invitation. He leaned in towards her, and she tilted her face back, her lips already slightly parted in anticipation of his kiss.

But now Nil had other plans. Her mild but unexpected injury had roused a protective feeling in his chest, and for some reason he thought the feeling could be assuaged with a taste of her budding sexuality. So instead of kissing her, he purred against her ear: “I need a closer look at that bruise.”

Her tiny gasp was more pleasing to his ears than any music he'd ever heard. “Okay,” she whispered. With her whispered permission, Nil slid the palm of his right hand gently over her bruise and slowly upwards.

Suntress curved into his touch and tilted her head back, presenting the smooth pale skin of her neck, and Nil happily took advantage, brushing his lips against the silk-smooth spot where her ear met her jaw and then down along her neck. He inhaled gently, savouring the scent of her skin. She smelled of mint, a hint of blood, and something warm and sweet that was uniquely her.

He flicked his tongue lightly over the tendon in her neck, tasting the salt of her sweat, then gave the spot a tiny nip of his teeth. “Nil,” she whimpered, arching her back more insistently as the thumb of his right hand brushed along her ribs, just beneath the edge of her Carja blouse and vest.

He took her whimper as the plea that it was and deftly unbuckled the crossed leather straps that held her vest together. Eagerly she slid the vest off, leaving her breasts covered only by her cropped silk blouse.

“Lie back. Let me see this bruise,” he said. Obediently Suntress reclined until she was propped up on her elbows, exposing the smooth expanse of her belly to his hungry gaze. Greedily he leaned over and kissed her bruise again, tiny gentle kisses that moved up towards her ribs.

“Goddess,” she swore softly, and Nil smirked at the consummately Nora curseword.

He sat back on his heels. “This is a gorgeous bruise,” he told her matter-of-factly, as he slid his
thumb along the lower edge of her blouse, just below her left breast. “It’s almost as good as a scar.”

Then he slipped his thumb under the edge of her blouse, enjoying the infinite softness of her skin just below her nipple. “A different kind of proof of your victory over death,” Nil mused.

Suntress’s eyelids fluttered shut and she bit her lip, and Nil smiled with satisfaction at her response to his touch, like a flower blooming at dawn. He slipped his hand higher under her blouse, brushing over her pearled nipple with his thumb. “Unfortunately bruises fade, but you’ll always remember the satisfaction you felt. The knowledge that clearly you were better.”

“Nil,” Suntress blurted, “Shut up. Just shut up and-” she interrupted herself with a sudden cry of pleasure as Nil abruptly pushed her blouse up over her breasts and laved her left breast with his tongue.

_Sweat and sweetness._ That was what Suntress tasted of, as he greedily took her nipple in his mouth and suckled gently. She jerked against his lips as he swirled his tongue around the small pink peak of her breast.

Then Nil reluctantly released her nipple and sat back on his heels again. “Lift your arms,” he commanded, and Suntress sat up and obeyed eagerly. Tenderly Nil slid the blouse up and over her head. Once clear of the blouse, Suntress’s red hair tumbled in a tangle of tresses and braids around her face, and she swept them back impatiently with one arm. Her hazel eyes were blazing with heat and fixed on his face, her lips parted as her delicious tongue flicked out to wet them.

Nil took a moment to just _stare_ at her: half-naked, sitting up proudly with those exquisite breasts on display, her face hungry and confident. Even her bruise was arousing. He’d felt bothered by her injury before, but now he saw it as a sign of her strength, her superiority over her enemies, and looking at it made his cock throb with delicious anticipation.

But he could hold out until the maiden’s jape was effective. Contraception was something he’d never thought much about; the courtesans all had to take maiden’s jape unless they were bought by a master who wanted children, so Nil had never had to worry about it, not that he ever came with any of them anyway. But he admired Suntress for thinking of it. In the meantime, he was happy to focus on her pleasure, and the feeling of satisfaction and power that it brought him.

“Oh what?” Suntress demanded impatiently, and Nil smiled at her lust. “Lie down. All the way down.”

Suntress bit her lip nervously, but followed his instruction. As soon as her back was touching the ground, he leaned over her again, his lips brushing ever-so-gently against her previously neglected right nipple, while the thumb of his right hand kept her left nipple company.

Suntress hooked her hand around his neck, her fingers gripping his hair. She whimpered in frustration and arched her back against his mouth. “More;” she moaned, and Nil smiled against her skin. He _loved_ hearing that word from her honeyed lips. To reward her, he pinched her left nipple and suckled firmly at her right.

She cried out involuntarily, and Nil actually laughed. “Your voice will echo across the channel if you’re not careful,” he warned, and through her pleasure Suntress gave a breathless laugh as well. “Sorry,” she gasped. “I didn’t expect… um…” She trailed off distractedly.

The source of her distraction was Nil’s clever right hand. His fingers had left her breast to slide along the inside of her thigh, enjoying the feel of her soft skin in the gaps between the leather plates of her armoured Carja leggings. Suntress was panting, her breaths coming shorter and sharper as his hand
neared the apex of her thighs.

He looked down at her face before going further. Her cheeks and lips were flushed with arousal, he eyelids at half-mast, making her look intoxicated with pleasure. She was fucking gorgeous.

“Should I go on?” Nil murmured, his voice a deep growl.

Suntress looked him full in the face, her eyes burning with desire. “Yes,” she said firmly. So Nil pressed the heel of his hand gently against the sweet centre of her thighs.

Suntress gasped. She reached up to grip a handful of his vest in her fist, then undulated her hips against his hand in such a smooth, sexual motion that the slow burn of arousal in his own body threatened to burst. He slid his hand up slightly until the flat of his fingers were pressing against her groin, then gently pressed and rubbed, using the friction of her leggings to stimulate the bud of pleasure between her legs.

Suntress immediately matched the rhythm of his hand with her hips, and Nil swallowed hard in an attempt to control his raging lust as he watched her. Her head was turned to the side, exposing the smooth column of her neck. Her nipples were hard pink pearls begging to be touched. He revelled in the heat of her centre, her sweet pussy, against his fingers.

He listened attentively as her breathing became jagged, then she whimpered his name. “Nil! I feel- it feels like… I-”

She was ready. Nil increased the pressure of his fingers slightly, and Suntress arched suddenly with a great gasp. Nil covered her mouth with a kiss, swallowing her cry of pleasure as her climax crested and broke.

She grabbed the back of his neck and plunged her tongue into his mouth, and he growled with a mixture of satisfaction and pain as her nails bit into his neck. She shuddered, her hips bucking fitfully against his hand, and Nil gently slid his hand up to caress her breast until the tension of orgasm left her body.

Once she had quieted, Nil stroked his tongue along hers one last time, then gently broke the kiss and sat back to admire her. Her eyes were closed and a tiny smile curled her lips. Her body was as limp and languid as a silk scarf, and her skin glowed in the warm orange light of early evening.

He’d never seen anything more appealing in his life. He felt like there was a lump in his throat as he sat staring at her, and he swallowed hard to clear it.

“There. Don’t you feel better now?” Nil drawled. He thought he knew the word that matched the feeling unfurling in his chest, but he couldn’t be certain. So he resorted to the comfort of sarcasm. “They say that pleasure can wipe away pain. That’s why I say the best cure for a fresh wound is a fresh kill. The satisfaction takes away the sting.”

Suntress turned her head to look at him, then started laughing. Soon she was laughing so hard it echoed across the channel, and he was reminded forcibly of the Stormbird, trebling the pressure of emotion in his chest.

Still laughing, she sat up on her knees then straddled his lap, startling him with her closeness. She wrapped her arms around his neck, and he savoured the warmth of her bare chest against his.

“You’re disgusting. You know that?” she said. Then she kissed him passionately.

Nil wrapped his arms around her waist and kissed her back enthusiastically. She could call him disgusting; he didn’t mind.
As long as she wanted him around.

Chapter End Notes

Three things, again:

1. My intention was to put some more Nil backstory in here, but I got derailed by smut instead. But that’s okay, backstory will appear later! Also SMUT IS KING.
2. Did I mention Nil is a little bit Dom in the sexy times arena? Aloy’s the badass boss on the streets, but Nil’s the boss in the sheets (or out in the wild)... For now, at least.
3. Um yes I needed to explicitly address contraception because I’m assuming condoms don’t exist in the HZD world and HELL no ain’t Aloy having no baby. There’s no sexy way of addressing STIs so let’s just pretend those don’t exist… bahahaha
Aloy and Nil pressed on, spending the next week travelling across the channel and then north through Shadow Carja territory. While travelling through the desert, they stopped only twice: once for Aloy to override a Tallneck, and once to purchase a light tent and two bedrolls from a merchant, as Olin had told her that Maker’s End was frosted with snow at the best of times.

On their sixth day of travel, Nil pointed north and west of where they were headed. “Sunfall is that way. I’m assuming you want to give it a wide berth?”

Aloy opened her mouth to agree, but before she could speak, a deep voice sounded in her ear. “Your... companion is right. I would advise you to avoid Sunfall. If the Eclipse agents at the palace recognize you, you will be killed.”

Aloy whipped around instinctively, even though she knew the mysterious voice was coming through her Focus. “You!” she hissed. “Finally decided to speak up again, have you?”

The voice’s reply dripped with disapproval. “You have finally decided to pursue important matters. Do not go to Sunfall.”

Aloy sneered. “I know that. I’m not an idiot.”

“I’m not entirely certain of that, given your companion was once a Shadow Carja. I’ve left some useful equipment for you just outside the ruins. Your Focus will show the location.”

Aloy frowned with surprise. How did her mysterious correspondent recognize Nil? She turned to look at him and found him gazing at her quizzically.

She pointed vaguely at her Focus. “That not-so-helpful mystery man again,” she explained. She’d told Nil about the mystery caller helping her to disable the Eclipse agents’ Focuses when she’d gone searching for Olin.

She narrowed her eyes at Nil. “Nil, he knew you were Shadow Carja. How would he know that? What exactly did you do when you were fighting for them?”

Nil shrugged and followed Aloy’s lead as she continued walking. “I fought under the Mad Sun-King’s banner before Avad led a rebellion against him. Remember, Suntress, there was no Shadow Carja before Avad defeated the Mad Sun-King. There was only the Carja, with a group of rebels led by Avad.”

That’s true, Aloy admitted to herself. “But why does everyone seem to recognize you?” she
persisted.

Nil twisted his lips in thought. “I suppose it’s because I was a Champion of the Sun Ring in the earlier days of the Mad Sun-King’s madness.”

Goosebumps rippled over Aloy’s arms. “A Champion? Like Helis?”

Nil waved his hand dismissively. “No, no. Helis focused on killing the weak. I only killed the strong.” He smiled charmingly at her, apparently oblivious to her growing discomfort. “You know me, I only enjoy it if there’s a challenge.”

Aloy stopped and grabbed Nil’s arm. “Nil, stop with the prevaricating. Tell me straight. What did you do in the Sun Ring?”

Nil blinked at her benignly. “I fought in hand-to-hand combat matches with armed slaves. The Mad Sun-King considered the deaths a better sacrifice if they were hard-won. This was before he introduced machines into the Ring, you see. I went up against Carja traitors, Oseram, Banuk, even a few Tenakth.” He tilted his head apologetically. “Also a few Nora Braves, I’m afraid. Sometimes they would send in five, six at a time against me. I once defeated a Tenakth and three Oseram Freebooters together, all heavily armed.” He looked off into the distance and smiled reminiscently. “It was glorious.”

Aloy released his arm and took an unconscious step away from him. Nausea was beginning to churn in her belly. “You fought against helpless slaves?” If he was standing here, that meant he had killed everyone he’d gone up against. *He killed slaves, innocent people abducted from their homes or during their travels... maybe dozens of them.*

Nil looked at her in surprise. “They weren’t helpless. They were all warriors, and as well-armed as I. I wouldn’t have fought them otherwise.” He looked closely at her, as though she was misunderstanding something he was saying. “The Tenakth believe that a victorious warrior absorbs the strength of his enemies. Weak enemies aren’t worth bothering with.”

Aloy rubbed her face, disgust and confusion warring in her chest. She wasn’t sure what to say. Just when she thought she understood him, something like this came out, and she was discombobulated again.

“Nil…” Aloy fought to find something to say. “Don’t you regret what you did? Can’t you see that it was wrong? Even if they were warriors, they were under duress. They had no choice but to fight you. And even if they’d beaten you-” She ignored his snort of disbelief - “…they would have been forced to fight again and again until they died. That’s horrendous.”

She paused and stared into his silver eyes that usually warmed her, but today were chilling her to the bone. “That’s... a war crime. That’s why you gave yourself up to Avad, isn’t it?”

Nil nodded. “Yes. That’s what I’m trying to tell you.”

Aloy swallowed, a small hint of relief loosening the tension in her chest. “So you realized what you did was wrong?”

Nil shrugged. “No.”

Aloy rubbed her face again and gave a tiny laugh. *This is unbelievable. What is wrong with him?* she wondered incredulously. “Nil, I don’t understand. Why…” She trailed off and stared up at him. What was going on behind those beautiful silver eyes?
Nil sighed, as though he was being forced to tell a boring story. “Avad was calling for the Mad Sun-King’s men to atone for their crimes. His notion of prison offered a fresh start. The war had been going on so long, it had become… monotonous. And rife with petty drama. It was no longer just about the killing. You could say I wanted to… start over. Start fresh, take no sides.” He gave her a small half-smile. “And after Sunstone Rock, I travelled mostly alone. It was very peaceful. I only travelled with my former partner because his goals aligned with mine.”

Aloy continued to stare at him, her mind churning with what he was telling her. Everything he was saying was so utterly contrary to Aloy’s way of thinking, but then, Nil was completely different from anyone she’d ever met.

“So you didn’t care either way whether Avad or Jiran won the war?” she asked. That seemed to be what he was driving at, but she wanted to be sure.

Nil nodded confirmation. “Either side could have won. It was all the same to me. I just wanted my fill of bloodshed. And when the opportunities for bloodshed dried up, well… Two years at Sunstone Rock were a small price to pay for freedom.”

“Why bandits?” Aloy asked suddenly. It sounded like he had had no qualms about killing anyone during the war. What had changed? “Why limit yourself to bandits, if you love killing so much?” She knew her voice was hard and disparaging, but she couldn’t help it.

“Janeva suggested it,” Nil replied, to Aloy’s surprise. “He said it was the only way for me to stay out of prison. He spent a lot of time talking while I was there. It was… strange.” Nil frowned pensively. “Janeva once said I couldn’t see the difference between black or white, that all I saw was red. It’s hard to know what he meant, but it felt right at the time.”

Nil’s eerie silver eyes traced over Aloy’s face, and he reached forward and gently took hold of a strand of her flame-red hair, running it through his fingers before flicking it over her shoulder. “It feels even more true now.”

Aloy bit her lip, torn between the different sides of Nil that were somehow knitted into one whole but damaged personality. On the one hand he was horrific: a dangerous killer with no sense of right or wrong, with the blood of innocents on his hands. On the other hand, he was tender, affectionate, devoted to her. And above it all, he was intelligent, observant, a skilled combatant who was able to take orders and follow them masterfully. She could see how he would be an asset in a war.

But now, Aloy fully understood what she was agreeing to by having Nil by her side. She was taking responsibility for his actions. With no moral compass of his own, Aloy was his conscience.

She wondered if it was too dangerous or heavy a burden to bear.

Nil, in that surprisingly perceptive way of his, seemed to understand what she was thinking. “I know that look, Suntress. I’m used to it. Are you going to send me away?” His words were blunt and matter-of-fact, but his shoulders were drooping slightly, giving him a faintly dejected air.

Despite herself, and despite everything he’d told her, Aloy felt a pang of sympathy for him. He’d once said he was never lonely when there was killing to be had, but now that they’d been travelling together for weeks, she wondered if that was true anymore.

Finally she looked up at him, her arms folded. “No. Not right now. Nil… I need to think, but… let’s press on for now.”

The corners of Nil’s eyes crinkled in a smile. “Lead the way.”
Late afternoon the next day, they reached the edges of Maker’s End. Aloy had changed into her Oseram sparkworker clothing to deal with a convoy of Shellwalkers, and was now thankful for the extra warmth of sleeves and trousers against the bite of cold.

Aloy’s roiling thoughts had moved away from Nil and back to her task, and she felt energized, impatient for answers. She turned to Nil, glad she had someone to talk about this with. “Olin said he found an image of the woman I resemble on an ancient device,” she said. “If she’s my mother, why would there be traces of her all the way out here, so far from Nora land?”

Nil shrugged. “You said yourself, it’s possible that she’s not your mother. But it is strange that she looks so much like you.”

Aloy nodded, a pensive frown on her face. “I don’t get it. Who is she?”

“Her name is Elisabet Sobeck.” The mysterious voice was back, intruding on her thoughts, but welcomely this time.

Aloy raised her eyebrows with surprise and pointed to her Focus so Nil would know who she was talking to. “Well, go on. What do you know about her?”

“Stay on your present course, and before long, you’ll know her as well as I do. Maybe better. But be wary. Maker’s End is crawling with Eclipse troops.” Then the voice was gone again.

Aloy pursed her lips with annoyance. Mystery Man was more frustratingly evasive than Blameless Marad. She looked up at Nil. “He says her name is Elisabet Sobeck. What kind of name is that?” she wondered.

Nil shook his head. “Never heard the like during my travels.”

They approached the ruins at Maker’s End cautiously. Aloy found the Mystery Man’s equipment stash - right where he’d said it would be - and her Focus picked out a handful of Eclipse guards at the edge of the ruins. She and Nil seamlessly slid into bandit-hunting mode, dealing with the guards quickly and quietly.

She then stood and looked down at Nil. “Stay here and set up camp. I’ll go in alone.” This was something Aloy had always intended to do alone, but after her earlier conversation with Nil, she felt strongly that she needed some time away from him.

He stood slowly and looked down at her, his silver eyes glowing in the fading light of day. She tensed, wondering if he was going to argue. But he only reached forward hesitantly and tucked a braid behind her ear. “Make them bleed, Suntress. But preserve your own blood.”

Despite her ongoing ambivalence about what he’d told her the previous day, Aloy’s nerves sang in response to his touch. She could read between the lines of his words: Be careful. She didn’t resist as he stepped close to her and tilted her chin back with two gentle fingers. And she accepted the warmth of his body as he kissed her, then nipped her bottom lip gently before pulling away.

Aloy swallowed hard, then nodded briefly to Nil and set out alone.

She might have been uncertain about Nil, but she was certain of one thing: she was ready for some answers.
Darkness had long fallen by the time Aloy returned to the little tent Nil had set up at the edges of Maker’s End. Her stomach felt heavy with dread, now that she knew what the Derangement of the machines could mean: it could herald a disaster like the downfall of the Old Ones, when the Faro swarm had destroyed the Old Ones’ society.

She still felt stung from Sylens’ reprimand, for making her sound like a petulant child when she’d complained about still not knowing how she was connected to Elisabet. But now that she’d had time to cool off as she rappelled down from the top of Maker’s End, she had to admit that Sylens had a point. It was more important than ever for Aloy to learn who Elisabet was, and how she had stopped the Faro swarm.

Nil had built a small fire just outside the tent, and she felt a pang of amused disbelief to see that he was still wearing his lightweight Carja clothing. He travelled so light, she supposed he didn’t have anything else.

She sat beside him and held her Oseram-gloved hands over the fire. “Aren’t you cold?” she asked.

He shrugged. “A bit. But I enjoy the cold. It’s like a bite to the skin that draws no blood.”

Aloy gave him a small smile, then wrapped her arms around her legs for warmth, her eyes on the fire.

Nil offered her a wax-cloth with freshly roasted turkey leg, and Aloy accepted it gratefully. “So. What happened? Did you release countless breaths to the wind?” he asked with a half-smile.

Aloy smirked at him as she chewed her turkey. “You have no idea. Eclipse everywhere, at first. And there was this machine…” She paused as goosebumps ran over her body at the memory of the Deathbringer. And it had been only partially functional. Imagine one that could move… This huge machine, covered with firespitters and canons.”

“Not a problem for you, clearly,” Nil said, his eyes scanning over her uninjured form, though her shirt was scorched and muddied.

But Aloy shook her head. “You don’t understand. This machine, this Deathbringer, it would do exactly as its name suggests. If they manage to rig one up that can walk…” She shivered at the thought of what a Deathbringer could do to a Nora village.

She ate hungrily for a while, absorbed in her thoughts, and Nil sat quietly sipping Scrappersap. Once finished, she turned to him. “The Old Ones’ society was destroyed by machines. They built the machines, but they couldn’t control them. That’s what happened to them.”

This revelation was what Aloy felt to be the most incredible. All her life, she’d wondered about the Old Ones: how they had built such enormous structures, how they had seemed to have such control over machine technology. She’d read glyphs in Meridian with the various tribes’ beliefs about the Old Ones’ downfall, and that had been interesting. But now Aloy knew the truth.

And if the same thing is happening again, with the Derangement… It didn’t bear thinking about.

Nil huffed, his mouth quirked in a smirk. “They were destroyed by machines of their own making? That must have been embarrassing.”

Aloy stared at him. “Embarrassing? It was catastrophic. The entire world could have been destroyed.”

Nil raised his eyebrows. “But it wasn’t.”
“No, because she stopped it. Elisabet Sobeck. She found a way to save… to save the world.” She was starting to feel angry at his apathy. “How can you be so blasé about this?” she snapped. “It could happen again. The Derangement of the machines, it could be a sign of the same thing happening again!”

Nil gazed at her carefully. “You’ll stop it,” he said simply. “You wanted answers, Suntress, and now you have them. But you’re the only one who cares. So you’ll find a way.”

_You’re the only one who cares._ She knew he’d meant to be encouraging, but the stark truth of his words hit her like a fist to the stomach. Abruptly she rose to her knees and crawled into the tent.

Angrily she began pulling off her muddy Oseram clothes, throwing them in the corner of the tent. A moment later she heard the soft sound of the tent flap as Nil slid inside behind her.

She pulled on her worn old Nora outcast shirt and turned to face Nil. “Why doesn’t anybody care what happened to the Old Ones? We all live on the bones of their dead culture, all of us from every tribe. How can it be that I’m the only one who wants more information? Well, me and Sylens.” She breathed heavily for a moment and glared at Nil’s kneeling form. He looked totally at ease, his head tilted slightly to the side, and somehow his calm made her feel angrier.

Nil gazed back at her, his face neutral. “You grew up as an Outcast. You consider this a punishment, but I see it as a privilege,” Nil said placidly. “You were shielded from the pettiness of societal problems. You told me yourself you were unaware of the Red Raids. This gives you a wider perspective, something like a bird’s-eye view. I… dislike people, but I had to spend a lot of time observing them. Most are too busy worrying about the present to wonder about the past, or to see beyond the next day.”

He cocked his head to the side, and his face wore that expression he had sometimes when looking at her, like he was examining something novel and fascinating that he’d never seen before. “Your interest in things beyond the immediate is part of what makes you compelling, Suntress. Don’t be angry that your mind works differently. Embrace it.”

Aloy stared at him, simultaneously humbled by and grateful for his words… and startled by the realization that, contrary to what she’d thought, she and Nil were not complete opposites. In a few brief sentences, whether he’d intended to or not, he’d drawn a parallel between them: outcasts in their own way, with ways of thinking that didn’t match their tribes, driving them to fulfill their goals alone. Granted, her goals might be… well, _loftier_ than Nil’s, to say the least… but the odd similarity between them shook her.

He’s right. He has a point. This was the second time today that someone had put her in her place. Suddenly she was angry again. She knew it was completely irrational, but she wanted to attack Nil with her words, shake him out of his complacency. “That’s your excuse? Your mind works differently, so embrace it? Is that how you justify your lust for killing?”

To her surprise, Nil smiled. “Don’t hate me for being single-minded. Besides, my single-mindedness works in your favour.”

“In what way?” Aloy demanded.

Nil frowned at her like she was being obtuse. “Isn’t it obvious? Before, all I thought about was killing bandits. Now all I think about is you.”

Aloy stared at him, feeling suddenly overwhelmed by emotion. He’d struck her again with his talent for blunt truth, struck right to the heart of her, catching her off guard and burning through her anger.
and frustration with so few words.

Suddenly she was straddling his lap, tossing his headdress aside, her hands gripping his hair and her
tongue in his mouth. Nil responded with equal ferocity, tangling his tongue with hers as his hands
roughly encircled her waist. His left hand slid up under her thin shirt towards her ribs, while his right
hand reached around her back to stroke the back of her neck before he suddenly gripped her hair and
tugged her head back, exposing her throat.

Aloy gasped as a dizzying wave of lust washed over her, zapping her with an electric pulse in her
throat and her groin. Almost as though he could sense her thudding pulse, Nil lowered his lips to her
throat and placed an open-mouthed kiss at the base of her throat, then traced his tongue delicately
along the line of her neck and dropped a tiny bite just below her ear.

With his left hand he was stroking the sensitive underside of her breast, then he rolled her nipple
gently between his fingers. Aloy whimpered, arching eagerly into his touch and undulating her hips
against his.

Suddenly Nil cupped one hand under her bottom and sat forward, gently laying her on her back so
that he was kneeling between her legs. He kissed her, his left hand bracing his weight beside her
head as his right hand slid inside her shirt to caress her nipple gently with his thumb before pinching
the firm bud again.

Aloy panted and moaned with frustrated desire. She wanted Nil so badly, but the healer at
Brightmarket had told her the mother’s bane would require two weeks to be effective. “Nil,” she
gasped, as his right hand began to slide down her belly towards the waistband of her soft Nora
leggings. “We have to wait - I can’t - the mother’s bane…”

Nil smiled. “I can wait,” he purred in her ear, sending chills of excitement down her spine. “Half the
pleasure is in the waiting.” His fingers slid slowly into her leggings.

Aloy managed a breathless little laugh. “If half the pleasure is in waiting, I might go up in flames
when… oh Goddess!” Aloy suddenly arched, her hands flying up to grip his hair again as the heat of
his fingers stroked between her legs.

Nil ran one finger slowly along the length of her labia, spreading her moisture before dipping gently
into her cleft, making her mewl with desire and thrust her hips against his hand. “Remember to keep
your voice down. You might attract machines,” he whispered to her, and she could hear the distinct
undertone of laughter in his hushed voice.

“You talk too much,” she gasped, then gave out an involuntary little cry as Nil’s finger slid up to
gently circle the bud of her pleasure.

Aloy had thought her first orgasm with Nil had been incredible, but it was nothing compared to the
heat of his hand directly on her skin. This was so much more intimate. Nil’s reverent touch seemed to
savour the feel of the slippery moisture between her legs. This moisture had initially alarmed her, but
now she understood that it signalled her readiness for him, and she felt only excitement as he spread
the warm moisture along her cleft with his clever fingers.

His finger returned to move in slow circles around her clit, and she lifted her hips in a wordless plea.
Nil kissed her lips, then pulled away and looked her in the eyes. “What do you want, Suntress?” he
asked, his voice guttural with lust.

Aloy pulled his hair and whined. How to put into words the things she wanted? More pressure. More
“That’s the word I was looking for,” he growled, and slid his finger inside of her.

Aloy cried out involuntarily, and Nil smothered her lips with a kiss as he began moving his finger inside her in a swirling motion. “Shhhhh,” he whispered, and Aloy covered her mouth with the back of her hand, biting her own skin as the swirling of his fingers began to coax an answering swirling pleasure deep in her abdomen.

Nil gently slid a second finger inside her, and Aloy moaned at the increased pressure, the sound muffled by her hand. Then he began stroking his fingers in a come-hither motion, and Aloy jolted, her breath catching in her chest at the unusual, new sensation of pleasure. This was different from the pleasure she’d felt from his fingers on her clit. It felt just as good, but deeper.

She gasped, her hot breath meeting the back of her hand as Nil’s fingers continued to stroke in a curling motion inside her body. Then he began thrusting with his fingers, gently at first then more firmly, and the edge of his thumb was rocking gently against her clit.

Aloy uninhibitedly met the thrusting of his fingers with the thrusting of her hips. She could feel her pleasure building with every thrust, like a wave trying to gain strength before smashing against the shore. She gasped for breath, every speck of her awareness focused on the heat of his hand.

Suddenly the wave broke, washing over her with a vicious pleasure that tore a visceral cry from her throat. Nil gave a rare laugh and covered her mouth with his lips, stroking his tongue inside her mouth to muffle her. She whimpered eagerly into his mouth as her orgasm sent spasms of pleasure down her thighs and calves, leaving her toes tingling.

Once her pleasure had eased and her body was relaxed, Nil tenderly slid his hand out of her leggings and sat back on his knees. Aloy gazed up at him, feeling lazy with pleasure… then her eyes widened as he casually lifted his hand to his mouth and sucked her moisture from his fingers.

A combination of shock and fresh lust slammed into her at the intimacy implied by his gesture. Did that mean that he would… Would he actually taste…?

The sudden image of his mouth hot on her most intimate parts roared through her like a blazefire, and abruptly she sat up on her knees. Nil looked at her quizzically, then bared his teeth in a feral grin as she gracefully pulled her shirt over her head, revealing her breasts.

“By no means am I complaining, but what are you doing?” he growled curiously. He sat back as she crawled close to him, and Aloy enjoyed the widening of his own eyes as she straddled his knees and fumbled with the buckle of his belt.

“I want to see you. I want to see what I’m waiting for,” she panted, and Nil swiftly came to her aid, deftly undoing his belt so Aloy could tug impatiently at the laces of his trousers. Finally his laces came free, and Aloy caught her first glimpse of the dark curls between his legs.

She swallowed, suddenly a little nervous. It was one thing to bare herself to Nil; he was experienced, he knew what he was doing. But would he think her inept? Aloy felt a small twinge of annoyance; it had been a long time since she had felt unskilled at something.

Seemingly sensing her uncertainty, Nil tipped her chin up to meet his eyes. “Suntress. There’s no need to rush. Patience can heighten the passion.”

“Thanks for the offer, but I don’t want to wait. Just show me what to do,” she commanded, and Nil grinned at her, his eyes dancing with humour. Slowly he reached into his trousers and pulled out his manhood.
Aloy licked her lips as she stared down at him. The sight of his strong hand wrapped around his shaft struck her like a hammerblow of desire, and she swallowed again, this time with lust as his hand began to move slowly up and down his cock.

She watched with greedy attention as he stroked himself, admiring the little bead of moisture that appeared at the tip of his cock. Then she pushed his hand away and replaced it with her own. “I want to try,” she announced.

Nil smirked, then hissed in a sudden breath as Aloy began copying his motions, gripping his shaft firmly and sliding her hand up. She looked up at his face in alarm, worried that she was doing it wrong.

He shook his head tensely to reassure her. “Your hand feels better than mine,” he gritted, and Aloy smiled proudly, then continued the stroking motions of her hand. She was curious about that little bead of moisture on the top of his cock, so she smoothed it with her thumb, surprised to find it slippery like her own moisture. Maybe she should spread it, like Nil had spread her own?

Gently she smoothed her fingers over the head of his cock, and he gasped in a breath. “Yes, I like that,” he hissed. “Try this.” He gently removed her hand from his shaft, then spat into his palm and stroked it along his length again.

Aloy nodded eagerly, then reclaimed her grip on his shaft and slid her hand up and down. Yes, that was much better - her hand slid along his length more smoothly now. It seemed to make a difference for Nil too: he had leaned back on his elbows, his abs tensing as his breaths came faster.

Aloy was panting too. All she could imagine was her body atop his, his abs rippling under her fingers as she rode him with the same rhythm that her fingers were playing now. She pumped her fist more quickly along his length, and his head fell back with pleasure.

Suddenly Aloy circled her palm gently over the head of his shaft, curious whether it would make a difference. Nil’s hips bucked up involuntarily, just the way hers did when she was excited, and Aloy smiled with satisfaction. She swirled her palm over the head twice more, then resumed her firm stroking along his shaft.

Moments later, he bucked again. “Suntress,” he gasped, and to Aloy’s surprise, his cock became even harder in her grip. She looked down at his cock, eyes wide, and then her mouth opened with surprise and delight as he came.

But this was messier than she’d anticipated. Without thinking about it, Aloy swiftly slid down Nil’s body and closed her lips over his cock. He groaned loudly as she swallowed instinctively, thereby eliminating all but the first drops of his come.

She almost laughed, but was unable to around the width of his cock. It tasted strange. Not bad, exactly, but a little bit salty. When the pulsing of his manhood ceased, Aloy released him, wiping her mouth on the back of her hand.

Nil was lying flat on his back, breathing hard. Aloy grinned to herself, feeling proud. Not so bad for a first-timer, she thought smugly as she clambered over to sit cross-legged beside him.

He turned his head to look at her, and his silver eyes were blazing with heat. “You didn’t have to do that,” he said, his voice almost slurred with pleasure. He lazily tugged his trousers up to cover himself closed his eyes languorously.

Aloy lounged on her side, her cheek propped on one fist as she smiled cheekily at him. “I know. But

I enjoyed it. Even though it tastes weird,” she teased.

Nil smirked, his eyes still closed. “Now who’s disgusting?” he murmured. Then he lifted his hand and gently entwined his fingers in her hair. “Come here,” he whispered, and pulled her down for a kiss.

Aloy shifted closer to him, her hand rising to cradle his neck as he kissed her, his tongue slipping gently into her mouth. After a long, blissful moment, he broke the kiss and wrinkled his nose. “You’re right. Tastes weird,” he said, then yawned.

Aloy chuckled throatily, then lay peacefully beside him, her head resting on his arm. Within moments, his breathing became deep and slow as he fell asleep.

She lay beside him for some time, savouring the feeling of warmth and wellbeing from their closeness. She felt wide awake, but simultaneously more calm and relaxed than she had in days. Since her first climax on top of that mesa, in fact. Maybe this feeling of calm was the normal outcome of sex play.

Quietly she sat up so as not to wake Nil, then deftly pulled on her thin Nora shirt and her Banuk jacket. As she crept quietly to the tent flap, Nil stirred, rolling onto his side. “Suntress,” he murmured, then quieted again, a lock of midnight-black hair falling over his forehead.

A burst of tenderness flowered in Aloy’s chest, and she gazed at him for a moment before slipping out of the tent to sit by the fire. She added a few more branches to the dying flames, coaxing them back into life, and nibbled some figs while she gazed peacefully at the flames.

Nil was far from perfect. Aloy would be the first to admit that. But no matter who he had been in the past, whatever he had been at Sunstone Rock, he was a loyal and affectionate companion to her.

At that moment, Aloy made her decision: she was willing to accept responsibility for his actions, at least for now. She couldn’t say what would happen in the future, but right now, she was happy with him.

And if things with the Eclipse and the machines were going to get difficult down the road, as she suspected they would, Aloy would shamelessly enjoy every drop of happiness she could get.

Chapter End Notes

Notes:

1. When I started writing this chapter, I was kind of like “eh I just want to get this one out of the way because the next two are gonna be so fun to write.” But then this one kind of took on a life of its own and I kind of feel... emotional now? Is that just me? What do you guys think?
2. Any thoughts on the term “manhood” in smut?? Does it annoy anyone?? I tried not to overuse it here but I can leave it out of future chapters if it annoys anyone lol
3. Nil falling asleep immediately after sex. Typical man. ;)
Chapter Summary

Aloy goes back to Meridian and hangs out with her good friend Erend, and hears a mind-blowing revelation about her silver-eyed companion.

A/N: No smut. But I released this chapter and the next one (which IS smtty) together on purpose, just for you smut-hounds. Love you all… ;)

Also, +10 XP to anyone who catches the little Game of Thrones line I stuck in here.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Meridian was Suntress’s next destination, with the rationale that she needed to warn Avad about the Deathbringer threat prior to heading east to the Grave-Hoard. Nil would travel south with her until the outer edges of Meridian, where she would leave him to take care of her business. They would meet again on the road towards Daytower three days later.

Over the following days of travel, Nil’s mind kept drifting back to his orgasm at Suntress’s hands. Having never climaxed before, he was still surprised that he’d been knocked out right after he came. It had been on the tip of his tongue to say something to Suntress afterwards, words pressing at the inside of his chest that he only was starting to understand, but the next time he opened his eyes, it was morning and she was shoving his arm, cheerfully telling him to wake up so they could head out.

Sex could be used as a weapon if it's that soporific, he thought to himself, but with no real disgruntlement; in fact, Nil felt good, relaxed, smug even. When he'd lived in Meridian before, he’d never understood why so much time was spent talking about sex. But now, looking at his intoxicating Suntress, he understood. Everything about her made him horny, even the things that weren't overtly sexual: her narrowed eyes as she watched the pacing of a Sawtooth; the quirk of her lips as she laughed at him; the toned flexing of her abs as she aimed an arrow into a Watcher’s lens. Every time she mounted a Strider, all he could imagine was those sweet legs mounting him.

But Nil wasn’t stupid; he knew that he had almost lost Suntress when he’d told her about his role with the Mad Sun-King, but there was nothing he could do about that. He’d told her he wouldn't lie to her, and he hadn't. Nil knew who he was, knew he couldn’t change; he’d tried to blend in with regular people during his younger days but it hadn't stuck, and Sunstone Rock had helped him see that he just didn't give a shit what other people thought of him. But Suntress wasn't other people. All he could do was hope she would continue to accept his company.

A few days’ worth of brisk travel brought them to the outer edges of Meridian where the jungle melted into village. The periphery of the city had appeared hazily through the early morning humidity, and if they approached any closer, they would encounter villagers.

In the shade of the jungle, Suntress turned to him with a half-smile. She was wearing her light Carja armour again, and Nil couldn't stop his eyes from roving over her toned arms, her smooth bare midriff.
“Well, I'll see you in a couple days. Don't do anything I wouldn't do,” she joked, but her eyebrows were tilted with a hint of worry. He wondered what she was worried about.

Nil smirked. “So you're saying I’m allowed to attack Stormbirds and Stalkers, climb on moving Tallnecks, and face off against huge machines rippling with canons and firespitters. Tempting, but I think I’ll follow my own counsel,” he teased, and just as he’d hoped she would, Suntress grinned at him.

She shoved him playfully in the chest. “Don't hate me for being talented,” she quipped, and turned to leave. But before she could walk away, Nil grabbed her hand and tugged her towards him.

She fell against his chest and he claimed her lips greedily, enjoying the soft skin of her waist under his fingers and the heat of her hands as she cradled his neck and kissed him back.

Eventually she pulled away, a funny little smile on her face, and ran her fingers through her hair. “I have to go,” she said, and shot him one last smouldering green-and-gold glance before running off towards the bridge into the city.

He watched her go, but this time he didn't melt away into the jungle after she disappeared. An idea was knocking at his mind, and he stood in the shadows for a while, turning his idea over in his brain. Finally he turned and started walking through the jungle in a circumspect path towards Meridian Village.

Maybe Suntress would be seeing him sooner than she thought.

*************

Aloy’s first stop in Meridian was the market. Her pouches were heavy with machine parts, which she exchanged for other resources (she always seemed to be running out of wire). While trading Banuk figurines with Cantarah, she heard a loud, joyful voice holler her name.

“Aloy! Hey! You're back!”

Aloy turned and grinned at Erend, who was striding through the crowded market and smiling from ear to ear. His baby blue eyes were sparkling with excitement as he approached her, and he flung his arms open enthusiastically, almost smacking a hapless passerby by accident.

Months ago, Aloy would have been too wary of people’s touch to permit the hug Erend was so clearly offering. But now she was so accustomed to Nil’s intimate touch that a friendly embrace seemed like no big deal.

Erend swept her up in a rib-crushing hug, lifting her clear off of her feet. She laughed wheezily as he squeezed her, then rubbed her ribs when he set her down. “Erend, how are you?” she said.

“Forget me! Where have you been? It’s been so long!” Erend exclaimed, beaming down at her.

“Oh, you know. Learning the secrets of the Old Ones, taking out bandit camps, the usual. I can override almost every type of machine now. Including Thunderjaws.” Aloy couldn't help but brag a little as she planted a hand on one hip and smiled up at her Oseram friend.

Erend laughed and shoved her shoulder gently. “Of course you can. A girl on a mission to conquer the world. Imagine you running into battle with an army of Thunderjaws at your back!”

Aloy sobered slightly. “Actually, that’s not a bad idea. We might need all the help we can get.”
Erend gazed down at her in sudden alarm. “Wait. What do you mean?”

Aloy grimaced. “I made a really unpleasant discovery. A new type of machine, with *major* firepower. It’s called a Deathbringer.”

“Cheery name,” Erend muttered, and Aloy huffed a humourless laugh. “Yeah, and it’s about as cheery to fight as it sounds.”

Erend’s big blue eyes got even bigger as he stared at her. “You fought one?”

She stared back up at him, the look on her face saying *obviously*. “Yes. I had to. Fortunately, that means now I know how to take it down.”

Erend seemed at a loss for words. Nonplussed, he rubbed his hand over his bristly mohawk. “So… I guess you need to tell Avad, huh?”

Aloy nodded, fighting back the smile that was threatening to spread over her face at his obvious statement. Aloy knew he was older than her, but he acted like such a sweet summer child sometimes. “That’s the main reason I’m here,” she confirmed.

Erend twisted his lips with mock disappointment. “And here I thought you came to hang out with me. But you’ve got time, right? Do you have to go to Avad right now?”

He looked so hopeful that Aloy almost wanted to hug him. “No, I have time. I’m here for a few days. I might even have two minutes to spend with you,” she teased, and Erend perked up.

“What *have* you been up to?” Aloy asked.

“Dervahl is still here. We’re still negotiating his release back to the Claim. It’s exactly as Marad said - the Oseram clans are fighting amongst themselves to decide who gets the pleasure of killing the bastard.” Erend’s blocky jaw clenched for a moment, and Aloy waited in sympathetic silence for him to master himself. “But I’ve been negotiating with the clans, keeping things civil and helping them decide what to do. It’s the kind of job Avad would have trusted Ersa with.” Erend shrugged like it was no big deal, but Aloy could see his cheeks turning pink with pride.

“That’s a lot of responsibility, Erend. I’m happy for you,” she said, and punched him in the arm fondly. He waved her compliment away haphazardly, a proud little smile on his lips. “Eh, you know. It was about time, right? Time to start making something of myself, to be someone that Ersa could be proud of.”

“Someone that you can be proud of,” Aloy insisted, and Erend looked down at her, surprised at the force of her voice. “You *should* be proud, Erend. You’ve come a long way from that leery outlander at the Proving.”

Erend blushed deeply, his whole face turning red. He rubbed his hair again with agitation. “Ah, you just had to bring that up, didn’t you?” He smiled ruefully as she laughed at him, then elbowed her. “You’ve changed too, you know. You’ve got a sense of humour now. Your tongue still cuts like a whip, but you seem happier. More relaxed.”

Aloy looked at him in surprise. “I do?”

Erend nodded. “Yeah. You were so tense and focused before. I mean, you’re still focused now, but
you seem more… I don’t how to explain it. Confident, maybe? I mean, you were always confident too… Ah, I’m no Carja wordsmith. You just seem more like you fit in your own skin, that’s all.”

Aloy wasn’t sure how to respond to that. She’d always been confident in her own skills. She didn’t think she’d changed much. Had she?

Erend elbowed her again, looking down at her carefully. “Hey, it’s a good thing. You were always a force to be reckoned with. Now you’re… electric. Like a Stormbird or something.”

*Like a Stormbird.* Nil. Was he the difference? Aloy’s ears suddenly felt hot as she thought of him. Was it her partnership with Nil that had changed her in this way that Erend was describing?

Erend seemed to sense her discomfiture, because he suddenly changed the subject. “Hey. Dervahl is in the cells under the Sun Ring. D’you wanna go and taunt him?”

Aloy looked up at him with a grateful smile. “That sounds like fun. Let’s do it.”

**************

Dervahl glared at them petulantly as they approached his cell. “Well well, look who it is. The Savage and the Incompetent Idiot. A perfect pair,” he sneered, his arms folded over his chest.

Aloy was impressed by his snark. “You’re certainly mouthy for someone who’s going to be a dead man soon,” she said coolly.

Dervahl snorted. “Please. If my fate is left in this lunkhead’s hands—” He jerked his head at Erend — “... then I’ll be free sooner than later. And when I get out of here, I’m going to plant a Thunderjaw lure in your bedroll.”

“Oh good!” Aloy replied cheerfully. “I’ve been looking for a new pet. A cute little Thunderjaw would be just the thing.”

Dervahl scoffed. “Please. Riding machines? Am I supposed to be impressed? Get one to serve me lunch, then I’ll take notice.”

Aloy laughed. That comeback had actually been kind of clever.

Dervahl snarled at her. “Someday I’m going to build a machine with the specific purpose of pulling your braids out,” he spat.

Aloy folded her arms and exchanged an incredulous look with Erend. “That’s just stupid. Not to mention a waste of time. I thought you were supposed to be a genius tinker. The best you can come up with is a machine to pull out somebody’s braids?”

Dervahl stepped close to the bars, his eyes incandescent with rage. “I’ll admit, it burns me that a savage tracked me down,” he hissed. “Most Nora get confused by anything more complicated than two sticks and a string.”

Aloy raised her chin and stared back at him, not intimidated or offended in the least. But it seemed that Erend had heard enough. “You shut your mouth when you’re talking to her,” he growled at Dervahl, then deftly punched him in the nose.

Dervahl cried out in shock and pain and stumbled back, clutching his face. Aloy gave her friend a chiding look. “Very gallant, Erend. But not very Vanguardsman-ly.”
Erend waved a careless hand. “Ah, he had it coming. Hey, let’s go get a drink, right? It’s long overdue.”

Aloy smirked and shook her head. Some things would never change.

Erend leaned over and signalled the barkeep. “I’ll take a triple of Scrappersap. And a single for the lady.”

“Make mine a triple too,” Aloy corrected, and Erend looked at her in surprise. “You? A triple? Don’t tell me my bad habits have been rubbing off on you!”

“No, don’t worry. Though you should curb your drinking,” Aloy told him sternly as they sat at a bench with their drinks.

“I have!” Erend argued. “I’m only a social drinker now, see?” He gestured between himself and her, and Aloy shrugged acknowledgement. “But when did you become a Scrappersap fan?”

“I’ve met a few connoisseurs during my travels,” Aloy replied, and took a healthy sip of her drink. “Gera and Kendert, at Hunter’s Gathering. And Petra up at Free Heap?”

“Petra!” Erend exclaimed. “Now that’s a real woman. Ersa always liked her. And, you know. So do I. You know.” He cleared his throat awkwardly, then said, “How is she?”

Aloy bit the inside of her cheek to stop from smirking. “She’s great. I really like her.”

Erend nodded happily, and Aloy continued. “I also made friends with a Carja soldier who likes Scrappersap. A… strange man, named Nil.”

To Aloy’s great embarrassment, she suddenly felt her cheeks heat with a blush. She realized that this was the first time she’d talked about Nil with anyone, at least since she and Nil had become intimate. She’d spoken of him with Janeva, but that had been…before.

Aloy’s face became even hotter, to her great pique. Erend stared at her, then grinned. “Oh-ho! The Nora huntress has a crush?”

Highly embarrassed, Aloy took a gulp of Scrappersap and rubbed her forehead. “A little more than just a crush, at this point,” she muttered. She might as well be honest if her mouth had decided to start talking about this without her permission.

Erend goggled at her, his face a picture of amazement. “Aloy. Are you saying you…? I mean, I thought you didn’t have any interest in the mushy stuff. Not that I’m complaining!” he said hastily as she shot him a suspicious look. “You’re like a sister to me now, you know that. But… I mean… Wow.” He continued to stare at her with a mixture of awe and delight, making her feel increasingly uncomfortable. “Who is this guy? Tell me about him.”

Aloy rubbed the back of her head and tugged uneasily on one of her braids. She had no experience with this kind of talk. “He’s Carja,” she said lamely.

Erend stared at her like she was simple. “Yeah, you said that. What else?”

“Well… okay. Technically he’s an ex-soldier. He used to fight under the Mad Sun-King. He went to Sunstone Rock for two years, and when he was released, he was obsessed with taking out bandit camps. That’s how we met. We took down all the major bandits camps across Nora land and the
Sundom together.” She frowned suddenly. “Erend. What’s wrong?”

Erend’s face had gone pale, making his big blue eyes stand out more than usual. “This… friend of yours,” Erend said slowly. “Is he a little taller than me, black hair, weird grey eyes with the tattoos under them? Creepy kind of guy?”

A shiver ran down Aloy’s back. “Yes. You… you know him?”

Erend nodded. Aloy leaned across the table, feeling tense. Erend’s reaction was making her anxious. “Erend, everyone I run into seems to recognize him. I kind of understand why, but… Actually, I don’t really. How do you know him?”

But now Erend shook his head. “Nuh-uh. Not my story to tell. You should ask Avad. He can tell you more.”

Suddenly Aloy remembered something, and wanted to hit herself in the face for forgetting it. Avad had once said the exact same thing as Nil: Good things come to those who lie in wait. How could she have forgotten? Suddenly she felt dizzy with the immensity of the knowledge that danced just outside of her reach. The pieces were falling together, but she needed the final nail to unite them.

Suddenly she had to know. She slugged back the rest of her Scrappersap and stood. “I have to go, Erend. Thanks for the drink.” She literally jumped over the table in her haste to leave.

“Hey, wait! What about me?” Erend called after her. “We just sat down!”

“Later!” she yelled, and set off towards the palace at a dead run.

**************

Fifteen minutes later, Marad was leading her to Avad’s pagoda. She’d told Marad she had problems to discuss that affected the Carja (not a lie, though not her most pressing concern at this moment), and the fact that she’d clearly run here from the market had lent an urgency to her appearance.

Avad turned with a smile as she approached, but his face immediately fell with dismay as he caught sight of her sweaty face. “Aloy! What’s wrong?”

Aloy had already decided to start with official business, especially since Marad was here. Let nobody ever say I can’t prioritize, she thought to herself with dark humour. She waved off Avad’s concern, still panting to catch her breath from her run. “I look more urgent than the situation calls for, don’t worry.” Finally she straightened and looked at Avad, and felt a pang of guilt at the concern etched across his face.

She smiled reassuringly at him. “Seriously. It’s not urgent. But I do have some bad news. A new kind of machine.” Quickly and efficiently she told Marad and Avad about the Deathbringer: where she’d encountered it and how she’d defeated it, the situation of its limited mobility, and the possibility that the Eclipse would find and activate more that could move. “I met Erend in the market, and I told him about it too. You can start planning defenses against it, though I’m still not sure when the Eclipse is planning to attack the city.”

Avad nodded decisively, a kingly frown on his face. He turned to Marad. “We’ll gather our military commanders and discuss this tomorrow, first thing. Let Erend know. He and his men will be instrumental to the defense.” Marad nodded, and Avad turned back to Aloy. “Is there anything else?”

“Yes,” Aloy said. “I have a private matter I wanted to discuss with you.” She was beyond
embarrassment at this point. All she wanted was answers.

Avad nodded, his eyebrows tilting up with anxiety. Marad needed no further prompting; he bowed respectfully to Aloy, then slipped away.

Avad ushered Aloy away from the pagoda and towards the more comfortable seating area in the back. “Please, have a seat. What’s the matter?” he asked.

Aloy launched right into it. “There’s a man I’ve befriended during my travels. He calls himself Nil. I’ve been travelling with him for almost two months. He used to fight under your father’s banner, but he gave himself up for war crimes and you sent him to Sunstone Rock for two years. He’s a bit taller than you, pale silver eyes…”

She stared at Avad with rising anxiety as his face went slack with disbelief. “Erend said you know him?” she asked weakly.

Avad stared at her, then barked out an incredulous laugh and rubbed his face. “You’ve been travelling with him? This man who calls himself Nil?”

“Yes,” Aloy snapped, her nerves making her testy. “Avad. Who is he?”

Avad lowered his hands and looked at her. “He’s my brother.”

Chapter End Notes

I know for sure I’m not the first person to propose that Avad and Nil are brothers. I was originally inspired by this Tumblr post. But I hope my take on things - which will show up in the next chapters - will be at least somewhat original, and true to the Nil I’ve been developing in this fic so far!

Also: did anyone else go and talk to Dervahl after he gets taken off to the cells? There were SO MANY snarky lines. I just had to throw some of them in here. So hilar.
Avad tells Aloy everything he knows about Nil's history. Later, Aloy gets a surprise visitor at the palace.

A/N: Super-long chapter here you guys, packed with backstory and SMUT. NSFW.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

“His real name is Kadar. He’s only a few months older than me; his mother was one of the royal courtesans. Back when the palace had courtesans,” Avad clarified apologetically.

Aloy and Avad were settled on one of the couches in the seating area behind his pagoda, and Avad had pressed a glass of Carja red into her hands. She’d insisted on hearing everything Avad could tell her about Nil. She sipped gratefully at the wine as Avad spoke.

“All the courtesans were supposed to take maiden’s jape. You know what this is?” Avad asked, and Aloy nodded. “My understanding is that Kadar’s mother didn’t take the herb. After he was born, she was punished, sent to become a scullery maid. But our father raised Kadar alongside myself and Kadaman, here in the palace.”

Aloy swallowed, feeling slightly nauseous and a bit guilty. She was hungry for every scrap of information Avad was telling her, but also felt like she was betraying Nil somehow by talking about him behind his back. But he could have told me all of this himself at any time, she thought. Why didn’t he?

Avad continued speaking, pulling Aloy’s attention from her roiling thoughts. “Our father permitted Kadar’s mother to see him sometimes. A rare act of mercy on his part… maybe because he hadn’t yet lost his mind. I remember seeing her come into our living quarters sometimes. She’d sing to Kadar. She seemed nice.” Avad shrugged apologetically. “She died when we were young, around four or five years old. An infection of some kind.”

“That’s terrible,” Aloy whispered, clutching her glass.

Avad nodded, sipped his own wine. “But even before she died, Kadar was… strange. First of all, he was uncommonly intelligent. He was reading all the tomes in the palace before I was speaking full sentences. But he didn’t speak until we were… six. Seven, maybe.”

Aloy frowned in disbelief. “He didn’t speak? At all?”

Avad shook his head. “No. You would have thought he was simple, if not for the reading. He understood what people said to him; we knew that, because he followed instructions, he could write, he excelled in our lessons. But he didn’t speak until we were… six. Seven, maybe.”

“Why?” Aloy wondered.

Again, Avad shook his head and shrugged. “I have no idea. But when he did start speaking, it was
like… like he was speaking in glyphs, if that makes sense. Complex thoughts, but… unusual for a child.”

Aloy suddenly smiled in recognition. Actually, that explained a lot. “He’s the same now. His speech is like poetry.”

Avad looked up at her. “Still, now? I see. We didn't speak much as we got older.”

“What else was unusual?” Aloy asked. She wanted to know how far back Nil’s strangeness went.

Avad looked at her uneasily. “He never seemed to understand when people were in pain. Or other people’s feelings, in general. When we played together, sometimes he would hurt us - Kadaman or I - and he didn’t seem to realize it. When the nursemaids or Father told him what he’d done, he… I’m not sure. He didn’t seem to understand. Or perhaps he didn’t care.”

This chilled Aloy. He was detached even when he was so young? she thought. But Avad wasn’t finished. “He was also… unstable, for lack of a better word. Usually he was calm. But... extremely calm, to the point of scaring some of the courtiers. Things that would excite me or Kadaman didn’t seem to interest him. Fireworks, or feasts, or… normal things that children enjoy. They didn’t affect him. He would just sit there watching, staring at people while they celebrated.”

Avad leaned back, frowning pensively at the glowing flame of a lamp on the low table between himself and Aloy. “Then sometimes he would have these tantrums. Enormous fits of temper that nobody could calm. When we were young, his rage was… terrifying. His mother used to be able to calm him before she died, but as he got older, his tantrums became dangerous to other people. The nursemaids would make us leave the room, would just leave Kadar alone in a closed room until he wore himself out.”

Aloy didn’t realize that her hand was clutching her throat in sympathy until the press of her nails in her collarbone started to hurt. She lowered her shaking hand back down to grasp her glass of wine.

“By the time we were teenagers, all the staff in the palace gave him a wide berth. He made people uncomfortable. He learned to copy people’s facial expressions, but when he was by himself, he just looked… blank. It doesn't help that his eyes look somewhat blank as well.” Avad gave Aloy a rueful glance, and she nodded acknowledgement of this. She’d thought his eyes were creepy too when they’d first met.

“Things reached a head as my father’s madness worsened. There was an incident in the palace; one of my father’s Kestrels killed a courtier on palace grounds. I remember because we were all there - Kadaman, and Kadar and I. That was the first time we’d seen a man killed.” Avad rubbed his face, and when he raised his face to Aloy’s, the lines in his youthful face spoke of distress. “Kadar seemed… transformed somehow. It was the first time we ever saw him excited about anything.” The corners of Avad’s mouth pulled down in faint disgust as the memories slid across his eyes.

“Will you call him Nil? Please?” Aloy suddenly asked, her voice taut with strain. This was so hard to hear about already, and somehow it felt disrespectful to call Nil by a name that he had chosen to discard, for whatever reason.

Avad threw her a wary look, but nodded agreement. “All right. He… Nil… was more interested in the death of the courtier than anything we’d ever seen before. And our father, being, well, mad, encouraged his morbid fascination. Soon he had Nil training with the Kestrels, going out to commit whatever… bloody atrocities the Kestrels were up to. Sometimes we would see Nil returning to the palace in the dead of night, blood on his clothes, but smiling like we’d never seen him smile before. It was…. ” Avad trailed off and shook his head.
He gulped from his wine glass, then said, “Kadaman and I tried to make him join the Hunter’s Lodge at one point. We thought it might redirect his energy into something more… acceptable. But it didn’t work out.”

Aloy suddenly laughed, despite the bone-deep chill she felt. “He hates machine hunting. He’s not very good at it.”

Avad smiled at her. “That hasn’t changed either, then? No, he wasn’t very good when we went out together either. To be fair, neither was I. Kadaman was the strongest machine hunter of the three of us.” Then Avad’s smile faded. “He refused to join us after a few hunts. When we asked him why, he would say ‘it’s not the same’. Something about the scent of fear, or the look of fear….” Avad curled his lip slightly in an unconscious expression of disgust that made Aloy’s chest hurt.

“The strangeness, the coming and going with blood on his hands, it continued for a few years. Kadaman and I tried to make him spend time with us, make him more… sociable. I think even our father realized something was off, because he forced Kad- er, Nil, to go to the courtesans.” Avad blushed, and Aloy felt suddenly embarrassed herself. That felt too personal for her to have heard. “But nothing helped. Then one night, Nil left the palace and didn’t come back. He disappeared.”

Aloy stared at Avad. “One of the Carja princes just disappeared?” she demanded in disbelief.

“Aloy, you must understand. He had been coming and going as he pleased for years. Nobody could make him do anything he didn’t want to do. So when he decided he wanted to leave, there was no stopping him.”

Aloy swallowed. “How long was he gone for?”

“Months. Almost a year. Then suddenly he just returned to the palace, like no time had passed. He was still strange, but… calmer somehow. More controlled, like something inside him had stilled. And yet he was more bloodthirsty than ever. He told our father he wanted to join the army, so he trained as a soldier. He began training as an officer, too, but he eventually stopped. I’m not sure why.”

“I don’t suppose you know what he did while he was gone all that time?” Aloy asked. She didn’t really expect Avad to know. Sure enough, Avad shook his head. “He never told us. And… if I’m being completely honest, I never asked. A cowardly part of me didn’t want to know.” He lowered his eyes humbly as he slowly turned his glass slowly in his fingers.

Aloy bit her lip. So there was still a piece of the puzzle that she’d have to ask Nil herself. “Avad… Nil told me that during the war, he fought in the Sun Ring against warrior slaves. But that was only before Jiran started bringing machines into the Ring. What did he do during the rest of the war?”

Avad lifted his eyes, and their warm brown depths screamed apology. “He fought in various battles against Carja rebels. And… he participated in raids to the other tribes,” Avad said softly. “The Claim, Plainsong… the Sacred Lands.”

Aloy leaned forward and slowly put her wineglass on the table before she dropped it. Her hands trembled as she ran them through her hair. “He… he took slaves? From the other tribes?” From the Nora?

Avad shook his head slowly, his sympathetic eyes still on hers. “No, I don’t think so. My understanding is that he would enter the settlements as part of a frontline assault. Then he would leave once the settlements’ warriors were killed.” Avad lifted his shoulders uncertainly. “That’s what I was able to piece together from the information he and the surviving witnesses gave.”
Aloy nodded, unable to speak. That sounded like Nil. What was it he had said? A victorious warrior absorbs the strength of his enemies. Weak enemies aren’t worth bothering with. It was in keeping with his character that he would storm a village and take out its best fighters, then leave when the challenge was done.

Aloy looked at Avad again. “And when the war ended? What happened?”

Avad leaned back, his fingers still nervously playing with the rim of his wineglass. “He wasn’t here during the Liberation. He must have been on a raid, or perhaps a battle elsewhere in the Sundom.” Suddenly Avad smiled, and Aloy looked quizzically at him. He shook his head. “It’s not really funny, but… well, it was just his way. I had assembled a crowd of my father’s soldiers in the Sun Ring here in Meridian. I was willing to hold trial over those who would confess to their crimes during the Red Raids and be held accountable for their actions. And then I see one hand rise among the ocean of soldiers, and then Kada- er, Nil, his voice called out in the crowd.”

Avad shook his head again, and to Aloy’s surprise, he chuckled. “All he said was, ‘I confess.’ So I asked what he was confessing to. His reply? ‘Whatever you think I did is probably true, so let’s start with that.’”

Aloy didn’t mean to laugh. But what Avad was saying was so utterly Nil that it was a relief. She could practically hear the words in his sarcastic voice. Without thinking about it, she snorted, then just started laughing.

Her laughter was more than just amusement. It felt like a release of tension and enormous sadness. Listening to Avad’s story had been like watching someone get stampeded by a herd of Tramplers in slow motion. She was powerless to stop it, but unable to turn away, forced to listen to what she knew would be a terrible story.

And yet, though the details and specifics were new, nothing Avad had told her truly conflicted with what she already knew about Nil. If what Avad said was true, Nil hadn’t murdered anyone who was weaker than him, no babes in arms, no defenceless villagers. What was it that Janeva had said? He wasn’t a knife without a thought behind it, like the butchers of the Sun Ring. Well, he had fought in the Sun Ring, but she supposed he hadn’t really been a thoughtless butcher per se. A thoughtful one, perhaps.

Aloy shook her head briskly, rubbing the heels of her hands into her tired eyes. Was she making excuses for him just because of her feelings for him? She sincerely hoped not.

Finally she lowered her hands and looked at Avad, and was surprised to find him watching her, his eyebrows contracted with concern. “You care about him,” Avad said. It was a statement, not a question.

Aloy answered it anyway. “Yes. We’ve become… close. He’s been a very loyal companion.”

Avad continued to watch her carefully. Now that Aloy knew he and Nil were brothers, the occasional similarities she could see in their expressions was uncanny; the look on Avad’s face now was so similar to the one Nil gave her sometimes, like he was marvelling at something new and fascinating. She dropped her eyes awkwardly.

“He must be a different man than the one I sent to Sunstone Rock,” Avad said softly. “That’s the only way I can imagine he would captivate a woman of such caliber as you.”

Aloy wasn’t sure how to answer. Did this mean Avad still had feelings for her? Cautiously she inclined her head respectfully to him. “I think you and Warden Janeva can consider your
rehabilitation program to be effective,” she replied, and Avad smiled at the formality of her words.

Finally Avad sighed and drained his wineglass, then leaned back into the couch. “So. Have I answered your questions?”

Aloy nodded and finished the dregs of her wine as well. “Thank you, Avad. For your time, and… for telling me all this.”

Avad smiled at her. “It’s the very least I could do for the saviour of Meridian,” he replied, with a slight hint of mischief dancing in his brown eyes.

Aloy smirked and rose from the couch, then covered her mouth abruptly as a huge yawn wracked her body. Though it was only early evening, she was suddenly exhausted.

Her fatigue didn’t escape Avad’s notice. “Aloy, you must be tired from your travels. Please stay the night here at the palace. There’s more than enough room, as you’ve pointed out before.”

Aloy protested, even as another yawn overtook her. “No, I couldn’t-”

“I insist,” Avad said firmly, ushering her forward with a solicitous hand at her back. He waved a hand, and a palace servant appeared. “Mari, please make our Nora guest comfortable in one of the guest rooms. One with a westward-facing view,” he added, then smiled at Aloy. “You’ll at least be able to enjoy the sunset.”

Aloy gave Avad a small smile. “All right. Just for the night. Since you insist,” she said, and Avad grinned his youthful grin as the servant led her away.

“Sleep well, Aloy. You’ve more than earned the rest.”

*****************

Aloy stared at the guest room, then turned to the servant. “Is there a smaller room?”

The servant, Mari, clasped her hands nervously. “...A smaller room, huntress? These are accommodations befitting a special guest of His Radiance. But I can ask the head steward…”

Aloy pursed her lips. This room is big enough for a tribe to sleep in, she thought. And it’s all for one person? But she turned back to Mari in resignation. “No, that’s all right.” No point making trouble for the palace staff.

Mari relaxed slightly at Aloy’s concession and led Aloy into the room. Aloy didn’t bother to hide her incredulity as she examined her accommodations more closely.

The room was massive, almost the size of a Nora lodge, and handsomely furnished; it boasted a four-poster bed draped with blue and green gauze hangings, a chaise-lounge, a small dining table with two chairs, a carved chest, and against the east wall, a narrow table with a wide padded stool facing an actual glass mirror.

Aloy approached the mirror and stared in awe at her reflection. She’d heard tell of these mirrors, but had never seen one before. Her image was tinted slightly green - some result of the manufacturing process? - but startlingly clear.

After inspecting the mirror, Aloy moved across the room toward the west-facing side of the room. It was basically an open wall enclosed with a wide balcony, allowing the fragrant jungle breeze to blow through. Aloy walked to one corner of the balcony and ran a hand curiously over what looked
like a narrow door in the corner. The door seemed to be made of multiple narrow panels of wood.

Mari bustled over, gently ushering Aloy to the side as she pulled on the edge of the door. “Do you want the balcony closed, Huntress?” To Aloy’s surprise, the door unfolded like a fan - indeed, it was made of floor-to-ceiling panels of artistically carved wood, connected by intricate metal hinges - and Mari began tugging it to close the balcony off, like a fold-out wall.

“Oh, no, I was just looking. You can leave it open,” Aloy said quickly. Mari smiled and nodded, pushing the door back, and then hurried over to a large tub in the corner of the room. “Shall I draw you a bath?”

Aloy turned to watch the servant, feeling overwhelmed by her attentions. “Um…” She drifted hesitantly over to the tub, which was attached to what looked like a rectangular pipe that descended from the ceiling.

Mari turned a knob on the side of the pipe, and Aloy’s mouth dropped open in surprise as a small metal panel pulled back from the mouth of the pipe and water began gushing into the tub.

Mari turned casually to Aloy as though this aqueduct system wasn’t a technological marvel. “Do you have any clothing you wish cleaned?”

Aloy tugged one of her braids in agitation. This whole experience of pandering was giving her some major culture shock. “I can wash my own clothes. It’s fine,” she said, but Mari suddenly straightened and frowned at her like she was being difficult.

“Huntress, it is my duty to make sure your needs are cared for. Allow me to do my job. May I clean any clothing for you?”

Aloy recoiled in surprise at the shorter woman’s insistence. “Okay, okay. Yes, I have some stuff that could use a wash.”

Mari smiled at her, satisfied, and gestured to the carved chest at the foot of the bed. “That chest contains a selection of silks. You can change into something that fits when you’ve finished your bath.”

Hastily Aloy handed over a bundle of her clothes, and Mari finally left the room, to Aloy’s relief.

She prowled around the huge room a bit longer, running her hands over the intricately carved furniture, studying the mirror, and admiring the view from the balcony for a long moment. Then she shed her clothes and stepped gingerly into the bath. The cool water was refreshing in the heat, and Aloy simply lay in the tub lazily for a while. Then she rose from the bath and carefully began to undo her braids one by one, placing the beads and linen strips into an ornate dish on the table in front of the mirror.

While I’m here, I might as well wash my hair really well, she thought to herself, then stepped back into the bath and enthusiastically washed up. Afterwards, she slipped out of the bath and chose a pair of loose silk trousers from the carved chest, then sat topless in front of the mirror to redo her braids.

She had just fastened the wooden beads onto the smaller braids behind her right ear when she heard a low voice call to her from the balcony.

“Aloy.”

Instinct kicked in and she was on one knee, bow in hand and an arrow aimed at the balcony, before her mind could register the strangeness of hearing her name in that intoxicating voice.
Nil stepped slowly out of the evening shadows and stopped at the edge of the room, his silver eyes glowing in the low torchlight. His gaze roved over her half-naked form, and his lips tilted up in a predatory smile.

“They told me your name. I said hair like a splash of blood, tenacious as a Scraper’s jaws.”

Aloy lowered her bow and stared at him in shock as she rose slowly to her feet. She tossed her head impatiently to get her half-done hair out of her face. “Nil? What are you doing here?”

He tilted his head to the side, his eyes still perusing her with delicious slowness. “I came for you.”

Affection for him burst inside of Aloy’s chest like a fresh berry, and she smiled helplessly at him. Nil hated coming into settlements, hated talking to other people… and he’d entered the biggest settlement in the known world for her.

Then she took in his appearance and grinned more widely. He was still wearing his purple silk trousers, but his armour and vest were gone, as well as his headdress. His feet were bare, and he was wearing a common shirt made of thin cotton. His signature red scarf was wrapped around his head in the style of a villager.

Aloy laughed. “Is that supposed to be a disguise?”

Nil shrugged and took a step into the room. “Yes. I had to talk to a merchant to buy this shirt.” The flatness of his voice as he said this couldn’t more clearly have conveyed his displeasure, and this only made Aloy laugh harder.

She ran her hands through her unruly damp hair and gazed at him in happy disbelief. “How did you even get up here? Did you scale the wall?”

Nil took another step towards her. “I walked through the village wearing these clothes. There are tunnels and paths to the palace that few know about. I took one of these paths, then climbed up this wall using the balconies.” He smirked smugly. “The Sun-King should probably review his security measures.”

Aloy sobered suddenly at the mention of the Sun-King. “Nil... I spoke to Avad. About you.” She looked closely at him as she spoke, to gauge his reaction. “He told me your real name. Kadar.”

Nil gave an unconcerned little shrug. “A former name from a former life.”

Aloy frowned, and some of her resentment from earlier returned. Avad had filled in so many gaps about his life that she hadn’t known existed. Why hadn’t Nil told her any of that himself? All the time they’d spent together, talking and travelling…

“Why didn’t you tell me your real name? Or that Avad is your brother?” she demanded.

Nil frowned at her. “I don’t go by that name anymore. And you didn’t ask.”

Aloy couldn’t decide whether to laugh or scream with frustration. *How was I supposed to know to ask if the Sun-King was your brother?* she wanted to yell. But another part of her mind reminded her that she’d had hints of it long ago, when she’d first met Avad.

*But was I really supposed to remember that, with everything that was going on?* she argued with herself. *Why is it my responsibility to figure Nil out, like a puzzle with pieces missing? He should have told me.*
Aloy turned her back to him and sat down again on the stool facing the mirror. She reached up and began twisting a lock of hair near her right temple and teasing it into a loose dreadlock, in preparation for braiding the rest of its length.

“Avad also told me about your participation in the Red Raids. Cutting down warriors during the slave runs.” Aloy cut her eyes to him in the mirror.

He watched her for a moment, then approached the dining table and leaned against it, his arms folded. “Yes.”

Aloy glanced sharply at him. “I asked you before what you did during the war. You didn’t tell me about the Red Raids. Why didn’t you just tell me?”

Nil frowned more deeply. “You asked me why so many people recognize me. The Sun Ring is the main reason. Lots of soldiers fought during the Red Raids; I was one of many. The strongest and most skilled, perhaps,” he smiled winningly at her, “but still just one of many.”

Aloy glared at him, unable to respond because in his own circuitous way, he had a point. Once again, his strange logic had worked out in his favour. He was probably more known for his battle skills - and his bloodlust - than he thought, but he didn’t seem aware of that.

This was the way Nil was: he answered her questions directly and honestly, but he only gave as much as she’d asked. He never seemed to catch those implicit cues in her questions that prompted further disclosure.

Aloy bit her lip in frustration and busied herself with her braids for a moment, quickly twisting the hair along her forehead before gathering it into a thicker plait and fastening it with a strip of cotton. The hair on the left side of her face had fallen over her eye, so she impatiently tucked it behind her ear as she worked her way along her hairline.

She glanced at Nil again, and despite her irritation at him, a flowering of desire bloomed in the core of her abdomen at the look on his face. He was still standing at the table, his arms folded, but his silver eyes were staring intently at her, his face almost predatory with lust as he watched her plaiting her hair.

She realized then what she must look like to him: bare to the waist, her breasts on show while she dealt with her braids. He probably didn’t expect her to be half-naked when he dropped onto her balcony.

A roar of anticipation suddenly ripped through her body. It had been two weeks since she’d started taking the mother’s bane.

And here they were, in this intimately lit opulent room, and he’d snuck up here without anyone knowing…

Aloy bit her lip again, this time with lust as a distinct rush of heat between her legs heralded the intensity of her desire. But quietly, determinedly, she continued twisting and braiding her hair.

Nil licked his bottom lip, his eyes still fixed on her. “Aloy, I didn’t lie. I didn’t hide anything. Will you fault me for failing to answer a question you didn’t ask?”

Her name on his lips was jarring. “Don’t call me ‘Aloy’,” she said suddenly.

The corners of Nil’s eyes crinkled with a tiny smile. “Suntress,” he said, and his voice was low and gentle. “I didn’t intend to deceive you. When will you release me from your anger?”
Aloy swallowed, and realized that she already had. She truly believed that he didn’t mean to deceive her. In the context of what Avad had told her, and all the time she’d spent with him, she understood better now how his mind worked. He hadn’t told her all the details because genuinely hadn’t thought they were important.

She turned her head to glance at him. “Soon,” she said, then smiled conspiratorially at him. “I’ve heard that good things come to those who lie in wait.”

Nil smiled suddenly, and Aloy felt a throb of affection in her chest. His expression of pure happiness lit his silvery eyes like the stars. He pushed off of the table and slowly came to stand behind her. “Wise words,” he murmured.

A surge of hunger suddenly lit her from the inside. Nil’s voice was deep and intimate, and it brought Aloy’s nipples to attention. She could feel them tightening into taut little buds as she moved her fingers to her left temple to finish off the last small braids.

This didn’t escape Nil’s notice. He reached under her upraised right arm and palmed her breast, stroking his fingers over her flesh before returning to tease her nipple with his thumb.

Instinctively Aloy arched slightly into his touch, though her suddenly-trembling fingers continued their plaiting. She was almost done; two beads to slip on, then one more braid. If she could just hurry, and he could just wait another moment…

Nil lifted his hand from her breast and slowly slid her still-damp hair away from the right side of her neck. Then he bent over and placed a warm kiss on the spot where her neck met her shoulder.

Aloy breathed in sharply through her nose as Nil trailed a line of slow kisses along the line of her neck to her earlobe. Then his lips were at her ear. “How much longer do we have to wait?” he whispered, and the gentle heat of his breath sent a shiver cascading down her spine.

She knew what he meant. “No more waiting,” she managed. “Just until I finish this braid.”

“Braid faster,” Nil growled against her ear, and Aloy smiled despite her own rising desperation. Her fingers shook as she reached for the wooden beads.

Nil kissed her shoulder again, then knelt behind her stool to trail his lips and tongue down her back. His hand rose again to pinch her nipple, and Aloy almost dropped the bead in her fingers as a jolt of pleasure zapped straight from her nipple to her groin.

“Nil,” she gasped, “Just wait!”

“Braid. Faster,” he repeated, and at last Aloy slid the two beads onto her braid. “There. I’m done—”

Nil roughly spun her stool around so she was facing him, her legs on either side of his kneeling form. He wrapped his hands around her waist and buried his face in her chest, nuzzling the soft skin of her breasts before taking her right nipple into his mouth and suckling firmly.

Aloy groaned with pleasure, her hands clutching at his shoulders. She revelled in the delicious light friction of his facial hair as he released her right nipple and slid his lips across her chest to trace her left nipple delicately with his tongue. Meanwhile, his hands were sliding up her sides, his fingers tracing along her ribs, floating lightly over the still-fading bruise on her left abdomen.

Aloy thrust her chest towards him, begging for a firmer touch. “Nil!” she moaned, and he complied with her body’s request, taking her nipple into his mouth and sucking hard for a moment before biting it gently with his teeth.
Aloy jerked and gave a tiny sob of pleasure. The now-familiar exquisite pressure was building at the apex of her thighs, and she was desperate for Nil to relieve it with his skillful touch. She thrust her hips towards him, spreading her legs wider to get closer to his body. “Nil, touch me. I want…” She trailed off, panting, unsure how to be more specific about what she wanted aside from everything.

Nil reached behind her and fisted his hand in the hair at the base of her neck, tugging her head back. She gasped with delight, then gasped again as he rose higher on his knees and lightly bit the base of her throat. “I’ll tell you what I want,” he growled against her skin. “I want to taste you. Here.” His other hand slid slowly down her ribs and he cupped her between her legs.

“Yes!” Aloy gasped, as a flush of dizzying pleasure flooded her body. His hands were so damn hot. How were they always so hot, goading her higher into the flames of her own desire?

Briskly Nil stood, lifting her by her hips to a standing position. Then he kissed her roughly, his tongue sliding against hers as his fingers quickly unlaced her silk trousers.

Aloy pulled his scarf from his head and grabbed his hair, shamelessly rubbing her nipples against his chest as she basked in his kiss. Finally her laces came loose and Nil shoved her trousers down, then lifted her onto the desk and sat facing her on the stool she’d just vacated.

Aloy panted with rising excitement as she looked down at him. This was only the second time she’d been completely naked in front of him, and she was more exposed than she’d ever been before: her feminine folds, slick with her desire, were presented most intimately to him, and suddenly she felt a bit vulnerable. Despite everything she and Nil had done together, this felt even more intimate.

Nil looked up at her, and her nervousness was burned away by the longing and lust that blazed in his eyes. “I’ve wanted this for weeks,” he told her. Then he slid his tongue along the length of her labia in one smooth, firm lick.

Aloy jerked as a pleasure stronger than she’d ever felt jolted through her body, making her skin feel like it was on fire. Nil’s clever tongue was lapping gently at the nub of her pleasure, each tiny flick of his tongue adding a jolt of pleasure to the storm of ecstasy that was roiling in her core.

Aloy’s hands flew down to cradle his head as he changed his rhythm, circling his tongue around her clit with agonizing gentleness. The circling of his tongue danced on that fine edge of not-quite-enough, and she wiggled her hips slightly and mewled with need, pulling slightly at his hair in a plea for more.

Nil then stopped licking and placed a sweet kiss on her wetness, almost as though he was kissing her mouth. He placed two more open-mouthed kisses on her labia, and Aloy moaned loudly with frustration.

Nil glanced up at her, and mischief danced in his eyes. “I know what you’re thinking, Suntress. I want to hear you say it.”

“All-Mother’s mercy, I want more!” Aloy cried, digging her nails into his shoulders with frustration. Nil hissed with pain and pleasure, then obeyed her demand, his tongue resuming its firm sweet licking over her sensitive clit.

Aloy was panting desperately now. Her climax was dancing at the edge of her perception, building like a churning thunderhead, her attention fully focused on the lapping of Nil’s hot tongue.

Then suddenly he slid one finger inside of her and gently stroked in a come-hither motion, and Aloy’s orgasm exploded. The pleasure felt like it was throbbing upwards through her chest and
throat, tearing a scream of ecstasy from her lungs. Convulsively she arched her back and thrust her hips against Nil’s clever mouth as he continued the rhythmic lapping of his tongue.

As Aloy’s shudders of pleasure slowed, Nil gently lifted his face, roughly wiping his mouth on his hand before standing and kissing her passionately.

Aloy wrapped her arms tightly around his neck, savouring the earthy scent of her own pleasure on his lips. Nil tilted her hips close to his with one firm hand on her butt, rocking his still-clothed groin against hers, and suddenly Aloy couldn’t wait any longer.

She broke the kiss, her hands sliding down to his trousers to pull eagerly at his laces. “Now,” she panted. “I want you right now.”

Nil tugged his shirt over his head, then gently pushed her hands aside to untie his laces; Aloy’s fingers were clumsy with lust and haste. He dropped his trousers, then stepped back and kicked the stool and his trousers aside.

Aloy stared at him for a moment, greedily drinking in her first glimpse of Nil totally naked. He was goddess-damned gorgeous. The familiar sexiness of his hard chest and abs flowed into the less-familiar and intensely sexual sight of his erection springing up proudly from its bed of black hair. Then Nil reached down and pumped his fist along the length of his shaft, just once.

Aloy shoved off of the desk and leapt at him, barely aware of what she was doing, knowing only that she couldn’t stand another second of not being pressed against his skin. Luckily Nil’s reflexes were as good as hers and he caught her, swinging her legs around his hips and supporting her weight with one strong hand under her bottom while his other hand grasped the back of her neck.

“All right, Stormbird, let’s fuck,” he growled against her lips. “I’m ready to make you mine.”

“Finally,” Aloy whined, digging her nails into his shoulders again, and Nil laughed as he carried her over to the bed. Roughly he dropped her onto her back, then covered her body with his, bracing his weight on his hands as he nudged her thighs apart gently with one knee.

Aloy panted, her gaze fixed on the size of his manhood. It had been one thing to stroke him with her hand, to take him in her mouth. Suddenly it seemed like quite another thing altogether to take his girth inside of her. What if he didn’t fit? Would it hurt?

“Suntress.” In that uncanny way of his, Nil seemed to have noticed her hesitation. He tilted her chin up with one finger and looked into her eyes, his face serious. “You sure about this? Are you ready?”

The concern in his face burned away the last of her hesitation. Aloy bit her lip and nodded. “I’ve never been more ready,” she said firmly, and she meant it.

He smiled slowly at her. “Kiss me,” he whispered.

Obediently Aloy lifted her chin, and Nil kissed her so softly, so gently, his lips sliding over hers, his tongue tracing her lower lip delicately before slowly slipping into her mouth to dance with her tongue.

A wave of heartwrenching emotion washed over her at the tenderness of his kiss, and she cradled his neck with both hands as he tasted her lips with such care that it brought an unexpected burn of tears to her eyes.

Without breaking the kiss, Nil gently slid his hand along her left leg, then lifted her knee over his shoulder, spreading her wide. He shifted his weight upwards, then pulled away from the kiss and
rested his forehead against hers as he carefully ran the head of his shaft along the length of her labia.

Aloy gasped, a fresh burst of desire heating her blood at the touch of his cock. Teasingly he slid the head of his erection along her length, spreading her slippery moisture and stroking over her clit until she was bucking her hips eagerly.

She mewed with desire, her hands stroking his chest pleadingly. His teeth were clenched with ferocious lust, and sweat was beading on his forehead. She knew he was holding back for her comfort, but she’d never wanted him more. “Nil! Please, I’m ready. I want you inside me!” she begged.

He looked at her sharply. “Tell me if you want me to stop,” he gritted through his teeth. Then he kissed her roughly, plunging his tongue inside her mouth as he slid his length inside of her with one smooth, long stroke.

Aloy screamed into his mouth, feeling the pressure and fullness of his cock like a wave of sweet pleasure that rippled straight down to her toes. Instinctively she bucked her hips, trying to take him deeper, and she felt Nil’s chuckle against her lips. “Are you ready for more, Suntress?” he whispered.

“Yes,” she gritted, bucking her hips again. Nil withdrew from her body and Aloy whimpered, missing his fullness already, then she moaned as he slowly thrust into her again.

Gradually Nil picked up speed, and Aloy matched him thrust for thrust until they were fucking with such ferocity that the bed was creaking beneath them. Aloy gasped for breath as the seed of pleasure in her abdomen grew and swelled anew. She could hear Nil’s desperate panting in her ear as he thrust into her, and the sound made her feel both powerful and protective at the same time. She wrapped one arm possessively around his neck, clutching him tightly to her chest as her orgasm continued to build.

Then Nil suddenly stopped thrusting and shifted his position slightly. With his cock still deep inside her, he ground his pelvis against her in slow circles, and his pelvic bone rubbed lightly against her clit.

Aloy flung her head back into the pillows and cried out. She hadn’t thought she could feel any more ecstatic, but the slow friction against her clit was exquisite.

“You like that?” Nil hissed into her ear, and Aloy cried out an unequivocal “Yes!”

She could feel Nil’s smile against her cheek. “Come for me, Suntress,” he whispered, and continued the grinding of his hips.

The combined stimulation of her inner walls and her taut nub brought her to a sudden and furious climax. Aloy’s toes convulsively flexed, and she arched her back viciously and bit Nil’s shoulder hard, lost in the throes of pleasure.

“Ahh, fuck yes,” Nil hissed, then resumed his furious thrusting, and moments later he shuddered and groaned in completion, burying his face in her neck as he came.

Aloy and Nil lay peacefully in the aftermath of their pleasure, their sweat cooling in the breeze from the balcony and their limbs tangled together comfortably. Aloy idly twined her fingers in Nil’s hair, enjoying the slow in and out of his breath against her neck.

Eventually Nil slowly pushed himself up on his elbows to smirk at her. “You bit me hard there, Suntress. Trying to draw blood after all?”
Aloy looked at his shoulder in surprise, then covered her mouth with amusement and apology. “Oh no. Nil, I did. Look.”

Nil sat back on his knees and craned his neck awkwardly, trying to see his new wound. He reached over his shoulder to touch the bitemark with one hand, and indeed, it came away with a smear of red. He grinned down at her. “Suntress,” he drawled, “You’ve been holding out on me. If I knew all this time you had such a taste for blood…”

Aloy laughed and tried to roll away from him. “Ugh, Nil, you’re so disgusting. Cut it out.”

Nil grabbed her hips and rolled her back under him, pinning her between his forearms. “You know you love it,” he purred, then kissed her firmly.

Aloy smiled against his mouth, then kissed him back passionately, twining her arms around his neck. Aloy loved more than just his gruesome sense of humour.

She knew it now for sure. She was in love with the silver-eyed Carja killer.

Chapter End Notes

Omg you guys I'm exhausted. HAHAAAA but in a good way! I loooove writing Niloy. They've got me in a chokehold and won't let me go.

The next chapter will drop in a few days, but I'll be taking one evening off from writing tomorrow - gotta do laundry and spend some time with the other human being who lives in my apartment (also known as my future husband. HAHA!)

As always, HUGE ENORMOUS THANKS to everyone who's been reading along, leaving kudos, and especially commenting! I love knowing there are others along for the ride who love these two as much as I do. xoxo
Tenakth Blood: Part II

Chapter Summary

Nil reveals to Aloy what he was doing when he left the palace for a year during his youth.

NSFW. Fluff/backstory, romance, and lust lust lust. (Ooh, that reminds me of this song. Anyone else know it? Love it.)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Bliss.

That's what this was, Nil was sure of it.

Night had long fallen, and the sky outside of the balcony was scattered with stars. Suntress was sitting up against the head of the bed, and Nil was lounging between her sweet legs, his back pressed against her chest. Her knees were bent, and he swept one hand idly over the smooth length of her leg. But the best part of their entanglement was Suntress’s hands.

She was running her fingers over his scalp, her nails lightly scratching, her nimble fingers playfully braiding and unbraiding the longer hair of his mohawk. In the wake of their intense fucking, it was the most soothing touch he’d ever felt, and he felt hypnotized with lazy pleasure.

When Nil had decided to sneak into the palace to see Suntress yesterday, he hadn't had any kind of plan in mind. He’d just wanted to be near her. But then he’d dropped onto her balcony to find her kneeling on the floor, his warrior-huntress, half-naked with an arrow aimed at his face… and it was like all his fantasies, both violence and lust, coming true at once. The blood had left his brain so quickly that he'd actually felt dizzy for a moment. The sight of her untamed hair falling over one eye and partially obscuring the roundness of her breasts, her green-and-gold hunter’s eyes narrowed suspiciously at him… she was like a wild demon of fire and blood personified.

She was everything he never knew he wanted.

Nil’s desire had been fanned even higher when she’d started plaiting her hair, her upraised arms lifting those pert breasts even higher, blatantly taunting him with her nakedness while lambasting him again with her words. She’d glared at him, disappointment written across her face like a book of glyphs, and for a moment Nil had felt hopeless, like the only two things he wanted were just outside of his grasp: Suntress’s acceptance and her exquisite body, the latter effectively blocked by her withholding of the former.

She was everything he never knew he wanted.

Then she’d smiled at him, forgiven him for things he didn’t even know he was doing wrong, and suddenly Nil felt… free. Vindicated. The permission in her smile was like a dam breaking, and finally she was his for the taking, his Suntress, meeting him with the same ferocious need that was roaring to break free from his body.

Suntress’s voice broke through his sleepy reverie. “Nil?”
“Mmm?” he mumbled. She was smoothing her fingers along his temples and down towards his neck, and it felt fucking good.

“Avad said you left the palace for almost a year when you were younger. Where did you go?”

Nil sighed, but out of relaxation rather than annoyance. “South to the Bloodlands. Tenakth territory.”

Suntress’s hands stilled for a moment. “You went to Tenakth territory?” she asked, her voice passionate with curiosity. “What were you doing there?”

Nil craned his neck to the left, and Suntress ran her thumb along the edge of his neck up towards his ear. He grumbled happily, then replied, “I was seeking better prey. The Kestrels were killing anyone who naysayed the Mad King. It was… unsportsmanlike. Like taking maize-bread from a child. What value is there in a death that’s handed over freely?”

He shifted up slightly, tucking his head back against the tender spot where Suntress’s neck met her shoulder. “One night when I was out, I met a Tenakth warrior. It was the finest fight of my life. To that date, anyway. He tried so hard to cling to his life. It was commendable, really. But in the end I won, with only these scars to savour the memory.” He pointed out a thin white line of scar tissue under his right ribs, and the fine scarlines on the backs of his hands.

“He told me to drink his blood so his stories would live on.” Nil turned his head slightly to look up at her with amusement. “I do love the spilling of blood, its sharp scent like the smell of life itself… but to drink it? That’s just going too far.”

He felt Suntress’s sarcastic huff of amusement through his back. “Uh-huh. There’s not much I would put past you, Nil.”

“You wound me, Suntress. I have my limits,” Nil replied with mock hurt, then continued his story. “The fight was exhilarating. I wanted more like it. So I headed south. Carja records show only that the Tenakth lands are somewhere south of our borders, across the mountains. So I hunted my new prey down that way.”

“You crossed mountains just to find more people to kill?” Suntress’s voice was incredulous, but her fingers continued their hypnotic stroking and braiding of his hair.

“I crossed the mountains for the challenge,” he corrected her. “Carja lore speaks of the Tenakth as fearsome cannibal warriors, reviled across the known world. So obviously, the Bloodlands sounded like paradise for a hunter like me. Every Tenakth I met along the way fell under my knife or my bow. I suppose my reputation preceded me; eventually I came across a band of them, and their leader challenged me in a fight. I almost killed her. Almost.”

Nil sighed at the bittersweet memory and shifted again, tilting his head to the right this time. He smiled with pleasure as Suntress ran her nails along the sides of his neck and his temple, then continued. “If I had killed their leader, I’d have been set upon by the rest of the band. I know my limits. Four or five at once in a direct fight is a thrill. A doable challenge. An entire band of Tenakth fighters…” Nil sighed. “I’ll admit, I was out of my league. It was... a bitter feeling. Like choking on bile.”

“So how did you get out of the fight alive?” Suntress asked. “At Blackwing Snag, Ullia was determined to kill me. I can’t imagine anything but her own death would have stopped her.”

“I bluffed,” Nil said simply.

Suntress’s hands stilled, and she gave a sudden laugh. “What?”
“I bluffed. Said I’d kill the leader unless they gave me food and resources. And then I stayed at their camp for a while.”

“Wow. They invited you to stay with them?”

“No. They hated me for not drinking all the blood I’d spilled. Apparently my wasting of blood was… sacrilegious to them? But I stayed anyway.”

Suntress gave him an incredulous look. “You invited yourself into their settlement and just stayed. That’s… How is that even possible?”

Nil shrugged, ran his fingers over her ankle. “The Tenakth respect strength above all else. I was strong, I’d snuffed out the lives of some of their best fighters. I’d won their respect, so... I suppose they just allowed me to do what I wanted. I made them think they couldn’t stop me, in any case.”

He closed his eyes dreamily as Suntress continued running her fingers over his hair and scalp, and his mind drifted back to the past. When Nil had first met the Tenakth band, he hadn’t known that power was attributed to the strongest fighter. He’d just done what had always come naturally to him: he’d killed, and he’d done exactly as he pleased. It was only later, after spending time living among them, that he realized he’d inadvertently gained their respect and grudging acceptance by forcing his company upon them.

Then Suntress spoke again. “Avad said you were gone for almost a year. Did you stay at that settlement the whole time?”

Nil raised his eyebrows in mild surprise. Had it really been that long? He supposed it had; he’d never really paid much attention to the passing of time. “No,” he replied. “It was more a camp than a settlement. Some Tenakth bands are more nomadic than others; the one I came upon moved often. They raided for resources, things that can be easily carried. Not all Tenakth bands do that.” He stretched lazily, then settled back against Suntress’s chest and pulled one of her arms around his neck. Lying in this bed was so nice. He’d never just laid around relaxing like this. Maybe he and Suntress could just stay in this bed all day.

But Suntress’s curiosity was unstoppable. “Did you meet other Tenakth bands as well?”

Nil nodded, then nipped at the skin on her wrist. It was deliciously salty from their earlier exertions. “The bands often fight each other. Not to the death, though, at least not usually. Otherwise they’d all be dead. They have rules of engagement. It’s very civilized.”

“The Tenakth fight amongst themselves? I’ve never read anything about that.” Suntress’s voice was keen with interest, and Nil smirked faintly at her enthusiasm. Then she pushed him away gently so she could look at his face, and her eyes were serious. “Nil… You might be the only person in the Sundom who knows the Tenakth. Who really knows them. There are probably a dozen Carja academics who would die to know what you know.”

“Yes, they would die,” Nil confirmed, then settled back against the warmth of her neck. “The Tenakth don’t like interlopers.”

Suntress tapped his chest with recognition. “That reminds me - Ullia! She called you an interloper. I thought you didn’t know her before Sunstone Rock.”

“I didn’t. But she had heard of me. I told you, Suntress, my reputation spread like blazefire among the Tenakth. She recognized me in prison.” He smirked smugly. “From what she would scream at me through the bars of her cell, it seems there are a number of Tenakth warriors who want to spill my
blood.”

Suntress huffed with amusement. “Don’t sound so pleased about it.”

“Why not? I consider it a compliment. You’d be respected too, Suntress. The ferocity in your blood would be highly coveted. And I heard Ullia when you took her down. She wanted to take your for her child,” Nil taunted, and Suntress bit the top of his ear lightly in rebuke, making him smile.

“What made you decide to come back to the Sundom?” she asked.

“Boredom, mostly,” Nil replied lazily. “I’d gotten used to the Tenakth. Their infighting rarely came to the death, so I lost interest. And I’d heard the Carja wars were getting bloodier, more interesting. Though I do enjoy that the Tenakth strive only to fight those who are as strong as them, or stronger. Did you know they believe that you absorb the strength of your defeated enemies?”

Suntress nodded, and her chin brushed against his temple. “I remember you saying that. Do you… believe it?”

Nil shrugged. “I suppose not,” he sighed. “But in some way… I wish it were true.” He turned his head and smirked teasingly up at her. “If it was true, imagine how strong I would be if I’d fought you and won.”

Suntress scoffed and shoved at him, making him grin wider. “You’d be dead, Carja. No chance you would have beaten me. You’re too slow.”

Nil chuckled and settled back against her again, this time pulling both her arms around him so she was hugging his neck from behind. He didn’t refute her words. He’s seen her in action enough to admit that she was probably right.

Suntress kissed his temple gently, her lips moving in a sweet line towards his ear. The tip of her tongue traced his earlobe lightly, making a shiver of pleasure run down his back, and his cock stirred in anticipation.

“Why did you change your name? Why ‘Nil’?” she murmured, and Nil stirred restlessly now as a fresh burning of lust began to simmer in his veins. “I wanted a blank slate after Sunstone Rock. No affiliations. No expectations to be sociable for the sake of politeness. I wanted to disappear. Anyone who saw my face would be a bandit, and my face would be the last shadow over their miserable lives,” he rumbled distractedly. His mind was quickly losing track of their conversation; his attention was diverting to other things. The smell of her hair. The smoothness of her skin. The knowledge of her legs spread wide just behind him…

“You wanted to be no one,” she said softly, and Nil turned slightly to look at her, surprised at her immediate comprehension. Her voice was pensive and gentle, and Nil felt a strange jolt in his chest. Perhaps she understood him better than he thought.

Then her next words made his heart skip a beat. “It must have been hard for you. Living here at the palace. All those expectations to fit in…” she whispered.

Nil felt a sudden lump in his throat and swallowed uncomfortably. He had hated living here. This night, now, with her, was the only time he could remember feeling comfortable in this damn place. Nil couldn’t speak, so he simply squeezed her ankle.

Suntress was silent for a time, and he was lulled back into sleepy relaxation by the reassuring warmth of her arms around his neck, her thumb stroking his shoulder.
Eventually she spoke again. “I have to meet with Avad and his military council tomorrow to talk about defences against the Eclipse. Do you want to come?”

Nil snorted in disbelief. “No.”

He could feel Suntress's smile against his cheek. “I think Avad would be interested in seeing you again. I told him that you and I are… close.”

Nil turned his head to look at her in surprise. Suntress had told Avad about their partnership?

There it was again. That swelling of pressure in his chest and throat.

Nil had never had a companion before Suntress; he’d never wanted one. He’d never cared what people thought of him: their disgust, the fear in their eyes, it was so common, so boring. It rolled off his back like water off an oiled machine.

Then Suntress had burst into his life, a tempest of passion and fire. Their partnership had started as idle curiosity, an almost academic question: how long will this last before that look enters her eyes? How long before the tone of her questions shifts from curiosity to disgust? But as time has gone on, it had become so much more than that. For the first time, Nil cared. This woman, this hunter of machines, had torn him wide open, leaving him bleeding in the sweetest way. And now, in telling others about him, about them together, Nil felt like she’d accepted more than just his company.

She’d accepted him.

Unaware of the emotions threatening to burst the dam inside his chest, Suntress continued speaking. “Sure you don’t want to come? Friendly relations with the Sun-King can’t hurt.”

Nil gently unpeeled himself from her embrace and turned to face her. He cupped her cheek in one hand, then slid his hand around to cradle her neck, his fingers savouring her warmth, his eyes hungrily drinking in her freckles, her proud eyebrows, the fine lines of her lips.

“I don’t need any of that. Everything I need is right here,” he told her. “Where my hands pass between your armour and your skin, Suntress, that’s the place I belong now. This is home.”

A smile lit her face, her hazel eyes shining brilliantly like blazefire, and that pressure in his chest suddenly felt lighter somehow, like he was filled with hot air. He wanted to say something, to spill the truth that now filled him so completely, but he had no experience with these words, no experience with these feelings before he’d met her. So instead of talking, he kissed her hard, sliding his tongue into the sweetness of her mouth, suddenly desperate to drink her in, to drown his senses in her.

Without breaking the kiss, Suntress pushed him back and straddled him, her arms around his shoulders. Her hands were sliding over his chest, gripping his neck, wiping his mind blank with bliss. Even now he could taste the winterfresh on her tongue.

Nil slid his hands along the smoothness of her back. His fingers traced the slender lines of her ribs, his fists twined in her hair, his teeth scraped along her shoulder. He thrilled at the moan that escaped from her lips.

Slowly but firmly he pulled her hair and she arched pliantly, her back curving with all the strength of a Carja bow. Nil savoured her outthrust breasts, first with his eyes and then with his tongue, marveling at how the ripeness of her curves almost made him want to come right now: another sensation that was new, that only this woman had ever engendered in him.
The movement of her hips was like an Oseram clockwork, her undulations smooth and hypnotic, gracing his cock with the evidence of her desperation. Nil needed no further prompting. He lifted her deftly, then slid his length inside of her. His gasp of longing mingled with hers, and her hot breath in his ear was like a spear of lust, driving his need to spiral higher still.

He reached between their bodies and sought the bud of her pleasure with his thumb, pressing gently in time with his thrusts. The sudden sharpness of Suntress’s breaths was like the finest edge of a dagger: they cut through his skin, into his flesh and deep into the heart of him.

Their bodies joined hard and fast, his hips thrusting in powerful rhythm and his thumb maintaining a firm circular pressure on her taut bud. Her nails bit into his shoulders, but the pain only fuelled him, making him wonder how he’d never realized before that pain could amplify pleasure, like the slight bitterness at the end of a swallow of Scrappersap.

Suddenly he withdrew his hand and she mewled with distress, digging her nails ever deeper. Nil loved seeing her beg, loved hearing her plead for more, but now he wanted her to take, to rip her pleasure from him like the force of nature that she was.

Nil purposely slowed his thrusting and she writhed against him, pressing those gorgeous breasts against his chest. “Don’t stop!” she gasped. “Nil, please-”

He grabbed her by the back of the neck to get her attention. “What do you want?” he demanded.

Her eyes flew to his and he could swear they were snapping with electricity, with the wildness of the Stormbird that lived within her breast. “I want you to keep going!” she snapped, and the ferocity of her voice made Nil’s cock even harder.

“Show me what you want,” he told her. His voice was low and coaxing, but his hips were stubbornly still, and he could tell his stalling was pushing her lust - and her frustration - ever higher. “Take what you want.”

Suntress shoved his shoulders, shoving him flat on his back, and suddenly she was riding him hard, her hands braced on his abdomen. Her unequivocal seizure of control slammed a bone-melting surge of excitement through his body, and vaguely he knew that watching her mount Chargers and Striders would never be the same after this.

He grabbed her right hand and guided it towards the apex of her thighs. “You try,” he gasped, and eagerly she did as he suggested, dipping one finger between her red-and-gold curls to reach her centre.

Immediately she slowed her pace and arched gracefully, and her moan of pleasure thrummed through his body like the resonating tone of a braumdrum. Slowly she ground her hips on his, a slow circular cycle centered around his cock.

Nil was transfixed by the sight of her. Her belly was taut with the strain of her pleasure, and her nipples were perfect pink peaks. Her slow, undulating grinding was hypnotic, and the pleasure was slow but delicious, allowing him to feel every smooth, slick centimetre of her inner walls. Her fingers swirled over her clit in a quick rhythm, and he felt a surge of smug pride at the fact that this exquisite woman had chosen him.

He sensed the moment her climax began to build: a strengthening spasm within her sweet pussy, a quickening of her breath and a trembling of her thighs. Suddenly she was crying out and gasping breathlessly, riding him faster and deeper than before, and the contractions of her inner muscles were pulling him higher into a frenzy of pleasure until his orgasm burst in harmony with hers.
She shuddered one last time and collapsed onto his chest, panting hard. Nil was gasping too, his breaths fighting to keep up with the pounding of his heart. Once his heart rate had calmed, he rolled over, trapping Suntress beneath his body.

Her eyes were half-closed with lazy pleasure, and she stretched her arms languorously over her head. Her breasts lifted along with her arms - a most happy accident, in Nil’s opinion. “Good thing I’m such a strong rider. I think I’d be sore tomorrow otherwise,” she said with an irreverent smirk.

“Good to know the machines are useful for something,” Nil deadpanned, and Suntress grinned, then gave a tiny gasp and a moan as he lowered his lips to the delicious temptation of her breasts.

He might not be able to say the words that pressed so strongly at his sternum, begging for release, but he could show her with his hands and lips and tongue.

Nil would be happy to show her he loved her for the whole fucking night if she’d let him.

Chapter End Notes

Three things, yet again:
1. Nil likes having his head and neck scratched. Yes, I made him into a big cat. I LOVE CUDDLY BIG CAT NIL.
2. I thought the hints of the Tenakth and Utaru in HZD were so interesting, so I wanted to bring them in here! Here’s to hoping we’ll learn more about them in future games. My take on these cultures will feature heavily in my next Niloy fic. (Gotta force myself not to write that one so I can get this one done! Focus, brain, FOCUS!)
3. Nil and Aloy will FINALLY be leaving the bedroom in the next chapter, guys, so no more smut for a little while. These two have some travelling to do and some big bad guys to bust up…

And as always, MUCH LOVE to my readers and commenters! Niloy fam FTW.
Foundations

Chapter Summary

Aloy and Nil head to the Grave-Hoard, then to the Eclipse base to take out the Focus network. Sylens gets under Aloy's skin, and she and Nil have an argument.

Hurt/comfort and action, as things get moving again with the main story line!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The weather was changing as Aloy and Nil travelled back east. The breeze became cool and sharp, and the landscape shifted gradually from the rusty red of desert to the golden yellow of desert grass, then to the characteristic grassy-green and snow-white that marked the border of Nora land.

They stopped only briefly at Daytower for supplies. As expected, Nil had declined to enter the settlement, deciding instead to pass straight through the gates and wait for Aloy on the side of the Sacred Lands.

She jogged towards him and whistled for two Striders, then watched with pride as Nil mounted his Strider with an easy grace. Aloy had patiently taught Nil to ride during their travel east, and she’d been delighted to find him a fast learner, picking up the mechanics of riding within just a few short days. Now, he rarely needed her help at all.

She hopped onto her own Strider and they set off at a brisk lope, riding in a comfortable silence for a time. As the landscape became more and more characteristically Nora, Aloy couldn’t help but think how strange it was to be back in the Sacred Lands. Did she feel like she was coming home? She’d grown up in these lands, but they felt unusually foreign. She’d been so deeply entrenched in the climate and culture of the Sundom that that felt like her new norm now.

Maybe Nora land really isn’t my home. The cabin where I grew up stopped being home when Rost died. Maybe home isn’t a physical place, she mused. She would have expected that thought to make her sad, but to her surprise, it didn’t. Her eyes drifted over to Nil, and her heart swelled with a now-familiar wave of affection as she admired the relaxed, easy grace of his seat on the Strider.

Nil had told her that she was his home. Maybe, just maybe, he was hers too. Aloy smiled to herself at the thought.

A short time later, Aloy pulled on the wire-reins of her Strider and hopped off her steed. Nil followed suit, but frowned quizzically at her as he landed lightly on the balls of his feet. “What are we doing, Suntress? We stopped not long ago.”

She turned to him with a grin. “You said you’d follow me anywhere, right? Then come with me to Hunter’s Gathering. I want you to meet someone.”

Nil groaned. Actually groaned, like a spoiled child. “Do I have to?”

Aloy poked him playfully in the abs and headed towards the path up to Hunter’s Gathering. “Come on, Carja, I didn’t take you for a coward.” She smirked as she walked away, knowing he’d follow.
Sure enough, his disgruntled muttering followed her up the steps into the ramshackle settlement.
Aloy bit her lip to stop from laughing at him, then smiled as she spotted the person she was looking for.

Gera spotted Aloy at the same time. “Aloy!” she bellowed, and waved Aloy over to the table where she and Kendert had apparently been arm-wrestling. “Come for a drink? Or if you want to try my arm...”

“She’s flush with her victories,” Kendert explained, with a fond smile at his round-cheeked wife. “Turned a Carja soldier right over on his back.”

“Anything to stop him singing,” Gera chuckled, then looked at Nil with friendly curiosity. “Speaking of Carja, who’s this boy at your heels?”

Aloy smiled at Nil, who was hovering awkwardly behind her, his face a blank mask. “This is Nil, my travelling partner. Nil, this is Gera and Kendert. They’re friends of mine.”

Nil nodded to the Oseram couple with barely enough warmth to be polite, but Aloy didn’t mind; she knew she was pushing him out of his comfort zone, and she appreciated that he was even here. But Gera beamed at him as though he’d greeted them with open arms. “Your young man here is a fellow of few words, little spark!”

Aloy grinned. “Yes, he saves his breath for when he has something important to say. Which isn't often,” she joked. Nil smirked faintly at her, his silver eyes warming… which had been Aloy’s real intention anyway.

Gera turned to him. “So! Are you a machine hunter too?”

Nil gave her a feral smile that didn’t reach his eyes. “No. A bandit hunter.”

Kendert scratched his bristly chin. “I heard most of the bigger bandit clans have been driven out. It’s much safer for travelers now.”

Nil gave a resigned sigh. “Yes. It’s a shame,” he said, and Gera smiled uncertainly, while Kendert looked at him with sudden surprise and dismay.

Aloy coughed into her hand to hide the bubble of laughter that was threatening to rise up through her chest. With an effort of will, she looked at the nonplussed couple with a straight face. “I was just headed through, wanted to see how you were doing,” she said.

Gera tore her eyes away from Nil to smile at Aloy. “Well, time and troubles mostly pass Hunter’s Gathering by. And you, little spark?”

Aloy shrugged. “I think I attract trouble. But I’m getting used to it.”

Kendert grinned at her. “It’s the red hair.”

To Aloy’s surprise, Nil replied. “Yes. Hair like a burning flame tends to draw any number of vicious beasts from the dark. Luckily she’s a demon of blood, sending her foes to their graves without blinking an eye.”

Kendert and Gera stared at Nil, then at Aloy. Aloy could practically hear the gears in Gera’s mind trying to reconcile the helpful little spark with the bloody huntress that Nil described. Again, Aloy bit her lip to hide her laughter, and smiled sweetly at Gera and Kendert. “Shall we have a drink? Have you got the time?”
Kendert and Gera ushered Aloy and Nil to join them at their table, their eyes still wide and nonplussed. Aloy held out her hand wordlessly to Nil, who handed over his golden flask of Scrappersap. Aloy poured out four small tumblers of the thick dark liquor and shared them among her companions.

Then Aloy raised her tumbler. “To forging new paths under the light of the Sun. Together.”

Nil smirked faintly at her. “Very inclusive, Suntress. You've been spending too much time with Avad.”

Gera and Kendert looked at her with fresh amazement. “Avad? As in… the Sun-King?” Kendert asked weakly. Aloy blushed slightly and threw Nil an annoyed look for putting her on the spot.

“Little spark!” said Gera. “You can't keep a story like that from us!”

Aloy sighed in resignation. “All right. How much Scrappersap do you have?”

After their stop at Hunter’s Gathering, Aloy and Nil rode hard for the Grave-Hoard with minimal stops to rest. Once arrived at the site of the defunct Metal Devil, they operated the same way they had at Maker’s End: Nil helped her eliminate the guards outside of the bunker and Aloy went in alone, clambering quickly up the steep climb towards the entrance, her Banuk gloves helping only slightly to keep off the metal’s chill.

Later that night, Aloy ziplined back down to the plateau where Nil was waiting by a fire. He had finally conceded to the cold and was wearing the cotton shirt he’d worn to sneak into the palace, topped with his vest and armour.

She dropped lightly to her feet and shook her hair back, glancing up at the dizzying course of the zipline. “I’d ride that down again if it weren't so much work to get up there!” she laughed breathily, then sat beside him and took a swig from his golden flask.

“You’re in a good mood. Happy news?” Nil drawled as he slung an arm around her waist and pulled her close.

“No, actually. The opposite,” Aloy replied, her face and tone sobering immediately. She curled gratefully into Nil’s warmth and held her freezing hands out towards the fire. “We have to go to Sunfall. That’s where Zero Dawn was started.”

Nil frowned. “Zero Dawn?”

Aloy looked at him in confusion, then smacked her forehead. “Sorry. I forgot. I’ve hardly told you…” With some guilt, she realized she’d been so caught up in her own thoughts that she’d actually told him very little about what she was discovering in all the Old Ones’ ruins. And then in Meridian, all thoughts of her quest had been driven from her mind by their explosive passion.

Quickly she filled Nil in on the broad strokes of what she’d learned while simultaneously devouring some dried boar meat and figs. “So I need to get into this Orbital Launch Base at Sunfall, but all the Eclipse Focuses will recognize me unless we disable them. So first, I have to cut down this… this network that connects the Focuses.” She shrugged helplessly. It still wasn’t entirely clear to her, and Aloy hated not understanding something, but Sylens had made it sound like she would understand once they arrived at the navpoint he’d sent to her Focus.

Nil listened carefully as always, then sat back. “Back to the Sundom then,” he concluded.
Aloy nodded, threw him a cautious glance. Was he irritated at having to go back and forth? He’d said he’d follow her anywhere, but this kind of long-distance travelling was a lot to ask. Aloy had her need for answers to drive her onwards, her curiosity like a burning torch inside of her to spur her across the world. But all Nil had to keep him moving was her. She wondered if he was annoyed. His face was quite neutral as he gazed at the fire.

Then he looked at her, and the warmth in his smile burned away her doubts. “I’m ready when you are,” he said.

Aloy wrapped her arms around his neck impulsively and kissed him. He pulled her flush against his body with one strong arm, and Aloy smiled against his lips. “Let’s go,” she whispered.

A week later, Aloy and Nil reached the cliff to the navpoint Sylens had sent her. Aloy couldn’t help but notice that this spot was close to where she and Nil had swam in the waterfall… the first place she’d stripped herself bare for Nil. From the look on his face when he met her eye, he hadn’t forgotten either.

She smirked, her cheeks flushing with pleasure, but continued her climb up to the spot that Sylens had indicated. She wasn’t sure whether to be surprised, annoyed, or suspicious to find a small firepit. He’s been here before, she thought to herself as she and Nil settled down to wait on the large boulders around the firepit. How else would he know where to go?

Nil noticed her frown. “What’s on your mind, Suntress?”

She crossed her legs and scowled. “Sylens. How does he always know exactly where to go? It’s almost like... “Almost like he was one of them, she thought, but she didn’t want to say it. He was probably listening, the sneaky slag.

Sure enough, her Focus bleeped and Sylens’ holographic image appeared. Nil was now used to the blue ring of light that would appear around her Focus to herald the incoming call from Sylens, and he sat back quietly in the shadows.

Aloy leaned forward. “How nice of you to finally drop by,” she said flatly.

Sylens ignored her bolshy tone. “Your purpose this night is to crash the Focus network,” he announced.

Obviously. You said that before, Aloy thought snarkily. “Yeah, tell me the part I don’t know. How?”

“For starters, you’ll need to infiltrate the Eclipse's main base.”

Aloy recoiled with dismay. “Wait. What?” He could have warned her that she’d be going into the enemy’s stronghold!

“That’s right,” Sylens said briskly, oblivious to Aloy’s dismay - or more likely, he just didn’t care. “Fortunately for you, I’ve brought you around to the back way. It’s right through that crevice.” He pointed towards an overgrown crack in the cliff, then quickly explained to Aloy about the derelict Tallneck and the control module.

Aloy listened carefully, then sat back, her eyes narrowed. His knowledge was so detailed. There was no other explanation for it, except for her hypothesis. “So you were part of the Eclipse,” she accused.

Sylens stared back at her, his gaze as inscrutable as ever. “I’ve never been part of anything. I serve
my own interests, always. But… it is the case that I… assisted the Eclipse before I sensed the threat they might become. It was a mistake that I’m doing what I can to correct.”

Aloy was on her feet, approaching his glowing violet image threateningly before she could stop and think about it. She knew he wasn’t here, that her looming stance probably meant nothing to him when she was so far away, but she was suddenly angry. He helped the Eclipse? Did his help lead to Rost getting killed? she wondered. “What sort of assistance did you give them?” she growled.

Sylens frowned at her as though she was nothing more than a disobedient child. “Head through that crevice, Aloy. You have more important things to do than ask questions.” Then he was gone.

Aloy sat back down, frustration and anger burning through her body. She took a moment to compose herself, then glanced over at Nil, who was watching her warily.

She shook her head slightly. She didn’t want to get into the details right now. Just focus on the task at hand, she reminded herself firmly. “This is the Eclipse’s main base,” she told him flatly. “The… device for crashing the Focus network is in the main base.”

Nil stood. “All right, let’s go,” he said immediately.

Aloy gazed back at him in surprise. “No. Absolutely not. This has to be quick and quiet. Two of us will attract too much attention.” Her eyes drifted to his bright red headdress.

Nil frowned. “You’re not serious,” he said. “Your enemies will be crawling like maggots over a pungent corpse. You need backup.”

“I don’t need-” Aloy stopped herself and took a deep breath before she said anything she’d regret. She glared at Nil. This was the first time he had challenged her, and it couldn’t have come at a worse time. Not when the stakes were so high.

To her surprise, Nil didn’t look like his normal placid self. His expression was mostly neutral, but his fists were clenched and his eyes narrowed. He’s… angry, she realized with a touch of regret. It was subtle, just a hint of anger, but she’d never seen him mad before.

But it didn’t change anything. He’d told her he’d do as she said. “Stay here,” she ordered. “I’ll be extremely upset if you follow me.” Without waiting for a reply, she darted off towards the crevice.

********************

“Damn damn damn damn damn,” Aloy hissed, dodging fire arrow after fire arrow as she pelted along the rocky ledge and flung herself onto the adjacent ledge. All hell had broken loose when she’d destroyed the module, and now the entire base was after her.

“Keep going,” Sylens’ voice barked in her ear.

“What do you think I’m doing, taking a nap?” she yelled back, then slid swiftly under the outstretched arms of two Eclipse fighters.

Forwards, onwards, don’t fight, just run, she told herself as she dodged and ran with increasing desperation towards the bridge with its rappel point. Finally, the bridge was within view, and Aloy flung herself from the rappel point without hesitation.

Then the rappel point broke.
Aloy had a split second to be grateful that the bridge was over a waterfall before the impact of the water against her back slammed her breath - and her consciousness - out of her.

******************

“Suntress. Suntress!”

Aloy snapped into sudden alertness, then coughed fitfully. With effort she rolled over onto her side and heaved, and a small amount of water gushed up from her esophagus, making her retch a second time.

“Unghh,” she groaned, then pushed herself up onto one hand, then her knees, finally rising to her feet with Nil’s help.

He smoothed her soaking hair back from her face and cupped her face. Vaguely she noticed that his hands were trembling. “Fire and blood, Suntress. I thought…” He stopped, then when he spoke again, his voice was rough and hard. “Are you hurt?”


Nil stepped in front of her. “Aloy. Stop. You need to rest.”

Aloy actually stopped, arrested more by his use of her real name than because she agreed with him. Before she could respond, Sylens appeared.

He looked at her, one eyebrow raised in grudging approval. “Rough-going, but you survived,” he remarked.

Suddenly Aloy was enraged. He was so bloody smug, and he wasn’t risking anything. “You knew Hades was there and you sent me to him?” she yelled.

Sylens stared back at her mercilessly. “I won’t deny I risked your life. But it was the only way. Now with the Focus network down, we can both get what we want: access to the secrets of Zero Dawn.”

Aloy felt like her chest was filling with boiling water. In this moment, she hated Sylens, with his smug tone and his treating her like a child and his stupid insider knowledge. “I’m past trusting you with secrets,” she hissed. She shoved Nil out of her way and started striding through the jungle, ignoring the pain that jolted through her body with every step.

Unfortunately, as long as her Focus was on her face, she couldn’t outrun her digital antagonist. Sylens appeared in front of her again, stopping her short. “Good,” he said. “That means you’re wising up. Trust is for fools. It shifts and crumbles like sand; a poor foundation for any partnership. But mutual self-interest?” He eyed her appraisingly. “Now that is a solid bedrock upon which you and I might build a new science of understanding. We both need answers, Aloy. Thanks to you, we’re on the verge of grasping them. At Sunfall, we’ll speak again.” And without further ado, he disappeared.

“Damn him,” Aloy hissed, then finally her anger and her energy fizzled out and she sat abruptly on the ground.

A moment later, Nil crouched beside her. Aloy glanced at him, but didn’t speak. She was so tired and cold and wet, and suddenly all she wanted was for Nil to take her in his arms and hold her.

Then he spoke. “You should have let me come with you.”
His voice was as flat and neutral as his face, and Aloy’s anger sparked back into flame, this time tinged with hurt. After what she’d just been through, and Sylens’ smug superiority, now Nil was going to behave like he knew best too?

She took a lesson from Nil’s book and hid her hurt behind a mask of sarcasm. “Yeah? Then we both would’ve fallen from a burning bridge and almost drowned. What a great plan that would’ve been.” She pulled her knees up to her chest and wrapped her arms around them, shivering slightly from the cold.

Nil noticed her discomfort and set about to building a fire. In stony silence, Aloy watched as he cleared the nearby vegetation, dug a small pit in the sand, formed a circle with some rocks, and built up a comfortable blaze. Then he sat across the fire from her.

Aloy swallowed another pang of distress. Despite her irritation at him, she had hoped he would sit beside her. She just wanted…

She laid her cheek on her knees so she wouldn’t have to look at him. A sudden wave of loneliness washed over her, and for a second she wished she was actually alone. When she was by herself, solitude was something she could master.

Then Nil spoke. “I was… scared. For you.”

She raised her face and looked at him across the fire. “If you had come, we would have both been in danger,” she insisted. She knew she was right about this. “Besides, you said you would follow my lead. I told you I had to do some things alone, that you couldn’t always come. You said you agreed to that. It’s not fair for you to get mad when you can’t come.”

Aloy took a deep breath, then glared at him. “I don’t need you to be scared for me. I can look after myself. Don’t you trust that?”

And there it was: the insidious little seed that Sylens had planted with his cold, clinical speech. Aloy had thought she’d dismissed Sylens’ words out of hand, but now that the words had left her lips, she suddenly wondered if he had a point. What if Nil didn’t trust her ability to keep herself safe? How could she trust him if he wouldn’t listen to her judgment? What was the point of this partnership?

She hid her face again against her knees. Moments later, she heard a rustling as Nil stood, then came and crouched at her side. “Suntress.”

His voice was deep, soft, close to her ear. A burst of longing bloomed in her chest, but she kept her face turned away from him.

“Suntress. I trust your skill. You’re a Stormbird, remember? A demon of lightning and blood. I’ve never seen you fail to take out an enemy, metal or flesh. But what happened up there was… outside of your control. Outside of anyone’s control,” he amended, as she shot him a sideways glare. He shrugged. “I was... worried about you.”

“It doesn’t help me for you to worry,” she snapped, finally turning her head to look at him. “You want to help? Be there when I need you, and wait for me when I don’t. That’s how you can help.”

Nil gazed back at her, his silver eyes reflecting the firelight. Finally he nodded, then sat beside her. “I’ll follow your rules, Suntress. Promise.”

Aloy gave a little disbelieving laugh. “Just like that. You’ll do what I say, just like that?”

He raised an eyebrow at her and smirked, and the expression was so familiar, so dear, that Aloy’s
anger finally began to melt. “I don’t have much choice, do I?” he drawled. “Stubborn though you might be, you’ve pierced my heart, and the only thing that slows the flow is you. So I’ll do as you say.”

Aloy gave a great huge sigh, feeling like her remaining tension and doubt was melting away. She relaxed from her tightly-tucked position and looked Nil full in the face.

She believed that he would try to do better for her. He always did.

Nil smiled at her, and his eyes radiated warmth. “Come here,” he murmured, and pulled her into his lap, wrapping his arms around her.

Aloy sighed again, and her shivering gradually slowed as Nil’s delicious warmth seeped through her damp clothes and into her skin. She hooked her arm around his neck and pressed her face against his chest, feeling like she was being warmed from the inside out as she finally, finally got the comfort from him that she’d wanted.

_Stupid Sylens_, she thought to herself contentedly. _He doesn’t know what he’s talking about._

Some time later, Nil’s voice rumbled soothingly in her ear. “Are you ready to go, Suntress?”

Aloy shook her head. “Not just yet. A little longer.”

Just a little more of Nil’s warmth, and she’d be ready to move on.

Chapter End Notes

Awww, awkward Nil is awkward with Aloy's friends. But she loves him anyway. :3

As always, so much thanks and gratitude for your comments and your readership! Niloy fam forever. Love you supernerds.
Changes

Chapter Summary

Nil accompanies Aloy as she does some favours for Vanasha, and suggests to Aloy that she should try saying ‘no’ once in a while.

This chapter covers the Traitor’s Bounty and Queen’s Gambit sidequests.

10 XP to anyone who catches a little line from the movie Troy (the one with Brad Pitt)!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A few days later, Suntress led them to the slums of Sunfall. The late morning sun was high overhead when she turned to Nil. “Wait here for me,” she said gently. “I’ll try to come back and update you before I go into the Orbital Launch Base.”

Nil nodded silently. He was wary of saying the wrong thing, so he drank her in with his eyes instead. She was wearing heavy Carja armour, and her bird-shaped diadem glinted in the sun. Nil knew it was largely decorative, that she was wearing it as a faint attempt to blend in, but it comforted him to think she had a symbol of the Stormbird on her person. He wondered now if dissuading her from colouring her hair all those months ago had been a disservice to her. She’d stand out less if her hair wasn’t so… red. If only it was some other colour, something less brilliant…

But Nil couldn’t say any of this. He’d spent much of the past few days working through more new feelings. But these feelings were... distressing. Unfortunately, it seemed that being in love with Suntress went hand in hand with worrying about her. Even more unfortunately, Suntress had made it clear that she did not like the worrying.

Fear. Fear for her safety. That was this new feeling, and Nil hated it. He’d never felt fear before. Nil was the hunter; he was the one who brought fear, who engendered it in his enemies - encouraged it, even, as it sweetened the eventual theft of life from his hapless victims. But to feel fear himself? It was so uncomfortable.

Nil’s thoughts were brought back to the present at the soft touch of her palm on his cheek. Then she was pressed against him, one hand on his cheek and the other on his shoulder as she kissed him gently.

He wrapped his arms around her bare waist and pulled her tightly to him, deepening the kiss and stroking his tongue into her mouth in an attempt to tell her to be fucking careful. After a long, bittersweet moment, she pulled away, smiled at him, and ran up the steps into the Citadel.

And as always, but this time with a faint roiling of nausea in his gut, Nil settled down to wait.

To pass the time, he observed the residents of the refugee camp. Skinny children with barely the energy to run. A few pregnant women who, despite their rounded bellies, had too-thin arms and too-hollowed cheeks. A few nobles swanning up and down the Citadel steps. Nil observed it all impassively.
His attention was briefly pulled by a noblewoman in rich purple silks and veils who, incongruously, stopped to give food to a gaggle of dirty urchins. *Unusual,* he thought briefly, *but not likely a threat.* He then continued his emotionless observation.

When Suntress descended the steps a short time later, a disgruntled look on her face, Nil stood with relief but also confusion. What was she doing back? He hadn’t been sure when to expect her, but it definitely hadn’t been this soon.

She caught his eye and the corner of her mouth tilted up ruefully, then she jerked her chin towards the purple-silked noblewoman. Nil raised his eyebrows with surprise, but joined her as she approached the noblewoman.

The woman turned as they approached and smiled at Suntress. Her dark eyes sparkled mischievously, and suddenly Nil recognized her from his former life in Meridian. She’d been a courtier, but he didn’t know her name.

“I’ve heard whispers about you,” the woman said to Suntress. She shifted her weight to one hip and cocked her head coily. “Rides machines, fancy spear, delightful freckles. Some even say you have a conscience. How extraordinary!” She grinned yet more widely, then her gaze slid to Nil.

“I know *you* as well. The disgraced Carja prince. Come to join your compatriots in the Citadel?” she asked sweetly, but her smile was as sharp as knives.

Nil stared down at her, unimpressed. “I’m no prince. And I go where she goes.” He nodded to Suntress.

The woman’s eyes sparkled again, and she bit the tip of her tongue saucily as she looked at Suntress again. “She has a pet prince, too! Extraordinary indeed.”

Suntress raised one eyebrow. Nil couldn’t tell whether she was amused or annoyed. “Who are *you*?” she said bluntly. “You’re obviously not one of the Shadow Carja.”

The woman smirked. “My name is Vanasha. For now, all you need to know is I’m a whisper of reason in this howling pit of insanity.”

Suntress grinned. *Amused then,* Nil decided. “I know how that feels,” Suntress said.

Vanasha smiled. “I’m sure you do. And so does Uthid. He’s a good man, so naturally the Shadow Carja want to murder him. I’ve done some digging, and I think he’s headed for the Greenclimb. It won’t take long for the mercenaries to find him. He could use some help, if you’re so inclined.”

*Ithid.* Nil rolled the name around in his mind, then connected it to a face. Ah yes, a very loyal soldier of the Sun. A Captain of old honour, old religion, and also, well, just *old:* Nil’s memory conjured the image of a stern, unsmiling man in his late forties.

Nil waited patiently while Suntress spoke to Vanasha. It seemed that this Uthid soldier had been accused of trying to kill the boy king. As always, Suntress agreed to help, and she and Nil headed down the path away from Sunfall.

Nil glanced at Suntress. “I thought you were going to that Orbital Base place. What happened?”

Suntress gave an impatient sigh. “She asked me for help, and I agreed.” She smiled up at him. “I don’t mind helping. It’s just…” She sighed again. “The answers are so close. I’m this close to finding out what Zero Dawn was… How Elisabet Sobeck stopped the machines from destroying everything.”
Nil raised one eyebrow at her as she whistled for two Chargers. “You know, you could have said ‘no’. It’s very easy.”

Suntress hoisted herself onto her Charger and looked down at him, sardonic disbelief written across her smile. “Really now? I’m pretty sure the last person I said ‘no’ to was you. When you asked me to fight you. To the death.” She turned her Charger and started off towards the Greenclimb in an easy lope.

Nil hopped onto his Charger and squeezed it with his heels to catch up with her. “And look how well it worked out for you. Now you have a pet prince,” he deadpanned.

Suntress shot him an apologetic look. “That was… needlessly rude of her,” she said softly. “Does it bother you?”

Nil shrugged and gave her a lazy smile. “No,” he said, and he meant it. He didn’t care what anyone said. The only person whose opinion mattered was Suntress’s, and fuck all the rest.

A short ride later, they arrived at the landmark Vanasha had pointed out. “All right, now to find Uthid’s tracks,” Suntress muttered. They dismounted their Chargers and followed the invisible tracks picked out by her Focus.

The climb itself was easy enough, but the Glinthawks they met were a huge nuisance. Nil helped Suntress as best he could, but by the time the damn birds were felled, he was out of breath and annoyed. Glinthawks, he thought with disgust. Why is it always Glinthawks?

Quietly they continued in Uthid’s wake. But twenty paces later, an arrow thunked into the snow at their feet.

Immediately they both crouched behind some rocky cover, and a gravelly voice called out, “The next one doesn’t miss.”

Nil scowled. It certainly won’t, if you try that again. My next arrow will slide straight into your eye socket, he thought. But Suntress seemed to be in a more charitable mood than he. “Uthid?” she called. “I’m not here for the price on your head. I believe you’re innocent.”

“No,” he said, and he meant it. He didn’t care what anyone said. The only person whose opinion mattered was Suntress’s, and fuck all the rest.

Finally Suntress and Nil approached the veteran soldier. Suntress held out her hands placatingly. “I want to know what happened at Sunfall,” she said firmly. “What really happened.”

Nil listened with a fraction of his attention as Uthid explained some scheme, dreamed up by High Priest Bahavas, to cull the weak among the refugees. As Uthid reached the end of his tale, he sighed. Twenty years I gave to the Sun, and for what? Malice and murder? As for honour, true sacrifice, the kind that priests and rulers know nothing about… it’s all a fat joke.

If it’s honour you seek, the Sun Carja seem trustworthy. A little stuck-up, but trustworthy, Suntress said.

Uthid shook his head. “Those Carja once raided your Nora lands. Raided every land we could reach! It was the Sun’s will. I did what I was told. Others did worse... but as their captain, I…”

Suntress interrupted him, her voice firm but surprisingly patient. “Uthid, I don’t care what you did. I can’t absolve you. But the Carja are changing their ways.” She looked up at Nil with a small smile, then back at Uthid. “You could too.”
At this, Uthid looked at Nil as though seeing him for the first time. His eyes widened in recognition. “You’re… Kadar. The Shadow Carja prince. But…”

Suntress interrupted again, and her voice was even more firm. “His name is Nil now. And if he can change, so can you.”

Nil said nothing. He didn’t think he had changed; he was still the same killer. He still loved the slow drip of blood from a well-placed wound. But it seemed that his silence would serve her argument better here.

Indeed, Uthid stared at Nil for a moment longer, then said, “Perhaps. But Avad doesn’t understand what the Sun demands of its soldiers.”

Suntress tilted her head to the side. “Or perhaps he understands too well?”

“Now you sound like the Blameless Marad,” Uthid muttered, and Suntress smirked.

Suddenly a cacophony of yells ripped through the air, and Nil was instantly alert, his blood singing in his veins. It sounded like at least a dozen voices rending the air. An excellent challenge, he thought, his excitement rising.

“Mercenaries,” Uthid grunted. “Think they’ll all line up to tell me I’m innocent?”

“You didn’t make it hard to be followed,” Suntress snapped as she pulled her bow from her back. “Almost as though you wanted it all to end in a showdown.”

“Nothing gets past you,” Uthid said. Then the three of them waited for the mercenaries to come within range.

The fight was bloody and fierce, but not nearly long enough for Nil’s liking. The mercs came in four waves, then disappointingly the bloodshed was done. Nil, Suntress and Uthid climbed higher into the mountains towards a path that Uthid said would eventually lead back to a safe path down.

Nil had to admit to some surprise when the High Priest himself appeared, with three guards to protect him. Only three? Nil thought with disappointment. The odds weren’t even challenging. The trio of guards was soundly eliminated, then the Carja Captain took his revenge and killed the priest.

Nil was idly ransacking the High Priest’s guards when a cheerful female voice called out over the keening of the wind. “That was quite a fireworks show!”

Suntress looked up, impatiently tossing an errant braid over her shoulder. “You took your time,” she called out as Vanasha approached.

Vanasha smiled at the three of them as they gathered around her. “I was busy. Who do you think took care of that final merc band? And I had to organize passage to Meridian for a wanted man.” She looked at Uthid and Nil. “Gentlemen, give us a moment. Girl talk.”

Uthid obediently moved away, but Nil folded his arms obstinately and didn’t budge from Suntress’s side. He knew where this was going. This woman’s going to ask another favour, and Suntress won’t be able to say no, he thought.

Vanasha raised her eyebrows at him expectantly, but he stared flatly back at her without blinking. Suntress folded her arms as well. “Speak, Vanasha. What is it?”

Vanasha stared hard at him and pursed her lips - the first sign of annoyance Nil had yet seen on her
“Remember Itamen and Nasadi, the child king and his mother guarded like hostages at Sunfall? With Bahavas gone, no one will be watching them. I want to get them out, and I could use your help.”

Nil opened his mouth to refuse on Suntress’s behalf, but she was already speaking. “What do you need to get Nasadi and Itamen out of Sunfall?”

Vanasha relaxed visibly and smiled at Suntress. “With Bahavas dead, Sunfall is the easy part. I’ll handle that. The big fuss will be crossing the border to the Sundom. Find my friend Three-Toed Huadiv near the Branded Shore. I hired him and his crew to sweep the path, so all you have to do is wait for me.”

Suntress and Nil raised their eyebrows in tandem. “If this Huadiv has already cleared the area, why do you need me?” she asked, her voice dripping with the same skepticism that Nil felt.

“Contingencies, little huntress,” Vanasha purred. “Something will go wrong. I need protection I can count on: you.”

Nil turned to Suntress. “You don’t have to do this,” he murmured, but she held up a hand to silence him and looked at Vanasha. “I’ll try not to disappoint,” she said.

Vanasha beamed at her, then cut her sharp dark eyes back to Nil. “You’ll be helpful too in a pinch, Pet Prince. I saw you taking down those mercs. Your aim is very… sharp.” Her eyes slid provocatively from his face down along the length of his body. “Besides, blood is thicker than water. You’ll be helping your own family.”

“You’re right. Blood is thicker than water. And I’ll make sure yours drips very slowly if this goes badly,” he told her in a cold voice.

“Nil,” Suntress hissed, but he ignored her as Vanasha bared her teeth in a grin that only a fool would call a smile. “Then let’s make sure nothing bad happens, shall we?” she trilled playfully. “We all have jobs to do.” Vanasha turned to Suntress again, and her manner softened into friendliness. “Aloy, thank you again. I’ll see you soon.” She walked off towards Uthid, leaving Nil and Suntress alone.

Suntress pursed her lips at him and jerked her head towards the path down the mountain, and Nil followed in resignation. He’d done it again, said something to displease her.

They walked in silence for a short while, then Suntress stopped and turned to him, her arms folded. Nil stopped as well and looked down at her, waiting for the inevitable dressing-down.

But to his surprise, Suntress smirked and shook her head. “You don’t like Vanasha, do you?”

Nil looked at her in surprise. “I don’t like anyone, Suntress. Except-”

“Except me, I know,” she said, but her voice was gentle. “But you really don't like Vanasha. Why?”

Nil frowned at her. Suntress wasn't usually this thick. “All she’s done since she met you is ask for your help. She interferes with your goals.”

Suntress’s face cleared and she unfolded her arms. “You think she's taking advantage of me,” she said, and Nil nodded.

Suntress sighed and tilted her head at him. “Nil… A lot of people ask me for help. And I can help, so there's no excuse to say no.” Suddenly she looked away, a pensive look on her face, and when she
turned back to him, she looked more determined than usual. “The strength to stand alone… is the strength to help those who can’t,” she said carefully.

“I don't understand,” Nil said.

Suntress smiled at him in exasperation. “You can't threaten everyone who asks me for help,” she stated clearly. “It's going to keep happening, and I’m going to keep saying yes. You have to curb it on the threats.”

Nil sighed loudly, but his Suntress’s face was implacable. “Fine,” he grunted, and he and Suntress continued their walk towards the Branded Shore. “But I still don't like Vanasha.”

Suntress smirked. “Well, I think she likes you. The look she gave you…” Suntress ran her eyes sensually over Nil’s body in a perfect imitation of Vanasha’s earlier look, but Nil didn't rise to the bait (well, parts of him did, but still).

“You must be joking,” Nil said flatly, and Suntress laughed. “Yeah, mostly,” she said, and poked him playfully in the chest. “Now come on, let's go meet this Three-Toed Huadiv.”

Vanasha was full of shit.

When Nil and Suntress met Huadiv, it was to discover the old merc sitting alone and injured and whining about some rock-throwing beast in the pass.

"Cleared the way, my ass," Nil thought in irritation.

“Rockbreaker,” Suntress muttered, and immediately headed into the pass, with Nil and his misgivings close on her heels. Suntress destroyed the heinous machine, barking orders at him which he followed dutifully. Then Vanasha showed up with the royal family and two guards in tow. She sent the child king and the Dowager Queen through the pass with Huadiv while she, Suntress, Nil eliminated the Shadow Carja troops who had followed in pursuit of the royal family.

Then an earth-shattering roar split the air, making the hairs at the back of Nil’s neck stand up on end. Thunderjaw.

Suntress turned to Vanasha, and her face was so intense with focus that her eyes were practically sparking. “This one’s mine,” she told Vanasha. “Get to the boat.”

Vanasha nodded briskly, her eyes fixed on the direction of the horrific roar. “You know, this time I think I might be out of my league.” She turned to the two Carja guards who had accompanied her. “If anything happens to the huntress, I will be very cross.” The guards saluted smartly, and Vanasha ran off towards the shore.

Nil watched her go, his lip curled slightly with disdain, then turned to find Suntress staring at him like a demon of war, her eyes still burning with wild ferocity. “Are you ready?” she said.

Nil nodded. He’d never tackled a Thunderjaw, but he was powerless to do anything but comply with the authority that was practically sparking from her skin.

“I’ll shoot off the disc launchers and tie it down. You grab the disc launchers and shoot the machine. Got it?” she barked, and Nil nodded again, then followed her as she sprinted forward.

Suntress was as good as her word; as soon as she was within range, she took the disc launchers off the Thunderjaw with two well-aimed tearblast arrows, then dodged close and began tying the beast down with her ropecaster. Nil did as she’d commanded and grabbed the nearest disc launcher and
blasted the Thunderjaw until the ammo was depleted.

The Thunderjaw gave an enormous roar, and Nil looked up sharply; Suntress was shooting arrow after hardpoint arrow at a very specific spot on the Thunderjaw’s side, her lip curled in an animalistic snarl. Nil swallowed a sudden, inappropriate bolt of lust and ran towards the second disc launcher.

Soon, the disc launchers were empty, but the Thunderjaw was still roaring. It had broken free of its ropes, and though it was sparking with damage, it was still perfectly capable of eviscerating them if they got too close.

“Fire arrows!” Suntress called to him. “Just pelt it with fire!”

Nil nodded, but wondered what she was going to do. He followed her instructions, shooting high to prevent her from getting hit by the fallout, but watched anxiously as she darted around the beast, tying it down again with her Ropecaster… and it toppled over onto its side with an earth-shaking CRASH.

“You’re down!” she yelled, and slammed her spearpoint into the spot in the Thunderjaw’s side that she’d previously attacked with arrows. After one last ear-splitting shriek of metallic rage, the Thunderjaw sparked and fell quiet.

Slowly Suntress rose to her feet, then tossed her hair back and whirled her spear deftly before storing it on her back. Then she grinned at Nil.

He was already striding towards her on an unstoppable course. He didn’t even give her time to speak before wrapping his arms around her waist and lifting her off her feet with a fierce kiss.

Suntress wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him back with equal ferocity, her tongue plunging into his mouth to tangle with his. Nil’s body sparked to life, his heart pounding with wild joy at her heat, her violence, the smell of burning metal and blood in the air.

A long, delicious moment later, he broke the kiss and grinned at her. “You’re terrifying, Suntress. It’s a true pleasure to behold.”

She threw her head back and laughed wildly, and the sound resonated through Nil’s body, making him feel almost dizzy with lust and love combined. How had he lived this long without this woman making him feel this way?

Finally he set her back on her feet, and together with Vanasha’s two guards, they ran towards the shoreline to join Vanasha, Huadiv, and the little king and his mother.

Nil and Vanasha pushed the boat into the water, then hopped aboard for the short trip across the channel to Brightmarket. Slowly Nil walked over to stand behind Suntress at the bow of the boat; she was standing with her arms folded, her face serious and her eyes narrowed against the dancing glare of the evening sun off the water’s gentle waves. She glanced back at him as he joined her, and her lips tilted in a half smile that he returned.

Then Vanasha sidled up on Suntress’s other side. “You’ve done a good thing,” she said softly. “Maybe even ended a war.”

“Maybe,” Suntress murmured. “But my war just keeps going.”

Vanasha squeezed her arm, then rejoined Itamen and Nasadi on one of the boat’s two benches. Nil took a step closer to Suntress until her back brushed against his chest.
“You’ll have your vengeance, Suntress. Your every foe falls beneath your arrows. Soon you’ll look down on Helis’s corpse and smile.”

Suntress sighed and leaned into him. “It’s more than just vengeance, Nil. It’s… the knowledge that our whole world is based on. The machines, us… I need to know what happened. I need to get back to Zero Dawn.”

“You will,” he reassured her. “Tonight.” As he said it, he felt the return of that trepidation, that fear that accompanied the idea of her in danger… but he quashed it, refusing to let it show in his face.

She turned her head to look at him. “You don’t mind going straight back to Sunfall right away?”

Nil shook his head. “No. Let’s find your answers.”

Another half-smile graced her lovely face, and she leaned into him fully, tucking her head back against his cheek. He encircled her shoulders from behind with one arm, and she lifted a hand to grasp his wrist, her fingers squeezing affectionately.

A short time later, the little boat slid into the docks at Brightmarket, and the Sun-King himself was striding down the docks with four guards in tow. Suntress slipped out from Nil’s arm to help Vanasha tie the boat, and Nil observed the Sun-King impassively as he stepped off the boat.

Nil hadn’t seen Avad for over two years. Avad looked older, careworn. The Sun-King knelt in front of Itamen and murmured something to him, then smiled and ushered Itamen and Nasadi towards the guards.

Then Avad turned to Suntress, his face glowing with a happiness that made him look more like himself. “Aloy… it seems I see your influence everywhere. You’ve done so much for the Sundom, and it will always be appreciated. You have my thanks.” Suntress smiled and nodded formally.

Then Avad turned to Nil with a tentative smile. “Kadar… Nil. Aloy has told me of your travels together. I’m… pleased for you. You’re a fortunate man to keep company with this Nora huntress.”

Nil nodded his head, unsmiling. “Yes.”

Avad’s smile became rueful, then he bowed to Nil and Suntress both. “May you walk in the light,” he said, then gestured politely for Vanasha to follow him as he walked away.

Vanasha snorted as she stepped up beside Suntress. “Appalling. I spend two years in the Forbidden West setting this up, and the redhead gets all the credit?”

Suntress grinned at Vanasha, who smiled back broadly. “I couldn’t have done this without you,” Vanasha said seriously, then squeezed Suntress’s arm once more before jogging after Avad. “When we meet again, I’ll give you a proper thanks. I promise!”

Finally alone again, Nil thought with exasperated relief. He turned to Suntress to find her grinning at him.

“What?” he said, one eyebrow raised, and she shook her head with amusement. “Just… you and Avad. It’s like day and night.”

Nil shrugged unconcernedly. Then he remembered something from earlier that he’d meant to ask her. “Suntress. You told Uthid that I had changed. Were you just trying to get him to follow your plan?”

Nil huffed with amusement. “No I haven’t.”

Suntress smiled slowly at him, her green-and-gold eyes sparkling. “You have. You used to travel alone, you focused only on killing bandits. You wanted to kill me. Now you’re travelling with me, you’re helping to eliminate the Eclipse even though you said you wouldn’t. You… care. That’s different from the boy - from the man that Avad described.”

Nil frowned at her pensively. Finally he said, “The only difference is you. I care about you. Nothing else has changed.”

“It’s okay, Nil,” Suntress replied reassuringly. “It’s the same for me. Erend said I’m different, more relaxed now since I met you.” She shrugged. “I don’t think you can love someone without it changing you at least a little bit.” Then her cheeks suddenly flamed red with embarrassment.

Nil’s mouth dropped open in surprise. *Did she just say what I think...?* But before he could grab her, make her say it again, she was running away, up the docks into Brightmarket. “I have to get some wire! I’ll be back!” she yelled over her shoulder.

Nil smirked and turned back towards the water. Then suddenly he was laughing alone on the dock, laughing silently so he wouldn’t draw attention, but he couldn’t stop.

That feeling he’d been getting, that pressure behind his sternum, felt like it was bursting and dissolving joyfully into the air like bubbles from a bottle of beer. Suntress loved him. And Nil now knew he had everything he’d ever need.

Chapter End Notes

Two things:

1. I just want to point out that I really like Vanasha. Like all of the female NPCs in the game, she is one cool girl. But Nil doesn’t like her, and it’s his POV that matters here... HAHA
2. Back to Sunfall now, guys. And you all know what happens there… O_o
Aloy invites Nil to join her in the ruins under Sunfall as she discovers the secrets of Project Zero Dawn.

Darkness was falling by the time Nil and Suntress returned to Sunfall. Nil slowed as they reached the slums, expecting to wait as he usually did, but Suntress grabbed his hand.

“Come with me,” she said.

Nil looked at her, surprised but pleased. He’d stopped hoping she would let him follow her into the Old Ones’ ruins. “You sure?”

She smiled, her eyes glowing warmly in the light of the nearby torches. “Yes. You’ve earned it. Now come on, quietly.”

He darted after her up the steps into the Citadel. Predictably, the court was in an uproar in the wake of Bahavas’s death and the royal family’s escape, and Suntress and Nil were ignored as they slipped over a banister and climbed down the rock face surrounding the Sun Ring. Soon they reached a ventilation shaft that was covered with an old wooden gate. One after the other, they rappelled down the shaft.

Suntress landed lightly on the balls of her feet and eagerly strode into the cavern, but Nil stopped dead, his eyes widening as he took in the size of the cavern. It was… huge. A vast room, studded with stalactites and stalagmites. But the most astounding feature of the cavern was the far wall.

It was entirely metal, adorned with a huge carved triangular symbol that was easily three times his height. Nil had never seen the like during any of his travels, but Suntress was walking towards it without hesitation, as though it was commonplace. When she was just a few metres from the wall, the seams in the triangular symbol glowed red.


Suntress fisted her hands in her hair in frustration. “Are you kidding me? There’s got to be another way!”

Nil approached cautiously, a prickle of unfamiliar unease running down his spine as he watched her. This was what she’d been doing all this time, in these ruins? Talking to these… machine voices?

Suntress glared at the metal wall. “Hey! Elisabet Sobeck here, requesting access!”

The machine voice sounded again, its cool voice resonating through the cavern. “Access request acknowledged. Root command functions available. Do you wish to proceed?”
“I do! Get me through this door!” Suntress shouted, and *banged* the wall with her hand. Nil flinched - if the wall could glow and, well, *talk*, what else could it do?

A sudden display of orange and blue light appeared on the face of the wall, numbers and unfamiliar glyphs, and Suntress fiddled with them for a moment. Then suddenly the wall *split* apart. Suntress flung herself clear as a huge rush of air emerged from the opened wall, making the cavern tremble like an earthquake.

Instinctively Nil grabbed her and pulled her into the shelter of his body until the trembling subsided. As soon as it was safe, Suntress pulled away from him and strode through the now-wide open wall, then looked up with a frown of annoyance. “Guess you can’t have everything,” she muttered.

Nil joined her and looked up as well. Air was flooding noisily up through a huge vent in the ceiling just behind the newly-opened wall, and Nil understood the implications: the air had to go somewhere, and that somewhere was likely just outside of the Sun Ring… attracting the attention of the Shadow Carja, and the Eclipse.

Apparently Suntress’s mysterious correspondent felt the same way, because Suntress was scowling as she listened to her glowing Focus. “Last thing I checked, *I* was the one risking my life down here,” she snapped, then met Nil’s eyes and sighed.

“Come on. We need to be quick,” she told him briskly, then strode confidently into the labyrinthine depths of the chamber.

“Suntress… where are we?” Nil asked as he followed her slowly. He was glad that his voice sounded steady, because his hands were shaking. This entire… experience was beyond anything he’d ever known. And Suntress’s obvious mastery of these types of surroundings was staggering him even further.

She turned and opened her mouth to reply, but before she could speak, a nasal-sounding machine voice interjected: “Welcome to Project Zero Dawn.”

“Finally! We found it!” she hissed, then prowled around the room carefully, her Focus glowing as she stopped and examined various defunct objects scattered around the destroyed room.

While she worked, Nil stood in the middle of the room, taking everything in, trying to force himself to get accustomed to the strangeness of it all. Almost everything was coated in a thick layer of limestone, and anything that wasn’t partly calcified was rusting. But underneath the ruin and decay, Nil could see clear signs of civilization, of organization.

Then Suntress called out to him. “Nil. Come on.”

He joined her where she stood, his eyes widening once again as he noticed what she was looking at. She was facing a metal panel the size of a door, but there was no handle or knob; instead, a ring of blue and red light glowed in its centre. Suntress reached towards the ring of light and twisted her hand… and the ring of light glowed green. A formerly-invisible seam appeared in the centre of the door-panel and it slid apart neatly, revealing another chamber.

Nil’s eyes flew to Suntress’s face. She was frowning in concentration, looking more focused and determined than he’d ever seen, and Nil realized again that none of this was unusual to her.

This was what Suntress had been doing in these ruins. This… magic.

*No. Magic is for priests and children*, Nil told himself scornfully. But he had no other simple explanation for what she was doing, manipulating light and machines with her bare fingertips.
He followed her into a large room with a ring in the centre that looked like a stage. “What was this place?” Suntress whispered to herself, and Nil felt a jolt of surprise that she didn’t know. Her movements thus far had shown nothing but confidence.

Then a man appeared in the middle of the room. Nil jolted back, crouched in a defensive position with his knife in hand before he could think. He peered more closely at the figure of the man: it wasn’t real. It was… light. A man made of light…

Suntress watched the light-figure attentively as it introduced itself as General Herres, and Nil was again seized by the feeling that her acceptance of this obscenely foreign situation was just as unnerving as the situation itself.

The light-figure continued speaking, but Nil only understood a fraction of the words. Faro Plague… global extinction… polyphasic entangled waveforms… Operation Enduring Victory. It meant nothing to him, but Suntress listened with her eyes narrowed in concentration, seeming to understand every unusual word and phrase.

When the light-figure disappeared, Suntress sighed, and her Focus glowed blue as she spoke into it. “That doesn’t make sense. Life on earth didn’t cease to exist!” she hissed. “Somehow… Somehow Elisabet saved us. I’ve got to keep looking, find out how she did it.”

Then her eyes drifted to Nil, and she took a step towards him. “Are you okay?” she asked, her face creased with a frown.

Nil wasn’t sure how to answer. He felt like he was in a dream, or perhaps a nightmare. This place, Suntress’s mystifying actions and her brusque demeanour, his own feelings of trepidation and uncertainty… everything was strange and unfamiliar, and suddenly he wanted to wake up.

But he didn’t know how to articulate all of that, so he shrugged.

Suntress smiled, and suddenly she looked like herself again, her hazel eyes glimmering with humour. “It’s strange. I know,” she said.

Sarcasm was the easiest response, and Nil seized onto it with relief. “It’s not so bad. Throw a few bloody corpses in the corners and I’ll be right at home,” he drawled.

Suntress grinned more widely, then cupped his face in her hands and pulled him down to press her forehead against his. “I’m glad you’re here,” she said softly. “You’re better company than Sylens. He’s such a—”

“I can hear you,” interrupted an unfamiliar disapproving voice, and Nil realized he was hearing the voice of Suntress’s mystery companion through her Focus, as they were so close together. “Stop wasting time with sentimentality and get moving. We have more to learn.”

Abruptly Suntress pressed herself against Nil and kissed him hard. Instinctively he slid his hands around her waist, meeting her tongue with his, and faintly he heard a disgusted sound emanating from Suntress’s Focus. But Nil didn’t care; her reassuring warmth and the familiar heat of her mouth were melting away his worries.

Finally she broke away from Nil. “How’s that for sentimental, Sylens?” she barked into the air, then smirked at Nil and pulled him through to the next room.

It was an auditorium with rows of seats and a stage. Another light-figure appeared on the stage, this time a woman, and Nil’s jaw dropped in utter shock. “It’s you,” he said stupidly.
Suntress squeezed his hand, then slowly walked down the steps towards the stage. “It’s Elisabet,” she breathed, and suddenly Nil understood: this was the mystery woman, the woman Suntress had talked about who looked uncannily like her.

The light-figure Elisabet spoke, and more images of colour and light appeared around her in a dizzying kaleidoscope. Again, Nil hardly understood a word, but he watched the play of emotions over Suntress’s face: comprehension, awe, horror, then sadness.

The light-figure disappeared, and Suntress turned away from the stage, her face tense with distress and confusion. “Elisabet did this. For life. For us. But… why HADES then?” she asked, and Nil knew she was speaking to Sylens. “If it was part of GAIA, how did it end up in the wreckage of a Faro robot? And APOLLO… the archive of knowledge… what happened to that?” Her gaze drifted aimlessly around the auditorium as she listened to Sylens, and finally she nodded briefly and headed through to the next room.

And so they continued, moving from room to room with Suntress stopping to scan various ancient objects with her Focus, and multiple light-figures appearing and talking incomprehensibly. Their journey was interrupted a few times by small groups of Eclipse fighters, which Nil and Suntress dispatched quickly and quietly.

A long time and many disorienting turns and corridors later, Suntress led them into a smaller room with a huge glass window. It was sparsely furnished with a run-down calcified desk that glowed incongruously with a sharp display of orange and blue light.

Suntress’s posture suddenly straightened as though she’d been electrified. “The alpha registry master file!” she gasped, and she skidded over to the desk, her face alight with hope as she peered at the light display.

“No signs of corruption,” she muttered, and Nil joined her to peer at the display. He had no idea what she was talking about; how could these lights be corrupted? They weren't a machine.

Through Suntress’s Focus, Nil could hear Sylens’ sharp voice. “Then what are you waiting for? Copy the file!”

Suntress’s hand swiped and prodded with sure grace over the display. “With this, I can restore the registry to the hatch inside All-Mother Mountain,” she breathed. “Open it, go inside…”

“And grasp the secrets within,” Sylens added.

Suntress leaned back and paced impatiently in front of the display. “Where I was born… maybe… maybe who gave birth to me…?” She smiled tentatively at Nil.

But Sylens spoke again, and though his voice was faint through Suntress’s Focus, Nil could hear the scorn in his voice loud and clear. “‘Who’? Are you really so naive? There’ll be no ‘who’ waiting for you there, Aloy. Whatever birthed you into the world was a ‘what’, not a ‘who’.”

Suntress whirled back towards the display, a grimace of rage contorting her features. “You bastard!” she hissed venomously, her eyes shining with unshed tears.

Instinctively Nil reached out to her, sliding his hand up her back to cradle the back of her neck, but she ignored him. She was breathing hard, and Nil could feel the tension in her neck muscles as she listened to Sylens’ cold reply.

“No, I had a legitimate birth. It’s you, Aloy, who are the creation of a machine. But what kind of machine? And why were you created?”
Just then, a subtle movement at the corner of Nil’s eye caught his attention. He turned sharply toward the movement and looked through the smeared glass window behind the desk.

Shadowy figures sliding down ropes...

Nil’s fingers tensed at the back of Suntress's neck. “Eclipse,” he grunted.

Suntress spun and looked through the window, her delicate lips curling into a snarl.

Sylens’ sharp reply was clearly audible through her Focus. “You need to get out of there. What you found is too valuable. You’re too valuable!”

Suntress turned back to the light display, her fingers clenching and unclenching anxiously on the desk as she watched its shifting colours. “Come on, come on!” she hissed.

Nil’s gut suddenly felt like it had been plunged into a tub of chillwater. His keen eyesight had recognized a larger, closer figure that had just slid into view on the other side of the window. Pale. Powerful. Dead grey eyes.

A menacing orange globe smouldering in his right hand.

*Helis.*

Nil had never been afraid of Helis. It was hard for Nil to be afraid of someone when Nil considered himself to be the more skilled hunter and killer.

But it wasn't for himself that Nil was afraid now.

He didn't think. He moved faster than he'd ever moved before and tackled Suntress down to the ground.

“Hey-” Her yelp of shock was cut off as Nil landed on top of her, covering her with his body before a monstrous bloom of flame and heat exploded through the window.

Nil saw only red: the red of her hair. The red of flames. The delicious crimson red of blood.

Then everything went black.

Chapter End Notes

Fuck. What have I done.
Aloy tries to control her grief as she realizes that Helis has trapped her in the Sun Ring alone... and Nil is nowhere in sight.

Throbbing pain. *All-Mother’s mercy, make it stop.*

Blurred vision. Blink, blink a few more times. *Better. That's better.* Everything becoming clearer. But that throbbing pain over her right eye and cheekbone…

The skin felt tight. *Must be swollen.* Then she remembered: a boot to the face.

Then everything slammed back into her memory and Aloy sat upright, completely awake and alert, ignoring the throb of agony in her face that accompanied the sudden movement.

*Nil. Where’s Nil? Where… where am I?*

An uncharacteristic panic clawed at her throat as she realized she was alone. Wildly she looked around, and immediately recognized where she was: caged on the platform that hung suspended over the Citadel’s infamous Sun Ring.

Then she spotted a faint glimmer of hope: her Focus and her spear, sitting on top of a crate just adjacent to her cage. She shuffled towards the edge of the cage and reached for her spear.

“*My entire life, I’ve always known one thing with prophetic certainty: that I was destined for glory as a great champion of the Sun.*”

Aloy’s skin crawled at the sound of that voice, and her hatred was such that she was moved to use one of Nil’s worst cursewords. *Fucking Helis,* Aloy thought to herself venomously, and stretched her fingers more desperately towards her spear.

Then Helis’s booted foot appeared, and his shadow loomed over her. “*When I heard that you had survived, a doubt took root in my mind. As sure as the Sun rises and falls each day, those I am bade to kill, die. And yet I failed. How? Why?*”

*Who cares?* Aloy thought petulantly as she withdrew her hand and glared up at Helis. As he droned on, Aloy’s mind raced as she tried to come up with options. Her spear was *right there,* and her Focus. How to get them? Try to break the cage? No, it was too well-made. Distract Helis? He was so stupid that distracting him might work.

But above it all, trickling over her thoughts like poison, was a familiar and horrible feeling, one she hadn’t felt for some time, not since Rost. A throbbing ache in her chest that tried to claw its way up her throat.

*No. Shut up, Aloy, don’t go there,* she told herself fiercely. Just because Nil wasn’t here didn’t mean
he was dead.

The ache in her chest roared for release as she thought the word *dead*, and she firmly squashed it, turning her attention to Helis in an attempt to quell the feeling.

Unbelievably, he was still talking, apparently oblivious to Aloy’s divided attention. “In slaughter, I am a practiced hand. So why hesitate? Why fail my destined purpose?” he mused.

Aloy stood and stepped close to the bars. “See that scar on your cheek? You didn’t get to finish,” she gritted.

Helis raised an eyebrow. “Yes, I remember. He fought well, for a savage.”

*Savage*. Aloy hated the word, hated its implications, and *hated* the fact that Helis, this murderous pile of slag, thought he was more civilized than Rost.

She grabbed the bars and snarled. “His name was Rost, and he was a better man than you could ever hope to be!”

Helis smiled thinly, and his next comment was so disrespectful that Aloy literally saw red. “The better man is the one who doesn’t end up with his guts steaming on the ground. No, it wasn’t him. I could have finished you before he attacked. But I didn’t.”

And then he just kept *talking*. Was he going to carry on lecturing her all day? Maybe he planned to bore her to death.

Aloy pretended to listen as she unobtrusively surveyed her surroundings. Obviously Helis was going to drop her into the Sun Ring, so she needed to spot a weak point, something she could take advantage of to escape.

While he spoke, she tuned in occasionally to insult him, to challenge his ridiculous beliefs in an attempt to enrage him. If he got angry, maybe he would step closer to the bars… she could grab his knife… gut him here and now. “Do you really not hear how ridiculous you sound?” she taunted. “You’ve gone from serving an insane homicidal Sun-King to an insane homicidal machine. You’re moving *down* in the world, not up!”

Helis narrowed his eyes, but his lips remained curled in a smug smile. “You fail to grasp the point. As surely as you’ve been conquered, so has all doubt. And with certainty of belief comes unstoppable force.”

Then suddenly he tilted his head mockingly. “I almost forgot to tell you. After you crashed the Eclipse network, I sent messengers into the east to rally the forces there and mount an invasion of the Sacred Land. I ordered every Nora killed. I was hoping to catch you there... but, alas, it all seems to have been unnecessary.”

A surge of nausea roiled in her gut. *Varl and Sona. Teb. Teersa.* They had no idea, none of them. And the Nora were so weak already… “The Nora have no part to play in this. Leave them alone,” she snapped. How many people was this monster going to take from her? First Rost, then Nil, then-

*Don’t say that*, she yelled internally at herself as another ache of sadness pressed at her throat. *You don’t know it. Nil might be fine. He might be... he might be in the Orbital Launch Base still. You don’t know.* It was a desperate scrabble for hope and Aloy knew it, but she couldn’t fall into a pit of despair now. Not now.

Helis smiled, and Aloy clenched her jaw at the realization that her reaction was exactly what he’d
wanted. “Soon they’ll have no part to play in anything, that much is sure,” he purred. “In any case, I
can’t recall the order even if I wished to, thanks to your destruction of the network. You not only
doomed yourself, but an entire tribe.”

Then he reached down towards the crate, and Aloy’s blood went cold as he picked up her Focus. He
eyed it speculatively, then smiled coldly at her. “Your Focus. Such a powerful device, isn’t it? And
yet, so fragile.”

No, Aloy thought, forcing her face not to register her sudden dread. No no no, not my Focus.
Her Focus was her sixth sense, her gateway to discovery, the repository of everything she knew about
Elisabet Sobeck. She needed her Focus.

Helis crushed it between his fingers, and Aloy clenched her fists so hard that her nails bits into her
palm. Then he grinned at her. “This time, I did not hesitate. The knife has already been twisted,” he
whispered maliciously, then walked away from her.

Damn fire and spit of the Sun, Aloy cursed to herself, her hands shaking with rage. No chance of
goading him into an attack, then. She forced her attention back to the Sun Ring… and watched in
resignation as two Corruptors crawled over the walls of the stadium, then overrode a penned
Behemoth just beneath her cage.

If she had her weapons, a Behemoth would be a surmountable challenge. Without her armour or
bow, she was as good as naked. And yet…

Suddenly her cage dropped through the platform, its base flew open and Aloy slammed into the
ground, her breath driven from her lungs by the impact. But as she struggled to her feet, she wasn’t
afraid.

By corrupting the Behemoth to attack her, Helis had inadvertently given her a battering ram. Get the
Behemoth to hit those pillars. It’ll bring down the platform with my spear and weapons. Once I’m
armed, this beast is as good as done, she thought with vicious determination.

Destroying the pillars went precisely as planned, and Aloy felt vindictive satisfaction as the leftmost
pillar toppled sideways and smashed through the edge of the Sun Ring, destroying a section of the
palace. As the platform began to tumble, Aloy didn’t hesitate; she sprinted towards it, narrowing her
eyes against the debris and dust of destruction, and dragged on her Oseram sparkworker armour as
fast as she could to protect against the Behemoth’s shock attacks.

Appropriately garbed and armed, Aloy jogged back into the centre of the Sun Ring. Then, with an
insolent stare at Helis, she bowed mockingly.

She took a split second to savour the snarl of fury on his face before turning her full attention to the
Behemoth. Now you’re just a big, dumb target, she thought.

This was just another hunt; that’s all it was. Panic, grief, uncertainty - those she couldn’t handle, not
right now. But a hunt?

Easy.

Aloy had never enjoyed destroying a machine as much as she did this Behemoth. The looming threat
of Helis’s Corruptors didn’t bother her, and the roaring jeers of the Shadow Carja crowd only
encouraged her. She focused all of her rage and hatred into every arrow she shot and every spear-
strike she landed, and when the Behemoth finally fell, Aloy felt galvanized, energized, electric.

She felt like the Stormbird that Nil had always said she was.
A wave of grief smashed over her and Aloy turned away from the defeated Behemoth, tears of rage in her eyes, ready to scream defiance up at Helis. But suddenly her attention was drawn by a subtle movement off to the left, near the base of the collapsed pillar closest to the palace.

Aloy’s heart stopped. It couldn’t be. It was wishful thinking, her mind conjuring tricks to keep her hopeful. Wasn’t it?

Anxiously she took one tiny step towards the base of the pillar; she didn’t want to draw Helis’ attention in case she was right. Then she experienced a surge of relief so strong it was almost orgasmic, as she realized that her eyes weren’t deceiving her.

Nil was crawling towards the base of the pillar.

The toppled pillar had taken out the wall of the Sun Ring nearest to the ventilation shaft that led into the Old Ones’ ruins, and somehow, somehow, Nil must have climbed back up the shaft. And here he was, in the Sun Ring, alive.

Aloy watched breathlessly as he hauled himself painfully to his feet using the toppled base of the pillar. He looked like he was in complete agony. But once he was on his feet, he lifted his face and looked at her.

Aloy beamed at him, her chest swelling with a wild, uncontrollable joy at the look on his face. He was filthy, covered in blood and burns, but his silver eyes glowed fiercely and his teeth were bared in a maniacal demon’s grin.

Aloy had never seen anything more damn beautiful.

Suddenly euphoric, Aloy looked up at Helis and punched her fist into the air in victory. The jeers of the Shadow Carja audience filled her with perverse happiness as she lowered her fist and stared at Helis, waiting to see what he’d do next.

“Shadows! Kill her!” he screamed, and the two Corruptors at his sides sprang into the Sun Ring. Aloy sneered at him. This was so like him, to have machines and other men do his dirty work. Maybe he really is afraid of me, she thought scornfully.

She ignored the two Corruptors and glared up at Helis. “Why leave it to them? Come get me yourself!” she bellowed, her arms thrown wide in defiance.

At that moment, the air was rent with a sudden explosion on the far side of the Sun Ring, and Aloy stumbled to her knees. She peered suspiciously at the site of the explosion, and her mouth dropped open in shock as two blue-necked Striders and a single rider bolted into the ring.

It was Sylens.

Aloy experienced a strange feeling of familiar-meets-unfamiliar at the sight of him in the flesh, no longer just an abstract figure of holographic light. Sylens slammed a lure into the centre of the Sun Ring and Aloy pelted after him, slinging herself gracefully onto the back of the second Strider. Then she pulled the Strider in an about-face and rode madly towards the toppled pillar, towards Nil.

“Aloy! Now!” Sylens barked, but she ignored him. She reached Nil’s side and flung her hand down to him. “Come on, let’s go!” she panted. He grinned up at her as he took her hand, then dragged himself onto the Strider behind her.

As they rejoined Sylens and bolted for the collapsed side of the Sun Ring, three overridden Ravagers pounced into the ring, and Aloy grinned smugly, feeling restored and whole with Nil’s reassuring
weight behind her.

Finally they fled the Sun Ring, and Helis’s enraged howl followed them like a malediction.

“Traitor!”

****************

They rode hard for some time, and Aloy’s relief faded into worry as Nil’s weight against her back became heavier. It seemed that his injuries were catching up with him, and he was having a hard time supporting himself.

When the cacophony of the Sun Ring had long since dissipated and the landscape began to transform from pure desert into grasslands, Aloy slowed her Strider and slid off its back, then turned anxiously to Nil. His posture was half-slumped, but still he tried to dismount the Strider, his face twisted with pain.

“Easy, easy,” Aloy crooned, reaching up to support him as he slid his leg over the Strider and then stumbled to the ground on his knees. Her heart quailed to see him like this. He’d never really been injured during any of their bandit squabbles or Eclipse run-ins. He’d always seemed indomitable, cocky with confidence and health.

Aloy knelt and peered at him, and her stomach roiled as she began to catalogue his injuries. His face was surprisingly unscathed, but the back and left side of his neck were red and raw with burns, as was the exposed skin of his left arm and back. Small shards of glass peppered his back and arms, sparkling like malevolent gemstones in his skin. The rest of his back and his legs were mottled with the beginnings of bruises, likely from the rubble of the explosion. He was breathing hard, and when he raised his eyes to smile at her, his eyes seemed overly bright. “Suntress,” he rasped with a painful smirk. “Your thrill-seeking has reached a new height. I only wish it wasn’t my blood being spilled.”

He grimaced in pain, then panted for breath before speaking again, his voice taut with agony. “I told you I’d follow you anywhere.”

Aloy’s heart swelled with love and sorrow and she laughed, but the sound came out sounding more like a sob. For the first time, she wished she’d left him behind. If she’d gone into Zero Dawn alone, he wouldn’t have gotten hurt. “Following me into the Sun Ring was probably not your smartest move,” she retorted, her fingers hovering hesitantly over his skin. How would she even start to fix this damage?

Nil looked at her, but his gaze was slightly unfocused. “Of course it was. Here we are, free of the Sun Ring. Unfortunately you’ll have to slake your thirst for vengeance another day.”

“Has Helis always been like that? With the non-stop lecturing?” Aloy asked, her voice taking on an edge of panic as she examined him. The glass was embedded in the burns, but the burns were weeping serum. How much would it hurt to pull the glass out? Did she have enough bandages?

Nil gave a wheezy laugh. At that moment, Sylens pulled up beside them on his Strider and Aloy looked up at him, grateful for the distraction. “You’re really here. You risked your life,” she said appreciatively.

Sylens raised his eyebrows. “Of course I did. If you’d been killed, the Nora’s sacred mountain would never have given up its secrets.”

Nice, Aloy thought acidly. He really didn’t have a sentimental bone in his body. “Too bad you wasted your time, then. Helis destroyed my Focus, and the Alpha registry with it,” she replied
scathingly.

“Not at all,” Sylens said. “The whole time I’ve been monitoring your Focus, I’ve duplicated every file you scanned. Installing that data to a new Focus was trivially easy.” He extended his hand to her, and in his palm sat a shiny new Focus.

“‘Happy Birthday, Isaac. Daddy sure does love his little big man,’” Sylens said, his voice flat with sarcasm.

Relief swam through Aloy’s veins as she took the precious device from his palm. She’d felt powerless without it. “You’re making it impossible to like you, Sylens. But… I need this. Thanks,” she said grudgingly.

“It’s time to see where you were born,” Sylens told her officiously. “Maybe you’ll even learn why.”

Aloy gave him a hard stare. “‘Yeah. Meet the machine that birthed me into this world. Isn’t that how you put it?’” She turned back to Nil, her anxiety returning as she surveyed him. He was still on his knees, supporting his weight with his hands on his thighs, but he looked like he might fall over at any second.

“I’ll be off,” Sylens said. “When the time’s right, I’ll be in touch. I’ll contact you later.”

Aloy ignored him. She pulled a handful of salvebrush berries from her medicine pouch and gently started feeding them to Nil one by one. He lifted his eyes to hers as he chewed them. “I hate these,” he muttered, and she smiled, trying to ignore the tears welling in her eyes.

“Aloy…” Sylens said, and Aloy suddenly felt a rush of hate for him. He doesn’t care about me. He doesn’t care about anything except… answers. Why doesn’t he just leave?

His next words softened her anger slightly. “When you were recovering the Alpha Registry, I was... needlessly cruel,” he admitted. “For your sake, I hope there is someone waiting for you there inside the mountain. Not a ‘what’, but a ‘who’.”

Aloy glanced up at him and nodded her head in thanks. Sylens nodded back, then flicked the wire-reins of his Strider. Moments later, he was gone.

“Back to Nora land, then?” Nil gritted, and to Aloy’s horror, he tried to stand.

“Nil, stop! Stay still. You can’t come east. You’re too hurt.” She stood and placed her hands on his more-or-less undamaged right shoulder to keep him down.

He smiled vaguely at her, and Aloy suddenly realized his skin felt hot… Too hot. He was feverish. A new poisonous bloom of fear rose in her throat. Rost had taught her that fever could mean an infection throughout the body.

“It’s just a scratch, Suntress. I’ve given worse,” he muttered, and Aloy had to control her panic. He was becoming delirious. He’d probably made it this far through sheer force of will alone.

“No, Nil. This is really bad. You have to stay here. I… I can’t patch you up myself. You need a proper healer,” she told him firmly, hoping he couldn’t hear the shaking of her voice.

He cut his eyes back to her, and to her surprise, their silvery depths blazed with sudden anger. “I didn’t climb back up from the bowels of the earth to stay here without you,” he hissed, and Aloy recoiled slightly from this uncharacteristic expression of fury.
She recovered quickly from her startlement. “You don’t have a choice,” she snapped. “You need a healer. Besides, you’re Carja. The Nora won’t be able to tell you apart from the Eclipse - they’ll kill you on sight!”

“Fuck the Nora and fuck the Eclipse,” Nil yelled. “I’m coming with you.”

“No!” Aloy yelled back angrily, and to her disgust, a tear ran down her face. “You can’t stay here and get better.” She turned away from him towards the south, impatiently wiping her face and ignoring the flare of pain as her fingers skimmed over her swollen right cheekbone. Then she recognized the silhouette of the closest settlement, just south of where she stood, and suddenly she knew what to do.

She turned back to Nil and glared imperiously down at him. “Go to Free Heap. It’s just beyond that rise. Tell Petra I sent you. She and her people will look after you.”

“No,” Nil said petulantly, and Aloy lost it.

It was too much. First thinking he was dead, then having him return to her from the depths of underground, then seeing the extent of his injuries... What if he’s got an infection? What if the fever roasts him from the inside while the burns on his skin eat away at him from the outside? What if he leaves me like Rost did?

She fell to her knees and screamed at him. “You have to go to Free Heap! You have to go, Nil, you have to get better, I won’t lose someone else, I can’t, I won’t accept it!” Tears poured down her face as she grabbed his tattered vest furiously. “I have to go back east, I have no choice, but if I come back here and I find out you died of these injuries, I... I’ll...”

“You’ll kill me?” Nil drawled, sounding more like his usual self, and Aloy accidentally sobbed instead of the laugh she’d intended. “Don’t tempt me,” she snapped.

Nil chuckled painfully, and Aloy glared at him, still breathing hard and hiccuping from her outburst. He reached out with his right hand and tucked one braid behind her ear. “Fine, fine. I’ll go to Free Heap. I’ve never been able to resist the command of the Stormbird,” he said softly.

Suddenly Aloy was crying again, and she pressed her forehead to his, gritting her teeth to keep her sobbing at bay. Then Nil was kissing her, and she melted desperately into the heat of his lips and the sweet stroke of his tongue in her mouth.

When they broke apart, Nil smiled crookedly at her. “I feel better already,” he quipped, and Aloy finally managed a smile as she helped him slowly to his feet.

“Ride straight and fast,” Aloy instructed him, falling back on briskness to mask her pain at leaving him behind. “Petra will help you, I know she will.” She helped him onto the Strider’s back.

He panted with exertion and pain as he mounted the Strider, and Aloy felt a renewed anxiety as she looked at him; his posture was slumped with exhaustion and his extensive wounds were still weeping blood and serum. He swayed slightly as he tried to sit up straight. But he managed to give her a feral smile as he finally found his seat.

“Paint the Sacred Land with the blood of your enemies, Suntress. Your lands could use some red to break up all that white and green.”

She choked out a laugh, then reached up to squeeze his hand on the Strider’s wire reins. “You’re so disgusting.”
He squeezed her hand back, then looked down at her seriously. His silver eyes were overbright with fever, but his face held that longing look, that intensely passionate stare that always made Aloy feel both powerful and protected. “Be careful,” he said.

She swallowed hard, ignored another tear as it tracked down her face. “You too.”

Now that the moment was here, she didn’t know how she was going to let him go. Never before had Aloy been sad to leave anyone or anything behind. Even when she’d left Rost’s grave in the Sacred Land, she’d never looked back.

She would just hold Nil’s hand for one second longer. Just one more second.

He squeezed her fingers a final time, then turned the Strider towards Free Heap and flicked the reins.

Aloy pressed the back of her hand against her mouth to hold in her sobs as she watched him go. She watched until the dust cloud in his wake obscured her view of him. Then briskly she wiped her face, whistled for another Strider, and slung herself onto its back.

*Back to the east,* she told herself firmly. But this time, she’d be leaving a part of herself behind in the west.

Chapter End Notes

Nuuuuuuuu they’re separated for the first time in months!! *ugly crying*
Aloy finally makes it into the All-Mother Mountain, and Nil waits at Free Heap for her return to the west.

How tragic, to learn you're a person of towering importance.

Sylens' scathing words rang in Aloy's ears as she walked back towards the door to All-Mother. She knew Sylens thought her to be childish and near-sighted. But GAIA's revelation of Aloy's purpose was threatening everything she believed about free will.

Aloy had always firmly believed that she had control over the course of her own life. She'd always believed that her choices and decisions were just that: hers. Now, to know that she'd been born *not born, made* - to fulfill the purpose of an intelligent machine... that everything she'd done, without knowing it, was exactly what the machine intended...

Aloy's hands were shaking. She was a tool. Did she have free will at all?

The door to All-Mother opened, and Aloy walked back through to face the Nora. Worms of discomfort began to crawl up her back as she looked upon the tribespeople: many of them were on their knees, and all of them were staring at her like she was a ghost.

Teersa stepped forward eagerly. “The Goddess spoke to you?”

*Sure. Whatever helps them to understand this,* Aloy thought, and nodded. “She did.”

“What did she say?”

Aloy took a deep breath. “That I was born to lift a curse. To... kill a Metal Demon.”

Teersa gazed at her, her eyes shining with awe. “How, Aloy? *How*?”

Aloy turned away and tugged one of her braids in agitation. “I don’t know yet. But she told me where to go to find out.”

“And you will do this?” asked Jezza hopefully.

Aloy paused, her fist clenched in her hair. Of course she would; there was no choice. If she didn't destroy HADES, the entire world would burn. Or be suffocated back to square one, as Travis Tate would say.

But was that Aloy's will speaking, or GAIA’s?

Finally Aloy turned to face the Matriarchs. “It was... her wish. What she made me for. Yes, I will do it.” She sighed. “I'll try, anyway.”
Then she recoiled as the Matriarchs suddenly cried out, “All praise Aloy, Anointed of the Nora!”

To Aloy’s disgust, the assembled tribespeople all began kneeling and bowing as the Matriarch’s cry rang through the hall. A sudden rage ripped through her. “No! No no, stop this!” Aloy cried, and grabbed Yun’s arm and hauled him up, then Olara’s.

She spun to face them all. “First you shun me, now this?” she demanded. “I will not be worshipped! I’m not your Anointed! I don’t belong to you!” How dare these Nora bow to her, act like she was one of their stupid deities, like she was something more than human!

But you are, a little voice in her mind told her… a voice that sounded suspiciously like Sylens. You’re more than a simple human. You’re the image of Elisabet Sobeck, resurrected to fulfill a special purpose.

No, Aloy argued back. First and foremost, I’m Aloy. I decide for myself what matters. And this world, the people on it, the animals and plants that Elisabet loved so much, that is what matters.

She faced the Nora again, her face set and determined. “There’s a whole world beyond your borders, whole tribes of people just as good as you, and it is all in danger! It’s a world worth fighting for - not just here, everywhere.”

She paused, her chest heaving with emotion as she thought of all the people she’d met on her journey: Gera and Kendert, and their simple joys in life. Petra and her down-to-earth attitude. Talanah and Nakoa, both young like herself, and both so determined. Janeva, who’d risen through prejudice and the military ranks. Vanasha, with her sharp arrows and sharper smile. Uthid, who had humbly changed his ways for the good of the Sundom. Avad and Erend, both still learning to fill the shoes of enormous responsibility, and doing an admirable job of it.

And Nil. Nil, who’d started as a strange Carja killer, and who had pierced her with the sure aim of his bow to become the other half of her heart.

Varl stepped forward, his battered face sharp and serious. “How can we help?”

Aloy turned to Varl. She was filled with fresh determination. She was certain now that GAIA’s will hadn’t governed the course of her life. Instead, GAIA had simply given Aloy the means to do what she really wanted: secure the safety of all the tribes and their people.

“If you can fight, and you’re willing, go to Meridian and wait for me there,” she announced.

Teersa raised her arms and her voice. “As Aloy says, so it shall be! Nora, make way for Aloy! Make way so that she may forge the path for others to follow!”

Then Teersa gazed at Aloy with all the benevolence and pride of a grandmother in her gaze. Aloy smiled faintly, then turned towards the exit of All-Mother.

She had one more stop before going back to Meridian. One more place to find the last of her answers.

**************************

Time passing pulled his anticipation - and his longing - as tight as wire.

Every day, Nil waited on the top of the squat tower at Free Heap facing towards the east. Every day, he waited for the telltale cloud of dust and the blue glow of machine light that would herald Suntress’s return to the west.
Every night, he returned to his makeshift pallet at the tower’s base to sleep fitfully before climbing back to the top the next day at dawn.

Nil didn’t fully remember arriving at Free Heap. He had a vague impression of dust, unfamiliar faces, loud annoying Oseram voices, and confusion. When he’d next woken, a husky Oseram woman in her late thirties was telling him it was about time already, that the flame-hair would be spitting if she came back to find the Carja boy still laid low.

Delirious and disoriented, Nil had immediately tried to rise, thinking that Suntress was there, that he could reach her if he could just get up. Two heavy-set Oseram forgemen had had to hold him down while the settlement’s healer forced a small dose of Dreamwillow down his throat.

The next time Nil had woken, the Oseram woman was holding his golden flask, telling him it was well-made. “For a Carja metalwork, that is,” she’d added. Nil had scowled at her and taken the flask back, disappointed to find it empty. The woman had laughed at him, then told him to get off his ass and come get some food at the fire.

Eventually Nil learned that this woman was Petra, the leader of Free Heap and Suntress’s particular friend. Nil didn’t like her. She talked too much; her sassy remarks got on Nil’s nerves, and her stories about the elevator at Meridian bored him.

For the first sennight of Nil’s stay at Free Heap, he couldn’t walk or sit for long before the pain of his healing burns and bruises would overwhelm him. Eventually, as the tissue healed and the scabs became scars, he climbed the stairs to the top of the squat tower where Petra’s workbench was located.

He did not want Petra’s company; he wanted a lookout, and this was the only place in Free Heap that was tall enough to see to the east. At first Petra had been annoyed, telling him he was underfoot, that he was a spark in her britches. Nil didn’t care. He remained on her tower, his eyes on the horizon, until darkness fell and he was forced back to his pallet to sleep until it was light enough to see to the east again.

One day, when Nil had been keeping vigil for a few days, Petra stopped in front of him with a bundle of crafting materials in her arms.

Nil looked up at her coldly. “I know the Oseram aren’t known for their scholarship, but surely even you know that you aren’t transparent.” He leaned back and folded his arms. “You’re in my way. Move.”

“Ha-ha, Steel-Eyes, very clever. If you’re going to be a pain in my ass, you might as well make yourself useful.” Petra dropped the bundle of materials at his feet unceremoniously. “Start crafting. We need arrows to protect our claim.”

Nil looked up at her and smiled coldly. “Why in the Sun’s name would I do that?” he said.

Petra stared back at him, unimpressed. “You want to explain to Aloy why you took advantage of our hospitality and then sat around doing nothing? Everyone here pulls their weight. I don’t tolerate freeloaders. Now start crafting, or I’ll have the boys throw you in the brig.” She tossed him a dirty look, then walked over to her workbench.

Nil’s lip curled with disdain, but for once, he did as he was told. Petra had used the one and only thing that would secure his cooperation: Suntress’s name.

As the days melted into weeks, Nil continued his faithful vigil and began making not only arrows,
but also firebombs and shockbombs for Petra’s canons. He had to admit that it was a good distraction to have something to do with his hands, to have something to focus on aside from the cold rock in his chest that seemed to keep getting heavier as the weeks went by. Besides, the constant crafting was helping to keep the skin and scars on his left hand supple.

One day, as she was collecting a basket of freshly crafted firebombs from Nil, Petra surprised him by asking him a question. “How did Aloy wind up in the company of a miserable slag like you?”

Nil glanced at her. “Bandit hunting,” he said. Then he returned his attention to the arrowhead and ridgewood shaft in his hands.

Petra didn’t move. Faintly annoyed, Nil looked up at her again to find her staring expectantly at him. “Fire and spit, boy, that’s all you have to say?”

Nil sighed loudly. These fucking Oseram and all their talking. The only person Nil enjoyed talking to was Suntress. “I was seeking a partner to join me in purging the bandit camps. Sun…er, Aloy agreed to help me.” He bound the arrowhead to the shaft, then trimmed the wire. “The scent of blood just seemed sweeter when she was around. And when the bandit camps were reduced to bones and dust, she allowed me to keep travelling with her.”

Petra hefted the basket of firebombs onto her curvaceous hip and walked over to her workbench. “Why would she let you travel with her? Can’t be your sparkling conversational skills.”

Nil’s hands stilled. The truth was, he didn’t even know the answer to that question. He had never really thought about it. When he’d first asked Suntress to let him come machine hunting with her, he’d been mildly surprised when she’d agreed. He hadn’t expected her to let him stick around for as long she had, and he hadn’t planned on becoming her constant companion.

But once she’d ignited the flames of lust in his blood, he’d been bound to her as surely as she captured Stormbirds with her ropecaster. And once he’d realized he was in love with her, he couldn’t imagine ever being apart from her. The situation Nil found himself in now - stuck recuperating in some backwater Oseram town, separated from her by impossibly vast distances - was literally an unimaginable circumstance for him.

*Why did she let me follow her?* He wondered. He knew now that Suntress loved him (whether she’d said so by accident or not), but she hadn’t back then. He wasn’t even sure she’d liked him much when he first started travelling with her.

Nil shrugged uncomfortably, then fell back on glib witticisms like a security blanket. “Maybe I made her realize her violence was wasted on the machines. Bandits are a much more tantalizing form of prey. Maybe she wanted to learn from a master killer.” Nil shot Petra a vicious smile.

Nil expected an expression of disgust, but Petra surprised him by laughing loudly. “That flame-hair doesn’t need your help with taking bandit’s lives. She brought that bridge down on a whole clan of them.” Petra jerked her head towards a construction site at the southeast corner of the town. Now that Nil looked more carefully at the site, it did look like it had been pile of rubble not too long ago.

Nil smirked. “That sounds like her.”

Petra guffawed again and nodded happily. Then she shot Nil an appraising glance before turning back to her workbench. “She ever tell you how we met?”

Nil started crafting another arrow. “No,” he said. He would usually start ignoring Petra’s stories by now, but she was talking about something - or rather, someone - he was actually interested in.
Petra grinned. “She comes running up here dressed like she came straight from the Claim, that red hair flying like she’s branded fresh from the forge. I tell her I have calluses older than her, and she says she’s got plenty of calluses too if I want to test her.”

Nil laughed. “That’s definitely her.” He listened with wry amusement as Petra told him the rest of the story. He remembered the day she spoke of; it was that same night that Suntress had taken him into Stormbird territory.

That had been the night everything changed. As the sun had risen, Nil had watched Suntress destroy the metal beast that eventually became her signature, and he’d discovered a warmth in his core that he’d never felt before. Being stuck at Free Heap made him think frequently of the day of the Stormbird, and only made him miss her more.

Her story finished, Petra leaned back against her workbench and folded her arms as she looked at him with that annoyingly appraising look. “So. What happened to you? How did you get so injured? When you first arrived here, you looked like you’d fallen into a forge.”

Nil trimmed the wire on another arrow and put it aside. “Helis threw a firebomb at Aloy. His aim was true, but I got in his way.”

Petra stared at him more intensely. “Wait. Helis attacked her? And you took a firebomb to protect her?”

“Mm. Not exactly. I shoved her down to protect her. Landed on top of her. The blast could have been worse.” Nil shrugged lightly, then began crafting a shock bomb.

Petra was quiet for a time. Her silence was so unusual that eventually Nil glanced up to see if she was still there. To his confusion, she was smiling at him. “Her grip on you is tighter than a Carja moneylender with a fistful of shards, eh?”

Nil smirked, shrugged again. “I don’t deny it.”

Petra smiled more widely. Just then, a ruckus of raised voices by the main gate grabbed both Nil’s and Petra’s attention. Petra frowned and headed towards the stairs, but a messenger was already making his way up to the tower.

Nil was surprised to see that the messenger was Carja, and from the palace no less. The Carja messenger threw Nil a surprised look before saluting to Petra. “Petra Forgewoman? His Radiance the Sun-King Avad would like to formally request your assistance with a matter of utmost-”

“Spit it out, boy, don’t bother with the sweet talk,” Petra barked. “What’s this about?”

“There’s going to be an attack at Meridian,” the messenger blurted. “The Sun-King is calling for allies. The Nora Huntress, Aloy, she told him that the Shadow Carja-”

Nil grabbed the messenger by the throat. “Aloy is in Meridian?” he demanded.

The messenger stared at him in abject terror. “Yes, sir, she- she arrived five days ago. She-”

Nil released the messenger and strode down the steps. He shoved past the Oseram who were crowded curiously around the base of the tower and grabbed his bow and knife from his pallet. He ignored Petra’s shout that he needed to take it easy. Then he was running out of Free Heap towards Meridian, running as fast as his healing bruises and his tender scars would let him.

Suntress was back in the Sundom, and Nil would be at her side again. And blood and steel would
rain on anyone who got in his way.

Chapter End Notes

*Stage whisper* Smut is coming...

Also FYI, the next chapter *might* not make it out until the weekend... it's going to be a longer one I think, and I have to go do social things with IRL people this weekend (BOOO lol jk mostly) so it might be a couple days. Hang in there Niloy fam!! <3
In Our Bedroom Before the War

Chapter Summary

Nil and Aloy finally reunite in Meridian.

NSFW, obviously. Porn with feelings, I guess? SO MANY FEELINGS. <3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes
It took almost a week for Nil to get to Meridian on foot. Though his injuries were mostly healed, some of his scars were still tender, and the deeper bruises on his legs still pained him when he ran for too long.

Upon his arrival, he was directed towards the gates at the western ridge along with a steady stream of Carja and Oseram allies, as the attack was anticipated to come from Sunfall. Nil felt like there was a beast roaring in his chest and demanding to be taken straight to Suntress, but he fell back into his soldier’s training with surprising speed and dutifully went where he was told. He’d overheard some soldiers mention that the Nora Huntress was discussing strategy with Marad and that she would be overseeing preparations on the ridge in due time, so he supposed he could wait a little bit longer to see her.

As long as he could control the screaming need in his body, he supposed he could wait.

As Nil passed through the gate, he immediately spotted Vanasha and Uthid standing on a platform together. His lip curled in disdain as he listened to Vanasha tease Uthid about his spear, and he wondered if he could slip by them unnoticed.

No such luck. As he strolled past, Vanasha called out to him. “Nice to see you again, Pet Prince! I look forward to watching you in action. You certainly know how to tug an arrowshaft tight and hard.” Her dark eyes glinted wickedly in the afternoon sun.

“Enough, woman,” muttered Uthid, but Nil only smiled coldly. “And you certainly know how to tempt a man to point an arrowhead in your direction,” he retorted.

Vanasha laughed loudly. “I like you, Pet Prince. I’ll see you on the other side.” Then she turned back to torture Uthid some more with her incessant talking.

Nil snorted scornfully, then made his way to the river to wait. Maybe watching the lazy flow of water would help to calm the clamouring in his chest. His nerves were on edge knowing that Suntress was so close, just inside the city. It would be so easy to walk back through the gates, ignore the guards, get into the palace… he knew all the unused alleys and tunnels, he could find her easily—

“Kadar. Or should I say Nil?”

Nil looked down in surprise at Janeva, who had walked up beside him and now stood looking over the river. “Warden,” Nil said politely. “Strange to see you so far from the Rock. I know how much you love the colourful vitriol of your charges. Their shouts of abuse are like music to your ears.” He smirked teasingly down at the shorter soldier.

Janeva huffed disdainfully. “You’ve been away from Sunstone for too long,” he retorted. “Anyone who sasses me loses their front teeth, remember?” Then the warden cut him a sideways glance. “How’s the bandit hunt working out for you?”

“Oh hiatus, unfortunately. It seems that… Aloy and I were too effective.” Nil sighed mournfully. “The bandits clans have scattered. But I’ve kept busy doing other things.”

“So I understand,” Janeva replied blandly. Nil glanced at him but his stern face gave nothing away, so Nil returned his attention to the river.

Nil’s mind finally began to drift along with the water, and he thought idly about the warden at his side. Janeva’s suggestion to exclusively target bandits had truly been a smart one. It had taken the guesswork out of the definition of an ‘acceptable kill’, giving Nil a quick and dirty rule of thumb for his uncontrollable bloodlust. It had given him a way to be free in a world where his natural impulses
just didn’t sit on the right side of ‘normal’.

But it was more than just smart. Without Janeva’s suggestion, Nil wouldn’t have stalked the bandit clans to the Sacred Lands. He wouldn’t have ended up on that road near Devil’s Thirst. And he wouldn’t have met a red-haired Nora huntress who whispered machine secrets and metal death.

Nil didn’t believe in anything so abstract and feeble as fate. But if it hadn’t been for Janeva’s suggestion, he would never have met the woman who was, without a doubt, the better half of him.

“Thank you.” The words left his mouth before he knew he’d formulated them in his mind, and Nil realized that what he was feeling was… grateful.

Janeva narrowed his eyes suspiciously and Nil gazed back, his face blank and serious. They stared at each other for a long moment. Then the corner of Janeva’s lip lifted in a tiny half-smile, and he nodded briefly.

“Aloy! It’s Aloy!”

Suddenly alert, Nil whipped around towards the joyful shouts and sudden clamour of noise at the gate, his pulse thudding in his throat. And then, at long last, he spotted his Suntress.

She looked different. An obvious part of that was her gear. She was wearing new armour that he’d never seen on her before, armour that flashed and glittered in the sun, and now that he’d been in the Old Ones’ ruins he could recognize it as some kind of spectacular combination of Nora leathers and ancient technology. Instead of her spear, she carried a lance that glowed electric blue like the cords that the Banuk sewed into their skin.

She looked fucking formidable.

But her gear wasn’t all that was different. Nil stared at her closely and realized that she carried herself differently. She’d always moved with a fluid grace, but she was more… grounded somehow. Nil watched her as she walked over to speak to a slender Nora standing by the gate. Her footsteps seemed heavier somehow, and though she smiled at the Nora man, her face remained serious.

Janeva suddenly grabbed his wrist. “Easy, soldier,” the warden snapped, and Nil realized he’d taken a few steps towards Suntress without thinking about it. He glared down at Janeva as the warden yanked him back a step.

“Wait your turn. She’s busy and important,” Janeva commanded, then turned firmly back towards the river. Nil seethed with impatience and the injustice of knowing Janeva was right, but grudgingly he turned away from Suntress to face the river.

“Killed anyone lately you’d like to talk about?” he asked Janeva glibly, and perhaps a little spitefully. Anything to keep himself entertained and distracted, and if it riled the placid warden up a bit, all the better. Unfortunately, Janeva knew his tricks too well and ignored him.

An eternity later, Suntress’s voice called his name. “Nil! Janeva!”

Finally, at long last, he turned and looked at her, his own personal goddess of violence and lust, and her familiar smile was so beautiful that suddenly he couldn’t think. She smelled of winterfresh and leather and and heat, and a powerful rush of longing threatened to drown him. He didn’t hear a word as Suntress spoke to Janeva. Then Janeva was walking away to inspect an Oseram canon, and Nil and Suntress were alone.

Her eyes roamed hungrily over his body, focusing particularly on his mostly-healed left arm and
neck, and though her words were formal, her smile was warm with relief. “Nil. You look well. It looks like Petra’s people took good care of you.”

Nil shrugged and smirked. “It was touch and go for a while. Petra almost killed me with her inane stories about the Great Elevator. But I managed to escape with my life and my wits intact.”

Suntress grinned wickedly at him. “That remains to be seen,” she quipped, and he grinned back.

Then her face sobered, and concern lifted her eyebrows as she skimmed her fingers over his left arm. “This battle will be hard. Are you ready?” she asked.

Nil raised one eyebrow. “Hard? I was assured the odds would be near impossible.”

Suntress frowned at him, worry still painted across her face. “And you’re okay with that?”

He took a small step closer to her and lowered his voice intimately. “Impossible odds, fine company, killing without consequence… how could I resist?”

Suddenly something inside of her seemed to melt, and she took a step closer to him. She cupped his neck with one hand and pressed her forehead to his. “I missed you,” she breathed.

Nil’s heart pounded painfully and he returned the gesture, cradling her neck and twining his fingers in her hair. “I missed you too,” he told her. “You tore the heart from my chest when you went back east. Every breath without you was like a dull knife between the ribs. I can breathe easy now that you're back where you belong, with me.”

Suntress bit her lip and closed her eyes. Nil could feel her trembling, could see the emotion she was holding back for the sake of propriety, the desperate desire she was masking in the clench of her jaw and the tightness of her posture.

Nil could see it because he felt it too. Every speck of his being was begging to pull her close, to feel her reassuring heat against his body and her tender voice breathing in his ear.

But Suntress pulled away, her fingers lingering on his neck for a moment as she gazed at him, her eyes still blazing with words unspoken. “Find me tonight,” she said, and her voice was taut with strain. “I have to go to the Spire, make sure Erend and Varl and everyone has what they need. But tonight I'll be staying at Olin’s apartment in the city. Find me there,” she commanded.

He tucked a braid behind her ear, and she swallowed visibly. “I'll find you, Suntress. Go rain lightning and fury on the idiot Vanguardsmen. I'll wait.”

She gave him a chiding smirk and stroked his cheek fondly, then she was running towards the Alight, her armour glittering like caged lightning. Nil turned back to the river, feeling calmer than he had felt in weeks. He supposed he could wait a little longer.

For Suntress, he would wait forever.

********************************************************************************

Aloy slowly made her way up the stairs to the sleeping loft in Olin’s apartment. She knew she should try and rest since all of the allies were as prepared as they could possibly be. Teb and the other quartermasters had set up ammo and healing stations at multiple sites on the ridge and at the Spire; the Oseram canons were ship-shape and ready to go, thanks to Petra and her crew; the Nora were focused and prepared, their spears sharpened and their arrows plentiful; and Erend and his men were so ready for battle that Aloy thought they might start punching each other soon if they didn’t get an
enemy to sink their axes into.

Everything was ready. There was nothing else that could be done. So why couldn’t her mind just settle? Incessant worries and what-ifs continue to flit through Aloy’s mind with every step.

She sighed and set Sylens’ lance on the floor beside the bed, then began to strip off her armour. *How could you sleep, Elisabet, with a weight like this pressing on you? How did you, Rost, after you lost your family?*

Once she was wearing just her soft Nora leggings and undershirt, she sat crossed-legged on the bed and gently stroked the charm around her neck that Rost had given her... the one that had once belonged to his daughter Alana.

When Teersa had first revealed Rost’s story to her, Aloy had thought the Matriarchs cruel for forcing a baby girl on a man who had lost his own daughter under such horrific circumstances. But now, as she gazed down at the worn but precious bone charm in her fingers, she could only feel grateful... for Rost.

For the first time in months when she thought of him, her feelings weren’t tainted by hatred or anger towards Helis. At this moment, as she pictured Rost’s face, she simply missed him. His gruff manner and kind eyes; his stern guidance and his patience; and his rare hugs and smiles, made all the more meaningful for their scarceness. She wondered whether he would have left the Nora lands to fight here in Meridian.

*Of course he would have,* she thought immediately. *For me, he would have come.*

A pang of sadness accompanied the thought and Aloy sighed, then lay back on the bed and stared up at the ceiling for a moment. It was so quiet in Olin’s apartment, and her thoughts were so loud. “Sylens? Are you there?” she called out on sudden impulse.

No answer.

*Guess I shouldn’t ask ghosts for advice,* she thought with a twinge of melancholy. And then she heard a soft scuffling noise from the attic level to her right.

A squiggle of excitement suddenly swam through her chest, like a molten drop of steel sliding down her throat. “Nil?” she called out.

Nil dropped through a trapdoor in the roof that Aloy hadn’t known was there, landing lightly on the balls of his feet. Then he hopped down from the attic loft into the sleeping area and took a step towards her, his face lighting with a slow smile.

Aloy beamed at him as she slid off the bed onto her feet. She wanted to laugh, partly out of sheer joy that he was here, but also partly because of how he was dressed, in an incongruous mixture of Carja and Oseram clothes. His shirt, trousers and boots were Oseram, but over these he wore his own armour of machine plates and his signature red silk scarf around his neck. It was strange but pleasant to see him without his headdress, and she felt a tiny pang of guilt that she didn’t miss it.

“I should report you to the City Guard for sneaking around,” she teased. “You’re a security threat.”

“The City Guard should thank me for pointing out their weaknesses,” Nil replied smoothly as he stepped closer to her. “Poking holes in their defenses is *almost* as much fun as poking holes in bandit bodies. But alas, nothing is quite as satisfying as that blooming of blood spreading from a freshly given wound.”
Then he was standing right in front of her, his fingers tilting her chin up to look into his ethereal grey eyes. “Well, almost nothing,” he amended in a husky whisper.

Wild anticipation took wing in Aloy’s belly and soared through her chest with a searing heat, and Aloy couldn’t think of a clever reply. What need did she have for cleverness when Nil was looking at her like this, like he couldn't tear his eyes away from her if his life depended on it?

Suddenly Nil’s hands were under her shirt, sliding beneath the soft fabric and lifting it, and Aloy raised her arms so he could free her from the garment. Her hair tumbled around her face and she tossed her head to look at him, and a bolt of joy and desire slammed into her chest at the expression on his face.

Nil’s lips were parted with desire, but his eyes were brimming with emotion. Tenderly he smoothed the hair away from her face with both hands and then kissed her without hesitation. Instantly Aloy wrapped her arms around him and gripped the back of his shirt, desperate for the feel of skin against skin. The slide of his lips over hers and the gentle nip of his teeth at her bottom lip had her gasping, and at this moment, all she wanted in the world was to be pressed flush against him, to share in his exquisite heat and to draw strength from his reassuring solidity.

Without breaking their kiss, Nil tore his scarf from his neck and shed his vambraces and shoulder guards. Impatiently Aloy pulled at the hem of his shirt until it was untucked from his pants, and Nil reluctantly broke their kiss to pull his shirt swiftly over his head. He walked her backwards toward the bed with one persuasive hand on her hip until the back of her legs hit the bed, and together they fell onto the mattress.

Then Nil was kissing her again, and Aloy was awash with happiness. The comforting heat of his skin and his reassuring weight felt like they were grounding her, bringing her back to herself and away from her worries. Every stroke of his tongue against hers melted her concerns just that little bit more. He slid his hands up along her sides and along her upper back to tenderly cradle her shoulder blades with the heat of his palms, and Aloy felt like he was smoothing away her fears, chasing them away into the ether.

In place of her worries was a truth that Aloy had known for some time, ever since she’d left Nil behind; a truth which had been forced to take second place to her search for answers, but which preoccupied her now as Nil kissed her with such sweet passion. The slide of his hands over her skin was reverent, like he was trying to memorize the curves of her waist and every plane of her ribs. She traced his lips with her tongue and the tendon in his neck with her fingers, savouring the salt of his sweat and the solidity of his muscles beneath the velvet of his skin.

When Nil gently broke their kiss to stroke his thumb over her right cheekbone, Aloy swallowed hard. “Nil, I… I just…” She broke off, unsure how to formulate what she wanted to say. Nil stared into her eyes, his face absolutely serious, and Aloy knew she had to try, had to attempt to tell him everything that she was feeling.

When she and Nil had been apart, it had felt _exactly_ as he’d said: like a dull knife beneath her ribs, reminding her incessantly of that part of her that she’d left behind. Now that they were together again, pressed against each other so closely they might as well be one, Aloy couldn’t fathom how she'd gone so long without him. Her blood sang for Nil. Her body thrummed in time with his pounding heart, and she knew that she wanted this to last forever. Not just this moment of lust with him, but _everything_. This Carja soldier, this killer, this _man_: he was what she wanted forever.

Overwhelmed with emotion, she clasped his face in her hands. If worse came to worst when the Eclipse attacked, he had to know. “Never again,” she said firmly. “That separation, I just... I can’t…” She swallowed again.
“I know,” Nil murmured, and his voice was deep and soft. He smoothed her hair back from her face to press his forehead against hers. “I know, Suntress. It’s the same for me.” Then he smiled slowly, his happiness blazing like the light of dawn, and his kiss was more tender yet more intense than ever before.

Love and desire ripped through her like twinned arrows, and suddenly Aloy needed him closer, every damn part of him. She arched firmly into his body and kissed him, savouring the feel of her nipples against the hardness of his chest, and her hands fumbled for the laces of his trousers.

Nil’s fingers were tugging at her laces too, and finally Aloy broke their kiss with a gasp and a suggestion. “You do yours, I’ll do mine,” she panted, and Nil chuckled, then sat back on his knees to quickly untie his trousers. “Still so wise, Suntress, even when blood is pounding so far from the mind,” he teased, and the growl of lust in his voice sent a searing whip of desire through her body.

“Stop talking and take off your clothes,” she commanded, and Nil laughed. He slid off the bed and kicked off his trousers.

Aloy’s thoughts were momentarily drowned in a wave of lust as she stared greedily at his proudly jutting erection, and she almost missed his saucy reply. “You’re very bossy, Suntress,” he drawled, then took a step towards her and pulled her to her feet with a firm hand around her wrist. Slowly he tugged at the laces of her leggings, and the graze of his hot fingers against her abdomen sent butterflies spiralling through her belly.

“Always giving commands,” Nil added, his voice pitched low in a seductive purr. “I think it’s my turn to tell you what to do.”

He bent over and tugged her leggings down, and Aloy shuddered, clenching her nails in his shoulders as he placed a gentle kiss just below her navel, then torturously slipped his mouth higher. His thumb skimmed beneath her breast as his lips brushed over her sternum, then over her collarbone. Nil growled against her throat and Aloy inhaled sharply, her lust doubling at his feral sound of hunger. Then his lips were at her ear. “Or maybe I should just show you,” he hissed, then lifted her abruptly.

Startled but delighted, Aloy barely had time to wrap her arms around his neck and her legs around his waist as he carried her over to the wall and slammed her back against it. He swallowed her gasp with a rough kiss, his tongue plunging deep into her mouth, and Aloy arched helplessly against him, her moan of desire muffled by his tongue. Then Nil pulled her right hand from his shoulder and laced his fingers into hers, then pressed her arm back against the wall as well.

Aloy broke from his kiss and gasped; her desire was so acute it was almost unbearable. Nil’s possessiveness was like an animal bursting from its cage, as though something that always lived dormant inside of him was breaking free. It was true that Aloy called almost all the shots during their daily travels, but now, at this moment, she had never been more happy to not be in control.

Nil nuzzled the length of her neck, then abruptly bit her neck just below her ear, and Aloy cried out in shock and pleasure. Helplessly she jerked her hips against his; she felt empty and aching, desperate for him to fill her up and soothe the restlessness in her core.

But to her dismay, Nil shifted her weight so that she was higher up and farther from the hardness of his manhood. Aloy whined in frustration and thrust her hips pleadingly, then cried out again as Nil bit the spot where her neck met her shoulder. “Nil!” she gasped. “Please.” She writhed entreatingly and bit her lip as her nipples brushed against his face, then tried fitfully to pull her right hand from his grip against the wall.
Nil laughed. The low, smug sound pooled in her belly and slid lower to the juncture of her thighs where she needed him so badly. “I like you like this, Suntress,” he purred. “Begging for my mercy.” He doubled his pressure on her hand and slid her down the wall until her entrance was hovering right over his cock but not quite close enough to touch, damn him.

Aloy cried out again as he ducked his head and slicked his tongue over her left breast. “You’d better enjoy it,” she gritted. “You’ll never see me beg for mercy any other time.” Then she moaned as he suckled her nipple.

Nil released her nipple and laughed again, this time with appreciation. Finally he released her right arm and cradled her neck in his left hand, stroking her neck fondly with his thumb. “Now that I know for certain,” he said with a grin. He reached down with his left hand to support her bottom with both hands, then kissed her hard and slid his cock inside of her.

“Yes!” Aloy cried against his mouth. His manhood was so delicious, filling her up so completely and soothing that exquisite ache inside of her. Nil thrust his powerful hips twice, and the friction was so beautiful that Aloy’s head fell back against the wall in bliss.

Then suddenly his cock was gone as he lifted her higher again. Aloy whimpered in complete desperation and tried to twist her body free, but Nil’s strong hands under her thighs were implacable. “I have a privilege here, and I want to take advantage of it,” he purred against her cheek. “I want to hear you beg.”

Aloy didn’t hesitate. “Please!” she cried, and arched against him, desperate for him to touch her: her breasts, the taut nub between her thighs, the petals of her entrance, anything. “Please, Nil, I need you to touch me. Stop torturing me!”

Nil sucked in a sharp breath between his teeth at the bite of her nails, then abruptly he slammed his length inside of her again.

Aloy screamed his name in ecstasy, then barely had time to catch her breath as he thrust into her in a gorgeous driving rhythm that both soothed her and riled the desire roaring through her blood. She clasped his shoulders for support and thrust her hips eagerly to meet every smooth pump of his cock.

Then Nil abruptly stepped away from the wall and carried her over to the bed, and threw her down onto her back. Aloy opened her mouth to complain, but Nil knelt at the foot of the bed and forcefully pulled her towards him with his hands on her thighs. Before she could say a word, his mouth was between her legs, his tongue sweeping along the length of her labia and over her clit.

Aloy’s entire body arched in desperate pleasure. The sweet pressure of his tongue and lips on her clit was almost too much to bear after the intense rhythm of his cock. Broken whimpers of ecstasy spilled from her lips as he lapped at her clit in gentle circles, then swept his hot tongue along the length of her cleft.

Aloy clenched one fist in the sheets over her head and panted hard as her inevitable climax began to build. Nil’s talented tongue was tireless, slipping along the length of her labia to probe gently inside of her before returning to flick over her clit.

Then he kissed her taut bud tenderly, and the combined sensation of his gentle lips and clever tongue
pushed her over the edge. She arched suddenly, throwing her head back and crying out as her orgasm rushed through her like an unstoppable blazefire. And yet Nil didn’t stop; he brushed his full lower lip firmly over her bud, then more gently to ease her down from the peak of her pleasure.

As her orgasm receded, Aloy sat up on her elbows and eyed Nil with even more heightened arousal. She liked his unapologetic possessiveness. His predatory, wordless control was intoxicating, and she felt euphoric, helpless with anticipation of what he would do next.

He didn’t disappoint. He stood, his silver eyes blazing with lust, then grabbed her hips and swiftly flipped her over onto her hands and knees. Aloy was momentarily shocked; in this position she felt totally exposed. Then she looked at Nil over her shoulder, and a fresh surge of lust ripped through her. His eyes were fixed on her ass, and a look of such longing and admiration was painted on his face that her vulnerability was immediately wiped away.

Nil’s longing gaze slid up to her face. When he spoke, his voice was guttural with arousal but genuinely concerned. “Are you okay with this?” he asked.

Aloy nodded eagerly, then instinctively lowered herself onto her elbows. Somehow she knew this would inflame his desire even further. She watched with interest as his pupils dilated abruptly. “Fuck me,” he whispered in awe, then knelt on the bed behind her and reverently smoothed one hand along the length of her back.

“Yes please,” she panted, then cried out as he slid his length inside of her in a long, smooth, slow stroke.

Nil gripped her hips and slid himself out, then back in slowly. At this angle, he felt much larger against her inner walls and his reach felt deeper, and she was glad that he was taking it slow. She bit her lip and listened in rapture to the sounds of his pleasure, his deep groans and gasps as he slowly but inexorably filled her up.

He stroked her shoulder and slid his hand down along her arm coaxingly. “Come here,” he groaned. “I want you closer.”

Aloy followed his physical cues and rose back on her knees so that her back was flush against his chest, and abruptly the difference in angle sent a jolt of pure ecstasy through her body.

“Fire and spit, Nil, yes!” she screamed incoherently. Nil wrapped his arms around her, his left hand cupping her breast as his right hand drifted down to lay flat against her abdomen. Aloy reached over her shoulder and fisted her left hand in his hair as he began thrusting into her more quickly. Her right hand flew down to grip his hand, her fingers clenching tensely as a new orgasm started to build with surprising speed.

Suddenly Aloy couldn’t think, not about anything but the insane ecstasy that was rising so quickly in her body that she could barely catch her breath. Nil’s rapid breathing in her ear only spurred her higher. He continued his swift thrusting, and every pump pushed her higher towards her peak.

Then he reached down with his right hand and brushed his finger lightly over her clit, and Aloy fell apart. Her back arched involuntarily and her head fell back against his neck as she let out an animalistic cry of pleasure. She raked her nails over the back of Nil’s right hand, and he suddenly jerked and thrust into her hard. “Aloy,” he groaned brokenly, and sudden tenderness bloomed in her chest as he came.

Once Nil’s body had relaxed behind her, Aloy wiggled forward on her knees and then fell onto her side. Nil flopped down onto the bed facing her and smiled, then reached over and gently pushed a
sweaty strand of hair back from her forehead.

“They say that sex before a battle clears your mind and body for better kills,” he said matter-of-factly. “We should do this every day until the battle comes. It’ll ensure your kill count is as noteworthy as you are.”

Aloy laughed at his wicked smile and rolled onto her back. “That’s very generous of you,” she replied teasingly. “Very altruistic.”

He reached over and pulled her close to him with a hand on her waist. “It is just a rumour, Suntress. But there’s only one way to find out if it’s true.” Gently he turned her face towards his and kissed her.

Aloy kissed him back, then smiled as he whispered, “Come here.” He pulled her flush to his body again, his hand roaming slowly over her skin from shoulder to thigh.

Aloy sighed happily, enjoying the heat and the rough calluses of his palms as they smoothed over her body. Eventually she and Nil shuffled under the blankets for warmth, and Aloy’s calmed mind drifted towards sleep.

No matter what happened when the Eclipse finally attacked, Aloy could rest easy this night in the strong arms of her Carja lover, safe in the knowledge that he belonged to her forever.

Whether forever was tomorrow or years from now, only time and battle would tell.

Chapter End Notes

Aaaand now I’m off to Fan Expo for the day!! The next (and final????) update will probably be on Monday; Tuesday at the latest.

Chapter title inspired by this incredible song by the Canadian band Stars.
The Eclipse launch their attack on Meridian, and Aloy defies her enemies with Nil at her side.

A/N: Includes a non-canon take on events! (I mean, this whole thing is non-canon to some degree since Nil is there, but whatever. You’ll know what I mean.)

A hand grabbed Aloy’s shoulder and she snapped into full alertness. Beside her, Nil’s arm tensed instinctively around her waist, then he growled as he sat up abruptly.

One of the palace guards was standing over the bed, his face tight with anxiety. “Ma’am, there are signs to the west. Sun-King Avad waits for you at the Temple of the Sun.”

*Fire and spit. It’s beginning,* Aloy thought with a surge of determination. She nodded a sharp dismissal to the guard and threw back the blankets, unconcerned about her nakedness. Nil was already on his feet and pulling on his half-Oseram half-Carja clothing.

Aloy swiftly pulled on her shieldweaver armour and racked her weapons on her back, then nodded sharply at Nil. Without a word, they ran to the palace.

They found Avad on the highest west-facing tower of the palace. He turned when he heard their swift approach, his face creased in a stern frown. He looked more regal and authoritative than Aloy had ever seen him before. Aloy joined Avad at the balcony, with Nil looming in his customary place just behind her. Together they looked out towards the western bridge into the city.

“Campfires, perhaps?” Avad asked. “Massing forces for the long march to the city gates?”

Aloy shook her head slowly, and a slow writhing of anxiety began to stir in her gut. She would recognize those angry red lights anywhere. “That’s not wood smoke.”

“They what is it?” Avad demanded, his voice hard and tense.

“The end,” Aloy murmured distractedly. “Or how it begins, anyway.”

And then the whole world shook.

Aloy stared in horror as an enormous explosion shook the far end of the western bridge. A huge dust cloud bloomed in slow motion, then expanded exponentially as the cliff on which the bridge was built simply crumbled away.

Aloy knew what the Deathbringers were capable of; she’d defeated two of them with great difficulty, after all. But she’d never imagined they could bring down an entire cliffside.

Avad’s voice was hoarse. “The Deathbringers you spoke of?” he rasped.
Aloy wasted no time to reply. She turned to the row of Carja soldiers standing along the path to the second balcony, where a row of Oseram canons waited. “To the guns!” she called, then started along the path.

The soldiers didn’t move. They glanced at her uneasily, then at Avad. Aloy’s blood suddenly boiled with a surge of rage. These idiots are going to play the young-woman card now, of all times? she thought furiously. “To the guns! Now!” she barked, glaring at them.

“By the Sun, do as she says,” Avad bellowed, and finally the contingent of guards snapped into action and followed her down to the second balcony. Aloy supervised as the Carja guards and Vanguardsmen took up the canons and aimed them west, waiting for the macabre parade of corrupted machines to come within range.

Avad and Nil joined her, and she could see the first hint of anxiety in Avad’s eyes. “Will the guns hold them back?” he asked.

Aloy pursed her lips. “We’re about to find out,” she said grimly. Then she stumbled to one knee as the palace trembled madly, and a portion of the tower just below her feet exploded outwards in a cacophony of flames and rubble.

What in the bloody Metal Devil? she thought furiously as she rose to her feet. Cautiously she peered over the edge of the ruined balcony, and sighed in resignation as she recognized the tall, pale form and ostentatious red headdress of the assailant below.

“Helis!” hissed Avad, and grabbed for his sword.

“No!” barked Aloy, and she grabbed his sword hand to stop him. “Rally the Vanguard, and send reinforcements. Nil, with me.” She darted towards an undamaged pillar at the edge of the balcony, her rappel already in her hand. A surge of inspiration had suddenly struck her, and she knew exactly what to do.

“Aloy, no!” Avad yelled, and Aloy spun back to face him, her eyes blazing with determination. “We need those guns!” she shouted back. There was no choice. Helis had to be stopped, and she knew just the way to do it.

“He will cut you down!” Avad argued, and Aloy could hear the pleading undertone of his stern voice, his fear for her evident in his warm brown eyes.

She raised one eyebrow. “Not this time,” she replied confidently, and without another moment’s hesitation, she rappelled over the edge of the balcony.

Aloy landed lightly on the balls of her feet, and Nil landed beside her a moment later. Immediately she shot two swift hardpoint arrows into the throats of a pair of Eclipse soldiers, and she watched as Nil rolled forward and slammed his knife into a third Eclipse fighter’s eye. She rose her feet, and through the smoke and dusty debris in the air she spotted the so-called Terror of the Sun across the room.

Helis’s smooth, self-righteous voice rang through the noises of battle. “You have vexed me long enough,” he called out to her, and Aloy smiled.

“You have vexed me long enough,” she replied casually as she stored her bow on her back. Nil shot her a questioning look, and she knew he was wondering why she was putting her weapons away.

But Aloy had a better plan than fighting Helis herself. Oh, it wasn’t because she couldn’t kill him; in
fact, Aloy was utterly confident that she could. He might be a vicious example of brute strength, but he was no match for her agility and sure aim.

Her new plan had nothing to do with ability and everything to do with motivation.

For months after Rost’s death, all Aloy wanted was to know who her mother was, and for Rost’s death to be avenged. But somewhere along her journey for answers, particularly between All-Mother Mountain and GAIA Prime, Aloy’s priorities had shifted. She was armed now with the knowledge of Elisabet Sobeck, her love for the world and all its people, and for life. Aloy’s thoughts about what was important - about what really mattered - had inexorably changed.

_The strength to stand alone is the strength to take a stand_, she thought. Rost had taught her that. And Aloy knew that Rost would have been proud of her for putting aside her own concerns and taking a stand for the good of the world.

Helis wasn’t important anymore. Revenge didn’t matter anymore. In fact, Helis was such a small piece of the bigger picture that he hardly even figured. Aloy could barely be bothered to waste energy on hating him. As she watched him approach, his face smug with anticipated victory, all she could feel was pity.

Well, maybe a little bit of hate, she thought to herself wryly. She’d be lying if her new plan for disposing of Helis wasn’t vindictively satisfying in its own way: not only was she confident that Helis was about to die, she was also certain that her refusal to fight him would enrage him.

And as an added bonus, she was about to make Nil very happy.

Aloy turned to Nil and jerked her head in Helis’s direction. “Do me a favour? Kill Helis.”

************

Nil turned slowly and stared at Suntress. Had she just said what he thought she had?

She was looking up at him, her eyebrows raised, her lips curled in an amused smirk. “You want me to kill Helis?” Nil asked, praying that he hadn’t misheard her.

Suntress nodded. “He’s all yours. I have more important things to do.” She turned towards a collapsed door just behind them and took out her lance to pry it open.

“What about your revenge? You’ve wanted to spill his blood ever since I’ve known you,” Nil insisted. But already his veins were surging with excitement. Helis was the ultimate challenge. Nil had sometimes fantasized about facing off against him, even when they’d both been fighting under the Mad King. But Suntress had clearly marked Helis as her prey, and Nil had accepted this with mild regret.

Suntress waved her hand impatiently. “That’s not important anymore. Besides, I know you’ll enjoy it,” she added with a teasing smile. “Finish him. I’ll be on the western ridge. They need all the help they can get with the Deathbringers.” Then she prised the door open with a swift thrust of her lance.

“I love you,” Nil blurted. He couldn’t help it. This probably wasn’t an appropriate time to say so, given that the palace was burning around them and there was a parade of corrupted machines marching on their position, but she’d just given him the greatest gift he could imagine: a death match with the most notorious killer in recent Carja history. Suntress knew him so well, and better yet, she accepted him in all his bloodlust. If that wasn’t love, Nil didn’t know what was.

Suntress gaped at him, then she let out a wild laugh. “I love you too,” she yelled over the noise of
fighting and fire. “But now I have to go!” Then she leapt onto a nearby zipline and was gone.

Nil turned back towards Helis and almost laughed at the look of utter disbelief on his face as he watched Suntress disappear. Helis’s lips peeled back in a mask of pure rage. “The savage girl dares to spurn her destiny? The Sun has written her death at my hands!” he snarled.

Nil smiled coldly. He twirled his knife once then crouched slightly, his whole body singing for this fight. “Not today,” he drawled. “Today I’ll be writing your death in the ink of your own blood.”

Helis’s eyes fixed upon him, and their pale depths burned with zealous madness. He unsheathed a curved scimitar as he approached Nil. “Prince Kadar, once a Champion of the Sun. Now reduced to a savage girl’s pet,” he sneered. “I thought you died in the depths beneath Sunfall. But no matter. I’ll happily cut down a traitor to get to the savage. Your death will be but a blot on the parchment of my greatest deeds.”

Nil smirked. Suntress was right; Helis never stopped talking. “Shut the fuck up and fight me already,” Nil said.

Helis bared his teeth in rage and then rushed Nil suddenly, but Nil was ready; he blocked Helis’s lunge, diverting the larger man to the side, then slashed at Helis’s abdomen with his trusty knife.

The fight was everything Nil had ever imagined and more: challenging and bloody, with wounds sustained by both himself and Helis. Nil had to admit that he wasn’t quite as fast as usual due to his previous injuries, but he was still far more agile than Helis. He stayed close to the larger man, relishing the intimacy of the fight and the snarls of anger and pain that Helis was letting loose.

As the duel went on, Nil noticed that Helis was starting to get sloppy; his rage was getting the better of him. It was a fatal mistake: he took a wild swing at Nil, and Nil dodged under his arm and slammed his knife into Helis’s gut three times, then booted him hard in the chest to send him sprawling onto his back.

Immediately Nil kicked away Helis’s scimitar and kneeled directly on the wounds on his abdomen. Helis gasped in agony, then rasped, “Impossible. I am Chosen. This was not meant to be!”

Nil laughed and laid his knife gently against Helis’s throat. “Yes, you were chosen by the ‘savage girl’ to die at my hands. Now turn your face to the Sun… or don’t. Makes no difference to me.” Then Nil sliced Helis’s neck from ear to ear, and with a last desperate choking gurgle of blood, the Terror of the Sun was no more.

Nil stood slowly, and a grin of pure delight lit his face. If only the Tenakth were right, and a victorious warrior could absorb the strength of his enemies! If ever there was a time when Nil had actually been tempted to drink another’s blood, it was now.

Then a sudden, enormous explosion rattled the palace again, and Nil shook his head slightly; there was no time to relish this kill right now. The western ridge, Suntress had said. He would find her there.

********************

“Aloy! Aloy!”

“Suntress!”

Heavy. Her head was so heavy. But his voice was pulling her up. She had to get up to see the face that went with that beloved voice.
Finally Aloy opened her eyes. Teb’s and Nil’s faces wavered before resolving into clarity as she blinked hard. Nil’s warm hands were cradling her face and neck, and Teb wilted with relief as Aloy tried to sit up.

“By All-Mother, you survived!” Teb groaned. “I thought you were killed!”

_Never mind me_, Aloy thought as she pushed herself slowly to her knees. Her ears were ringing and her head hurt, but otherwise she felt miraculously all right. “The others - are they…?”

Teb shook his head emphatically. “No, no. Wounded, but alive mostly. The machines blasted through and then kept going. They marched on the Spire, dragging that… thing with them.” Teb swallowed hard, and his pale blue eyes were wide with fear.

_HADES_. With Nil’s help, Aloy forced herself to her feet. _I’ve got to stop HADES before…_ She couldn’t bear to finish her thought. “Take care of the others, Teb. I’ve got to go,” she said. She nodded to Nil, and together they climbed through the rubble of the destroyed gate.

As they scrabbled over boulders and broken bricks, Aloy glanced at him inquiringly. “Helis?” she asked.

Nil grinned at her, and she couldn’t help but smile back at the pure satisfaction on his face. “Dead. It was glorious.”

Despite her rising anxiety, Aloy managed a small laugh. “Good. I hope you made it hurt.”

“Oh yes,” Nil said happily. “I made sure of it.”

Aloy laughed again, but her laughter died abruptly in her throat as she took in the state of Meridian Village.

It looked like the end of days. _Everything_ was on fire. The heat was unbelievable, emanating from every direction, and corrupted machines stalked imperviously among the flames like demons.

Aloy’s mind stuttered with shock even as her hands worked on autopilot, shooting a tearblast arrow into a Longlegs’ air bladder before pelting it with fire arrows. Beside her, Nil pulled out a tearblast arrow - she hadn’t even known he stocked them in his quiver - and skilfully he shot a Corruptor’s poison cannister, then began pelting it with fire arrows.

When the Corruptor was totally wreathed in flames, Nil turned to her as casually as if they were just going for a stroll in the jungle. “Suntress, don’t you have somewhere you need to be?”

Aloy closed her mouth; it had dropped open in surprise at his apparent proficiency with destroying machines. She nodded briskly, but she felt absolutely torn. The village was a _mess_. How could she just leave this behind…?

At that moment, Vanasha skidded up beside them. “Aloy, we’ve got this! Go!” she yelled. Then she turned to Nil. “Pet Prince, we could use your damn help, if you can tear yourself away from the redhead for once.”

Nil raised one eyebrow at Aloy and nocked another tearblast arrow in his bow. “Suntress, go ahead. It seems that Vanasha needs a lesson in machine hunting.” He smiled slowly at her. “After all, I learned from the best.”

Aloy hooked her arm around his neck and pulled him into a furious kiss, then released him. No point thinking about the danger she was leaving him in, no point, no _point_. “Okay,” she panted. “I’ll be
back.” Then she turned on her heel and pelted for the Spire as fast as her feet would carry her.

She had one last task now. If this didn’t work out, nothing else would ever matter.

*******************

Light.

The network was laid out before her, and it was beautiful.

Whether this was a fever dream, or a seizure or a hallucination, Aloy wasn’t sure, but suddenly Elisabet was there, a towering figure of light and potential.

“Master Override armed. To activate, state name and rank.”

Aloy reached up towards the majestic figure of her progenitor and smiled. “Elisabet Sobeck, Alpha Prime,” she breathed.

“Master Override activated. Purging Extinction Protocol.”

Then the light was everywhere, expanding exponentially, searing the backs of Aloy’s eyes with its dazzling brightness. When Aloy next opened her eyes, she was lying in the grass, the destroyed shell of HADES hissing and spitting with sparks before her. Then Varl was hauling her up from the grass, Talanah was shouting excitedly, and Erend was swinging her around in the air in a wild hug.

It was over. HADES was gone. They were safe.

Aloy’s people, the people of everywhere, were safe.

As Erend set her down in the grass, she finally allowed herself to smile. It felt unreal, almost too good to be true. Needing proof, she jogged over to the edge of the Alight to look down at Meridian Village.

The flames were still burning, but every corrupted machine in the village was… quiet. Many were destroyed, but many weren’t, and those that weren’t were silent and still. Dormant.

We did it, she thought to herself, Elisabet and GAIA and I. We did it. A wild surge of happiness washed over her and she lifted her bow to the sky in victory. From the village below, she heard a faint but unmistakable cheer in response, and she grinned as she lowered her bow.

Then Aloy turned and headed back towards the village. There was a residual tightness in her chest, and only one person could lessen it; she wouldn’t feel completely fine until she saw him, healthy and whole, with her own two eyes.

Aloy shook her head with amusement at Varl and Erend as they chest-bumped each other and roared in celebration, and she squeezed Talanah’s shoulder in thanks. On her way down from the Alight, Aloy knelt at Sona’s side to ensure that the injured war-chief was all right, then fled to the village.

As Aloy ran along the river, Janeva nodded briskly to her, and Petra shouted praise and raised a small flask of Scrappersap. Aloy slowed her pace as she walked through the village and smirked when she spotted Uthid and Vanasha clasped together in a passionate embrace. She patted Teb on the shoulder as he bandaged a wounded palace guard.

Then Aloy spotted him, covered in soot and blood but still so painfully handsome that her heart skipped a beat, and the tightness in her chest dissolved like excess dye from a strip of Nora cord. She smiled slowly as she approached him, and he grinned back at her, his silver eyes glinting with
humour.

“Come here,” Nil purred, and Aloy’s heart took flight. She loved those words and the way he delivered them, his familiar deep and mocking tone tempered with affection.

But more than his words, Aloy loved him.

Once she was within arm’s reach, Nil wrapped an arm around her waist and swiftly pulled her against his chest. “Does this mean your days of whispering metal death are over?” he asked.

Aloy smiled and slid her hands up his chest to his shoulders. “For now, at least. Who knows what might happen in a few years?”

“Who indeed,” Nil murmured. Then he was kissing her, and Aloy kissed him back uninhibitedly, feeling more free and light than she ever had in her life.

After some time, but not nearly long enough, Nil gently pulled back and raised one eyebrow. “So. Now what do we do, Suntress?”

She wrapped her arms around his neck and smiled. She knew that Avad and Erend would want to celebrate, throw a feast in her honour, but the last thing she wanted right now was to be the centre of attention. “I do have something in mind,” she told Nil. “There’s someone important that I need to thank.”

Chapter End Notes

Just one chapter left, friends!
Epilogue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Aloy slowed her Broadhead to a gentle lope and gazed up at the rusted sign overhead, and her heart skipped a beat with nerves. The ancient glyphs read Sobeck Ranch.

She’d found it: the place where Elisabet had lived before Project Zero Dawn. Now to find out if Aloy was right in her hunch. She looked over at Nil. He’d already dismounted his Broadhead and stood looking at her expectantly. Aloy nodded silently, then slid off her steed and walked through the gate.

Immediately she spotted a precise triangle of mauve flowers growing around a stone bench that was overgrown with the richest green moss Aloy had ever seen. The lush growth around the bench contrasted starkly with the flowing red desert that surrounded the ranch.

Nil hung back as Aloy hurried over to the stone bench. As she knelt in front of the bench, her Focus gave a tiny chirp, alerting her that the final audio file from Elisabet’s journals was repaired.

Aloy brushed the lush foliage away from a metal humanoid figure slumped on the bench. Then she eagerly tapped her Focus to listen to the repaired recording.

Elisabet’s voice shivered into life in Aloy’s ear, both familiar and strange because the voice was Aloy’s too. Aloy listened curiously as Elisabet spoke to GAIA of an experiment gone wrong when she was a child.

Then GAIA’s calm voice spoke. “You often tell stories of your mother, but you are childless.”

Elisabet’s voice was weary but patient as she replied. “I never had time. Guess it was for the best.”

Aloy peered at the chestplate of the metal figure and brushed her fingers over it. A label from her Focus suddenly appeared:

Dr. Sobeck.

Aloy’s heart skipped a beat and she bit her lip in melancholy joy. Her hunch had been right.

Then GAIA’s voice spoke again. “If you had had a child, Elisabet, what would you have wished for him or her?”

With shaking fingers, Aloy wiped the face of the metal figure’s helmet and scanned it with her Focus.

“I guess... I would have wanted her to be... curious. And willful. Unstoppable, even. But with enough compassion to heal the world... just a little bit.”

Inside the helmet, Elisabet Sobeck’s face was utterly and completely at peace. The doctor could have been asleep. A tear of grief and joy ran down Aloy’s face and she smiled, her fingers grazing the metal figure’s cheek.

“Anyway, that's all I've got for now, GAIA. Time to tuck in,” Elisabet's gentle voice said.
“I wish you a pleasant sleep, Elisabet.”

“Thank you. I’ll catch you tomorrow.”

Elisabet would never know how much her sacrifice had meant to the world she’d left behind. And no one in the world knew that they owed everything to the woman inside this metal suit.

But Aloy knew. And that knowledge meant everything to her.

Suddenly Aloy spotted a small green-and-blue orb in Elisabet’s metal hand. She wiped her eyes and picked it up curiously, and with a flash of insight, she recognized its shape. It matched the holographic globe she had seen in Maker’s End.

It was the Earth, a tiny representation of the world on which everyone lived.

Aloy cradled the tiny Earth to her chest with reverence. She wished she had thought to bring something with her, some token to show Elisabet how much she appreciated everything that the passionate doctor had done.

Then Nil was crouching beside her, his palm extended, and Aloy looked over to see a metal flower in his hand.

Aloy looked at him in surprise. “You found another metal flower? I thought I’d gotten them all. Where was this?”

Nil shrugged. “I found it on my way from Free Heap to Meridian. I forgot to tell you before.” Gently Aloy took the flower from his hand, and he stood. “The Carja like to leave flowers on the graves of their dead. Personally, I think it’s a waste of shards. But… a metal flower seems fitting for this, Suntress.”

A throb of affection washed over Aloy. Despite Nil’s deadpan lack of sentiment, he’d offered her this token, knowing it would mean something to her. And to have a metal flower for his machine-hunting Suntress?

She smiled up at him. He knew her so well.

Lovingly she laid the metal flower beside Elisabet’s head, then scanned it to read the poem it encoded.

Lift your head and look out the window
Stay that way for the rest of the day and watch the time go
Listen! The birds sing
Listen! The bells ring
All the living are dead, and the dead are all living
The war is over and we are beginning

Another tear ran down her cheek, and for a moment Aloy couldn’t speak. She knelt for a long while with Nil’s reassuring presence just behind her.

“Is the verse fitting, Suntress?” Nil asked quietly, and she nodded. “It’s perfect,” she whispered.

Then Aloy stood, and slowly she and Nil walked back towards their Broadheads. Once they reached their steeds, Nil reached out and tucked one of Aloy’s braids behind her ear. A burst of tenderness washed over her in response to his familiar, loving gesture.
Gracefully Nil slung himself onto his Broadhead’s back, then gave Aloy his signature half-smile. “Where to next?” he asked.

Aloy looked out towards the horizon. The sun was just starting to set, its fading rays gracing the tufted clouds with shades of pink and gold.

For the first time Aloy could remember, she had no destination in mind, and it felt good. The world and all its lessons were waiting, welcoming her like an open door.

And with Nil by her side, all things were possible.

Aloy hopped onto her Broadhead and smiled at her silver-eyed Carja lover. “Anywhere we want,” she said.

Chapter End Notes

To anyone who has read along from start to finish: THANK YOU for being here. This has been the longest fic I've written to date, and certainly the one I've been most emotionally invested in. I'm kind of a wreck right now that it's over. Having your comments along the way to show I'm not alone on this Niloy train has been a privilege.

I listen to music incessantly while writing, so a few music credits are in order:

1. The metal flower poem in this chapter is lyrics from "In Our Bedroom After The War" by Stars.
2. My personal theme for Aloy is "Warrior" by Aurora.
3. My personal theme for Nil is "Furr" by Blitzen Trapper. (At least after he falls for Aloy; before he met her, it probably would have been "Closer" by Nine Inch Nails. Actually, depending on Nil's mood, it probably still is...)

Finally, this Niloy train is not stopping - more to come with these two. Please feel free to subscribe to me for updates!

Love you all! <3

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!