This is my story, Geralt. You must let me finish telling it." Cirilla Fiona Elen Riannon

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This story line explores the bond between Ciri and Geralt that started when she was a child to grow to love the man that gave her new life.
This is completed. Mature themes include violence, strong language, and sexual material integral to character development. By pairing these two powerful characters together, I took this story line seriously and worked tirelessly to honor the characters and the original source material to develop a beautiful and exciting story I believe in.

My 2nd work: "Lost Days At Kaer Morhen" found HERE

"Still" A Geralt/Yen missing love scene HERE

Translation in Italian HERE

Based on Andrzej Sapkowski books and TW3 Wild Hunt video game by CDPR.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
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Game image owned by CD Projekt Red

The Witcher - Something More

By CelticBabs13

PROLOGUE
When something ends, something else begins.

He did not press his horse, Roach, into a quicker trot. Instead, he let her trudge along the snow-covered road at her own pace. Her hooves crunched on the icy road, the sound glaring, echoing in the stillness. The frigid breeze bit through his cloak, and battered large white fluffy flakes drifting down from the sky in all directions. Although eager to get to the warmth of the village inn, he had ridden her long and hard. Now he wanted to take it easy on her for the rest of the journey.

Creaking leather, both from his armor and saddle, sounded distinct and louder than usual in the icy air. His shoulders sank a little lower, bracing against the frigid wind. He sighed. The weight of the world did not disappear. Not like he thought. But the truth of it? It was a different kind of strain. A path lay before him now, unknown, unfamiliar. His gloved fingers tightened on the reins. Did he possess the strength to move forth in this new role? So foreign to him, how could he prove to be… adequate at best? He knew nothing about... He shook his head, still in disbelief. Snowflakes fell off his hood at the movement only to get stuck on his beard.

But the worst of it? Treading forth on a foreign path alone… Again.

He should be used to it by now. In the near century that he had wandered the world, he did it alone. He walked The Path alone, preferred to work alone. Oh, there were times when he enjoyed the companionship of lovers, but those relations were casual. True meaningful intimacy eluded him. Not because others did not want to make that bond with him. No, it was not them. The deficiency lay with him. In his inability to truly open himself up to another. He had found respite only with a couple significant women, and even then, those instances were rare. His friends, other brothers in the trade, dispersed, following their own ways. Uncertain now when they would ever meet up again.

Glancing at the western horizon, the pure white snow blanketed the ground and foliage. The sun had set bathing the sky with tints of blue and lavender glistening off a sea of white. It set the landscape in an ethereal misty glow. No words could describe its beauty and the sight inspired thoughts of new beginnings. Somehow, the snow clinging to everything masked nature’s imperfections. It bore a redeeming quality. While everything now lay dormant for the winter, the promise of new birth followed. Maybe someday soon, he would find redemption… that spring would shine on him, wash away his imperfections.

At this time of year, he usually wintered at Kaer Morhen, the one place he had ever called home. He and his friends would weather the harsh winters there before taking up The Path again in the spring. But this year, it was difficult to make the arduous long journey back to an empty fortress. What few witcher brothers were left had vacated the Witcher School of the Wolf after its founder and chief witcher, Vesemir, had passed away over the summer.

The fact that his companions had left so suddenly after his death disheartened him. True, the fortress would never be the same without Vesemir’s presence, but it was the only home they had ever known. They grew up there. He was not ready to let it go. The few other witcher schools had already crumbled and its members wandered the continent or, killed off. The School of the Wolf was the legendary guild headquarters where they had created witchers for centuries. He could not
leave it abandoned. No. He would not. Vesemir would… well, he would be heartbroken if the final symbol of their occupation was on the verge of extinction. He pressed his chapped lips tight together. But what could he alone do? How could he restore a fortress alone? Was it even up to him when had a… Dammit.

He heaved another sigh. What he wouldn’t give to have a heart-to-heart with the elder witcher now. The one man who was the closest figure of a father. A man of wisdom, Vesemir would have guided him in the direction he now faced wrought on by recent events.

Facing uncharted territory, he needed words of encouragement and advice from his dear friend and mentor. Vesemir’s loss had hit them all hard. He had departed this world defending the life of one very dear to him. Dear to all of them, but to this witcher especially.

The one in whom he, the legendary White Wolf, had a tremendous influence since her inception. A course he had set in motion that no one, perhaps only Destiny, could have foreseen. A path that was often brutal and heart-wrenching, yet rewarding in its own way. Yes, rewarding. In a manner he never could have imagined. For Destiny had brought him Zireael, Swallow, Child of Destiny, Child of the Elder Blood, the Lion Cub of Cintra… his Surprise Child - inherited by a misplaced and untimely invocation of the Law of Surprise.

Was it misplaced? At times, he questioned it, but deep in his soul he knew the answer.

He steered his mare down the center road of White Orchard, heading toward the inn. A few townsfolk, bundled up in layers of clothing, braved the cold. One gave him a wide berth, but it was not because he was dominating the road. Greatly feared, or often enough despised, most people avoided him as much as possible. He was a witcher. The two swords strung across his back were the most recognizable traits that distinguished him from the rest of the population. And his pure snowy hair. The white mane that contradicted his youthful appearance often confused people. For a man in his prime should not have pure white hair as if he were in his senior years. The hood of his cloak covered his head now. One other villager stepped aside, peering at him with fear in his eyes. Most avoided his gaze, or when they could not, shot him reproachful glares. If that was all they did, he was lucky. Some people had gone great lengths to show their disdain of him and his kind.

He sighed again.

It was tough for witchers to blend in with society. Physical traits alone made them stand out in a crowd, and unequaled with their skill with the sword. He had accepted the fact he was an outcast, one to be shunned until his services were needed. But at times, it still stung.

This outcast had a large hand in saving the entire world from an otherworldly elven conquest. If that was not enough to boast about, he also helped save the world from the infamous prophetic White Frost. But the world’s inhabitants would never know it nor acknowledge it, instead preferring to behave in a manner familiar.

The price of saving the world had been a steep one. It had cost him the man whom he had considered a father. It had also cost him his home, his dear friends, and the love of his life. There wasn’t much more he could give, although he had gained something more he had never believed he could have. But even in that, fate was particular.

But still, he had his faithful companion, Roach. Stroking her neck, he cooed softly. They were almost at the inn and she would be warm eating her fill of oats shortly. She snorted, great clouds of frosty air billowed from her nostrils as if she understood him.
The light falling snow stuck to his full beard and blended in with the white of his whiskers. Turning into the front of the inn, he dismounted and left Roach in the care of the stable boy with instructions on her proper care. His mare meant a lot to him and there was nothing he would not provide for his faithful companion.

A gloved hand rested on the door and he paused. It was here at this inn eight months ago when the course of his life had begun its dramatic turn.

Now… well… now everything was different. Times have changed.

Pushing open the door, a wave of sound and firelight washed over him in welcoming warmth. Breathing in deep the mouth watering aromas of roasted pork and potatoes reminded him he should eat. However, his stomach clenched tight, prevented him.

Some things have ended.

He stepped over the threshold with both exhilaration and apprehension tumbling about his insides. Scanning unfamiliar faces sitting at tables or standing by the hearth, he searched the tavern for someone in particular. There, back in the far corner, a cloaked individual of slight frame sat with their back to him.

Memories washed over him, filling him with a myriad of emotions he had finally come to accept. Emotions that had become a part of who he was. No sense denying them any longer.

Now... now was the time to welcome a new beginning. To embrace something more...
Chapter Summary

Geralt meets up with Ciri at the White Orchard Inn. Elated to see her again, something was not quite right. This is assuming the Witcheress Ending at the end of TW3 game.

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10/13/2019 - did some editing to tweak the information to stay in line with future chapters.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

by emmalineisnotsocreative

CHAPTER TWO
Amidst the Shadows

Drawing in a ragged breath, he ignored the glares and curious glances from other customers. Taking another step, he then halted. His gaze, set upon that cloaked lone figure in the corner, never wavered.

A drunkard dressed in filthy rags stumbled in his path blocking his way and his view. Bleary-eyed, instead of moving aside the man swayed, tried to pass him, and stopped. He stank worse than a stable not cleaned for a week.

“Hey,” the drunkard slurred. “You’re that, whaddaya call ‘em? W-witcher! That’s it. Remember you, mutant.” He belched, the foul stench of stale beer combined with a fish dinner rivaled the stable odor. A high-pitched hiccup came next and the man lost his balance. Shit, it was winter and all, but it wouldn't hurt to bathe more often.

Several men huddled around a nearby table hooted and hollered shoving the drunk back on his feet. Turning his head, he glanced away, focusing his attention once again on the cloaked figure in the back.

“Weren’ chew here lash shummer?”

“Excuse me.” Maneuvering around the drunk, he crossed the room dimly lit by torch and candlelight. Passing the hearth, its warmth seeped through his thick black cloak wet with snow. He would have lingered in front of it, thawing out his hands and feet, but he had yearned for this meeting and did not want any time wasted.

Approaching the cloaked individual, he took a deep breath. The familiar scent of woman, of this particular woman, registered in his nose. The aroma he knew well. At one time, the fragrance of lilac and gooseberries titillated him, intoxicated him. But that was a distant memory now. This scent was raw and natural, of leather and steel, and soft womanly freshness tinged with only the scent of lilac. Influenced by Yen, no doubt. Heart thumping, he pushed back his hood and laid a hand on her slender shoulder.

Turning toward him, her hood concealed most of her features. But then she glanced up. Brilliant green eyes gleamed in the candlelight framed by ashen hair. A smile slow and bright spread wide across her diamond-shaped face. The familiar pink scar marred her cheek from under the left eye to ear. Odd, that scar invoked nostalgic sensations warm in his belly. Hell, invoked much more than nostalgia.

“Ciri.” He faltered and her name was all he managed. Straddling the bench, he sat next to her and enveloped her in his arms. Hers wrapped around him clutching him close. Mugs clanged, dishes rattled, a cacophony of voices, all the noises blurred in the background to a dull hum.

“Geralt,” she murmured, her familiar voice soft in his ear, her breath warm on his neck. He closed his eyes, savored the moment.

Breathing in her scent, pride swelled in him. She had accomplished what she had set out to do and
survived. He squeezed her tight against him. He swept the hood off her head and gave himself permission to absorb her presence. His gaze roamed over her features, his hands smoothed down her back. Ashen hair swept back into the customary bun at her nape, a timeless style she had always preferred. Cheeks tinged pink, eyes glittered with that glow whenever she looked at him. Stunning as always.

Something in her gaze faltered, a wrinkle, barely noticeable to the human eye, but evident to his, marred her smooth skin between her dark brows. That was not there before her confrontation with the White Frost. A minute detail that aged her slightly and spoke of the hard life she had lived. He frowned. Something had happened since she had left them to confront the White Frost.

The flush in her cheeks intensified in response to his admiration. “Looking good yourself, Witcher.” Her fingers tickled his stubbled chin. “Haven’t seen you in a full beard in a long time. I don’t know… Maybe I’ll get used to it.”

Scratching his cheek, he grimaced. “Can’t wait to shave it off. All of it. But for now it’s keeping my face warm.”

A waitress stopped at their table. “Can I get you two anythin’? Beer, ale?” Her scathing glance left Geralt only to rest on Ciri. Eyeing her, the waitress’ lip curled.

An older woman with salt and pepper hair and eyes lacking any joy, she wiped her hands on her soiled apron. Leaning down, she drawled, “Can I get you a mug of milk, child?” as if she were talking to a kid.

“I’m no child,” Ciri spat in her usual feisty manner.

Geralt grinned inwardly but shot the waitress a scolding glare. “That was no way to address a lady, ma’am.”

“Oh, my mistake.” No apology hinted in her response. “What about you, grandpa, what can I get you?”

He sighed. All right, he got it. Hair and beard as white as milk aged him. It often confused people, but it still stung. He was in his prime, for fuck’s sake.

“Listen, lady,” Ciri spoke the word with contempt. “He is a Witcher. Show some respect, would you?”

On that cue, Geralt glanced up at the waitress giving her an unobstructed view of his eyes. Blanching, the waitress took a step back and fidgeted with her skirts avoiding his gaze.

“Two beers-” he ordered in a gruff voice.

A hand covered his wrist.

“Hot cider.”

His eyes slid to hers and then back at the waitress. “Two, please.”

Speechless, the waitress nodded and hurried towards the kitchen.

Geralt watched Ciri closely. She met his gaze, her fingers fumbling with the clasp on her cloak. The thick wool folds fell open.
“Everywhere you go,” she shook her head. “Doesn’t that bother you?”

“Used to it.” He smiled at her, then dropped his gaze to the table. A small wooden vase sat at the end stuffed with evergreen boughs. Their green branches drooped over the sides touching the top of the table. Mostly, he was used to it. But sometimes, deep down, it stung. So different from ordinary folk, he would never blend in with society or ever become one of them.

“How are you feeling, Witcher-Girl?”

“I’m fine, Geralt. Even better now I’m with you.”

He dropped his gaze, not entirely believing her. Looking more gaunt than usual, he surprised himself at not seeing it earlier. And the dark circles tainting the skin under her eyes. Scrutinizing closer without drawing attention, the dark smudges were not from the heavy kohl eyeliner that lined her eyes like he initially thought.

“Want something to eat? I’ve got plenty of coin, so anything you want-”

She shook her head and paled almost imperceptibly, but he caught it.

“All right…”

Eyeing her out the corner of his eye, he was not sure how to ask this. His gaze scanned the room before speaking. “How did you do it? I mean… how’d you defeat the White Frost? And, are you feeling okay?”

She paused, peering at him, and when he glanced down, she smiled. “Yeah. I’m fine. Nothing to be worried about.”

He nodded. She was happy. Despite a sense of anxiety she tried hard to conceal, he knew she was happy. That alone made him the happiest he had ever been.

Ciri beamed up at him. Chin pointed up proudly, her eyes glinted in the soft golden glow. “Conquered the White Frost. At least for a long time.”

“You did it, Ciri. You truly are a remarkable woman. Damn proud of you. But how did you do it?”

A mug clanked down in front of him, the liquid sloshed over the sides and spilled onto the table. The second mug landed just as hard in front of Ciri.

“Charming hospitality,” he muttered.

The waitress huffed, gave him a wide berth and scurried back across the room.

“Can’t say I blame her. The last time I was here, Vesemir and I defended ourselves from a bloody brawl started by some locals. Did not end well for them. Sure I bring all that back whenever I show up.”

She laughed and the sweet sound washed over him soothing him. He loved her laugh. She took a sip careful not to burn her mouth. “Mmm. Haven’t had mulled cider in… ages. Missed this from the old days.”

“Me too.” He took a sip.

“How’s Yennefer?”
The dreaded question. Sighing, he set down the mug and wrapped his palms around the pottery. The heat seeped through his leather gloves. “Afraid you’d ask that.”

Her gaze fell to the table. “She’s my mother, Geralt. I need to know…”

“Of course you do. But…”

She waited unusually patient for him to continue. All the while, she stared outside the window covered with frost along the sill and edges.

“Haven’t seen her since you left through the portal Avallac’h opened. You know, to face the White Frost. She... Well...” Pausing, he coughed, finding it difficult to find the words. Words to suffice enough without giving away any details. It would spoil their reunion if he did.

"Geralt?" She peered at him questioningly. "You and Yen have a falling out again?"

"You could say that."

Her gaze clearly betrayed she demanded a definitive answer. She was not playing around.

"Yes," he mumbled into his mug. "Doubt we'll ever get back together again this time."

“I'm sorry Geralt,” she breathed, her hand reaching for his and squeezing it meaningfully. He returned the gesture, but took his time in letting go of her hand. “I know how much you loved her.”

“Still do, actually, but even now I sense that love changing into a different kind of love.” He avoided her penetrating gaze and took a sip of the steaming cider. But out of the corner of his eye, Ciri’s gaze snapped to his. She had a questioning look in her eyes.

“You know, in a different way. Not like I used to. Before, I obsessed over her all the time—” Abruptly he stopped, remembering with whom he was speaking. Now was not the time to reveal the more personal aspects of his love life - a life long in the running well before Ciri was even born. "Never mind. It's probably better this way."

Her slender shoulders slumped. Her grin before had lit up the dim chamber, but now she frowned and it grew dark inside the tavern again.

“I should’ve said goodbye to her. Should’ve explained my plans. I… Just knew it would be too hard. And I’d falter. Had to do that… confront the Frost.” She glanced at him and smiled a melancholic smile. "Now I feel doubly bad knowing you two are on the outs again. Maybe things will change in the future."

"Hmmm," he grunted. "Not so sure. But you two still have each other. Yennefer would be overjoyed to know you've returned and are home safe.”

Nodding, she wiped a strand of hair from her face. “Where is she?”

He sighed. “Last saw her on Undvik, after you left through the portal.” Resting an elbow on the table, he stared at what was left of the cider. Gritting his teeth, he hated lying to her, but, well it wasn't really a lie, per se, just redirecting the truth a bit to spare her more anxiety. “Discovering you had... left...” he swallowed and disguised it by taking another sip of the hot drink. ”Ah, haven't seen her that livid in a long time. Gave me a good lashing. Still stings,” he added under his breath. “Avallac'h couldn't console her either. Tried explaining what you needed to do, but she just couldn't see past her pain of losing you.” Yeah, that seemed to work based on her worried
expression. "She teleported away in a fury. Don't know where she went. Haven't seen her since."

“That was… four months ago.” Her eyes misted over. She blinked rapidly staring at her mug. “I'm sorry, Geralt. I should have handled that better. That was selfish of me. Hadn't considered yours or Yennefer’s feelings when I leaped away mere moments after you defeated Eredin and the Wild Hunt.”

She leaned in close, her eyes hooded and sincere. He did not take his eyes off her when she pressed her lips to his. Neither of them moved, the kiss lasting a delicious eternity. Every muscle melted at the contact. Her lips smooth and silky calmed and heated him.

She pulled away, their lips holding onto each other for another lingering moment before parting. Sighing, he licked his lips, still tasted her.

“Never had the chance to properly thank you.”

“For what?”

Her unwavering gaze held his then it roamed over his face loving every bit of him. A flutter rolled in his belly.

“For everything. For being the man I could trust with my life. For challenging and defeating two commanders and the king of the Wild Hunt. No small accomplishment, Geralt. You've done more for me than anyone.”

“I’d do anything for you, Ciri,” he murmured.

“I know. I’d do anything for you, Geralt. Hope you know that.”

Tugging off a leather glove, he swept aside bangs that had fallen loose near her eyes. “I do,” he whispered.

She shook her head, wiping a stray tear from her lashes. “Ugh. Can't talk about Yennefer anymore. Hurts too much. I fear I’ve hurt her. Maybe she’ll never want to see me again.”

He took a sip. Hurts too much. That was an understatement. Every relationship he had hurt. Normal for him.

“Don’t believe that. She loves you more than anything. Even more than me. You could find her. Anytime you want you could go to her.”

“Yes, I will go to her shortly. I need her, Geralt. I mean, I need you too, but in the next few months, I am going to need her. But, I wanted to be with you first.” She fixed her bright gaze on him. A shadow of worry darkened over them for a moment then she blinked and looked away. She drew in a shaky breath. “Speaking of fathers…”

“Weren’t speaking of fathers,” he pointed out.

“Well,” she waved her hand in the air dismissively. “We are now. How did he take the news? Did he believe you?”

Silent, Geralt took his time drawing a pull from the mug. Its cinnamon spiced heat warmed him all the way down. He sat down the beverage and stretched his legs under the table. “Honestly, have no idea. Your father is a hard man, Ciri, and tough to read. Told him what you wanted in the most convincing way I could.”
“That’s all I could ask for. This way he’ll stop hunting me down. Thanks, Geralt.”

A silence settled between them thick like a fleecy blanket. He eyed her and took another sip. “When are you going to tell me what you really want to say?”

“What?” The mug wobbled on the table when she let go of it. Cider splashed over the sides. “You heard me.”

“How’d you know?” she whispered, her cheeks reddened.

Quirking his eyebrow, he did not answer right away. When he did he kept his voice low. “Your heart rate is quick, your smile, at times shaky like you are nervous about something. You look tired, weary. What is it?”

“Not here, Geralt… please. Rather not be in a public place.”

“All right.” He stood up. “Will get a room…”

Her hand snapped out and clutched his arm. “Took care of it. Already rented one for the night.”

Sitting back down, he nodded. “Good thinking. The place is busy.”

“Yeah, all the rooms are taken.”

“Let’s go then.”

Finishing the cider in one large gulp, he deposited the mug on the table. He wiped the back of his hand across his mouth and rose from the bench. Offering her a hand, she shook her head, muttering something about being able on her own. Her fingers clutched the heavy black cloak closed across her chest. Something about the cloak pricked his subconscious, but his focus on her buried any further thought.

“Follow me,” she passed ahead of him and headed for the stairs, her cloak billowed out behind her. Some drunken townsmen leered and whistled at her. When their gazes landed on him, their jeers turned to filthy taunts and crude jokes. Ignoring them all, he followed her tall, but slender frame to the staircase.

“Which room?”

“The last one on the right.”

“Meet you there. Gonna grab my saddlebags first.”

She nodded.

He watched her reach the second floor. Gods, he was so glad she made it back. After she willingly left to face the Frost, he honestly steeled himself against the thought that he’d never see her again. It was a reality he could not live with. Back on Undvik, Yennefer’s anger and fury were directed at him, but only a part of it was due to Ciri’s hasty departure. The other part - well... best learn to live with it. By no means was he a flawless man.

The door clanked closed to their room and he turned to step out into the biting cold. A secret grin captured his lips. Ciri was back and he could breathe again.
The door clicked closed.

Every nerve ending popped alive as soon as he stepped into the room. She bit her bottom lip. Keeping her excitement in check, Ciri tossed another log in the grate and the flames roared. Turning, she removed her cloak and draped it over a chair facing the hearth. Geralt dropped his saddlebags on the end of the bed.

“Nice room,” he said. “Bigger than expected.”

“Yeah,” she nodded. “Must be the honeymoon suite. It was the last available one.” He chuckled and waves of tingles racked her lower belly.

Removing his cloak, he watched her with those unique cat-like eyes that only a handful of other men in the world possessed. She faced the fire again eager for its warmth, not knowing why. Although the room was chilly, she burned from within.

“Have something for you.”

Glancing over her shoulder, Geralt picked up a scabbard from the bed. It was not one she had seen before. Steel hilt and guard glittered in the firelight. Widening her eyes, she took a step a forward.

“It’s… beautiful,” she breathed.

He stood before her, tall as a towering sentry. She breathed in deep his familiar scent of leather and steel mixed with that natural woody fragrance of pine and campfire. It was an aroma she always appreciated and remembered at Kaer Morhen. It was the scent she dreamed of when she could not be near him.

The weapon lay flat across both palms and he presented it to her. She peered in his eyes. They glowed golden, his vertical pupils rounded in the dimness of the chamber. His expression reverent and proud.

Breath caught in her throat, she wrapped her fingers around the etched ivory hilt, its chill bit her palm. Cherishing and honoring the craft that formed this weapon, she slid her hand down the pommel to the circle of steel at the end, its sturdy circumference fitting her small hand just right. This was made specifically for her. Never before had she experienced this sense of awe. He did this just for her.

A quick glance up at him revealed an intense, unblinking gaze, and a slight grin spread across his bearded cheeks. He held his breath then let it out slowly as she stroked the hilt again. Impressive craftsmanship.

“Go ahead,” he rasped in that deep gruff voice of his. “Hold her.”

Slowly, with reverence, she unsheathed the sword and the high-pitched hiss sang in the room. She held her breath. Pure silver glinted in the golden glow of the chamber.

“Thirty-eight and a half inch blade weighs about forty ounces.”

Sharp as a razor, and fit for a witcheress. Runes etched in the blade glistened sky blue when the light hit it just right. They matched the runes of Geralt’s silver blade, but this one had a glyph
etched just below the cross-guard. She angled the sword in the light. It depicted a sparrow in the Elder Speech. Below the glyph engraved the word, “Zireael.”

“Swallow,” she breathed.


“Oh, Geralt,” she breathed. Warmth and love overwhelmed her heart and soul.

“Had it made especially for you, Witcher-Girl. Notice the weight? Slight enough for you to wield it, but just as damaging if I were to use it.”

Heart pounding, she raked her gaze up to his glittering eyes and beaming smile. “This… is a true witcher’s silver blade?”

He nodded. “Silver-plated siderite steel core. Forged by the most talented master swordsmith in Novigrad.” His hand smoothed over her hair and caressed her cheek. Closing her eyes, she leaned into his warm touch.

“A witcher needs her silver blade.”

A quivering sigh escaped her lips. Hugging the weapon to her chest, waves of emotions ran rampant through her veins and left her light-headed. Her tower of strength, her refuge, her will to survive, her everything, all wrapped up in this one man. The one man who had changed the course of her very existence, gave her a home for almost two years and taught her just about everything she knew about the Witcher trade. Now he pronounced her with the very title she had always yearned to achieve. Just like him. A witcheress.

“This is the greatest gift ever, Geralt. But, it must have cost a small fortune.”

“Not for you to be concerned about.”

Striding over to the bed, she carefully laid the sword on the downy comforter. Turning, she rushed into his full-bodied embrace, clutching him close. His arms enveloped her, his warmth seeped through cold leather, chain-mail, and sharp buckles. She was back in his arms again, the one place she ever longed to be.

“I love it, Geralt. And I love you.”

Reaching up, she raked her fingers through his long milk-white hair and drew his head down towards her. His lips captured hers before she could do likewise. Strong arms wrapped around her back crushed her against his chest.

She laid a hand on his chest and broke the contact. With a sigh, she turned back to the fire and hugged her stomach.

“What is it, Ciri?”

“Nothing.”

“Don’t believe that for a second.”

The jingle of buckles and chain-mail crashed to the floor. Leather came next. Then he was beside her at the fire wearing only his leather trousers. A large hand rested at the nape of her neck. A delicious tingle shot down her spine to join the tumult already churning in her belly.
“Ciri. What’s wrong? You feeling alright?”

She continued staring at the dancing flames.

“Tell me what’s wrong.”

Huffing out an annoyed sigh, she yanked the bun loose from her nape. Long silky hair tumbled over her shoulders and down her back covering his hand resting there.

His brow crinkled.

She turned to him. “I’m tired, Geralt. So damn tired.”

“If anyone has earned a good rest, it’s you.” He led her to the bed. “Get undressed and go to bed.” He placed a kiss on the side of her neck, just beneath her ear.

Her eyes misted over and she nodded. “Yes... sleeping in a bed. That would be lovely.”

Once under the covers, he stretched out behind her and pulled her close against him. His chest hairs soft against her back comforted her. His hand slid down her side from ribs to thigh and back up again before he draped his arm in the curve of her waist. Her gaze found her new sword propped against the nightstand. Sighing, she found his hand and intertwined her fingers between his long ones. He squeezed and held it tightly.

This was how she remembered the nights on the road all those years ago when she was a terrified little girl. Only he kept the fear at bay. Warmth flooded her mind, body, and soul. Here in his arms she was safe and treasured. Not for who she was or how she could further the gain of another, but to Geralt she was simply his little Witcher-Girl. His destiny. The heat he generated seeped through her inside and out. Once again her protector and mentor. Everything would be all right. She longed to stay here, just like this… always.

Sleep descended quickly. For the first time in a decade, she slept peacefully, void of nightmares.

Chapter End Notes

Reunion at the White Orchard Inn how I see it. :) Hope you enjoyed it.
Geralt suspects Ciri may be paying the price for what she went through in confronting the White Frost. A toll on her body and soul that may require Yennefer's attention. But there is one thing Geralt wants to complete, something more to give his new Witcheress. And so they set out on a journey.

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10/13/2019 - did some editing to tweak the information to stay in line with future chapters.

CHAPTER THREE

A Question of Price

Geralt’s eyes slammed open, his ears piqued for a sound that yanked him from a delicious dream and a perfectly peaceful slumber, but could not recall. Heart thundering, the fingers on his right hand twitched for his sword. Letting out a slow breath, he stilled. No danger around. That's right. He was at an inn. And safe.

But his ears burned. His eyes grew accustomed to the room’s dimness in an instant. A wagon rattled by crunching on the snow-covered road. He stifled an irritated groan. Indistinct voices, near and distant, and horses’ hooves clattered proved already the village had sprung to life. A gray slice of light filtered through the drawn curtains.

Next to him, the bed empty, the rumpled sheets cold. A chill bit the air and he missed the warmth she brought during the night. He glanced into the room, sensing something not right. An
unpleasant sound alerted him near the fireplace. Gingerly, so he did not startle her, he rolled onto his back. The fire had long since died down and only red embers smoldered, but it cast enough light for his sharp eyes.

On her knees before the hearth, wearing only the red tunic she wore beneath her armor, Ciri hovered over a chamber pot and groaned softly, rocking back and forth. So quiet as not to awaken him. Her agonizing noises would not stir a normal man, but him, well, he was a witcher, and his extra sensitive hearing picked it up in a sound sleep.

A fist twisted long ashem locks over her shoulder away from her face. She spit into the pot. A stubborn strand of saliva strung from her bottom lip to the bucket, glistened like a silky spider web in what little firelight was left. She uttered a whimper and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. Sitting back on her legs, she pressed an arm across her stomach as if it pained her.

He propped up on an elbow and frowned. He had never seen her ill before. She never got sick at Kaer Morhen as a kid.

“Ciri...?” he croaked, sleep thickened his voice.

She snapped her gaze to his, her face paled more than it was already. Looking away, she wiped underneath her eyes and smoothed back long tangled hair.

Throwing off the covers, he swung his feet to the floor and rested his elbows on his knees. He peered at her. “You all right?”

“Fine,” she breathed. “Must've been something I ate.”

She did not have anything to eat, he recalled, only drank the cider. But, he did not point that out. Perhaps all she needed was to eat something.

He stood. Clutching the comforter, he dragged it from the bed. The corners of the blanket trailed behind him on the floor. He reached her side and wrapped the quilt around her thin form. She gathered it about her, clasped it close around her neck. Crouching down beside her, he smoothed some stray strands of silvery hair that clung to her face. He pressed a palm to her forehead.

Clammy, but not hot.

“Not feverish. That's good.”

Despite that, she rested her head on his shoulder and shuddered. He drew her into a warm embrace and stole a quick glance in the chamber pot. Not much in there except bile. “Clearly something is bothering you, Ciri. You're not the sickly kind and you hadn't eaten anything. If you talk about it, you'll feel better.”

She shook her head against his shoulder. “I'll be okay,” she mumbled into the folds of the quilt.

Cool fingers gripped the heavy silver wolf-head medallion that rested against his sternum. With slow strokes, her forefinger traced the smooth angular edges of the wolf’s face, lingered on its nose over an open mouth baring sharp fangs in an eternal snarl. Her touch was reverent, meaningful. It was the symbol of his guild, no, their guild. The pendant trembled with her nearness, as it always had. Sharp tingles pricked all of his witcher senses like usual when she was close.

Her eyes, green as the emeralds of her late grandmother's royal necklace, clouded over, lost in a melancholic memory. He knew full well what she recalled. Vesemir’s medallion. Identical to his own, Ciri had snatched it from his funeral pyre to keep as a memento of her mentor and friend. Of the chief Witcher who was like a father to them all. Shortly before she left to confront the White
Frost, she battled the three Ladies of the Woods, or Crones as some called them. Believing she had defeated all three, one had tricked her and made good her escape. But not before tearing Vesemir's medallion from her neck in the process. Ciri, morose at losing it, believed she had lost a connection with Vesemir along with the necklace. Although, she had never came out and said that specifically, but he knew her well enough to know better.

He observed the wrinkle appear between her brows, the crinkle that was not there last they were together. The crease deepened, then her eyes misted over.

Moving on from the medallion, her fingers explored the star-shaped scar that marred his right pectoral, an eternal reminder of the mark of his trade. She traced the jagged edges, slow and purposeful as if she could magically erase it. His muscles quivered beneath her touch.

Sighing, with a palm to his chest, she pushed away and drew in a deep breath through her nose. “Feeling better already,” she stated.

“You need to eat. When was the last time you had a solid meal?”

“Don’t remember. The other morning. I think.”

“Ciri…,” he shook his head, a stubborn strand of white hair at his temple fluttered near his eye and he swiped at it unconsciously. He stood and found his saddlebags on the floor by the bed. Rummaging through them, he pulled out a hunk of crusty bread from a small linen bag and sniffed it. Smelled okay. Might be stale, but it would do. Wrapped in a gauze cloth, he found a wedge of goat cheese that did not have any mold. Returning to her, he crouched down and handed them to her. “Here. You’ll need your strength.”

She frowned. Reluctant, she accepted the bread and tore off a chunk and nibbled on the corner. “Thanks.”

Satisfied she was eating something, he stood and tossed a couple logs on the fire. Within moments, flames roared lighting the room and spread delicious warmth. He sat down on the chair, watching her finish the bread and start on the cheese.

“You slept in your trousers?” Her gem-colored gaze dropped to his legs for a moment.

He stared at the flickering flames. “Hmm-mmm.”

“You slept in your trousers?” Her gem-colored gaze dropped to his legs for a moment.

He stared at the flickering flames. “Hmm-mmm.”

“Yeah, it was, but necessary. Had to keep something between them. Flesh against flesh was too arousing. Just her lying flush against him alone was tempting enough. The leather barely did the job, but it was better than nothing. “Would’ve been uncomfortable for us both if I hadn’t,” he grumbled.

She paused with the hunk of cheese to her lips. A slow grin spread along her face, then she bit off a piece. She chewed, her eyes on him. “That must’ve been tough for you last night.”

She paused with the hunk of cheese to her lips. A slow grin spread along her face, then she bit off a piece. She chewed, her eyes on him. “That must've been tough for you last night.”

She had no idea. As if mocking him, the blanket slipped off her shoulder piling in a heap of folds on the floor next to her. It exposed more of her than he felt comfortable. Her tunic was a mid-riff style that came just below her breasts and left her belly bare. His eyes traveled over her narrow waist and alluring curve of a hip marred with a long scar. He did not mean to gawk, then glanced at the fire out of propriety. But his eyes, by their own volition, slid back to her. He let out a slow breath that sounded more like a hiss. She was practically nude if not for the short tunic that did little to cover her womanly form. She made no move to cover back up. How comfortable she was
Despite her nakedness, he frowned. Always slender, her build sleek and athletic, but to his horror,
she was thinner now than last he saw her. Before, her rib cage was noticeable just beneath her skin.
But now, an unhealthy detail of each rib was prominent. Disturbingly so.

Silence weighed heavy between them like the quilt covering her. He bent forward and wrapped the
blanket back around her shoulder. Holding her emerald gaze, he laid a hand at the nape of her neck.
“What’s happened to you?” he uttered, leaning in close.

His whisper hung in the air. His gaze swept over her features, mere inches from his own. Her eyes
dropped, hidden beneath pinkish lids. Then she met his gaze unblinking. Determination pierced
him. The answer he expected never did come. At least, not the one he wanted.

Shuddering, she shook her head, pulling away. Her chin rose up in that stubborn manner he knew
so well.

He dropped his arm, but remained close. “You can talk to me, Witcher-Girl. I'm here for you.”

Chin still high, she shifted her gaze to the dancing fire. Its orange glow tinged her paleness with
some color. Sighing, he dropped it. No one made Ciri do or say anything she did not want to.

After battling the Wild Hunt, she immediately left to face the White Frost. Although he wished she
had not left so quickly, he wanted more time with her. But she left, sensing the time was right. Her
bravery inspired, and in no way could he imagine what she went through dealing with the threat
that only a select few had truly understood. No one else had the ability to do it. She tread where no
one could go. It was clear something had happened, and the consequences apparent now. He had
not considered the toll it took on her, the price she had paid all her life for this gift. Maybe she had
not either.

Perhaps, he should take her to Yennefer. She could certainly attend to her physical and emotional
needs. Ciri had mentioned she would need her in the next few months. Maybe now was the time.
As luck would have it, he had no idea where Yen was. But that fact was trivial now. Ciri could
transport right to Yen with a mere thought. And take him along with her.

Ciri finished the chunk of bread and cheese. Satisfied, he stood and her hand snapped around his
wrist.

He gazed down at her.

“I - I know, Geralt.” She offered a sad crooked smile, her thumb rubbed the sensitive spot on the
inside of his wrist. The sensation shot tingles through his whole arm and down his back. “Just...
not ready to talk about it,” she said in a small voice. “Please give me time.”

After all they've been through together, she couldn't confide in him? Always had in the past, why
not now? Although he didn't like it, he nodded. He'd have to wait for her to open up in her own
time.

The golden flash of firelight glinted off his medallion drawing his attention. The pendant, more
than an adornment, more than a piece of his armor set, was a part of his soul, like a permanent
magical glyph etched on his chest. It defined him, labeled him for others, and alerted him of danger
and magical auras. It was an essential tool for a Witcher. One he never went without.

Glancing across the room to the nightstand, the silver sword shone in a slice of gray morning light
that beamed through the curtains like a beacon. He turned back to her.
She stayed on the floor wrapped up in the bulge of the over-sized quilt and peered up at him adoringly with large glistening green eyes. Youthful, her pixie-like features gave the impression of innocence, but what she had been through, that innocent-young-girl-look was just that, a facade. Despite all the horrors she had experienced, this young woman saved the world. Hell, not just their world, but countless others as well.

Breathing in deep, pride warmed him through. He had always believed she was extraordinary. And now, she had fulfilled her purpose. And he helped her. For he and his other witcher brothers had taught her to defend herself, trained her with the ability to fight with the sword. Yennefer had equipped her with magical knowledge. Avallac’h, that blasted elf from another world, also aided her with her ability that only a few individuals possessed within the history of their world.

Amazement shot tingles through him that settled in his fingertips. He was damned proud to be a part of her life. Hell, lucky she was a part of his. Memories of her running around Kaer Morhen…

The young eleven-year-old princess who had wrapped five Witchers around her little finger, strutting about the fortress as if it had belonged to her. He could not help grinning. Precious to him, those days he treasured in his heart.

“Get dressed,” he said, excitement bloomed in him. “We'll eat a solid breakfast then head out.” He gave her a wide smile. “Give you a chance to wield your new blade.”

That did it. She gleamed as bright as the daylight shining in through the windows. She rose from the floor and marched toward the bed, the quilt trailing behind her like a royal gown. Within moments, she had dressed in black leather armor with an assortment of belts and straps, a layer of chainmail over her shoulders, and high black leather boots. She strapped her new sword across her back, smiling the entire time.

He dressed and tossed her the fur-lined cloak. She adjusted the buckles of the belt that held the scabbard until it was comfortable before wrapping up in the cloak.

“What?” she asked with a grin. “You're staring at me, Geralt, what is it?”

“Ah, n-nothing,” he stammered, looking away, embarrassed that he made her uncomfortable. He strode over to the windows and thrust the curtains open. Bright grey daylight flooded the chamber.

“Come on, what is it?” she prodded.

Glancing out the windows, frosted at the corners, the sky had brightened promising a clear day with sunshine. No snow, rain, and no ice. Great day for traveling. He glanced back at her.

“You’re… you’ve… grown into a stunning woman, Ciri. Strong-willed, fearless... You’re a force to behold.”

Her smile, bright and genuine, warmed him through. “The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree, does it? To think I was once a terribly frightened little girl who couldn’t be out of your sight. How I’ve changed, huh?”

“Yeah, a lot. Completely,” he murmured. He handed her a saddle bag and slung the other one over his shoulder. “Come on, I’m starving.”

The idea that had occurred to him would get everything off her mind. Probably what she needed right now. Yeah, this was good.

She’d be so glad and… happy when they were through.

Yennefer can wait. For now.
Bundled up against the biting wind, they left White Orchard behind and headed southwest for Velen, giving the imperial city of Vizima a wide berth. They dared not risk recognition by the Nilfgaardians or the cover Geralt so expertly delivered was in vain. More over, his lie, if discovered by her father, would likely get him executed. One did not lie to Emhyr var Emries, Emperor of the largest empire in the known world without paying for it with his life.

But she could not go on wondering and worrying if he would continue to pursue her. Ruthless foes of her past, the mad wizard, Vilgefortz, the sadistic bounty-hunter, Bonhart, were both dead, the Wild Hunt defeated, and the White Frost impeded. All that was left… her father's tireless hunt to bring her back to the Empire in the hope she would claim her rightful inheritance. An inheritance she wanted nothing to do with.

Everything was behind her now and nothing would hinder her living her life the way she wanted, and certainly not what everyone else wanted. As long as she was with Geralt, nothing else mattered.

A bit annoying, Geralt refused to tell her where they were going, only that it would take several days of hard riding to get there. When she kept insisting, with finality, he said, “You'll figure it out once we get close, so stop asking.”

She made a face at him. He grinned and winked at her. She smiled back, loving it when he smiled. Too bad he didn't do it more often. When he did, something inside her came alive. The doubt and fear always vanished with his presence, but his smile, only for her, sent delightful tingles through her limbs.

And eventually, she did stop asking. So, it was to be a surprise. And she would let it be a surprise. Only because it came from him.

The ride was slower than anticipated. A few days or so into their journey, the sun vanished behind low-hanging ominous clouds, and the snows started. Lightly at first, large fluffy white flakes blew easily in the breeze blanketed everything. Although pretty, it did not take long to turn into a hard snowfall that obliterated everything. Small ice pellets stung the face and coated branches and the brush, and even more so, the roads. Forced to seek shelter, Geralt steered them to a rural manor tucked back in the woods in southern Velen, north of the village called Downwarren.

Through the thick white haze, an orange glow lit up a single window of a sprawling manor house. “We'll stay here until the snow stops.” Geralt swung off his horse, his booted feet crunched through the snow.

“Where are we?” Shivering, Ciri dismounted from her chestnut mare. “Someone lives here?”

“Dolores. This is Reardon Manor. Follow me, there’s a large barn over here. It’s dry and should be warm.”

“Been here before, have you?”

He did not answer, only opened the double wooden doors that creaked and groaned piercing the stillness. Ciri winced and glanced around, but could barely make out Geralt just a few paces before her. The snow pelted her in the face. She buried her nose in her scarf.

The doors slammed open against the walls with a gale force that nearly tore the doors off their hinges, and blasted snow into the barn. Ciri’s cloak whipped against her legs, strands of white hair...
swirled out from Geralt’s hood. If no one heard them before, they did now. She glanced toward the
house expecting someone would investigate.

The horses danced in place, shook their manes, their snorts echoed loudly in the blustery night.
Wet snow spattered her face and she gripped the reins in a fist. Geralt urged an anxious Roach
inside. Her chestnut followed, entering the barn with less anxiety. She stood between the horses,
cooing and soothing the mares. Geralt fought to close the doors against the wind. He managed, and
slammed the wooden plank into the bracket barring them shut.

Darkness swallowed them. Ciri shuddered, holding her breath, not knowing why. The gusts
whistled and howled around the barn, thumping tree branches against the back wall elicited an
eerie sense standing in pitch blackness. Her horse snorted, her breath warm, fluttered against Ciri’s
neck.

A snapping of fingers sounded. An orange burst lighted Geralt's fingertips and then torches and
candles nearby lit with a bright orange-yellow flame. She grinned to herself. That never got old.

Fresh rushes covered the entire floor of the large L-shaped space. Several stalls stood on the right
side of the structure. Only one horse occupied one of the stalls. A work bench with shelving lined
one wall, hoes, rakes, and a pitchfork hung on another. Crates and barrels stacked on each other
filled every corner space.

Ciri led her chestnut into the stall next to the lady of the manor’s’ horse. The grey colored bay
stared at her, then continued munching on oats from a bucket. Geralt led Roach into the stall
beside her.

“Plenty of hay here.” Geralt snatched a deep wooden bucket and scooped up hay from a pile in the
corner and dumped a heaping pile in the troughs of both stalls. Their horses wasted no time.

Ciri plucked a torch from the wall bracket. Holding it out, she inspected their surroundings. The
space was large and not many torches lined the walls casting most of the space in shadow. Stacks
of chopped wood lined the side wall by the door. Wonderful, she thought. They could have a fire
too. Hay mounds were plentiful providing food for the horses and a natural and effective
insulation. Geralt was right. It was dry and considerably warmer than she expected. “Nice place.
For a barn.”

“One of the better ones I’ve seen. Even by Novigrad standards. One could live here quite
comfortably and if I recall, someone once did.”

“Is that…?” Ciri stepped closer to a nook in the inner corner of the L-shape and held out the torch.
Shadows danced over a large round object. “Oh, it's a spinning wheel.”

“Don't prick your finger,” he chuckled.

“Wasn't planning on it.”

With his back to a stall, Geralt looked up toward the ceiling. Ciri followed his gaze. A loft, used
for storage mostly, contained several barrels and crates.

“We’ll sleep up in the loft. Would you get it ready? Gonna let Dolores know we’re here for the
night.”

“There’s room up there?”

“Plenty.”
Holding the torch high, she peered into the farthest corner obscured in darkness. Nothing but barrels and spider webs. “Sure she’ll be okay with us helping ourselves to her barn?”

“Positive.”

She glanced at him for a moment. “Helped her once, didn’t you?”

Geralt opened the door and stepped outside into the swirling snow and tugged the hood down low over his face. The breeze whipped his cloak and hair in a dizzying vortex about him. Turning back towards her, he smiled a knowing smile and closed the door with a low boom.

“What was I thinking?” she muttered aloud. “Of course, he did.”

* * *

After unsaddling both horses, she brushed them down, then filled their water pals from the well outside. She rummaged through the other saddlebag and retrieved an apple. Offering it to Roach, the mare sniffed it, then bared her teeth and snatched it out of her hand gently. Grinning, Ciri stroked the mare's nose and then offered an apple to the other horses.

Now she could get started on creating a comfortable space for them to spend the night. She climbed the ladder to the loft. Several candles glued to the floor in their own puddle of wax, their soft golden glow lit up the cozy space. He was right, it was spacious up here too.

To the left was a cozy alcove. The slope of the ceiling and barrels lining the edge of the loft created the feel of protection and privacy. A perfect spot to sleep. Mounds of hay lined the walls and she spread some on the floor close and smoothed out their blankets on top. A metal brazier in the far corner opposite would contain a fire safely. Logs piled in it already saved her the trouble of hauling them up the ladder. Dragging the brazier into the alcove, she lit it with the torch and a fire blazed in the grate. It was warmer in the barn, but in this weather, they needed all the heat they could get.

After removing her sword belt, she stretched out on the blanket nearest the ladder and waited for Geralt.

She must have dozed off. When she opened her eyes, she laid on the inner blanket closest to the wall. He had moved her over closer to the wall. He stretched out next to her on his side facing her, their cloaks covered them both. He wore a cotton tunic. Reaching her hand beneath the cloak she encountered leather. He had on his trousers again. She grinned.

The flames had died down some, but still offered a warm glow. Another wind gust blasted the side of the barn whistling through the wooden planks. The flames danced erratically for a few moments then settled. A horse whinnied, probably Roach. Skittish mare, she was.

His arm around her shoulders provided safety. But more than that. She hungered for this kind of intimacy. Smiling and content, she pressed herself against him and closed her eyes. His regular breathing soothed her. The heat he generated warmed her. He squeezed her closer.

* * *

With an arm draped over her in that protective way, Ciri melted against him and sighed. It was a sound one made in utter contentment, close to a purr, like a cat curled up in a ball in a warm safe place. And it pleased him. She had always experienced that complete trust and safety with him.

They laid like this for a long time, him listening to the slow steady thrum of her heart beat and deep even breathing. At one point, she whimpered and jerked against him, plagued by a dream.
“I’m here, little Witcher-Girl,” he murmured near her ear. When she was a young girl, he had soothed her with those same words. He tucked her head underneath his chin and hugged her tight. “You’re safe tonight.”

She relaxed against him and sighed, her hand searched for his. When she found it, she intertwined her slender fingers through his large rough ones.

His eyes drifted closed again. But instead of sleep descending upon him, his thoughts turned back to when she was a kid and the precious months she had spent with him....
While Geralt and Ciri sleep peacefully in the barn at Reardon Manor during a bad snowstorm, Geralt remembers the time she became a part of his life.

In 1262, Ciri was 11 years old when her home and country were overtaken by Nilfgaard. Family and friends, all dead, she was lost and alone, a displaced princess with no where to go and no one to protect her. We know from the book saga that a black knight, with winged birds of prey on his helmet, had plucked her out of the carnage during the massacre, thus saving her life.

In "The Sword of Destiny" short story, Ciri had escaped the Black Knight and fled toward Sodden. There, a kind family had taken her in to be one of their own, the daughter they never had. One day, Geralt stumbled upon her at that merchant's home. Coincidental or an act of Destiny? But upon setting eyes on him she had no second thoughts about staying with them. She wanted only to be with him. Not knowing what else to do, Geralt brings her home to Kaer Morhen.

This chapter begins detailing their journey to Kaer Morhen...

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Chapter Notes

This chapter opens with a more fleshed-out re-telling of the ending scene in "Sword of Destiny" short story with the conversation between Geralt and Mousesack.

CHAPTER FOUR

Destiny Calls
“You will not escape, Geralt.” Mousesack looked him hard in the eyes. “The child is linked to you by destiny.”

Geralt studied the old druid. His long, full beard made his own scruffy week-old stubble itch. The elderly man did not avoid his gaze. “A mistake,” Geralt ground out in a soft voice. The crackling of the fire was the only prominent sound in the quiet forest. A soft breeze whispered through the trees and tall grass with the ease of a silk negligee sliding off slender shoulders. “I acted without thinking it through. I’ve spoken with Calanthe. Four years ago, Mousesack. Didn’t the queen inform you? Renounced my claim on the child, much to her great relief.”

“It’s destiny, Geralt.” The druid locked gazes with him, unfaltering, unblinking. “You think it was because of a few words spoken, a vow demanded and then renounced? No. Destiny is far greater than your invocation, than your unwillingness. Much more far reaching than our finite minds could ever grasp, Witcher. Destiny lies in the fact she is an extraordinary child. And she has chosen you.”

Geralt held the druid’s serious gaze with a grave one of his own. “You expect me to believe she wants to go with me? For what? To become a Witcher? A little girl? You don’t even realize what that entails.”

“You demanded a vow from her parents, from her grandmother, the queen, and they’ve upheld that vow.” Mousesack tossed a stick into the flames. “Oh, I know you’ve renounced it. But you will not escape.”

Geralt gritted his teeth. The finality of the druid's intonation, the certainty of his belief… He swallowed a harsh retort. It was pointless. A waste of words. “From destiny?” was all he managed instead in a tone slathered with sarcastic mockery. It should have irritated the man who sat before him. There was no destiny save one. The same destiny all faced.

“Ultimately, yes,” Mousesack answered with unruffled conviction. “But that was not what I meant.”

Geralt gritted his teeth and waited for the druid to complete his thought.

“I meant you will not escape from her.” With a jut of his chin indicating the direction of the campfire, Mousesack’s somber gaze slid to the slumbering form of the ten-year-old princess.

Geralt glanced as well. She lay underneath a tree on a bed of soft grass and pine needles. The waning orange glow of the dying firelight cast dancing shadows over her slight form wrapped in the druid’s jerkin.

“She would not fall asleep until you cuddled her. She searched for your hand and murmured your name a few times tonight already. So when you asked me if I believe she wants to go with you, my answer is yes.”

Geralt’s throat tightened. He rose quickly without another word and strode to his horse in
purposeful strides. That was exactly why he needed to leave. In the handful of days since he had found her, lost and alone in this dangerous forest, she clung to him, terribly frightened. He understood the attachment. Although, he could not blame her, it was too dangerous. He tightened the straps on Roach and slipped his booted foot into the stirrup. He paused, his gloved hand squeezed the leather reins. Instead of mounting his horse, he took three steps toward Mousesack.

“Tell Calanthe again, it was a mistake. I should not have invoked the Law of Surprise. I take it back, I do not hold her to it, I do not claim her. I’ll not rip a royal heir from a loving family and rich heritage only to bring her to a forgotten ruin of a fortress on the other side of the world inhabited by five witchers. It’s a hard, gritty, dangerous, and lonely life, druid, and I would not impose that upon her. Would you?” Although soft spoken, Geralt’s deep gravelly voice seemed to hang in the air, drifting before it dissipated. He glanced over at Ciri. She did not stir.

“She’s your only chance, Geralt.”

He grated in a deep breath. “I asked you a question, Mousesack. Would you condemn her to a life like mine?”

A heavy silence settled between them.

“Like I said, she is your one chance.”

The silence thickened, became suffocating. The air thinned and for a moment, Geralt found it hard to breathe as if the very forest held its breath in anticipation. He held his, silently willing the druid would respond first. It was futile. He exhaled. “Chance for what?”

Mousesack’s gaze pierced him with an expression Geralt could not identify. “A chance to be a father. We both know you are incapable of siring a child--”

“How dare you,” Geralt hissed.

“I meant no offense, my friend.” Mousesack said gently.

“No? Oh, you are bold, druid. She had a father. And I am not a father, and never will be. I’m a Witcher. That is all I know and all I will ever be.”

Only the snapping of the fire responded.

Geralt turned his back to the druid, then faced him again, his lip curled. “Her destiny…” He spat out the word. He coughed and lowered his voice to a seething whisper. “She’ll be queen one day. That is a far better life than what I could--” he bit his bottom lip halting his words. His throat tightened.

“Cirilla needs a guardian, Witcher.”

“She has one! You for the moment, and a queen with a royal guard when you take her home.”

When the druid made no attempt to further the conversation, Geralt mounted his horse in one swift motion. “She is better off with you. Take her back home, Mousesack. Where she belongs.”

The druid gazed up at him in silence, a whorl of emotions swirling around in his dark eyes. Then he simply nodded. “Until we meet again, Witcher. Good luck on the Path.”

“Give Calanthe my regards.”
Mousesack dipped his head in a polite nod.

Tugging the reins, the horse turned. Geralt glanced one last time at the sleeping girl, who in the space of a few days had melted his heart. He shot a glance at the old wise man. “Tell Ciri to forget about me. For her own good.”

Spurring Roach from the camp, darkness enveloped him. The Brokilon Forest, with ancient trees towering so high one could not see their tops, boded ill for any who dared cross its borders. Peering between the trees and bushes, he was well aware of eyes watching and ears listening. The Dryads would let him leave in peace as they would let Ciri and the druid leave, for they were not foes.

He walked Roach through a valley of heather, their stems reaching his boots. When he reached the trees again, his sharp gaze caught the glint of a pair of eyes near a tree. The Dryad stepped out just enough for him to spot her. Long wavy olive green hair stuffed with leaves and vines camouflaged her well in just the right places. However, his eyes raked over her slender and toned figure covered only by a short cloth about her hips, and high boots accentuated curvy legs. Holding his breath, he swallowed.

She lowered her bow, sliding the arrow back into the quiver strung on her back. She nodded, a slight smile drawing across her face. With a tilt of his head, Geralt acknowledged her and kept on riding. Once he sensed he was alone, he breathed easier.

“Gerrrrraaalt!!!”

The shrill scream pierced the stillness and jarred him. Clamping his mouth closed, he kept riding when his name reached his ears. She called for him. No, Ciri screamed for him to come back in that desperate hysterical wail of a child whose world had shattered around her.

“Come back!! You can't run away!”

He willed himself to keep going despite her gut wrenching cries. It shredded his heart like a bruxa tears apart her prey with long vampiric-like claws, but he kept riding.

“Gerrrrraaalt!!! I'm your destinyyyy!”

Her high-pitched screech echoed down the hillside, crashed through the trees, bowled through the valley of heather, and pierced his soul like a silver blade sliced through drowner flesh. But he kept riding. Hardening his heart, he reminded himself he was the cold, heartless Witcher. Lied to himself that she was better off without him. Witchering was not a life for a young girl. Nor being in the company of one. His invocation be damned. His claim be damned. They could not understand that by leaving, he did her a favor. Did her grandmother a favor. Did them all a favor.

Swallowed in the blackness of the moonless night, he trudged forward, his mood darkening with each step of Roach’s hooves. The last few days, Ciri was a bright light in the gloom of his world, but he had to snuff that out too.

He was a Witcher. He had to leave. That was what he did.

Alone.

Always.

* * *

Velen – Northern Temeria
Breathless and weary, Geralt stepped into the curtain of frigid cascading water. It enveloped him and he breathed in deep through his nose. Fresh water, wet earth and grass, the strong aroma of mildewed rocks, and the sweet scent of verbena flowers filled his senses. The late summer night was comfortable, the water, cool and refreshing. It rushed over him in beating waves.

“Cool me off,” he breathed. No one, except perhaps Mother Nature, heard his breathless plea. The torrents plunged from above, pounded him, both gentle and hard. It soaked him, plastered his long hair to his back. It seeped into his pours, but did not banish the images of soft curves and delicate rounded breasts from his mind, nor the titillating familiar fragrance of lilac and gooseberries from his memory.

Tilting his face up into the showering waterfall, he impatiently waited for its chill to smother the fire, and at the same time, relished its soothing sensation. As usual, vivid, lucid dreams heated him to the core. She dominated his dreams at night. Every nerve ending tingled, a sweltering and uncomfortable need pulsed through him, uncomfortable because he was alone, but not by himself. He had not been with Yennefer or spoke to her in several months. Even though their last words were angry ones hurled at each other in a fury of pain, among other physical objects, the mere thought of her, still ignited him. As if an after-thought, he rubbed his shoulder where he had broke the trajectory of a glass bottle.

Shit, he must purge Yen from his mind if he were to stay sane. He ground his teeth. They had ended their relationship. It was over. Period. Again. Been down this road before. Several times. At least until he swallowed his pride and apologized. But dammit, it would mean more if she sought him out for once and apologized instead. Why did he grovel all the time?

If two people were so passionately attracted to each other and had great sex, why the hell couldn’t they stay together like normal couples? Granted, they were not normal individuals, a witcher and a powerful sorceress, far from it, but still, they should act like a couple in love would act. Why did they hurt each other so often? These questions, the same ones he had asked himself for the last decade, still plagued him.

He raked fingers over his scalp and through his hair. It had been days since he last bathed, but a clingy young girl made it difficult to find privacy. He only managed to sneak away while she slept by the campfire. He glanced toward the ring of firelight by a cluster of trees several yards up the grassy hill. The delicate slumbering form of the innocent and helpless eleven-year-old princess of Cintra stretched out on his bedroll.

He stepped gingerly around small pebbles and rocks on the bottom of the stream and waded to the grassy knoll. On a large boulder sat a towel, a bar of fresh smelling soap, and a razor. A firefly lit in front of him scurrying about it’s business. He griped the long straight razor, and scraped it in one long smooth stroke across a soapy cheek from ear to jawline.

But another one in his life now needed his attention. A young lady needed him more now than ever. With a slow measured stroke, he pulled the blade down his other cheek.

A dreadful fate befell the girl. Truly alone now, she had no one and no home to go back to. He dunk the razor beneath the water’s surface. Then ever so slowly, he scraped the blade up his neck and underneath his chin.

Her home, overtaken by the damned empire to the south, left few to no survivors as far as he could gather from the girl. Ciri’s grandmother, Queen Calanthe, had perished in the battle. Ciri’s mother and father had died at sea years ago, and Mousesack, the queen’s druid… Ciri could not tell him.
what fate befell him. Perhaps he escaped the carnage.

A pang twisted his belly. Such a shame Calanthe was gone. He liked her. Young, even for a grandmother, she was beautiful, spirited, regal, powerful… and a friend.

Splashing frigid water on his face, it's chill soothed the burn. While drying off, a high-pitched screech pierced the stillness. Ciri withered and kicked on the animal hide, arms and legs flailing as if beating off an unseen attacker.

He groaned. Again? The second nightmare tonight. The first one had woke him up earlier.

Tugging on his trousers, the leather did not move quick up over his damp skin. It glued to his shins. Shit. Her screams grew louder and more frantic. With the trousers now half-way up his thighs, he started for the camp, but the pants constricted his movements. Wobbling in short steps, and then hopping, he yanked them up, cursing all the while, attempting not to faceplant in the process.

“Gerrrraaaalt!!” Her shrill screech echoed through the trees. She bolted up, frantic, scanning the camp looking for him. “Geralt, where are you!??” The sob that choked her melted his heart.

“I'm here, Ciri.” Several strides away, he stopped and fought with his pants again.

“Geralt, is that you?”

Finally, he managed to get the trousers up over his backside. Lacing up the front quickly was another challenge. “Calm down. It's me. I'm right here.”

“I can't see you. Come closer! It's dark.”

“Give me a minute, all right?”

Fumbling with the laces, he managed to close his trousers. In a few strides, he entered the ring of firefight and knelt down alongside her on the hide. Wild from thrashing about, he smoothed back her tangled hair. “I'm here. It's okay. You're all right. It was just another bad dream.”

At the sight of him, she calmed, yet tears still streaked down her face. She sniffled hard.

"That was quite a nightmare," he said gently. "Want to tell me about it?"

Sniffling, she wiped her wet cheeks and nodded. "A big scary knight in black armor. He... He had large wings of prey on his helmet and he wore a long cloak. He..." she sniffled again.

"It's okay," Geralt cooed. He sat down on the pelt and reached for her hand. She gripped it eagerly.

"He stole me away in the middle of all the fire. Fire... so much fire!"

Geralt listened without commenting, but gave her his full attention.

"He took me away from my home, even though... Oh, I can't, Geralt! I can't!" Sobs racked her small frame.

Unsure what to do, he gripped her shoulder and squeezed it. Her sobs became more intense. Should he hug her? What if that frightened her more?

Clutching his arms, she pulled herself closer and threw her arms around his neck.
He wrapped his arms around her, smoothing down her hair and back. So small and delicate, he was afraid he'd crush her. "Is he what you dream about? That scary black knight?"

Her head nodded in the crook of his neck. Warm tears pooled there. Geralt sighed, his heart aching for this trauma this child had endured. He thought he had a rough childhood. A mother, who abandoned her son, handed him over to the Witcher school when he was a babe. He never knew his parents. Was that worse than knowing them and losing them? No. It was not.

If he ever crossed paths with this black knight, a Black One, the Nilfgaardian knights were called, he'd make him wish he never existed. "Ssshhh. He's gone now, Ciri. No need to worry about him anymore. He'd have to get through me first."

She pulled back and stared at him for a long while. Water escaped his hair and dripped down his chest and back. The firefight glinted yellow on her ashen tresses, glistened in her emerald green eyes.

“It's still early. Dawn’s not far off. Get some more sleep. We still have a long journey ahead of us.”

She folded her arms across her chest, a glare as icy as the stream chilled her eyes.

“You left me, Geralt.”

The sharpness of her accusation surprised him. He sighed. “No, I didn't. Was in the brook, just over there.”

“Don’t ever leave me, Geralt. Please.”

This time her tone softened, pleading. Her bottom lip quivered again and it nearly undid him. The fear in her pixie eyes, wide and innocent, dispelled any frustration only to be replaced by regret.

He was to blame for that, he sighed. He had abandoned her a year ago. Leaving her in the hands of the druid, he left the Brokilon Forest like a… He ground his teeth. Like he left all females he grew attached to.

Recalling her screams as he rode off that night, he grimaced. It took days to shut out her desperate wails from his memory. He could only imagine the trauma she experienced because of him. Add on top of that what had happened recently and he sympathized for her. Deeply.

But he had his reasons for leaving that night, legitimate reasons. He did it for her own good. Now, things have changed and come full circle. No uncle to leave her with this time. No home or country to return her.

He held her gaze. “I promise, Ciri. I won't ever leave you.”

He leaned back against the over-sized tree trunk. She smiled then, bright and genuine and the sun seemed to shine although dawn barely broke yet. Her gaze full of trust, she snuggled up against his side and searched for his hand. She found it on his lap and gripped it. Her tiny fingers poked through his long calloused ones.

The medallion resting against his chest, trembled. Alerted now, Geralt scanned the trees. His swords, propped up against a tree stump a few paces away, but he could get to them in a hurry if needed. Focusing his hearing, the slight breeze rustled leaves, a lone wolf howled far off in the distance, but he did not detect anything dangerous nearby. Sniffing, he breathed in deeply. Campfire, pine, verbena and Ciri. No danger around, so why did his medallion tremble?
“Ugh, you're getting me wet,” she whined and wiped the side of her face from the water droplet that escaped his hair.

“Ah, sorry.”

The reality of the situation smacked him hard like the frigid water from the stream. What the hell was he doing? She was an innocent child, a girl raised in a castle. A fucking princess. Now here she was alone with him, a witcher, of all people, bathing in freezing wilderness streams, eating small rations of bread and fruit or whatever game he killed, sleeping out in the wild… He sighed heavily.

What a twist of fate. He hadn’t expected the child would be a girl. A fact Calanthe so expertly hid from him when he returned to Cintra five years ago. It was a damned good thing he renounced his claim back then.

But here she was now anyway, despite it all. Appeared destiny had her way, if he believed in such an ideal. What the hell was he supposed to do with a girl? Things would have been much easier had she been a... A boy, he could bring home to Kaer Morhen. He’d fit right in with him and his witcher brothers. He’d learn the trade like other boys brought to the school…. Only there have not been any new boys for generations.

“Geralt, where are we going again?”

Her high-pitched voice jarred him out of his thoughts. He glanced toward the stream. The first grey rays of dawn peaked out over the trees. “Taking you home. To my home,” he clarified. “To Kaer Morhen, the Witcher School of the Wolf.”

“So that’s why you wear a wolf’s head pendant?”

“Yeah, it identifies our guild. But it has other qualities too.” Still, it vibrated against his chest. Could she tell?

Small fingers reached for it and when they made contact on the wolf’s silver snout, she jerked her hand back and sucked in her breath.

“It’s… alive!”

He chuckled low in his throat at her wide eyes glittering in the firelight.

“Why is it jittering?”

Why indeed. He'd like to know as well. There's no magic or danger nearby… Geralt peered at her, then afraid he made her uncomfortable, focused on the fire. Unless…

“Why, Geralt? Why is it trembling like that?”

He cleared his throat and gripped her delicate hand in his. He covered the pendant with her hand. It jumped this time, not merely shook like before.

She sucked in her breath again. “Did you feel that?”

“Yeah, I did.”

“Did you make it do that?”

“No.”
She looked at him clearly not believing him.

“I'm not making it move. It's doing it all on its own.”

“How?”

He waited a beat, silent. She removed her hand and drew closer, inspecting the pendant in the firelight as if she could find out why just by looking at it.

“A Witcher medallion is enchanted with magic. It warns me of danger, but mostly it senses magic nearby.”

Her attention shifted to the star-shaped scar on his chest near where the pendant hung. Staying silent, he watched her, but she did not say anything about it.

“How?” She settled close beside him again.

He shook his head. “I rarely take it off.”

Her lips puckered out in a pout.

“After we get home to Kaer Morhen you can try it on.”

That satisfied her. She found his hand again and held it tightly. After a few quiet moments, she stiffened and the hand holding his squeezed hard.

Her voice was low, and quivered. “Are you going to turn me into a Witcher?” Her eyes grew large and fearful. “Will I have eyes like yours?”

“Whoa, slow down. Don’t get all excited.” He tossed a small stick into the flames.

Her question stirred up some legitimate questions. What would happen once they arrived at Kaer Morhen? The schools were meant only for boys. Not knowing what else to do, getting her somewhere safe was top priority, so Kaer Morhen made the most logical sense. Would they train her as the first female Witcher? Would that be so bad? Developing her stamina through physical training would do her good. Why couldn’t she learn sword work? None of these things would hurt her a bit and settled on the wisdom to train her to protect herself. Nevertheless, he coveted Vesemir’s guidance and judgment in this unique situation. Together they would figure it out.

“I’m taking you to my home where I grew up. We’ll figure it all out once we get there. You won’t become a witcher, so don’t worry about getting eyes like mine.”

She relaxed at that.

“And you’ll be safe there.”

She let out the breath she had been holding. Looking up at him, she visibly calmed and her lips turned up slightly in a melancholic smile.

That was it. Her deepest fear and greatest need. Safety. Of course that was what she needed most. Everything had been taken from her. Lost and alone, having nowhere to go, no one to watch out for her… She needed to know she was safe and secure.

“Why couldn’t I be a Witcher like you?”

He stared at her. One minute the thought frightened her and now she’s asking why she could not
become a Witcher. He studied her face. "Only men become Witchers."

"No female ever became one of you? Ever?"

Looking down at the ground, he whispered, "No. At least, none that we've heard of."

Frowning, she tossed a tiny stick into the fire. "Why?"

He knew that question would come next, but it still didn’t make answering it any easier. "It’s a tough, rigorous lifestyle, Ciri. And an extremely dangerous one. A Witcher must be faster, stronger, more clever than the creature he is hunting in order to survive and to protect others. It’s a job that is dirty and painful. It’s more suited for men."

She thought about that for a few moments. "Has a woman ever tried to become a Witcher?"

Inwardly, he smiled. She was bright for her age. "Not that I’ve heard. Don’t think women desire to be one of us. It’s not a glamorous job, by any means. Don’t think females would survive the mutation process. A lot of boys didn’t survive. Women’s bodies are not strong enough to endure the changes."

"What’s a mutation process?"

"Nothing you need to be concerned about. I’ll explain it some other time."

The fire snapped and danced while they both fell quiet.

"What’s it like? Kaer Morhen."

He tossed another small branch into the flames. "What do you want to know?"

"Is it a castle?"

He tossed her an apple, a small chunk of cheese, and crusty bread he snatched from the saddlebags. "Yeah, it’s a castle all right. It was built into the sheer cliff face of the Blue Mountains. In Elder speech, the name means Old Keep of the Sea, Caer a’Muirehen."

She sounded out the elven name softly.

Geralt smiled. "Wait until you see it. The view is… indescribable. You’ll have to see it for yourself. But the fortress is ancient and crumbling in places."

"You don’t fix it up?"

"We’re not wealthy, Ciri. We do the best we can, but a fortress is a huge place for five men to keep up."

"Only five?"

"Yeah," he croaked.

A comfortable stillness settled between them. Both tossed small sticks into the fire.

"What’s it like living there?"

He chewed an apple piece and swallowed before answering. When he did, his voice was soft. "It’s quiet. The castle is isolated in the valley. We’re the only people there. Sometimes friends come and
visit, but not often. Vesemir lives there full time. You’ll meet him. Pretty much runs the place. You know,” leaning towards her, he lowered his voice as if he were revealing a secret. “It’s believed he’s older than the castle itself.” He chuckled when her eyes went as round as saucers. “He’s the oldest living Witcher and he’s in charge. He taught us all how to walk The Path. He trained us in sword fighting—”

“Is he your father?”

Blinking, he looked at the fire. He hadn’t expected that question. “Physically, no. Witchers are not able to have children. But, yeah, he is a father figure to all of us. You’ll like him a lot.”

“Then who is your father?”

“I… don’t know, Ciri. Have no memory of him. Vesemir is the only father I’ve known.”

“So, you’ve lived at Kaer Morhen your whole life?”

“Yeah, that’s right.”

A ray of sunshine filtered through the trees. Geralt rose and kicked dirt over the fire. It hissed and the flames turned to black smoke.

“Come on, princess. Let's pack up. Need to hit the road.”

She snorted un-princess like.

He crossed over to the other side of the campfire. His medallion settled down. “Get used to helping out around here and especially at Kaer Morhen. You won’t be treated like a princess anymore.”

“I’m not a princess anymore,” she declared with a hand on hip. “I’ll be a Witcher! Like you.”

“Well, Witcher-girl, get moving.” With a smirk, Geralt tossed a blanket at her and dressed in the rest of his armor. After packing up and securing everything to Roach, he was about to hoist her up into the saddle, but she batted away his hands and mounted on her own.

Swinging up behind her, he spurred on Roach. The pendant quivered again. A sudden wave of anxiety gripped him, drying his throat. His medallion proved Ciri possessed magic. What kind of magic or abilities, he had no idea. The irony… appalled or astonished him, he was not sure which. All he was certain about, was bringing home a girl to a Witcher school for men. And she belonged to him now. She had no one else to turn to and it was up to him to protect her, to figure out what was best for her now that her world had completely changed.

“Geralt?”

He steered the horse through the trees. Roach shook her head, her mane whipped around before settling against one side of her neck. “What, Witcher-girl?”

Ciri settled back against his chest. “I’m so glad you found me in Sodden. Although, I would’ve stayed with the merchant's family… for a little while at least. Eventually, I would’ve left them.”

“What for?”

“To find you.”

Silent, Geralt swallowed hard, his eyes burned. "Is that so?" he croaked, his voice tight.
Her head nodded, her ashen tresses moving in waves about her shoulders. "That's right. Although Uncle Mousesack told me to... I - I couldn't."

"Told you what?"

"I'd never forget you, Geralt. Never."

He lost the ability to speak. Instead, his arms squeezed her closer as he gripped the reins tighter.
Novigrad Reunion - Part 1

Chapter Summary

All he wanted to do was get a room at an inn on a stormy night. Unfortunately, Geralt learns what towing a young girl around earns him and reunites with an old friend in the city of Novigrad. includes an Original Character for plot purposes.

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CHAPTER FIVE

Novigrad Reunion - Part 1
Free City of Novigrad, 1262

An eye-piercing flash of silvery light lit up the Hierarch Square and the tall brick buildings that surrounded it as bright as day. Multiple brilliant flashes in rapid succession scorched the brain and Ciri’s hand flew to her eyes. From her vantage point inside the stable, she scanned the square. It was eerily empty due to the stormy night.

Dark movement caught her attention. She stared at the lone figure heading towards the inn. Draped in a dark cloak fluttering about long skirts, the unmistakable graceful movements of a female tread with care across the cobblestones. Hood pulled low obscured her features, she avoided as many puddles as possible with the light-footed grace of a ballerina. Another round of white flashes stung the eyes. Her movements appeared clipped and unnatural during those flashes of light.

Ciri watched with a strange fascination. Why would a woman be out alone in this weather? Although drenched, she did not walk any faster in the pouring rain.

Behind her, Geralt's deep raspy voice, soft and soothing, gave a young teenage stable boy strict instructions regarding the care of his mare. Muffled underneath the angry thunder clap that shook the stable, most of what he said was lost. She smiled to herself. He fussied over Roach all the time. Clearly, his mount meant a lot to him. Another one of the many traits she loved about him.

She turned and leaned back against the door frame. The clink of coins dropped in the stable boy’s hand and he nodded patiently. For a stable in the middle of a city, this one was nice. Clean and dry, the stalls larger than some stables she had seen. Granted, no match for her family's royal stables, but… An empty knot twisted her stomach at that thought and her eyes stung. Blinking rapidly, she turned away, not wanting Geralt or the cute stable boy see her cry as if she were a child.

The cloaked individual stepped through the door and Ciri jumped, startled. Cheeks flaming, she bit back an automatic retort. She had not counted on the lady coming to the stable. Figured she headed for the inn.

Dripping water around her, the newcomer, taller than most women she'd known, tossed back the soaked hood. A mane of glorious red locks cascaded in long ringlet curls that framed a heart-shaped face. Milky chocolate-brown eyes glittered in the candlelight.

Ciri sucked in her breath.

"Hello." The woman's smooth and husky alto voice washed over her like warm honey. Impeccable makeup accentuated beautiful eyes with long lashes and lips stained the same shade as her hair. A sweet floral perfume conflicted with the poignant smell of stable.

Ciri swallowed and shrunk away. “Hi,” she mumbled. She smoothed back uncombed tresses and clutched her cloak closed in front of her.

The beautiful lady smiled and leaned down. “Aren't you adorable, little one. What's your name?”
Heart thumping, Ciri scurried over to Geralt and clutched his hand. He glanced down at her and turned around.

Geralt's gaze landed on the newcomer and his expression changed. It was a look Ciri had not seen before and did not appreciate. His golden gaze raked over the woman's slender form and revealed too much interest for comfort.

The lady's eyes sparkled. Then a knowing grin spread across her perfectly made up face. “Well, well. It's none other than the White Haired One. Haven't... ah, had the pleasure in a while, Geralt.”

He approached, towering over her. Ciri marveled at that for a moment. The lady had seemed tall before, that was, until Geralt stood before her. He dwarfed her. At any rate, he stood too close for her comfort. His gaze lingered on her full chest, the fleshy rounded mounds pushed up by a fancy corset. A telling grin crept along his face. Ciri crushed his hand with a death-like grip. She frowned at the beautiful woman.

“Wendy,” he dipped his head in a gentleman's polite greeting. “It's good to see you again. You look...”

Ciri tugged his hand. Hard.

He cleared his throat. “What brings you here?”

The redhead dropped her lids and smirked in a feigned demure manner. She fluffed out her ringlets and took her time doing it. Geralt's eyes glittered. Ciri coughed.

“You are not one to butt his nose in other people's business,” she drawled in a husky voice. Her gaze roamed over his face, traveled to his wide shoulders and then down his torso. “It's a shame really.”

“Not butting into your business?”

Wendy smiled and her cheeks glowed in the lamplight. She reached up and brushed a strand of hair from his temple, then trailed painted fingertips down the side of his jaw.

The gesture implied a familiar intimacy Ciri did not appreciate. She narrowed her eyes, but no one paid attention to her.

“That I'm here for a client,” Wendy clarified. “Otherwise, I'd be glad to take you.”

The rain pelted against the stable. A jagged crack of thunder filled the space between their words.

Take him? Take him where? Ciri gasped, her blood pulsed in her temples closing her ears. She fired a hard glare at the woman, but it was lost. No one paid any attention to her. Tugging on Geralt's hand, she pulled on him. He didn't budge a bit. It was like trying to move a tree. “Geralt. I'm hungry.”

He cleared his throat. “Right. Gotta get a room and ah... eat. Been a long day.”

Wendy nodded and gazed down at Ciri. Her eyes, questioning, slid back up to Geralt's. “She's with you?”

“Yes.”

Perfectly shaped eyebrows crinkled. “Well, in that case, good luck getting a room. Doubt there's
any left available at this hour.”

“You're not worried about that?”

She shook her head, jouncing her ringlets. “No. My client already has one.”

“Lucky man,” Geralt drawled in a deeper voice than usual.

Ciri rolled her eyes and tugged on him again. “Come on, Geralt,” she whined.

“Right. Maybe I'll see you again, sometime. Next I'm in the city.”

“Looking forward to it.” Wendy trailed her fingertips down the silver chain of his medallion and then clasped a silver buckle on his armor near it. She tugged on it, drawing Geralt a bit closer. Her voice became more sultry. “Very much looking forward to it. Goodbye, White One.”

Biting her tongue, Ciri headed for the stable door hauling Geralt behind her with an outstretched arm. The blasted woman had to ruin everything. Geralt ogled her like a kid in a candy shop, practically salivating anticipating that candy. What did Wendy have that was so special?

* * *

The main square of the largest city in the northern kingdoms usually swarmed with people, but tonight, eerily void of bodies in the steady rain. An ear-splitting clap of thunder ricocheted off the tall brick buildings that surrounded the market square.

Ciri clutched his gloved hand and pressed close to his side. “I'm cold, Geralt. And hungry.”

“I know, Ciri. Me too.”

The rain beat down in torrents, running off his hood, splashed his face. Glancing down at Ciri, her face was just as wet. Hurrying towards the Kingfisher Inn, he was not at all certain a room would be available tonight. Several groups of people huddled at the door impatient to get out of the storm.

After waiting several minutes to get to the door, Geralt pushed it open. The noise and smells typical of a tavern hit him full force. The warmth of the place was immediate and welcomed. His stomach rumbled at the wonderful aromas of roasted chicken, hearty soup, and beer.

Weaving through the throng of middle class patrons in the multi-level large space, he shouldered his way up to the bar. He dipped his head at the innkeeper, splattering a stream of water from his hood onto the counter.

“Need a room.” With a ringing clink, he slapped down coin onto the bar. Squeezing in next to him, Ciri glued herself to his side.

A burly middle-aged and balding man, the innkeeper eyed him with narrowed lids. He wiped his hands on a soiled towel tucked in his apron pocket.

“Kindly remove your hood, sir. This is a decent establishment. I’d have a look at you first.”

“Have a problem with… unruly customers lately?”
“I’ll still have a look at ya.”

Geralt huffed out a sigh and pushed back the soaked hood. Every person in the inn turned and
glared at him. Of course, that was not entirely true, only a few nearby did, but to him, it seemed
every eye in the joint turned upon him.

“A Witcher.” The innkeeper uttered, surprise registering first, then his expression grew sour.

Among the din of many voices and off-key chords of lute strings getting tuned, whispers echoed
the innkeeper’s surprise and rippled in waves around him. News traveled fast.

Another chord struck. A performer prepared to give a performance on the stage that occupied one
side of the chamber. Without turning around, Geralt wondered who the performer was tonight, but
shooed the thought away.

Ciri glanced around, gripped his hand tighter. He peeked down at her briefly.

The innkeeper's frown grew darker. “Like I said, this is a decent establishment, Witcher.”

“Understood. You’ll get no trouble from me. Need two hot meals and a hot bath.”

The innkeeper snatched the towel from his apron pocket and wiped up the rainwater with quick
annoyed swipes. “I don’t know what you’re up to, Witcher, but whatever you…” he cleared his
throat and avoided Ciri’s gaze. “Whatever you plan on doing with that innocent young lady will not
be tolerated in this place, understand? You didn't go far enough. Crippling Kate’s is on the port
side of town. Should have kept goin’. ” He muttered that last statement, but Geralt caught it loud
and clear.

Some patrons within earshot had stopped chatting and stared at them. Most wore expressions of
awkward disgust. Others avoided his gaze altogether preferring to inspect the contents in their	ankards instead.

He knew precisely where the brothel was located, thank you very much. Passed it on their way to
this inn as a matter of fact. He glanced down at Ciri and bit his tongue. It was clear what others
thought. His eyes narrowed. He gripped Ciri’s shoulder.

Eyeing her out of the corner of his eye, he turned an unaltering gaze back on the innkeeper. “My…
daughter and I need a place to stay.” Gently, he squeezed her shoulder. She peered up at him wide
eyed, then looked away, a frown wrinkled her dark brows. He couldn't take the time to ponder her
expression at the moment. “You realize, that by refusing me hospitality, you are also denying it to
a young girl. If you hadn’t noticed, it’s dark and storming outside. You seem to be a decent man,
Innkeep.” He was only partly successful at keeping the steel edge from his voice.

The innkeeper curled his lip. “Don’t got one available.”

Geralt swore beneath his breath. “Don’t have an available room or don’t want to give it to us?”

“Look around, Witcher. Busy place tonight. We have a special guest performing tonight. Besides,
the last available room was promised to our performer. So… No vacancy.”

Ciri tugged on his hand. “Let’s go, Geralt. I don’t want to stay here anyway.” She glanced around
again.

Shit. Where was he supposed to find shelter tonight? Crippling Kate’s was out of the question for
obvious reasons. The Passiflora was too. Though located in the noble Gildorf District, the
Passiflora was a glamorous brothel, but a brothel, nonetheless. The Golden Sturgeon near the harbor attracted sailors, deckhands, and other brutes. No place for a young lady.

Geralt shoved a few crowns toward the innkeeper. “At least let us eat.”

He nodded and left to fetch two dinners. When he returned, the food was packed up nicely in a burlap bag. The innkeeper leaned forward, spoke softly. “For the girl’s sake stay in the stable tonight. At least you’ll be dry.”

Giving a curt nod, Geralt clamped his mouth shut and clutched the bag, but the man did not let go of it. The innkeeper peered long and hard at Ciri. Geralt watched her hold his gaze steady, without wavering, then she hugged his side. He gave her shoulder another gentle squeeze. Good girl.

“So help me, Witcher…” The innkeeper warned in a threatening tone. “The young one is not your kid. No one will believe it anyway. I swear, if I hear anything... or someone reports anything--”

“Like I said,” Geralt gritted through clenched teeth, “You’ll get no trouble from me.” He snatched the bag from the innkeeper’s hand. “Let’s go.”

Grasping Ciri’s hand, he led her across the main room, weaving between the throng. All the while, the glares of the locals bore into him as he passed. Accustomed to others’ stares, he ignored them. To a point. Until it dawned on him that they were not glaring at him because of his unusual characteristics. Clenching his teeth, he steered her to the door. He could not afford to start anything here now. They needed shelter for the night and might again in the near future as well. He had to stay on good terms with this place. Even if they were spending the night in the stable. It was better than nothing.

A knot wrenched his stomach. They truly believed the worst of him, of his kind? He was a Witcher, not a whore-son, rapist, or pedophile. Ciri ran down the steps ahead of him, the rain beating off her cloak. He followed slowly, firing his disapproval at the patrons within eye shot with a hard glare, then exited.

He recalled her tendency for nightmares and exhaled slowly. Better be careful around here.

* * *

At least they were dry in the stable. In the corner of Roach’s oversized stall, Ciri lounged on a mound of hay. Propped up against the saddlebags for pillows, she braided three strips of leather she had found lying around. She was quiet tonight.

Bellies satisfied with roasted chicken and potatoes, Geralt tossed the bones to the resident dog. The mutt chewed on them content for a long while. He took a liking to Ciri and stayed within the stall, but would not get any closer. Thunder rumbled, but gone were the sharp cracks overhead that rattled everything. The downpour had settled to an even and steady rain.

Geralt smoothed his hand down Roach’s foreleg. He lifted her hoof and swore under his breath. Working his way around, he inspected her other hooves. Dammit. That’s why she was sluggish and stumbled often when they had entered the city.

“What’s wrong, Geralt?”

He sat down next to Ciri on the hay pile that was to be their bed for the night. “Roach threw two
horseshoes.” His voice grated in his own ears. “Which means, tomorrow we find a blacksmith and hope I have enough coin to buy new ones. But sleeping here tonight saved me some coin—”

“See, it was meant for us to sleep here tonight.”

He smiled, but did not say anything for a moment. “Is that why you didn't want to stay in the inn?”

She was quiet while braiding and then shrugged. “Maybe.” She tugged on the braid tightening a section. Her voice grew hushed. “Besides, they didn’t have any rooms.” She avoided his gaze, focused on the leather straps. “The way they glared at you… at us.” Her voice was tight. “Why did they do that?”

“People jump to conclusions about things they know nothing about.”

“What do you mean?”

He unbuckled his chest armor and shrugged out of it. He straightened his cotton tunic. “It’s… uncommon for a young girl like you to be with a man like me.”

“A man like… You mean a Witcher?”

“Hmm-mmm.”

“Why, because I'm a girl? I know girls don’t become Witchers, but that… that wasn’t what the innkeeper was talking about, was it?”

He sighed, not sure how to explain. “I'll explain it someday.”

“Tell me now, Geralt. Please. If you think I'm too young, I’ve been schooled, you know. By the most respected educators.”

“Right,” he grumbled. “Of course you would have. Well… Witchers bring boys to learn the trade, not girls. And everyone knows that. So when they see you, they think I'm up to no good. They're judging me, Ciri, not you.”

She thought about that a moment and he took a swig from a water skin.

“They think you would do something to me?”

He opened a blanket and covered her legs. “It's late. Get some sleep.”

She secured the leather braid at the ends and nestled down into the hay. She tugged up the blanket to her chest. “Why would they think that, Geralt? Because you're a Witcher?”

“Yeah, exactly.”

“I don't understand…”

“Someday you will. When you're old enough.”

He settled next to her with his arms folded underneath his head. But he did not share her blanket. It was warm enough for him.

“They know nothing,” she declared. “You wouldn't do anything to harm me.”

“That's right, Ciri. I'd never harm you.”
He stared at the ceiling. A soft meow came from the far side of the stable. A cat too. Then again, this was a stable. Did she hear it?

“That doesn't bother you?” She peered at him, her eyes warm and… concerned. “That people seem to think bad of you just because you're a Witcher? They don't know you.”

He took a deep breath. He was about to say that it did not bother him, that he was an emotionless mutant, so why should it? He knew what kind of man he was. But he swallowed hard. Honestly, that was not the case. “Yeah,” he whispered. “It does bother me. But I don't let it show.”

“Because you're a Witcher.”

He caught his breath. Coming from her it seemed rather banal, as Yennefer would say, but…

“Yeah.” He stared at the ceiling again.

They were quiet for a few moments.

“What did you make with the leather?” he asked softly.

“A headband.”

He closed his eyes and grinned.

After a few moments, she whispered. “You told that innkeeper I was your daughter.”

He didn't respond. Only opened his eyes and stared at the wooden beams on the ceiling.

“Why, Geralt?” came her broken whisper.

He stayed quiet.

After a moment, she turned to face him. “Why? I'm not your daughter.”

“I know. Thought it was the best way to protect you. To show them you mean something to me. That I wouldn't do anything to hurt you.” Her emerald green eyes softened and a gleam appeared in them from the dim lamplight.

“When I said that to the innkeeper,” he prodded, “you gave me a sharp look. What was that about?”

Her cheeks flamed redder than before, her eyes lost their sparkle. She stared at the ceiling too.

“It’s about the daughter comment, isn’t it?” he inquired.

She nodded.

“That upset you. I’m sorry.”

She peered at him. “Don't worry about it. I just...” She did not offer anymore than that. With a huff, she flopped back on her side facing the wall again and sighed.

“Who was she, Geralt?”

Her question, uttered so soft, yet he detected a hint of accusation. He glanced at her, but she faced the wall. “Who? The redhead?”
Silence.

“She’s… an acquaintance.”

A distant rumble filled the quietness.

“A girlfriend?”

Ah, he began to understand. “No,” he replied softly thinking of Yennefer.

She turned onto her back and fired a stony glare at him. Cheeks flushed, eyes gleamed in a hard stare… He recalled another young princess who looked exactly like this. Her late mother, Princess Pavetta.

“You lie.”

Her tone sharp, her accusation sliced through him. It hurt. A little. He sighed and met her gaze. “No. Not lying, Ciri.”

“You are. The way she looked at you… The way you looked at her…” her voice cracked and with a huff, she flopped on her side again, her back to him.

Geralt raised his brows and chuckled to himself. Someone was battling the green-eyed monster.

* * *

A few hours later, a soft click, and a wooden door creaked open.

Geralt cracked open an eye and listened. Hushed whispers and female giggling sounded by the entrance. He glanced over at Ciri. Her back still to him, her breathing slow and steady. Good, she still slept. A fur-ball of a kitten curled up at the small of her back. He glanced in the corner. The mutt was still there too.

He rose quietly and peeked over the stall door. And groaned. He swiped his hand over his tired eyes.

In the dim orange glow of a few oil lamps, long red ringlet curls bounced and swayed. Wendy’s giggles grew louder. Arms and legs wrapped around a finely dressed man, she kissed the nobleman with a familiar vigor. He could not make out the man’s features, for he buried his face in her breasts.

Just great. Like he needed this distraction in the middle of the night. What the hell were they doing in the stable? Wendy had mentioned her client had had a room.

The exuberant gentleman slammed Wendy against a wall in a fit of passion that shook the stalls. Both kitten and dog jumped. One hissed, jumped over the stall door and took off, the other was not quite as agile and ran in circles in the stall, yelping, startling Roach into a dance of fright. Fuck!

Geralt winced and glanced back at Ciri. The blanket lie crumpled up and the hay pile was empty. Shit. Ciri climbed up on the stall door next to him for a better view.

Grabbing a fistful of Wendy’s long locks, he then fondled plump breasts about to spill over her low
Clutching an overly curious eleven-year-old about the waist, Geralt pulled her from the door. Or rather attempted to. She had a death grip that turned her knuckles white. Finally, he managed to tear her away and set her on her feet. She stumbled and fell back into the hay. She glowered at him with a royal imperial tilt to her chin. He might have laughed had the situation been different.

The fellow’s beret with a white feather fluttered to the floor. He kissed the redheaded beauty with a passion that rivaled the legends of only one man he knew of… The client raised his head and came up for air.

“Dandelion?” Geralt stared with disbelief when the gentleman turned towards him.

Upon recognition, he promptly dropped Wendy, with a grunt, to the hay-covered floor and adjusted his glaringly bright fanciful attire.

“Geralt? Well, I’ll be! What are you doing here?”

Geralt shot him an expression that said it all. He nodded. “Of course, it all makes sense now. You’re the special guest minstrel who gave a performance. And who got the last room.” He glanced at Wendy. She rose with wobbly legs and plucked hay stalks out of her curls. “And Wendy’s client…”

Ciri peeked her head above the stall. “Hi there! What do you mean by ‘her client?’”

Dandelion’s jaw went slack and his face lost color. Geralt glanced at Ciri and a few tawny hay stalks stuck straight out of her hair too.

He groaned. Of all the blasted luck!
Novigrad Reunion - Part 2

CHAPTER SIX

Ciri faced him expecting an answer. “Well? What did you mean by ‘Wendy’s client’?”

“Get down from there and never you mind what I meant.” Geralt plucked her from the stall door again and then opened it.

“Geralt! Ah, it’s good to see you, my friend!” Dandelion reached for his arm and grasped it in an exuberant shake. The familiar scent of apple and cinnamon teased his nostrils. Dandelion's signature cologne. “To think, you here… In a stable.” He chuckled and the bard's eyes slid to Ciri. “With a young… ah, very young lady.”

Geralt, glad to see his good friend, rested his hand on Ciri’s shoulder. Dandelion knew him well. He would not judge him like the others.

Ciri stood tall and straightened her shoulders. With a lift of her chin and hands on hips, her lips pursed in a regal expression. “I'm Ciri! I'm with Geralt. He's looking out for me.”

Dandelion beamed in his usual charming way. “Well… you couldn't find a better protector.” Snatching his beret complete with white feather from the floor, he moved smoothly into a low,
dramatic, and formal bow. “It is my pleasure to meet you, fair maiden. One whose beauty is
unmatched.” With a show of chivalry, he reached for her delicate hand. Hovering over it, he
pressed his lips in a butterfly kiss along her tiny grubby knuckles.

Cheeks glowed pink, Ciri stood even taller, grinning from ear to ear. Geralt could not help but do
the same. Her smile lit up the stable.

“I, my fair lady, am Master Dandelion. Renowned poet, minstrel, and troubadour. And Geralt's best
friend.”

Ciri curtsied with the learned grace of a queen in return even though she wore a lambskin jacket
and breeches instead of a fancy gown fit for a princess. But it clearly made no difference to her.

“The pleasure is all mine, Master Poet,” she intoned with as much regal grace. Then she giggled.

Wendy cleared her throat quietly.

“Oh, right.” Dandelion grasped Wendy's arm and pulled her aside. “My sweet peach, meet me in
my room. I'll join you momentarily.”

Her smudged lips pouted and she shook her mane of ringlet curls. “Oh, pooh, don't make me wait
too long. I might fall asleep.”

Dandelion pecked her on the tip of her nose with his lips. “Don’t you dare. May the Goddess
Melitele slay me shall I be too long.”

Wendy shot both Geralt and Ciri a non-consequential glare and turned, her skirts twirled about
shapely legs as she did so, and left.

“Geralt, what brings you to Novigrad? And how are you in possession of this lovely lady?”

The orange tiger-striped kitten, scared off before, had returned. Purring, she rubbed against Ciri’s
ankles. A well-timed distraction, Geralt took advantage and scooped her up. He placed the purring
kitten in Ciri’s arms. “Why don’t you give this little one some attention since she likes you so
much. Go lay down while I speak with the master poet.”

“I'll stay here, thank you very much.” The tilt of her chin displayed her seriousness. She meant to
stay.

Dandelion chuckled softly.

“Ciri…” Although he did not want to, he resorted to the you-had-better-listen-to-me tone of voice.

She huffed. Facing Dandelion, she curtsied again. The bard bowed likewise with the same
chivalric flavor as before. Stroking the kitten’s fuzzy head, she made one last pleading look at
Geralt and disappeared into the stall.

“You won’t go far, will you, Geralt?”

“No. We’ll be up front by the doors.” He closed the door with a click and peered down at her over
the half-door of the stall. She looked up at him with wide worried eyes, but settled down on the
hay and snuggled with the kitten.

“Let’s go up front.” He motioned Dandelion to follow.

The two men stood quiet, listening to the thrumming of rain in the square. Neither wanted to speak
“Clearly much has happened. Fill me in, old friend.”

Geralt breathed in deep. “Ciri…” He cleared his throat. “Your dramatic greeting was strangely appropriate. She... is the princess of Cintra. Actually, she’s queen now. Calanthe perished in the massacre. Ciri's the sole living heir to a non-existent country now, thanks to Nilfgaard.”

Dandelion let out a low whistle. “Whoa, she’s royalty.” He scratched his head then rubbed the back of his neck. “Everyone’s heard about Nilfgaard overtaking Cintra. What a tragedy about Calanthe, though. She was a great queen.”

Yes,” Geralt nodded. “And an equally formidable woman.”

His friend eyed him. “Is that admiration in your voice? It was! I’ll be… You liked her.”

“She was good to me, Dandelion. I am saddened by her loss.”

“So how did you end up with her granddaughter, then?”

“Stumbled upon her in Transriver, in Sodden. A merchant’s wife had taken her in thinking she was a peasant girl, an orphan of war. The merchant took me home after saving his life. He meant to reward me with his second-born son as payment. Then… You could imagine my surprise when I saw Ciri with his boys--”

“Hold on a minute,” Dandelion held up his hand. “Is this… is she the child you claimed with the Law of Surprise before she was born all those years ago?”

Geralt nodded. “Eleven years ago.”

“You renounced your claim didn't you?”

Geralt nodded again.

"Yet you ended up with her anyway by some twist of fate.” The bard chuckled, but there was a note of amazement in it. “So what are you going to do now?”

Geralt stared out into the dark square. Only a couple braziers managed to stay lit in the storm illuminating a few canopied vendor stalls. A daring individual stumbled his way across the square. The man pitched to the ground. A drunkard, gotta be.

“Taking her back to Kaer Morhen.”

Dandelion stared at him. “Whoa, what? Geralt, have you thought this through?”

“Keep your voice down, will ya?” He pinched the bridge of his nose and exhaled. “Where am I supposed to take her, Dandelion? Her home, her family... all gone. She has no one, nowhere to go.”

Dandelion stayed quiet, but his blue eyes glittered.

"Spill it, Dandelion. Can see it in your eyes."

Looking a bit sheepish, he said smoothly, in a gentle voice, “Could've left her with the merchant.”

Geralt shook his head. “The thought had crossed my mind, but no, I couldn't do that.” He glanced back outside at how the raindrops splattered when they hit the street. "You didn't see the way
she… threw herself at me… clung to me like I was the only thing in her world she could hold on to. I felt her pain, Dandelion. And her fear. Promised I'd never leave her. I did once, a year ago. No. I couldn't have left her there. Just couldn't.”

Dandelion glanced out into the courtyard. Geralt’s gaze followed. A guard had caught up with the drunk and tried to help him to his feet. Unsuccessfully.

“Ah, Geralt. You're a good man. She's very lucky to have you as a benefactor.”

Luck? Was it as random as that? Or destiny, as Ciri claimed quite often? A destiny he created. One he put in motion by invoking the ageless tradition. Whatever it was, fate or not, she was his responsibility now. And he had to make decisions and figure out what was best for her.

“What are you going to do when you get her to Kaer Morhen?”

Geralt lifted a shoulder and sighed a deep heavy sigh. He had been asking himself the same question. More than once. “Train her. What else would we do?”

His friend’s eyes opened wide. “You're going to make her a Witcher? A little girl? A queen... a royal Witcher? Why, that's absur--”

Geralt glared at him and he fell silent.

“No. Not a Witcher.” He rubbed his eyes then smoothed a hand over his hair pulled back into a half-ponytail. "Couldn't subject her to the trials. And it's not like we've been doing them lately. But at least we can teach her basic self defense skills. And why not some sword work? She needs to defend herself. She'll learn survival skills, basic combat, improve her strength, develop stamina, and gain confidence. She’ll learn how to track, and fend for herself. She’ll become self-sufficient, Dandelion. That’s the gift I can give her.”

He leaned against the door frame and crossed his arms. “Since I've found her, she's been terribly frightened. Enough so she has nightmares nightly. She wakes screaming for dear life. It’s… To hear what she has gone through, Dandelion. It'll tear you up.”

The bard held his gaze with sympathetic blue eyes. “All right, Geralt. You make great points there. Those are important skills to learn. But have you thought about the fact you're bringing a young girl home to an isolated castle? Only you guys live there. There are no women at Kaer Morhen. What about her need for female companionship? Are you guys equipped to handle the needs of a budding young lady? What about her continued education?”

Geralt was about to say his friend was overreacting, but knew better. Dandelion’s arguments were just ones. Dammit, he had thought about those things, but what the hell was he supposed to do? Drop her off at Yennefer's home in Vengerberg? Oh, the sorceress would appreciate that. It wasn’t like he could enlist her in the Redanian army.

“Geralt.” Dandelion gripped his shoulder. “You're in a position that has no easy and obvious answers. If you feel taking her home is the best thing for her, then by all means, do it. If there's anything I can help with, I will--”

“She’ll be safe there.”

“You're right. That's important.”

“There's more.”
“What? What do you mean?” Dandelion raked his fingers through his brown hair.

Geralt dropped his voice even more to barely above a whisper. “Someone is following us.”

“What? Are you sure?” Dandelion turned and took a step toward the door then halted. "Look who I’m asking… Of course you are. Do you know who?”

“Haven’t seen him yet, but, I bet it’s the--”

A piercing high-pitched scream rattled the stable and their ears. Dandelion jumped, his fingers plugged his ears.

“Dammit! Not here, not now!”

Geralt flew to the stall and crashed it open. The kitten hissed and ran out between his legs. Ciri thrashed about on the hay screeching at the top of her lungs, tears streaming down her cheeks. Roach whinnied, anxious, dancing in place. He cast the Axii Sign and calmed the horse. He dropped to his knees next to Ciri and gripped her shoulders.


Dandelion entered the stall, his face white as bed sheets. “By the Gods! Quiet her Geralt, or she’ll have the whole city upon us!”

“I know, Dandelion!” he hissed through clenched teeth.

“Gerrrrrraaaalt!” she screeched.

He cradled her against his chest and brushed back her ashen hair from wet cheeks. “Sssshhh. I’m here, Ciri. It’s okay. Just another bad dream.”

She turned her face into his shirt and sobbed. Dandelion squatted down next to them. “She gonna be okay?”

At the realization the master poet was there, she choked back her sobs and buried her face deeper in his chest.

“Was it the Black Knight again?” Geralt whispered.

She shook her head and sniffled. Her tears wet his shirt.

“Black Knight?” Dandelion inquired.

“I’ll explain later.”

He rocked her back and forth. “Then what was it this time?”

A fist scrunched his tunic. She lifted her gaze to his, her eyes red and swollen. “It’s not safe here, Geralt. They'll take you away! Please don't leave me. Please don't go!”

“Ssshhh. Calm down, Witcher-girl. I'm not going anywhere.”

"They'll take you!" she sobbed.

He looked at Dandelion and shrugged. This was something new. Usually it was the Nilfgaardian knight that appeared in her dreams.
"Ssshhh. Everything will be all right. Try to calm down."

A ring of steel sent shivers down Geralt’s back. Dammit, it was too late! Why didn’t he hear them coming? Both men turned toward the stall door. An uncomfortably close tip of a long sword pointed at them glinted in the lamplight.

“Don’t either of you make a move.”

The man pointing the sword was a burly scruffy man in his forties, and dressed in the uniform armor and colors of the city guard.

“You.” The sword’s tip indicated Geralt. “Move away from the girl. Now!” The guard’s voice was deep and commanding.

Geralt gently pushed Ciri away from him. She clutched his arms. “No! Geralt! Don’t go!”

“Quiet, Ciri. It’s okay,” he whispered for her ears alone.

With his eyes fixed on the guard, he held up his hands and slowly rose, stepping back. His swords were propped in the corner by the stall door. No way he could get to them and avoid confrontation.

“This is all a simple misunderstanding--”

“Did I say you could talk? Shut up, mutant! You.” The sword point slid to Dandelion. “You, Poet. Up against the wall and don’t move. Do as I say! Now!”

Hands raised, Dandelion did as instructed.

Ciri, with hair disheveled and tear-streaked cheeks, looked helpless at both him and his friend. Oh, this wasn’t good. Shit! Geralt swore under his breath. Why was this all going wrong?

The guard called out. “Innkeep! Get the girl out of here.”

The balding innkeeper scuttled between the guards and into the stall. His gaze landed on him and hardened. Then he turned to Ciri. “Come, child.” He held out a hand to her. “Come with me. You’ll be all right.”

“NO!” she yelled shrinking back away from him. “I was fine before you all showed up!”

“Listen to the man,” the guard advised. “If you want these men to live, you will go with the innkeeper. Now.”

With wide eyes full of fear, Ciri looked to him. Her eyes pleaded for guidance. He had to think about her safety first. He nodded. “Go with the innkeeper, Ciri. You’ll be safe. I’ll come for you once this gets straightened out. I promise.”

Shaking her head, her chin quivered. Biting her lips, she rose. Refusing the innkeeper’s hand, she walked out of the stall on her own.

Good girl.

He gave the innkeeper a stony glare, a hard one, full of promise. The man blanched ever so slightly and left the stall behind Ciri.

Dandelion spoke, breaking the tense silence. “This really is not what you think, my good Sir. The girl belongs to this man.”
“I don’t think you understand me, Poet. When I say you can talk, talk. But not until then!”

The guard nodded to two other guards behind him and they entered the stall. Bearing shackles, a mountain of a man snapped them over Geralt’s wrists. The fellow was not tall. Geralt stood a few inches taller than him, but with his barrel chest and thick arms and legs, he was not one to underestimate. The thick man took another set of shackles, hooked it around the set on Geralt, and then snapped one closed around his own wrist. Just great. Geralt grimaced. He was shackled to the fucking guard.

Both Dandelion’s wrists were cuffed, but not bound to a guard. The captain snatched Geralt’s swords.

“You two are under arrest for endangering the well-being of a child.”

Geralt curled his lip, shaking his head.

“Move it, dog!” The heavy set guard shoved him proving the man’s size was not all fat. He stumbled forward, but regained his footing.

Escorted out of the stable and into the storm, the dampness chilled and he shivered. The rain pelted him gluing his shirt to his torso. Dandelion’s colorful fluffy attire withered before his eyes.

Hair plastered against his neck, Geralt’s gaze caught a glimpse of ashen hair, inside the door of the Kingfisher Inn. Some guests then blocked his view and he fixed his gaze willing them to move aside. As people moved, the firelight glowed a halo on top of her fair head. She made eye-contact, stared wide-eyed, her eyes glazed over with worry and fear. Her mouth formed a word, though uttered no sound. Someone stepped in front of her again.

Her fear was palpable. Overwhelming fear. It wrenched his gut and clamped his heart so it became difficult to breathe. The guard shoved him again from behind. He almost face-planted on the cobblestones were it not for the shackles.

The person moved and Ciri was gone.

His stomach twisted in uncomfortable knots. He had promised never to leave her. What would she do without him? She’d be terrified beyond measure. Though the situation was out of his control, it did not matter. He was leaving her. And it killed him to do it.

I promise, Ciri. I’ll come back for you.

* * *

He could not let them take him to the authorities. Ciri needed him and he must get back to her. Patient, Geralt bided his time, observed the guards on patrol and at posts. The farther away from the inn, the better and safer for her.

The captain, behind him and to the right, carried his sword belt. Dandelion was also behind him. The beast of the guard would not be easy to bring down quick. Especially shackled to him. They turned down a dark and narrow side street. No one was around.

Now was the time.

With a twist of his hips, Geralt jammed his knee in the giant’s groin. When he grunted and bent over, Geralt clasped both hands together and with an upswing, slammed his fists into the guard’s nose. Blood spurted everywhere. The guard dropped to one knee, crying out.
“Dandelion!” Geralt encouraged.

Spurred into action, the bard turned and jacked his knee into his guard’s groin, but the man was ready for it and jumped backwards. No contact made. Surprised, Dandelion stumbled, then stood there, jaw slack, not sure what to do.

“Run!!” Geralt bellowed.

Without a second thought, Dandelion took off passed him down the street. When his guard sprinted after him, Geralt stuck out his leg at the right moment. He clipped the guard’s ankle, pitching him to the ground face first. He slammed his booted foot on the back of the guard’s neck. Satisfied at the crunching of bones, he turned and hammered his knee into the face of his oversized guard. Blood showered all over him. The beast spit out a few teeth and collapsed on the ground. He didn't move after that.

Forced to bend over him, Geralt swore. If only he could get out of these cursed shackles!

“You think you’re so smart, dog.” The captain sauntered up to him. A sickening smile crept along his drenched face. “You’re still shackled and I have your weapons. Sure, you let your friend get away. But you’re still mine.”

Bending over, hands on knees, Geralt glowered up at the captain. His hair hung in a dripping curtain over his shoulders. Rain pelted him, running into his nose and eyes. The captain’s arrogant confidence disgusted him. “Have something to say to you,” he hissed.

“Oh, the mutant has something to say.” He spat at the ground. The spittle landed at his feet in the swirl of rainwater.

Although shackled, Geralt could still move his fingers. He drew the Axii Sign in the air and cast the persuasion spell. “Unbind me. I’ve done nothing wrong. Give me my swords and go home.”

Groggy, the captain shook his head as if waking from a deep sleep. Fumbling for the keys, he found the right one, and unlocked the cuffs. The shackles fell off his wrists.

He retrieved his sword belt and buckled them on his back. He swiped water from his eyes and added, “You don't remember what happened here. Leave now.”

The captain nodded. “Right… What was I doing? I need to go home…” He headed down the street.

Turning, Geralt stepped over the comatose guard and headed back for the inn. Dandelion would have done the same. He'd protect Ciri until he returned.

Keeping to the shadows, he slinked between buildings and dark alleys like an agile acrobat, climbing and jumping over all obstacles in his path. He prowled through the dark streets not making a sound, staying out of sight.

Approaching near the Kingfisher Inn, he plastered his back against the wall of an adjacent building. The firelight shone from the windows of the Inn. He halted, and cursed inwardly. The inn swarmed with Witch-Hunters. Shit! He ducked back behind a wooden post.

Dandelion probably did not make his presence known. At any rate, he couldn't count on him. Ciri was a prisoner and must be scared out of her mind. His chest armor, elixirs, and healing potions were in the stable, however, the entrance was guarded also. But he had his swords and they were all he needed.
Scanning the Witch-Hunters, two of the five carried crossbows. Breathing in through his nose, he focused, calmed himself, slowing his heart rate. He'd have to fight without his potions. Not the first time, and wouldn't be the last. He just had to be extra careful. Dammit it though, a crossbow would come in handy right now. He could pick them off one by one from here.

A faint and familiar high-pitched cry reached his ears. Ciri!

Teeth clenched, he crouched down and scurried silently across the cobblestones, the rain battered his eyes.

Sneaking up behind the hunter posted at the stable door, he reached around and grasped his chin. With one swift jerk of his wrist, he snapped the man's neck. The body slumped to the ground and the crossbow clattered next to him. He snatched it up, aimed, and fired at the other hunter that carried a crossbow. He went down gurgling, his hand grasped his neck. The bolt protruded from his throat.

The remaining three hunters sprang into action, swords raised. Geralt fumbled fitting another bolt into place. The rain made it too slick. He lost precious time and the hunters closed in on him. They spread out in a semi-circle around him.

He chucked the crossbow to the cobblestones with a ringing clank. It skidded towards the stable. He slid his steel blade from its sheath with a ringing hiss and raised it before him diagonally in a fighting stance. The raindrops tapped on the blade in high pitched tinkling sounds, spraying water in all directions. His gaze flitted between the three hunters, waiting, anticipating the first attack. Crouching to the ground, he sank the fingertips of his free hand into the frigid standing water on the street.

The three hunters lunged at him at once. Anticipating this, his hand wet with water, shot the Aard Sign toward them. The magical force field mushroomed from his hand and cracked and thundered about him, ricocheted off the buildings. The added moisture charged the shock wave giving it an extra punch. The explosion, as loud as the thunder was earlier, picked up the three Witch-Hunters and pitched them backwards several yards. One hunter crashed through a vendor stall, sending wood shards flying in all directions. Another slammed against the brick wall of the inn, his breath knocked out of him. The last hunter plummeted, and landed hard in a puddle on the cobblestones. All three staggered to their feet like drunkards. However, they proved resilient. They regrouped in less time than he expected.

They attempted to surround him again. The one to the far left lunged at him. Geralt slammed his sword down on top of the hunter’s blade, knocking it off balance with the strength of his blow. Before the hunter could regain balance, he turned with his hips and sliced his steel down in an arc that severed the hunter’s head from his shoulders in one clean swipe. The body crumbled to the ground. Blood spewed and ran a swirling trail on the cobblestones mixed with the rainwater. The head rolled and stopped in a mud puddle a few feet away.

Whirling around, Geralt parried the blow from the middle hunter with a loud metallic clang. Batting the hunter’s sword arm away from him, he took advantage of the opening and stuck the hunter in the gut. His blade slid through leather, clothing, and flesh with ease. The man's eyes bulged. A stream of blood gushed from pale lips. Sensing life departed, he yanked out his sword before it went down with the body.

Blade dripping red, he turned and fixed his attention on the last Witch-Hunter. The foe assumed a fighting stance. Geralt bared his teeth. “Come on!” he growled. “Let's get this over with!”

The hunter lunged for him and he side-stepped him easily. He whacked him on the back of the
head with his blade like a club as he passed by. The hunter grunted and stumbled forward clutching the back of his scalp with his free hand. When he pulled his hand away, it was covered with blood. Blanching, the hunter clamped his mouth shut and found his balance again. He whirled, and swung at him, arcing the sword from the side.

With a flick of his wrist, Geralt deflected the blow like child's play. The sharp ring of metal against metal echoed loud in the empty square. In a flurry of movement, their blades clanged and hissed in a rapid succession of blows and parries. The rain pummeled them, water sprayed from their weapons, barraging them in their eyes. Neither opponent took the precious time to swipe away the water. A piercing white flash lit up the square and hurt the eyes. A ground-shaking crack of thunder followed.

Their swords met in the middle with an angry metallic whine. His hair, although tied back into a half ponytail, loose hair clung to his face and lips. His clothing stuck to him like a second skin, hampering his movements.

With blades-crossed, Geralt fought the sense of urgency building within him. If he did not tamper that now, it would get the better of him. He would get sloppy, make mistakes. He must stay clear headed.

Another brilliant flash of lightning startled the Witch-Hunter and Geralt took advantage of the distraction. With a quick, but powerful thrust of his sword, he clocked the hunter’s sword arm away giving him the opening he needed. With a blindingly fast downswing, Geralt filleted the hunter from collarbone to hipbone. The hunter dropped his sword with a rattling clank. Eyes wide, he glanced down at his torso and his innards spilling into the street. He croaked something, then crumbled to the slick cobblestones.

Geralt dashed through the inn's door. It was late and most of the guests had retired for the night. The remaining few were too drunk or too lazy to leave so they slumped over tables or in corners snoring loudly. The conscious ones just peered at him bleary-eyed without a care.

No one was behind the bar. Perhaps the innkeeper went home. Geralt headed for the stairs. Where would he have taken Ciri? All the rooms were taken. He halted. Maybe back in the kitchen? Storage area, or basement? To his home? Where the hell did the innkeeper live?

*Ciri, where are you?*” he cried inside though he did not make a sound.

Closing his eyes, he focused his thoughts, his ears, his sense of smell. Breathing in deeply through his nose, he took it all in. So many scents, pleasant and unpleasant. Beer mostly, strong body odor, varied colognes and perfumes. Vomit, urine... he grimaced. Took a step toward the back of the inn. Apple, and... cinnamon.

"Dandelion?" he whispered.

He opened the door to a pantry. Dandelion, at first startled, practically collapsed with relief.

"Geralt! Thank Melitele you're back! I snuck in here through the back door when I noticed the place was covered with Witch-Hunters.” He gave him a glance-over. "You look like hell."

Sighing irritably, Geralt grabbed his friend and yanked him out of the closet. "Have you seen Ciri?"

"Yeah, she's with the innkeeper. He took her back out that way."

"You mean, she's not here?"
An angry rumble of thunder rolled about overhead.

"Calm down now, Geralt. He probably took her home. The man's not a rogue. I mean, I think he was just looking out for her."

He sheathed his sword and wiped his eyes. "Yeah, I get it," he growled. "Why the fuck would an innocent young girl be with a morally deprived Witcher? Like it was the worst thing in the world to be with me?"

Dandelion blanched and his gaze softened. "Hey, I didn't mean... I know you, Geralt. I know the kind of man you are. But not everyone does. You're a dangerous man, everyone knows that--"

"Shut it, okay? I've heard enough. I just want Ciri back. It's time to find out where this innkeeper lives."

"Right. I'm going with you, friend. Geralt, what is it?" Dandelion gazed at him, concern laced his eyes.

"It's not safe here. They'll take you away." She had said that... No, dreamed it, mere moments before it all happened.

He glanced at Dandelion.

Was she a seer too? Just what kind of magic did she possess?

He stepped out the back door. Something told him she was no ordinary girl. Even more so, how could an innocent stay at an inn go so terribly wrong? He shook his head and rubbed the back of his neck. He's a wanted man again now. Refused arrest and killed a couple guards. Even worse, he killed five Witch-Hunters on top of it. The Church of Eternal Fire would never let that go.

He had to find Ciri and get out of this city before dawn.
Novigrad Reunion-Part 3

Chapter Summary

Gritty Witcher-action continues in the third part of *Novigrad Reunion*. Geralt has met up with an old friend, however, an innocent stay at an inn goes horribly wrong.

WARNING: This chapter contains canon-typical *attempted rape* and graphic violence.

Please do not let the warning of this chapter scare you away. I took great care in writing this scene. I do not wish to make anyone uncomfortable. See notes at the beginning of this chapter why I felt this sensitive subject matter is integral to Ciri’s story.

Follow me on Tumblr to get notified of updates! :)

Chapter Notes

I am not a fan of rape scenes and my intent was not to offend anyone. I realize this is a sensitive subject for many. This scene was not added in a gratuitous manner or for the shock value, but this is really canon-typical and those who have read Sapkowski’s Book Saga, will understand that attempted rape was performed on Ciri a few times.

My goal in this chapter was to clearly define an occurrence to highlight Ciri's fighting spirit, her fear of being alone, and the beginnings of the distrust she has for men that makes it very difficult for her to become intimately involved with them when she matures. It also made her trust and love for Geralt even more meaningful which will have strong implications in future chapters.

If you have read this far, I am ever so grateful and thankful!

See the end of the chapter for more notes
“Take me back now!” Ciri commanded with an accompanying stomp of her lambskin booted foot. She did not pay attention that the rainwater spattered over her ankles. Her hair plastered to her face and the dampness seeped through her jacket.

The innkeeper’s hand gripped her upper arm, a bit too hard, and dragged her down the street. Digging in her heels, she skidded across the cobblestones and made it difficult for him.

He scowled and swiped a palm across his forehead. “You're better off without him. Why do you want to be with him, a Witcher of all people? You'll be safe, I promise.”

“I was perfectly safe with him!” Her fingers, slick with water, tried to pry his hand from her arm. Why did he insist she was not safe with Geralt?
“You came willingly before. Why are you fighting me now?” Sighing, the owner of the Kingfisher Inn hauled her to a stop before a brick house. He held open the door for her.

She ground in her heels like planting roots in the street. She crossed her arms and glared at the man.

“You're getting wet. Go on inside.” He nodded towards the door.

“Do you know who I am?” She changed tactics. Her voice, calm, and imperial, would have made her grandmamma proud. “I order you to return me to the Witcher this instant!” She made sure she followed that command with an equally stately lift of her chin.

It didn't work. He did not move or say anything, and certainly did not know who she was. But, it had always worked for her grandmamma. Her chin lost its lofty air.

A middle-aged woman appeared at the door wearing a ruffled and wrinkled nightdress and matching slippers. Groggy, she stifled a yawn. Strands of squiggly dark tresses poked out from underneath a nightcap. “What the devil’s all this racket?"

The innkeeper grasped Ciri's arm and pain shot down her elbow. She cried out, and he shoved her into the house. She rewarded him with a solid kick to the shin. No one had ever handled her in a such disrespectful manner before.

“Holy Melitele!” the wife cried, wide-eyed and now awake. She stared at her husband while he groaned and hobbled on one leg.

Twisting from his grasp, Ciri kneed him in the crotch and took off out of the house toppling over a plant just outside the door in the process. Sprinting down the street, the frigid rain pelted her face. She couldn’t recall which direction they had taken. She only remembered a few turns. Darkness and the incessant downpour confused and disoriented her. Not familiar with this city, she had no idea where she was or in what vicinity was the inn.

*Geralt, where are you?!!*

Breathing hard, her stomach clenched and a rush of energy spurred her forward. She was alone again! What was she to do? Where to go?

Forcing herself to breathe in deep, she focused on thinking clearly. She had been alone before. *Breathe…*

She did not want to be alone again! Although horrific and terrifying, she had managed back then, when she had escaped from the Black Knight. For weeks she survived on her own until she stumbled upon that nice family with two sons.

*Breathe in…* So now, she had to manage again and get back to Geralt. Her stomach churned. What if she could not find him? They took him away, just like she had dreamed mere moments before it happened.

She continued in the direction from whence the innkeeper had brought her. Just so long as she kept moving. And didn’t panic. If she could get back to the stable, she’d be safe and dry. There she could hide and think.

She turned down a dark alley and stopped. Tall buildings on either side of the narrow passage did not let any light through. But there was not much light anyway unless lightning flashed, which it did from time to time. Still, no need to take unnecessary chances. She should stay on the main road.
Turning back down the cobblestone street, she stopped short. A gritty grimy man with a black patch over one eye blocked her path. She gasped, taking back a step. A strong stench of stale beer and piss emanated from him. Another scent she could not place, musky and distinct, not sure it was unpleasant or not, but definitely in the realms of body odor and quite unfamiliar. Oddly reminded her of the sea. Ciri backed away more.

The man clutched her arm and hauled her up against him. Colliding with his chest, she stood on tiptoes to relieve the pain in her elbow. She wanted to cry out, but did not. She pulled away to no avail.

“Well, well. What have we here?”

“Let me go!” She ground out through clenched teeth.

“You’re a little young to be out wandering the streets alone at this time of night, eh?”

His accent, thick like a sailor, eyes, dark as night, raked over her and took too much interest in her chest. Her skin crawled, eliciting a chill that raced down her spine. Grimacing, she tried twisting from his grasp, but the burn was too much.

“How old are you anyways?” He chuckled in a slow knowing manner that raised the hair on the back of her neck.

“Please…” She scraped the words through a constricted throat. “I’m with a Witcher. He’d kill you in an instant.”

For a split second, fear flashed in his eye, but amusement was quick to follow. “Is that so, eh? Don’t see no Witcher around.”

He hoisted her off her feet by her arm and crushed her to his chest with as little effort as if he carried a ragdoll. Swaggering deeper into the blackness of the alley, his other hand shoved open her jacket.

“See, miss, been at sea for… a long time and… well, a man has needs. Hmmm. A woman would be preferable, but you’ll do in a pinch. You must’a came from Cripplin’ Kate’s.”

A large rough hand explored her chest. She squirmed, and heat rushed to her cheeks. His fingers lingered over her small buds, tender in growth, crushed under his demanding touch. Her teeth ground against each other, her stomach twisted in knots. How dare he! No one had ever touched her in this manner! And no one ever would again.

He grunted, squeezed her breast, and snorted. Her cheeks flamed. Damn him! She kneed him in the groin, or rather, attempted it, but her closeness did not allow her the force she would have rather used. So she spit in his face instead.

“Oh, a feisty one, are ya?” He wiped the spittle from his nose. “You ain’t no woman, but I like ‘em with fire.”

Chuckling, he set her on the ground roughly and she staggered. She did not have enough time to regain balance before he whipped her around so her back was to him and bent her over the top of a dirty crate. Its edge was rough and sharp. A large fist twisted her soaking tresses back into a hand hold that prevented any movement. She couldn't move her head at all.

What did this man want? What was he going to do? Teeth chattering, she forced down rising bile in her throat, but it choked her. He strained her neck backwards.
A knee forced her legs open wide. The weight of him crushed her, pinned her to the crate. A
buckle jingled and the soft swoosh of leather laces plucked open dried out her mouth. Unable to cry
out, she squirmed, but it was no use. He was too heavy.

Geralt! I need you!

A fist gripped the back of the waistband of her pants. A swift yank ripped seams and they dropped
over her backside. Cold air chilled her between her legs. A heart-stopping wave of panic paralyzed
her. Her fingers crawled over the top of the crate, seeking a rock, a wood piece, or anything to use
against him. Nothing! Nothing but dirt and silky spider webs tangled her fingers.

His full weight crushed her into the splintered wood. It bit her lower belly. She cried out.

“Don't you worry, miss. I reckon you’ll be real tight, so it'll be quick. The less you squirm, the less
painful for ya. Just relax.”

An intrusive finger probed slowly where it had no business and she gasped. Tears spilled over her
lashes and she bit her lips until the rusty taste of blood tinged her tongue. Her knotted stomach
turned into a thick wave of nausea. How could a man treat her so? Like she was a piece of property
or an object a man could just do with whatever he wanted whenever he wanted? She did not want
this, did not ask for this… Maybe she could vomit, that would turn him off… wouldn’t it?

She swung her arm behind her in an effort to clobber him. Her fist met nothing but air. He grabbed
her wrist and pinned it behind her back. She groaned at the stabbing pain in her shoulder.

“Geralt…” she whimpered in a choking sob. It was the only sound she could utter. He tugged on
hair craning her neck backwards. She vowed this would never happen again. No man would ever
violate her, even touch her. He would die before he managed.

“Who’s Geralt?” he rasped, his beer tainted breath, too close to her ear, gagged her. “Your
boyfriend?” he sneered with an ugly chuckle. “Or your daddy?”

He emphasized that last comment with a thrust of his hips hard against her bottom. The crate’s
rough edge pinched deeper into her lower belly. She stifled a cry.

“A Witcher.” A deep harsh and commanding voice broke no argument and teemed with warning
came from the entrance of the alley.

Ciri’s heart stopped at the sound of the familiar velvety voice she had grown to love. Relief flooded
her, made her light headed. Glancing toward the street, the tall imposing figure of a white-haired
man with the hilts of two swords protruding over a shoulder stood silhouetted at the entrance of the
alley. What little light emanated from the street shone on his hair and shoulders, glinted off the
steel accents of the sword hilts. His face was lost in shadow.

He found me! She focused on breathing. Geralt was here, he’d make everything right!

In three long strides, Geralt was at the sailor’s side and slugged him solidly across the face. The
blow jarred the sailor and he careened to the side almost taking her with him.

Freed from his weight, she could breathe again. She quick tugged up her pants. But now they were
ruined and could fall off.

After a deep thud, the sailor grunted behind her. “Get off me, mutant!”

Another smack followed by a groan.
“In the habit of assaulting young girls, scum?”

A scuffle, loud and fast-paced erupted behind her. Ciri straightened up, her abdomen bruised and bitingly sore. Holding an arm across her belly, she hopped onto the crate avoiding the scuffle.

The metallic ring of steel sang in the darkness. It was darker than the black of night in the alley and only the pure whiteness of Geralt’s hair glinted in the minimal light gave clue to his whereabouts. He did not have any trouble making contact with the sailor’s sword, by the sound of it. It was as if he could see perfectly fine in the dark. Probably wasn’t so for the sailor, on the other hand.

The ring and hiss of metal scraping on metal grated her ears. Heavy breathing, grunts and growls accompanied the metallic song. Lightning lit up the alley in a rally of rapid flashes enough to reveal sailor and Witcher in a struggle of brute strength, their blades criss-crossed in the middle. The sailor was bulky, but Geralt, leaner and athletic, stood taller. The Witcher kicked the sailor in the thigh shoving him backwards.

“Ciri! Get out of here!” He hissed. With ringing clangs, he parried another succession of frenzied blows.

“No!” she cried scurrying back on the crate until she could go no further. The solid cold brick wall of the building prevented it. “I won’t leave you!” I don’t want to be alone again!

Within that split second of distraction, the sailor landed a fist squarely across Geralt’s jaw with a resounding smack. She sucked in her breath when his head snapped in the direction of the blow. Going with the momentum, Geralt spun in a pirouette and surprised the sailor with a heavy blow of steel. Barely able to parry it, the sailor stumbled backwards until he flattened up against the side of the building.

“Dammit, Ciri! Get out of here, NOW!”

The time it took to command her to leave was enough for another fist to meet his jaw. Geralt’s soaking wet hair flailed in a fan, splattering a trail of water everywhere. With a growl, he stumbled back. Lifting his sword in a parry, he deflected the incoming whirl of the blade from slicing off his head.

“Geralt!”

Ciri snapped her attention to the male voice that came from the street. Dandelion, clothes wrinkled and plastered to his form, hair a right mess, and beret sagged covered half of his face. He approached the alley and called again in a fierce whisper.

“Witch-Hunters coming!”

Geralt spat an oath and swung again. His blade landed hard against the sailor’s and scraped it along its length. While holding his sword captive, he whipped out a dagger from his belt and plunged it deep into the sailor’s lower belly.

Satisfaction alighted in Ciri, the pleasure at witnessing the demise of the scumbag brought pure delight. And it was Geralt who fulfilled it. Her protector, her destiny.

Sheathing both blades, Geralt rushed to her, scooped her off the crate, and took off at a breakneck speed deeper into the dark alley. She circled his neck with her arms, wrapped her legs around his waist, buried her face in the crook of his neck, and held on tight. Whatever would happen next, everything would be all right. Geralt had her. She was with him and everything would be okay.
Dandelion followed at a much slower pace. His silky shoes slipped on the wet ground.

Heavily armored feet of the Witch-Hunters echoed down the alley. Geralt crouched behind some stacked crates and barrels and motioned for Dandelion to follow suit. Ciri buried her face in Geralt’s wet hair and held her breath. None of them made a sound.

The Witch-Hunters came part of the way down the alley, but didn’t see the need to go any farther and turned back. They must not have seen the sailor’s corpse.

They waited until they could no longer hear their footsteps before venturing out from their hiding spot.

“How do we get back to the stable without being seen?” Dandelion whispered.

“We keep going down this alley. I passed through here earlier tonight. We’re not far.”

Ciri shivered, her teeth chattered uncontrollably. A powerful cold gripped her. Like no cold she had remembered. She quivered again and could not stop.

Geralt’s hand smoothed up her back and pressed her closer. Safe. She was safe in his arms. She breathed out, deeply comforted simply being with him. Tightening her arms around him, she clung to him. She would always be safe with Geralt.

“We gotta get you warm,” he murmured. “You’re freezing. Come on, Dandelion. Follow me and stay quiet.”

* * *

In the quietness of the stable, methodically, he did it. First, he laid the blanket over Roach’s back, then came the saddle, and the straps buckled. He checked tension and adjusted accordingly. He went through the motions by force of habit, his thoughts tumbling over themselves, far from the task at hand.

An occasional shake of a horse’s mane in a nearby stall and the spitting of the fire in the grates were the only sounds. Re-adjusting the straps, he glanced over Roach’s back at Ciri. She lay wrapped in a wool blanket, her head rested on Dandelion’s lap. He lounged propped up against the corner of the stall. She had dozed off not long before. His friend, unusually quiet, stroked her drying hair away from her face.

Geralt crouched down before them. Ciri still quaked even in her sleep.

Dandelion wiped his bloodshot eyes. “Think she'll be all right?”

His throat tightened, recalling how close the sailor had come to… He cleared his throat. “Hard to say. She’s been through too much already and now… this. For fuck’s sake, Dandelion… if I was thirty seconds later…”

“I know. You saved her just in time. She’s still shivering.”

He laid a hand on the blanket. “Wish I had gotten to her sooner. We need to get her out of those wet clothes. But we’ve gotta get out of here fast--Someone’s coming.”

He rose and poked his head over the stall door. At the sight of long red ringlet curls, he relaxed. Turning, he glanced at his friend. “It’s Wendy.”
“There you are!” Sharp brown eyes flashed and she opened the stall door.

Both men gestured for her to keep quiet.

“Dandelion,” she hissed. “Where have you been? Did you forget about me?” Her curls bounced with an angry shake of her head.

“I’m sorry, Wendy. Truly am. This night had not turned out the way we planned it.”

Geralt sighed. “It was not his fault, Wendy. But we are in some trouble, Dandelion included.”

“What--?”

“Can’t explain. But we need to get out of here now. The longer we tarry, the more risk we take.”

Silence thick as the wool blanket that covered Ciri, settled in the stable. Geralt wiped his burning eyes. “Shit. Roach threw two horseshoes on the way into this cursed city. She can’t travel fast or far without them. I was going to go to a blacksmith tomorrow to take care of that.”

“Right,” Dandelion spoke up. “Can’t do that here now. But… there is a village just outside the city. Maybe there you--”

“What direction are you headed?” Wendy interjected in hushed tones.

Geralt hesitated. The less she knew the better.

“Don’t go to Arette.” She did not bother to wait for his answer that did not come anyway. “It’s still too close if you are in that kind of trouble. Instead, keep heading northeast a ways to Yantra. It’s a small village, but they have a blacksmith there. His name’s Bjorn. Tell him I sent ya and I insist he takes care of ya. And he will. You have my word.”

Geralt stared at Wendy. Her eyes were kind and sincere. But still...

“Trust me, please. I would only do this for you two. And you have my word I'll not say anythin’.”

Geralt nodded in that gentlemanly way. “Someday I’ll repay you for your kindness. You had better leave now and lay low for awhile.”

Wendy nodded and looked to his friend.

Dandelion slowly lifted Ciri’s head from his lap and snuck away without disturbing her. He followed Wendy toward the doors.

Geralt intercepted him with a hand on his arm. “I hope you plan on… ah,” he cleared his throat. “Even though you didn't--”

“You have that low of an opinion of me, my friend?”

“Not at all--”

“Relax, Geralt. I take care of my ladies same as you.”

He nodded and let him go to Wendy.

Their voices low and hushed, Geralt secured the saddlebags to the saddle. Then he donned his leather jerkin and buckled many buckles, and tugged on leather silver-studded gloves. He glanced
at Ciri slumbering while strapping the sword belt over his shoulder.

She peered at him through half-closed lids. She sat up, her expression worried. “Geralt? What's going on?”

“It's all right, Ciri. We're leaving the city now.”

“I'm cold, and tired.”

“I know. Me too.”

Dandelion came back into the stall. “Well, Geralt. Safe travels to you.” He bowed low in front of Ciri. “My lady, it was a pleasure—”

“Cut the shit, Dandelion.” Geralt ignored his astonished look and took his arm and pulled him out of the stall. “You're a wanted man too, you know. You should also leave the city for a while.”

The bard stared at him with the most serious expression he had ever witnessed his friend possess. Usually carefree, cheerful, and riding the high tides of life, in the current circumstances, the gravity of their situation was not lost on him. Good. He didn't want anything to happen to his good friend.

For several moments, both men stood quiet, contemplating. Geralt glanced back at Ciri and scowled. All he wanted to do in Novigrad was get a good night's rest and stock up on food and clothing. Winters in the Blue Mountains were harsh and long. She'd need warmer clothes. Not to mention new trousers since the scumbag of a sailor had ruined hers. And add horseshoes to that list too, he sighed. Dammit, how did this night go so horribly wrong?

“I'll come with you.”

Geralt snapped his attention back to his friend. “I'm going home, Dandelion. To Kaer Morhen, remember?”

“I know. Just as far as Yantra. Then I'll head south to Oxenfurt. Or somewhere else if I think of it. I'll let my muses guide me. Besides, I think you could use a friend now.” With a pat on his shoulder, Dandelion strolled to the next stall and saddled up his bay mare.

Geralt rode his mare out of the stable. Ciri, wrapped in her cloak and the wool blanket, shivered in Geralt's lap. Her head lolled back against his chest. With lute slung across his back, the troubadour followed Geralt's mare out of the stable.

Quietly, they walked, not trod, down dark narrow streets, keeping away from the lit main roads, making minimal sounds as possible. They crossed the lesser used southeastern bridge to the village of Arette, instead of the well-traveled Oxenfurt Bridge, for fear it was heavily guarded.

Padding through the silent empty streets of the village, Geralt kept an eye and ear open. He knew he was there, following them. Keeping far enough away, yet, watchful. He had to give it to the man, he knew how to track. He had kept up with them all this time without betraying his identity. He nodded despite it all.

He did not warn Dandelion, and certainly could not risk Ciri understanding. But he knew. So he kept on and shifted northeast to Yantra, plotting how to lose the bastard.

Chapter End Notes
If you have read this far, I thank you! :) It is my hope that you continue with this story as I make updates! :)

Vision

Chapter Summary

Fleeing Novigrad, Geralt grapples with the events that had taken place in the city. Dandelion had to flee with them for he is no longer safe either. Ciri, traumatized, needs help and Dandelion is the one who finds that help for her. Introducing a new original character Chessa, a village healer.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Artist unknown - Katie McGrath as Morgana
borrowed from Pinterest

CHAPTER EIGHT

Vision
The moon, obscured by thick low-hanging storm clouds, abandoned the world to oppressive darkness. The persistent rain continued its barrage and trailed down his leather jerkin in steady streams, drawing out its familiar pungent scent from the wetness despite wearing a thick wool cloak. But the rain could not wash away turbulent thoughts or untwist churning knots deep in his gut.

With a swift kick of silver spurs, Geralt jolted Roach from a trot into a gallop once they reached the open fields beyond the village. The rain had turned the dirt path to treacherous mud, but the mare, accustomed to off-road trekking, trudged through the muck with confident speed. This was one of those times he appreciated and relied on her stamina and agility.

Securing an arm around Ciri’s midsection, he braced her against him and tucked her inside his cloak. The woolen folds closed over her completely, protecting her from the elements.

He spurred Roach again. Faster! Fly across the fields! As if she understood his thoughts, the mare lowered her head and thundered across the muck onto the grassy plains, her mane whipped in the wind spraying water in all directions, as did his. Mud and grass tore from the ground underneath her hooves, arced in the air behind them marring the landscape. Tall grass and copses of trees blurred passed in nondescript black shadows. The moonless night offered no guiding silvery rays, but he did not require much light to see in the darkness anyway. Balancing his weight on the balls of his feet, he bent low into the biting wind, clutching Ciri all the while. Faster she sped northeast with the frigid rain stinging his eyes.

The sharp cold he’d take rather than the sickening churning inside. He kicked her flanks again and Roach lengthened beneath him, giving the effort he demanded. With each thud of her hooves, he expected an outlet for his tension and anger, yet all he managed was to seethe even more.

He drove her on. Mud shot into the air and rained down about them in a radius like a twisted hailstorm spell gone wrong.

It was not about leaving the city behind as fast as he could. No, not at all. But he couldn't let off steam in a sword fight or an arm wrestling match at the moment. But what he really wanted was to gut the fucking sailor a second time, pick him back up, and do it again. Really, he would not have let the scum die so easily. A few unpleasant torturous ways of disposing a man had crossed his mind that he would have liked to do to the bastard and draw out an agonizing and slow death had Ciri not been present. Blast her stubbornness!

But right now, all he had was his horse and she thundered over the saturated ground tearing it up in her wake, but what release he gained was far too little for his satisfaction.

He sustained the relentless sprint and only after Roach slipped and stumbled a couple times, did he rein her in. Slowing to a steady trot, he steered her off the muddy road into a dense forested area. Running her hard with two bare hooves was not wise or kind, but concern over Ciri dominated his thoughts.

Damn it all to hell! He was supposed to protect the girl!

He slammed a silver-studded fist into the nearest unsuspecting tree trunk. Bark chips shot in all
directions. One ricocheted off his shoulder and careened to the ground near Roach’s back leg. Typical of his skittish mare, she danced sideways and snorted.

Still tucked within his cloak, he tightened his arm around Ciri. The innkeeper took her away and he let it happen. What was he thinking? He should have known she would come find him. With spunk and wit she had escaped from that Nilfgaardian knight that had plucked her from the carnage during the massacre of her country. She had eluded him and the empire’s battalions across Cintra’s borders, so of course she could certainly break away from an inkeep. But tonight, she was alone in a foreign city, lost in the middle of a stormy night, and terrified…

She had no one else. He was all she had. If not for him, she would not last long in this world. A world that was unkind, and to women especially, regardless of age. No young girl should be left alone with no one to turn to for protection and support.

He snapped the ends of the leather reins across his knee. Its bite stung, even through the leather trousers, but ignored it. Why didn't he wreck the guards in the stable right then and there, which was his initial instinct anyway?

“By the gods, Geralt!” Dandelion sided his bay mare alongside Roach. Both horses labored in gasping breaths, belching out puffs of white clouds from their noses and mouths like smoke from a scorching forge. “Plan on running your horse into the ground? Forgot she’s missing horseshoes already, did you?”

Geralt ground his teeth. Rain streamed from his forehead, down over his cheekbones, and the back of his neck. No, he had not forgotten. With a wet glove, he swiped water from his eyes and mouth. This cursed incessant rain!

His gut churned in painful spasms. “I should never have told her to go with the innkeeper. It's all my fault,” he ground out.

“No, don’t think like that, Geralt. It wasn't your fault.”

Roach danced in placed and snorted out a huge cloud of white. He tugged the reins and she settled. “If I hadn’t let her go with him, none of this would have happened, Dandelion.”

“I think the innkeeper only meant--”

“He was motivated out of concern for Ciri, I get it. But his good intentions ended up doing her more harm than if he had let us well enough alone. Why couldn't he have just let us be?!” His gaze dropped to the soggy ground. “All because he didn't trust me, a Witcher, like I was some kind of... monster.” He spat that last word. “Where did we go wrong?” That last comment was more of an afterthought than a direct question.

“People are afraid of what they don’t understand.”

After centuries of existence, people still did not understand their kind? Long ago, Witchers, revered and respected, were held in such high esteem kings sought their expertise and gladly compensated them handsomely. Even folk easily tossed them coin bags for a job well done, but nowadays, negotiating a higher price for a contract usually left a bad taste in one’s mouth and often accused them of exploiting their services. Truth of the matter was no one but the wealthy could afford a witcher’s true worth, which left them risking their necks for a few coins scraped up by those who barely had any to give in the first place.

Have Witchers fallen from grace so far that a young girl in his presence elicited such mistrust and
disdain?

A sharp pang twinged in his chest and he grimaced. Just the memory of those dark scowls directed at him at the inn sliced through his sense of honor like a steel blade. The way the innkeeper had implied he had disturbing sexual tastes that involved young and undeveloped girls. His lip curled up in a snarl. He and his kind risked their lives every day protecting people, and this was how they were treated? As if they've lost moral and ethical standards, indeed become the monsters they hunt?

“I let her go with a stranger, Dandelion. What was I thinking?”

“Geralt… you did the only thing you could. You acted with her in mind, my friend. Stop beating yourself up. You did nothing wrong. All we can do now is move forward.”

Geralt found his friend’s gaze, his pupils wide and black in the darkness. “She was almost raped, dammit!” The sharp bitterness in his tone was not lost in his own ears. “She needs me. I’m protecting her and that happened… On my watch, Dandelion. My watch.”

His friend simply gazed at him, his expression full of concern. His shoulders slumped just a bit, but he caught it. Then it hit him how the usually primped and immaculate troubadour looked at the moment. The rain soaked him. In his colorful and fanciful velour, he resembled a drowned rat with his usual light-brown wavy locks hanging long and straight, plastered to his head. He was also mostly covered in mud thanks to his irrational mad dash.

“You are protecting her, and I know you, Geralt, you will protect her with your life for the rest of hers. She could not have asked for a more able and loyal guardian.”

Geralt heaved a hefty sigh. Some guardian he had turned out to be! Ciri had not been with him very long and look what happened. He needed to do better than this. She deserved a much more competent protector.

He glanced back at his friend. However grateful he was for his presence, Dandelion was unwittingly dragged in the middle of this shit. They would not be in this situation had he bypassed the city altogether, but he needed to replenish supplies such as dried fruits and nuts, and clothing, warm ones for Ciri. And Roach needed two horseshoes. Another blanket and bedroll would come in handy.

“I’m sorry, friend,” Geralt muttered. “You didn’t have to be involved in this.”

“I’m a wanted man too, Geralt, remember? We’re in this together. Like old times, hey? You and me traveling together, a lot of times in weather as foul as this. Now tell me why we have left the road. Are they following us?”

He glanced back toward the direction they had come. Murky darkness swallowed the city, snuffed out what little lights flared along the skyline behind them. Fog as thick as cream soup hovered over the saturated ground and rolling mists wove their vaporous tendrils through the trees like the long crooked fingers of a crone weaving a magic spell.

Ciri nestled against him, but still she trembled violently. He tightened an arm around her again. He had to get her out of those wet clothes or she would catch her death.

“Dandelion, Ciri is still shivering. Take her and ride as fast as you can to the village. I’ll not run Roach like I have already. Get her by a fire as soon as you can. Would you do this for me?”

With a serious expression, Dandelion nodded. Water sprayed from his drooping cap. “I said you
could use a friend and I meant it. But wouldn’t it be better if you took her on my horse? I’ll take it easy on Roach and meet up with you there.”

Geralt chose his next words carefully. He glanced around, inhaling a deep breath. The bastard was on their trail, he could feel it. “Normally, yes, but I need you to do this for me.”

“Don’t you think you sh--”

“Just do this for me. Please.” He kept his tone serious, but not harsh. He locked his gaze on his friend’s eyes, dark in the night.

Dandelion nodded. “I’ll take her and wait for you there.”

He let out the breath he held and nodded.

Carefully, he scooped her from his saddle and hoisted her up in front of Dandelion. After making sure she was secure in his saddle, did he let go of her.

“She didn't even wake. I hope she's just really tired.”

The bard adjusted his lute strap so the instrument lay across his back in the same manner as Geralt wore his swords. The steady ping of raindrops tuned a more bass note on the wooden lute in contrast to the higher pitched pings on his sword hilts.

“Make sure you hold her tight… with your arm around her like--”

“Geralt, I got this.”

“Right.” He unfastened his cloak and flung it around his friend’s shoulders. “Close it over her. Protect her from the rain.”

“I can manage.” Dandelion closed the cloak around her.

“Don't tell anyone who we are. Keep her identity hidden, please.” Geralt collected a few gold coins from his leather pouch and placed them in the bard’s gloved hand. “Here, use this for whatever you need.”

Dandelion stuffed the gold into a hidden pocket and frowned down at him. “Don’t worry, she’ll be all right. You gonna be long?” He gave him a serious unblinking stare. “I know when you're not telling me something.”

“Go. I'll catch up as fast as I can.”

He slapped Pegasus’ rump and she jumped forward. He stood and watched them weave through the trees and thunder away on the murky road. Within seconds, they vanished amongst the grey swirling mists.

Glancing back at the direction they had come, he checked the tautness of his sword belt across his chest. The cursed rain turned into a slow and steady drizzle, but it still seeped into everything. The dampness chilled to the bone.

Stifling a shiver, he relieved himself in front of some bushes. Leaning back against a medium-sized tree trunk, he waited long enough to give Dandelion lead time.

* * *
Warmth… Heat… She craved heat, needed it, would die without it. Why couldn't she warm up? Teeth chattered loud in her head, she could not stop it. She quaked from head to toe. Cold… this unnerving cold…

Geralt… she wanted him, needed him. She didn’t feel him. Was he near? She sniffed. His earthy wood smoke and leather scent that reminded her of a campfire in the woods was not around. He was not around… Cold. She was so cold…

She sank back into the vision that formed in her mind. Shadows focused into undetectable shapes and then those shapes twisted into recognizable forms, the colors, vibrant, filled in everything…

* * *

There he is. Tall and still, standing before a thatched-roof stone cabin. Not a single part of him moves, except his familiar white ponytail fluttering in the slight breeze. When the clouds part, silvery rays beam down outshining a single candle on top of a cloth-covered crate next to the entrance. The soft moonlight, diffused by mists, illuminates his pure white hair so that it glistens with the motion. The black leather trousers and jerkin, that fits him like a second skin, also shines sleek, the rays glint off the many silver buckles and studs on every piece of clothing.

Some baskets stuffed with glass bottles of various sizes, crates loaded with herbs, a few long two-by-four wood planks, and a wagon wheel propped against the side of the structure, fills the space beside the door, all suggests someone lives here. But the owner is nowhere around.

The house, the only one in sight, is surrounded by once full and vibrant pines that now droop their bare branches in a wearsome and drawn-out permanent winter, never having returned to the world of the living from their dormancy. A bluish-grey fog, illuminated by the moon, silhouettes the bare trees in an eerie way as if she has become a part of a dark children’s tale.

She hovers just over his right shoulder, behind him, not sure how or why only that she is not in her true form. Or perhaps, this is her true form… However it may be, it seems Geralt is not aware of her presence.

His back to her, she cannot see his face or read his expression. The wooden door, framed with an ancient intricate and symmetrical design carved by an artistic and practiced hand, hung open but a crack, beckoning, but he just stands there staring at it.

An awful silence hovers over the dreary land. A breathless silence. One full of anticipation and… dread.

Still, he remains unmoving before the door. Is he afraid to go in? Hesitant of what he may find?

Breathless herself, she waits. Where is this place? A lone cabin in the middle of nowhere. Dank, cool, with swirling mists coiling around the trees after dusk, crawling low over the ground, suffocating everything. The distant cry of a… what is that? A harpy... echoes through the trees. Before she ponders how she recognizes a harpy’s cry, she focuses on the locale. Reminds her of Skellige, actually, her home away from home. Is it possible they are on one of the isles? But this place… not one she recognizes.

Her attention snaps back to him. He has placed a gloved hand on the wooden door and ever so gently, he pushes it. The wood groans and creaks louder than usual in the stillness as his arm
extends, holding it wide open.

Hesitating at the threshold, he just stands there. Motionless.

Her gaze shifts, peering into the darkness beyond the door. Eerily quiet, she cannot make out much of what is inside other than some broken crockery on the floor near the door. Is someone in there?

A bright silvery beam shines down behind them lighting a path into the darkened home. Or is that light emanating from her?

He casts a long dark shadow into the room. The black elongated shapes of the hilts of two swords, large and distinct, the circumference of his head and wide shoulders stretch across the floor and up the far wall where a bed rests. Someone lies upon it, also unmoving.

“Geralt…?” she dares, but her voice falters. She’s not sure why she spoke, but just the sound of his name calms her even though the tone of her voice jolts her. It is not a familiar voice, but deeper, more mature, that of a woman. But it is her voice, of that she is sure.

He does not respond.

Can he hear her? Perhaps that is why he’s not aware of her presence.

Just a small step he takes inside and stays focused on the bed in the back of the room. Then another small step forward.

She lingers at the threshold. She shouldn’t go any further, doesn’t want to intrude, although she felt silly for feeling this way. It was the way he moved, silent ginger steps… hesitant, as if he dreaded discovering something horrible, or the possibility of facing a deep-seeded fear. His body language, tense, alert, and ready to brace what he will find, all suggests this is a big deal… This is a moment he has been waiting for, something he has labored long and hard for… and yet, he cannot bring himself to face it.

Peering into the large single-room home, she studies the slumbering figure. Lying on her side facing the wall, a woman stretched out on top of the covers. Slender, feminine curves betrayed a lean, lithe figure, alluring, and tall. Dressed in tight black leather armor, high boots, a wide black and silver belt, and a deep wine-colored blouse underneath chainmail covers her upper body. Clearly fully grown. And her hair...

She sucked in her breath. No! It cannot be...

The emotions he so desperately attempts to stifle radiates from him like the rays of the noonday sun. They scorched her, suffocated her, for her emotions were truly similar at the moment. It is clear that the person on the bed means a great deal to him. To the man that means a great deal to her.

Standing there, he stares down at the woman, his expression stony, yet his eyes, soft and rounded, glazes over with… wetness? Gently, he sits down on the bed beside her, his weight dipping the mattress. The young woman does not wake or stir… Is she alive?

Her gaze races back to Geralt’s and then at the woman again, but she still doesn’t bring herself to cross the threshold. Not yet. He needs to be alone with this lady who is breaking his heart right now.

His lips firm in a straight line, he reaches for her shoulder. For a moment, his hand rests there, as if he were gathering the courage to finally face the inevitable. Gingerly, he rolls her onto her back.
Her arms, limp, fall with a dead weight next to her and her head lolls to the side. He jumps to his feet and staggers backwards, overwhelmed.

From the threshold, she stares at the woman whose identity is now clear and loses the ability to breathe, fluttering to the ground just outside the door like a wilted flower, her light dimming. She does not have the strength. She cannot face the truth that...

The raw emotions he stifled moments ago, cascades over her like a thundering waterfall and she drowns in its intensity. He nearly stumbles and collapses back onto the bed, his elbows on his knees, head down... his heart broken.

NO, no, no! She screams, yet her voice is not heard. The sound never passed her lips. No, she cannot do this to him, she is right here! “Geralt!” she cries, but he still sits there, hanging his head, his eyes tightly closed. “I’m right here!”

Why can’t he hear her? Her body may be in a deathlike state, but she is right with him, has been all along!

He turns to the still form, lying in the sleep of death, and slides his hands underneath the crooks of her arms like a mother does to pick up her baby from a crib. Drawing her up, he embraces her, buries his face in her neck, rocking back and forth.

It is too much. She cannot bear the grief, his loss. “I am right here...” she murmurs, her strength about gone. “Geralt, I’m here!”

Her strength evaporates and she wilts on the ground before the threshold. The only thing she can do is gaze into the house and at Geralt clutching the woman’s limp form close to him. He knows she is gone, yet he still embraces her and slides a hand up her back, gripping the nape of her neck.

The display before her brims with the tender compassion she has always longed for and a sense that it has been ages since she has experienced that left her breathless. She lets go and absorbs the scene she is witnessing. However tender it is, it is intimate as well, by the way he wraps his arms tighter around her as if he wills to impart his life force into the empty shell of her body. However futile the effort, the longing is there. It is palpable. His thudding heart echoes in her ears, the groans of grief barely heard uttered from his lips, reverberates in her soul. The tears she cannot see she discovers on her own cheeks.

A sudden understanding fills her and her light grows in intensity until it blinds her. His love, true and unconditional, gives her strength, but even more so, sets her free. Weightless again, she rises in the air absorbing the rays of the moon. Her strength returns and she knows what she must do.

Finally allowing herself to cross the threshold, she scurries inside the dark house, as light as a butterfly, her essence shining in a radius around her. She flutters to Geralt, more than grateful for this man in her life, and then the pull takes over. His pull, his influence. Letting go, she twirls around him, but he doesn't see her and that was all right. He’ll know in a moment. Over his shoulder, she came up behind him and the pull sucks her essence into the forehead of the unresponsive woman. The woman she knows all too well and is yet a stranger. The grown woman with ashen hair...

The crush of his arms around her, his hand at her nape holding her in place is the one place she longs to be... this close to him, protected and loved. The familiar scent of leather and steel, of pine and wood smoke surrounds her...

She opens her eyes and encircles her arms around his back, clutching him as fiercely as he holds...
With a gasp, Ciri’s eyes shot open.

A ray of morning sun sliced a line of gold from the window down onto her face. A myriad of tiny glittering particles danced in a tireless rhythm inside the beam. Squinting, the brightness pained her eyes, and groaning, she moved to flatten the pillow over her face. But she could not turn her head. Or move her arms.

Her heart slammed in her chest, her breathing became difficult as a sick horrific wave struck her. She was paralyzed and unable to move in the slightest fashion!

A jolt slammed her in the forehead and shot an electric bolt through her limbs and out through her fingertips and toes. What was that? What just happened?

Breathing in rapid gulps of air, she twitched her extremities. Exhaling deeply, relief flooded her. Everything functioned properly.

She’s alive… and able to move.

The memory of the dream began to fade and she scrambled to grasp it, to etch it in her mind and soul before it was lost forever like most of her dreams. For this one was special, she could tell. Geralt… he was in it. It had something to do with him. And her. But what was it exactly? She had a hard time recalling. It hovered on the precipice, but warmth swelled inside at the mere thought with a powerful sense of…

“You’re awake, dear. Good. How do you feel?”

Tingles shot down her back. Although grateful she wasn’t alone, she glanced about for the source of the unfamiliar alto voice. Ciri took in the chamber in one sweeping scan before settling upon a woman before the hearth. It took a moment for her eyes to clear and focus on her long dark waves that flowed over her slender back. The woman bent toward the grate and placed another log on the fire. Flames swelled and danced around casting shadows in the darkened room, although sunlight poured inside through the window over the bed.

“Wh-where am I?” Ciri croaked with a parched throat.

“Hush, child.” The stranger turned toward her, her long flowing skirts swirled with her movement when she padded across the room. The dimness cast her features in shadow and Ciri squinted to get a look at her, but the brightness from the window blinded and hid everything beyond its golden beams in dark, muted shadows.

Pushing herself up on an elbow, she wiped her nose. Strong and varied aromas of sweet flowers and poignant herbs assaulted her senses. The tickle made her sneeze. Many different varieties of herbs hanging upside down from the ceiling and around the mantle bespoke this lady was an herbalist, or possibly a healer.
The lady came over, bent near, and placed a palm to her forehead. “Much better. Shivering ceased and still no fever.”

Returning to the hearth, she used a wooden ladle and poured steaming liquid into a wide-mouthed earthen-colored crock. Gathering her skirts close about her legs, she sat down on a stool beside the bed. Holding out the mug, she said softly, “Here child, drink. You need to replenish your fluids. Careful, it is very hot.”

Ciri sat up, clutching the sheets, but did not accept the crock. Glancing down, her lambskin clothing had been replaced with a long plain linen night shift a couple sizes too large. “Who are you? And where am I?” She looked for Geralt, but clearly, he was not there. Only the herbalist, or healer, or whomever she was, and she were the only two in the modest sized house.

“You’re safe here. Please drink.”

Ciri’s breathing quickened. Although the woman appeared youthful, her glittering blue eyes were lined with kohl emphasizing their hue. Her fair skin, smooth and flawless was framed by dark wavy hair and red lips. She was beautiful. But despite her appearance, she was a stranger and she had no idea how she had gotten there and why. And where was Geralt? Or the poet, for that matter?

“Geralt!” Ciri cried flinging off the covers.

“Hush, child. There’s no need to be upset. You’re safe.”

“I don’t care! I don’t know you. Where’s Geralt? I want Geralt!” Despite an unusual weakness in her limbs, she scurried down the length of the bed and swung her legs to the floor. Upon standing, the room swayed in a circular pattern and she paused placing a hand to her forehead until the room righted itself again. The dizziness passed. Did that lady give her potions? Was she a witch? She must have drugged her! Geralt… she had to get to him!

It was then her eyes landed on her clothes drying out by the hearth. Her pants in particular arrested her gaze as well as her soul.

The woman’s gaze followed hers and when they rested on her trousers also, her lips tightened, her eyes narrowed.

Stumbling over to the hearth, Ciri picked up the pants that had no longer fit properly. The back seam had been completely torn apart leaving a gaping hole where her bottom would be.

Cheeks flaming, the memory of what caused her pants to end up like this came rushing back at once. The sailor with one eye… the dark alley… her pants torn and ruined in an attempt at something much more horrifying.

A full-bodied quake overtook her again and weakness stole her strength. The sensation of falling and not able to control it until she hit the wooden floor left her breathless. The woman was beside her in an instant, helping her to her feet and back to the bed.

“Geralt…” she whined breathless. “Please... take me to Geralt.”

A soft pillow beneath her head and covers tucked under her chin eased the shivers somewhat, but still she trembled.

The woman pressed the warm mug to her lips. Holding up her head, she encouraged her to drink it's contents. The taste was familiar and sweet, but it was mixed with something else she did not recognize. Her parched throat begged for hydration. She drank eagerly anyway.
The lady watched her with a worried expression.

Lying her head back down, Ciri needed to make sure the woman understood. “Please, mistress… I need Geralt—” Sleepiness weighed her eyelids. “I need him…”

“Sssh, dear. You are safe. Sleep now.”

Everything went black.

* * *

Dandelion, exhausted, treaded down the path toward the healer’s home situated on the outskirts of Yantra. The reins slack in his open gloved palm, even Pegasus’ gait was slothful.

After he had stumbled upon this house a few hours ago, he thanked his lucky stars the home belonged to a healer, and a rather attractive one at that. He grinned to himself. And single too, for it was obvious she lived alone.

She took Ciri in and administered her skills at once, no questions asked. Not able to watch and do nothing, he jumped back on his horse and headed back in the direction where he had left Geralt, just a little way, in case he could be of assistance. But Geralt was nowhere to be found and he did not want to leave Ciri alone too long with the woman, healer or not.

It grated on him that Geralt wasn’t forthright. He was hiding something, he was sure of it. Yeah, it annoyed him. And hurt a little to boot. How could a friend not trust him? But, on the other hand, perhaps trust was not the issue here for Geralt trusted Ciri in his care while he stayed behind and… well, dealt with whatever it was he wouldn't tell him. When he got here, he'd make him spill the beans or he'd regret it. He would compose a ballad about the Witcher's closed mouth syndrome and blasted sense of privacy.

Dandelion sighed. Reality was, he knew his friend well enough to know Geralt had good reason to do what he did. He always did. Methodical by nature, Geralt never wasted time on anything. Efficient and reliable, he always had a method behind the way he tackled anything. He would simply have to wait and trust him.

At the moment, the sun shone bright this morning, although he doubted it would last. The receding storm clouds darkened the sky to the east, but lighter clouds overhead still bode a mostly overcast day.

Tucked within a copse of tall thick oak trees, Chessa’s humble and weathered wood house showed signs of years of decay, and due to lack of direct sunlight, the roof was covered in green and brown moss. The sun’s rays clearly did not penetrate through the branches heavy with large leaves. Already, many of them had lost their dark green hue of summer and various shades of reds and browns of autumn now littered the ground around the house and the path that led to it. As if on cue, one such large multi-pointed leaf fluttered in the air not far ahead. It suddenly furled upwards, dancing in the current, tumbling over itself. Then caught up in the breeze, shot towards him. A well timed dodge saved his eyes from an unpleasant mishap at the risk of nearly tumbling out of his saddle.

When he reached the house, he took his time dismounting. The door groaned opened and Chessa stepped out on the porch, a hand clutching her skirts up enough to reveal high-heeled laced black leather boots that disappeared beneath the flowing folds of her dress. He grinned, despite the fatigue. The healer was a comely lass and not a green-faced, wart-nosed witch popular in children’s’ tales. Of that he was grateful.
After closing the door with care, she whirled on him, hands on hips and fire ignited in those stunning blue eyes.

Sadly, not the kind of fire he anticipated.

Was Ciri all right? A muscle clenched in his gut at the thought she might not be and that was the reason for Chessa’s unmistakable fury. But wouldn't she be morose instead of angry?

Dandelion paused, taken aback. “How are you this morning, my fine healeress?” He tried to sound confident and offered a rather lazy bow, but truth be told, he was too damned tired.

“Don’t you dare take a step closer, Poet, you hear?!”

Skirts fluttering, she approached and drawing herself up to her full height (which meant the top of her head barely reached his shoulders), her palm made contact with his cheek with a loud crack. A burning ache spread across the left side of his face.

“Had I known!” She spat.

Taking a step back, he rubbed his stinging cheek.

“Hey, I didn’t deserve that.” Although his pride stung just as much as his stubbled cheek, he refrained from raising his voice. It never bode well to yell at a lady. “Kindly inform me had you known what, exactly?”

Chessa's eyes spat fire anew. “You came to my home in the wee hours of the morning, frantic with worry, sopping wet, with a young girl in obvious need. She cried in her sleep for this Geralt fella. And when she awoke, she went into near hysterics because he wasn't here. I had to give her quite a bit of chamomile to induce sleep! But, she never cried out for you.”

“I can expl--”

Chessa’s pointed finger at his face silence him. “The back of her pants are ripped to shreds! They practically fell off her when I removed them. This girl is scared to death! I can only imagine what you did to her!”

Dandelion swallowed hard. “I can explain.”

“Oh, I bet. You'll start by explainin’ who this Geralt is and why she wants him so badly. Is he her father?”

“I… uh, no. But, he--”

“Where is he?”

“He’s on his way. Look, Chessa. I… Geralt and I are very grateful you helped us out. You'll see for yourself when he arrives--”

“You and another man traveling with a ten-year-old girl? No others? No women in your troop?”

“Eleven,” Dandelion sighed. “She's eleven. And ah… no. Just us three.” He barely uttered that last statement because suddenly Dandelion had an idea of what Geralt felt back there in the city. Now he was accused of perverted behavior much like Geralt was. This could be bad. Very bad.

Chessa gave him a solid expression of disgust. “You'll not get any closer to the girl, you hear? Sleep in the chicken coop or… anywhere but my house you understand?”
“Chessa, my lady ‘tis a simple misunderst--”

“Oh, don’t try to flatter me with your fine eloquent tongue, Master Poet. I know men like you. And until I know what exactly is going on here, you stay away from the girl. Understood? Don’t make me put a pox on ya.”

Blue eyes flaring, Chessa’s gaze swept over him and her stern expression softened. Just a bit. Was that the slightest hint of a smile of desire? Slight or not, he recognized that gaze when he saw one.

With a dramatic turn, she headed for the door with a grace unusual for someone like… a healer.

“It’s not what you think, Chessa!” Dandelion’s hands dropped to his sides. No, this was going all wrong! Why would she think he had anything to do with... Then a thought struck him. “Wait! Can I have my lute, please?” Dandelion called while the door closed.

A few moments later, the door opened again.

“No, no, NO!” Dandelion lurched toward the porch as the instrument came sailing through the air. Landing hard on his stomach on the wooden planks, he lost his breath, but pressed his forehead on his bicep, and breathed out a huge sigh. The lute lay across his outstretched forearms. His livelihood saved from destruction!

Rising from the porch with a groan, he straightened his jerkin and hugged his instrument to his chest as if it were the one thing he cared most about. Well, in a way, it was. He stood staring at the closed door of the healer’s home. It was quiet inside. Ciri seemed to be in good hands and Geralt would never forgive him if he learned he left Ciri unattended, so not having any other choice, he pulled a rocking chair closer to the window and sat down, resting his lute across his thighs. He stole a peek inside the window. Ciri lay peacefully asleep on the bed, the sun’s rays glittering off her messy ashen hair.

Relaxing, he sat back and propped up the lute against his chest and strummed it with well practiced ease. Grimacing, it was dreadfully out of tune. In the midst of the birds’ relaxing lullabies, he rocked on the chair lazily strumming, and tuned it up as if he had all the time in world. Then he found himself humming a favorite song, one he had written showcasing the romance between Geralt and his sorceress lover, Yennefer. The romance that had become legendary because of his ballad.

Stealing another glance in the window, he met Chessa’s intense gaze and they held the connection for a few fleeting moments until she turned away, her glorious long waves swirling with the movement.

Sighing, Dandelion continued making music and it drifted through the trees. He stifled a yawn.

When the hell was Geralt going to join up with them?

* * *

On its own accord, Geralt’s hand found his sword hilt. He tightened his fingers around it and breathed better with the reassurance of its cold solid steel. He let it go. The blade he could count on, it was a part of him, an extension of his arm. He let out a slow calming breath.
Ciri was safe with Dandelion. He would get her to the village and to the warmth she so desperately needed. As for the bastard following them, he would know the sharp bite of steel soon.

Keeping to the trees, he continued back toward the city. Eyes and ears sharpened, he studied the ground for the tiniest evidence, listened to every bird call, heard sticks breaking, leaves rustling, and the scurry of small forest dwellers through the brush. He breathed in the dank musty air for any scent of their pursuer.

This he understood, this was his element. Already, his stomach unclenched, muscles relaxed, even though his blood stirred.

The Witcher was on the hunt.

Chapter End Notes

Gamers will recognize the dream sequence. We live this scene through Geralt's perspective in the game, but I wanted to tell the most moving cinematic piece in The Witcher 3 Wild Hunt from Ciri's perspective.

In this "Vision," not only does she get a glimpse of her future self, but I wanted to dramatically show a thread I hope to carry throughout this work. The idea that by taking Ciri under his wing, Geralt, in truth, sets her free in many ways and in return (more visible later in the story) she sets Geralt free on an emotional level.

I hope you've enjoyed this chapter!
The Hunt

Chapter Summary

The Witcher is on the hunt hoping to confront his pursuer, but runs into the unexpected.

"Come on, dammit," Geralt grumbled with barely a whisper. He crouched near a bush refusing to
swipe away a pesky branch from poking him in the ear. If he adjusted it, it would make noise and worse if it snapped. Another stick poked him on the outside of his thigh. He ignored it.

Glaring through the dried up rustic-colored leaves and withering white myrtle blossoms not yet surrendered to the autumn breeze, he concentrated his attention again on the small camp several yards away. It was quiet in the dark wee hours of the morning, save for the snapping of a small fire by which three men lounged. The fog still hovered over the ground and its snakelike tendrils wove its way through the camp. At least at this point, the rain took a break.

Several tankards and large carafes of alcohol littered the campsite. These men were nothing more than common brigands. Dressed in patched and filthy leather jerkins, these grubby bastards hid tucked away near the main road to Novigrad waiting to ambush unsuspecting travelers. Filthy swines.

He tuned out the rhythmic snoring of one man lounging against a tree trunk and focused on the other two carrying out a hushed conversation on the far side of the fire.

“Cursed rain,” one brigand with a dark and full beard muttered. “Damned storm kept the travelers at bay for two blasted days.”

The second man, younger and clean-shaven, tossed a couple sticks in the struggling flames. “Knew we shoulda tried to inter… interse…”

“Intercept, idiot.”

“Right. We shoulda intercepted those two men a couple hours back.”

“Boy, you really are an idiot. Those two flew past like the devil were on their heels. How did you suppose we were to intercept ‘em, huh? Coulda tossed you out in front of them horses. That mighta slowed ‘em down enough.”

“Hey, no reason to be mean,” the younger man grumbled.

Eavesdropping for about three quarters of an hour, all they discussed were nagging wives, their common distaste of the growing presence of non-humans in the city, and listless lovers, all during frequent urination and passing gas.

Geralt shook his head and swiped the blasted branch aside.

“Enough of this.”

Emerging from the bush, he did not bother to creep across the road, but strode with purpose straight into the brigands’ camp. Making eye contact with both men, he nodded politely, taking care not to appear threatening, although he was in no mood offering good manners to these thugs.

“Need any help? Lost by chance? You’re not far from the city.”

“Help?” The younger man looked at him with a quirked eyebrow. “What you think we need help with? And we ‘ain’t lost neither. No one gone by to--”

“Kind of you to offer, stranger,” the older man interrupted shooting his companion a fierce glare that quieted him. “But, ah, no thanks.”

“You guys alone out here?”
Bearded man made a show of glancing around. “Looks that way.”

“Haven't seen anyone else snooping around here, have you?”

Silence. Two pairs of eyes narrowed sizing him up. Perhaps that question came a bit too soon.

“Just who the fuck are you?”

Crouching down before the fire, Geralt extended his hands near the flames, warming them. He offered a slight easy smile. “Just a traveler passing through—”

“Yeah, and I'm the Queen of Cintra,” the young man drawled. Bearded man gave him an off-color look.

Peering at the younger bloke through narrowed lids, Geralt refrained from commenting. Although that remark was nothing more than pure coincidence, however, he kept up his guard.

The older man tossed a stick at the young man. “Have respect, man. Gods rest her soul.” He returned his gaze to Geralt. “Look, stranger. Don't know what ya want or who ya really are, but by the look of ya, with your fine black armor and shiny hardware on your back, you are not ‘just passing through.’” He reached for a sword propped nearby on a tree stump. His fingers closed around the hilt. “Me thinks you're here deliberately. If you are out to arrest us—”

“Relax, I'm not here for you.”

The older man eyed him a minute longer before slowly withdrawing his fingers from the hilt, not quite convinced. He resumed his former casual slouch. “Good choice. Or we'd have to defend ourselves, you understand.”

“Understood. But you don't have anything to fear from me unless you make the first move. You never answered my question. Seen anyone else around here?”

The older man tossed a small branch onto the smoking flames. “Looking for someone? Well, good luck. Ghost town here thanks to the storm.”

He changed tactics. “Crying shame about the Queen of Cintra.”

“Crying shame,” bearded man shook his head. “The Lioness of Cintra will no longer hold up the north. And her poor Lion Cub. An even greater tragedy.”

Geralt caught his breath and released it slow and steady, keeping his outward show casual and indifferent. Come on... continue. What about Ciri?

The young man shook his head, “Queen’s dead, Pavetta’s dead, and her daughter, what's her name? Sereena, Serna?”

Bearded man tossed a clump of grass at the young man. “Cirilla, dolt!”

Young man dodged the clump of flying earth, but the soil sprayed over him. He wiped it off and smeared dirt over his already grubby jerkin. “Right, Cirilla. Young girl. Too bad.”

“She's disappeared. No one has seen her, apparently, but I think she's dead.”

“It's likely,” Geralt dared, keeping his tone straight and casual. “The odds are against her. A young girl alone with nowhere to go, no one to protect her, would not last long.”
“Very true. Care for a drink, friend?” Bearded man offered a dark glass bottle with a long neck.

“Kind of you, but I best be on my way.” Geralt stood, hesitating, daring one more question. "Say she disappeared. Anyone looking for her, you think?"

"Ah, who knows,” bearded man waved a hand. “There's talk that a Nilfgaardian captured her and brought her safely out of the falling city at the time of the attack. But haven't heard anything more."

Geralt nodded in thought keeping his expression steady.

Now he was sure these men were not pursuing him, but… he rubbed burning eyes. That meant he had followed the wrong trail, or there was nothing to follow in the first place. These men were not trackers or hunters, but lazy drunkards looking to make an easy profit at the expense of unsuspecting travelers. Someone was out there, but he couldn't take the time to backtrack or move forward in search of another trail. It would take too long and already he had been gone longer than he should have.

Turning on his heel, he glanced back at the thugs and grinned keeping a light air. “If a lady is less than enthusiastic, clearly, you're doing something wrong.”

Bearded man glanced up at him and scowled. Then he guffawed loudly, his laughter echoed through the trees. He took a long swig from a tankard. “Suppose you think you're the expert at pleasing the ladies, huh?” he chuckled again.

Geralt grinned. "Know a thing or two."

The younger man snickered. “Doubt it. Just look at him. All pale, hair white like my grandpa. And that ugly scar splitting his eye…” He pointed at his companion. “Bet he scares away the ladies.”

Bearded man grimaced in a jesting manner. "Come on, admit it, stranger. Have a hard time gettin' in between shapely legs, do ya?"

Geralt shook his head, but did not comment. To think he had had sex for more years than these jerks have been alive, would blow their minds.

Young man laughed harder. "Bet his right hand gets more action!"

The two roared and drowned themselves in vodka, by the smell of it.

Their mocking tones did not ruffle him. Not reacting to often rude and insulting comments was a strength he prided himself on. Instead, he chuckled, letting them have the upper hand. "Well, what man's hand isn't a faithful companion? You know," he added as if he were letting them in on a secret, "women are moved by scars. And I've got plenty.” He winked knowingly.

The men did not react. In fact, they did not pay any attention to him. Really, was his comment that bad? Men banter all the time...

Their glee had vanished, swallowed up in an unexpected tense moment. Faces pale, they gasped for breath as if all the air had disappeared from some unexplained abnormality. It was then the unnatural stillness settled around them. No, it was not his comment. The stillness was just that: unnatural. It sucked the air from the atmosphere as if a magical portal was about to appear in a swirling vortex before them. Yennefer opened portals frequently and he experienced the sensation often enough to recognize it, but no portal opened here, at least not one within a wide radius of this location.
Their faces paled even more as they struggled to breathe. The feeling only lasted a moment more and they relaxed, relieved, shaking their heads and taking deep breaths.

“What was that?” bearded man breathed. “Did you feel that?”

White puffs of air escaped Geralt's nostrils that hadn't before. It was cool and damp out, but not cold enough to see one’s breath. Exhaling slowly from his mouth, a billowing white cloud evaporated shortly after it had escaped his lips. But even more puzzling, a chill sharp as a blade cut across his forehead then penetrated his bones with a deep excruciating ache. A shiver wracked his frame that rattled his teeth. The frigid cold was more intense than midwinter in the Blue Mountains. Was that even possible? What caused such a drastic change in temperature?

In answer, a roar in the distance, at first a low rumble from behind, swelled in intensity. Thunder again? But something about this was different, unusual. It was continuous, unlike a storm, yet more like a large herd of wild game trampling through the fields.

He glanced back at the brigands. Color had returned to their complexions and no longer labored to breathe. The clean-shaven thug rubbed his arms and leaned in closer to the fire. Then he glanced up at the sky and his eyes rounded, an expression of disbelief and fear evident on his face. Pointing up, the bearded man’s gaze followed.

The pounding thunder of many hooves, much louder now, emanated from the sky somehow. Impossible. He must not be hearing correctly.

A bluish-white glow lit up the night. The moon had been obscured by storm clouds, so where was that light coming from?

“By the gods!” Bearded man staggered to his feet, never taking his eyes from the sky. “No…. HIDE! Get out of sight, NOW!”

Both men scrambled from the mucky ground and took off for the cover of the nearest trees, slipping and kicking up mud in haste.

Their snoring companion snorted and came to. Glancing around sleepily, he rubbed an eye. “Wha--what’s goin’ on?” he mumbled.

“Get out of sight!” Geralt barked, kicking dirt and mud over the flames smothering the pathetic campfire in an instant. A soft hiss and smoke billowed up from the logs.

Crouched in the shadows of the treeline, Geralt waited and watched, his fingers twitching for his blade, but he held off a moment longer. Peering up at the sky, he couldn't believe his eyes. What the hell?!

A cavalcade of spectral warriors flew toward them overhead, a trail of ice and snow swirled behind along with black tattered banners rippling in the wind. Amidst the fog, ice, like hailstones, plummeted to the ground. A few nailed him on the head. The roar swelled to deafening decibels, the ghostly army vanished and reappeared between the grey mists advocating their ghastly natures.

Fixing his gaze above, he studied them, knowing he had only a few moments to gain any information on this phenomenon before they passed from sight.

Warriors in black armor rode upon massive dark skeletal steeds. Their armor, both ancient and expertly crafted, was layered with frost. But, astonishingly, they were semi-transparent! The sky was visible through them.
Wraiths? None like he had ever seen.

Each warrior wore hideous masks, some resembled the human skull, that hid any signs of their likeness. Their sheer size struck Geralt. Even from this distance, these warriors were huge, much larger than the males of any race here in the northern kingdoms. Even the horses were immense, swift and strong.

For centuries Witchers had catalogued all the different species of creatures and monsters known in this world trapped here by the Conjunction of the Spheres. But what he witnessed now was not classified in brother Aldabert’s Bestiary. Yet, somewhere in the deep recesses of his memory, an old legend came to mind. But now was not the time to dwell on it.

Drowsy man howled at the top of his lungs and Geralt’s gaze snapped back to him astounded he hadn’t sought shelter. The brigand’s eyes fixed on the fields across the way and struggled to his feet as fast as he could.

Following the man’s anxious and intense gaze, Geralt pushed aside a few branches for a clearer view. Movement in the fields caught his attention. The tall grass and bushes swayed to the ground in a single path as if some giant invisible foot trampled them. Small trees even toppled one in front of the other. Whatever it was, moved swiftly and headed in the direction of the camp.

What have we here?

With a metallic hiss, Geralt unsheathed his silver sword. Focusing his gaze and tightening his grip on the hilt, he waited for what would emerge.

He didn’t wait long. A huge creature burst forth from the tall grass and hurtled towards them closing the gap between in a few heartbeats.

The brigand found his footing and took several hurried steps backwards, his face as white as the snow trailing behind the spectral beings. Howling, he turned and dashed for the trees.

By the gods, it was a demon on four legs! On closer inspection, it was no demon, but a ghostly hound of some sort with a dark spectral look about it and frost iced its hide. But it was no hound he had ever seen before. Its back legs bore a strong parallel to long lean thighs and calves of human males. Its front legs also resembled humanoid arms. Could it be that magic twisted humans into these... creatures? But aside of their appendages, human likeness ended. Its back boasted spiked ridges that toothed across from one side to the other like an ancient creature found only in long forgotten archaic tomes. The face bore no snout, but its teeth appeared deadly sharp.

The creature’s speed was unbelievable for its size. It barreled towards them just nearing the line of trees at the entrance to the camp, kicking up muddy tufts of grassy ground. It was upon him in a matter of seconds. Another bone chilling wave of mind-numbing cold permeated the area.

Jaws gaping revealed short, but razor-sharp teeth. It sniffed him and lunged.

With a sheer instinctual and automatic reaction, Geralt splayed his hand toward the damp ground. The Sign shot from his palm and the magical force field exploded around him in a shock wave of energy with such force it shook the trees, spattered muck in all directions, and derailed the hound from its path. It skidded backwards several yards. However, it recovered quickly and regained its footing. Shaking its head, it sprinted towards him again.

Geralt dove and rolled out of its path, the tip of his blade sliced its backside. A high-pitched metallic scrape pierced his ears. Damn, the hound was armored! Naturally or not, he couldn't quite
tell and that changed his strategy.

A deep penetrating cold emanated from the beast! Was it made entirely of ice? Maybe that was what his blade scraped against...

Positioning himself with bent knees, in a fighting stance, he held his blade in a defensive diagonal parry bracing for the next contact. Goose flesh ran a race down his arms and legs and he stifled the urge to shiver.

The otherworldly foe turned toward him and bared its impressive set of fangs. Saliva dripped from their pointy edges, the stench of its breath as poignant as the chill.

Flexing his hand, he cast another Sign and a magically-charged shield glowed orange around him. The immediate protection from the cold was a relief and slowly, Geralt backed away, putting more space between them.

The hound hunkered down on its haunches, staring at him, ready to pounce. Geralt dug his heels into the soggy ground, lowered and widened his stance, preparing for impact. The hound leaped and collided with the shield. A sizzling crash jarred it backwards.

The impact jolted him even guarded by the magical energy. He breathed out heavily as the shield crackled and dissipated. The power used to strengthen it drained it, shortening the length of its use.

This was a formidable creature. He had not seen everything it could do, he was sure, but did not want to find out. Where did it come from? Was it even a natural beast or one created by magic?

Again, the hound recovered quickly and jumped him. Geralt sprang out of way, but not far enough that he couldn’t reach it with his blade. He thrust at it, but the hound was ready and lurched at him. He jerked his sword up in a frantic defensive parry, but its brute force flung him backwards. He landed hard on his back smacking the back of his head on the ground shooting hammering jolts of pain through his skull. Gasping, he croaked out a groan, his breath gone.

Regaining his wits, he clenched his hand and about panicked. His palm was empty. Where was his sword?! The impact had forced the blade from his grasp.

The hound approached and stood over him, powerful legs on either side of his shoulders. Its huge body blocked everything from view. Its leg muscles, thick and sculpted, rippled in controlled strength. The creature expanded its chest, proving its superior size and strength. The frigid cold, as deep as the grave, brought more pain than a knife wound. The cold alone could kill.

Staring at him, it growled low in its throat. Bared fangs closed in on him not more than a hand-span away and globs of saliva slobbered onto his nose and chin. Grimacing, Geralt dared not move. The drool stank of dead fish and ran a cold trail down his neck. He could not stifle the shiver that overtook his frame this time.

Not daring to breathe, Geralt froze. Why did it not attempt to finish him off? Was the beast gloating? Was it that intelligent? It thinks it had the upper hand, but he still had a few arsenals up his sleeve. He wasn't ready to die now at the mercy of this thing.

His fingers crawled along the soaked ground searching for the cold hard steel of the sword's hilt, but it was too far out of reach. Twisting the fingers of his other hand into the form of a Sign, he was ready, but then a deep brass horn blared through the night.

The hound relaxed its fighting stance and looked to the horizon and back down at him again as if it was torn as to what to do.
So the horn summoned it... Would it finish him off, or do as it was commanded?

Making eye contact once again, it growled at him. Geralt held his breath, his fingers ready. Then it leaped over him, taking off for the treeline toward the city, spraying mud and ice over every inch of him.

At last he let out the breath he held. He rolled onto his stomach and rose to rest on one knee and retrieved his sword.

Several yards beyond the camp, the dark shape of a man bolted from the trees, scurrying away in a frenzy.

“NO!” Geralt hollered, and spat away the slimy dribble. “Stay in the trees!”

But the thug, the man who had slept through his conversation with Bearded man and the younger man, was too panicked to pay attention and did not listen. Within seconds, horrifying screeching and howling tore through the night as the beast gripped the man in its gaping sharp-toothed maw and disappeared further into the darkness.

“Shit!” Geralt cursed.

“What the--?” The other two men emerged from the trees looking to him before they came out in the open.

“It’s all right.” Geralt waved them out and wiped the slobber from his face and neck. “They’re gone. For now.” The grave-like chill also dissipated.

"Oh, Walt, you idiot! You've gone and got yourself killed," bearded man lamented gazing in the direction the hound had carried his companion.

Younger man approached Geralt, eyes wide and intense. “By the gods! What was that… thing?!”

Geralt glanced at the city skyline. “Clearly, the creature belonged to those wraith-like warriors.”

Young man stepped toward him, then abruptly halted, a look of disgust on his face. "Ugh, man, you reek!"

If only he had a gold crown every time he heard that comment. Witchering was dirty, smelly work. "Thanks for your concern. I'm all right."

His gaze found the city's skyline again. The roaring grew distant when the ghostly cavalcade breached the city. He sucked in a breath at the realization. Their destination was Novigrad! All those unsuspecting people! What could they want? To overtake the north’s largest and richest population? What then, the world?

He sheathed his blade and whistled for Roach. She cantered up to him from her hiding spot in the trees and snorted clouds of steam from her nostrils. Gripping the reins, he hauled himself up into the saddle.

Bearded man splayed his palms open before the horse, halting her. “Wait, Master. Where are you off in such a rush? Certainly not Novigrad!”

Although faint, piercing screams and hollers of city folk drifted across the valley. It sent shivers down his back. Thinking what the citizens faced now, he thought of Ciri. She needed him. He must get back to her... but… The city needed him too!
“All those people!” he breathed.

Bearded man grasped Roach’s bridle. “There’s nothing you can do to help, Master Witcher. Yes, I realize now who you are. No other man could have withstood a hound of the Wild Hunt like you did. Witcher or no, one man cannot save a city from this army.”

The Wild Hunt…. Vaguely sounded familiar.

"They will return again on the next full moon."

Return? Next full moon…? They made frequent visits?

Geralt heaved a sigh. Bearded man was right, he couldn’t possibly save a city by himself let alone against an army of spectral warriors. The legend… an ancient elven legend. What could they possibly want?

Roach danced nervously in place and Geralt gripped the reins taught and smoothed his palm down her neck soothing her as far as he could reach.

The distant cries faded to an eerie silence. The roaring thunder of many hooves quieted. The unnatural chill dissipated. All was still. Even the swirling mists ceased their otherworldly pulsations and hovered breathless over the soggy land as if waiting with baited breath for what might happen next.

The strange army had left. Now, there really was nothing he could do.

Younger man still stared at him with wide intense eyes. “What… what the hell are you…?”

“What am I?” Geralt chuckled without humor. “A ghostly army flies by and you ask me what I am?” he shook his head.

Bearded man did not even bother to reprimand younger dolt. “Witcher. Don’t know what we woulda done had you not been here.”

“Sorry about your comrade.”

Bearded man sighed heavily. “He was a decent man, but his own foolishness got him killed.”

“Make sure yours doesn’t.”

Geralt gazed towards the eastern horizon and the faintest line of gray low in the sky. He had better return to Ciri and Dandelion. He shook his head.

“Heed my advice,” he offered. “Instead of taking advantage of innocent travelers, find real work. You’ll respect yourselves more earning an honest living. Otherwise, you never know, a contract may be posted to bring you to justice and I… well, need the coin.”

Bearded man swallowed, paling even more, and nodded.

Geralt tugged the reins turning Roach north. She was ready to spring forward, but he held her back a moment longer. “Best wait until daylight before you head back to the city. Won’t be long.”

The man nodded. “Thank you, Master.”

As for who was hunting him, would have to wait. But he knew he was there trailing him expertly, almost as adeptly as Witchers hunt their contracts. He’d find him. At the right time, he’d stop him.
Grinding his teeth, he spurred Roach and flew like the ghostly visitors toward Yantra and Ciri, sick at the thought he had turned his back on an entire city.
Ready for a different kind of action? I think Geralt is :).  

Geralt meets up with Dandelion and Ciri at (original character) Chessa's homestead after his surprise encounter with the hound of the Wild Hunt. We get a glimpse into his heart and soul in recalling an intimate night with his lover of yore, Yennefer of Vengerberg.

**Content WARNING! This chapter contains sexual material**

Fan art by King of Shadows26

CHAPTER TEN
Fingers rake over his scalp like one caresses a purring kitten, leisurely and repeatedly, and he, eager as a kitten, responds in kind. The pleasurable tinges spike down the nape of his neck fairly eliciting a purr. If only he can. Instead, he quivers with the pleasure. Closing his eyes and sighing out a low moan, he kisses the crevice of her palm, then nudges it with his forehead for more. She obliges, grinning warmly.

The familiar scent of lilac and gooseberries dominates his senses, sends him reeling with memories of her in similar fashion sprawled out on a plush white animal hide before the fire, naked... or along the back of the neck of the life-sized stuffed unicorn where she prefers to make love. Thankfully this time, she gave him a break from the animal and accommodated him in front of the large stone fireplace.

A smooth white sheet drapes randomly over her breasts outlining their alluring rounded curves, and, ahhh… their hardened peaks poking through stirs him. Grasping a petite foot, he presses his lips in the dip just below her ankle bone. Slowly, sensually, he slides his hand up over the curvature of her calve, up and over the sharp incline of her kneecap, and continues up her slender thigh. A soft giggle escapes her lips and gooseflesh bumps up her leg before he reaches her hip. Her skin, silky smooth heightens his ardour.

Peppering kisses along the juncture of her inner thighs, he inhales her intoxicating scent like one salivating over the aroma of a favorite home-cooked meal. It always has an immediate effect on him. Uniquely hers, it stirs in him emotions ranging from comfort to exhilaration, but right now, a soothing serene mood descends upon him anchoring his excitement.

Soft tufts of hair tickles his nose. Hungering for her again, he nuzzles her, his growl is muffled against her skin. Mimicking the same slow and meaningful caress of her leg, he laps her slick core from bottom to tip, drawing out the motion, savoring her musky honey. She quivers again, merely a tremor after her explosive climax a few moments ago, and gasps a sharp intake of breath. Again, he tastes her with the same relish, this time giving attention to her most sensitive and pleasurable spot. A soft content purr follows and her fingertips dig into his scalp.

He has already taken her tonight and the need to have her again so soon after... she'll think him an insatiable beast and turn him away, for sure. But, reality is, she never turns him away. He loves that about her.

Stretching out beside her on the pelt, her taste lingers on his tongue. Closing his eyes, he licks his lips and enjoys the distinct flavor.

She rolls into him, the points of her breasts brush against his side. In a purposefully seductive manner, she lifts a slender leg slow and steady, making a show of draping it over his thigh. Exhaling, he keeps breathing, especially when her knee rubs the side of his arousal. Shifting, she repositions her leg, then slides the bottom of her foot along the underside of his shaft. He sucks in a short breath. She utters a wicked chuckle.

A fire crackling in the large stone hearth is dying down. The flames dance and spit casting dark shadows across the main living space of her home. Through a pair of French-style doors open to a patio surrounded by both flower and herb gardens, the distant hooting of an owl drifts through. The call is soothing and they both listen for a while, holding each other, until laughter from the streets of Vengerberg swell overpowering the nightbird. The evening is getting on, but a few hearty souls still meander about.
Glistening violet eyes, though usually cold and imperial, pulses with a heated swirling warmth and he is lost in those turbulent depths once again. He smiles at her, fulfilled, and... peaceful. He lets out a deep sigh. It is not often he is relaxed enough to enjoy feeling content like this. Truth is, he is never content. Always longing for more, lusting for more... and when they part ways, like they do so often, he'll still hunger for her. Then he sets out on The Path always searching, forever hunting... ever needing more and never finding...

Finding what?

Fluffing long raven locks, she sighs, placing a kiss on his shoulder. With an arm around her, he hugs her tight in an embrace that molds her petite form to his. The warmth of the fire combined with her nearness, heats him more.

“What is it, darling?”

“Hmmm? Nothing.”

She leans up on an elbow and looks him in the eye. “You know as well as I, dear, that is a lie. Perhaps I should rephrase my question. What is it you are forever seeking?”

Long and hard, he peers into her eyes, their swirling depths remind him of a storm over the ocean. Reading his mind is her custom, whether he likes it or not. He really ought to learn there is no keeping secrets from her.

“If I knew, Yen, I’d tell you. But maybe you can enlighten me.”

“I can enlighten you on many things.” A fingertip, smooth and gentle, trails down his cheek to rest on his bottom lip. He kissed it.

Rolling on top of him, her soft breasts crush against his hard chest, her locks fall in a curtain about his head. Lilac and gooseberries surround him, the scent poignant and delicious. His head spins, his aching manhood demanding release again.

She captures his lips in a fierce kiss, then ends it sweetly, caressing his cheek. “No one pleases me like you do, darling.”

He swells at her praise. Not one to compliment easily for anyone or anything, but when she does, it is sincere and well deserved. It is no small feat to earn her acclamation and respect. But--

“What sets you apart?” she voices his question aloud.

“You’d rather I not speak? Don’t like the sound of my voice? Is that why you read my mind all the time?”

“Don’t be daft. You have an incredibly sexy voice, love. So deep and raspy... sets me on fire. But back on topic. You take your time,” she whispered with enthusiasm, her hand reaching down between her legs and wrapping her fingers around his shaft.

He groaned.

Squeezing and stroking him in an agonizingly slow rhythm robs him of the ability to breathe normally. Groaning, he grasps her head, his fingers entangles in her curls. With his eyes, he pleads an end to the delicious torment.

Instead, with a controlled roll of her hips, she grinds her groin on his. He lets out a hiss.
“You’re in no hurry at all. When we make love, Geralt, time bows to you. You are time’s master and it must obey. I lose all sense of time and place. Do you realize what a rare and special gift that is?”

He smiles secretly. He has especially pleased her tonight.

Straightening up, the sheet falls away and she continues the merciless and arousing rotation. Her breasts and every inch of her glistens in the glow of the fire. Palms itching, he cups each perfect globe, letting his hands wander all over her pinkish skin. They are the most perfect breasts in the world. Not bulky and heavy, but round and delicate. Alluringly pert, they are just right. He slides his palms down her flat belly, dips a thumb in her navel, and rests his hands on her rounded hips.

Her grinding grew faster and more demanding. “Men are in a hurry and within minutes…” she stops suddenly, “it’s over,” she sighs dramatically.

Breathless, he throbs beneath her. Did he just whimper?

“But you, my love…” arching her back, she lifts her impressive mane of silky curls with both hands. He devours her femininity on display for his eyes only. Sitting up, he encircles her in his arms and takes a hardened nipple between his velvety lips. The familiar burn below becomes unbearable.

With a gasp, she lets her tresses cascade over her shoulders, grabs his head, and crushes his face to her breasts. “You, my love, worship me all night long.”

He can say nothing but utter a guttural grunt.

With surprising force, she shoves him back down against the pelt. He went without resistance. Trailing a flaming path down the chiseled planes of his chest and then over his flat belly, her fingertips tease the soft hairs below his navel. Hot tingling chills tightens his groin in painful pulsating throbs. He lifts his hips into her aching for release.

In one quick and smooth motion, he graps her by the hips and flips her onto her back. Outstretching her arms above her head, they entangle in the pillows. Long raven locks fan out in drastic contrast on the white animal hide.

Yeah, he worships her. But who can blame him?

Losing all perception of time and place always happens to him too whenever they are together. With her, he prefers to take his time, savor all the delicious heartstopping pleasure and draw it out as long as possible. Not just for his, but for her enjoyment as well. Every second he craves her. When it comes to her, he is greedy that way. He wants all of her.

He smothers the valley between her breasts with tiny heated kisses. “Can’t get enough of you,” he breathes.

He is ever searching for that which he never had.

Scooching down, he tastes her navel, and can’t resist filling the crevice with the tip of his tongue before kissing the side of a hip. Massaging her small round bottom, she purrs with his touch. Sighing, she arches her back in a distinctly feline stretch and opens her legs for him. It is all the invitation he needs.

Drawing in a ragged breath, he rolls her onto her belly and sinks into slick warmth losing himself in a sea of shapely legs, silky curls, the titillating scent of lilac and gooseberries, and a bottom as
delicious as her breasts.

No other sensation brings him greater pleasure than being enveloped in her. Deep. It is like coming home after being gone for a long... terribly long time. It is reconnecting with the remembered yesteryears, the familiar smells and sights of a childhood long gone, but knowing that here, in this place with this enchanting woman, is forever his and no one can take it away from him.

Despite the pain of their tumultuous relationship, she fascinates him. Excites him with her wit, charm, intelligence, strength of character, and of course, her rare and unique beauty intoxicates him, makes him forget who he is. This is why he takes his time. Yes, he worships her and admits it without shame, because she will have him, lets him have her. Why a powerful sorceress can be passionate with him, a simple Witcher who does the dirty work none other can, is beyond his understanding. He tries not to think about it, just accepts the fact she wants him as much as he hungers for her, no, burns for her, and needs these rare moments to last a lifetime even though the reality of that dream is nothing more than a fantasy.

Things have been going well lately, which means anytime now, their world will explode in a windstorm of pain and rage like it usually does. He knows better to think that is not coming around the corner.

But for now, he forces that thought away and focuses on this moment. His large hands caress the curvature of her hips, then sliding up her thin waist, he rocks into her harder, faster. Please, he breathes deep in his soul. Don't let this night end...

Her breaths become sighs, then moans, as do his. Yen... I need you.

"You have me, darling," she pants.

He shakes his head. No, you don't understand... I don't understand... my need is so deep...

Peeking over her shoulder, glittering eyes shine sea blue with desire. She shoots him a sharp knowing glare before closing them and succumbing to the pleasure again. "Am I not enough for you, love?"

He barely hears her broken whisper, but his soul does. If he can be with her permanently, he will not desire other women. For no other woman matters. Those others are merely temporary replacements. "You are," he grinds out in a hoarse voice. But he needs... something more. Something possibly no one is able to fulfill.

She smiles amidst a moan. Arching her back, her hand reaches behind her head searching for him. Leaning towards it, her fingers scrape over his scalp scratching his head as if she were petting a kitten. He nudged her hand for more, purring silently in his own way.

Stretching out over her small body, he brushes aside tresses dark as night exposing her creamy pale neck. She turns glancing over her shoulder, lips parted. Clutching her chin, he holds her prisoner and captures her ruby lips in a sensuously long kiss. She responds in kind, the tenderness she shows so rarely racks him to the deepest reaches of his soul.

Her climax shatters her in waves of powerful spasms that thrusts him along on the ride. Breathless, he holds her through the wild quaking while she vocalizes her pleasure. Every muscle in her body convulses, inside and out.

Then suddenly, he explodes, quaking just as powerfully, his release shaking him to the center of his
being. Leaning over her back, he clutches her trembling form to his chest and they shake together, as one, letting the tingling heat coarse through their joined bodies.

“Yen…” he hums burying his face in her fragrant curls.

* * *

The moment he opened his eyes, the magic of the memory vanished on sight of the wooden rafters above. His ears rang with the sound of his own moans. He heaved a sigh, the hollowness inside paralyzing after the peacefulness experienced with the dream. Yennefer was gone, her cozy plush home in Vengerberg… gone, the idea of them… nothing but a memory. He was alone, just as he had anticipated that night. It did not take long after what was their last night together before they called it quits, for who knew how long, if ever they would come together again. Their parting was bitter, with harsh words meant to hurt - and hers still stung.

Hues of ruby red rays of the setting sun beamed in through the only window in the loft setting the upper level of the small barn on fire with its glow. Piles of hay along the outer wall insulated the area keeping it warm from the cool autumn nights. Another pelt over in the corner must be where Dandelion slept. A scratched up square wood table sat in the corner next to the railing with a single lit pillar, his medallion, daggers, and armor strewn about it. The saddlebags were tossed on the floor near the front table legs. Both swords laid propped up against the railing at the loft’s edge.

Rubbing his eyes, he rolled over on his stomach and rested his head on a forearm. The plush animal hide that served as a bed soft and soothing against his skin. Birds finished their songs and quieted for the night. Stillness, peacefulness all around.

Damn, the dream was so real… And his physical reaction was real. Excruciatingly real. His heart rate strong and rapid slowed to a more normal pace, but his desire, however, not so much. The familiar burning ache would be the death of him.

Recalling now where he was, he heaved a sigh full of regret and longing. He might as well face it. Chances were he’d blown any chance for a future with Yen. At least a permanent one. For the rest of his life, he’d be alone. He had always known that, always… feared it. After nearly a century, he should be used to it by now. Doubt he’d ever love anyone with the same passion as Yen, and the thought he could never vocalize bubbled up from within again. With a quick shake of his head, he shook off the thought, stuffing it back down far enough to never surface again.

A horse whinnied softly below. Roach. He chuckled to himself and raked fingers through his long tousled hair. He always had Roach. She was his most faithful companion and she reminded him she was there.

But besides his mare, he welcomed being alone for the moment. Shoving aside the blanket, he laid for a moment longer, completely nude. It was wonderful. The only times he slept like this was at Kaer Morhen or… Yen’s house, and any place safe from the dangers of the road. He closed his eyes and listened to the birds outside, until his stomach rumbled.

A creak sounded, and a click of a boot heel, followed by a clink. Instinct kicked in. Instead of covering his bare backside, he rolled over and reached for his blade. His fingers wrapped around the hilt before common sense dawned on him. Of course he did not need a weapon. This was a safe place, but old habits die hard.

“I… I’ve startled you. Forgive me.” Chessa stood by the wall near the ladder, her slate-blue skirts hiked up in one hand revealing high-heeled black laced-up leather boots and in her other hand, a small round container and a handkerchief concealing… something. Maybe food? Her blue-eyed
gaze raked over him before her cheeks flamed red.

The ache just became more demanding. He glanced away before she detected something more than curiosity in his eyes. Letting go of the sword, it rattled against the railing, and he sat back tossing the blanket over his lap not embarrassed by his nakedness or the arousal so evident it was difficult to hide. He did it more for her sake than his. Modesty never suited him.

“Don’t worry about it.”

She took a step closer and appeared breathless. “Came to check on you. You’ve slept all day… But then, you needed it, apparently.”

He nodded. Did he ever. “Thank you. For taking care of Cir… Serena and letting us stay here for a day or so. I’m grateful.”

She came closer stepping into the rays of the setting sun. The beams highlighted her dark hair a deep auburn and it glistened in the light. It also lit her blue eyes from within and its rich hue dazzled him. He caught his breath.

Crouching down beside the pelt, she laid the handkerchief on the edge of the hide. The low neckline of her bodice revealed the promise hidden beneath. He averted his gaze, reluctantly.

“It’s nothing much, but… I wasn’t sure if you were awake yet. Just some bread and cheese. A proper meal awaits whenever you come down.”

“I’ll pay for your hospitality and inconvenience. It was unexpected and you’ve been generous.”

She waved a hand in dismissal. “I’m not worried about coin.”

He eyed her for a moment. How couldn't she be? She was supporting herself here, and though her homestead was decent enough, she certainly did not appear that well off.

“Many cannot pay with coin, so they reciprocate in other ways. That's how this barn got built, and an addition added to my house. And others pay with chickens. Some pay with…” Cheeks pink, she smiled, although did not complete her sentence.

“With what?” he breathed leaning closer. She smelled of a conglomerate of flowers and herbs, but the sweet exotic verbena was the most distinct scent. He smiled. Verbena always reminded him of Essi Daven, or Little Eye as Dandelion had called her.

“Folks repay me in whatever manner they are able.”

“I can pay with coin.” His voice sounded lower and raspier than normal. He cleared his throat.

She frowned ever so slightly.

“Oh, I almost forgot.” Her outstretched hand opened revealing a small round container in her palm. “For you.”

He picked it up. Her fingertips grazed the sensitive underside of his wrist and the sensation tingled down his arm. Her deep blue eyes glinted with an inner fire.

“What is it?” He inspected it then twisted off the lid. A strong pleasant aroma caught his nose. Coconut oil. And… aloe. He recognized it immediately. “A soothing topical ointment.” How’d she know?
Eyes bright in the gathering darkness, she nodded. Her flaming hair darkened before his eyes as the rays lowered below the windowsill. “You know what you smell. It’s for the chafing.”

He grinned and chuckled. “I’d ask how you knew, but then again, you’re a healer. It’s what you do.”

She smiled sweetly. The loft became brighter for it. “Just assumed, really… Your armor is all leather and you arrived pretty soaked to the bone. Just a hunch.”

He laughed. “Yeah, well… your hunch was correct.” He held up the container. “This will get used up pretty quickly.”

“And I’ll have more when you need it.”

Leaning in closer, she frowned slightly, her gaze fixed on his chest. “So many scars… You must be a dangerous man.”

“Have a dangerous occupation.” He watched her watching him. Intently. His breathing became more rapid and shallow.

Scanning over his chest again, her gaze finally met his. “Are there any that… need attention?”

Shaking his head, he immediately regretted it. That could have been an opening… an invitation, really. Damn, what was he thinking? Just because she was attractive and he was already aroused didn’t mean she’d jump in the sack with him. Envisioning himself taking a leap in the frigid pond, he forced the thought as far away as possible. Cold. Pond. Cool himself off or he’d have to…

“Why is a young girl traveling with a dangerous man and a flamboyant troubadour?”

Her total change of topic threw him off and no-nonsense tone cooled him as if he had just jumped in the water.

Shifting to her knees, she looked at him at eye level. Her expression lost its merriment and grew serious. “I know Serena is not her real name, but it’s the name your bard friend gave me. You are keeping her identity a secret--”

“For good reason.”

“I imagine so. She’s a troubled girl. Something traumatic happened and I have an idea what--”

“More than one…”

Chessa clamped her mouth closed taken aback. “She’s frightened beyond understanding, Geralt, and continued to call out for you. When she awoke she went into hysterics because you were not around. I had to administer sleeping agents to keep her calm. It’s only now that you are here, she has relaxed. Such a change has come over her since you’ve arrived.”

He glanced out the window. The pond behind the homestead glowed reddish-pink in the dying light. Its appeal diminished. He swiped a hand over his eyes and sighed. “She is attached to me. I bring her comfort. I don’t know why or how… Only eleven years old and she’s been through too much already.”

“You make her feel safe, that’s why. She knows with you, she is protected. That makes a huge impression on a young frightened girl. But, you still haven’t answered my question.”
“Chessa, your hospitality is greatly appreciated. Just know that… Serena,” he paused stumbling over the name he wasn’t used to. But Dandelion only did as he bade. “Serena is safe with us. We are secretive to protect her, but also to protect you. There may come a time you’ll thank me for this. As long as she is able, we’ll be out of your hair as soon as I can shoe my horse and get some supplies.”

“Then you can leave sooner than you think. Your friend took your horse to the village while you slept. Your mare is shoed and he also bought supplies enough for a long journey.”

Geralt forked a hand through his hair. Dandelion did all that?

“I’ve also provided new pants for Serena since hers were… ruined. Sometimes when patients don’t… make it, their clothing comes in handy for others that do.”

“Add the pants to my tab.”

“I’ve also given her warmer clothes. Winter's nigh approaching, you know.”

The chastisement in her tone was unmistakable.

“Clearly, she is not your daughter, nor the bard’s. You don't know the first thing about taking care of another person, let alone a young girl.”

Geralt flinched, imperceptible to her, but he did nonetheless at her accurate assessment. What the hell, was he talking to Yennefer? Deflated in more ways than one, he didn't need this lecture or the tone that reminded him so much of the sorceress. But she wasn't through.

“So help me, give me one good reason why I don't take you to the authorities and take possession of the girl myself? Why should I release this troubled child to the likes of you two? What do you plan to do with her?”

He met her gaze steadily. “I know you mean well, Chessa. And you're right, she is not my daughter. And I don't know the first thing about taking care of a child but have no choice but to learn real fast. There are things going on far beyond your understanding of this situation. Potentially dangerous ones for her and anyone who’s in our path. She is coming with me because I've sworn to protect her. I’m taking her someplace safe.”

That quieted her. She held his gaze, the fire in her blue depths softening some. She exhaled slowly and glanced at his swords propped against the railing.

“I've judged you both harshly, I know, but I needed to make sure Serena, or whatever is her real name, is safe with you. You could be a heartless brute with nothing but dark twisted desires. But I can see you speak the truth. Your eyes don’t lie.”

She rose to her feet and tossed her long wavy mane behind her slender shoulders. “You can stay as long as necessary.”

“Not planning on staying, but the invitation is appreciated. We have a long journey ahead before winter comes, you understand.”

She gave him one last long penetrating gaze before retreating down the ladder. He sat there, the blanket over his lap, sniffing the remnants of verbena in the air. It was not lilac and gooseberries, but because of a certain petite blonde with blue-eyes, the sweet scent held a special place in his heart.
Essi. Little-Eye. Dandelion’s musical friend. He smiled at the memory of their whirlwind romance and how Dandelion... bought supplies and reshoed his horse...

Cursing, he flung off the blanket and stood. A constricted gasp from below drew his attention. He turned, gripped the rail, and gazed down into the center of the barn. Chessa stood there, staring up at him without shame, her eyes glittering and intense in the torchlight, her lips parted. Even from this distance, the verbena combined with her heated gaze had the same effect on him as it did with Essi. He was a fool, he knew it, but… damn it, he was a man, and a Witcher to boot.

She was up the ladder in a flash, her chest heaving with rapid shallow breaths. Taking a step closer, she swallowed, her skin flushed, her eyes never wavering. Trembling fingers unlaced the opening of her bodice. His breath caught in his lungs. At first sight of bared breasts, he was helpless.

Grasping her wrist, he yanked her against him, her petite form offering no resistance. She gasped, splayed her hands along his chest, then raked long slender fingers through his hair. His lips covered her face, collarbone, breasts, belly, hip, and thigh as he peeled the dress off her trembling form and laid her down on the soft bed of fur. Burying his nose in her wavy tresses, the delicate floral scent engulfed him.

He took her with pent-up fervor, without regrets, without recalling the earlier dream or the raven-haired sorceress. She in turn, matched his eagerness with creative energy of her own. And when they were through, he loved her again, taking more time about it, and she was just as enthusiastic the second time.

Twilight had settled outside, that time of night that everything was highlighted in shades of gold and pink. They laid on their sides, spent, breathing deeply. Lying behind her, he molded his form to hers and draped an arm over her waist. Filling a palm with a breast, he fondled them while they cooled down. She sighed, arching her back and raking fingers through her hair.

“Come downstairs and eat,” she purred. “You must be famished.”

“I was... and I am.”

She turned toward him and grinned. “Well, now that I’ve satisfied one hunger,” she planted a velvety kiss on his lips, ”let me satisfy another before Dandelion comes looking for us.”

Scratching an ear, he groaned, rolling onto his back. He had completely forgotten about Ciri and Dandelion! Some protector and friend he was. "Right. Should check on Ciri again."

He should have gotten up and started dressing without looking at her, but instead, he laid there, watching her pull on her dress. The fabric spilled over her shoulders and disappointment filled him when it covered her breasts before plunging in a rippling wave to her ankles. It was a shame fabric had to hide such a lovely figure.

"She’d like that."

He almost did not hear her. Focusing on what she said rather than how sexy she looked with disheveled hair and the reason why it was in that condition, he remembered something she had said earlier. "Add the extra clothing for Ciri and meals to my tab."

With a wicked grin, she took a good long look over his bare body, stalling at a certain area before meeting his gaze again. "Oh, I planned on it." With that, she turned and retreated down the ladder.
Impossible Dreams

Chapter Summary

A glimpse into the heart and dreams of our favorite Witcher, tender moments with Ciri laced with apprehension, and an unexpected turn that sends Geralt reeling for answers.

Edited 9/3 to correct a glaring mistake! I should reread my chapters more often...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Impossible Dreams

“There see? You're properly shoed and feel much better now, huh?” Geralt cooed, sliding his palms down Roach’s forelegs. She didn't flinch at his touch, that was good. No muscle knots, tender spots, or cuts either. He'd know it if she was sore from the distance and speed he forced her without horseshoes. Good, she was fine and that relieved him greatly.

Coaxing her to lift a leg, he inspected her hoof and the new horseshoe. Decent quality and properly in place - solid work by a professional. You did well, friend. She nudged his shoulder when he stood up. Stroking the bridge of her nose, he touched his forehead to hers. Like silk, the bangs of her mane were smooth on his skin. “Yeah, you do feel better don't ya?”

Brushing her down, he whistled a tune Dandelion had strummed earlier after dinner. It was the first time in a while he felt this good. Rested, relaxed, and hunger satiated… in more ways than one… Too bad they couldn't stay here a little while longer. Perhaps it wouldn't be so bad delaying another day.

Truly a peaceful and scenic homestead Chessa had here. For awhile, he had dreamt that someday, Yen and he would have a similar living arrangement, a nice cottage or villa off the beaten path that he'd build himself, with flower and herb gardens for an endless supply for her potions and his
Witcher elixirs. He nodded. Yeah, and a nice body of water too for skinny dipping at midnight, not too large and sprawling like the mountain lake at Kaer Morhen, but just cozy enough to take a small boat out to go fishing… He'd build her a shop, attached to the house, and larger than her existing one, of course, complete with an alchemy lab enabling her to sell all sorts of magical and magically enhanced items. She'd tend to women in need of magical medical experience to help them conceive like she had always done on the side.

And he would… He paused with the brushing.

He had often mused about what he would do besides make love to her all night long. Gardening was not completely foreign to him, but he never really did take the time to learn more about it. Vesemir was the gardener. Farming was another option. But could he till the fields day in and day out? He shook his head. Doubted it. Too monotonous. He needed an occupation that would earn an income for he would not live off Yen entirely, but one that would not take him away from her for long periods of time like Witchering often did. Unless, he could pick and choose his contracts that would keep him close to home. Or... he could instruct swordplay. He was a master swordsman. What’s wrong with training young men or even garrisons to be effective fighters? That could bring in a handsome income. Being a Witcher could open up many doors or none at all. Only time will tell.

At any rate, however he’d decide to earn a living, they'd be well off. Yen was adviser to King Demavend of Aedirn and along with her shop, she helped women overcome their infertility. She had gained a respectable reputation over the years. It was a vocation that had proved extremely lucrative and who knew so many women needed help conceiving? Well, enough, and there was no price they wouldn't pay.

Such a shame she couldn't cure herself.

Roach shook her head and whinnied softly.

“Sorry, girl. Tug too hard on your hair?”

After all the women, and including some men, she had helped couples start families. That deserved some reward. It was a rare instance that a sorceress conceived and sadly, Yen was not one of them - although Geralt’s mother was the rare exception.

Not able to become a mother was the one detriment that had always haunted Yen as she watched the women she helped bear children months later. But no matter what she did or how hard she tried, no matter the cost involved in searching for that elusive potion or magical formula, the miracle she craved evaded her. And would always.

It was the sacrifice for her magic, much like his sterility the result of his Witcher mutations, for anything altering the natural always demanded a hefty price. Damage to the reproductive system was almost always that cost. And it did not discriminate.

As much as it killed him to see her bear this heartache, there was nothing he could do but support her in her search for a cure. He had helped fund her experiments and efforts, survived the fury of her wrath when hope proved futile, and held her tight, soothing her when she soaked his shirt with bitter tears.

“Ah, Geralt… this is where you disappeared to.”

Dandelion, his lute slung over a shoulder, approached and laid a hand on Roach's flank.
“Just making sure she's all right.”

The bard patted Roach in a loving manner. “The stable master in the village assured me she was.”

“She is.” Geralt returned the brush to its storage place and stroked her soft mane. “You’re a good friend to have taken care of her while I rested. It was appreciated, Dandelion. Thank you.” Geralt extended his hand toward him.

Smiling, the bard grasped his arm in a firm shake. “It was the least I could do. I'm here for you, you know that. It's what friends do.”

“Chessa told me you purchased supplies for the journey as well. You didn’t have to do that, but I’m glad you did.”

“They’re packed away in your saddlebags.”

Geralt nodded. “What do I owe you? Sure that had to cost a pretty copper.”

“Nothing.”

Geralt stared at Dandelion. “No, I’m serious. I mean to pay for it. How much did it cost you?”

“Geralt, my friend, don’t worry about it. You owe me nothing and I won’t take a copper, you understand?”

“Dandel—”

Sweet verbena tickled his senses. He glanced toward the entrance. Chessa walked toward them and tugged a hand-knitted shawl over her shoulders.

“I didn’t mean to intrude…” she began, flushing slightly.

“Nonsense, my dear,” Dandelion glanced at her and back at him. After a moment's silence, he feigned a great yawn, bowed slightly, and excused himself claiming he was dead tired and wanted to retire for the night. He disappeared up the ladder to the loft, his lute thumping against his back.

Geralt gestured for them to head for the door. “Dinner was delicious.”

Her cheeks reddened and she offered a kind nod, her expression turning to one of concern.

It turned serious now, he sighed inwardly closing the barn door behind them. Gone was the lighthearted camaraderie they experienced through dinner while Dandelion entertained them with stories and ballads. Her mood was somber now.

“What’s wrong?”

“Go to Serena. She needs you right now.”

His heart thudded in his chest. “Is she all right? What happened?”

“Don’t misunderstand, she’s fine, although, I saw her strolling by the pond. She seemed, well… moody. Maybe you ought to…”

“You’re right. Was going to spend some time with her anyway. Seems now’s the best time.”

“I’ll leave you two alone, but I’ll be near if you need me. Just call.”
“I will.”

Geralt found Ciri sitting by the pond, staring out across the water black and smooth as glass. Dressed like a boy, she wore brown trousers, high leather fur-lined boots, and a cotton tunic underneath a soft lambskin jacket. The clothing was decent enough, but in obvious places, just a bit large, but it would do. Good thing Chessa had enough sense not to dress her in skirts.

He sat down on the damp ground next to her. He gazed across the pond. The deep croaking of many frogs filled the otherwise quietness of the night. “Mind if I join you?”

She shot a quick glance at him, a shoulder lifted in a half-shrug, and continued staring out across the water.

“How are you feeling?”

“She’s fine.”

He groaned inwardly. Ugh, that tone. Usually, when a woman says she’s fine in a curt short statement always meant she was anything but. Playfully, he jabbed her in the ribs with an elbow. She did not react. “If you need to talk, I’m all ears.”

She paused a moment. “Why does she call me Serena? In fact, in her presence you all do. Don’t like it.”

The stars visible between the clouds sparkled on the glass-like water. “I had asked Dandelion to keep your identity hidden and that was the name he’d come up with. He only did what I asked, don’t be mad at him.”

“Why do I have to be a secret? I’m a princess,” she reminded him.

“That's exactly why. You're special. Just want to protect you. The fewer people who recognize us and know where we’re going, the safer for us all.” He paused and swallowed a lump that just lodged in his throat. It wasn't easy talking to a young girl, especially a princess. “But that's not all that is bothering you, is it?”

She tossed a pebble into the water and they watched it skip across the surface as far as it would go before sinking to the bottom. Small waves rippled in an arc away from where the stone had skimmed the water.

“No,” she grumbled.

Her lips drew taught in the pout of the century and Geralt hid a grin. Amidst the grass, his fingers found a small rock and he chucked it over the water’s surface. It sunk immediately to the bottom.

“She’s what I like to hear.”

She grew quiet again and laid her head against his shoulder.

“Come on, something’s bothering you. What is it?”

“What that man wanted to do to me.”

He paused a long moment. Oh, hell. Was he able to talk about this? With her? It was uncomfortable, damned uncomfortable for both of them. Awkward, and a bit nervous, he gently
wrapped and arm around her back. When she didn't flinch but snuggled up closer, he breathed out in relief. Good, he didn’t scare her.

“You hesitate,” she accused, despite the show of warmth. “But you know. I know you do.”

“Of course I know, Ciri. And I didn’t let it happen.”

"But... but what would have happened if you hadn't shown up when you did?" Sighing, he pressed her closer. "Let's not think about that. It didn't happen, and the slug is dead. Got what he deserved."

A small arm stretched across his back. He melted at her show of affection. It was something he was not used to and... suddenly made him consciously aware his childhood severely lacked this kind of pure unconditional affection. The result was a hollow knot in his stomach accompanying an acute sense of loss. It was a sensation he did not care for.

She pressed her cheek into his shirt which muffled her voice. “He... he touched me, Geralt. Where no man has ever touched...”

Her voice broke and a sudden ache crushed his chest. He balled one hand into a fist and pressed her closer with the other in a protective and compassionate gesture surprising even him.

“I'm sorry, Ciri,” he grated out with a knot in his throat. "That I didn't get there sooner."

Quiet for a long while, neither of them spoke. He simply held her, gazing out at the pond and listened to the frogs and a symphony of cicadas singing their tales of longing and elation. Then he caught her heart beat, strong and rapid, and her breathing increased. Then she began to speak again, her voice soft and full of emotion.

“There's something wrong with me, Geralt. It... Oh, I’m a... a horrible person--”

“Don't be ridiculous,” he interrupted. “Why would you think that?”

“I hated him for what he did... w-what he tried to do…” She sniffled against his shirt.

“No one is blaming you for that. It’s normal to feel that way.”

“But...” she cut herself off and squeezed him in a gripping hug, her face buried in his chest.

Gazing down on fair hair sparkling in the twilight, he held her tight. The aura she emanated at the moment was as convoluted as her feelings. A great deal of anxiety, shame, and... anger, emanated from her. He took a chance and rubbed his palm down her back and slid it up to rest at the nape of her neck. Good, she accepted his touch for it had occurred to him she might never want a man to ever lay hands on her again. But she allowed him. This was indeed encouraging.

“But what?” he prompted.

Her hair moved in a wave and slid over her shoulder covering her face when she shook her head against his chest. All he got was another sniffle.

“If you can’t talk about it, we don’t have to.” He really did not know what else to say. Offering encouragement and support to a young girl was foreign to him, but he wanted to help, offer what little he had to strengthen her spirit.

“When he...”
The rest of her words were lost against his shirt, however, he didn’t want to disrupt the courage it took to speak her deepest thoughts and feelings. Silent, he listened and stroked her back. What was she trying to tell him?

“Is that wrong?”

Floundering, he had no idea what she had said, but it was something that bothered her, that was certain. He swallowed, not able to answer.

“Is it wrong, Geralt?”

Lifting her head, she gazed right at him, her eyes, large and round, misted over with unshed tears daring him to answer, yet afraid of it all the same. He swallowed. Dammit, what should he say?

“You’re not answering! It is wrong! There is something wrong with me!”

Hands dug in his thighs using him for leverage to scramble to her feet. She meant to flee and instinctively, and without thinking, he snapped a hand around her slim wrist preventing her from taking off. The move jarred her, jerked her backwards, and fear overwhelmed her. Falling back into his lap, she fought against him bursting into tears. Immediately, his arms surrounded her, clutching her close against him while cooing softly in her ear, rocking back and forth, murmuring apologies for scaring her and assurances there was nothing wrong with her and she was not a horrible person, no matter what she might think.

Eventually, she calmed down and composed herself, clearly grateful for his compassion. Shifting in his lap, she threw her arms around his neck.

Something broke inside him. He had no way to express what exactly, but this soft girl, her clean hair smelling of verbena and an assortment of other herbs clung to her just from being inside Chessa’s fragrant home… so innocent and pure, she deserved to be freed from this… hellish turn her life had taken.

He would do anything for this little lady just to see her smile and hear her laughter. She hadn’t been with him a month and already she had had an affect on him. Proving that he did feel, the heartless Witcher that so many accused him of being, did possess a heart and a soul that ached for others enduring pain.

Adjusting her on his lap so she could look him in the eye, he wiped away tears from her soft cheek with a calloused thumb and waited for her to meet his gaze. When she finally found the courage, he firmly stated, “It was not your fault, Ciri. And I don’t want you believing it was. The bastard was scum, a poor excuse for human decency and I…” he balled up and released the fist he just made, but did not finish his sentence. Perhaps he shouldn’t.

“What?” she breathed, her full attention locked on him.

He scratched an eyebrow and sighed. “I’m an honest man, Ciri. I’m not going to lie to you. I took great pleasure in killing him because of what he… what he meant to do to you. Wanted the worst fate for him.”

She stared, hard and unblinking. “So did I.”

She turned her face then towards the water and he studied her profile. Without blinking, she fixed her gaze over the pond. The twilight glistened upon her hair, defined cheekbones, and long straight nose, a face so young and pleasing, so innocent, but her eyes… He swallowed, frowning. Her unusually emerald eyes were as sharp and cold as the rock from which the gem was cut.
Completely void of emotion. He clenched his jaw, an unpleasant feeling crept over him.

When next she spoke, sickly chills raced down his spine for her voice matched the coldness of her eyes. “I only wished I had killed him myself.” She looked him right in the eyes and his soul wept. “And I would've. I would have found a way.”

No… his heart cried. Clutching her to him, he wrapped his arms tight around her again, enveloping her, his hand held her head to his chest. He couldn’t begin to imagine what she felt, what she was going through, but to be eleven years old and to wish to have killed the man who attempted rape - was not the path she should go down even if she was justified in those feelings. Revenge was a slippery slope and one he knew all too well. He hugged her tighter as if his body, his arms, his soul could protect her from all things evil, from anything and everything she would encounter that would make her want to follow a dark path.

He had no memory of his father and the image of his mother hazy at best. The only family he had ever known were the trainers of Kaer Morhen and other boys his age that had survived the horrific mutation process and mind-numbing sorcery that had twisted and formed them into enhanced monster hunters. He had endured rigorous training that some would consider inhumane to prepare him for the life of a Witcher… but this… No, this was not her path, should not be her destiny. She was not a killer and he would do everything he could to prevent her from becoming one.

Suddenly, everything he had planned concerning her felt so wrong. Perhaps taking her to Kaer Morhen was not the best plan, but what was he supposed to do with her? He couldn’t take her on monster hunts, nor could he leave her alone or drop her off with one of his lady friends… He wasn't on speaking terms with Yennefer, so she was out of the question.

Deep within his own thoughts, he almost did not hear speak, her voice muffled against his tunic.

“Don’t leave me, Geralt.”

Her breath was warm against his skin. Finding the opening in his shirt, her fingers crawled up his chest to entwine in his long hair. She played with the white strands, letting his tresses slip between the valleys of her fingers. A strange sensation came over him.

“Please. Don’t ever leave me.”

His medallion trembled, but it always did with her nearness. But why a sense of… foreboding?

“I won’t,” he promised, not sure he could live up to that vow, but deep inside he would protect her for however long he could.

“I’m scared, Geralt,” she sniffled. “So scared.”

The pendant vibrated more urgently. He glanced around, sharpening his eyes and ears for anything out of place. He didn't detect anything. Yet.

“I know. I’m here, Ciri. I’ll always be here. And Dandelion too whenever he comes for a visit. He likes you.” He felt her smile against his chest.

She wiped away tears. “I like him too. He’s amusing.”

"That he is,” he chuckled.

Pulling her head back, she glanced at him with a serious and questioning gaze. “Geralt… Something's not... I don't feel right.”
Indeed, her aura changed, he sensed it becoming strong and intense. His medallion rattled against his sternum. What the hell was going on?

"It hurts, down here."

She pressed a palm to her groin.

Alert now, he urged her off his lap and rose to his feet, his fingers twitching to grasp a sword. But his swords were in the house. Dammit. He glanced behind them toward Chessa’s home and then at the barn. All seemed normal and undisturbed.

Ciri cried out and doubled over in obvious distress. “Geralt,” she gasped, clutching her belly and dropped to the ground on all fours.

The atmosphere seemed to change too, became more dense and thick. Worried that the spectral army may make another appearance, he lifted her up. “Taking you back.”

He carried her toward the house. Slowly increasing his pace, he scanned the landscape, the horizon, the sky, alert for any sounds and smells. Only the frogs and cicadas made any noise. Even the leaves settled in the stillness. Nothing moved.

He hugged her closer. It could also be their unidentified pursuer. Would he finally reveal himself tonight? Every instinct screamed that was very probable.

* * *

Chessa settled Ciri down in bed. She swallowed the last sip of an elixir to calm and relax the pain in her lower belly.

Geralt sat down beside her and she reached for his hand. Taking hold of it, he rubbed his thumb over the back of her hand until she slipped into sleep quick and easily, much to his relief. Gingerly, he pulled his hand away and tucked the covers under her chin.

“Did you have a good talk out there?” Chessa whispered.

She snuffed out a candle near the table where they had eaten dinner. He moved to extinguish the pillar beside the bed, but she laid a hand on his arm and shook her head.

“She prefers the light.”

Leaving it alone, he nodded toward the door communicating silently for her to follow him outside. His sword belt was propped against the wall and his leather jerkin draped over the back of a chair. He took them quietly so as not to awaken Ciri. Chessa followed him out onto the porch.

"What do you think is wrong with her?" he asked quietly after she closed the door behind her.

"Hard to say. The pain centers low, in her uterus. How old is she?"

"Eleven. Could be going on twelve, but... ah, don't really know when her birthday is. I know it's sometime in the spring, around Belleteyn, I believe, if my math is correct."

"It's possible it's the very beginnings of menstruation."

Geralt stared at her unblinking, then glanced out over the yard, heaving a sigh. Just what he needed. "Now?"
"She is of the age, you know. Anywhere from ten to sixteen years old a girl can get her monthly bleeds. I don't think it'll happen just yet. She might feel aches down there for a while before anything appears."

He raked fingers through his long and loose strands.

“What's wrong?” she whispered.

“She's angry and confused. Saw a new side to her tonight and that has me concerned.” Lowering his gaze to the floor, he murmured, “A direct result of the horror she endured in Novigrad.”

Chessa laid a hand on his arm. “She was raped, wasn't she?”

The tightness in her voice got to him. “Almost.”

A hiss escaped her clenched teeth. “I'd guessed as much. Damn men and their uncontrolled lust--” she stopped herself with fingers covering her mouth. “I'm sorry… I…”

“He was a low-life scum and he’s roasting in hell now thanks to me.” He shrugged on his jerkin and clasped many buckles and tightened straps. “Saved her before the worst of it, but enough was done to shake her… maybe even scar her for life…” he let his voice trail off not finishing his thought. “She was violated, plain and simple. I wager she’ll never trust another man again, or at the very least, not for a long time.”

“She definitely trusts you,” she countered with hope. “And Dandelion.”

“We may be the only men she’ll ever trust. Only time will tell.” He strapped on his sword belt and adjusted the buckles.

“Where are you going at this hour?”

“Search the perimeter. Want to make sure there are no surprises tonight.”

Stepping closer, she tugged the shawl around her arms tighter, her delicate fragrance grew stronger the closer she came. The top of her head barely reached his shoulders. Short, he thought to himself. Petite, a small build, smaller than even Yennefer. That observation sent fire through his veins, although he had no idea why.

Her eyes filled with concern, she glanced out over the yard. “You think there might be trouble? Here?” Her gaze whipped back to him. “Are you in trouble?”

"Yes, and yes."

“Should I be worried?” Her voice was tight.

“Too early to tell. Stay here. Watch over Ciri.” He bit his tongue. "Dammit,” he swore under his breath. He just gave away her real name. There was no taking it back nor any sense in worrying about it. He had other potentially dangerous things to think about now.

Pulling all his hair back into a ponytail, he looked at her. “Do you have a weapon of any kind?”

Paling before him, she nodded almost imperceptibly.

"Good. Keep it near. Don't venture out of the house no matter what you hear out here, understand? And don't open the door for anyone except Dandelion or me.”
She nodded again, her eyes wide and serious.

Just to be safe and thorough, he pulled a dagger from its sheath strapped to his thigh. “Here, take this, just in case.”

He presented the hilt. Reluctant to take it, she did finally.

“I’ll be back in about a half hour. If I don’t return in one hour, get Dandelion to take you two to the village without delay.”

She swallowed and her face lost more color, if that were possible.

“In fact, I’ll send him over here now. I want him with you two.”

She remained silent, watching him, her fingers clutching her shawl.

The potion bottles on his chest strap were all secured. “Listen. Nothing can happen to Ciri. Please… keep her safe…”

"I understand,” she whispered laying a hand on his chest. "I know we really don't know each other well, but I trust you, Witcher. Rest assured, you can trust me.”

He fixed his gaze on her. The silvery light lit half her face in stark contrast to the other half lost in shadow. Her eyes shone black as a moonless night staring up at him, full of sincere concern.

Trouble was, he found it difficult to trust anyone other than his closest friends and fellow Witcher brothers. He'd been burned too often in the past to freely trust. One had to earn it. But Chessa had done nothing to make him not trust her, and she had helped Ciri and had been generous in hosting them.

A pang of regret stabbed his gut. The last thing he wanted was to endanger her. The pang followed by an ache settled deep in his belly. An ache for an opportunity to stay with this enchanting herbalist and find out what kind of life they could make together. It was time to move on. Yennefer was in the past and would likely stay there. She'd never have him back, he was certain of it. But this lady... she desired him as he desired her and why couldn’t they live happily here together?

A tingle shot through him. Reaching for her, he splayed his fingers through her wild waves and clutched the back of her head. Pulling her flush against him, she came willingly, her face tilted up, eyes scorching, and lips slightly parted. Ah, she was ready for him. Her womanly scent tantalized his senses and stirred him to life. Stifling a growl, he briefly, but fiercely possessed her lips with his. She returned the enthusiasm leaning into him, standing on her toes, caressing his stubbled cheek with feathery fingertips. The shawl slipped off a shoulder and hung to the floor behind her.

Before he lost control, he tore away, took another long look at her, and hurried down the steps tugging on leather gloves.

When she called out for him to be careful, he did not look back.

* * *

For the next forty minutes, Geralt came up with every reason known to man why the healer would not want him to stay with her on a permanent basis. Irritated that he could not shake her from his thoughts, he thought of Yennefer instead, but that only left him feeling worse.

Forcing his attention back to his task, he was almost at the homestead having found nothing
suggesting that anyone or anything was nearby that would be cause for alarm. No tracks out of place, no smells or sounds that would be abnormal for this time of night. Nothing. Nothing, but heavy dank air that was unusual for this time of year.

He sniffed the air. A sensation made the hairs stand out on his neck. The atmosphere, charged and electrified, but he could not pinpoint what caused it. No storm brewed anywhere nearby. His medallion jiggled again, the soft clinking of the silver chain chiming in the quiet. Wait…

The medallion had stopped trembling when he left the homestead earlier. Now that he was near, it had started vibrating again. But he wasn’t near Ciri… He turned slowly around in a circle, unsheathing his silver blade, scanning the area carefully. Alert to any kind of danger, he paid attention to all his senses. The air thickened even more. With the blade ready, he cautiously approached the house. The sounds of all wildlife ceased, the leaves ceased to rustle, thick stagnant and highly charged air hovered around this house. Was Chessa not as she appeared?

Shit! No! How could he have fallen for the oldest trick in the book? Cursing himself voraciously, he sped toward the house, a sick feeling pooling in his gut.

From the direction of the house, a piercing scream split the night.

“CIRI!”

But before he made it to the porch, the sky lit up. Or at least, a small portion of it, directly in front of him. A green light sliced through the air dancing countless tiny sparkles in all directions. Much like when the spectral army had appeared, the air now got sucked into that green light and he struggled to breathe for a few moments. Gasping, he stopped, holding up his blade in a defensive stance and peered into the blinding glow.

Ciri screamed again. The door crashed open and she stood in the doorway her eyes fixed on the green anomaly. Frantic, Chessa, looking as normal as she did when he had left, tried to urge her back inside the house, but Ciri would not have it.

Perhaps Chessa had nothing to do with all this...

“Get back inside, Ciri!” Geralt hollered.

But she didn’t pay him any heed. Stumbling forward, she descended the stairs and bolted into the middle of the yard, just a few paces away from him and the light.

Holding out his hand, he ordered her to stop and return to the house. Her chin raised in a clearly defiant way never taking her attention from the mysterious green phenomenon. She was not going to listen to him, he sighed moving to stand next to her.

He glanced toward the house. Chessa clutched the rail of the porch, watching with a distressed expression. Dandelion appeared next to her, just as transfixed as Ciri.

Before he could form another thought, the swirling foggy green light brightened, making them all squint, and a figure materialized on the ground, unmoving before Ciri’s feet. A sword clattered nearby.

“Don’t!” Geralt scrambled for her. “Don’t move, Ciri! We don’t know who… or what it is.” With an arm across her chest, he pushed her behind him and kicked the sword out of reach.

The light vanished into the darkness, swallowed up like a black hole leaving everything in a darkness thicker than night. Slowly, the stars appeared in the sky once again.
Ciri knelt before the unconscious figure. Long fair hair covered his face. She moved to swipe away the hair...

Geralt was at her side in an instant, sword pointing at the comatose… man? Clearly a human male dressed in fine clothing underneath quality leather armor with blood stains near his shoulder.

Ciri pushed away his blade. “Geralt, is this necessary?”

“Maybe,” he growled at her lack of caution.

Two pairs of footsteps hurried behind him. Chessa and Dandelion stopped, gazing down in apprehensive curiosity. Squeezing in between Geralt and Ciri, Chessa sank to the ground. Cautiously, with a hand on the figure’s shoulder, she rolled him over on his back. An arrow shaft protruded from the young man’s left shoulder.

“By the Gods!” Dandelion breathed.

His sword shook. In fact, both hands shook. Geralt stared unblinking down at the figure of a young nicely built man in his early twenties, and lost all ability to think, to breathe even. How could this be?

Groaning, the visitor opened his eyes for the briefest moment. Focused on Ciri at first, he smiled and visibly relaxed. With a struggle, he glanced up at Geralt and sighed again just before his head lolled to the side, losing the battle with unconsciousness.

Chessa glanced up at him and her face whitened. Then she spurred into action. Standing, she grasped his arm. “Help me, Geralt! He’s alive. Bring him to my house. Hurry!”

Somehow, he managed to sheathe his blade and pick up the young man, moving stiffly and automatically. He was good size for his age. Cradling him in his arms, his head rested against his shoulder. Walking in slow motion to the house, Geralt’s medallion jumped wildly against his chest. Briefly, the movement of a chain around the young man's neck drew his attention, but after a momentary glance, he kept his eyes locked straight ahead. He couldn’t look down, wouldn’t gaze at the man who had dropped out of the heavens for it disturbed him too much.

Chessa took over, the healer performed her craft, doing what she did best. Ciri stayed by the mysterious man’s side, mothering him, smoothing back hair as light as hers. She remained calm and helped Chessa remove the arrow shaft and assisted whenever she needed an extra pair of hands. It was a side of her he had not yet seen. A good side, much better than the one he witnessed earlier tonight.

Dandelion paced in front of the hearth, his hand covering his mouth, oddly quiet and much too serious for the usually upbeat troubadour.

Geralt stood by idly, keeping to the shadows on the far side of the room, overwhelmed by this turn of events. Plagued by questions which answers would not come easily or quickly, his stomach churned, his senses remained alert, and watched the whole exchange in a state of disbelief as if trapped in a dream… a transcendental dream.

For a moment, Ciri stepped away from the bed and the man's face came into view.

Dandelion turned toward Geralt with a shocked expression and shook his head, raking a hand through his wavy hair. Clearly, he thought the same thing as he.

Geralt closed his eyes, not able to look at the man without a host of emotions it stirred within. Was
this a dream? He gazed at Dandelion, silently pleading for his friend to tell him this was his imagination and he would wake up and forget everything. But, the bard’s expression darkened and he turned away.

He had his answer. This was no dream.

Of their own volition, his eyes fell on the boy’s face again.

It was... an impossible dream.

Chapter End Notes

Many thanks to Vic-of-Thor who has been a wonderful and generous supply of support!

Thank you to all the readers who have stuck with me so far and the new ones joining on this unchartered story line. I hope you all stay with me... You'll be blown away!! ;)

Revelations - Part One

Chapter Summary

Our emotionally reeling Witcher attempts to deal with the sudden and strange appearance of a young man that only brings more questions than answers.

In this chapter, we get a deeper glimpse into the heart and soul of our favorite Witcher and his ward.

***CONTENT WARNING: This chapter contains an explicit love scene. (Okay, so I couldn't help myself! ;)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

CHAPTER TWELVE

Revelations - Part 1

Chessa slumped into a chair before the hearth and breathed out a tired sigh. Fingers covered in blood, she found a way to swipe damp strands of hair away from her face with the back of her hand, careful not to smear any on her forehead. She wiped off the blood as much as possible from her hands and arms with a well-used cloth.

At the far end of the room at a table, Geralt watched, silent. A mug full of wine sat untouched before him. No one spoke, actually, Chessa clearly exhausted, and Ciri solemn. Dandelion unusually quiet through it all, stared at the small fire in the hearth. When Chessa's concerned gaze sought out his, he held it without wavering, but did not soften his expression or give any sign he was all right. He was not all right, far from it. She broke the connection and turned her attention toward Ciri.

“Come, dear. No frettin’ now. Let him sleep. He needs rest.”

Ciri handed Chessa an earthenware cup, which she took gratefully, and drank a large gulp of its contents. Drawing her into an embrace, the healer was careful not to get any more blood on her
than she had already and kissed her hair.

“T’m grateful for your help tonight, Ciri. You were wonderful.”

With a worried expression, Ciri snapped her gaze across the room and found his, her eyes questioning. He simply nodded. Relaxing, she smiled at Chessa. “You know my real name now.”

“I do. Geralt told me.... He couldn’t help himself.”

Dandelion eyed him sharply. He returned the bard's stare.

“Good. I like to be called by my real name.”

Dandelion sighed and sat down on a chair opposite from Geralt. He laid out the visitor’s sword on the table between them. “Well, it worked for awhile.”

“My fault, I know,” Geralt growled the first words he had spoken since the young man’s appearance. He did not need for him to point it out.

Ciri returned to the newcomer's side, gazing down on him. “He’s going to get better, right, Chessa?”

“Yes, he will,” she reassured, weariness clearly present in her tone. “A textbook case, that arrow wound. It missed any major arteries. We removed it without problems, cleaned it up, and sewed the wound closed. He just needs rest and time to heal. He’ll be fine in no time.”

“Good.” Ciri sat down on the bed beside him, found his hand, and wove her fingers through his.

Geralt frowned. Dandelion looked at him with a puzzled expression. Why was she so clingy with the young man? A total stranger they knew nothing about. Where he was from or why he had appeared here of all places were just a couple of the many questions jumbled in his mind.

Chessa rose and called for Ciri to join her outside. She glanced over at the men. “We’re going to get cleaned up at the pond.” Opening the door, she let Ciri out before her.

Geralt rose from the chair. “Wait…”

She stopped and glanced at him. Blood smeared along the side of her nose and streaked down the column of her neck but somehow made her all the more alluring. For regardless of who the visitor was, she had saved his life. Hopefully, he wouldn't have to kill him when he discovered his intent.

Suddenly, he felt foolish for what he was about to say, and they were not alone. He shouldn't worry so much. They would be safe at the pond. He nodded. “Be careful.”

“We’ll be back shortly.” Grabbing a couple towels and a bar of soap from a nearby woven basket, she paused before leaving the house offering him a comforting smile. “We’ll be fine.” Stepping out, she closed the door behind her.

Dandelion yawned loudly. “You that worried about them going to the pond alone?”

Grimacing, he felt stupid, but he did worry about them out there alone. “It’s dark and late. After what had happened tonight, you question why I worry?”

Shrugging, he frowned. “No, I suppose I don't. It's only natural. But you worry way too much, in my opinion.”
“Didn’t ask your opinion.”

“A little testy tonight, I see.”

Geralt shot his friend a harsh glare that shut him up.

Turning his attention to the young man’s sword, he studied it, although it did not make him feel any better. Instead of providing answers, it only instilled more questions. Silver-plated siderite steel core. He’d recognize it anywhere. Finely crafted too. He gazed down the length of it. Slightly shorter than his forty and a half inch silver blade, this one was about thirty-eight to thirty-eight and a half inches long, he’d bet. Look at that, runes etched down the middle too… just like his own Witcher’s sword, but this was… No, it couldn’t be…

Movement drew Geralt’s attention and he looked up. Dandelion approached the sleeping young man. Looking back at the sword, he turned the shiny blade this way and that for a clearer view inspecting the runes in the candlelight.

“By the Gods, Geralt…” Dandelion mumbled, raking a hand through his hair.

“What’s this?” he murmured, peering closer at the blade.

“I just can’t get over it…” Dandelion was saying. “It’s remarkable, really. And did you see his eyes, Geralt?”

He stared unblinking at a glyph just below the cross guard. Strange a symbol like that would grace a blade of master quality. Unusual... A single word inscribed beneath it, and recognizing the elder speech, he read it aloud. “Zire--”

“Geralt?”

“Yeah?” He gripped the hilt. Lighter than a normal sword too. Good balance, but a smaller hilt… Hmmm... the boy must have delicate hands. This was a master crafted sword, no doubt about it.

Still holding it, he reluctantly joined Dandelion standing by the bed, and his throat tightened. He was not sure he could… Taking the last step, he stood beside his friend and gazed down at the boy. His medallion trembled and his stomach flopped.

“I just can’t get over it,” the bard said softly. “Did you see his eyes before?”

Swallowing hard through a constricted throat, Geralt nodded. “I know,” he grated in a hoarse voice. “I… I don’t understand, Dandelion. How can this be? What are we witnessing here?” He looked to his friend truly desiring support in a way that was unknown to him. Support he never knew he’d ever need. Dandelion laid a hand on his shoulder and squeezed it. A small gesture, but he drew comfort anyway.

He spotted the young man’s hands. Definitely not delicate. Before he even realized what he did, he placed his large hand on top of the boy’s. Hmmm… Same size. Breathing in deeply, he stepped back and held up the weapon. “And his sword… There’s something about it…” He shook his head.

“A fine weapon, but what’s wrong with it? Is it enchanted?”

Shaking his head, he propped the sword against the wall by the hearth. “Not enchanted, but… hmmm. Can’t put my finger on it. It’s a smaller, lighter sword than a man his size should wield.”
“Everything about this boy is a right mystery, Geralt, and one we will uncover at some point, I’m sure. It’s one of your strengths, friend. Until we can talk to him… You watch. All will become clear once we learn who he is and where he’s from—”

“And why he’s here,” Geralt added swallowing the lump that choked him. He stared down at the boy. “It’s not possible… Is it, Dandelion? It can’t be… Can you believe how much he…? A Doppler… or magic,” he nodded convinced. ”It’s gotta be higher magic that changed him…”

“Geralt,” Dandelion muttered turning his full attention on him. “My friend, don’t do this. Don’t go there. You’ll drive yourself insane. You’ve clearly been around too many sorceresses.”

“Someone is fucking with me, Dandelion!” he growled. “This shit isn’t possible. It’s not, and you know it. What if he is a Doppler? Only they can change their likeness, take on the image of another person. The resemblance is too real…” Geralt turned away, knowing all too well he couldn’t see through the illusion, see the true person behind the magical mask. It was not because the magic was beyond his Witcher abilities to detect, but because there was no illusion. No magic involved, here. At least, in the case of the boy’s appearance. He was genuine, and everything about him was real. This was no joke, no prank. But who could be behind this?

His breathing out of control, his chest constricted painfully making it difficult to breathe. He hadn’t felt this way in ages. Anxiety like he had not had since before his mutations. Breathing in deeply through his nose, he forced himself to calm down. “Need some fresh air.”

“But…”

Geralt held out his hand. “Stay here with the boy in case he wakes up.” And out he went, the door rattling closed behind him.

* * *

The autumn night, fresh and cool, however, a little warmer than usual for this time of year, brought him back under control if only for a few minutes. He hadn't been this shaken about anything since he survived the mutation process and woke up with white hair and strange eyes.

Taking a deep breath, he slowed his pace. Quietly approaching the pond, he kept to the shadows of the trees. The moon, bright and high in the sky, lit up a layer of wispy white clouds and bathed the pond in its silvery glow. Its reflection glittered down the center of the water’s black surface in a brilliant jagged line. A doe approached and drank to her content before leaping off into the woods sensing his presence. The constant singsong of cicadas and frogs filled the night and in a few hours, any birds that had not yet migrated south would join the symphony with their own songs come dawn. The idyllic peaceful scene was at odds with his tumultuous thoughts. Questions he had no answers to left him anxious, perplexed, and disturbed among a host of other feelings he did not care to identify.

Halting, he sat down on a large boulder and tried to calm his shaking hands. A giggle echoed over the water. Ciri. Just over the way, she finished tugging on her boots and picked up a towel for Chessa. The herbalist waded out of the water.

Hungrily, he devoured her with his eyes, grateful he hid in the shadows. Her long hair, even longer now soaked and plastered to her back, the ends came to just above the swell of her backside. The
backside he admired in their rendezvous earlier, and even now from this distance. She shook out her hair and turned. He lost his breath. The moonlight blessed him with a clear view of her beautiful body before Ciri wrapped her in the over-sized towel. He breathed out slowly. He had enjoyed her once, but wanted more. Needed more.

He was always searching... always...

Within moments, she had dressed and they headed back toward the house hand in hand. When they had vanished from his line of sight, he listened until the door opened and then closed a few seconds later. They were back safely in the house and he relaxed, if only a little.

It was then he became aware of the deep longing, a pesky recurring ache in his soul he had tried to appease all his life, usually with promiscuous actions, and he groaned, for it had surfaced yet again. It was a feeling he'd rather not experience and burying it deep down only brought temporary relief until something triggered it. At first, being with Yen had stilled that ache for a while, until the deep void reared its ugly head again. Perhaps, that also contributed to the behaviors which drove them apart. Ah, who knows. He was tired of it all. He squeezed closed his eyes.

He always searched for that which he never had.

Sitting there on a boulder in the darkness, he felt more alone now than ever. He was the only one who understood the potential gravity of their situation. He alone had to protect them, and anticipate what new danger they might yet face.

He chucked a stone into the water. The thump and swoosh it made penetrating the surface momentarily quieted the frogs. If only he could be still.

Truth was, he had no idea what the fuck to think or do next.

Except one thing.

* * *

Gently, he pushed open the door to the bedchamber, but did not enter.

Stillness had settled like a blanket over the house at this late hour. Not a sound met his ears save for her barely detectable quiet and even breathing and the constant muffled pitch of cicadas outside offered a soothing backdrop.

The soft silvery glow of moonlight lit the cozy room enough to pick out the contours of colorful petals of floral garlands adorning every space and sheer white curtains draped around the windows and bed that gave the room a warm, inviting, and distinctly feminine touch. Not a single trace of a male presence in this house. Unusual that. Why an attractive woman in her prime would have no husband and children to her name was a question he couldn't bring himself to vocalize.

The hearth was dark and cold for the autumn night was pleasantly warm. He took a step inside then hesitated. Gazing at Chessa’s slumbering form, the deep longing that had gripped him tonight continued to gnaw even after the long walk he had hoped would drive away.

It didn’t.
On a bed just wide enough for two people, she slept serenely on her belly, her soft curls swept up above her head and piled on the pillows revealing a slender alluring neck. He imagined his lips there, with slow tender kisses and the thought burned him hotter than he was already. The blankets covered her from the hips down and the backless sheer white lace nightdress left her back tastefully exposed. The bumps of her shoulder blades framed a beautiful line of a spinal column that dipped into the small of her back. The anticipation of knowing what a delicious bottom awaited concealed beneath lodged the breath in his throat.

Propping his swords against the nightstand, he only removed his hand from the scabbards when they wouldn’t make a sound when he let go. He shouldn’t do this. He’d only be using her to satisfy his own selfish desires. He paused. He really shouldn’t, but the need was too great.

Despite the sliver of hesitation, he unbuckled the leather strap around his thigh and let it and the scabbard it supported slink to the rug. With trembling fingers, he unlaced his trousers.

But, it was more than that. It was more than just satisfying a physical need. The ache grew more intense at the sight of her now. He breathed in deeply and exhaled through his nose and in the quiet, sounded loud to his ears. It was an emotional need, a deep one, one he didn’t understand fully, but it centered around the very core of his being.

Stripping out of his jerkin and tunic, he tuned out the voice of reason and knelt on the mattress. It dipped beneath his weight. Heart in his throat, he feathered fingertips down her side beneath her arm, slowly tracing the side of a breast, and continued down until he reached the blankets. He followed the trail with his lips.

“Hmmmm…” she sighed. Stirring, she glanced over her shoulder. “What took you so long?”

At her groggy whisper, he could only watch her, grateful the shadows hid his face. Although he could see her clearly, she probably could not see him well.

“Are you all right?” Stretching languorously, she found his gaze.

Both hands gripped her sides and caressed the length of her torso while she stretched, the texture of the lace soft as silk and utterly pleasing. He craved more of her softness.

“I'm worried about you,” she murmured. One hand reached for him and found the sensitive spot just above his knee. He sucked in air. Her touch scorched him.

She started to roll over, but he pressed a hand between her shoulder blades preventing her. He did not say anything, only let his touch communicate his wish. His other tugged the blankets down passed her knees eliciting a sigh from them both. Hers was a fluttering sigh, his, low and deep in his throat at the sight of the sheer white lace gown hugging her curves. The embroidered flowers spaced enough apart offered a tantalizing view of the smooth skin of her rounded backside, and the promise of the dark shadow splitting her down the middle flamed his excruciating need.

Positioning himself behind her, he massaged her bottom and squeezed and caressed until she writhed beneath him begging for more.

The sweet and saltiness of her back, fresh from the coconut oil infused soap, pleased his senses. Placing heated kisses along her shoulders, down her shoulder blades, and then the line of her spinal column, he licked the dip at the small of her back right at the edge of the lace just before the swell of her backside. Her taste ignited every nerve ending in his body.

Sighing, she arched her back. Her mane of glorious waves spilled down over her backside. “Geralt… I know the young man shook you… I can understand why… Do you know him?”
“Ssshhh,” he hissed in her ear. “Don’t want to talk about it.” Hunched over her, he stretched both arms out supporting himself on the downy pillows on either side of her head. Flattening his cheek against the side of her face, he buried his nose in her fresh fragrant curls. “I'm a wreck, Chessa.” He grated in a rough voice against her ear, “And I need you.”

Groaning sympathetically, she clutched his arm. “I know...” She turned her face towards him, her parted lips a hair’s breadth from his. “Whatever you need... I’m all yours, Witcher,” she breathed.

With a guttural growl, he possessed her lips in a fierce kiss before she could utter a sound. Leaning on one arm, his other hand shoved the lace gown up over her rump and it pooled in folds at her hips. Tearing his lips from hers, he scorched her backside with his mouth all the way down and drank her musky delight, savoring her taste on his tongue and in his mouth, inhaling her scent and only hers craving to be overcome by nothing else. He did not, could not think about anyone or anything, only escape from the torrent of questions and the gut-clenching emotions they fueled. This was the only way he could cope. It anchored him, gave him a sense of control and empowered him to continue on in the harsh environment of their world.

Amidst urgent moans, she whimpered and writhed, ready for him. Good... he would not last long. Already dripping, he rose to his knees behind her and plunged into her slick softness, deeply and repeatedly, not giving her time to adjust to his hard invasion. He groaned, losing himself in her hot wetness, the silver medallion rattled and jostled in rhythm against his chest. Gripping her hips and encouraged by her cries, he focused on a much more delicious kind of torment.

Forcing her into the pillows with short quick drives, he reassured himself things would make sense later. He’d sort things through, willing to believe it would be all right… he’d know what to do. Now, he was in control and would remain that way in this entire situation. He groaned, confidence and intense pleasure forced all thoughts aside and sent waves of tingles throughout his body and soul.

Her hands clutched the headboard until her knuckles turned white. Raising her hips higher enabled deeper penetration. Alternating from short quick thrusts to long slow drives erupted high-pitched vocals spurring him on. A deep growl escaped him.

Smoothing his hands up over the curvature of her bottom, they dipped in at her slim waist and over the ridges of her rib cage. Reaching around, he filled his palms with soft pliable breasts, caressed and fondled them before raking his fingers through her wild storm of curls. Flipping her glorious mane over her head, they spilled on the pillows. He tasted the back of her neck and nipped her just below the hairline. She moaned sweetly.

His breathing turned erratic, as did hers. The effects of the night melted away clearing his mind and unclenched deep muscles only to tighten again to serve another purpose.

He was not the sort of man who finished before the lady, and he clenched his teeth attempting to restrain his climax, but at the same time, craving release. It was the worst and delicious kind of torment known to man. The room spun, he squeezed his eyes closed.

“Yen...” he ground out, panting. Anything else he might have said evaporated in a breathy sigh. At this point, nothing mattered, only burgeoning release dominated all thought. Groaning, one hand clutched a hip, the other plastered her head into the pillows. With a hoarse growl, he sank deep driving into her as far as he could go and erupted, emptying himself along with all the negative thoughts and emotions that had ruled him tonight. Wave after wave of pleasurable tingling heat rippled through his body.

She followed suit, crying out trembling around him, her spasms massaging every inch of him.
Breathless, her hands sank back to the pillows.

She achieved her pleasure and he was relieved, although he would have made sure she had. Every muscle relaxed and his mind stilled, finally... Collapsing on his side next to her, he savored the warmth and rejuvenation flowing through him.

Gathering him close to her balmy body, she wrapped herself around him in lace and verbena pressing his head against her bosom holding it there steady. Whispering sweetly, she gently removed his hair tie and let his long strands fall loose around him, her fingers combing lovingly through the hair that had been white since he was a boy. Occasionally, she traced tiny kisses along the scar that dominated his face while fingers tenderly caressed the prominent slashes marring his back long scarred over.

Oh, Gods... This tender show of affection was like a soothing healing balm over his frayed soul. Comforted, he fondled and suckled her breasts through the sheer lace and then deep relaxation came over him.

Just before he let soft blackness of sleep claim him, he breathed in and sighed against her softness, her affection, and her comfort, the hunger for that which he never had, abated, if only for a little while.

* * *

Stomach clenched and a lump constricting her throat, she stepped away from the door that was not closed all the way. Her heart thudded in her chest again. All she wanted was to crawl in bed with Geralt after a nightmare that had awakened her in a cold sweat. Strangely, she heard him in Chessa’s bedroom and hurried here to be with him, desperate for his presence. He always calmed her and she needed to feel safe. He always made her feel safe.

But the scene she had just witnessed burned her mind and squeezing closed her eyes, she willed them away but at the same time, intrigued by it and not understanding why. Silently, despite the anxiety, she sped back down the hall to her room and threw herself on the bed, burying her face deep into the pillows and fought against the fear lurking in the darkness.

No, she would not cry. Would not give in. Geralt was just in the other room, he would protect her.

But... the fear had no mercy.

* * *

Clutching him to her breasts still, Chessa dropped a kiss on top of his head, blinking away the fierce tears that burned her eyes, grateful he was unaware. A wave of emotions assaulted her, ones she did not expect. The bitter disappointment of being called someone else's name in the middle of such an intimate moment was bad enough, but she was not unrealistic.

He was a Witcher, and it was well known his kind traveled incessantly and would find a warm lovely woman like her to escape from the pressures their trade imposed. The constant and horrid
witness of death and destruction on a regular basis and knowing he was the harbinger of most of that, must be a tough burden to carry.

But what really melted her heart was his deep need for comfort and affection. That widely perceived understanding that Witchers were void of emotion and feeling was completely false. She grinned to herself despite a tear that rolled down her cheek and dropped in the wild mass of her tresses. Oh, that was a bare-faced lie and a true misrepresentation of his kind. She had no doubt that he possessed a canny ability to keep his emotions in check when it suited him, but the raw emotion uncovering his soul tonight was palpable. Reality was, underneath his rock hard exterior with all the many scars she couldn't fathom one body possessing, he was as vulnerable as any human being, possessing deep feelings and needs. And that just made him more dear to her heart.

She had no idea who this 'Yen' was, but she must be someone very special to him. Kissing the top of his head again, his deep and even breathing told her he was fast asleep. Good. He needed the rest. She could, yet in many ways could not, understand what he was going through, but she was glad he found reprieve with her. She squeezed him in a tight embrace. Even if it was only temporary.

* * *

Drifting awake, he floundered between that state of sleep and wakefulness, verbena prominent and soothing his senses. Total relaxation like he had not had in a long time warmed him through. Or it was Chessa that heated him. He squinted open his eyes. Molded behind her frame their legs intertwined, he laid on his side with an arm draped over her holding her possessively close against him. He wanted to stay like this forever with the fragrant softness of her hair against his face. Breathing in the sweet floral scent, he closed his eyes again. Hugging her tighter, he savored her closeness and the feminine scents surrounding him brought bliss.

She was still fast asleep and he was comfortable enough and did not want to move, but his thoughts stirred him. And his bladder. Groaning, he debated whether to take care of that now or not. He did not want to move.

The bladder won.

Ever so slowly, he peeled himself from her, grinning at the floral imprints her lace nightdress branded on his skin. When he was sure she would not awake, he sat on the edge of the bed in the dark. No one stirred the hour before dawn. It was the darkest, coldest part of the night just before the foggy gray light of the new day made its appearance. With elbows on his knees, he raked a hand through his loose hair. She still slept soundly, and even though he found restful sleep for only a few hours, he grew restless thinking about their visitor downstairs. He needed answers. The sooner, the better.

Spotting his hair tie on a pillow, he took it. Gathering the top section of his hair, he tied it back into a ponytail. Tugging on and lacing his trousers, he shrugged a cotton tunic over his shoulders. Padding over to the nightstand, he retrieved his swords and leather armor quietly. With a long glance at her slumbering form amidst tousled locks and even more rumpled bed sheets, he sighed both with longing, and regret. Last night brought relief in more ways than one, but embarrassed by his desperate need for her, he exited the room without looking back.
He shouldn’t have fucked her. At least not in the manner he had. It was a bad idea from the start. Should’ve listened to his conscience. It was only for himself, really, to make him feel better and a terribly selfish thing to do. She should hate him for it. Probably would wish him gone now and did not blame her if she did. But thoughts of her tenderness afterwards would suggest otherwise, but he was not one to wear out his welcome.

Without a sound, he trod down the hall, her scent following him, or more to the truth, was still on him. Traces of her taste lingered in his mouth and he smiled at the memory despite feeling conflicted over it.

Passing another room, he stalled and peeked in the cozy bed chamber, its door slightly ajar. Ciri slept peacefully, sprawled on her belly in a tornado of twisted covers, her hand resting against her cheek and long fair tresses fanned out on the pillows. Grinning at the adorable picture, he memorized it, storing the memory before closing the door quietly.

He continued down the stairs, deposited his swords and armor on the trestle table by the door, and stepped outside and relieved himself. When he returned, he glanced at the still sleeping visitor with apprehension. His stomach started knotting up again. He just couldn’t believe the resem--

A piercing high-pitched wail split the quiet and when it didn’t stop, he bounded up the stairs taking the steps two at a time. He burst through the door to her chamber. Ciri, tangled in the linens, flailed her arms and legs, her long pale hair swooshing in all directions. Tears streamed from her eyes. She gasped, then screamed again.

“I’m here, Ciri!” he whispered urgently, grabbing both her arms and sitting down on the bed. He had to hold her wrists fast or she would have pommeled him. “Ssshhh, I’m here.” Drawing her into his chest, he embraced her fully, smoothing back her hair, running his hands up and down her back until she stilled. “I’m here. You’re safe. It was just a bad dream.”

She climbed onto his lap and flung her arms around his neck tightly, almost possessively. With her sniffles, wet tears pooled and dripped down into the hollow of his collarbone and dampened the collar of his tunic. Kissing her hair, he continued soothing her, rocking her back and forth until the tears stopped.

He became aware of a presence at the door. Glancing over quickly, Chessa stood there tying a robe that matched her nightdress around her waist. Her expression was one of questioning concern. She mouthed to him if she was all right and he nodded confident the worst had passed.

“Ssshhh. It’s early you know,” he whispered against Ciri’s ear. “Try to get some more sleep, all right?”

She shook her head against him.

“Ah, come on.” He paused. “You wanna talk about it instead?”

Again, she shook her head.

“Fair enough.”

Chessa took a hesitant step inside the room. “Ciri… Dear…?” she began softly.

Shoving some hair away from her face, Ciri glanced at the healer. Her eyes swollen and red. Tear steaks shone on her cheeks.

“Want to sleep in my bed, hon? Just for a little while longer.”
Ciri looked to him and he nodded, encouraging the idea. Glancing back at the healer, she nodded and got off his lap. Holding out her hand, Chessa took hers and led her from the room.

Geralt caught Chessa’s gaze and nodded, grateful. She started to leave and he thought to apologize, but clamped up. She gazed at him a moment longer and returned to her bed chamber.

* * *

He poured a mug of wine, and downed it while watching the slumbering young man. Placing the empty mug on the table, he slowly approached him and sat in the chair beside the cot and lit the candle on the nightstand. For a long while, he studied the visitor.

He had noticed it before when he had brought the boy in from outside, but did not get a close view. Now, he could. Reaching for the young man’s neck, he drew the silver chain from underneath the collar of his finely tailored tunic. Holding his breath, his mind spun… What if he recognized it? But, more so, what if he didn’t? Indeed, the chain ended in a large black and gold pendant about the size of a woman’s palm. Swallowing hard, he turned it around in his hand. Constructed of solid gold and onyx, its background consisted of a black checkerboard in the shape of an eight-pointed star that boasted the relief of a golden sun in the foreground, its squiggly rays pointed in all directions. Clearly, the Black Sun, the god and symbol of the Nilfgaardian Empire. So the boy was a Nilfgaardian. Sent by the Emperor himself, maybe?

He gazed back at the man and his throat closed. Was he the…? No, he couldn’t be. Ciri would not have been so close and caring for the man if he were the knight that had whisked her away from the massacre of her home. So then who was this mysterious stranger and why did he look so familiar?

But there was more to the pendant, which was highly unusual. The Black Sun alone was the most recognized emblem on the continent, but in its center... a small, but with distinct detail, a silver snarling wolf-head…

“What the--?"

Tugging off his own medallion, he held it beside the boy’s pendant. The wolf-heads were identical, however, the boy’s was smaller in scale to fit within the circumference of the sun. Both medallions trembled in his hands and he ceased to breathe.

What the fuck is this?! HOW?!

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to @Vic-of-Thor for his ongoing support and insight!

Thank you to all the readers who have stuck it out this far - just wait -- it gets even better!!
Revelations - Part Two

Chapter Summary

Geralt interrogates the mysterious stranger that had appeared out of nowhere. Torn between his witcher instincts and judgement of character, he can't understand how the young man seems familiar. Danger is never far away from a Witcher...

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Revelations - Part Two

He stood up in the water and a chill forked down his drenched form, but welcomed it. A few minutes ago, he was grimy and sweaty and the pond was easier, faster, and less hassle for bathing than the traditional method. The cool water refreshed him. His toes sank into the sandy muck and seaweed brushed against his legs. Crossing the grass to the boulder, dripping pond water everywhere, he grabbed a towel and dried off, then wiped his razor before tucking it away in a small pouch.

Restlessness had settled in his bones the moment he had awoke this morning and waiting for the stranger to wake up did not help either. Rather than succumb to idleness, he had made himself useful in the meantime. The chicken coop had needed a little roof repair and busying himself with that project made the morning hours pass quicker. He had figured the young man would have awakened shortly after he had got started, however, much to his frustration, he had not.

It was quiet around the homestead and heavy dark ominous clouds hung low in the sky casting all in a murky grey light. More rain, he groaned. At first he thought Dandelion still slept, but his mare was not in the barn. If he had gone into town, he had better be cautious.

Chessa kept herself busy around the house and kept a close eye on her patient with Ciri’s help. The coop roof was finished so he had a little bit of time before he would wake the visitor for his patience had run thin. Already, the better part of the day was lost waiting for the bastard when he had wanted to get back on the road this morning. If his calculations were correct, today was a full fortnight after Velen, the autumnal equinox. Dammit, they had too far to go to get to Kaer Morhen and time was running short. They must get to the Blue Mountains by Samhain. Once the snows start, they wouldn’t make it at all. Tonight they’d leave… under the cover of darkness that way
anyone hunting them wouldn’t be the wiser. Granted, might not be the wisest time to resume a journey, but he could see pretty well in the dark and Ciri would be close enough to protect.

However, he’d have to leave Dandelion behind, but that wouldn’t be an issue because fat chance in hell he’d winter in the Witcher keep without any female companionship. Not that Geralt was looking forward to that either. The season was long and frigid, and a cold empty bed got lonesome surprisingly fast. Each autumn, he had sworn to bring a guest along, someone willing to warm his bed. This year, he was certain Yennefer would have, if not to live there, at least teleport back and forth, but… ah, yeah, that dream went up in smoke.

He tugged on his trousers and picked up the young man's pendant. Hopefully, he had removed it before anyone else noticed it. Chessa might have seen it while working on him last night, but he did not want Ciri to see it. There was a chance she might have, but she was so calm through it all, she must not have noticed it. If she realized a Nilfgaardian followed them… he clenched his jaw. Not good.

But was the unexpected visitor a true Nilfgaardian or not? He traced a finger over the face of the Black Sun and up and over the three-dimensional snout of the open-mouthed wolf head in the sun’s center. The exact image of his own wolf medallion - the recognizable symbol marking his guild, his home. Why the hell was his guild’s badge merged with an imperial one? It made no sense! The Wolf School, hell Witchers in general, were entities unto themselves and remained neutral in all things… They did not join alliances with anyone. According to this medallion, his guild was in league with Nilfgaard. His gut wrenched inside. Impossible! This goes against everything Witchers were meant to be! He’d never before seen this kind of medallion or the boy, so he clearly was not from Kaer Morhen. His head spun making sense of it all. The boy had stolen their badge. Plain and simple. But why? Everyone knew the Witcher Wolf School symbol. What would he gain by claiming it?

For a moment, he thought he’d keep it, show it to Vesemir, get his thoughts about it all. The chain dangled between his fingers. It trembled again as did his own medallion. Soft footsteps approached. Turning toward the pond, he stuffed the necklace down the front of his trousers before she got close enough. He winced at the chill and the sharp edges.

Ciri halted a few paces back.

“What is it?” he asked without turning around.

“Chessa… She sent me.”

Her voice tight and sounding strange, he turned and peered at her. Her expression downcast, she avoided his gaze, which was also unusual. She must still be bothered by that nightmare.

“The visitor is awake,” she informed him rather regally with an upturn tilt of her chin.

Nodding, he tugged on his tunic, tucked it inside his trousers, and pulled his wet hair back into a ponytail. Turning his back to her, he relocated the medallion from it’s uncomfortable hiding spot in his pants and dropped it inside his shirt. She patiently waited, and when he was ready, took his hand. The gesture surprised him, but it made him smile. With pink cheeks, she made eye contact, but then averted her gaze again. Shy now? This was yet another a new side of her…

Hand in hand, they returned to the house just as the first big plump raindrops splattered on both of them. She made a face and swiped a hand across her forehead where the drop hit her.

“Race you to the house!” he challenged.
Letting go of her hand, he made like he was going to sprint, and with a beaming smile, she took off leaving him behind like last night’s bath water. Chuckling, he jogged, watching her speed toward the porch, her long ashen tresses whipping behind her. She leapt up the steps and jumped around arms raised and pumping in victory, taunting him about being too slow. Ha, yeah, much better seeing her this way rather than the glum, shy girl from a moment ago.

“Hah, you won,” he drawled. “I slipped back there.”

“Sure you did,” she stuck out her tongue playfully. “You’re just slow for a Witcher.”
Leaping up the steps, he lunged for her, tickling her sides. “Hey, now, I deserve some respect.”
Batting away his hands, she giggled and caught her breath. With a valiant effort, she attempted tickling him back, but he dodged out of the way and swiped aside her hands. “Too slow now, huh?” A sound he wasn’t used to hearing made him pause. It was him… giggling. They continued tickling each other, until out of breath, Ciri straightened her hair and clothing.

“Chessa’s waiting.”

“Right.” His cheeks hurt. From laughing? He smiled feeling as if the weight of the world had lifted off his shoulders for a brief spell. He winked at her and opened the door. The brilliant smile that followed lightened his heart. She followed him inside.

* * *

His lightheartedness evaporated immediately upon sight of the young stranger. Propped up against the wall with a few fluffy pillows behind his back, he sat with his left arm in a sling resting across his midsection. Chessa finished tying it behind his neck and made sure he rested comfortably against the pillows.

“I’d speak with him privately. Please,” he added in a hoarse whisper, standing close enough to the healer he could feel her warmth.

She nodded. Leaving extra gauze, scissors, and a small bowl of ointment on the nightstand, she took Ciri’s hand and gave him one last long searching look before ushering her toward the door.

He clasped her wrist halting her. “Have you seen Dandelion?”

“He went into town, I believe.”

He glanced out the window. It was much darker than it was a few moments ago. A storm was minutes away. “I…” Sapphire eyes warm and wide, she waited for him to continue. He glanced at the young man on the cot awake and coherent, and then at Ciri. No, now was not the time. “Ah…” he stammered clearing his throat. “We’ll talk later.”

She continued peering at him with sparkling eyes in what was left of the hazy overcast daylight and after a short moment, he offered a smile. With a supportive squeeze on his forearm, she ushered Ciri out and left them alone. The door clapped closed behind them.

A distant rumble of thunder rolled in from the plains. Geralt fixed his attention on the young man. The boy, although battered and wounded, possessed an air of nobility about him. Clearly battling strong feelings, he peered at him directly in the eyes.

Geralt’s heart thumped strong behind his ribs. Those eyes… He’d never before seen their likeness. Of all people, he and the other Witchers possessed unusual, distinct eyes, but his were... similar,
but brilliant green, so green, they fairly glowed with an inner and unusual light. Was he a Witcher? Until his pupils constricted into vertical slits, he couldn't be sure.

Thoughts rampant with questions and possibilities, he sat down on the chair before the cot, letting several long moments pass before speaking. Why the young man struggled to tame emotions was not clear. He certainly did not look fearful as one might be in his position.

“I'm Geralt,” he finally spoke, keeping his voice low, but firm. “Geralt of Rivia. Witcher.”

Color almost imperceptibly swelled in the boy's cheeks, but he remained silent. After a few moments, he nodded only once. “I--” he coughed, his deep voice rough from sleep. "I know who you are."

“Of course you do.” Geralt sneered, not bothering to disguise the sarcasm lacing his tone. “Many know who I am.” He wouldn't be the legendary White Wolf if no one ever recognized him. But the visitor's tone was so matter-of-fact, so easy and casual, like he knew him for years.

It unsettled him, honestly.

"Clearly, you know who I am, but I know nothing about you."

The fellow stared at something on the floor, and at the same time, straightened his shoulders, yet remained stubbornly silent.

Geralt curled his lip. “And you are?”

The boy's eyes snapped back to his, but he did not offer any information.

Sighing, Geralt glared at him. “You're not going to make this easy for me, are you?”

The young stranger offered a defiant shrug. His eyes roaming over him intently as if studying his features, his eyes full of…

Suddenly uncomfortable, Geralt looked away. “You've been tracking me for quite some time. Why? What's your game?”

"Wh-what? Track you?" He looked genuinely surprised. "I'm not following you. In case you haven't noticed, I've dropped out of the sky at your feet, and quite by accident. You'd think I'd possess a little more stealth than that."

Leaning forward in the chair with an arm crooked on his thigh, Geralt scowled, imagining his expression quite sharp at the moment. He couldn't shake the feeling this boy was somehow familiar. Did he know him from somewhere? The way he spoke just now, with more than an obvious hint of sarcasm, sounded surprisingly like… He shook his head.

A liar's vitals almost always spiked when not truthful and this was not the case with him. The boy's pupils remained the same size, his pulse and breathing did not accelerate as expected. The kid spoke the truth, no question about it. Frustrated, Geralt sighed. About to speak again, he opened his mouth, but the young man held up a hand, halting him, and spoke before he could.

“Let me save you the time and energy,” he offered, his voice gravelly and strangely familiar, but what caught Geralt’s attention was the unmistakable note of confidence and command common in generals. Articulate and refined, his speech clearly revealed an educated man and maybe even… a high born status. But even so, a distinct rough quality about him conflicted with the nobility he exuded so effortlessly. He waited without looking away. "I am… not supposed to be here.” It was
clear he chose his words with care. "My arrival was random and quite by accident. Unfortunately, I cannot tell you who I am or where I’m from. I know you don’t want to hear that… Please, I cannot explain anything. There would be consequences... dire ones. Know only that I mean you and Cir…” he coughed, "the others, no harm.”

In one swift motion, Geralt stood and bunched both fists with Unnamed Man’s cotton tunic drawing him away from the wall with a sharp jerk. The guy sucked in a breath and stifled a groan, clearly in a good deal of pain. “You think I’m that stupid?” Geralt hissed through clenched teeth. “Or did you forget who you’re dealing with?”

Unnamed Man did not resist Geralt’s choking grasp. Simply, he held up his hand, palm facing out, and met his gaze without wavering. “I did forget who I was dealing with… in a manner of speaking. Nor do I think you unintelligent. Quite the contrary, actually. You have every right to feel as you do. I’m a stranger to you, although you are not to me. As soon as I can get off this cot, I will leave this place and return…” pausing a moment, he made eye contact. "Home.”

Slowly, Geralt released him, but did not back down. He had never seen this man before. How could he know him as well as he implied?

The boy lounged back against the pillows and stifled a wince, a hand pressed against the bandage on his shoulder. His lips formed a tight line.

Hmmmmm, handled pain well. Not many could hide it like Witchers learned early in life. “And home is where…?”

The visitor looked Geralt squarely in the eyes, but kept his mouth closed.

“Nilfgaard?” he prompted with a sneer.

The boy’s eyes gleamed defiantly for a moment and looked away. Sighing, he met his gaze again. “I repeat. It would be better for us all if you knew nothing about me. There are... consequences.”

Glaring at the boy, Geralt leaned forward with elbows on his knees. “And let me repeat. You think I’m going to believe anything you say? Everything about you disturbs me. You know who I am, but I don’t know you. You know my ward’s name. How? And there will be **consequences** if you don’t start giving me some answers.”

Reaching inside his shirt, he withdrew the medallion. The chain chimed in the sudden stillness, the candlelight glinted off the silver links. Unnamed Man’s mouth drew into a tighter straight line. Holding up the chessboard eight-pointed pendant with the golden sun and wolf-head, he pointed it towards the newcomer. “Nilfgaard. Tell me why the fuck you have my guild’s wolf-head symbol joined with Nilfgaard's now before I Axii the shit out of you.”

The young man’s face became stoic as a statue. “No, please. Don't use your persuasion on me. That would be a… distinctly bad idea.”

"You’re spying for Nilfgaard. Admit it.”

“I'm no spy,” he seethed between clenched teeth clearly offended that he would be thought of as such.

“Right,” Geralt drawled full of sarcasm and nodded. “You're a Doppler, then? To change your appearance--”

“A Dop…?” he shook his head, “no. No Doppler.”
Unnamed Man’s shoulders slumped and his expression turned to one of deep resignation and… sorrow?

Geralt barely contained a seething growl. “We're getting nowhere.” Tracing the Sign in the air, he cast Axii, a powerful persuasion spell that had provided him with many satisfying results in the past.

“No, don’t!”

The boy cringed and his hand waved in front of his face, palm out, and held it there as if blocking something invisible with all his strength. For a moment there was an unseen struggle between them before it sank in that the young man was magically blocking the spell! Both medallions jumped wildly, one in his hand, and the other on his chest, and a dizzying force Geralt had never felt before hit him solid in the forehead and knocked him backwards to the floor, sending his feet over his head. Landing hard on his back, he grunted and sprang to his feet as fast as a cat.

“What the hell?!”

The young man held up his hands apologetically. “Forgive me, fa--,” his voice got choked off and he swallowed visibly. "I meant no harm, friend, but I could not let you hex me. It would have been… most unforgiving if you had.” He scooted to the edge of the cot and stood. He swayed slightly then found his balance. Holding out his hand towards him, his gaze focused on the necklace in his hand.

“My medallion. Please. I need it back. It must not be left behind.”

He stared at the Unnamed Man eye to eye for he was the exact same height and build as he, and Geralt was not a physically stunted man in any way. "It vibrates like mine.” He held up the pendant letting it dangle between them like some sort of doomsday pendulum. “The wolf image is mine,” he hissed through clenched teeth. “Does it have the same abilities?”

The stranger held his gaze with brilliant glowing green eyes for a long moment. He nodded silently.

"How?"

“I cannot explain. You would not understand--cannot understand, not now.”

In a quick movement, Geralt clutched the boy around the throat and only applied enough pressure to add brevity to his next words. “I learn you are a spy or an impostor, I will hunt you down and kill you. You know there isn't a better tracker around. Be sure of that.”

Unnamed Man breathed in deeply through his nose, but did not react otherwise than maintain his steady gaze. “Forget me and this pendant,” he croaked. “Don’t waste your time and energy figuring this out. You have better things to do now.” He nodded his head toward the front porch indicating the ladies waiting there. Understanding he was referring to Ciri, Geralt tightened his grip around his neck a bit more.

“I know you, Wolf,” the boy struggled to speak. “You won't rest until you solve this mystery. I'm afraid for this once, you'll have to wait. A long time.”

He looked him straight in the eyes. "I meant it,” the boy said quietly. “Before. And now. I mean you no harm.” His gaze was heartfelt and sincere and another emotion crossed over his features that he couldn’t fathom nor want to take the time to decipher, but one thing he understood. Again, the boy spoke the truth. Rubbing his smooth chin, he was torn between believing him despite every
“Leave this place, now.” Geralt hissed, barely restraining himself from throttling the man, but slowly released his grip.

“My medallion… please.” The boy rubbed his neck red with the imprints left by Geralt's fingers.

Geralt lifted it--

The door banged open and Chessa, worry etching her features, stood breathless. “Geralt--”

Turning to her, his mind spun as to what could be wrong.

“Dandelion… He’s yelling something.”

Rushing out through the door, he stood on the porch and spotted Ciri sitting in the rocking chair looking as if in pain, her hands pressed against her lower belly. Damn, he didn’t have time for this now! Dandelion’s voice at the end of the path came piercing through the air.

“Geraaaaalt!”

The thunderous pounding of a horse grew louder. The bard came tearing down the path on Pegasus wearing Geralt’s black cloak and it whipped behind him wildly. In his hand, he swung his colorful beret in the air like a flag. “Witch-Hunters coming! Witch-HUNTERS!!!”

Shit! They’ve caught up with them! He was afraid of something like this. Dammit! If only they had left this morning like he had originally planned! But, with the mystery boy’s unexpected appearance last night delayed their departure… He closed his eyes for an instant. Oh, what perfect timing!

Turning on his heel, he sought Chessa and found her anxious gaze. His voice was low and impactful. “They cannot find us.”

Her lips pressed tight, she paled and clasped Ciri’s hands pulling her from the chair. “Quick! All of you in the cellar. It’s a hidden entrance. I’ll stall them.”

Nodding, Geralt urged Ciri to go with her. Turning towards the bard, he hollered, “Dandelion! Get in here now!”

Jumping from his horse, the bard barely got his foot out of the stirrup before propelling himself from the saddle. Amazingly, he managed without lurching to the ground head first. Pegasus, alert and skittish, sensed anxiety and bolted for the barn.

Holding open the door, Geralt followed his friend into the house, grabbed his armor and swords in one hand, and Unnamed Man in the other. “You’re coming with us,” he growled. He didn’t give the young man a chance and shoved him hard behind the others.

Chessa led them through the main living area and into her alchemy lab pregnant with various herbs and plants and all their diverse poignant scents. Her work table, complete with a mortar and pestle, an alembic, clusters of herbs and flowers, and many filled and empty glass vials of various shapes, sizes, and colors stood stationed in the center of the lab. The room instantly brought thoughts of Yennefer and her lab in Vengerberg to mind. Clenching his teeth, he forced the memories aside.

“Geralt…” Ciri tore away from the healer and sought him out. Her arms came around his hips hugging him. She whispered, “I’m scared,” and hid her face in his shirt. Chessa's expression
softened and she rubbed Ciri’s shoulder, her gaze locked on his.

He patted her back. “I know. We’ll be fine. We’ll get out of this, don’t worry.”

Chessa led them to the far corner. A door on the back wall with white frilly curtains led out behind the house. That could come in useful. She shoved an empty barrel aside and he helped her. After they moved the others away, she rolled back a medium sized throw rug revealing a trapdoor in the floor with a ladder leading down. Opening it, she pressed a hand to Ciri’s back urging her down the ladder. She planted her feet and shook her head.

“It’s dark down there…” An ominous rumble of thunder accentuated her uncertainty.

“I’ll go first.” Unnamed Man started for the ladder, but Geralt yanked him back. “No, you don’t.” He looked to Chessa. “There a way out down there?”

She shook her head, rustling her stormy waves of curls. “No.”

Geralt heaved the boy towards the ladder. He clutched the side with his good hand before falling straight down below. Dandelion assisted him maneuvering the ladder and followed him into the cellar. Ciri climbed down more slowly, her eyes staying on Geralt.

“It’s not that deep down,” Chessa warned. “You must all be silent or they’ll hear you.”

Geralt stepped in front of her keeping his back toward the trapdoor. He stood close, towering over her petite loveliness like a solid ancient pine. Verbena teased him again amidst all the other aromas in the room. He laid a gentle hand on the side of her face, his thumb grazed over her skin smooth and soft. She leaned into his hand and fluttered her eyes closed for a moment. He breathed in her scent. “I…” His shoulders slumped. “About last night--”

Azure blue eyes glistened and she placed a forefinger against his lips silencing him. “Shhh,” she whispered. “There’s nothing to talk about.”

“There is...”

Glittering eyes roamed over his face and with trembling fingers, she pulled him closer and placed a sweet lingering kiss on his lips, however, the moment was spoiled by a deep muffled voice from the front of the house ordering to be let in. They paused, holding their breaths.

“Later, Witcher,” firmly, yet with a gentle touch, she shoved him toward the hatch. “Get down below.”

He shook his head. “Don’t like this. Not the hiding kind, and it’s a small space down there with no exit…” Lightning flashed, followed by a sharper thunder clap an instant later.

“You don’t have time… or a choice, Geralt. Go now, please.”

He peered at her. She swallowed, looking frightened. Damn, he hated putting her in this dangerous position! They should have left the first chance they had. Tipping up her chin with a thumb, he forced her gaze to meet his. “I won’t let anything happen to any of us.”

Turning, he tossed his sword belt and jerkin to the dirt floor below and ignoring the ladder, dropped in the cellar and landed with the agility of a cat, with grace and little sound. He stood and his head almost touched the floorboards above. A sinking feeling gripped him. It was a small space. Too small. Fighting in here would not be easy if it came to that.
“You’ve got one minute to show yourself!” The rapid thumping of a fist on the door thundered through the house in correlation with another thunder clap outside.

Chessa closed the hatch with a finality that knotted his gut. He shrugged on the rest of his studded leather armor and strapped his sword belt on his back.

“Open up!” Boomed a deep commanding voice clear and distinct. “We’re coming in!”
Revelations - Part Three

Chapter Summary

Our Witcher must deal with the mysterious stranger and the Witch-Hunters up to no good. And when things couldn't get worse - they do...

Angst and strong feelings abound in this chapter!

**Content Warning:** This chapter contains acts of canon-typical violence and use of some strong language.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Revelations - Part Three

“We're coming in!”

The Witch-Hunter’s deep commanding voice thundered through the healer’s home as fierce as the clap that cracked from the sky. The front door slammed open and Chessa’s steady, yet disquieted voice met him in the common room while heavily booted feet of several hunters stomped around the upper floor.

To keep from whimpering, Ciri bit her bottom lip and clutched Dandelion’s sleeve, bunching the silk in her small fist. All she wanted was Geralt’s arms around her, comforting her, but instead, he remained at the ladder and gingerly laid down his studded leather jerkin and sword belt on a crate by the wall. Its plethora of straps and buckles would take too long and the clinking sounds could give them away. That had to be the reason he did not put them on.

Intensely oppressive, the darkness suffocated and she stood there with the others, anxiety creeping up on her like a slithering snake. Coiling its body around her, it choked the breath from her, and already, she found it difficult to breathe. Focusing on the faint grey slivers of daylight filtering through the tiny slits between the floorboards, brought little assurance. Jittering, she willed herself to remain calm. She was not alone, and Geralt would take care of everything.

The Witch-Hunter barked something and Chessa’s stern words drifted to them. Ciri caught her
breathe. Geralt cursed under his. Stranger remained oddly silent. Dandelion drew her close to him, took her hand, and crept deeper into the shadows. He hid her behind some barrels stacked upon each other in the far corner, all the while keeping Geralt in sight.

His eyes turned upon her, and he nodded once. Shifting his gaze to the stranger, he scowled, uttering a curse under his breath.

Footsteps halted in the center of the lab, near about the work table. Oh, no, they were close!

Stranger positioned himself in front of the barrels blocking most of her view. Peeking around his arm, Geralt glared in their direction, but didn't say anything, only moved lightly, without a sound, behind the ladder and sank back deeper into the darker shadows quietly drawing his steel blade.

Chessa’s voice rang loud and clear. “You barge your way into my home… at least you could give me a reason for this rude intrusion.”

“Don't have to explain a thing,” the scruff voice scolded her. "But I'm not an unreasonable man. Your husband home? Need to speak with him.”

Silence reigned for a few beats. Ciri’s lip curled, despite the anxiousness clenching her stomach. Why women were treated sub par to men, was beyond her. Even her grandmother, the Queen of Cintra, could not rule on the throne without a husband - as if she had not been sufficient enough to rule alone. Were not females viewed as equals? At the thought of Grandmum, sadness compounded her already frayed emotions. It was a merciless reminder she was alone and orphaned in this harsh world. A world that proved unkind to females and the fear Chessa would experience that attitude today knotted her gut even more.

"I'm sorry… no husband here at the moment so you'll have to speak with me. Can you handle that?"

A crack split the air and Chessa's startled gasp elicited one from her as well and spurred Geralt around to the front of the ladder, one boot silently planted on the bottom run and a hand grasping a higher one. A curt hiss from the stranger kept him from bolting up the ladder. He froze and stared up through the floorboards, a sliver of grey light lit his face and sparkled on his pure white hair. At the sight of his fierce scowl, a shiver forked through her.

An awful tense silence percolated above and below. Chessa would be all right, wouldn't she? The healer seemed the strong independent type that could handle herself, but Ciri was not sure of anything anymore. Her only certainty in life now rested in Geralt.

“Ready to talk, then?” continued the gruff, but resigned voice above. “Looking for two men traveling in the company of a young girl about ten years old.” Dandelion's hand squeezed her shoulder. She swallowed, keeping her eyes fixed on Geralt. His features resembled a stone statue, cold, sharp, and bearing the promise of deadly intent.

"One is extremely dangerous with white hair and carries two swords on his back. The other… well, a touring minstrel, you could say. Also, reports of an anomaly… a green-like light sighted in this vicinity late last night. Know anything about that?"

Ciri glanced at Stranger standing in front of her. He looked toward Geralt, and the Witcher glanced at him, a fierce glower etched his features. Oh, no… this could be bad. Chessa’s answer snapped her out of her frantic thoughts. She listened closely.

“Have not seen these two men you describe or that young girl. That would be cause for concern.
But the ‘anomaly’... simply an chemical reaction during the burning of expired herbs and plants. The result, though not entirely unexpected, emitted green smoke that rose in the sky. It soon dissipated. No harm, no foul.”

Marveling that the healer could be so quick to answer craftily on her feet, Ciri couldn’t help but admire her. Chessa was a strong woman and inspired her to be strong too one day. Silence fell again like a thick suffocating blanket. Another voice joined them, younger sounding and not as deep. “Sir... Found three horses stabled, and this in the other room.”

“That’s my sword,” Chessa stated in a flat matter-of-fact tone.

 Stranger stiffened, as did Geralt. Ciri kept her eyes on him as well. She didn't want anything to happen to him either although she didn't know him... though, maybe she should. There was something about him…

“You wouldn’t think a woman like me living alone would not protect herself?” Chessa continued with ease.

“A woman living alone has three horses?”

“Aye. One has always been mine and two are payment for services recently rendered to a sick old man and a garrison guard’s son. Both clients couldn’t pay with coin and offered their mares instead. So yes, all three belong to me.”

Younger man spoke in a hushed voice and it grew quiet again. Ciri could not make out what was said.

“My scout spotted fresh horse tracks leading up to your house, and the horse ran swiftly. A man’s footprints head toward your house, spaced far apart. Probably running to warn you moments before we arrived. I see no one here besides you.” A pause ensued and when the Witch-Hunter spoke again, he did not raise his voice, but the note of command was unmistakable. His orders would be carried out. “Scout, you and the others, search the house and the entire homestead. Leave nothing unturned.”

Geralt cursed under his breath, as did Dandelion. Only the newcomer remained unruffled by the situation. How could he be that calm?!

“My lords…” Chessa’s voice, now breathy, shook as she stammered. “Is this really necessary?”

“Look, woman. If we find you are harboring these aforementioned individuals, you will hang along with the men.”

“Please… I’m a lowly healer, what could I have done with a dangerous--” the rest of her sentence was cut off with another crack and a yelp of pain.

“A witch more like! Should hang you for that fact alone!”

Commotion broke out above, but Ciri couldn’t see what was happening. With a loud bang, a table overturned and shook the floorboards above spraying dust clouds everywhere sparkling tiny particles in the silvery rays. Many glass bottles and beakers shattered, the smaller shards rained through the cracks littering the dirt floor.

 Stranger moved back providing a shield directly in front of her and Dandelion. Glad for the protection, she still wanted to keep check on Geralt. If anything happened to him… she wouldn't know what to do.
Without a sound, Geralt held the sword ready, baiting his time.

Chessa’s frantic cries as they destroyed her lab went unheeded. Crates smashed, what sounded like shelves knocked off walls, and more shattering glasses caused dirt, dust, and anything small enough to drop through the floorboards. A stream of yellow-blue liquid poured down through the crack in the center of the cellar. A pungent and unpleasant odor wafted over and she wrinkled her nose at the offensive smell. Another table thrown to the corner knocked over the barrels that disguised the trapdoor.

“Sir! Over here!”

Oh, no! Ciri, torn between staying tucked behind Stranger’s back and wanting to jump out and be ready for anything, fidgeted and clenched her fists.

Footsteps drew near and a tense and deadly silence permeated all around. The hatch creaked open slowly and a moment later, a flaming torch landed on the dirt floor. All focused on it as it rolled and settled, sputtering, before the flames flared regaining strength. Orange light flickered in a wide radius lighting up most of the cellar and cast deep dancing shadows further back. Ciri held her breath, a tense hush charged the air and her heart thudded painfully in her chest.

“A cellar, Sir. I’m going down.”

“Be swift about it.”

Geralt gripped his sword ready. Stranger glanced back at her and nodded. He’d protect her too, she knew, not understanding why or how, but she did.

A hunter descended the ladder. As his boots thumped on the ladder rungs, her heart rushed in her ears, her breathing stopped. The only other sounds were the creaking of his long cape-like leather armor, metallic clink of buckles, and his sword at his hip.

She breathed again when the Witcher emerged from the shadows with a hideous glint in his dark golden eyes. In a flash of motion, his left hand shot between the rungs and clawed him around the throat. Startled, the hunter gurgled and attempted to bat away his arm, but was not successful. Clutching Geralt’s arm instead, his gloved fingers scraped along his forearm and wrist desperate for a hold, but, ruthless, the Witcher yanked the hunter towards him, slamming his forehead against the rung, and thrust the tip of his sword deep into his belly. Red ran freely down his hand and arm. Within moments, a steady stream poured from the hunter to the dirt floor. With a growl, Geralt shoved the hunter off the ladder. Sailing backwards, he landed hard on his back in a puddle of his own blood. With feline speed and agility, Geralt spun around the front of the ladder and planted his heel against the hunter’s Adam’s apple and crushed his neck with a sickening snap.

The torch, still roaring and snapping on the ground near the corpse, eerily shed its orange light upon a face devoid of all color. Ciri shrank behind Stranger, burying her face in Dandelion’s silk tunic. His arms came around her, rubbing her back in smooth strokes. A moment later, she inhaled a deep calming breath and let him go preferring to watch rather than hide. She peeked around Stranger once again.

Within seconds, many trampling booted feet surrounded the trapdoor above. It sounded like a small army!

As she feared, another hunter ignored the ladder and leaped landing on top of Geralt pitching him to the ground. The Witcher grunted, skidding hard on his left side on the dirt, the hunter sprawled on top of him. He still held the sword, but the man gripped his wrist wrestling his arm behind his
back. Geralt’s other arm was pinned beneath him and he couldn’t maneuver it free for the angle he laid prevented him from gaining the upper hand. The two struggled in brute strength for long moments.

Another hunter jumped to the cellar floor followed by a third and a fourth. A fifth one waited at the top for space to clear before joining the fray. Within moments, he did. Another followed him.

Losing all ability to breathe, she grasped Stranger’s sleeve with both hands. NO! Oh, why was this happening?

Stranger shed the sling and both arms came around her protectively. She clawed his arms in a futile attempt to get to Geralt, but he held her back. Yelling for him, Stranger grasped her arms, gently, yet firmly, preventing her from running to him. He crushed her body against his and she lost all reason. Using her strength, she fought against him, kicked, punched, did everything she could to free herself. Terrible visions of Novigrad flashed before her eyes and as panic overtook her, there was nothing she could do…

A strange unpleasant feeling came over her and her knees buckled. Blackness closed in on her vision and her ears roared. The sensation of falling without being able to control her limbs forced her to succumb to the darkness.

* * *

The Witcher struggled to breathe with dirt clogged in his nose and mouth. The hunter’s knees speared him between the shoulder blades and a hand on the back of his head forced his face into the ground. He also yanked his sword arm as far back behind as he could. Bucking his hips, Geralt twisted and flipped back onto his side, his right leg outstretched for leverage.

The hunter, unable to maintain his balance, tumbled off him. Taking advantage of speed, Geralt flung himself on top of him, straddled him, and sliced his throat a mere second before two other hunters yanked him off.

Knocked out of his grip from an adept kick to his hand, his sword skidded on the ground and booted out of the way by another hunter. He slipped in a puddle of blood and before regaining his footing, caught sight of Ciri collapsed in a faint in Unnamed Man’s arms. Although she appeared safe for the moment, he didn't like any of this one bit.

Two hunters held his arms and yanked him to his feet. The third kneeed him in the groin. His breath knocked out of him, he couldn’t curl protecting the area. Instead with a growl, he jammed the hunter in the knee at precisely the right angle to dislocate the kneecap. The man’s leg buckled and he landed hard on the floor, howling in pain.

“Where’s the girl?” Witch-Leader shouted from above. “Bring her to me!”

“NO!” Geralt struggled against the over-sized hunters holding him in their strong grip. A fist clocked him squarely in the jaw. It was followed promptly by another blow to the gut and the inside of his thigh. He saw stars. Limp for a moment, the hunters dragged him backwards towards the ladder.

Two other hunters cornered Unnamed Man and Dandelion. Knowing both men were weaponless, Geralt shook off the pain, and stomped his boot heel on the guard’s foot satisfied that the silver
spur shattered the bones all the way through. The hunter roared, and dropped. Timing it precisely, he jammed his knee up under his chin knocking him out soundly. His right hand freed, he whirled and choked the other guy that held his left arm with a crushing grip. At the same moment, he lost strength in his leg with a sharp burn in his thigh. Staggering, warm liquid seeped down his leg. A hunter stood with a smug look on his rugged face, holding his Witcher sword… the edge glistened red in the torchlight. His own weapon, dammit!

Three hunters jumped him, crashing him to the ground hard on his back. Everything went dark. Leather, belt buckles, and the stench of male body odor smothered him along with the weight of the burly hunters. As he struggled to pull his dagger free from his belt, Dandelion’s muffled voice called his name in a high-pitched frantic tone.

Fingers clenched in a choke hold around his throat stifled his breathing and dimmed his vision. Blackness closed in on him. It would be moments before he’d lose consciousness. If he could reach that dagger before he passed out… One hand clawed the one crushing his throat, while the other strained for the weapon... A roar in his ears grew louder. Dammit! He’d be out in another moment...

From the corner where Ciri and Dandelion huddled together, a blast of magically electrified energy pommeled him. The impact lifted the three hunters off him flinging them backwards towards the wall, and Geralt skidded across the floor several spans. One hunter slammed against the ladder snapping his back and slumped to the ground not to move again. The other two crashed against the wall, the breath knocked out of them. Another hunter also flattened against the wall right beside the others. All collapsed in a dazed stupor. Barrels smashed to smithereens around them, burlap bags, crates, dirt, glass bottles, brooms, and anything else not anchored down, either exploded or flung full steam against the cellar's natural walls. Everything shook to the very core. Dust billowed everywhere, making breathing even more difficult.

Freed from the hunters, Geralt coughed and hacked, sucking in ragged breaths of sandy air through a burning throat. His vision slowly returned to normal. What the hell?! That was a Witcher Sign… but he did not cast it!

Rolling onto his stomach, he locked gazes with Unnamed Man, and the fellow with glowing green eyes held his gaze steady. More than one emotion played across his features, intriguing though they were, but he did not have time to ponder them. He cradled a comatose Ciri in his arms and glanced down at her with a gleaming warm softness in his eyes. After a moment, he raised his gaze and met his again.

“Trust me, Wolf.”

His throat closed. Parched and burning, Geralt couldn’t speak if he wanted to, but never tore his gaze away from the boy. In a swirl of green light, the mysterious stranger vanished with Ciri in his arms.

“Noooo!!” Geralt's hoarse cry tore through a constricted throat died eerily in the sudden stillness. No one moved for a few beats. Dandelion regarded him with a shocked, yet blank expression.

The dust settled, the pain in his leg excruciating, his head pounded, his privates hurt, but his heart burst. He lost Ciri!! Taken from him so easily… he failed her! And so soon! They hadn’t reached Kaer Morhen and he failed! She’s gone! Despite the pain in his soul, he knew it all along… The boy had come for her. Dammit all to hell!!

Three hunters had regained their senses. Staggering to their feet, they withdrew their blades.
“Finish him off, for fuck's sake!” yelled the captain, watching from the vantage point of the hatch.

The three guards split up and one ran for Dandelion while the other two closed in on him. Sick at heart and pissed at this entire situation, the Witcher snarled like the animal he was named after and in one swift smooth motion, whipped the dagger from his belt and chucked it at the hunter before he reached the bard. The blade pierced through layers of leather and lodged between the man's shoulder blades as easily as slicing a piece of warm pie. It jarred the hunter to a halt and his arm reached back in a feeble attempt at pulling it out, but couldn’t reach it. He slowly crumbled to the ground in front of the minstrel.

A thump from a height landed behind him. Great, the captain joined in on the party!

The Witch-Hunters cursed, and two lunged for him baring their blades. With a furious upswing, Geralt parried the attack from the right and elbowed the hunter on the left in the nose. He went down on a knee clutching his face, red seeping between his fingers.

Pissed off, he parried the first hunter’s blows with rapid succession, without effort, and disarmed him easily. Yanking the guard toward him, he pommeled the top of his head with the hilt of his sword, knocking him out for good. Turning his attention back to Bleeding Nose, he grasped his head and twisted hard snapping his neck.

Focusing on the hunters’ leader, Geralt held up his sword and glared at the captain. The commander held up his hands, palms facing out.

“An impressive display, Witcher. To survive against such odds. And managed to protect those you call friends too. Well, except for the girl. Bad luck that.”

Geralt bared his teeth. He might have done him in with a flick of his fingers, one swift upswing with his blade, or twisted his neck with his bare hands. So many ways to kill a man… but he caught a glimpse of long wavy hair and distressed sapphire eyes watching from the hatch opening. Relieved Chessa was all right, the sight of her calmed him enough to not display just how brutal he could be. And brutal he could so easily be. And right now, he wanted to kill and kill as savagely as possible. A long hissing breath escaped his clenched teeth. But not here, not now.

“You’re a reasonable man.” He grated out in a low and lethal voice dripping with sarcasm. “Suggest you leave now. And never return.”

The captain looked around at the dead bodies of his company scattered around him. Geralt glanced as well satisfied at the varying degrees of blood soaking them and the ground. Not as many limbs dismembered as is typical after a fight, but he hardly used his sword this time.

The captain nodded. “You’re right, I am a reasonable man. The girl is gone, stolen right out from under you. At least she’s not with you anymore. My orders were to arrest you, but I’m no fool. I’m no match for you, Witcher, that is clear. Go back to whatever cave you crawled out of and if I run into you again, understand I’ll have to follow through with my orders.”

“And understand I’ll kill you if I have to.”

The captain nodded once, and retreated back up the ladder. Silence followed in his wake. Geralt stood silent as the captain climbed onto the main floor, look at Chessa briefly, then disappear from sight. His booted footsteps grew faint as he left the lab and common room. The front door clapped closed behind him.

Breathing out a huge sigh of relief, the bard flew over to Geralt, holding a broomstick in his white-
knuckled fist. Looking at it as if he saw it for the first time, he tossed it away.

“Geralt, are you all right? Ciri... She’s--”

“I know!” He barked and coughed. Swallowing hard, his throat burned.

“You’re bleeding. I’ll help you up the ladder.”

“My sword…”

“Don’t worry, I’ll grab your things.”

Chessa waited for them at the top of the ladder. Outstretching her hands, she grasped his upper arms and hauled him onto the floor while Dandelion pushed from below. With great effort, he twisted his body to avoid landing on top of her and collapsed next to her instead. Breathing hard through the pain, he gritted his teeth and groaned.

“He’s hurt,” Dandelion's frantic and needless statement only proved how much he cared for him.

She laid a hand on his arm. “I know, Dandelion. Good thing I’m a healer.”

“I’m fine,” Geralt snarled and rolled onto his knees stifling a wince. After a moment, he staggered to his feet favoring the injured leg. He slowly put weight on it. Tendons intact, muscle barely scratched. Tissue wound. Not severe and would heal quickly. Good.

He glanced at Chessa. Red and bruised, her cheekbone displayed the Witch-leader's handy work. Her bottom lip was swollen as well. And she showed no concern for herself. Dammit all!

“Are you, all right?” he murmured smoothing a hand over her wild waves and tucking them behind an ear. The bruise disguised split skin and it bled just a bit.

"Yes. I'll be all right."

He could tell by the softness in her eyes, she was grateful for his tenderness. Tenderness he didn't often allow himself to display.

He nodded toward Dandelion and surveyed the room, breathing out another curse. Her lab... destroyed! Everything scattered over the floor and turned over as if a gale had blown through it. All her equipment... broken and useless. The floor, covered with herbs and flower petals strewn about, upturned tables, shelving, and broken glass littered every floor space available and made walking anywhere hazardous.

Holy shit, this was all his fault! By seeking shelter here, he had endangered her, and her livelihood… Her home... Ah, dammit, desecrated because of him! And Ciri... gone! Everything had all gone horribly wrong! And why...?

He turned, and found Chessa’s soft gaze. She should hate him right now, yet she stared at him with sympathetic warmth in her eyes! He gritted his teeth at the same time his heart yearned. All because he had to fuck her! They would have been gone by now had he kept it in his pants. Gods above, he was a lustful, selfish mutant! None of this would have happened if he could control himself. How he took her last night… oh, it was special... for him, but he pursued his desire despite knowing it would only benefit him. It was selfish to use her like that!

“Geralt?” She stood, reaching for him, her eyes, brilliant and beautiful, and full of concern. She burned him. She set him on fire and this was the result!
He recoiled at her touch and immediately hated himself for doing so, for the dejected expression that clouded her beautiful face made him feel even more like a slug. He brought all this devastation upon her. All of it!

Looking about the ransacked lab, he couldn't meet their distressed gazes. Snatching his equipment, he stalked out the back door without looking back letting it bang on its hinges behind him in the stillness like an eerie omen. A raven, perched on a branch scurried into the air flapping its wings and cawing loudly, but paid it no heed. He needed to be alone… And find a way to get Ciri back. Fast.

But, how?

Pain throbbed in his temples.

How could he track someone who vanished into thin air?
Leaves crunched under his booted feet and he shoved a narrow low-hanging branch out of the way that whipped back into place after he passed. Had someone been walking behind him, it would have snapped them in the face.

Some guardian he was! He didn't prevent a girl, and not just any girl, a princess of all people, from getting abducted. He should have thought of the possibility, seen it coming, but she was stolen from right underneath his incompetent nose! He was a Witcher, this was what he did! Protected people, either from post-Conjunction monsters or ill-willed men… it didn't matter. He was supposed to protect her and he failed! And that mattered.

An hour of stalking about the woods and his leg finally stopped throbbing. Sitting on a fallen tree trunk, he inspected the slash on his thigh. It had scabbed over already and by morning, the scab would fall off and would be completely healed. The healing potion he drank a hour ago ensured no infection and sped up the healing process.

He continued walking, still unsure of his next steps. Master tracker that he was, this situation might be beyond his capabilities alone. Perhaps now was the time to swallow his pride and go to Yennefer for help. She could perform a magical scan to locate Ciri’s whereabouts and at least provide him with a geographical location to begin his search. She could be on the other side of the world or worse, south in Vizima, the seat of the Emperor. The strange man had ties in Nilfgaard. Perhaps he should just assume that was where he took her and get on the road immediately. The sooner he left, the sooner he'd get there. Might as well face it, going home to Kaer Morhen this winter wouldn’t happen. He’d never get to Vizima and back north to the Blue Mountains before the snows arrived. But, first things first.
He halted. Stillness had settled over the trees like a wool blanket. So deeply lost in thought, he hadn't noticed it before, but now it was clear. Nothing stirred, save for a slight breeze through the leaves that haven't yet fallen. No birds sang their sweet lullaby, nor any critters scrambled in the bush.

Focused now, he peered at the leaf-covered ground. Too late, he should have looked for tracks the moment he left Chessa’s house. Mud-caked, dry, and crunched leaves littered the ground in all directions made it difficult to decipher any footprints. Damn. Where was his head?!

A raven landed on a lower-hanging branch nearby and fluttered its wings, but didn't take off. Geralt froze, focused on it. The bird peered at him. Directly. As if it recognized him. Wait… Was this the same raven that took off in a rush when he had stormed out of the house earlier? What were the odds? Unless…

Muscles tensed, he scanned the trees, a sliver of a shiver shooting up the back of his neck and anticipation alighted deep in his belly. Alerted now, his fingers twitched for his blade, but instead, he lightly pressed his fingertips to his medallion. It trembled ever so slightly, so slightly, he wouldn't have known it reacted unless he had touched it.

Magic nearby. It’s weak… but definitely present. The bird?

The raven had not moved except shifted on the branch, but it still stared at him, its small black eyes penetrating. Could it be...? No… He lowered his eyes a moment before meeting the bird’s glare again. Maybe? Giving it once last long look beneath his brows, he slowly nodded, once.

Crouching low, he inspected the ground again, lightly swiping away some leaves and tiny sticks with gloved fingers. It did not take long before he spotted tracks in the damp ground. Human footprints. He followed them several paces and retraced his steps so he was near the raven again. The footprints, identical in size and shape tread in both directions. There was no road or even a path through this part of the woods so he ruled out general traffic. The distance between the prints were average for a young healthy man and sank into the ground a bit deeper than normal, meaning the man carried a load or armor weighed him down.

Quietly, he tread on the fallen leaves making as little sound as possible. When he passed underneath the branch again, the bird watched him a moment longer, then took off in the air in a flutter of midnight black wings.

The raven headed southwest.

It was not long before woodsmoke wafted through the trees and tantalized his nose. There were no houses nearby for the aroma to be that noticeable. Sniffing the sweet woody scent, he took his time detecting the direction from which it came. It could be a camp, a bandit camp, or an out-of-the-way residence, but he had better check it out. He didn't want any surprises.

The raven lightly landed on a branch a few paces ahead and turned its onyx eyes on him, and then looked southwest, the direction he headed.

Someone once told him ravens possessed an intellect many considered extraordinary. He’d see just how smart they really were. Crouching low, and staying close to the brush, he crept up the crest of a small hill and hid in the shadows of the dying daylight. Well, well… Perhaps ravens were intelligent after all, or perhaps they were obedient little creatures.

Curling his lip, he crouched behind the nearest tree and focused all his senses down over a little valley. And at the paltry camp tucked between a circle of trees.
What have we here? Reaching back over his right shoulder and across his silver sword, he wrapped a gloved hand around the glacial solid hilt of his steel blade and drew it silently from its scabbard on his back.

The raven launched into the air as silent as a wisp of smoke and seemingly disappeared in like manner.

As daylight dwindled, he studied the camp from his vantage point on the crest of the hill. A small fire encircled in a ring of stones was the focal point, complete with a rabbit roasting on a homemade spit of whittled tree branches. An axe, upside down with its long wooden handle propped against a pile of chopped wood, and a thick chunk of a tree stump sat by the fire served as a bench to sit upon.

Under a nearby sprawling pine with bowing branches for some protection, laid a bed roll spread on fallen pine needles and leaves. A couple leather saddlebags and a canvas bag huddled at the end of the roll were probably used as pillows. Something round and black laid propped against the bags, but deciphering what it was from this distance was difficult in the dying light.

One bed roll. One man’s camp.

He crept closer, inspecting the ground. Many tracks, mostly footprints the average size for a human male, muddied up the ground and judging by the older dryer tracks, he’d been here a few days. The prints sank into the ground more so than normal. Either the man was massive or… He wore armor. He was sure of it judging by the clarity and straight edges of the prints.

Hoof prints and noticeable piles of equine waste littered the perimeter. A traveler for sure.

The rabbit had roasted for a while judging by its browned crisped skin. A copper plate and utensils laid scattered on the ground by the fire ring. Had the traveler left in a hurry? As stealthy as Witchers were, maybe he had heard him approach camp. No, that wasn’t it. Geralt would have heard him before he had found the camp.

Turning, he crouched under the low hanging branches and inspected the bed roll. Spotting the dark piece he couldn’t identify from the hill, he exhaled audibly through his nostrils.

Dammit! Another one.

An armored helmet, black as night, and the shiny golden emblem he knew so well mocked him. Standing quickly, he kicked the headgear and it would have rolled away but for the tall wings of prey adorning either side of the helmet that prevented it from doing so. Geralt cursed. The winged helm signified a ranking officer. A cursed Black One, another friggin Nilfgaardian who had no business sneaking around this far north.

The raven landed with ease on the woodpile. He glared at it as it glowered at him.

“What are you telling me, bird?”

Its feathers rippled, but it remained on the woodpile. If it warned him of the returning officer, it would have cawed and taken off, but the fact it was quiet and stayed meant he was clear for the moment. Although, he should not tarry.

“I’ve seen enough.”

Turning, Geralt stared at the dying fire. A foggy mist had rolled in low on the ground and a feeling someone watched him made the hairs stand up on the back of his neck. Perhaps the officer finally
decided to return to camp.

He glanced at the woodpile. The raven was gone. What the--?

A familiar floral scent cut through the heavy and sweet woodsy aroma of burning wood. He sniffed again. Stronger this time… and unmistakable. It had to be…

He glanced back toward the crest of the hill and stiffened. A petite figure, heavily draped in a long black hooded cloak, strode to the edge of camp. The hood, pulled low, obscured the features of the individual, but he did not need to see the face to know who approached. He knew that figure and fragrance well. All too well.

She stopped a few paces from him before the fire. The heady scent made him weak in the knees. He caught his breath, a delightful shiver followed by a chill of dread forked up and down his spine.

Two delicate hands in fur-trimmed black leather gloves pushed the hood back off her head and he held his breath. Long midnight curls, in stark contrast against a creamy pale complexion, cascaded like a waterfall over slender shoulders, spilled over her breasts, and dangled passed her waist.

He exhaled slowly as a tingle fluttered in his lower belly. Despite the bitterness of their last spat that had estranged them, he was glad she was here now. Her expertise was sorely needed if he were to find Ciri fast.

Stately arched and kohl-lined brows lowered over penetrating violet eyes cold as a shard of ice. Ruby lips pursed closed without the slightest hint of a delighted smile of greeting, but rather, an accusatory curl of her upper lip frayed his soul. And she hadn’t even spoken a word.

“Geralt.”

Her icy imperial tone accurately depicted her mood and despite it, her beauty still took his breath away. He swallowed and managed to find breath enough to speak.

“Yennefer,” he grated through a constricted throat. He offered a polite nod as his gaze soaked in her frigid beauty that heated him to the core. At least they were still on a first name basis.

She took a step forward and the folds of her cloak opened revealing her attire, her customary black and white color scheme she rarely, if ever deviated from. A black form-fitting jacket, buttoned by a line of several moderately sized pearls covered a sheer white blouse underneath. The jacket’s feminine cut hugged the top of her delightfully rounded hips… hips that tormented his dreams often.

He swallowed, letting his gaze roam down the curvature of slim legs in tight black pants and thigh-high leather boots complete with several silver belts and buckles. Even though the boots had heels, her head barely reached his shoulders. A tingle shot through him at the memory of those legs opening for him...

Clearing his throat, he rasped, “Of all places… why are you here?”

The flash of sharp eyes glinted in the firelight. A sparkle caught his attention and his gaze dropped to her slender throat. A black velvet choker showcased an obsidian star talisman she never removed, much like he rarely took off his wolf-head medallion. The dying daylight undulated off the tiny diamonds framing the star and it dazzled him, as did she. The diamonds’ movements were barely imperceptible; only a few could detect it's magical abilities.

“So that’s the greeting I get?”
Her chin lifted in that haughty manner so familiar and irksome it brought to mind a vision of Ciri doing so likewise. He swallowed a grin.

“A simple ‘Glad to see you again, my love,’ or ‘You look well, dear’ would have sufficed.” Her melodious voice shot sharp as her gaze in the misty evening, piercing through the quiet trees. “Or better yet, how about an apology? No... All I get is - ‘Why are you here?’”

Her mimic of his question was spot on and he grimaced inwardly at her biting sarcasm, wanting to tear his gaze away, but could not. He cocked a brow.

She took a step closer and leered up at him. “I could go on, Geralt…”

“Please don't,” he muttered, but stood his ground, peering into her eyes, soaking in her presence and fragrance he loved so much.

She ignored the comment.

“Thank you for leaving without saying goodbye. The letter on my bedside table was a feeble explanation at best, but really, that was the best you could do? A year, Geralt. We lived together one year and that’s how you treated me--”

“I’m an idiot and a bastard, I know.”

“I can think of better words--”

“Bet you can, Yen, and they'd be accurate.” He held her gaze. “We need to clear the air between us, but frankly, I’m in a hurry and it will have to wait.” He hated having to shove their relationship to the back burner, but reality was the damage had already been done. He needed to steer her to the task at hand to find Ciri fast. One learned quick not to piss off a sorceress, although that was a talent he possessed in abundance, but he had to risk it.

Her gorgeous eyes widened at his frankness, clearly not expecting it. She clamped her mouth closed and stared at the flickering flames.

“You tracked me.” His soft spoken raspy statement, in severe contrast to her sharpness, jarred him. Honestly, he didn't think she would come after him. She wasn't the type. “It was always the other way around.”

“Don't flatter yourself, Witcher. As much as you think I'm desperate for your cock, think again. I did not come after you like some lovesick kitten who has missed her playmate. There are far more pressing matters.”

He bristled at her tone and the way she so easily belittled his affection for her. Not wanting to show it, he disguised it by throwing a couple logs on the dying flames. Sparks showered in all directions, caught the embers, and soon roared with new life.

“Right… I should have known,” he growled with an equal amount of sarcasm. “Why would you need me? You don't need anything or anyone.” He tried to keep his voice steady and even, from reflecting the hurt, but wasn't sure he succeeded.

Silence fell between them. He stared at her, then turned his gaze on the dancing flames. She moved closer. Holding out his hand, palm up, he offered assistance even though she’d ignore it. Surprisingly, her tightly gloved fingers took his. The weakness in his knees returned.

Drawing her near, he breathed in her scent deeply. Lilac and gooseberries. Her unique creation
always had a powerful effect on him. With a gloved finger, he swiped at a raven curl near her breast and watched it coil around his finger, its sheen mesmerizing. He smiled to himself. Her hair always had fascinated him.

“Whatever your reasons,” he murmured, towering over her petite frame, “Glad you’re here. Missed you.”

Her clear blue-violet gaze met his under a thick fan of long black lashes and he couldn't say anything more. For a brief moment, warmth thawed the chill of her gaze. Blessed warmth. Was that a hint of a smile that tugged at the corner of her lips? His breath lodged in his throat. How she effected him! Even though she was still angry with him, he wanted her. No, needed her. In more ways than one.

She sat down gracefully on the tree stump and crossed her legs in a slow sensual movement, drawing out the motion as if she took pleasure in tormenting him. Averting his gaze, he focused on the fire contained within the ring of stones rather than the one burning in his trousers.

“I need you, Yen.”

“You're the one who did the leaving, Geralt…”

He huffed out an irritated sigh. “Can we drop it? I was wrong, Yen, I know, but I need your expertise now and have little time--”

“So, it's true,” she murmured narrowing her eyes, “This is all about the young girl. And clearly, you are extremely anxious about her.”

He glanced at her not at all surprised. She knew nothing about him taking Ciri under his wings. But sorceresses would never change. Especially Yen. Reading his mind came like second nature to her. He nodded.

“Reports from Cintra conflict, but the princess lives... and you have something to do with that.” Her curios gaze did not waver.

“Conflicting how?”

The crunching of leaves nearby caught his attention. He glanced at Yen. She hadn’t heard it. Not that he expected her to, but it gave him a better understanding the distance the sound had come.

“All reports agree that Cintra was destroyed, overthrown, and Queen Calanthe committed suicide rather than be taken a hostage of Nilfgaard. But the princess... Reports conflict on her wellbeing and whereabouts. A rumor has spread that Cirilla perished soon after Calanthe. Made sense, few believe a young princess could survive on her own after such a traumatic event and no allies. Others swear she lives, but no one has seen her since the massacre.”

Yennefer uncrossed her legs and leaned towards him. “She lives... and you know where she is. Don’t you?”

For a moment, his stomach clenched as anxiety birthed anew inside him. A fleeting thought crossed his mind questioning how much information to provide the sorceress. Yennefer served as advisor to King Demavend of Aedirn. In one way or another, she got involved in politics and Ciri was no ordinary girl... Maybe he should keep the information to a minimum... just to be safe. He trusted Yen, but didn’t want to put her in a position that would compromise her loyalty to him. Ciri was an unseated and unprotected princess and that made her an attractive ransom to anyone who discovered her lineage. But then, all Yen had to do was probe around a little deeper in his mind.
She’d figure it out eventually.

He poked the embers with a long branch. “She lives.”

Turning, he dropped the branch and grasped her hand pulling her to her feet. “Not here, Yen. Need to make sure there are no prying eyes and ears.”

With a short quick movement of her head, she tossed her curls over a shoulder. “Of course, why would we speak here in the middle of a forest alone?”

Narrowing his eyes at her, his sharp ears caught the snap of sticks and crunch of leaves not too far away. It confirmed the sound he thought he had heard a few moments ago. The traveler returned to his camp only to find it occupied. Had to be.

“This isn’t my camp. Let’s go before the owner returns.”

“Where to?”

He sighed, already dreading the confrontation at the healer’s house. “Just walk with me. Or teleport and find me later. We need to leave now.”

“Fine. I’ll give you an hour and a half and then I will teleport to your coordinates. Is that enough time?”

He nodded.

Waving her arms in a graceful arc above her head, the air around grew heavy and dense. An electrical charge split the air and the tiny hairs stood on the back of his neck as an oblong shape opened up a few paces beyond camp. The portal sucked all the air into its black vortex and he struggled to breathe. He hated that feeling.

The sorceress pulled the hood over her raven tresses and headed for the magical teleport. At the last moment, he clutched her wrist and yanked her back against the solid wall of his chest. Before she could protest, he grasped her chin, turned her face toward him, and captured her mouth in a fiercely passionate kiss that left no question about how he felt about her. The sweetness of her dry velvety lips drove him to want more. Trembling, he pulled away before he did something else foolish.

Breathless, her eyes met his and her painted lids closed a brief moment. Her mouth turned up at one corner and her eyes sparkled in the magical light.

Without a word, she pushed off his chest, her hand near his medallion, and passed through the portal. It closed a moment later releasing the air again. His lungs burned with the fresh rush of air and he breathed in deep.

He smiled to himself. She had every right to be mad at him. It was a cowardly and stupid thing to do to just leave without a word like he had instead of facing the situation like an adult. But now there was hope they could smooth things over.

Remembering where he was, he listened for more sounds and left the camp. A rumble of thunder in distance barely registered in his brain as he walked for a quarter hour before turning on his heel and headed back toward the camp. That should have been enough time for the traveler to believe he was gone and relax his guard, or he packed up camp and left.

Hopefully, he was still there. He wanted to get a look at this Nilfgaardian and have a word with
Peeking around the same tree that he had hid behind earlier, he observed the young dark haired Nilfgaardian inspect his camp, making sure nothing had been taken.

Geralt shook his head. So what was this guy all about and why was he alone this far north of the army?

The officer had shed his black armor and wore unremarkable clothing soiled from weeks on the road. He sat on the stump gripping his sword hilt with grimy hands, eyeing the trees, not convinced he would not get a return visit. His black steed, a well-equipped and fine breed, fully saddled and armored face gear glinting with the firelight, grazed a few paces beyond camp.

Soiled clothing… Few possessions other than a horse and armor. Looked like he had been traveling for weeks or months even... And it had been weeks since Geralt had taken Ciri under his protection…

Flattening his back against the tree, he drew in a ragged breath as realization dawned and things started to make sense. Unnamed Man, the mysterious stranger, might not have been the one following him as he had believed. Geralt peeked around the tree again at the camp. Another Nilfgaardian officer… It was he then, not Unnamed Man who had been following them all along. Since the moment he became responsible for Ciri... The moment he faced his destiny and took her from the merchant’s home in Sodden. He’d been after her, to take her to his Emperor, no doubt. No other explanation made sense. So the mysterious stranger had told the truth… but could the mystery boy and this officer be working together?

Quietly unsheathing his blade, raindrops pelted him on the head and Geralt emerged from the trees. Stalking with quick purposeful strides towards camp, he gained a fair amount of satisfaction when the officer became aware of him, sprang from the stump in surprise, and tried to ready himself for a confrontation, but was not quick enough to out maneuver the Witcher.

Purposeful strides had quickly turned into a full sprint and Geralt roared, accompanied by a well-timed brilliant flash of lightning and an ear splitting crack of thunder. Ferociously, he swung his blade and with a twist of his wrist batted the officer’s blade aside with a cracking ring of steel and disarmed him. The boy’s sword careened across the flames and landed on the ground on the other side of the campfire.

The officer turned to flee and dropping his own weapon, Geralt tucked his head and tackled the man full force before he was able to run, pitching them both to the muddy ground face first and sliding a few paces before coming to a stop. The force of it splattered mud in all directions and knocked the breath from the boy and he grunted. Clutching the back of his head, Geralt shoved his face into the mud and kneed him between the shoulder blades with all his weight. It prevented him from rising or throwing him off. Rain streamed down upon them in torrents, extinguishing the fire in a billowing cloud of pungent woodsmoke.

“Who are you and why are you following me?” Geralt growled, his mouth close to the man’s ear. Rainwater streamed in a line off his nose onto the ground next to the man's face.
The officer groaned, unable to speak, and struggled underneath him trying to buck him off with powerful throes of his hips. Geralt shoved his face deeper into the ground one more time, then removed his hand, but still pinned him to the ground with his knee.

The boy turned his head to the side and hacked, spitting out dirt and mud before drawing in deep ragged breaths. “Let… me go…” he croaked. “Can’t… breathe…” He spit out more dirt. He struggled with effort to flip onto his back. Geralt ground his knee on his spinal column. He cried out, but continued to struggle against him.

“Not until you tell me why you’re following me. You working with the stranger from Nilfgaard… with a golden sun and wolf-head medallion?”

The officer froze, not moving a muscle.

“So you are working together conspiring against me.”

“What?!” The officer coughed again.

Another flash of lightning lit the trees for a brief instant before everything went dark once more.

Geralt eased up on his hold allowing the man to flip onto his back. He crouched low, straddling him on one knee, and clutched the boy around the throat, but not hard enough to prevent him from speaking. His face, completely matted with mud and dirt, and a leaf or two, obscured his features.

“Talk. Now.”

“I... I mean you no harm, but… but, I’ll kill you if I have to.”

“You’re in a good position for that, friend.” Geralt hissed with as much venomous sarcasm as he could muster.

Twisting his fists in his grubby tunic, he yanked his shoulders off the ground. Baring his teeth, Geralt leered at him, getting close up in his face.

“You working with the other Nilfgaardian? The one who took her? You know where she is? Tell me, or I'll strangle you here and now!” He shook him, adding emphasis to his words.

The officer ceased struggling. A flash of lightning illuminated him and wide eyes, strikingly sky-blue, brimmed with surprise and bewilderment. His brows crinkled, but did not speak.

“Who is the other Nilfgaardian?” hissed Geralt, his patience run out. He didn't have time for this. Yen was expecting him, and had to get back. “Answer me, dammit!”

“I know of no other Nilfgaardian!”

"You're alone?”

“Yes, I'm alone!”

Geralt glowered at him, rain streaming in his eyes. He shook away the water with an annoyed shake of his head.

“You know of a golden sun emblem with a wolf-head in the center? Ever seen one?”

The officer blinked rapidly, the rain streaking mud down his face, his expression blank.
“Answer me!” Geralt rattled him again.

The young man shook his head, dark strands of hair plastered to his forehead and caked in mud around his face. “Never seen such a symbol!” The familiar accent of their neighbors to the south was barely detectable under the growl of angry rolling thunder, but did not stop him from speaking. “Don't know who or what you’re talking about, I swear!”

Frustrated beyond words, Geralt tightened his grip on the officer's shirt peering hard into his eyes. Blue and striking, they stared him down, not a hint of fear in them. But, compassion and honor, he did detect.

“You can't have her.” His grated statement tore from his throat. Water ran down his cheeks and nose and dripped on the officer's face.

The Nilfgaardian said nothing, only continued to stare at him as rain pelted him. Mud streaks lined a youthful bearded jawline. Young for an officer of the empire.

Yanking his tunic, he lifted him off the ground almost into a sitting position. He leered at him. “She's mine,” he hissed. “Understand? The girl belongs to me, not your Emperor. Tell him he'll have to do without her. Or he’ll have to get through me. And I'm not so easily disposed.”

“Even a Witcher is no match for the largest army in the world.”

The statement carried a sinister note to it backdropped by another thunderclap. Geralt clenched his teeth as his stomach knotted painfully. He twisted the tunic tighter and the officer clawed at his fists in an attempt to breathe.

“Watch me.”

The man craned his neck and gasped in air.

“The other Nilf… gaardian…” he wheezed.

Geralt loosened his hold just a bit.

“He's… taken her?”

“What do you know of him?” he growled.

“Nothing! Only that he… succeeded where I... failed. And…” the officer narrowed his eyes and ground out, “I’m no Nilfgaardian.”

With a snarl more vicious than the fanged wolf-head depicting his guild, he hammered the officer in the jaw with a silver studded gloved fist. His head flung to one side with a grunt, and blood streamed in a thick jagged line from his slacked jaw. His body went limp. Geralt let go of his tunic, letting him fall back to the ground, the muck and water splattered in a circle around his head.

Dammit, the shit didn't know anything about the mysterious Nilfgaardian or the strange emblem. Crouching there a moment longer, he slumped his shoulders and sighed heavily. The rain battered him, splashing off his shoulders into his face. Still didn't learn any new information other than he had been the one following him for weeks. Cursed Black Ones and their nefarious ambitions! Gods damn that Emperor who couldn’t leave a young girl well enough alone!

His sole hope rested in Yennefer and her magical expertise. Hopefully, he could keep things smooth between them long enough for her to help in any way she could.
Retrieving his sword, he sheathed it and took off in the woods, in the dark, rapid lightning and thunder his companions. As he ran, dodging trees, low hanging branches, and splashing water and mud in his wake, the raven followed him low in the heavily misty night, swerving in and out between the trees. She stayed in speed with him, never falling behind nor flying too far ahead.

He grinned to himself. Yeah, he should’ve known. And he loved it.

Yennefer kept watch over him.
Things escalate when Geralt makes it back to the healer's homestead anticipating Yennefer's arrival and assistance in finding Ciri who had vanished along with the Mysterious Stranger. Yen does help, but the outcome is not what anyone imagines.

The ending of this chapter has a reveal that will throw many, but I encourage you to hang in there! Yes, it steers from canon, but we knew that it would from the get-go, right? ;) This is the first instance and may I remind any readers that find this upsetting, this is fan-fiction. Veering from canon is expected (that is what fan-fiction is), so just go along with the ride and enjoy it with the rest of us :).

**Chapter Content Warning: Mild use of strong language and a boat load of feelings ;)

*2/9/19 - Edited to fix a calculation error.

Many thanks to my beta reader Vic-of-Thor whose input and support has been invaluable!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes
CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Ghosts of the Future

Chessa wrung her hands, repeatedly glancing at the barn’s closed and barred doors. Not that she could see it much at all in the darkness. A cluster of candles on the table provided the only light in the loft in between the flashes of lightning.

At least here, they were safe from those hideous… things outside swarming about her homestead. She had never seen anything like them and hoped never to again! The stuff of nightmares! The sight of their twisted fleshly bodies resembled humans, with arms and legs, but there the similarity ended, for they crawled about on all fours like dogs, and fed on… She shook her head. And their cries... chilling! A shudder racked her frame.

Glancing over her shoulder, she stole a peek at Dandelion staring out the window. Unusually quiet tonight, he looked lost. But then again, the events of the last day or two were… well… less than ordinary. A flash of white illuminated the pond and trees and then all became black again.

Geralt had taken off after the confrontation in the cellar and hopefully, he was all right. Oh, physically, she had no doubt he would be, but he was clearly overwrought. She didn’t blame him. Ciri, kidnapped right in front of them, sent him over the edge and if she understood his character at all, he carried the burden of responsibility for all that had taken place since their arrival. Her heart went out to him. She couldn't imagine the life a witcher led, but it surely couldn't be an easy one.

Drawing her shawl tighter around her, she glanced at the door again expecting to see him come bursting through declaring all was safe like a white knight common in children’s tales. She sighed. What’s the sense in getting wrapped up in him? Clearly attracted to each other, he was drawn to her warmth and he fulfilled in her a need she had for awhile. It was… she sighed, so refreshing to have a man… a real man around the house these last few days. But, he was going to leave as soon as he found Ciri. Chances were slim she’d ever see him again, and besides, he had Yen, whoever she was. She must be someone special… His lover, no doubt.

Her heart dropped. Be realistic, he’s a vagabond, a wanderer, not the kind to settle down. Probably had a young woman waiting for him in every corner of the continent. How could he settle when he had to roam constantly to make any kind of living? The life of a witcher must be hard... to sacrifice so much, a home, a family, risking his neck every day...

Her stomach churned. Wrapping an arm around her belly, she leaned forward over the railing pressing her fingers to her lips. An acrid burning odor of flesh, hair, and gods-knew-what choked her.
“Oh dear,” she gagged. “What is that gods-awful stench?” Turning, she met Dandelion's gaze. “Is that coming from…?”

“Your house?” the bard finished for her. “My guess, it is--”

“My home is on fire?!” She rushed over to the window, but because it looked out over the pond, she couldn't see her house off to the side. But the water reflected dancing orange and red flames… Oh, blessed Melitele... Her home! Engulfed with fire!

A hand rested on her shoulder and Dandelion's presence close beside offered little comfort, but at least he made the attempt.

“I don't believe your house is burning to the ground--”

She whirled on him. "Then what *is* burning? Look at the pond!"

The dark circles under his eyes made her regret her outburst. He was certainly not his usual cheerful, laissez-faire self. He rubbed a tired-looking eye.

“The Witcher’s cleaning up. Necrophages feed on the dead and had sniffed out the corpses in your cellar. The only way to be rid of them is to burn them. I’m sure your house is not on fire. Good news is he's back and we’re safe now.”

She swallowed hard at the thought of the witcher facing those… ungodly creatures alone. And that was his job. She shuddered. "Well, I'm not going anywhere until he tells us it's safe.”

"Fair enough."

Silence settled between them and the bard crossed the loft and sat down in the chair. Elbows on knees, he removed his barret and forked fingers through messy dark blonde hair tousling it even more.

She leaned back against the wall and crossed her arms. "Who’s Yen?" she whispered.

His head snapped up. Locking gazes with hers, he didn't respond.

Cursing herself silently, she hadn't meant to vocalize the question that had plagued her since last night. The desire to know had clearly percolated, but she couldn’t bring herself to ask the witcher without revealing how she knew... for that would… would… She shook her head. He'd feel bad. Plain and simple. She didn't want to add to his troubles. But now that it was out there, this was a perfect opportunity, after all, he and the bard shared a strong friendship, odd as it was. Two individuals couldn't be more polar opposites, yet they've built this companionship that only left one scratching their heads in wonder. Who could define or judge friendships? But he knew Geralt well.

Going with it, she found courage to finally ask the question. “Who is she? Tell me, please.”

“Yennefer of Vengerberg.”

He stated her name in such a matter-of-fact way, as if she should have recognized it. She didn't. The woman that well known? So famous she should know it? Lifting a shoulder, she cocked a brow at him. The name sounded impressive. And important.

“A powerful sorceress,” he clarified. “Extremely powerful.”
Of course. Who could compete against a magic user? “That's it?” She stifled an irritated huff. “There's more. Please, I... I want to know.”

His eyes, wide and soft, pleaded with her, but then he sighed and sat back in the chair.

“Hmmm… Since Geralt mentioned her to you--”

"He didn't, actually. At least… not intentionally.” she muttered, cheeks flaming. Turning, she gazed out the window again focusing on nothing in particular in the darkness, not wanting him to notice the flush in her face or the pain in her eyes.

"Oh? Well… then...” He cleared his throat and straightened his shoulders. “Yennefer is advisor to King Demavend of Aedirn. She has a shop in her home and helps families conceive. Sometimes, she even helps deliver the babies, although she is no midwife.” He chuckled knowingly. "She's... well, quite a woman.”

This time, she didn't bother stifling a huff and tossed her hair over a shoulder and glanced sideways at him. “Just tell me what I wish to know.”

Dandelion sighed and hesitated. “Why do this to yourself?” he murmured finally.

She glanced back out the window and another bright flash lit the backdrop of her homestead and the loft in a harsh light then everything succumbed to darkness once again. Only the candles shed their unobtrusive golden glow.

“I see.” The bard stood and plucked his lute from the corner by his bedroll. A deep groan of thunder filled the silence.

Gnawing her bottom lip with her teeth, she blurted it out. “She’s his wife, isn't she?” The disappointment lacing her voice was clearly evident even to her own ears. She berated herself again.

He sat back down and adjusted the instrument on his lap and strung a slow melancholic chord then played a sweet, but sad melody.

Thought as much. Her stomach knotted and her hopes, unreasonable as they were, crushed beneath his silence and soulful music. Of course she was his wife. If not, then she was clearly his mistress. No one called out just anyone's name in a moment of great passion.

“Chessa…” Dandelion hummed. “Witchers rarely marry.”

Married or not, it didn't matter. She owned his passions, that was clear. “He loves her. Say it.”

The lute chords filled the loft in a soft pleasant tune that warmed the soul. The bard hummed along feeling out a new melody birthed on the spot.

She blinked back tears and gazed out the window again. Didn't matter. He called out Yen's name… that said enough.

Dandelion added his voice to the music giving it a haunting element. “The wolf and the raven....” he sung in a lovely warm tenor. “A love so complex... began so beautifully...” he paused and let his strumming take over for a moment. Filled with longing, the notes made her yearn. “A passion flamed like none I've ever seen. But the longing and the pain... every detail... left neither one the same.”
Squeezing her stinging eyes closed, her lips trembled, not able to withstand the power of the music or stirring vocals that pierced the heart. Her affections once again went out to the witcher, for even a relationship so passionate as he claimed, it too was plagued with turmoil. Seemed nothing came easily for him. No doubt the cause that drove him into her arms.

She drew in a ragged breath. The bard surely was a famed troubadour for good reason. “You’re a true poet master, Dandelion. When you finish composing that ballad someday, I’d love to hear it.”

His fingers continued to stroke deftly over the lute strings. He smiled meaningfully at her. Continuing his ab lib in the same melody as before, he hummed, “And the lovely healer, with a heart of pure gold. But her longing for the witcher…. remains untold.”

Remains untold. And that was how it would be. Swiping a stray tear from her eye, she rested her forehead against the cool window frame. Well, she was never lucky with love, so why would this be any different? But, Geralt was the only man who set me on fire, made me feel alive and desirable again. In all these years, no man had affected me as potently as he did.

Wait… There he was. A flash of light illuminated the witcher, splattered from head to boot with blood, mud, and goodness knew what else… she didn’t even want to imagine. Despite it, she breathed out in relief. He was all right and had taken care of those hideous monsters just as Dandelion had said. Geralt headed towards the barn.

Straightening up, she wiped dry her eyes and pulled her shawl tighter around her shoulders. “He’s coming.”

The side man-door burst open with the wind and rain. A second later, all light sources flamed with bright dancing flames, illuminating the barn in a soft golden glow. He had something to do with that, but not sure how.

Dismissing the thought, she hurried to the rail and sucked in her breath. Grim and menacing even from here, he was a figure worthy of respect and fear. Soaking wet, every tall inch of him caked with blood and mud. Even his beautiful snowy white locks now a mousy gray was streaked with blood giving him a foreboding appearance. The myriad of silver buckles and studs of his armor no longer shone, but barely visible beneath a thick layer of muck. She had never seen a man so filthy. And that said something since she’d treated all sorts of people in many professions, mostly farmers who were no strangers to getting dirty.

Glancing around the stable first, he finally raised his eyes to the loft and settled on her. She held her breath. His eyes glowed yellow! But it was his expression that made her go weak piercing her even from this distance.

“Geralt!” Dandelion joined her at the rail. “Finally, you've returned. By all that is holy! You look awful!”

The stony glare the witcher shot him chilled her. Shaking it off, she scurried over to the ladder and lowered it over the ledge. Geralt held up his hand halting her.

“Stay up there.”

His command vibrated in her chest and she froze, rooted to the floorboards.

“Don't want to be near me right now.”

Good sense in that. Probably smelled worse than he looked, but all she wanted was to be near him.
“The ghouls are dead and all corpses burned.” His no-nonsense deep gravelly voice carried throughout the stables and up into the loft. “Including those in the cellar. Shouldn't get any more visitors.”

Suddenly, an unpleasant feeling choked her and she found it difficult to breathe. All the light sources dimmed and a few flames extinguished completely. What was happening? Gasping, she clutched at her throat and understood why the torches and candles lost their light. Geralt's expression remained chiseled, although his eyes lit up even more than they were a moment ago.

“That is, except…”

She slid her gaze from the witcher to the bard. Dandelion's blank expression revealed nothing, but he paled a bit and drew in a deep breath. So he struggled too. Her heart thudded and a chill raced down her leg. She looked to Geralt again.

A gust of wind from nowhere rushed through the stable and clobbered her full force stealing what little air she had. She staggered backwards. It grew in intensity kicking up all items not bolted to the floor, swirling hay, leaves, dirt, and fodder in a vortex in the middle of her stable. Her hands held down her billowing skirts as a strong gust came up from below. Her hair sucked along with it snapped her in the face and made it difficult to see. The horses cried, and anxious, stomped in their stalls, the whites of their eyes visible from here. The witcher's hair, caught up in the breeze, whipped in all directions around his face as well but he didn't move, unperplexed by it all.

“Except what??” she gasped. Gods have mercy, what was happening?! A tornado in her stable?! And why can't I breathe?!

* * *

A magically charged orange and black swirling vortex, that she could only assume was a portal, closed with a snap behind a cloaked individual who materialized before the witcher. Everything that was sucked towards the vortex plummeted to the floor simultaneously in a radius around the newcomer as if a magnet in the floor overpowered all. Darkness swallowed them and suddenly the torches and candles flared with new life shedding their warm glow in the barn.

Fresh air bathed her and greatly relieved, Chessa breathed easily again. Drawing in huge breaths, her deprived lungs burned.

The graceful figure took a step toward the witcher wearing impressively fashionable thigh-high and heeled leather boots, form fitting black trousers, and matching riding coat. Of slight frame, she moved with practiced grace, and her tall carriage and fine attire bespoke her status and confidence.

A sinking feeling assaulted her stomach as the lady shoved back the hood from her head. At the sight of her shining midnight curls, creamy pale skin, thin ruby lips, and high cheekbones in a triangular-shaped face, Chessa suddenly felt inferior in the presence of such perfection. Taking a step back, she wanted nothing more than to disappear into the wood beams. Never had she seen anyone more beautiful and radiant. But despite those feelings, she smoothed back her wild waves with shaking fingers and took a deep breath, straightening her shoulders. She was not the cringing type.

The elegant woman's gaze swept the place with a critical and disapproving eye, clearly evident in
her pursed lips and one raised brow. Her eyes, glistening violet, noticed the bard and then raked over her. Chessa ceased to breathe. If she were a dried up leaf, the sorceress's glare scorched like the sun. That hard stare could shrivel anyone, but swallowing hard, she stood straight and tall.

The woman's gaze then landed on the witcher. Again, her lips tightened while scanning him from head to toe and back. An imperial brow arched higher and a gloved hand rested on a hip.

“How filthy you've become in such a short time. You couldn't have bathed knowing I would arrive soon? I could smell you through the portal.”

Geralt’s eyes narrowed ever so slightly. “I'm a witcher, remember?”

The sorceress eyed him without blinking.

The bard exhaled audibly and Chessa glanced at him. He gripped the railing until his knuckles turned white. He watched the exchange below with a serious expression and lips pressed tightly together. Chessa turned her attention back to the center of the stable, apprehension twisting her insides. She quietly moved beside him.

“Who is she?”

The bard peered at her from the corner of his eyes, the gravity of his gaze spoke volumes. Her stomach flopped. It was all the answer she needed. She gnawed the inside of her bottom lip as tension clenched her jaw and hopelessness weighed in her belly. So this was the infamous Yen, the extremely powerful sorceress, advisor to King Demavend, worker of miracles, and… dammit, the lady whose name Geralt uttered with passion. Of course they were lovers! Just look at her.... every man's dream.

Geralt took a step closer to Yennefer. His broad shoulders and towering height dwarfed her slight frame. “What do you need to perform a magical scan?”

Folding her arms across a pristine black velvety chest, Yennefer took a couple steps backwards, her nose wrinkled in disgust. “Again, a 'Hello, my love,' would have sufficed.”

He didn't react.

"What kind of scan? There are different types, you know. A body scan? Mind scan--?”

“Location scan. Need you to find someone. Fast. Can you do it?”

Silence thundered in the barn.

Chessa swallowed and started down the ladder quietly. This was her home and she was going to be a proper hostess. Sorceress or not, lover or not, it was simply rude not to be.

“Astromancy is not easy nor quick.” Yennefer narrowed her eyes slightly. "What is this all about, Geralt? And can we talk somewhere more comfortable? Really, a stable of all places and where's the gir--”

“Don't have time to explain, Yen. This is urgent." The witcher's usual soft spoken gravel boomed inside the quietness in obvious irritation.

She blinked at him.

“Please.” This time he tempered his impatience with a soft spoken plea that melted hearts. Well, at
least hers. Not so sure about Yen’s.

“Geralte, you’re a bloody mess and I cannot even begin to describe how offensive… Get cleaned up first and we’ll discuss the situation.”

Summoning courage, Chessa approached and smiled genuinely despite the stomach churning stench and Yennefer’s cool controlled gaze. Both petite women, she and the sorceress stood eye to eye. If only she possessed the same strong and proud spirit.

“Greetings, Mistress. I’m honored with your gracious presence in my home. I’m Chessa, a healer.” She bent into a slight curtsy. The sorceress's hard unblinking glare pierced deep into her soul laying it bare before them. Feeling a bit naked, she refused to shrivel beneath her scrutiny and smiled her most gracious smile and glanced at Geralt.

His expression could have been carved of stone. Did he not approve of her greeting? Her smile wavered just a bit. “May I offer you a drink, my lady?”

Yennefer merely narrowed her uncommonly colored eyes and turned to the witcher with fire flaring in those violet depths. But she did not speak a word.

Chessa glanced at Geralt again. His expression darkened, if it were possible. Oh, dear. This was awkward. And terribly uncomfortable.

“I can draw you a bath, Geralte. Perhaps that's the best thing for now. Then we can all talk.” She focused on him, trying not to pay attention to the clumps of fleshy creature stuck in his hair, but it was easier than meeting Yennefer's volatile scowl.

He hissed out an impatient sigh between clenched teeth and landed a steely glare on the sorceress. “Have an urgent matter and all you can think about is how bad I stink?! Don't have time, Yen--”

The sorceress huffed and waved her arms with irritated and clipped movements. An orange and black sizzling portal cracked open over Geralt.

“Yen… Don't!”

In the span of an eye blink, he vanished inside and it closed with a snap.

Chessa sucked in her breath. He was gone! Just like that, gone!

Yennefer, looking very satisfied, tossed her curls back over her shoulders with graceful flicks of her hands adorned in expensive gloves that fit her like a second skin.

Outside a moment later in a whirl of gusty winds, Geralt's distant, “Daaaaaammnn yooouuuuuuuuu!!!” ended abruptly with a hefty splash in the direction of the pond.

Chessa held her breath. It was deadly silent now… inside and out. Did she just…?

“Oh, don't worry, dear,” Yennefer's sweetness, laced with a condescending tone sent a chill down her back.

She narrowed her eyes. She did.

A smirk played across the sorceress's flawless face. “He knows how to swim.”
A smiled tugged the corners of his mouth. Freshly cleansed from his unexpected swim, he wore clean leather trousers and a cotton tunic open at the neckline. The laces draped loose revealing his chest and the medallion. He sat down at the table in the healer's home, drawing the earthenware mug Chessa sat there for him closer.

She gazed around the inside of her house with wonder and great relief etched on her face. Indeed, not all common folk got to witness a sorceress like Yen in action. With a quick incantation and a flick of her fingers, everything was put back in its proper place. All the furniture arranged as they were, any broken ones magically repaired. All her medicinal items and knick knacks were put back in orderly fashion, everything neat and tidy. Her cot made up with crisp white sheets, her walls and floors gleamed, not a speck of dust or blood anywhere - even the cellar was spotless. Her awe reminded him this was a once in a lifetime opportunity for someone like her, although, for him, it was commonplace.

Chessa hurried to her lab and when she didn't return right away, he followed slowly. Peering into the chamber from the entry, he leaned against the door frame, content to simply watch her search for specific items such as a favorite vial, or bowl. She stopped at the hutch against the inner wall and gingerly caressed a hand-painted blue glass potion bottle. Her fingers ever so gently traced down the side and a smile spread across her face. She glanced at him, not at all surprised he was there and wetness gleamed in her eyes. That particular item must have meant a lot to her.

"It's... ah, I..." she breathed. "She fixed it." Wiping a tear, she turned to him. "That bottle got shattered with all the... the... It was my grandmother's. Passed down to the females in my family, my mother gave it to me. I thought it was lost, for good."

He smiled warmly appreciating the act of kindness Yen bestowed on the healer.

They returned to the common room and she sat next to him and enjoyed a mug of cider as well.

"Thank her for me, will you? It would have taken me weeks to clean up this place, but she did it in a few seconds. And that bottle.... oh, Geralt. Anything she and you need, just let me know."

"You can thank her once she completes the location spell." Geralt took a sip and leaned back in the chair. "And it should be me saying that anything you need, you let me know."

A flush crept up her face.

"Hopefully, she'll be successful with the lock of Ciri's hair you pulled from her brush. This kind of spell will exhaust her and will need your bed tonight, hope you don't mind."

"Not at all. It's my pleasure. I'll sleep on the cot." As if the topic reminded her, she stifled a yawn.

It had been a long day and he was exhausted too. Dawn was a couple hours away. Maybe Yen would finish soon.

"Chessa, you've been wonderful through all this. I've done nothing but cause trouble and you still remain a kind hostess. I'm grateful Yen cleaned up your place. Would've done it myself, but... Time is not on my side right now."

Her warm smiled stirred him. "Don't worry about it. Just glad I could help in some small way."

Silence settled between them, but it was not an uncomfortable one. She looked tired, but still
lovely. He smiled sadly. "She knows. About you and me. That we've..." he gave her a knowing look. He had no doubt. That hard flaying glare as Yen scoped her mind when the healer had greeted her, was painful even for him. He knew exactly what she was doing and poor Chessa had no defense against her mind scan. Yen read quite clearly how he had made use of his short time here.

Placing her mug back on the table, she wiped her lips. "Oh... That's bad, isn't it?"

"Only for me. Maybe." He chuckled without much humor. "We hadn't been together for awhile. Wasn't going to remain celibate in the off-chance we might get back together. Doubt she would, either. Sure she's taken a lover or two as well."

"She sounds like the jealous type."

"Everything has to be on her terms. For the record..." he leaned in close and lowered his voice. "Enjoyed our time together. Really. Wish we had more time." When she flushed and beamed at him, he pushed some wild waves away from her face. "Hope you can forgive me."

"For what?" she breathed. Her eyes dropped to his lips, roamed over his chest, and back up to his mouth again.

Oh, no. Those sapphire orbs... filled with longing. He knew that look. Shit. Not only did he impose upon her home, fucked her thoroughly, almost destroyed her home, invited necrophages by his negligence and... and yet, she still managed to fall for him. And to top it off, his ex, whom he still had strong feelings for, was upstairs using her bed chamber. Was he really this fucked up?

"I'm a flawed man, Chessa. I guess... I just love women too much."

Her frown was like a cloud covering the sun and he hated himself for saying that much.

Tilting her head, she tossed long waves over a shoulder revealing a graceful neck. He inspected the contents of his mug.

"Who isn't flawed? No one's perfect." Her warm hand found his resting on his thigh. A tingle shot down his leg. "Follow your heart, Witcher." Her smile, warm and inviting, made him long to press his lips against hers, but that was the root of his weakness. How could he while Yen was upstairs and there was a chance he could reconcile with her?

Taking hold of her chin between a thumb and forefinger, he took her lips in a chaste sweet kiss. Chaste, yes, but he lingered, savored, not breaking the contact hurriedly.

The door opened, startling both of them and Dandelion entered looking tired and serious. They drew back from each other quickly as he sat down with them. His gaze traveled between them then morphed into an annoyed and hard expression.

“Have I Interrupted something?” The heavily sarcastic tone was meant for him. "Is she finished yet?”

“No.”

He raked a hand through his tousled hair. “This is exhausting. Tell me, Geralt, how is it Yennefer showed up out of nowhere--”

“Not out of nowhere, Dandelion. She found me in the forest and asked for her help.”

“And she agreed? Just like that? You two haven't spoken for... for a long time. I've lost track.
And... why all of a sudden find you in the middle of the woods? That's not like her.”

Geralt glared at him. The questions unsettled him even more than he already was because his friend was right. She would never trapse after a man regardless how strongly she felt about him. It was not her style. “Maybe…” he started slowly, thinking about it more. "Come to think of it, it was not me she came after. Said so herself. But she knew I had Ciri. Think she wants to know more about her.”

Dandelion scowled and stretched out his legs giving him that distrustful look. "Why would she want to know about Ciri?"

Geralt risked a side glance at Chessa. He had kept the girl's lineage from her for a reason, and he did not want to endanger her with it now. He began to see what Dandelion hinted at. Yen was advisor to Demavend... A missing heiress would catch the attention of many a powerful person not just Nilfgaard. Yen said herself that many believe she was alive. Clearly the Emperor did. Could she be acting on Demavend's orders? Scoping her out to give him intel or worse - take her to him? A sliver of doubt sliced his gut and he dropped his gaze staring at the steam rising from the cider. Then he eyed his friend with a sharp glare warning him not to say any more. "Oh, you know. Curiosity, I guess."

“She’s truly a remarkable lady,” Chessa interjected casually, staring into her earthenware.

Relieved she changed topics, he glanced at her and remained silent. Remarkable, yes, when she was not cutting him down. Hell, even then she was. No one matched her biting wit, exquisite beauty, sense of style, and elegance.

“She’s uncommonly beautiful. You really are a lucky man, Geralt.”

Peering deeper into her sapphire eyes, he silently thanked her. For her graciousness and understanding. For simply being the beautiful kind-hearted woman she was in this harsh world.

“ Wouldn’t call it luck.” Dandelion rested his hands at the back of his head.

Eying the bard with a hard glare, they exchanged a knowing glance, but remained silent. More like a spell binding them together from a certain djinn they encountered in Rinde, thanks to his friend. But had he a chance to do it all over again, he would have done the same. Bind their fates together forever. It was clear then, not so now, but maybe someday it would.

He kept an ear peeled on the room above. Yen paced the bedchamber and her chanting stopped for a while. His medallion trembled earlier, but it had stopped. Was she through with the spell?

He listened some more. A forceful curse, and a strong blast of energy hit the house. His medallion leaped off his chest only to be yanked back by the chain. Chessa’s wide eyes peered at him with fear etched in them. He looked up. The medallion jittered wildly on his chest. Something was not right. Geralt rose and headed for the stairs.

“She said not to disturb her.”

He didn't stop at Chessa's reminder. “ I know. But something’s wrong.”

A shatter shook the upper floor and a loud thump on the floor sent Geralt up the steps two at a time. Chessa followed more slowly. Dandelion remained seated at the table.

Crashing open the bedroom door, his fear smacked him in the face. Yennefer, unconscious on the floor. Her megascope sparkled with electrical charges and one diamond used in the contraption had
cracked. Not good.

“Yen!”

Throwing himself to the floor beside her, he lifted her head, cradled it in his lap, her tornado of raven curls fanned out around him. Her complexion paled right before his eyes.

“Yen, wake up. Speak to me.”

Sliding his arms beneath her, he cradled her small frame against his chest. Carrying her to Chessa’s bed, he gently stretched her out on the soft downy comforter. Smoothing his hands down her hair, he gazed frantically at Chessa.

The healer immediately sprang into the work she knew well. After inspecting her, she sat back on the bed.

“She’s sleeping. Exhaustion overcame her and should be fine after some quality sleep. But I’ll go brew up some tea that will help.”

He gently grasped her wrist. “Thank you, Chessa.”

She nodded and left the room. Geralt sat back down on the side of the bed, staring at the colorless face that meant everything to him. Searching for her hand, he found it and it was cool to the touch. He laced his rough large fingers with her smooth delicate ones. A throw blanket was folded at the end of the bed and he opened it over her.

“Yen, I’m sorry. For everything. Please wake up and let me know you’re all right.”

A few minutes passed and he grew more anxious until her eyes fluttered open. “Geralt?” came her weak whisper.

“I’m here, love.” He took her hand again and kissed it. “I’m here. You okay?”

Slowly, she nodded and groaned. “Oh, now I have a damned splitting headache. Just wonderful.”

He sighed and smiled. She was fine. Just fine. Only the dark circles under her eyes clearly revealed her exhaustion.

Chessa returned with a steaming mug of chamomile and mint tea. “Glad to see you’re awake,” she smiled warmly.

Yen struggled to sit up against the pillows. He helped and fluffed them behind her. Her face, white and drawn, clued him something was still very wrong.

“Yen… Tell me. What did you find?”

She gazed at him without the icy haughtiness, without coldness or scorn, but with… genuine bewilderment laced with obvious distress.

“Nothing,” she breathed. “Geralt… I couldn’t find her. Anywhere.”

A deep knot churned inside him. What?! Chessa put down the mug on the nightstand and covered her mouth with her hand.

He shook his head, not taking his eyes from her. “What do you mean, Yen?” his voice thick and
heavy grated in the room.

“I can perform this spell, Geralt. Have done it many times. But I could not find her. Thought something must’ve been wrong with my megascope, so I changed out the crystals and tried harder. Still nothing.”

“How can this be?” his voice shook.

Yen locked gazes with him. “Then I realized it wasn’t the megascope, nor any inability of mine. She is nowhere to be found, Geralt. Nowhere…”

He struggled to breathe, trying to wrap his mind around what she was saying, but refused to latch onto any concrete fact. She couldn’t… this could not be. She must not be saying--

“I don’t understand…” she mumbled, pressing fingertips to her temple. “It’s… yes, it’s the only explanation.” Her voice dropped to a whisper locking gazes with his. “It’s as if she doesn’t exist…”

Silence stifled the bed chamber.

Breathing hurt. His heart thudded alarmingly fast and his head pounded. NO, this could not be!

Yennefer closed her eyes and pressed fingertips to her forehead. Chessa covered her mouth, her eyes brimming with wetness.

“No…” he croaked unable to get passed the lump in his throat.

Suddenly, Yen clutched his forearms with a surprisingly firm grip. Pulling herself up close to him, her expression hardened, eyes flaring. A hand blurred before him and the sting of her palm against his cheek startled him. “What have you done?!”

Swallowing, he shook his head, still unable to speak.

“Where is she, Geralt? What happened to her?! Do you realize the Lion Cub of Cintra is GONE?! Not just lost, but vanished from existence! What... have you... done?!?”

Sprung into action, Chessa grabbed the mug of tea and sat on the other side of the bed. “Here, my lady, please drink this. It will help calm--”

“Calm!” Yennefer snapped her head in her direction, her hair whipped wildly with the motion. “How could anyone remain calm?” she spat. "You have no idea what this means…” She clutched Geralt’s shoulders, clawing him, drawing him closer. “Cirilla cannot be gone. She must live, she MUST!”

Swallowing hard, he had never seen Yen like this. For her to react this strongly regarding a young girl she had never met made no sense. Why was she so worked up? He didn’t want to do it, but forming the Axii sign, he cast it over the sorceress and she slumped back on the pillows, her head lollled to one side. Never had he done that before and he would surely pay for it once she awoke.

Chessa’s eyes opened wide.

“Don’t worry, she’s asleep. Had to calm her. It worked only because she's exhausted.” He stared at her slumbering form, unable to think, or know what to do next.

Chessa rubbed his back. “Are you okay?”

He shook his head. “No,” he choked. “I’m not. Yennefer was supposed to find her… She... she
should have been able... Never considered the possibility she wouldn’t find her…”

His fists bunched up in the covers and the air disappeared from the room. It meant only one thing: Ciri was dead.

“NOOOO!” Geralt howled, springing up from the bed. “NO, she cannot be dead! Won’t accept that!”

He turned for the door ignoring Chessa’s outstretched hands and tear-streaked face. *This was all MY fault! Everything! Every last fucking thing!*

As he flung himself out of the room and stumbled down the stairs with stiff and numb legs, he crashed through the door into the dark night that not even the moon cared to shed its rays upon. Might as well be. Let the blackness consume him!

Dandelion rushed after him. Not realizing his friend’s strength, his hands clutched his shoulders.

“Geralt! Geralt, listen to me!”

The bard’s unusually urgent tone pierced through the black haze of his grief. Steadying himself, though it was difficult, he locked his attention on his best friend.

“Listen to me. Don’t do this to yourself. It’s not your fault!”

His feet rooted to the ground. No, it *was*. And he couldn’t handle anything else, not now. Ciri was dead, and the last heir of Cintra was no more. The royal family’s line broken. An innocent girl he swore to protect perished because of him… The child destiny brought him, tore her away… a cruel, cruel fate! He had failed Calanthe, failed his guild… and himself.

“Please, my friend. It might not be as you think.”

He whirled on the bard, not needing to see the vicious snarl that made his friend take a step back. “What else could it be, Dandelion?!” he growled. “Don’t you get it? If Yennefer couldn’t locate her, it’s because she’s dead. And I failed her!” For the first time in a long time, tears burned the back of his eyes and he shook his head, clenching his teeth. Never before did he feel so incompetent. Even Vesemir would be ashamed of him. How could he return to Kaer Morhen knowing all this... they expected him to return with his ward. What would they think of him? What... what would he think of himself? Nausea gripped him and he turned to find a private place to be sick. Vomiting on his friend’s boots was the last thing he needed.

Before he had a chance, a flash of green sparkling light pierced his eyes and drawing his arm to shield them made no difference. The light was all around them. They were a part of the mist. What the--?!?

Dandelion gripped his forearm. “Look, Geralt!”

Peering into the green light, two figures formed. One, the size of a large man, the other...oh, Gods, the other... He panted, not able to regulate his breathing. The other was smaller, that of a young girl!

The light faded and a scratch of flint ripped through the air and a flaming torch lit all around. Ciri laid eyes on him and she tore her hand out of the mysterious stranger’s and flung herself into Geralt’s arms.

“Geralt!”
Falling to his knees, he crushed her to his chest, burying his face in her long ashen hair, sobbing with relief. She smelled clean with a touch of lavender in her hair. It was the most wonderful smell. She was back! Alive!

Her arms tightened around him. "Did you miss me?"

Gathering himself, he pulled away and looked into her beautiful and radiant emerald eyes. His voice failed him. Smoothing a hand down her hair, he cupped her cheek and nodded. "More than you know," he choked out. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine, silly."

Pushing her away, he flung himself at Unnamed Man pitching him backwards to the ground. They landed hard amidst grunts and the boy lost his grip on the torch and it rolled away a few spans, but remained lit. Straddling him, Geralt filled his fists with his fine tunic and slugged him squarely in the jaw. "How dare you, bastard!" He hammered him again, yet the boy did not retaliate. He only kept his hands in sight, palms facing out. "Better not have harmed her in any way, son of a bitch!"

Still, the boy made no move to defend himself.

Breathing hard, Geralt kept a firm grasp on his tunic, just in case.

A small hand on his arm cooled his ire. He looked at her. Green eyes, filled with warmth, brought sense back and he calmed somewhat. She tugged his arm urging him off the boy.

“It’s all right, Geralt.”

“Has he hurt you in any way, Ciri? And don’t lie about it.”

“No, but he did protect me. He’s... a friend, Geralt. Let him go.”

He scowled at Unnamed Man again and the man’s eyes were clear and friendly. Moreover, truthful. Slowly, he loosened his grip and stood.

Chessa approached, but stayed back a few paces. When she saw Ciri, she gave her a warm hug.

Unnamed Man slowly stood, never taking his eyes from Geralt. Purple splotches became visible on his jaw.

“Explain. Now.”

Dandelion snatched up the torch and held it aloft illuminating all in a golden circle warding off the darkness.

Unnamed Man straightened his tunic and it was then Geralt noticed. He was not adorned in the high-end leather armor as he had when he first appeared. Now, he was clothed in rich material most nobles couldn’t afford with fine embroidery on a tunic and matching trousers, a gold chain draped from one shoulder to another much like... Geralt swallowed. Royalty? The wolf medallion hung underneath the gold chain. Clean shaven, freshly washed, his long white hair tied back in a half ponytail, the same as he himself often wore. This unknown man who looked so familiar... was no mere warrior or witcher.

Ciri stood beside him and smiled at Geralt. She looked radiant, peaceful even... What was going on here?
“Geralt of Rivia. I know I have caused you great anguish when I vanished with Cirilla in my arms, and for that I apologize. Understand that it was only to protect her. I asked you to trust me before we left—”

“What the hell took you so long to bring her back?”

Unnamed Man glanced down at her and a shadow crossed his familiar features. “That will take some explaining and I have urgent news for you, but first, you need to know who I am.”

Geralt swiped a hand over his mouth, the nausea returned. “I’m listening.”

Turning to Chessa, he beckoned her forward. "My lady, Ciri needs rest."

"I'll take her inside." Chessa blinked rapidly and outstretched her hand to Ciri who looked at Unnamed Man first. He nodded. Taking the healer's hand, she squeezed Geralt's when she passed him.

"Everything will be okay," she whispered.

When Ciri was out of earshot, he continued. "I am Garret. Son of Cirilla Fiona Elen Riannon and soon-to-be Emperor of Nilfgaard."

A sharp twinge clenched his chest. “You’re lying, or insane. Emhyr var Emries is emperor.”

“True, my grandfather reigns currently. In this timeline.”

Geralt blinked and swallowed. Dandelion's gaze rested on him, his expression one of granite.

“In my time, he has stepped down and handed the throne to his successor, Cirilla. The real Cirilla. But my mother has other wishes and she, only after a short while of assuming the throne, abdicated, handing it over to me, her next of kin.”

A breathless silence thickened around them except for the snapping of the torch’s flames. Dandelion's face was void of emotion - something he was not prone to do. Yennefer remained unconscious in the house missed this whole exchange... He glanced toward the house. Suddenly, all he wanted was to lose himself in her soft and warm embrace. To escape this unbelievable turn of events.

“Yes, Geralt, I'm from the future, your future. I'll arrive in a dozen years or so, to be precise.”

“That’s why you know who I am,” he forced the words from a parched throat.

“Yes. You mean a great deal to me, in fact.”

Geralt sucked in a ragged breath. Two facts comforted him. Ciri lived long enough to grow up and become a mother and that thought made him happy. It meant, she allowed a man to touch her, to be intimate with her. She got over the incident in Novigrad, and that relieved him. In fact, this knowledge brought a world of relief. He did not fail her after all. The weight of the world lifted and the nausea calmed.

Forcing back the lump in his throat, he grated the question that burned inside since he had interrogated the man. “Who am I to you?” Although, deep down in his soul, farther down than he could ever have courage to reach, he knew the answer.

The now named man locked gazes with him with a familiarity that left him speechless. Holding his
breath for what seemed like an era, he only let it out slowly after the next statement that would ring in his memory forever.

“You’re my father.”

Chapter End Notes

Happy New Year everyone! I wish you all health and happiness in the new year! Thank you all for sticking with this story. I know it’s long, but I love living in this world with our favorite witcher and his friends. I hope you continue to lose yourself in this story right along with me! :)
A reveal that leaves him reeling, Geralt learns more from the mysterious stranger who now has a name. Despite the impossibility and his unbelief, he begins to view destiny differently. Faced with Yen's fury, he soon learns her appearance in all this is not as random as he initially believed causing more strain on their relationship and opens his eyes to the larger scope of what he will face with Ciri in his life. Things spiral with political advances that outweigh a witcher's ability, and Geralt finds himself pitted against impossible odds, his only desire - to protect those he loves.

**Content Warning** This chapter contains: canon-typical violence, strong language, adult romantic themes, a host of emotions, suspense, and a thrilling climax.

Hi Everyone! My studies this semester is heavy which has reduced my free time and mental energy so this chapter update is WAAAYYYY overdue and I apologize for the long wait. To make up for that, this chapter is longer than any of my earlier chapters, but it was necessary for the pacing. But, I don't think you'll mind too much as this chapter is the climactic ending to the past sequence story arc. Enjoy the ride! :)

Official art owned by CD Projekt Red
With that declaration, Garret stood tall with confidence and pride before Geralt. Dandelion remained silent holding the spitting torch aloft, but his gaze grew darker with each passing minute. Then he made eye contact with him and it became clear what he thought.

The mysterious stranger who now had a name and lineage was Ciri's future son. But why call him father? Well, he took Ciri under his wing, so it was feasible he did… or rather, does that for her son as well.

Dandelion stared at him, as if waiting for something, expecting something. From him, apparently. Lines of worry etched his features.

"Who is your real father?" Geralt ignored his friend's scowl staying focused on the young man before him.

Garret shifted his stance. "I've told you. You are."

He struggled to hold together the shredding remains of his patience. "You've made it clear I am a father figure. After all, I took in Ciri, so naturally, would help out with her son-"

Dandelion coughed, his dark gaze unwavering.

Garret, calm and unruffled, looked sideways at the bard. "I know what you must be thinking." Turning back to him, he grasped his unique medallion. "I am your son, Geralt, possessing your witcher blood and abilities though I've never undergone a single mutation. I was born a witcher, fathered by the only witcher who has ever sired a child."

Geralt found it difficult to breathe and a throbbing pain seared his head. His throat went completely dry. "Do you hear yourself? That's impossible," he choked and swallowed wetting his parched mouth. "All witches are sterile. There has never been an exception. And since I've undergone more mutations than any other witcher, that rings especially true with me." He clipped each word on his next statement in a deadly growl. "I cannot sire children. End of story." He started to turn and leave, but glanced back to the boy and glared at him. "Think it's time you went back to wherever you came from and never show your fa--"

"You're right, in that."

Geralt halted. Shifting his weight onto his right leg, he met him with a narrowed gaze.

"You cannot sire children." Garret paused, his brilliant gaze earnest. "But look at me, Geralt. I've haunted you from the moment I arrived here because your heart knew, but your mind blocks the truth. I look just like you - you cannot deny it. I know you see yourself when you look at me, it's plain in your eyes. Isn't that enough proof?"
Somewhere in the deep recesses of his soul, things had clicked, although unbelief clouded his heart. Not only did Garret bear resemblance to Ciri - even inherited the pale hair common of her bloodline and the unusual brilliance of her emerald eyes - but strikingly more so, and there was no arguing it - his facial structure, features, and body type, hell, even his mannerisms spoke the truth. And yes, the very first time he laid eyes on the boy, he saw the spitting image of himself. But could he have been spelled? Illusory magic at play here? He shook his head. No. He had debunked that theory after he had calmed down earlier. There was no magic used to change appearance nor was he a doppler, the chameleon race who could change forms into any being with which they came into contact. None of that was at work here. At least, he was almost fairly certain it was not.

“Wait one minute…” Taking a step forward, Geralt leered towards the young man, pointing his index finger at him. “You drop in out of nowhere claiming you're Ciri's son, which is the only believable part of this fantastical tale, and you expect me to believe I am your biological father, an impossibility in itself. In essence…” he drew in a ragged breath, “you're claiming Ciri and I…” his voice faltered, not able to finish the thought as the realization punched him in the gut. Rubbing his aching forehead, he turned and stalked away a few steps and stopped, arms akimbo with hands on hips, searching the grass but looking for nothing in particular. He focused on breathing deeply and evenly.

This was madness! He must be dreaming this all, gotta be. Ciri was an eleven-year-old girl to him now, but at some point in her adult future, he would... with her?! Just didn't seem right! What kind of monster did he become in this future?

“Father…”

Geralt's hand shot up. “Don't call me that,” he growled over his shoulder.

Silence beat heavy between them, the roar of the flaming torch the only sound. Garret's footsteps approached behind. After a moment, came his emphatic whisper, “She is your destiny.”

Geralt gritted his teeth and swallowed convulsively. He said that with the same inflection and with as much passion as Ciri had whenever she spoke that same sentiment. How often she had told him that...

“And…” Garret prompted.

“I am hers,” Geralt breathed, finishing the statement. A claim Ciri always willingly reminded him. And Garret knew this. Now it was beginning to make sense. Had destiny more in store for them than he thought? A flash of a conversation with the druid, Mousesack a year ago in the Brokilon Forest, suddenly echoed in his ears.

“Destiny is far greater than your invocation, than your unwillingness. Much more far reaching than our finite minds could ever grasp, Witcher. Destiny lies in the fact she is an extraordinary child. And she has chosen you.”

He glanced over his shoulder at Garret, his thoughts racing, piecing things together while holding onto fragile sanity in the process.

*Destiny*. *More far reaching than our finite minds could ever grasp.*

Had Mousesack foreseen *this*?

His gaze found the house and the golden glow of candles illuminating the windows, warm and beckoning, and imagined Ciri sleeping sweetly in the guest bed chamber. The sweet girl who had
everything ripped from her, including her inheritance and station in life.

And she has chosen me.

A simple witcher.

The druid had also said she was his only chance at being a father. He had assumed, naturally, he meant being a father figure to Ciri, but... He glanced back at Garret, and only saw himself and Ciri reflected in the man's features. He exhaled, dumbfounded.

Had the druid truly meant there was something more? That with Ciri, he would become a father? To father her child? He ground his teeth. What the hell was he thinking?! He didn't even believe in destiny...

Raising his gaze to the second floor window, a dim glow barely visible in Chessa's room, and the love of his life sleeping. What did this mean for Yen and him? Where did their relationship stand in the midst of all this? Did they even have one or did they call it quits for good? Shit, so many unanswered questions!

A gentle, yet firm hand rested on his shoulder, jarring him from his thoughts.

"It's the truth whether you believe it or not, Geralt. I'm sorry, truly, dropping a bomb like this on you, but you don't have time to process this right now. There is something else you need to know. It's urgent."

Geralt's burning eyes collided with his son's--- no, he cursed inwardly, Garret's.

His expression showed genuine concern. “Get Cirilla to Kaer Morhen as fast as humanly possible. I would teleport you both there in an instant, but I respect your distaste of portals. Every day that goes by, she is in greater danger until she's safely home. Nilfgaard is after her. And don't underestimate the officer tracking you now. In fact, there are others as well, even the kings of the Northern Realms, and don't underestimate them either.”

Garret knew of the Nilfgaardian officer he had come upon in the woods earlier? He hadn't breathed a word of that to anyone.

"And this is just the beginning. Cirilla is the most sought after person in the world. Remember that."

This is crazy! Sure, she was queen of a kingdom that no longer existed, so why the interest? None of this made sense! “They are after a little girl with no heritage any longer? Why? What could she offer them?”

“Forgive me, Geralt. Best not share that with you now. But trust me, you will find out in due course. The next couple of years are essential to her well-being. After that, well... instill in her what you do and things will play out as they should. You must leave tonight. Actually, now would be more advantageous.”

For a moment, he peered long and hard into Garret's striking eyes and face so like his own, it still shook him. Again truth and sincerity was all he detected in those green depths, unless he was an exceptionally skilled deceiver. But one thing did not make sense. “The medallion... explain that.”

Garret tugged his pendant out in the open. The firelight glinted orange off its shiny metal ridges. “The only one of its kind,” he declared with obvious pride. “The Wolf School emblem merged with the Nilfgaardian Black Sun for I am both witcher and royal heir. You taught me everything I know,
Geralt. You and mother. I'm familiar with Kaer Morhen, the Path… I know it all, even Signs. When I reached a certain age, mother thought it wise to send me to Nilfgaard to be trained and tutored in the ways of my royal heritage for she knew I would one day sit on the throne.”

Shaking his head, Geralt rubbed a throbbing temple. “Still don't understand your ties with Nilfgaard. Or even Ciri's. Does the emperor marry her?”

An interesting expression flashed across Garret’s features, then he tightened his lips. “Shouldn’t reveal any more. Said too much already. But in time, you will come to understand. Everything.”

It just struck him how alike their voices were. Both deep and raspy. But his possessed the clarity of youth. "Does... she know any of this?" His voice grated and cracked. He cleared his throat.

"No, nothing. Couldn't risk it. Never meant to share this much with you either. Time travel is risky business. She only knows I am a trusted friend."

Good. Too much information for anyone let alone a young girl. He would make sure she never discovered any of this.

Garret took a step closer, his expression intense and serious. "You must not share this knowledge with anyone for the consequences could change history as I know it and your future. Promise me, Geralt. It is imperative."

He searched the young man's eyes again. “You have my word.” He sought out and met Dandelion's gaze. “And that goes for you as well. Especially.”

The bard, in all seriousness, stepped forward. “I'll not speak of this until you do, I swear on all that is holy.”

Garret nodded at the bard and smiled. “It's good to see you again, Dandelion. You're a good friend, to all of us. Take care of yourself.”

Geralt grinned at Dandelion's flushed pleasure at the compliment.

The young man turned an urgent gaze on him. “Now get my mother safely home.” He stepped back putting distance between them.

“Wait.” Geralt clutched Garret's forearm, halting him. “What are you going to do now?”

Garret's eyes roamed over him, a myriad of emotions playing across his face. “I must leave, return to my own time. My presence here has caused you enough physical and emotional turmoil already. I'm afraid it will get worse before getting better. You will not see me again until I am born.”

Geralt released his grip. Born… The chances of the young man before him living were less than slim for certain, but he did live or he would not be standing here before him now. But how? How could this happen? I become a father in its truest sense… Yennefer discovers a cure, then? Even if she does, that cure would be for her not me. Yet... the undeniable evidence stood right here before my very eyes...

The young witcher peered at him for several moments as if debating to say something. “Don't try to figure out how, father. Just believe, otherwise you'll drive yourself mad.”

Garret extended his hand to him. Geralt grasped his forearm in a firm warm shake.

“Goodbye, father. Look forward to seeing you again in my time. Take care.”
In a swirl of glowing glistening green light and a wave of heat, Garret vanished into a wisp of cloud until it too evaporated.

“By the gods, Geralt…” Dandelion stood by him. “Can you believe this?”

Taking long purposeful strides, he headed for the house. “Admit, I'm struggling with it.”

“But, Geralt, he looks exactly like you, even has Ciri's uncommon eye color--”

“I know, Dandelion,” he clipped.

“What other explanation could there be?”

He stopped dead in his tracks and whirled on his friend. “Don't know, dammit! I only know two things. I've been told since the day I had undergone the mutation process I would be unable to have children of my own. None of the women I've fucked over the decades sought me out claiming I'm the father of their bastard child demanding recompense. The other…” Exhaling loudly, he resumed his earlier stride toward the house.

Dandelion kept up. “What's the other?” he prodded.

“Having a real hard time thinking I'd ever… you know... with Ciri. I mean, clearly she is an adult when… no, IF it happens… Dammit!! Don't want to think about this now. Or ever.” The pain in his head swelled and pounded behind his eyes.

Dandelion gripped his arm drawing him to a stop. “My friend, I know what you must be thinking--”

"You know fuck all, Dandelion, because all I'm thinking is what a disgusting monster I become!”

“I don't believe that--”

In exasperation, Geralt clenched his fists and held in a deep breath. Then forced himself to calm down. No sense in taking it out on his good friend. But the one thing that ate at him... “What happens to my sense of morality? Do I become so jaded and… and… desperate for a fuck I turn to Ciri for gratifica--” he stopped, his stomach churned at the thought.

The bard shook his head, sympathy glistening in his eyes. "Can't imagine what this knowledge is doing to you, friend..."

Geralt searched the bard's face, his thoughts tumbling over themselves, driving the pounding headache to a more severe intensity. “What kind of man do I become, Dandelion?” That last question rasped out in a strangled whisper.

The bard exhaled slowly and gripped his shoulder. “I know you, Geralt. Well enough. And that doesn't sound like the noble man I know you are. You're always looking out for others, often times at an inconvenience to yourself. It may not be as you think.”

Breathing heavily through his nose, he stared at his friend, clinging to his words. "Now maybe … but down the road, in time…” Please tell me I won't descend into a vile waste pit of human indecency. If that was what this elongated life of a witcher led too, I'd rather hang up my swords now.

“We don't know the circumstances of what brings you two together. How could we know? A lot will happen in a dozen years or so. But it's not the time for us to know. Oh, wow, there's a ballad in
Geralt stalked towards the house again. A whiff of male body odor and mud registered in his mind. Where had that scent come from? The unmistakable crunch of leaves and small sticks came from the wooded area.

"Wait! Sorry, I'm sorry, Geralt. Listen to an old romantic fool, okay?"

"Exactly what is your point, Old Fool?" Geralt looked around, and east toward the horizon in the direction of the Blue Mountains. A cloudy haze of dust rose above the treeline. What the--?

Don't underestimate them... Garret had warned. Did he know something would occur tonight? Might account for his urgency for them to leave quickly.

"Don't beat yourself up, that's my point, Geralt. You tend to do that, you know. A lot. I'm sure there is a perfectly good reason why you'd end up in bed with--"

"Can't do this!" He double-timed it to the porch. "Just can't, dammit! Don't ever speak of this, or so help me, Dandelion, I won't be responsible for my actions."

Opening the door with the force of gale winds, he stormed into the house and came to a dead halt. Dandelion collided with him from behind.

“Oh, boy,” the bard muttered, vocalizing his own thoughts.

Sighing, Geralt made eye contact with him over his shoulder. “Gather our things and bring the horses out front, please. And be quick about it,” he added as an afterthought.

Without hesitation, the bard nodded and left the house, his eagerness to leave understandable.

Icy violet eyes pierced him from across the room. For a moment he had forgotten about the headache, but now it battered him again full force. Although fully dressed and clearly alert, her face, pale and drawn, still showed evidence of fatigue.

Chessa sat at the table with a mug of chamomile tea steaming in front of her. She rose, her eyes sliding between the two of them, clearly uncomfortable.

In no mood for any kind of confrontation, he held up his hands, palms facing out. “Yen, don't have time. We gotta leave. Now.”

Her gaze staked him from across the room. “How dare you?!?” she spat. “You used magic on me!”

Although her tone was sharp, her eyes told a completely different story. Clearly, he had hurt her feelings by doing so. Hopefully, she didn't feel betrayed. But the pain in her gaze slayed him.

He shot her a meaningful glance and turned his attention to the healer. “Chessa, I can't begin to make up for the huge inconvenience we’ve been since we’ve arrived, and you’ve been nothing but the gracious hostess. We must leave now. Please gather Ciri, bundle her up so her hair isn't seen. Grab her belongings and anything you need immediately. Make sure you have warm clothes. Hurry, please.”

“I don’t under--”

“Go now, please. No time to explain.”

He waited until Chessa disappeared up the stairwell before cupping Yen's head in his palms.
Swooping in, he captured her lips in a confident kiss, backing her up against the table, knocking a chair in the process. She leaned back against the table and he lifted her on top of it, her hands clutching his arms for support. Angling himself between her legs, he eliminated any space between them. His hands smoothed down her back crushing her to his chest, the mounds of her breasts flattening against him. He took his time despite the urgency threatening to tear him apart, making the contact as sweet and potent as possible, storing it in his memory. Focusing on the warm velvety softness of her lips, the sweet taste of her tongue, and floral perfume made him long for more. More of her, more time to enjoy this moment… Who knew when he'd see her again? Winters were long and cold in the Blue Mountains and this memory would have to see him through many a long and lonely night.

“Wish we had time to be together,” he breathed. “No yelling, no insults, simply enjoying one another. Why can't we do that, Yen? Just enjoy…” he breathed, losing his breath in another kiss. “But we don’t have time for apologies or explanations…”

“Darling--”

“Sshhh,” he murmured against her lips before tasting their sweetness again. Slowly, deeply. Drawing his tongue across her bottom lip, he possessed her mouth once again. Grasping her hips, he tugged her pelvis against his. Her cushioning warmth against his hardness was a delightful and stirring contrast. Nibbling her bottom lip, this he understood, this he could control. Physical contact soothed him, excited him, yet at the same time, tempered his rampant thoughts and anxieties, halted the world outside that spiraled out of control. *Want to lose myself in you, Yen.*

She heard him, for her body language softened and drew him into a full-bodied embrace and she melted into him. Her floral scent engulfing, he sighed, no, fairly purred. Didn't matter. Only thing that did was being in her arms.

“I’m sorry I spelled you,” he whispered between kisses. He traced her jawline with his lips lifting long locks away from her face exposing an alluring neck. “Only did it because you were clearly distressed and exhausted. You needed sleep. In fact, you still look pale and fatigued. It was not a betrayal, so stop thinking it.”

Her expression softened, but she remained silent. Closing her eyes, she sighed, squeezing his hips with her thighs, arching her back, her curls brushing the tabletop as he continued to drop kisses down the column of her throat to the top curves of her breasts.

“What is going on, Geralt?” Yennefer murmured, and arched into him, pressing her groin harder against his.

He groaned deliciously. “We're being followed, for one.” Although he did not want to, he peeled away from her warmth, running his hands along her thighs as he backed away from the table. “That camp we met in earlier?” He cleared his throat, his voice thick with desire. “A lone man, young, returned shortly after you left. A Nilfgaardian officer, and he’s after Ciri.”

Pushing herself gracefully from the table, she stood and tugged her jacket back in place. “That doesn’t surprise me. Of course Emhyr would want her. You took care of him, I trust?”

He blinked at her. No, he hadn't. After what Garret had told him, he now wished he had. They might not be in this grave predicament now.

“Dammit,” she spat. “I swear, your sense of honor gets in the way of clear thinking at times, Geralt.”
He scowled at her.

“But,” she sighed, softening again, glancing up at him beneath long dark lashes. She smiled sweetly. “It’s one of the traits I adore about you.”

He remained silent, staring at her. Mood swings were one thing, but she swung too quickly between them now. Something’s not right.

“What is it, darling? I can see it in your eyes. Are we in danger now?”

There was more than a question, desire or anger in her eyes. Something he couldn’t put his finger on. He was able to turn her saltiness into sweetness too easily. He had never known her to forgive that quickly. She knew something she wasn’t telling him? Now that he had Ciri back, Yen's unexpected appearance was just that… unexpected and unlikely. Highly unlikely. Dandelion's outspoken suspicion about her showing up out of the blue might not have been misplaced.

“Yen… there something you need to tell me? Why did you seek me out in the first place? You'd never come after me, said so yourself. Exactly why are you here?”

…Even the kings of the Northern Realms, and don't underestimate them either. Garret had warned him! Of what? An impending battle?

Yen served King Demavend of Aedirn as advisor. She was interested and had intel on Ciri. In fact… oh, it was all beginning to make sense now. She sought him out because she knew he had Ciri under his protection. How she had come to find that out he could only guess, but the truth was she came to him to check on her, not him. None of this had anything to do with him. When he had told her Ciri was alive, she relaxed, but as soon as she realized she had been taken and Yen couldn’t locate her using astromancy, Yen flew into a raging hysteria. Now that Ciri had returned and was safe with him, Yen was all sweet on him. What stake did she have in all this? Was she feeding information to Demavend? Why did he want Ciri? Somehow, simply keeping her from Nilfgaard’s hands might be one thing, but what if… what if there existed more dire plans for the girl?

The ache in his head stabbed in a more intense agony that stole his breath. Shit, what had he gotten himself into by taking Ciri as his own? Had he inadvertently thrust himself in the middle of a political war that could pit him against the rulers of the known continent? All this over a young girl? He glanced at Yen, unable to conceal tumultuous thoughts and feelings. Could he trust her?

"Geralt? You all right, darling? You look exhausted, in more ways than one. Are you in danger?"

She held his gaze, long black eyelashes fanned out highlighting her eye color now more blue with passion. “Are we in danger right now?”

Why the false concern? She could read his mind easily and she wasn't picking any of this up? Fuck. Yen... Not you too... "You tell me, Yen. Are we in danger? Is that Demavend’s army approaching from the east?"

Her gaze grew wide, then narrowed. "Why do you say that?"

"Only an army kicks up thick clouds of dirt. Saw it on the eastern horizon just before coming in the house. I ask again, Yen. What do you know that I should?"

Her gaze faltered, her lips pursed tightly. His gut clenched. Dammit all! He really couldn't trust anyone! He pressed fingers to his forehead. This blasted headache! Leering at her, he got up close again, but all salt this time. “So that’s it,” he hissed. “You came here to hand Ciri over to Demavend, didn't you? He send you? Or did you come
“here on your own free will?”

“You misunderstand, darling—”

“Don't, 'darling' me, Yen. I'm right about this—”

Straightening her back, she stood as tall as she could before him, which wasn't tall at all. Her violet gaze, sharper than his witcher’s blades pierced him along with her voice. “Only on one account. Yes, Demavend is after Cirilla. And so is Emhyr and probably every other ruler. Demavend wants to keep her from Nilfgaard’s paws, but I'm afraid his plans for her are not born out of any love for her either.”

“And Emhyr needs Ciri to legalize his conquest of Cintra, doesn't he?”

Her gaze softened. “Yes. Demavend's original plan was to marry her off to King Vissegerd, but the other monarchs opposed the idea. I fear now he just wishes her dead.”

“And you're helping him?!” He didn't want to hear this... Any of it.

“Of course not, Geralt. I wish Cirilla to live. That is why I came to you. To ensure she doesn't fall into anyone's hands but yours. You are her only protection, Geralt and a little princess couldn't have asked for a better guardian.”

He dismissed her flattery. “And what's she to you? Why do you care otherwise? She's just a girl you haven't even met yet.”

Yennefer turned her back, took a few steps towards Chessa's lab, her voice soft. “That's just it. She's a little girl. And had everything stolen from her. Everyone she loved and everything she knew torn from her life. Her loved ones... gone. Her home, gone.”

The pain in her voice was not fabricated.

Turning back to him, her eyes were wide and full of emotion. “Even as a princess, her life would have been dictated for her. She wouldn't have had a choice with whom to marry, for instance. Now, she's a political pawn of every ruler in the world. They all want her for leverage over Nilfgaard. Let's just say, I sympathize for her, Geralt. Others will still dictate her life.” She came back and stood before him, her gaze roaming over him lovingly. “But with you... she has a chance to become whatever she wants to be. Not many of us get that choice in life, Geralt. I didn't. And neither did you.”

Silence reigned in the moment, as if the fabric of the universe held its breath, waiting... For the fate of them all hung in the balance.

“No, we didn't,” he murmured, renewed in his determination to keep Ciri isolated from the intrigues of the world. He had questioned whether bringing her home to Kaer Morhen was a wise idea. She’d be isolated from rest of the world, but there were no other girls there either which could be a detriment to her social adjustment for a girl not long for puberty. Consequences be damned! His first priority was keeping her safe. The rest would have to fall into place.

“Demavend’s coming for her, Geralt. I tried to talk him down. He promised to wait until I returned to him, but apparently he grew too impatient. Get her away from here, darling.”

He scowled and turned towards the door. The low rumble of thunder of many horses’ hooves and marching feet pounded the earth and grew stronger in his ears.
“They’re close.” He took a step towards the door, but Yen held onto his wrist. Tugging him back, she threw her arms around his neck, stood on her toes, and took possession of his mouth in an eager and promising kiss setting him on fire again. A kiss, that would most certainly have lead to further pleasurable delights, under different circumstances, but dammit, there was no time! His hands smoothed down her arms and back flattening her against him. Fire seared him again, but ignored it.

“What was that for?” he chuckled, grinning at her.

“For being you. Your mood altering kisses, and protecting Cirilla. A man like you giving his all for a little girl in need. Stirs me beyond words.” She swallowed and shook her head as if awakening from a dream. “I haven’t had a chance to meet the young princess, but take care of her, Geralt. I know you will. She is more important than you realize.”

The front door crashed open, bursting his next thought of what Yen meant about that last statement. Dandelion, flustered and disheveled, had a worried expression etched deep on his face.

“Hate to break up the romantic reunion, but there’s an army coming!”

Closing his eyes, he sighed, resting his forehead against Yen’s, exhausted in every way. And his head pounded still. So, his suspicions were confirmed. Garret hadn’t been exaggerating.

“Here are your armor and swords, Geralt. Likely be a battle soon.”

Shrugging on his jerkin, he buckled straps quickly and tied laces with deft fingers. “Yen…” he turned back to her and her stunning beauty stole his breath as it always had. “Need a big favor and it could end your employment with Demavend. Would you stall them, for me? Just give us enough time to get the hell out of here.”

Her lips remained pursed, either still irked by his using magic on her even despite their momentary escape, or determined to stop Demavend. Pale cheeks flushed earlier, had maintained their pink glow, and she nodded once, waving her arms in a graceful arc above her head. A portal opened up near the entry to the lab. With a meaningful gaze, her eyes glistened violet-blue and she disappeared through the portal.

Strapping on his sword belt across his shoulders, he looked out the window. “How close are they? Can you tell?”

“Judging by the vibrations in the ground, pretty close, I’d wager. Witch-hunters or Nilfgaardians?”

“Neither. The Aedirnian army.”

The bard’s jaw slacked. “Demavend? Didn’t see that coming. How can I help?”

“Get the ladies out of here. Head north toward Blaviken and Cahelibol, although Cahelibol would be better. I’ll catch up with you there and then I can head east between the mountains to Ard Carraigh. Best to go by the pond and through the woods so the army doesn't see you. Pick up the main road in Yantra and stick to it.”

Dandelion nodded, staring at him. “I know you’re a witcher and all, but tell me you are not going to face an army alone.”

Sheathing his blades, he adjusted the straps. “What, and you’re going to help the odds?” he grinned sardonically. He turned serious again quick. “Won’t leave Yen out there by herself. Don’t worry, have no intention on battling an army by myself. Besides, it’s most likely a battalion or brigade. Doubt Demavend would send a full army - would raise too much attention. Please, Dandelion. I’m
counting on you to get Ciri and Chessa far enough away so they won’t pursue.”

“Chessa too?”

“You’d leave her to face this on her doorstep alone? If they don’t imprison her, they will rape her mercilessly before killing her. Not about to let that happen. They’re here for Ciri. It’s the least I can do after all the hassle we’ve caused already. Want to keep her safe as well.”

A ghost of a smile played across the bard’s face. “See, I told you, didn’t I? You are a good man, Geralt. And that will never change.”

In appreciation, he squeezed Dandelion’s shoulder. “I’m sorry you got wrapped up in all this, my friend, but I am glad you’ve been here. Couldn’t have been easy for you either, but I need you one more time. Get them out and when I meet up with you, you’re free to go wherever your heart, and loins, desire.” He winked knowingly at him.

The bard chuckled and nodded, straightening his beret. “What a relief. I like you all right, Geralt. You’re my best friend and all, but the thought of wintering in that drafty fortress of yours is… well, let’s just say I have warmer places to spend the colder months, if you get my meaning.”

He laughed. “Sure do. Bet you have several, in fact.”

A bright sizzling flash lit up the night sky not far off to the east followed by an explosion that shook the earth. Yen had engaged the brigade. They had to move.

Chessa and Ciri descended the stairs. As he had requested, Ciri was bundled up in two layers of boy’s clothing, warm fur-lined boots, mittens, a wool cloak with the hood pulled over her hair, and a scarf covering half her face. Only the green of her eyes were visible. Chessa herself was garbed in warm wool riding clothes, her waves tucked inside the hood of a cloak.

Dandelion took Ciri’s hand and led her out the door, but not before she clutched the side of the door frame. She turned toward him. “Geralt?”

“Go with him, Ciri. He will get you and Chessa far from here.”

“What about you?”

The scarf covering half her face muffled her voice and did not hide the anxiety gloss over her eyes.

“I’ll follow soon, I promise. Chessa will be with you too.”

That was enough to allow herself to be hoisted onto Dandelion’s horse.

The healer stepped up to him, her eyes wide and uncertain. "I... wasn’t expecting to leave with you, Witcher."

Geralt approached and cupped her cheek, her face whiter than normal. Her deep ocean-blue eyes shone bluer than he’d ever seen them, melting him inside. “A battalion of soldiers are headed here because of Ciri and me.” The color drained from her face. “Not about to let you face them alone and risk imprisonment or worse on our account. Come with me, I’ll keep you safe. We'll figure it out.”

She drew in a ragged breath. “I’m going to Kaer Morhen with you?”

“You don’t have to, but if that is what you decide, I’m glad for the company. Ciri would love it
too, but you’ll be stuck there until spring. We'll pass through Cahelibol and Ard Carraigh along the way. Any of them could be a place for you to wait this out. If you have friends or family in those places, I’ll take you there. Then you could return here after all the fuss has died down. I’m sorry for all this, really, I am. But please, we need to go.”

With a hand on the small of her back, he gently prodded her towards the door and followed her out.

Dandelion had strapped their belongings to Pegasus. Offering his assistance, he helped Ciri up into the saddle. He mounted behind her. A moment later, Chessa sat astride her mare.

Geralt approached Pegasus. “Stick to the roads. I’ll catch up with you as fast as I can. Leave some signs along the way to help me find you faster.”

“Understood.” Dandelion took the reins from Ciri's hands. “Farewell, my friend.”

“Geralt, look out!”

Chessa's screech didn't warn him soon enough and a heavily armored body plowed him from the side pitching him to the ground. His shoulder and side of his head cracked against the ground hard and he blacked out momentarily. Throbbing pain stabbed the back of his head and stole his breath. The horses, startled, jumped aside, vocalizing their surprise in high pitched cries.

Rolling onto his stomach, the solid steel pommel of a Nilfgaardian sword hammered the back of his skull. Stars shimmered in his vision as excruciating agony seared his already assaulted head. Crying out, the weight of the armored man lifted off him and lunged for Dandelion’s mare. The black helm, adorned with tall wings of prey, loomed like a phantom from a children's tale, and the source of Ciri's nightmares.

A high-pitched blood-curdling scream erupted from Ciri.

“Go, now!” Geralt roared.

Dandelion spurred Pegasus with a fierce kick to her flanks. Just as the Nilfgaardian officer grasped Ciri's leg in a desperate attempt to yank her from the saddle, the mare leaped ahead thundering away, kicking clumps of dirt behind her. Their flight caught the knight off guard throwing him off balance, and he stumbled sideways with the horse’s momentum.

Despite the sea of dizziness, Geralt flung himself at the officer’s back, tackling him to the ground. A wave of nausea churned his stomach. Leaning to the side, he retched hard and repeatedly. Ah, damn. He spat bitter bile to the ground. The knight struggled to get up, but Geralt pinned him by the neck and a knee between the shoulder blades. Wiping his mouth with the back of a gloved hand, he swore. As he suspected, definitely a concussion.

Movement ahead caught his attention. A horde of cavalry knights and foot soldiers, at least two hundred in total, donned in armor with the customary gold, red, and black colors of Aedirn, closed in surrounding Chessa's property.

The world spun, fading in and out of black. By the gods, he'd better not lose consciousness now!

Loosening his grip on the officer, the knight managed to buck him off and jumped to his feet. Dizziness prevented him from rising and remained on all fours. A black armored boot slammed into his gut lifting him off the ground with the impact. He gasped and grunted, landing back on his hands and knees. Dammit! Spasms clutched him again and more than bile came up that time. It split his head to do so and now his sides screamed at him. Spitting on the ground, he wiped his mouth.
A pair of fists clutched his jerkin and yanked him to his feet. Everything turned upside down again. He groaned. A fist slammed his jaw sending thin threads of saliva from his mouth. Reeling, he grasped the helmed knight’s arms to keep his balance, but in reality he never moved. The cursed Nilfgaardian freed an arm and strong fingers crushed his throat. Everything blurred; he couldn’t see straight. Now he couldn’t breathe.

“Try puking now, Witcher!” the knight hissed.

Strangely, as if in a dream, a feminine voice called his name, but he couldn't make out whose. Yen wasn't near and it wasn't her voice. She called him again... Chessa? She still here? Didn’t she leave along with Dandelion?

Another blow to the jaw ceased all cognitive abilities. The metallic taste of blood lingered on his tongue. The ground lit up with a bright flash, burning his eyes. Or was it the sky? He couldn't tell anymore. Thunderous roars split the night.

A voice, a man’s, young and in command, muffled in his ears.

“Why did you send her away?! I need her!” In his fury, the young officer’s spittle sprayed him in the face. “By the gods, you are a bloody good protector, Witcher, but know this: all I have to do is return to the emperor and he will send his army after you! Mark my words! Think you can face an entire army?! For a young girl?!”

Geralt clawed at the hand around his throat, but in his fury, the knight shook him in his rage. Desperate, he kneeed the knight, ramming him in the groin and hated resorting to the dirty tactic. The hold around his throat loosened as the knight buckled before him. Sucking in huge ragged breaths, Geralt heeled the knight in the back with a spurred boot. He sprawled to the ground, groaning.

Another flash preceded an ear-splitting explosion that rattled everything and everyone. A rainstorm of fire poured from the sky around the homestead in flaring balls of fury. Thick clouds of smoke billowed everywhere clogging the nostrils and burned the eyes. Horses threw off riders and escaped the chaos despite their battle training. The blood-freezing screams of men burning to a crisp in their armor howled in his ears, splitting his head asunder in a torture he'd never before experienced. The colorful striped banner at the front of the company hung in tatters, its edges on fire. Chessa’s homestead did not escape the firestorm either and her home went up in flames, the barn followed shortly after. Yen would not have done that purposefully, but firestorms were an extremely difficult spell to control.

He tried to focus on the black knight, but his vision wouldn't clear, even for a bit. This man was after Ciri. He had to protect her. Anyone who would harm or even attempt to hurt his little girl would face his wrath.

The officer struggled to his feet and an arm cranked back to deliver another blow, but this time, Geralt blocked it with an arm and pummeled the guy in the teeth with his silver studded knuckles. The knight staggered backwards, blood sprayed over his nose and mouth. Swaying on his feet, Geralt took a few steps toward the officer and delivered another blow that spewed blood everywhere, even on him. The officer collapsed to the ground, unconscious.

Another wave of nausea hit him again. He stumbled. Searing pain throbbed in his head nearly drove him mad. Falling to his knees, he hunched over vomiting up nothing but bile, his stomach heaving uncontrollably until there was nothing left inside. But even then, the spasms wracked him, and dry heaved until it subsided on its own. Holy Melitele, put an end to this torment!
Cool and comforting hands smoothed over his face and damp hair, gently feeling the lump that had already doubled in size on the back of his head. He winced at the touch. Flaming fire bombs exploded in waves of heat around them. Embracing the healer close, he breathed in her calming and sweet scent. Clutching his head to her belly, she bent over him, shielding him with her body. Heat exploded around them, sparks showered over them. “No,” he breathed, but no sound came out. This wasn't the way it should be. I should be shielding her!

A roar nearby swooshed as the barn succumbed to the angry flames. Gusts of wind whipped her cloak and hair about them. With effort, Geralt struggled to his feet, clutching her for support. Weak… he was weak and thirsty.

Black streaks smeared her beautiful face and neck. “Geralt… you cannot fight anymore. You have a concussion. Should tend to you, but…” she faltered, unable to finish her thought.

Exactly. Glancing behind him, he squeezed closed his eyes. Consumed with fire, flames licked out the windows, the roof sunk about to collapse. All this… because of him. His gut lurched, but he forced himself not to throw up again.

“What do we do, Witcher?”

Gazing behind her, Geralt cursed. Or rather attempted. No sound escaped his parched throat. Another segment of soldiers closed in from behind the flaming house, long shields above their heads and before the front line formed a wall, protecting them from Yennefer’s raging fury.

Swallowing hard, he grated out, “Hide in the woods.” He swallowed convulsively, his throat raw. “Sneak off by the side of the barn. Go now. Head to the village and seek shelter. Be careful. I'll find you.”

She stared at him wide-eyed and followed his gaze, glancing behind at the pond. When she turned back to him, her face was like a ghost's. A grim determination set her jawline. Fathomless blue eyes misted over searching his face for anything she could read, hold onto. But he could not keep the seriousness of the situation from showing in his expression.

Chessa slowly shook her head and swallowed. “No, Witcher. I'll not leave you,” she choked.

Grinding his teeth, he couldn’t blame her, really, but her broken declaration swelled in him. Her home was up in flames now and where would she go? Soldiers would find her, rape her… He shook his head. These were impossible odds. Ciri's away from all this and Chessa’s and Yen’s safety mattered most now.

Outflanked, the soldiers were close. What was left of the first company drew closer as well. They were surrounded. Slipping the dagger out of its sheath strapped to his thigh, he handed it to her. Not that it would have done any good, but better to have something to defend herself with if the need arose.

She eyed the weapon with deep gravity, but grasped the hilt and slid the blade inside the belt of her tunic. Nodding her gratitude, she met his gaze again. A host of emotions gripped him, but regret was the most intense. If only… No! He wouldn't have met her otherwise had they not stopped here for help with Ciri. Chessa was an amazing woman, and longed to know her better.

Sliding a gloved hand around the nape of her neck, he leaned in close to her ear. “Can’t tell you how sorry I am for this. You don't deserve any of it. Forgive me. I'll see to it your home is rebuilt if I have to build it with my own hands.”
Blinking rapidly, her lips pressed together, her chin quivering. After a moment she found her voice. “I had a chance to be with you, Witcher. Although our time was short,” turning her face towards him, she breathed against his neck, “I cherish it all.”

Closing stinging eyes, he pressed hot lips to her cool forehead. Dammit all! Why had things turned out the way they had? She didn't deserve this… any of it!

Her eyes fluttered shut while she drew in a quivering breath. “Wasn’t going to tell you how much I love you,” she breathed. Mingling with the black soot, a teardrop rolled down her cheek streaking black along with it. “But… doesn't matter now, does it?”

"It matters to me,” he choked.

"I love you, Witcher,” she breathed amidst a barely controlled sob. A gloved hand shook covering her mouth. Then she stroked his jaw line slowly with a finger. “If you make it out alive, I hope you find whatever it is you've been searching for.”

Crushing her to him, he kissed her hair and peered meaningfully into her bottomless glistening blue eyes. Tenderly he pressed his lips to hers. “We will make it out alive.”

Tearing himself away, he stood with his back to her and focused his battered brain, ignored the pain and dizziness, and prepared himself mentally for a rough fight. He reached into his pouch.

“Stay close behind me,” he ordered. Uncorking a vial containing red liquid, he tossed its bitter contents back and swallowed all of it at once. Grimacing, he tossed the empty container to the ground. If he could keep that down, the healing agents would slow or even reverse the effects of the concussion.

The soldiers approached and Geralt contributed his own firestorm reinforcing Yen's magical fury. Pointing at the soldiers, a searing stream of flames shot from both hands like a blowtorch scalding the front line. However, their shields deflected most of the attack and little damage was done. Only a few soldiers in front caught fire, but not enough. Reaching in a pouch, he withdrew a few round containers encased with twine. Blocking Chessa's body with his own, he prepared himself for this battle not ending well.

“Hold onto me,” he instructed over the din of roaring flames and soldiers’ cries. Her delicate touch clutched his hip belt. Angling himself to see both sets of companies, one in front of the pond, the other in front of the house, he tossed two bombs, one into the center of both companies. They exploded simultaneously upon impact, at the exact same instant he bent Chessa over and covered her as he cast the magical shield around them. Fire and countless sparks rained upon the soldiers, scalding hotter than a blacksmith's forge. The force of the explosions flung flaming bodies into the air. Shields were forgotten as many soldiers collapsed, engulfed in flames. Others broke the lines, flailing arms and sprinting for the pond, and still others tried extinguishing smaller flames by batting them out.

Grasping the last two bombs, one in each hand, he flung them both again at each company and grasped Chessa, shielding her as he cast his witcher shield again. Wave after wave of heat beat against the magically charged force field and he used all his strength to keep it alive amidst the torrent of both his and Yennefer's combined maddening fury.

The one flaw in his plan he could not see a way around. There was no where they could escape. Surrounded by walls of fire and hundreds of soldiers, he glanced behind him toward the burning barn. Perhaps they could flee through the woods, but many soldiers would give chase. And Chessa would not be able to keep up with him.
“Geralt!” Her arms encircled his neck. “Hold me,” she pleaded and buried her face in his hair.

Catching movement by the house, he wrapped an arm around about her waist clutching her close. A black shape moved towards them. The Nilfgaardian officer! He had regained consciousness. Standing before the front line of his regiment, far enough away from the flames, he drew his sword, his expression confident behind a bloody face. Patient, he paced from side to side, biding his time...

Dammit!! If only they could vanish--

The air changed around them, but he could have imagined it. Growing heavy, it seemed to disappear and he did not imagine that. Chessa gripped him tightly, struggling to breathe as he also struggled. An orange glowing portal opened up directly behind them. Lilac and gooseberries tickled his nose and delicate hands with surprising strength clutched his shoulders yanking him and Chessa back inside the portal.

Normally, he would have protested, hating portals with a passion. But this time... he was grateful. This one time.

Darkness, weightlessness, and a chill as harsh as the grave consumed him. Let oblivion take him! End the pain... end the torment. He was tired. So very tired. The portal propelled him, tumbling him head over heels, wind rushed past him, roaring in his ears. Then Ciri flashed before his eyes, alone and desperate for him. He couldn’t leave her. She depended on him. She had lost too much already. He would not let himself become another. He would see this through and damn the consequences, damn the future that had revealed itself tonight.

A future he must forget.

...And never think of again.
Voice of the Heart

Chapter Summary

It's been a YEAR since I posted the prologue, friends! And 17 chapters later, you're still with me and some new readers gained along the way too! I can't thank you enough for accepting this story and sticking with it! :)

Chapter 18 is here and it's the transition scene between the past and present story line that was started in Chptrs 1-3.

It's 12 years later and Ciri has grown into a lovely woman. For the Witcher 3 Wild Hunt gamers - the timeline is where the main story ends with the Witcheress Ending. Having returned from confronting the White Frost, she had met Geralt at the Inn at White Orchard and for the past fortnight, they've been on the road south to a destination Geralt kept a secret.

Chapter 18 Summary:

Ciri's condition grows worse and Geralt realizes he needs to get her off the road and to a safe and warm place, maybe even with a healer. During this snowy morning, we get small glimpses into the night they had shared together. Geralt begins to realize the wheel of time is coming around and the impossible reality that had revealed itself back at the healer's homestead twelve years ago, may indeed have already begun...

Many, thanks to VicofThor - your support is invaluable!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes
Yen saved us tonight.

Detest those blasted portals, but gotta admit, it saved us.

Shit, my head...

With their help, I collapse onto a plush bed, my head pounding mercilessly, even after choking down a healing elixir. Inhaling deeply, I know this bed. The way it feels, how it smells. Just like her. A garden in the spring. Sinking deeper into the lush pillows, infused with lilac and gooseberries, a smile cracks over my dry lips. Here, countless passionate mornings and nights spent worshiping her...

Can’t help the rough groan from escaping at the thought.

Of all places, her portal deposited us at her villa in Vengerberg. The very capital of Aedirn. Yeah, the home of the same damned army that had come for Ciri on King Demavend’s orders. Dammit!

A stroke of foolishness on her part? Or brilliance? Hard to say right now. Hard to think, period.

Can’t blame her, really. Where else could she have teleported us without time to think things through? Novigrad was clearly out of the question as well as anywhere south, for Nilfgaard is after Ciri too. Shit... Nilfgaard, the northern kingdoms... Garret had implied that others are after her as well. WHO, dammit?! How can I protect her if I don’t know all who is a threat?
That means everyone is a threat.

Gentle fingers swipe away hair caked to my face then feel my forehead. The metallic taste of blood still lingers on my tongue. Want to open my eyes, but the world will spin. Feels like I've swallowed several blowball plants all at once. Bloody hell, haven't been in this bad shape since the fight with the striga years ago...

Ciri!

Where is she?! She needs me. Without me, she'll be too frightened! Must get to her...

I struggle to sit up… my head hammers like a blacksmith's forging blows. It steals away my breath.

A woman's voice consoles me, hands press on my shoulders urging me back down into the welcoming bed. A cold compress cools my forehead.

Yeah, that's right. I relax some. Ciri's with Dandelion heading north for Cahelibol per my instructions. Dammit! Why did everything always go sour? I need to get to her, but... damn, so exhausted. Just want to rest...

Fingers clutch my shoulder and shakes me. A hand gently taps my cheek repeatedly and brings me to again. Why are you doing this? Just let me sleep. Can't you hear me? Let me be...

“Witcher…”

Chessa's soft whisper brings relief. Thank you, Yen, for bringing her through the portal too.

“Witcher…” Her sultry voice warms my ear. “Don't fall asleep. Please, wake up.”

But I need to rest.

“Geralt, look at me.”

Another all too familiar voice speaks above me, cool and in command. Want to gaze into your stunning eyes, Yen, but I can't. Want to hold you, but don't have the strength.

My fingers crawl over the silky sheets searching for her. Finding her leg, I squeeze her thigh just above the knee, where the lacy band of her black stocking rests, but now it was the disappointing fabric of her trousers cool and smooth… but imagine her in the stockings anyway. Her hand captures mine, prying it from her leg and drawing it up to her lips feathering kisses along my knuckles. Velvety soft lips. Hmmmm...like it... a lot.

Did she really do that? Or am I dreaming?

Oh, gods...

Yen, something... impossible revealed itself tonight. Can't wrap my mind around it. Need to talk about it, but, shouldn't... can't, not with you, but wish I could. Yen... Is it true I'm going to be a father someday? But, it's impossible! Yet, I've met him, Yen! It's... undeniable he is my son! I don't know how...

“Geralt, darling… Wake up. Open your mouth for me, will you?”

Again she shakes me, slips a hand behind my head and lifts it just enough. Smooth pottery cools my lips. Steaming fragrant herbs soothe my senses. Opening my eyes for a brief second, the dim candle-lit room turns upside down.
“Drink, dear.”

“Swallow, Geralt.”

*The warm and bittersweet flavor soothes my parched throat. Should recognize the taste, the smell, but can't... think clearly. All I see is a young and strong man who looks just like me with pale hair and emerald green eyes... Ciri's son... My son....*

Our son...

*How can this be?! Yen, I love you.... I've never spoken those words, but hear me now. I love you. My last wish was for you, Yen, only you. That our lives will forever be intertwined. That was my wish because I don't want to live this long life without you in it. If I could ever be a father, Yen, it should only be with you...*

“Oh, we're losing him... He won't stay conscious.”

“No, it's not that.” Yen’s voice is clear and confident. “Quite the contrary. His aura is still strong. He's quite stimulated, actually.” Her voice grows quiet and fervent. “What's going on in that head of yours, Geralt?” she murmurs.

Yen... will you still love me if I have a child with another woman?

“I can't make sense of it all. His emotions are intense, thoughts lucid and rampant, but erratic and all a jumble. I'm only gleaning bits and pieces... they make no sense.”

*The healer's voice is soft and warm. “The tonic should relax him.”*

“Yes, he drank your tonic, Chessa, now it's high time I do my thing. He'll sleep. He needs it, but I will have to heal him first.”

*Low and curt chanting fills the room, a heat almost unbearable is all consuming. Light fills me inside, the pain dissipates, and relaxation, deep relaxation pulls me into blessed oblivion. Yen's magic is strong and true, she has it all under control. I'm with a sorceress and a healer. Couldn't be in better hands.*

Sweet nothingness and blackness finally overtake me.

*Now, I can rest.*

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

*Voice of the Heart*
Southeastern Velen

Yule, 1272, Twelve Years Later

“Ciri?” he called into the trees. His low gravelly voice echoed back at him, jarring in the frigid stillness of the morning deep in the middle of no man’s land of southern Velen. He gave himself up to the yawn he’d been stifling without success.

Geralt shifted in the saddle, rolled up the parchment he’d been studying, and rested his hands on the saddle pommel. He closed his eyes for a moment, and rubbed his temple. That cursed dream again. Started the night he and Ciri met at the White Orchard Inn a fortnight ago. Each night since, his sleep was disturbed by the same vivid dream. Woke him every time. And sleeping afterwards… well, about impossible.

Roach pawed at the snow-covered ground scavenging for a snack. The jingle of silver buckles and the creak of leather sounded louder than usual in the frigid air. They were close to their destination. In fact, the bog was just south a bit and they would've been there already if--

He cleared his throat. “Need anything?” he called again.

Ciri's mare, momentarily bereft of her rider, stared at him blankly and shook her head with vigor, whipping her mane about.

No response from the trees.

Slumping his shoulders, he sighed.

The all too familiar retching sounds grew tiresome, but immediately felt guilty for feeling so. Exhaling slowly, he stared at the back of Roach’s neck and the white flakes gathering in her mane sparkled in the diffused golden light of morning. The fluffy powder nested in his beard as well. He pulled the hood lower over his face.

A more intense heave met his ears. He sighed, worried. Each morning started like this. First at the White Orchard Inn, then each morning as they headed south. They had spent two days sheltering in the barn at the Reardon Manor forced to wait out a snowstorm that dropped more than a few inches of pure white snow. Same thing there. Now they've been on the road for two days and here she was again, disappeared into the brush to save him the misery.

He swallowed hard. A woman he knew years ago had suffered the same ailment each morning only to learn she had been with ch--

A whimper reached him.

That's it. He swung down from the saddle. “I’m coming.”

Tucking the scroll in his belt, he pulled his cloak close and plowed through the snow-covered branches of dormant brush and trees, getting covered by tiny avalanches of powdery white in the process. He followed her sounds until spotting her on her knees hunched low to the ground. White flakes littered her black cloak fanned out about her.

Crouching next to her, he brushed ashen strands from her pale face, tucking them behind an ear. A
quick glance at him before she hid her face was enough to reveal her misery and his heart swelled.

“Hey, I get it,” he offered with a gruff voice and a grin. "On the path with me for days on end is hard for anyone to stomach. Even myself sometimes.”

That earned a chuckle and a half-hearted slap on his chest. Catching her slight gloved hand, he held it there against him near his medallion. It twitched a few times. She didn't pull away, but held his gaze with tired wide eyes. In those green depths he witnessed a changed woman. A woman who had been through more than anyone should have. Seen more than any of them. This new freedom she experienced free of fear and of the Wild Hunt breathed new life into her, but seeing her ill like this was hard. She barely ate, dark circles lined her eyes, her complexion pale and drawn. He squeezed her hand.

Just the fact he made her smile warmed him, despite her flicking a teardrop from the corner of an eye. Drawing in a frustrated breath, she leaned into him and pressed her cheek on his chest beside her hand. An arm reached around his side and squeezed him. He pulled her close and kissed the top of her hair damp with powdery snow. His medallion jittered stronger than it had before with her nearness.

She wiped her face with a gloved hand. “Don't want to be anywhere without you. Been like this for a month now at least. What's wrong with me?”

“Gotta be the food,” he lied. He shouldn't have, but what was the sense in causing unnecessary anxiety should it turn out she wasn't in the delicate condition he suspected? But after a fortnight of being in each other’s company, and seeing this every day, it was the only explanation.

“If that's the case, then why aren't you puking?” came her muffled question.

"It takes a lot for me. Usually the elixirs make me want to vomit. Doesn't mean I don't feel nausea after eating sometimes.”

“I don't think it's the food.”

Squeezing her tight, he glanced around before looking back at her. “How do you feel otherwise? Exhausted?”

She nodded and sighed, “All the time.”

Another symptom.

"From what little detail you’ve provided, facing the Wild Hunt and the White Frost were two harrowing experiences back to back. You're still recovering, gotta be.” He pressed her closer. “It'll pass, I'm sure. If you're through here, we should keep moving.”

“Wait…” Her breathless wish halted him from rising. Ciri pulled away enough to meet his gaze again. The sparkle returned to her rich green eyes wide now with intense emotion.

“What is it?”

Her gloved finger swiped a stray white strand of hair from his forehead. It was a tender and heartfelt gesture that warmed him and filled his heart. Her eyes roamed over his face lovingly.

“That night…” she whispered, her voice thick with emotion faltered. She swallowed and blinked as if a thought had just occurred to her. “Just realized I never got a chance to say this before I took off so suddenly to confront the Frost. Here you and everyone had just fought the fight of your lives and
defeated Eredin for me. You all survived it and I… left. Just like that. So quickly. I need to say something...”

“Don't need to say anything,” he interrupted quietly.

“But I do. Please, just let me…”

“Ugh, serious talk coming, brimming with heartfelt feelings. What's a witcher to do?”

Halfheartedly, she shoved him and he giggled, steadying himself.

“This witcher is going to listen now whether he likes it or not.” She poked his chest with a forefinger accentuating each word as she said it.

Grinning, he waited patiently for her to continue.

“What you have done for me… I - I can’t begin to express how grateful I am. You've changed my life. Gave me a purpose, a reason to go on living…” She let her voice trail off and inhaled a shaky breath.

He swallowed recalling that… night she started to talk about. “You've already expressed it.”

She smiled, and closed her eyes as if thinking about a precious memory, a rosy glow pinkened her cheeks. “I left so quickly after you defeated Eredin because I knew if I had stayed, I would never do what I needed to do. I only ever wanted to be with you. I wanted to stay with you. But when I was younger trying to get back here to you, learning how to hop through dimensions and worlds, I saw the White Frost and how it destroyed worlds. And Avallac’h insisted that the Frost would continue until it destroyed all life. Even ours.”

Geralt wanted to sigh his frustration at the elven sage and how he had affected her with these apocalyptic views, but refrained. He let her simply speak. That was what she needed at the moment.

“So I left. Couldn’t stomach the thought of that happening to our world. But, confronting the Frost was more than braving the cold. And believe me, the chill could freeze the blood in your veins worse than the Hunt could with its frosty spells. It was awful.” She shivered, drawing her cloak tighter around her slim frame. She held his gaze, her green depths glistening with recollection. “But the worst part of my journey? Traveling through worlds devastated, empty and void of all life. It was heart-wrenching. There was simply nothing around. Not a living soul, man or beast. Nothing existed save the remnants of places and things left behind, covered in snow, merely an echo, a memory of life that once was. A life forgotten…”

A chill forked its way down his spine at the imagery she painted. He had no idea...

“There wasn't even a critter to be found. The most difficult part of that experience, Geralt, was surviving the utter loneliness that threatened to drive me mad. For I was the only living being. No one to talk to, no one to encourage me, telling me I'd be all right, and that I'd have the strength… No one.”

Her voice faltered. Reaching around her waist, he drew her against him. No. Gods, why couldn’t he have gone with her? That was not what he had wanted her to experience. The years she had spent fleeing the Wild Hunt constantly jumping from world to world had already left its mark on her. Not being able to forge relationships with others for as soon as she had, she had to flee again. Loneliness was not a life he had hoped for her. He knew that kind of loneliness and… He sucked in a deep breath.
A hand caressed his cheek, her finger traced the line of his jaw. “Only thoughts of you kept me sane and warm inside, Geralt. Especially, that night we shared…”

Straightening up, he breathed in deeply through his nose. Yeah, that night. The night he would never forget even if he wanted to. With trembling fingers, he pulled the hood low over his face again. “Even though I was not there with you, Ciri, glad I still helped in some small way.”

“Not small,” she corrected as huge white fluffy flakes drifted around them. “Nothing small about that. It was my life-line, Geralt. It kept me alive. You kept me alive. As you always have.”

Leaning in, she kissed the tip of his nose, her lips dry and cool. He held her gaze, melting with her sweetness, that soft part of her she kept tucked safely behind the hard exterior she’d learned to possess, and only expressed it with him.

Just like she did that night just before they faced the fight of their lives. Never had anyone expressed such powerful emotions as sincerely like she did. He never knew she felt about him so strongly.

They held each others’ gazes until hers became clouded. Swearing softly to himself, he dropped his gaze to the ground.

“You regret that night we shared.” It was not a question, but a statement. An accusing one.

He couldn’t respond. How could he? That night was both beautiful and laced with heavy emotions. They all dealt with the possibility of dying the next day. That alone would cause people to do things they normally wouldn’t do.

“Dammit, Geralt!” With a huff, she shoved him, much harder this time.

He caught her wrist. “No,” he firmly stated. He waited until she made eye contact with him, not at all liking the pain etched across her features. “Maybe I did a little…” When she pulled away, he held her arm captive and drew in her to an embrace. “But no longer. Now I know just how much that meant to you. How could I regret that?”

“Meant everything to me,” she choked out the sob, going limp in his arms.

It meant a hell of a lot to him too. He had loved plenty of women, but none had become as vulnerable and genuine as she was with him that night. Not even Yennefer. The tears she had shed, hell, the tears he shed along with her… Not something he was accustomed to. The tenderness and raw emotion he would not forget, not ever.

“Me too,” he murmured against her hair.

When she didn't react, a sinking feeling twisted his gut. Gazing down, he swore and scooped her up in his arms. “I’ve got ya.” Cradling her against him, he carried her back to Roach. He hoisted her in his saddle.

“What are you doing?” she mumbled, her voice weak.

He swung up and settled himself behind her and cast the Axii sign on her mare. She would follow him that way.

“We’re going home--” Now it was his turn to falter. Where was home now? Kaer Morhen was just an empty shell now that Vesemir had passed on. Eskel and Lambert found other places to weather out the winter. They couldn’t handle being at the witcher fortress without their beloved mentor and
father-figure. Couldn’t blame them really, but it looked like he would have to go back. Doubted Yennefer went home to Vengerberg, but perhaps she did. But would she welcome him?

“Why home? We have a contract to fulfill.”

“You’re not up to it, Ciri. Certainly not going to put you in harm's way until… you’ve recovered fully.”

“Normally, I would defy you, you know that.” The frailty in her voice made his thoughts tumble over themselves. He had to get her someplace safe, warm, and comfortable. But where, dammit!?

“I know. But even you realize you’re too weak to fight me on this.”

“Where will you take me, then?”

He paused. No idea. “Where do you want to go? Take you anywhere you want.” Hopefully, not Kaer Morhen. They would be too isolated and besides, the mountain pass was obliterated with the snow. No way they would get there now.

Her hand found his and squeezed. “Take me home, Geralt. To Kaer Morhen.”

He cursed under his breath. “Advise against it, Ciri. Won't get up the mountain pass with the snow. Besides, we don’t have enough supplies to wait out the winter. Have a second choice?”

“I could teleport us, silly.”

“You can barely stand on your feet and you think you have the strength to teleport me and two horses? Clearly, you don’t. Now, where to?” He spurred Roach on and Ciri’s mare followed obediently.

“Yen. Take me to Yen, please. Need to be with my mother.”

Gritting his teeth, he turned Roach around, heading northeast. “Not sure where Yen is, but we’ll try Vengerberg.”

“Thank you, Geralt. This means a lot to me.”

“I know. Do anything for you.”

Her hand squeezed his thigh and he pushed Roach on at full speed. He had to get her to Yen as fast as he possibly could. Whatever would happen between them would either have to wait, or be forced to work things out if Ciri was going to be comfortable enough to bring forth a new life into this world.

A new life…

To maintain sanity, he had not spoken about the night twelve years ago at the healer’s home when he had met his future son with anyone, not even Dandelion. Soon realizing he could never drink enough to burn the memory from his mind, nor fuck enough to forget, he had to do something to keep from dwelling on the future that had revealed itself that night. He had even kept watch on a pretty barmaid after screwing her good in her father’s barn to see if her belly swelled a few months later. It didn’t. Not until she married a blacksmith and squeezed out a kid nine months later. Just to be sure, he had found a young and willing red-headed medical student at the Oxenfurt University whom he visited regularly for a short time. Her belly didn’t change either. But he had gained a dear friend.
When he had a severe case of amnesia for about six months, it gave him respite, but once he regained his memories, that one was there as well, although, not as strong. Convinced that Garret, the witcher-born emperor-to-be, was merely one possible future, one of endless possibilities of realities that shifted with each decision made, each event that took place… Whichever reality had met him that night at the healer's homestead was a grain of sand with an improbable chance of becoming his reality.

He spurred Roach on faster. As he expected, he didn’t knock up those ladies, so how the hell could he have gotten Ciri with child? She must have lain with another either just before or after. No, couldn’t have been after. She left to confront the Frost immediately following their victory over Eredin. She herself had just told him there was not another living soul the whole journey she undertook in confronting the Frost, so it must have been before she came to him.

That night before they engaged the Wild Hunt to free Ciri for good, they were all together in the briefing tent, hashing out their battle plans. She had stomped off in a fury for both he and the elven sage agreed that it was too dangerous for her to be a part of the battle. She was clearly not happy about it. He grinned at the memory of her stomping off in a huff claiming they wouldn't let her go for a walk in the event she broke her leg. Yet, she had come to him that night and they shared something rare and beautiful. She needed him… and he needed her.

No. Being with another before couldn't have been it either. She had confessed to him he was the only man she wanted to be with. The only man she could have been with… gave him the distinct inclination she had not yet ever been with a man, although she was no virgin.

But her condition now was the result of their joining. Had to be. Still didn’t know how it was possible… but there was no other explanation.

And her morning ailment was just that.

He spurred Roach on faster. The wind bit, the snow numbing. He protected Ciri with his body as best as he could. He frowned. It would take a week or more to get to Vengerberg.

These dreams he had been having lately... visions of a white-haired man with emerald eyes and a wolf-head medallion on the face of an obsidian black background with a golden sun. And accompanying the imagery, the words of an ancient prophecy. Ithlinne's prophecy. The words uttered by the elven sage that had surrounded Ciri and her elder blood centuries before her birth.

"Verily I say unto you, the era of the sword and axe is nigh, the era of the wolf's blizzard. The Time of the White Chill and the White Light is nigh, the Time of Madness and the Time of Contempt: Tedd Deireadh, the Time of End."

"The world will die amidst frost and be reborn with the new sun. It will be reborn of Elder Blood, of Hen Ichaer, of the seed that has been sown. A seed which will not sprout but burst into flame."

The dreams were telling him something. Or confirming something more like.

Deep down inside he knew. There was much more going on between them than either of them could ever imagine. Beyond their control even. It was not merely about a lonely young woman who had fallen in love with her savior and mentor. It wasn't about him allowing an intimate encounter with the young lady he had protected all these years. But it seems it had everything to do with a power called destiny and a certain prophecy - both ideologies he did not give credence to.

Perhaps that old druid had been right all along.
It wasn't about a sterile witcher. Or a misplaced princess to whom he had given a new life. But together… destiny happened. And would happen.

When something ended, something else began.

... It had begun.

Chapter End Notes

For those of you who may be disappointed and thinking you won't get the read THAT NIGHT....

Just wait.... ;)}
Chapter Summary

Happy 4th Anniversary for The Witcher 3!!

***Content Warning*** This chapter contains a love scene.

I understand the sensitivity behind this scene. This is the scene that you have either been waiting for or dreading. For those of you who cannot stomach the idea of a love scene between Geralt/Ciri - perhaps you should skip this chapter (although, it's really beautiful!).

With that said, I took extreme care in the crafting of this scene. It's not as graphic as previous love scenes because I wanted to make this scene easier on the reader by focusing on the emotion behind the act rather than the physical. There's enough detail to let the reader's imagination add as much or as little detail as you feel comfortable.

I hope you enjoy it! :)

Fan art by Nastya Kulakovskaya
CHAPTER NINETEEN

Destiny Fulfilled

Vengerberg, Aedirn

Late Birke, 1273

Lazily, Ciri opened her eyes and groaned. No… wanna go back into the dream… Closing her eyes again, she willed herself back asleep, back to the dream, back to Geralt…

“Ciri, darling? You all right?”

Her eyes snapped back open. “Mother? What… How long have you been here?”

Yennefer sat in a rocking chair beside her bed with a plush blanket on her lap and a shawl around her shoulders even though it was late spring. The days were just starting to warm up, but the nights were still chilly. The dark purple of fatigue shadowed underneath her violet eyes, now a deep purple, almost black in the dim light of a single pillar candle on the nightstand.

“Couldn’t sleep, sweetling. Just wanted to be near you. Make sure you’re well.”

Pushing herself into a sitting position, Ciri rested against the plump pillows behind her. She pulled the covers up over her swollen belly. “Mother, I’m fine.”

Her thin lips drew up into a tired smile, and she patted her hand. “I know, dear. You’re in your second trimester now and you’re keeping food down more than you’re not, but still… I worry about you. Seemed like you were dreaming. Want to tell me about it?”

A sliver of moonlight arced through the lace curtains of Yen’s guest bedchamber. “Mother, it’s the middle of the night. You need your sleep.”

Sitting back, she crossed her legs drawing up the blanket to her chest. “Feel sleep will elude me tonight. I had a nightmare. I’ll stay up a while. Talk to me. There is something I need to know.”

Tightness crept along Ciri’s throat and neck. “Need to know what?”
The light left Yennefer’s eyes, although the moonlight glinted on her raven locks and shone on her pale face. “How did it happen? You and Geralt? Did he…?”

Swallowing, Ciri took a deep breath. “You know, mother. No, Geralt did not force himself on me. I’ve told you, I seduced him. He didn’t want to… but, I--”

In a strangled voice, Yennefer breathed, “Tell me everything, don’t leave a single detail out… please, child. There is something I need to know. I fear I won’t ever sleep again until I know.”

Pressing her lips together, Ciri considered not saying any more than she had already. She had witnessed the violent rage Yen hurled at Geralt after he delivered her to Yen’s home. Once she was settled and cared for, Yen turned on him like a crazed woman. If Geralt had not been a witcher, possessing magical abilities himself, albeit how limited they were, he would not have survived her raging firestorm that could have leveled all of Vengerberg to the ground had she not intervened and calmed her down.

Knowing what was best for them all, Geralt left so Yen could pick up the pieces of her shattered heart. These last three months have been rough, with her sickness getting worse before getting better. But Yen and Chessa, the healer from long ago, nursed her and continued to watch over her. She had been in great hands. And together, they would all see this child enter the world.

She missed Geralt horribly, but never had she felt so close to her mother as she had now. Wherever Geralt had gone, she hoped he was not alone. Whether he returned home to an empty Kaer Morhen with nothing but memories, or kept busy on the Path, she hoped he would return to her soon. If anything, to witness the birth of his child. The child no witcher could ever sire. This she wished more than anything, for it would sure break his heart if he couldn’t be a part of it.

“Ciri, darling. Please, for my own sanity…”

“All right, Mother," Ciri sighed. "I’ll tell you all…."

* * *

Six Months Ago

Skellige Isles - The Marlin Coast of Undvik

Late Lammas, 1272

Shoving a low-hanging pine branch out of the way, Ciri stalked on by as it snapped back in place behind her, not paying attention nor caring where she headed. Puffing a strand of bangs from her eyes, she kicked a pebble and got little satisfaction from it ricocheting off other rocks and roots on the ground.

She should head back to the Nilfgaardian camp before the last remnants of daylight disappeared. Although no stranger to the isles, the landscape was perilous enough by day let alone stumbling around after dark. That’s what her head said, but her heart wanted to continue its rage. Getting angry was easier to relieve frustration than… crying. And the more adult way. She was not a child anymore.
But, her head was right this time. If she stumbled, then her earlier statement to Geralt and Avallac'h of breaking a leg while taking a walk could become a self-fulfilling prophecy. And that couldn't come at a worse time. She halted and turned around, headed back for camp, her anger diffusing with each step.

Geralt, Yennefer, Triss… her closest friends, family really, together with her elven sage tutor, Avallac'h, and the newly restored Lodge of Sorceresses, had joined forces with her father's imperial navy. Black suits with the golden sun occupied this inlet. Tomorrow, they would all combine their strengths and confront Eredin and his Wild Hunt for the final time. And this time, they must succeed. For all their sakes.

Her anger, seething a moment ago, lost its steam. Her steps no longer stomped in fury, but slowed as she thought about… many things.

She sighed.

To finally be freed of the pursuit of the Hunt… The relief that alone brought. She could stop running, no more fleeing between worlds, trying to find her way in foreign lands and customs, and settle down wherever she wanted. Preferably with Geralt. And even Yen, although at the same time seemed unlikely. Well, if she had to split her time between the two, then so be it.

Okay, it was silly and probably immature of her to stomp off like she had just because she didn't get her way back at the briefing tent. But she could fight like the rest of them! After all, she was Kaer Morhen trained. She could take care of herself, but neither Geralt nor Avallac'h would let her near the fight. Was she supposed to stay behind and hide like a frail, helpless princess while all her friends and family did all the fighting for her?

And maybe even die for her?

Just as Uncle Vesemir had.

She sighed again. To protect loved ones was simply all Geralt wanted. To protect her. She groaned out loud. Just like he always had. She couldn't be mad at him. That's all he knew… protecting others. And he was so damned good at it. Yen as well. But at the same time, she wanted the satisfaction of knowing she had a hand in protecting herself too. But he'd preferred she stayed out of harm's way.

Halting at the top of an incline, she gazed upon the camp. Many braziers flared lighting it up in an orange and yellow glow. The fancy black and gold checkered tents pitched in every nook and cranny the jagged coastline offered, reminded her just how many lives were at stake. Cringing, she glanced at the horizon. The sun had disappeared into the sea and the sky no longer bathed in its golden glow. Now shades of pink and purple streaked the sky amidst twinkling stars.

He forbade her because she was no match for Eredin. She gnawed on the remnants of a fingernail. The truth hurt, but he was right, dammit. She stood a fighting chance over most of her father's trained imperial army, but she was no match for the king of the Wild Hunt.

Then the admission Geralt had made immediately following stopped her in her tracks and grab a protruding tree branch. Glancing out at the horizon swallowed up by midnight blue, she found it hard to understand… Her thoughts, centered on Geralt, prevented the fury from gushing like a geyser again and allowed her to fully comprehend. The witcher lacked confidence that even he could defeat Eredin. Geralt, a sword master, the most efficient killing machine alive, and he doubted. He'd earned his reputation and he admitted he didn't know if he could defeat the Hunt's king.
A knot twisted painfully in her belly. The hand that held the branch trembled. That cursed familiar poison of anxiety that had gripped her so often since childhood. If Geralt doubted his ability in this fight... he had unwittingly confessed he had finally met his match and the chances of surviving this battle were slim.

If that were the case... What hope did the rest of them have?

No... they must defeat the Wild Hunt, they just had to. And survive it.

An overwhelming need replaced anger and she hurried into camp, anxiety swooping in replacing her rage. First stopping at Yennefer's tent, she frowned. She wasn't there. She with Geralt? Maybe they put their issues aside and got together for one last night...

She headed for Triss's tent. Hmmm. Not there either. Perhaps the sorceresses held a conference of their own. None of her friends were around.

Trudging back to her solitary tent, if anxiety didn't manage to consume her, emptiness would. No, she was not going to spend the last night of her life alone in fear like this.

Night settled over the encampment. Anticipation and anxiousness weighed heavily in the air.

There was only one place she'd be comfortable tonight. While others prepared their equipment, brewed potions or conferred over maps, she turned and strode purposely across camp.

* * *
years. Like the oval shaped bite marks crowning his left shoulder forever imprinted by a striga boasted his most legendary feat worthy of a king's bounty. And the deep red arc over his left eye and cheekbone, the memento from the cockatrice of Spalla.

His head lolled towards her and she caught her breath. Sighing, he nestled deeper into the pillows and plush covers, his features taut with anxiety even in sleep. Anyone who managed sleep tonight would likely bear the same lines etched on their faces. If anyone got any sleep. No way she would sleep tonight, that was for sure.

Tomorrow would be a defining day in their individual lives and collectively if history in general would record the stand against the spectral army of the Wild Hunt in the annals of time, regardless of the outcome. A tough day it would be, no sense denying it. It was not every day one battled the Wild Hunt. It would require everyone's all, possessing a steely will to survive, forging great sacrifices, with no certainty of the outcome. And all this for her sake primarily, and the security of their world secondly. Defeating this otherworldly army would ensure her freedom to live her life without fear her magic would draw unwanted attention, and save all of them from the Aen Elle elves from migrating and taking over this world.

But Geralt’s doubts affected her the most. This legendary witcher, the man who had protected her since childhood, the strongest, most capable man she knew, doubted his abilities in light of this battle, and that unsettled her more than she cared to admit. The possibility of losing him was more than she could bear.

Swiping a stray tear that suspiciously materialized in the corner of an eye, she unfastened the ties of her fur-lined cloak. If tomorrow proved the end for either of them or even both… She swallowed convulsively and drew in a shaky breath. He was her world. And the thought of going on without him… squeezing her eyes closed, she choked back a sob.

But go on she would. If he lived or not. She must if she were to stop the White Frost the elven sage insisted was a more dire threat than the Hunt. Her Elder Blood designated her to be the only one who could stop it.

All the more reason… she swallowed nervously, inhaling a slow deep breath in through her nose.

Don't be daft. This is Geralt. The man I've always been comfortable with and with whom I could be myself. Free of fear and anxiety… free of pretense and expectation for he’s always kept those feelings from me. With him, I’m free to simply be me.

A thousand excuses tumbled over themselves, increasing her heart rate and breaths. Yennefer would most likely show up… maybe even Triss… In fact, surprisingly Geralt was alone and that was unusual for sure. He needed rest. That was it. Maybe he and Yen had a chance to be together earlier...

She should leave…

She needed rest too. No. If tonight was to be her last, through hell or high water, she was spending it with him. Whether he liked it or not.

As memories of crawling in his bedroll at night in the middle of the wilderness came to the forefront of her mind, she let go of the ties and the cloak slid down bare arms and folded in heaps at her feet. A shiver raced chill bumps down her naked legs, not sure it was just from the chill. She welcomed the flames’ warmth on her bare skin.

Strange… how many nights she slept beside him as a child… she couldn't sleep otherwise without
his comforting presence. Now as a grown woman, she longed for that comfort again, that
closeness, but… also longed for him in a much different way, much more intimately… She chided
herself silently being as nervous as a bunny despite her desire.

Heart pattering rapidly, she stillled her breathing and knelt one knee on the edge of the mattress.
When he didn’t move or open his eyes, she slowly stretched out beside him. Her soft frame pressed
close to his hard side, his warmth seeping into her, the flames behind her warming her backside.

Allowing herself to breathe again, she let loose the bun at the nape of her neck, her long hair
whispering over a shoulder. Pressing her cheek against his warm chest, she savored his manly scent
of leather, steel, and the woodsy outdoor aroma she had long associated with him and synced her
breathing in rhythm with his. His chest rose and fell in a slow and regular motion, his heart beat
strong and steady beneath her ear.

Her fingertips traced the scar in the shape of a star on his right pectoral with feathery strokes. Then
she traced the cold edges of the wolf-head pendant that jittered with her touch, and barely making
contact, so as not to startle him, her finger followed the line of the scar along his eye and
cheekbone, never removing her gaze from his face.

Damn the consequences. For once, she was going through with what she wanted, out of desire, not
of fear or others dictating her life. Inching up closer, she memorized his features, his dark brow
with white hairs intermingled with the dark ones, a strong, straight nose, and thin lips…

Fixing her gaze on his mouth, she feathered his lips with a light kiss. At first timid and shy, it lasted
no more than a heartbeat. Surprisingly dry and velvety smooth, it pleased her. Hungry for more,
she repeated the action, this time, holding the kiss for several moments. Closing her eyes, she
stilled her nerves and let herself be in the moment. No running, no resisting, not fearing anything,
forgetting everything, and simply savoring this moment with the man she had loved since the
moment he had rescued her in the Brokilon Forest.

Warmth flooded her insides. Raking fingers through his long white hair, she deepened the kiss. He
responded, his lips taking control. Heart pounding, she melted into him and returned with eager
affection, excitement building. A large hand held her head in place as he gently moved over her
lips with slow and tender well-practiced movements, drawing every feeling from her heart, every
thought into her lips, and partook of them. Hell, he birthed them in the first place, brought them to
the surface and tasted them… all with this simple toe-curling contact. Oh, she was in the hands of a
master and the safest place she could ever be… his arms. Sighing, her insides turned to water,
every muscle relaxed.

Breathless and wanting more, she caressed his cheek, peppering tiny kisses over his brow, the tip
of his nose and smooth chin with a hint of new growth. His features, both striking and strange,
were dear to her heart. He nipped at her chin and nose too as hands roamed over her back, gripped
her hips, and slid back up. One hand grasped her neck, the other splayed through her hair, twisting
silky tresses around a finger, clearly fascinated with her long mane. The playful display delighted
her.

Incredibly intimate and beautiful, she didn’t want anyone else. No. No other man but him. Rolling
on top of him, she continued tasting his lips, nipped an earlobe, and smiled against his mouth.
Pressure between her shoulder blades flattened her breasts against the hard wall of his chest.

Sucking in a breath, she let it out slowly, reminding herself to relax… she was with Geralt. With the
only man she ever felt completely safe. He wasn’t like other men who had tried to take her against
her will, force her to do things she did not want to do. Like the mercenary Leo Bonhart, or worse,
the mage, Vilgefortz, who had schemed to artificially impregnate her with his seed so the son she
bore would have his blood mingled with her Elder Blood. Then there were the Lodge of Sorceresses who would have married her off to a certain king mingling her bloodline with his. Avallac’h pawned her off to his elven king promising to help her back to her own world after she produced an heir for the Aen Elle elves. Yeah, the very same race of the Wild Hunt. And her own father! Geralt never told her, but she had found out what her own natural father wanted to do with her. A shiver racked down her spine. To wed her so she would bear his son… to create a new bloodline, and a powerful heir, even more powerful than she.

Every man she had ever come in contact with, other than the witchers and their close friends, had an ulterior motive to align their bloodlines with her powerful Elder Blood. And those that didn’t know about her heritage just simply tried to rape her for the sheer joy of it. Any wonder she couldn’t let a man touch her? For the man who had gotten her with child, his life would change drastically forever.

As their lips met again in another breathtakingly slow and burning kiss, with Geralt, she was safe in the fact that he couldn’t get her with child. Another reason why he was the one. Her child would be… powerful to say the least, but highly sought after as well. Maybe even more so than she.

Amidst breathy sighs, raking her fingers through his loose locks, she murmured barely audible words against his lips between kisses, but what she said was lost in the waves of sensations rolling through her. Holding her against him, he sat up, guiding her thighs to hug his hips. Large hands swept through her hair, smoothed up and down her back, hot lips trailed down her throat.

His eyes opened a slit, glittering beneath half-closed lids. He sucked in a breath, eyes wide. “Ciri?”

The calm peacefulness dissipated. Tensing up, she swallowed. What went wrong?

Looking around, he swiped a hand over his eyes, nose, and mouth and looked at her again. “Shit,” he breathed.

“What?”

“Thought... Was dreaming. Thought you were Yen.”

Her eyes stung, her heart sank. All this time he thought she was Yen? The taste of his kisses still wet on her lips, she frowned. “Sorry to disappoint you,” she clipped. Sighing heavily, she removed herself from his lap and sat on her knees beside him.

“What are you doing here?” His simple whisper made her feel even worse.

“What do you think, Geralt?” She meant her question to sound harsher because the disappointment stung like her witcher’s blade, but it barely escaped her lips as a whisper. “You thought you were making love with Yen, but it was me, Geralt, me.”

He swept over her with a hit gaze for the briefest of moments then slowly closed them. ”I see.” Sighing heavily, fingers pinched the bridge of his nose. ”This isn’t good.”

“No… don’t push me away... please,” she pleaded with earnest. She dropped her hands to her lap.

“You’re naked--”

“So are you,” she countered, fully knowing her argument held no ground. Swallowing, she stuck to her answer with a stubborn tilt to her chin.

“Not playing games--”
“Neither am I.” Her statement, declared in all seriousness, made him pause.

He held her gaze for long moments. “This…” he let out a sigh. “Why are you here at this hour? Wait… You know what you are doing…”

Letting out the breath she didn’t realize she held hostage, she reminded herself he was Geralt… the man she trusted with her life, and could be completely honest and open with him. “Yes.” Her whisper barely made it passed her lips. Heat flushed her entire face.

He didn’t say anything, just stared at her, a whirlwind of emotion storming in his strange yet, fascinating cat-like eyes. If only she could read thoughts like Yennefer.

Finding the courage, she found his hand in the folds of the covers and squeezed it with both of hers. “Yes, and I’m not drunk, I know exactly what I’m doing.” Leaning in closer, she smiled and whispered, “I want... to love you, Geralt.”

A curtain of hair slipped from her shoulders and draped across her face. Hiding behind it, she was relieved he couldn’t see her heated cheeks. More than her cheeks, actually. A hot flush rushed down her neck and chest and… in other places. A finger drew the hair aside exposing her face again and tucked it behind an ear. Slowly, she gazed up at him feeling as bare as a newborn. He peered at her, glittering and experienced eyes reading more than she cared to admit. But he did not smile. Not even a hint of one.

“Whatever you had in mind… not going to happen.”

“Geralt--” No… her heart screamed. Searching his face, she pleaded with her eyes. This was where she longed to be… with him. Now. Like this. Bared flesh against flesh. She would know a man, know him before she died, or he died… And he was the only man who could touch her! He must not send her away! “Please…” she choked out. Her throat closed tight.

“I mean it, Ciri. I'll walk you back to your tent.” Scooching over to the opposite side of the bed, he managed to pull on trousers without revealing a hint of skin.

Paralyzed with the force of her will, she did not move. Could not move. No, this wasn't happening. He was dismissing her like a spoiled princess. Like a child.

Snatching the cloak from the floor, he wrapped it around her shoulders, covering her nakedness. Warmth stifled her and he tied the ties about her neck. Was she fucking Little Red Riding Hood? Gently, without force, he grasped her arm and tugged her to her feet. Once her toes plunged into the soft plush animal pelt on the floor, she swiped away his hand angrily.

“Don’t treat me like a child!” she spat. “I'm not a kid anymore, Geralt. I'm a woman now and fully grown... and... and old enough.” With quick and angry movements, she yanked at the tie strings, letting the cloak slip to the floor.

If she didn’t know better, he fairly flushed. Clearly uncomfortable, he averted his gaze.

“No, don’t turn away. I’ve tasted you now… Would like--”

“Don’t say it, Ciri…” He took a step back, his face lost in shadow with the brazier blazing behind him, only two slits of glittering eyes shone in the dimness, his pure white hair gleamed like a halo around his head. “Never treated you like a child. Think you know that. Yeah, you’re a woman, Ciri, a very beautiful one,” he whispered, “but I am not the man to...” he paused, swallowing hard as if clutched in the midst of an inner struggle.
She flared her nostrils. “There you go again, dictating my life, like I don’t know what’s best for me.” Moving closer, she straightened her shoulders. She would have her way with this. Suddenly, she softened, not wanting to fight. She was so tired of fighting. For everything.

Turning, she stared into the brazier’s lazily dancing flames. “You are the man for me.” Glancing at him, she held his gaze, the sting burning behind her eyelids. “You are the only man in all the worlds I would let touch me.” Her voice failed her. “I cannot do this with anyone else.” Turning her back to him, she crossed her arms, studying the pelt on the floor, but not really seeing anything through the tears welling up in her eyes. “You are the only man I wish to be with,” she breathed.

“So this is it. How it happens,” he murmured so quietly, she didn’t quite hear what he said.

“What did you say?”

Turning, he kept his back to her. “It’s late. I’m tired. We have a tough day ahead of us tomorrow.”

“Exactly.” Her whisper, void of any sharpness, hung in the air between them. It grew intensely still, except the spitting roar of the brazier’s flames, the other lost in shadow. His hair, milk white, gleamed with the tint of the firelight, which also glittered in his eyes.

Geralt stood like a stone sentry, not moving or making a sound. His back to her again, she couldn't glimpse his expression. Until he turned slightly. Only half of him met the orange glow of the brazier’s flames, the other lost in shadow. His hair, milk white, gleamed with the tint of the firelight, which also glittered in his eyes.

He was so beautiful. A hard and chiseled warrior, world weary, yet still possessed a heart of gold. A man more noble than any of the elite citizens of Cintra that had once graced her family's royal palace, although he would argue his goodness did not outweigh his flaws.

Thoughts of her family… but a distant memory now. More than a half a lifetime ago, she barely could picture her mother's face before an image of Yennefer replaced it. And Vesemir… dear Vesemir. Already one who had given his all to protect her… No. No more would die for her.

The last thing she wanted was to weep, but the familiar sting brought wetness to her eyes again. Blinking them back, she whispered, “Don’t know any of us will live to see another night. Just wanted comfort… and to give it.”

Turning his head slightly, he glanced back over his shoulder. His expression, from what she could tell from the dimness, proved her words hit home.

Taking a step closer, she reached for his hand. His squeezed hers meaningfully. Taking in a deep shaky breath, she pressed herself close against his side and kissed his shoulder tenderly. Her sigh was broken, but the words came. “You’re my world, Geralt. I was so lost without you. Those years when we had gotten separated, all my efforts went into getting back to you. That was how I learned how to use to my power. Gave me the will to go on. Hopping from world to world, jumping through time… was to get back to you. I needed to be with you. You’ve given me everything, and tomorrow you will give more… possibly even your life.”

The kiss he planted on top of her head threatened to rush the torrent of tears over her lashes, but she choked them back. “Have already lost Vesemir. Couldn’t live if we… lost you…”

Strong arms enveloped her and her cheek plastered against his hard chest. Biting her lip, she forced back the tears, but one rebellious droplet escaped and dripped down her nose onto his medallion. She sniffled, hugging him in a tight embrace.
“I’m so afraid…” There she said it. The words she refused to speak since she was a child. But it was not fear for herself, but of losing him. Fear of losing Yennefer and all her friends, for without them, she was nothing, would have nothing… Nothing to live for.

“Ssshhh….” he whispered into her hair, his breath warm and comforting, his arms a fortress around her. Again, she was safe....

Tilting her face up to his, she pressed quivering lips against his. Thankfully, he did not jerk away, shove her away, or chastise her, but accepted the sweet display of affection. Breaking the contact to breathe, “Please…” she scratched her fingertips lightly along his jawline. “Let me experience this once…” she gulped in a shaky breath, “before what tomorrow brings.”

In an instant, she was at the mercy of his arms, her legs scooped out from under her. Cradled against his chest, he carried her back to the bed and with ease, gently laid her down upon the plush softness of the fur blankets. His weight settled on top of her, glorious and delicious as his mouth found hers.

His kisses, at first short, but plenty, became longer, drawing out the emotions she had longed to express for many years. Where words failed, her affection and need spoke volumes. Her hands and lips explored every part of him, as he did the same. Lost in his scent, his touch, lips, and… Holy Melitele, his tongue… the tears streamed from her lashes despite the effort keeping them at bay. Not able to control them any longer, she surrendered to their flow and melted every time he kissed away each tear. It soon became clear that the tears shed were not of sorrow, but overwhelming joy.

For the first time, she opened herself to the intimate touch of a man and the knowledge she would never feel this way again threatened to poison the moment. Shoving those thoughts aside, she welcomed his hardness stretching her, filling her in the most glorious and breathtaking way. Lifting and turning her body this way and that, he possessed her and she never before delighted in letting him have his way.

It seemed the brazier flared brighter, hotter. The tent's canvas walls flapped in the coastline breeze a little harder than before. Geralt's pendant jumped wildly against his chest. Thunder rolled in the distance heralding an approaching gale.

Digging her fingernails into his back and arms, she surrendered to his masterful touch, quaking with a release so powerful, her cries were accompanied by more tears. Sobbing out her pleasure, he held her tight through it all, and with soft breathy moans, rode the waves soon after.

Lying amidst rumpled covers, she pressed close to him, his arms wrapping her in a protective embrace. She rested her cheek on his shoulder and placed a tiny kiss on one of his many scars. He kissed her hair. All anxiety had disappeared and every muscle relaxed… Sleepily she closed her eyes aware she was smiling. When was the last time she felt this good? Had she ever felt like this before?

Soft and steady rain drummed against the sides of the tent, the sounds of nature soothing. Thunder, closer now, rumbled a low growl that echoed off the mountainside behind the camp.

Glancing up at his face, her heart swelled, melted, and burst again like it had all night. A wet drop trailed down his cheek and dropped off towards his ear. A particular expression chiseled his face, his eyes betraying a swarm of emotion, but confounded her all the same. Unmistakably, happiness shone in his eyes, but… he seemed…. She frowned. Haunted. What was he thinking right now?

So as not to ruin the moment, she pulled herself up closer and kissed away the single wet streak on his cheek while smoothing a hand over his hair. Her lips absorbed the neither salty nor sweet tear.
He held her gaze with wide eyes full of emotion. A large hand, callused from decades wielding heavy swords, cupped her cheek. A man so brutal in battle was so tender with those he loved. Sighing a contented sigh, she rested her head against his shoulder again. His arms squeezed her tightly. Never before had felt as whole as she did at this moment.

The heart of a witcher shattered her, put her back together and brought her life again. Her witcher. Slayer of all evil, physical and emotional. Her protector, savior, and life-bringer. Her purpose for being…

His fingers played with her tresses, repeatedly twisting her long locks around them then combing them through her hair. She smiled, loving this little display of affection.

“I’m your destiny…” she murmured against him, eyeing his medallion twittering against his chest like it had the entire time they made love.

His broken whisper filled her heart with joy and hope that drove away the fear and bitter reality her life had become after the sun-filled years spent at Kaer Morhen as a child.

“And I’m yours...”
Geralt seeks out Dandelion at The Chameleon in Novigrad during the Belletteyn Holiday (May Day, May 1st). A surprise visit from Avallac'h opens the Witcher's understanding regarding prophecies surrounding Cirilla and their soon-to-arrive son.

**Content Warning** - The opening of this chapter is a continuation of the intimate scene between Ciri and Geralt. If that bothers you, advise to skip the first scene.

This chapter is long, longer than any other posted so far, but it was written more for me and the care of the characters. ;) I don't think you'll mind overly much. ;)

Author's Note: I cannot thank you enough for sticking with this non-canonical SL so long and with such enthusiasm you've shown! Especially with the last chapter with the love scene between our favorite characters! No other chapter had received so many Kudos and hits in such a short period of time than that one! I am so grateful to all of you.

Many thanks to VicofThor - my beta reader with whose support I count on.

A special thank you to a new fan, Sashka Meilo, for reaching out to me privately. Our conversation was delightful and enlightening and I credit Sashka with the title of this chapter.
Lazily opening his eyes, Geralt blinked and looked about in the darkness, disoriented. Where the hell was he? Relief flooded him a moment later. He remembered now. It wasn’t often he slept so deeply he forgot where he was. Occupational hazard for a witcher.

The tent was dark, with smokey remnants of glowing red embers sizzling in the brazier offered little light and warmth, yet the faint grayish tint of dawn seeped through the cracks in the tent flaps. Ciri snuggled close to him, hugging him tightly as if she didn’t want to let go, even in sleep. He smiled to himself and hugged her closer, their bodies knit together so tightly they kept each other warm.

The rain tapered off to a gentle pitter-patter and eventually stopped altogether. The sea lapped against the coastline in lazy waves, ebbing and flowing rhythmically. From above, a seagull vocalized its presence searching for food along the coast. Distant moans of a couple in the throes of passion a few tents down grabbed his attention. He focused on the sounds, particularly on the female calling out the name of her lover in a long drawn out cry. Grinning, he breathed in Ciri’s soft scent. Similar sounds had erupted from her this night.

Nestling deeper into the plump pillows, he sighed, completely content. He could stay like this forever. The emperor treated his army well with all the luxuries of a privileged home. Spacious tents with actual oak beds and fleece blankets. Pelts covered the wood planks that made up a floor helped keep the cold from seeping into the tent, a table with chairs, braziers, chamber pots, even armoires to boot. Enjoying such conveniences on the Path would be nice, but impractical. Sleeping on the hard damp ground was what he was used to.

Closing his eyes, he listened. The lovers down the way enjoyed themselves some more, possibly for the last time considering their upcoming battle later.

As she slumbered, he stroked her mussed up hair. Even in sleep, a sweet smile graced her mouth. Relaxed and peaceful, she looked innocent and younger - even with the arcing scar that marred her left cheek that bespoke a troubled life. As always, she was more at peace around him.

His hand found hers and splayed his large fingers through her smaller ones. So this was how it happened.

Her lips parted on a blissful sigh. He stroked her hair again. Still couldn’t believe it. She came to
him, wanted it to happen - needed it to happen. With him. After all this time Ciri had been in love with him. And she meant everything to him, filling his life in a deep way... unimaginably deep.

Sighing adorably, she tucked her face into the crook of his neck. Leaning in, he kissed the top of her head. Relief flooded him, relaxing him completely. All this time, the one thing that had chewed at him since he had come face to face with his future son was the monster he feared he'd become in order for that to happen. But he never had to worry about it for she initiated it, she came to him.

Inhaling a deep breath, he relaxed more, hugging her close again. If only life hadn't taken her from him when she was... what, fourteen? And then again at sixteen or seventeen. He could have been there for her all that time. Could have saved her the heartaches and harsh experiences she'd endured without his protection. She had suffered too much in her short life.

"What are you thinking about?"

Sleepily, her eyes, green as the grass in a rainy spring fluttered open. Smiling, her joy reflected in them. His heart swelled at seeing her this happy and content.

"Well?" Rising up on an elbow, she smiled and squeezed his hand. "You're thinking something deep. Can see it in your eyes."

Rolling onto his back, he crooked an arm behind his head, resting their conjoined hands on his belly. "Hmmm... just..." He glanced at her. "Thanedd Isle... remember?" A shadow darkened her gaze and immediately regretted bringing up the memory.

"How could I forget?" she grumbled. "Escaping through that broken portal... should never have done that. Wish I hadn't. Had I known it would have taken years to get back to you like it had, rather had stayed with you and fought by your side."

"Wish you hadn't left through that portal either. I mean, I'm glad you got away, but had you stayed, certainly you would have been taken captive."

Her eyes narrowed, not convinced with his statement. "But you were there... you would have protected me."

"Of course I would have, but sometimes a fight gets so intense, it becomes too difficult to do so. Had my hands full. Was why I told you to run. And you did, but things rapidly went downhill soon after."

Pushing herself up, her expression grew serious. "What happened after I left?"

Scowling, he regretted bringing this up. He shook his head.

"Tell me."

He gave her an apologetic expression. "You fled up to Garstang and I followed you not knowing why you chose to go up to the abandoned place. Didn't know there was a portal there. But Vilgefortz materialized before me and we battled. Tried to keep him occupied enough to give you time to get away."

Her eyes grew wide and full of emotion. "Really? You fought him then... before Stygga Castle?"

"Yeah. To keep him away from you."

Her jaw dropped, eyes grew wide. "What happened? I mean, clearly, neither of you got killed in
"Yeah, but I almost didn't survive it," he confessed quietly. "Vilgefortz throttled me to an inch of my life."

“What?” she breathed, crinkling her brows.

He nodded. “Took his magical staff to the head, got a concussion. Broke a few ribs, my thigh and forearm. Even my sword snapped in half. I was done. Unable to fight any longer. The bastard could have killed me then and there, but he only meant it as a lesson. He left me there vomiting and took off after you. Triss found me before I passed out and teleported us to the Brokilon Forest. The dryads nursed me back to health with their skills and magical healing waters but even so, my recovery was slow. Spent at least… hmmm… six weeks there, maybe more, don’t remember exactly. Took at least a month before I could even stand again. Then I went off in search of you.”

Stillness settled around them, save for another high-pitched call of the seagull. He glanced back at Ciri and immediately regretted telling her all this. A single tear streaked down her cheek and dropped onto his arm.

She swiped away the wet trail on her face. “I… Had no idea you suffered so much because of me. That also explains why you didn’t come for me.” Squeezing his hand, she blinked back wetness gathering in her eyes. “I mean… that broken portal teleported me to the desert. I knew you wouldn’t be able to get to me right away, you had no idea where it had sent me, but as a fourteen year old… I held onto an unrealistic fantasy that you would find me fast. And when you didn’t… thought you had abandoned me.”

Dammit all, should've never have stirred up these memories! It brought her sadness after she was so happy and content a moment ago.

He sat up and stroked her cheek, drying the wet trail that was there. Then he raked his fingers through her silky tresses. “Ciri… I’d never abandon you if I could help it. I’m sorry. I’m sorry we got separated for so long, sorry that you were on your own scared and lonely. I’m sorry it took me years to find you, but believe me, did nothing else but try to find you. Dandelion was with me… he too made the effort.” His heart melted at the tears pooling in her bright eyes. “Didn’t mean to bring up these memories. Wish we hadn’t gotten separated. Wanted to be with you, continue protecting you. And I would have. I knew how much you needed me. And still do.”

Grasping his arm, her bottom lip trembled. “I did need you. Was alone for so long burning in that horrible desert. With no water, no shade… Then that band of ruffians that took me in—”

“Ssshhh… Stop.” Pressing his forehead against hers, he drew in a shaky breath. “Let’s not go back there. It’s making you upset. Don’t want you to be sad. Tonight… you’ve been so happy, want to keep it that way. Perhaps…” he paused, looking at her. Sparkling green eyes wet with emotion, undid him. “Perhaps… you needed to be far from me so that you would learn to protect yourself. As harsh as it was… Life brings us experiences that force us to grow, to stand and fight back. It builds character, all in an effort to become a better and stronger version of ourselves.”

The grip she had on his arm trembled with the power of her emotions.

Leaning in, he placed a tender kiss on her forehead. “And now, I’m discovering a young lady who had blossomed into a strong and fearless woman because of those experiences. You might not have grown into her today if you had stayed by my side all those years.”

Blinking rapidly, she thrust her chin into the air, a gesture from her childhood she hadn't outgrown.
He hid a smile at the familiar pose.

Her arms encircled his neck. “I know what you say is right, but all I wanted was to be with you, Geralt. Please don’t ever leave me.”

“Hey,” he whispered into her tresses, his soul trembled at her heartfelt broken whispered plea. “Not going to leave you. You’re a huge part of my life, Ciri. Especially now.”

Feathery fingers found his face and stroked his cheek. He kissed the inside of her wrist.

"I’ll always need you. Always.”

“I’m here…” Their lips met gently, delicately, taking all the time in the world to part. Time… might not have a lot of it now. His hand found hers again intertwining his long fingers through her small ones. They broke the contact gently. "Will always be here for you, you know that. Do anything for you. You know that too.”

She glanced toward the tent opening spilling in grayish light through the closed panels. “I know,” she whispered, squeezing his hand in return. "What you have done and what you’re going to do today is proof of that.”

Her gaze roamed over him, full with emotion. “I wish...“ she fell silent, squeezed closed her eyes as if trying to keep composed.

Their hands still intertwined, she climbed atop him, straddling him, and breathless, rested her forehead against his. “I wish there was some way to make it up to you. Everything you’ve been through because of me…” Her voice broke and she stopped, swallowing hard.

Breathing in deeply through her nose, she rolled her hips upon him. Before he had a chance to respond, she possessed him in a much more intimate embrace and for a breathless moment, couldn’t respond if he had wanted. Fingertips trailed lightly over the scars on his biceps as she arched her back, gasping in slow breathy sighs. He supported her with a loving and searching grasp at her waist.

Bringing their entwined hands up to her mouth, she tenderly pressed her lips against each of his knuckles in feathery kisses, then cupped his palm to her cheek. Holding it there against her face, she closed her eyes, leaning into him. She sighed.

He melted inside at such a display of loving affection.

"The hand that has protected me… kept the nightmares away, taught me… Killed for me...” Her voice trailed off in a shaky sigh as she kissed his palm. “And will again… today and always.”

She loosened her hold freeing him to love her breasts, cupping them, caressing them, tasting them, and she arched her back on a sigh. Long silky tresses brushed the tops of his thighs, tickling him. Her hands joined his, urging his roaming loving touch to knead her soft flesh more.

Slowly, in a sensual casual rhythm, unhurried and utterly relaxed, she swayed upon him in silence. Tears did not rack her as they had earlier, but this time, her eyes glistened as she held his gaze, simply losing herself beautifully in the moment with soft moans and breathy sighs. Gone was the little lost princess overcome with fear and anxiety, and now only the woman she had become, bold and in control, blossomed before his eyes.

This night meant everything to her, he understood that. Incredibly, it meant everything to him too. Somehow, in some beautiful way, their joining here would shape her even more, hell, it could
shape him in a different way even. It would change their lives and perhaps even give her hope and strength to face the future. And despite the consequences that would arise, both known and unknown, he was deeply moved that he was the one to share these precious moments with her.

Remaining quiet and patient as she, he let her experience her pleasure at her pace, the way she wanted, ever so slowly and sensually, while his hands roamed all over her smooth curves glowing with a golden pinkish hue in the dim firelight.

So this was it. This night was the night destiny had in mind for them. Exactly twelve years after he had come face to face with his future son, just as Garret had said. In nine months, she would bring him forth into the world... He sucked in a breath at the sudden realization. If this was all true, and since this happened tonight... that meant, they both would survive today’s battle. A shock of tingles shot through him. Although that thought invigorated him, he would not rely on this knowledge today. Too important a task to leave to chance.

Gasping, Ciri flung her hair over a shoulder and took possession of his lips, her fingers clutching his shoulders, neck, cheek, then raked through his hair. Her next words were uttered on barely a breath, but he heard her plain as day, his soul trembling in response.

"With all my heart, Geralt, I love you."

Upon that declaration of her heart's confession, her body mirrored her words in an all consuming peak shattering her from the inside out. Simply holding her in his protective embrace tightly, she quaked and trembled in his arms for several heart stopping moments. Stroking her hair and whispering sweet comfort in her tresses, he let her calm and relax against him.

Pressing a hand against her shoulder, he gently pushed her backwards down into the fleece covers. His hands gripped hers, her fingers grasped his with all her might. In the same unhurried way, he loved her in return, losing himself, and trembling, he too found blessed release.

* * *

Stealing a glance at his slumbering form, she wrung out the washcloth in a water basin, the cold water chilled her fingers to the bone. She gasped and shivered while washing, but didn't want to take the time to warm it up by the brazier first. So as not to awaken him, she dressed as quickly and quietly as possible.

She finished lacing her boots. Fully dressed in her customary leather armor complete with belts, buckles, and leather straps, she stood beside the bed gazing down upon him. He still slumbered so peacefully. More so now than when she had first watched him sleep earlier.

A sliver of guilt sliced her for sneaking out while he slept, but... She bit her bottom lip. It was just easier this way.

Her hand went to her throat and the pangs of loss gripped her once again at the absence of Vesemir’s medallion she had worn since his funeral. That was, until that damnable crone yanked it right off her neck on Bald Mountain!! How she missed it! Maybe someday, if she survived all this, she would finish off that bitch of a creature and claim the medallion back.

She sighed heavily. Should teleport there right now. Calming herself, she tied her hair in a messy bun at the nape of her neck. They had much bigger fish to fry today. Besides, teleporting now
would draw Eredin and his Hunt and they weren’t ready yet. She gnawed on a fingernail and watched him.

The way the fleece blanket, scrunched between his legs, covered his groin, but nothing else, made her smile. How she was going to miss him!! His calming, encouraging, and safe presence had always been her lifeline. Could she go on without him?

Staring at him, she was not able to tear away her gaze. Memorizing each chiseled muscle, each deep scar, she wanted this memory stored in her soul forever. It was likely she’d not ever see him again. With a determined pinch of her lips, she bent over him and kissed his wolf-head pendant. It trembled as it usually did when near, but not enough to stir him. So close to his face, she resisted the temptation to kiss him, no matter how strong the desire to do so for that surely would awaken him. Instead, she breathed, “Goodbye, Geralt. I love you.” After another moment, she added, “Forgive me.”

When he stirred, she caught her breath. But he didn't wake. Slowly, she let out the breath she held, relieved.

Wrapping the cloak about her shoulders, she paused at the sound of soldiers calling out greetings to one another outside. Already, the camp stirred to life. Pulling the hood low over her face, she grabbed her sword belt and scabbard and stole one final look at the witcher… the man, the dear man who had and would continue to give his all for her.

Not heeding the sting in her eyes, she blinked back the wetness and drew in a calming breath. Ducking out of the tent into the damp foggy dawn, she kept her head low as the guards nearby peered at her. She avoided their curious glances.

Avallac’h awaited nearby. Must not give him any pause to think about where she had been. Or with whom.

The memory of last night would stay fresh in her heart for the rest of her days. Because of one witcher, she could face the unknown, ready to meet her new future, without the threat of the Wild Hunt, and fulfill the duty her Elder Blood bestowed upon her if they lived long enough to see this day through.

Hugging the sword to her chest, joy filled her. She was a witcher too. He had taught her, prepared her, and instilled in her courage to face her fears. Sighing with the memory of his hands and lips all over her… last night gave her confidence to face the battle of her life.

* * *

Six Months Later - Present Day

City of Novigrad

Belleteyn Holiday, 1273

From the darkest corner of the tavern, Geralt huddled over his fourth foaming tankard of Kaedweni stout and swallowed with a grimace at the memory that clamored repeatedly in his mind. The one
con to loving a sorceress - was loving one who read your mind constantly whether you liked it or not. That was all it took for Yen to discover what had occurred between Ciri and him the night before their battle with the Wild Hunt. Yeah, she knew it had happened, but not why. And there was no reasoning with her. Not allowing him the opportunity to explain, she unleashed her fury on him in a mighty storm of magic that nearly sunk the isle of Undvik into the sea.

He took a long swallow and clanked the tankard back down upon the table hard enough that a plate with broken off pieces of crusty bread clattered with its force. He sighed heavily. Yen might never understand why.

Despite the heat and humidity of a spring blossoming into full summer, more than a few patrons enjoyed the stuffy atmosphere. Dandelion’s recently renovated Rosemary and Thyme brothel had become the sophisticated and elite artistic venue now known as The Chameleon.

The din of the cabaret was loud today. The Belleteyne holiday drove the populace out to celebrate in any way they desired and many chose this establishment. Geralt shook his head trying to tune out the clamor and turn off the memories as he drowned his stormy thoughts in the slightly bitter beer.

That night with Ciri… what six months ago now? Had to be at least that long. Geralt smiled into his tankard, the foam floating on top of the drink blurred in his vision as he relived the night for the thousandth time in his mind. Their experience was incredibly moving and beautiful. More than merely the joining of bodies, their souls molded together as well. Only with one other did that happen. With Yennefer. Since the very first time they had made love spontaneously and beautifully on the spot - right there on the floor after helping her defeat a particularly strong and devious djinn. The love they made was something special. And it hadn’t had to do with him, but everything to do with Yen.

Just as that night with Ciri was for her.

And despite some misgivings, he went through with it because how strongly she needed it, wanted it, and how uncertain were their futures. But a true joining of their souls merged that night. It was unlike anything he had ever experienced… with anyone… Never had he seen her more vulnerable, so wrought with raw emotion. Witnessing the joy and passion she radiated had touched him more than he could’ve imagined. And afterwards as they had laid with their bodies entwined, she poured out her heart to him. Clearly, she had believed the chances were too great that they wouldn’t live beyond the next few hours.

It also explained why afterwards she was able to leave so easily while he slept and again after the Hunt had been defeated. Clear of conscience, she was able to then confront the Frost, most likely believing she would never return.

He took another long swig of beer. What little faith they had! They all survived the ordeal and she returned after facing the Frost - and with child to boot.

Finding a satisfactory answer as to how she conceived and why his medallion behaved wildly throughout their time together, still eluded him. It leapt on his chest like it was alive, and the only other time that had happened was… Geralt slammed the tankard down harder than he meant to, splattering dark liquid over the rim. Shit. The last time that happened was when he stood face to face with his future son back at the healer’s homestead. The medallion recognized the strong presence of magic. And when she loved him that night… it was stronger than ever. The magic in her must have been stronger that night than it usually was… it became clear to him now. It was the eve of the Samhain holiday… Magic… Ciri’s magic. Her Elder Blood and two nights of the year when the magic was strongest to those sensitive to it. Magic had to be the reason she conceived.
Gods, he couldn’t think of this anymore. In his mind, he’d gone over that night time and time again… There was no other explanation and he’d come to finally accept that he had nothing to do with the miracle growing inside her now for her magic had done the rest.

Desperate for distraction, he glanced about the common room. He had to hand it to Dandelion. The bard really turned this place around. Aesthetically pleasing decor in a rich cabaret motif, a clean and tasteful inn upstairs, quality performers, and exceptional food and drink, Dandelion was well on his way to a lucrative and increasingly popular venue for cultured entertainment in the heart of the largest city in the north.

More than a couple patrons smoked pipes, filling the air ripe with cherrywood. The smokey haze drifted lazily and hung visibly in the air like an otherworldly serpent. A lovely blonde serving wench looked his way repeatedly. He tugged his hood down lower.

Damn, it was hot in here, but he couldn't risk anyone recognizing him. Meaning only to drown his thoughts in potent alcohol, he did not want to draw attention to the fact he was back in town. A witcher in a city coping with King Radovid’s recent assassination (with his help, of course) would be in demand. Emperor Emhyr closed in on the rule of the once free city further extending Nilfgaard’s border north. The witch-hunters, with no king to rule them either aligned themselves with the Church of Eternal Fire or went rogue, killing whenever they could. He was in no mood for contracts, verbal or written, or trouble of any kind, and least of all, unwanted attention. He was here for one purpose only. And with the unsettled populace, there was sure to be plenty of work for a witcher, but the not-so-distant memory of stepping in to calm a city in the midst of a pogrom ended with a pitchfork in his gut. He wouldn’t make that mistake again.

Downing the last swallow, he savored the heavy drink. Tearing off a chunk of bread, he discreetly glanced around from under his hood. A man, a few tables down glared at him with dark eyes. Geralt glowered back.

The serving staff fluttered from table to table, avoiding groping hands and leering men, refilling drinks. Platters of delicious varieties of culinary delights were delivered to a table nearby. The guests tore into the steaming roasted pheasant and savory pork ribs with enthusiasm.

The young petite blonde approached him for the fifth time. “Can I get ya another stout, my lord?”

“Yeah,” he mumbled, keeping his eyes downcast.

“Anything to eat with that, love?”

“No.”

As much as he could use a hearty meal, he refused all but the crusty loaf merely to help absorb the alcohol rather than to fuel his body. No way he could stomach the rich food with this brooding restlessness, nor risking his friend’s livelihood because of a sour and drunk witcher either.

The lass eyed him with a glint that proved more than general professional interest. “One Kaedweni stout it is.” With a twirl of her skirts and a seductive sway of her hips, she retreated into the throng and constant din of music, chatter, and clanking plates and mugs.

The bard had not noticed his presence yet, which was fine. He needed to get a few drinks in him before having a nice long chat with his good friend, but the place turned out to be busier than he had expected. Soon, Dandelion might get the chance to step away from his duties so they could have the privacy he required. The pangs of homesickness sprouted out of nowhere. Vesemir was no longer around for these kinds of heart to heart talks and Dandelion was the only one he could trust.
with this topic. One he already knew something about.

A minute or two later, the flirtatious wench deposited the stout before him and slid into the chair next to him. “You’ve been here a while, love. Waiting for someone?”

Turning his head slightly, he eyed light honey-brown eyes and rosy cheeks from the side of his hood. “Could say that.”

“Well, maybe they’ll show soon. Until then, I'll keep your tankard full.” After glancing around quickly, she leaned forward as if to share juicy gossip, giving him a healthy view of an equally healthy cleavage. “However, if she doesn’t show,” she winked, “I... ahhh… could fill in her place tonight. After all, it is Belleteyne. A pity a strapping man like yourself be alone tonight.”

Swallowing, he turned his attention back to his beer. A trail of foam slid down the side of the mug onto the table. He did not need this right now. Though he hadn’t lain with a woman since that night with Ciri, feminine attentions would lighten his mood… but dammit, he was here to speak with Dandelion not romp around with the first pretty girl who looked at him with glinting doe-eyes.

Keeping his voice and head low, he didn't look at her directly. “Working in the wrong place. Shouldn’t you be at the Passiflora? More willing customers there.” Stupid idiot! Melitele’s tits, he was a bastard. Called her a whore when all she sought was a lover for the holiday celebration as anyone else would be doing soon.

Her cheerful expression vanished and her eyes lost their glint only to be replaced with icy fire. “Very well, then. Forget I offered, jackass.” Jumping from the chair so that it rattled, she whirled and almost collided with a burly figure of a man who had approached. Stopping up short, she maneuvered around the newcomer while calling him a colorful name and stalked off toward the back of the room.

The man scowled, looking him over suspiciously. Couldn't blame him, he'd have done the same. Anyone wearing a hooded cloak in this humid weather had something to hide. Geralt met his gaze and nodded in a congenial way to diffuse any concern. The fellow reluctantly returned to the bar, although kept an eye on him. Maybe the brute worked for Dandelion for the holiday. Good thing, that. Drunks could get out of control easily.

A slender figure wrapped in a dark cloak sat at a table in the opposite corner, the hood pulled low over his face obscuring his features. How long had he been there? Didn't remember him there earlier when he had arrived a few hours ago. Immediately suspicious, Geralt scrutinized him as the tendrils of smoke slithered passed him in the heavy air. Across the room, a customer stepped into view blocking the hooded gent from sight. Taking a long and drawn out sip from his tankard, Geralt rose and headed towards the bar. At a glance, the hooded figure watched him and nodded once, the movement almost unnoticeable.

The blonde wench passed in front of him, breaking his concentration. He grabbed her arm gently and diffused a rush of harsh insults with more than a few shiny Novigrad crowns. She closed her mouth, eyes firing at him again. “You really think I am a whore!”

"No, I don’t. The coin is to close my tab. But I’ve insulted you, my lady. Allow me to make it up to you. Meet me later?" he ground out, pressing the coin bag discreetly into the palm of her hand.

Her breathing and pulse raced, her fingers shook as she inspected the contents, her eyes then glinted with wanton anticipation. Breathless, her bottom lip trembled. She nodded.

Grinning without excitement, Geralt nodded. “What's your name?” He spotted Dandelion behind
the bar.

“Heather, my lord. My shift ends in an hour or so, Master,” she whispered, looking up at him beneath long dark lashes and smiled.

He eyed all of her with appreciation. “Later. My lady.”

Bowing politely, he dismissed himself and approached the bar, catching the bard’s eyes. Dandelion’s face lit up like a torch in a dark night and scrambled around the counter, his arms open wide.

“My friend!” Laughing heartily, his silk-covered arms flung around him in a bear hug. “By the gods! You’re back!”

“Good to see you, Dandelion. We need to talk.” Glancing out of the corner of his eyes, he added, “Privately.”

The Bard's face grew serious. "Of course. The Ruby Suite is vacant for the time being. I'll meet you upstairs in a swift moment.”

Geralt nodded, relieved.

* * *

The bard took longer than a swift moment, but didn't let it bother him overly much. While he waited, Geralt browsed through some scrolls laying on a table in the southwest corner of the sprawling suite that clearly indicated this was the study. Bookshelves crammed with bound tomes occupied the walls and towers of books stacked upon each other stood almost as tall as the table. A couple upholstered chairs and two candelabras graced the seating area with comfort and enough light for reading.

One scroll entitled, *The Elder Blood* caught his attention. Scanning it, nothing stood out to him that he didn't already know and set it back down. Another parchment, having been disrupted, slipped to the floor. He picked it up and its title in flowing bold script read, *Daughter of the Old Blood.* Just as he began reading it, the door opened. Geralt quickly returned the scroll back to the table.

“The hero returns! The Wild Hunt is no more.” Dandelion entered with a flourish as befitting a poet and clapped him on the back. “Ahhh, my friend. Makes my heart glad. Have to compose a ballad about this legendary feat! Though stories have circulated already. Some say a second Conjunction of the Spheres took place, others a cataclysm that nearly sunk Undvik into the sea.”

The bard grew serious. “All accounts I've heard, you and Yennefer survived, but no word of Ciri's fate. Truly hope she’s okay. She hasn't been seen - except I heard a small rumor not long ago of an ashen haired witcheress spotted in southern Velen a few months back, but couldn't confirm it. Please tell me Ciri is alive and well.”

Geralt nodded. “She’s alive.” He smiled in reassurance.

Visibly relieved, Dandelion leaned against the table. “Can’t tell you how happy I am to hear that. And you? You look tired. You all right?”

“Been better.”
"Was the battle as bad as the stories claim? Or just exaggerated as stories tend to get when passed along? And which account is accurate, by the way?"

Sighing, Geralt sat down at the table, his fingers lightly resting on the scroll he laid down a moment ago. “Both,” he chuckled. “Though no way to tell what you’ve heard exactly. Long story short, we defeated the Hunt and as soon as we did, Ciri and Avallac’h raced to a tower ruin. There he opened a dormant portal - the force of his magic basically started a second Conjunction of the Spheres. The effect was…” he shook his head at the memory of it raining fire and conjunction beasts materializing through random portals all over the island. “Disastrous, really. Getting to them took effort, but when I reached him, found out Ciri had asked him to open the portal for her."

Dandelion remained silent a moment, eyes widened before narrowing them again. “Really?”

Leaning forward, he nodded silently, rested elbows on knees. He raked a hand through his loose hair.

Dandelion, somber, sat down across from him. “Geralt... Can I get you anything? A drink? Some food?"

“I’m fine, thanks. Had some downstairs. Left the coin with Heather.”

“You know you never have to pay for anything here, friend.”

Nodding, Geralt continued. “Not going to take advantage of you, Dandelion. I can pay. Back on topic, Ciri believed it was her purpose to stop the White Frost. After all, it was prophesied that only a child of the Elder Blood could attempt to stop it. Feeling dutiful, she left.”

“You’re referring to Ithlinne’s prophecy of the White Frost?”

“The same. But don’t want to talk about that right now--”

The door opened and the hooded figure from the common room stepped in and nodded once at both men. “Gentlemen, do not be alarmed.”

The tall slender figure draped in robes of multi coordinated colors became visible as he held his cloak aside and removed the hood. His light brown hair brushed back gleamed with silver streaks. Prominent cheekbones gave him a sharp and stern expression.

Geralt rose and took a step toward the elf. “You dare show up here now, sage?”

A hand rose with palm facing him. “Geralt, as I said, no need for alarm. I am not your foe.” Cold piercing crystal blue eyes penetrated him in that eerie way sending shivers down his spine. A high intellect reflected in those clear eyes. “I am not your foe,” he repeated, looking at both of them directly. “May I join you?”

Dandelion glanced at him, worry etched his features. Curling a lip, Geralt gestured to a chair despite his desire to throw him through the window. Ciri wouldn’t have left to fight the Frost if it hadn’t been for Avallac’h’s influence. But, clearly, there was good reason he had decided to show up out of the blue again and bet it had to do with her. If his assumption was correct, he needed to know what this was about.

Avallac’h, tall, broad shouldered, settled himself gracefully in the chair by the table. Geralt sat across from him. Dandelion, glancing between the two, appeared uncomfortable and lost. Remembering who he was, he offered the sage a drink. He declined politely.
“I’ll leave you two then—”

“Stay, Dandelion. Have a seat.” Geralt directed without removing his eyes from the sage.

The bard sat down keeping his back straight as a rod.

Geralt sat back in a relaxed manner. “Can’t imagine why you’re here after everything that went down on Undvik. Ciri passed through the portal you opened and, well, frankly didn’t think of you again after that. Assumed you went back to… wherever you call home.”

Avallac’h studied him, carefully keeping his features neutral, not betraying a shred of emotion. “I left as all had done. Did not wish to stick around while you and your sorceress had your little… spat.”

Swallowing a retort, Geralt inhaled a deep breath. “Be careful, sage,” was all he managed to grate out in a low voice.

“Hope you managed to work things out with your Yennefer. After all, the isle still stands, albeit not for the devastation she caused venting her fury on you. But that is not my concern. Let us skip beyond the pleasantries shall we, Geralt?”

“I said be careful, sage.”

“Let’s be real, Geralt. Think I’m so naive that I don’t know what happened on Undvik preceding the battle with the Hunt? Clearly, I know full well what happened afterwards. And why.”

Geralt swallowed again, leering at the sage, putting all effort into keeping a straight face before entertaining the idea of throttling the elf. Dandelion’s curious eyes rested on him, waiting for him, his reaction. Avallac’h’s ice blue gaze focused on the table, in particular, on the scroll Geralt had picked up from the floor moments ago.

“So, I see you found my scrolls.”

Geralt shot a questioning glare at the bard. Dandelion cleared his throat. “Aahh, Avallac’h showed up the other day and asked for this suite for a couple days. How could I turn him down, I mean—?”

“But you told me this suite was vacated at the moment.”

“It was,” Avallac’h intervened. “I had stepped out. Now I’ve returned.”

Exhaling, Geralt stared daggers at the sage. “Get to the fucking point, Avallac’h. Why are we having this conversation?”

“Relax, Witcher. I understand the hard feelings you have for me, rest assured, I’m here only to help. After all, so many, let’s say… decades of my life were dedicated to Cirilla’s purpose, preparing for her, and then teaching her to control her magic when the time was ripe—”

“And sent her on a senseless mission that could have destroyed her.” Geralt slammed a fist down on the table. The scrolls bounced and settled again.

“Senseless? No. The Frost had to be dealt with either now or later, but she did not perish, that is all that matters. Nor did she succeed, entirely, but the effort was there. And it was only because of you that she managed that much. I must admit, Geralt, since Cirilla has been in your life, she has been a stronger person for it. You taught her well. She trusts you utterly and completely.” The gravity of his smooth voice lowered and grew more serious, attracting his complete attention. “Your
influence resonates within her. You could say, breathed new life in her.”

Silence settled like a fleece blanket over them and despite the sage’s piercing gaze, the air became suffocating. Dandelion discreetly cleared his throat, shifting in his seat.

Geralt measured Avallac’h with a steely, unblinking gaze, penetrating the elf’s carefully guarded soul. Damn, guard it well, he did. Could he know?

Avallac’h kept his gaze just as even, his lips curving in a slight, arrogant smile. His next words were deadly serious. “My work with Cirilla is not yet complete, you see. I know she’s returned from her otherworldly adventure, the Wild Hunt has been defeated, through no small amount of impressive effort by you and your friends. Shows how dedicated you are to your beloved Cirilla. You’re a capable man, Geralt. Yet Cirilla’s purpose is not yet fulfilled. In three months, she will fulfill that purpose. Some say, as I believe, it is her true purpose, Geralt. The Hunt and the Frost, merely training grounds.”

Staring without blinking at the elven sage, Geralt’s thoughts swirled trying to figure just how much he knew.

Avallac’h turned and addressed Dandelion for the first time since his arrival. “Seems I struck the witcher speechless, friend. Might say the same about you. All will become clear momentarily, I assure you.”

Geralt could not contain the disdain for Avallac’h from showing on his face as he was sure it did at the moment.

Avallac’h turned his attention back to Geralt. “Enough of this speaking between the lines.” Reaching over, he plucked the scroll Geralt had spotted earlier from the table and opened it. He made a pretense of reading it allowing a few moments of intense silence to fray all their nerves.

“Say what you need to say,” Geralt hissed in a tight voice.

Still quite relaxed and calm, Avallac’h looked at him. “The Daughter of the Old Blood is an ancient elven prophecy, Geralt. Ever hear of it?”

He merely narrowed his eyes. No, he hadn’t. Dandelion’s gaze dropped to the floor.

“He merely narrowed his eyes. No, he hadn’t. Dandelion’s gaze dropped to the floor.

“Let me enlighten you, Witcher. Spoken by the elven seeress, Ithlinne, it is a variation of her White Frost prophecy not many were aware of. As you recall, Ithlinne was an adept prophetess, so I have it on authority the record of this prophecy is quite accurate. It says ‘from Falka’s blood will be born an avenger who will destroy the old world and build a new one upon its ruins.’”

Geralt ground his teeth. “Had enough of prophecies, sage. Not inclined to believe in them either.”

“Don’t you now? I think… in particular you will believe in this one, Geralt, for it applies to your Cirilla directly, and to you indirectly. Ever hear of the Sword of Destiny?”

Pinching his lips together, Geralt finally admitted he had. “Yeah, a double-edged sword.”

Avallac’h interjected before he could say anything further. “A metaphor for the ideology of destiny. You are one edge of that blade, Witcher. Do you know what, or whom, represents the other side of that blade?”

Exhaling audibly, Geralt sat forward, grating his teeth. “Death. Or as I’ve come to believe, Ciri…”
“Yes, you understand. Two edges of one blade, or two pieces of a puzzle fit together. You and Cirilla are two parts of this one prophecy, for without the two of you, the prophecy is skewed, to call it mildly. She is the end, you are the means.”

Gritting his teeth, Geralt eyed the sage not bothering to conceal his annoyance. “Could we… get to the point, please?”

“You humans are incredibly impatient. Then again, your life spans are so short, I suppose I understand why that is. The point, Geralt, Cirilla is a direct descendant of Falka. Fiona was Falka’s daughter. Cirilla’s mother, Pavetta, was Fiona’s great, great, great granddaughter. Which in turn makes Cirilla the last branch of the line of the Elder Blood, carrying the Lara Dorren gene.”

Geralt remained silent. Yes, he knew this. What the hell was the sage trying to say?

Speaking up for the first time in a long while, Dandelion nodded. "I believe I’ve read about this prophecy studying at the Oxenfurt Academy. Could Ciri be this avenger it spoke of?"

Avallac’h sat back in the chair inspecting the parchment’s bold script another moment before placing it back on the table carefully. "No, not Cirilla," he said slowly. "Her son."

When he spoke that last word, the sage looked directly at him. It was a peculiar sensation. One he had only experienced a few times before throughout his long life. Once was the first time he faced a creature on his own only having started out on the Path as a young and inexperienced witcher. The brutal reality that he was in it for real and the fight to stay alive felt unimaginably different than battling make-believe monsters made of wood and hay at Kaer Morhen. The second, when Yennefer finally confessed she loved him. The third, when Ciri sat mourning over the dead body of their mentor and the man he considered a father, Vesemir, after giving his life protecting her from the Wild Hunt at the battle of Kaer Morhen. The shiver raced down his spine and settled in his pelvic bone. His thighs trembled and the tiny hairs on the back of his neck finally relaxed.

“You’re beginning to understand,” murmured the sage. “Descendant of ‘Bloody Falka,’ as she had become commonly known, Cirilla is the sole living heir to the throne of the largest empire in the world.”

Dandelion appeared as if he were about to say something, but for some reason changed his mind.

The sage looked at both of them, silent a moment, and when neither added to the conversation, continued. “So you see, Geralt, Cirilla is destined to be the mother of the heir, the arch-prince - ruler of half the world and the descendant and avenger of Falka. In three months, the avenger of worlds will make his entrance into this world. Thanks to you.”

This time, Dandelion couldn't hold his tongue and sat forward. “You mean to say in three months Ciri will give birth?” He turned questioning eyes on him. “Geralt? Ciri’s with child?”

“Ahhh, yeah. Sorry, didn’t get a chance to tell you before Avallac’h decided to join us,” he ground out dreading the explanation the sage would demand.

Exhaling audibly, Dandelion beamed with the news and immediately became serious and remained silent at Geralt’s sharp glare.

Avallac’h’s gaze bore into Geralt, his chilling blue eyes would have frozen any other man if he were in his place. But he remained quiet. He stood and padded softly over to the door leading to the balcony. Opening it, he stepped outside desperate for fresh air.

Slowly, Avallac’h joined him. It wasn’t any cooler out here. Geralt looked out over the city of
Novigrad aglow with the setting sun’s fire without focusing on anything or anyone.

“You see, Geralt, Cirilla’s son will inherit her lineage and Elder Blood genes, and very likely your witcher skills and resilience. Quite the combination. Not only will her son become the next emperor of the empire, but—”

“The destroyer of worlds…” he breathed. By the gods, what had he done?! No witcher in the world ever sired a child and now from some miracle or likely magic, he had. And the result would be a man who would destroy worlds?? Thinking back on Garret, the man that had interrupted their timeline twelve years ago, he possessed his witcher abilities without having undergone the mutation rituals as he had. Geralt did not get the impression that the man was evil or heartless. Quite the contrary. He sensed goodness and a noble spirit within him. How could this be? How could he be the father of a destroyer of life?

The sage nodded and leaned against the rail of the balcony. “And along with the destruction of your world as it is, he will rebuild the new world upon its ruins, a better world, a stronger more beautiful world… and his son, that is, Cirilla’s and your grandson, will rule the entire world and possibly other worlds too. Sounds to me a job only a witcher with the Elder Blood could accomplish.”

Geralt swallowed, his throat drying up. Finally, he turned and looked directly at the sage’s shining light eyes. “That is an optimistic interpretation of the prophecy. What makes you think that the world he rebuilds would be better? The ‘destroyer of worlds’ holds a negative connotation to me.”

“I fear the prophecy is rather vague or even non-existent in that respect, I agree. But as with the nature of prophecies - they tend to not turn out as expected. It’s best to adopt the optimistic view, don’t you think, Geralt? In fact, that may be the only thing you can hold onto. Must be difficult to believe your son would be so… capable. But look at who his parents are. You two will raise him right, train him… We’ll just have to wait and see.”

“And what do you get out of this, sage?” Geralt straightened to his full height, looking eye to eye with the elf. “You said your work was not complete. You think to use our son where you failed with Ciri? Your race still needs to find a world to live before the Frost overtakes it—”

“Actually Cirilla delayed the Frost so our world is safe, for the time being. But that doesn’t mean in many years it may face the same threat yet again. Unless your son can stop it. Or destroy the worlds ahead of time and lead the populace to new worlds. After all, he would have the ability to travel through time and space, just like his mother.”

Finding it difficult to breathe, Geralt clutched the rail and lowered his head, not wanting the sage to read his expression. This was all too much. Yet, how much was truth, a real possibility and what was the ramblings of an old sage whose loyalties were questionable? If he hadn’t seen the evidence with his own eyes twelve years ago at the healer’s homestead, he wouldn’t have believed a lick of all this. Never had he put much credence in destiny… but, by all the gods, Ciri might have been correct all this time. She was his destiny and he was hers. How often had she told him that… Hell, maybe even that old druid, Mousesack might have had foreseen this. And with what Avallac’h had just shared, propelled that ideal to a whole new level. His role in her life was more than mere guardian. Gods, so much more! And in a short few months, their prophesied and foreshadowed son would enter this world and become reality. A son no witcher ever sired through natural means, to raise, teach… to become much more than witchers and Ciri would ever be on their own.

“Geralt? You all right?”

Dandelion’s hand rested comfortingly on his shoulder. His throat completely dry, he couldn’t
answer him.

At his silence, the bard lowered his voice. “I think it’s best we leave now. Come on, Geralt.”

Geralt turned shooting one final stare of granite at the elven sage.

He dipped his head once, eyes softening just for a moment. “You will not be alone, Witcher. I’ll be keeping watch over…” his voice dropped to a whisper, “your family.”

Stalking out of the Ruby Suite with Dandelion on his heels, he stood at the landing and as the door slammed closed behind them, it spoke of an ominous omen to his trembling soul. He didn’t know whether to take that last statement as support or a threat. But one thing he did know. It was happening...

* * *

Gods, what have we done?!

More than any of us could have imagined.

* * *

A single candle burned low and dim at a table in the back alcove. Sitting there, Geralt ignored another stout that sat untouched before him. The Chameleon was dark now, with only a few strategic candelabras lit to set the atmosphere and mood easing the Belleteyne celebrations into the next most anticipated phase.

Several overly drunk souls still hung about not wanting to end their celebrations any time soon and clearly have not proceeded to participate in the next "phase" of the celebrations. Though they probably should have, for in another half hour, they’d be passed out under the tables and lose their chances. Let them, Geralt snidied to himself. A couple of the men glanced his way, one apprehensively, the other glowering. With a snuff of his fingers, he extinguished the flame in a smokey hiss, shrouding him in darkness.

The celebrations would last well into the night, until dawn, really. At this time of the night, the loud cheerful music had quieted into slow and sensual rhythms and sweet melodies inspiring guests to pair off and go find dark alcoves and make love - the last and most anticipated part of the annual tradition. Those who did not already have a lover, or couldn't find one… or two for the night, either drank themselves into oblivion or stuck together in small groups with other unlucky ones and gambled the night away playing various games and taking bets on whom would disappear with whom.

Having had enough of drinking, he shoved his tankard further away with a bit of disgust. Heather, the willing blonde serving wench, had not waited for him. Figured as much. Probably found some strapping young lad to fuck hours ago. Only wanted some female companionship on the night of the holiday and now he would spend it alone for certain. Ah, he was better off anyway. The conversation with Avallac'h left a bitter taste in his mouth and turning off his stormy thoughts proved difficult. Even the beer wasn't helping. Probably would not be good company tonight anyway.

A lovely young lady with waist length fox-red hair approached the center of the common room and began to dance, barefooted, her hair cascading in ringlet curls down her back. Seductively curved hips swayed in time with the music. Geralt exhaled slowly. Employed by Dandelion, he'd seen her
here before, though not while she danced. Tonight, her dress, simple in design, hugged every curve like a lover’s hands, leaving nothing and everything to the imagination. Flaring out low at her hips, the skirt contained layers of fabric in unequal lengths, the effect whimsical, and the fabric swayed and whispered around the slender curve of shapely legs. Meant to entice and attract, she danced as sensually as she looked, the music accompanied her slow and graceful movements.

Gulping a large swallow of the forsaken beer, he cursed his luck. He should leave now before doing something he’d regret. Long tempted by not only that arousing hair color, but that particular hair color on a lovely dancing lady usually proved his undoing with desires he best not entertain now.

Glancing around, he looked for Dandelion, but the tavern-keeper was too busy keeping tavern on a holiday even at this late hour.

Settling back into his chair, he relaxed a bit, waiting for the bard. Shoving the tankard away, he admired the dancer’s alluring figure in the privacy of the shadows, despite his misgivings. He knew himself too well. He’d watch… but only for a few minutes.

Focused intently on the dancer, he barely moved or breathed. More than once, she looked his way, holding his gaze and twirling sensually as if she danced only for him. She held his gaze again and Geralt slowly shoved the hood off his head for even in the darkness, his snow white hair would be noticeable enough. Her smile grew broader, eyes gleaming in the dim light, her movements more graceful and convincing with purpose. He was her captive audience and now she honed in on him.

Approaching closer, she glistened with perspiration in the humid night, and the thin fabric of her dress clung to her skin revealing the more arousing features of a womanly body. Shining lips parted, she danced her way closer to his table.

The bard seemed to materialize at the table like a night wraith, giving Geralt pause as to which direction he had approached. Dandelion collapsed into the chair beside him, huffing out an exhausted sigh. The dancing girl glowered a moment and changed her course toward the group of men on the side of the room.

Annoyed and relieved at the same time, Geralt tried to forget about her and turned his attention on his friend.

“What a night! I swear, I’ll need to sleep for three days straight to recover from Belleteyne,” Dandelion chortled. At a glance at him, he grew serious. “Hey, you okay?”

Geralt simply shook his head and heaved a sigh.

“Yes, I know.” Dandelion rested his arms on the table looking like he could use a drink himself. “That conversation with Avallac’h was… ah, not easy. So…”

Geralt met Dandelion’s eyes when he hesitated in finishing his thought.

“So, ah… it’s happened.”

Nodding, Geralt glanced quickly at the dancing girl and looked back at his friend. “Yeah, it has. Ciri is expecting. She’ll deliver before Lammas. Still can’t wrap my mind around it, even with the physical proof.”

Dandelion smiled genuinely, reaching over and clapped him on the arm. “Knowing you, you’re driving yourself insane trying to figure out how it happened. Just let it be. Accept it. The mysterious ways of magic and the powers that be… You’re going to have a son, congratulations,
my friend. The first and only witcher to have the pleasure.”

Geralt made eye contact with him again. Fatigue gripped him suddenly and all he wanted was to collapse in a bed upstairs and sleep for a few days straight. “Twelve years exactly as Garret had told us, remember?”

Dandelion nodded, his tired eyes gleaming in the dim light.

“And according to the blasted sage, the ‘avenger and destroyer of worlds’ will be ‘my pleasure.’” He hadn’t meant for his tone to be quite so bitter, but dammit, he was still processing all the elf had claimed.

“Don’t be so pessimistic. Take what Avallac’h says with a grain of salt. Okay, a whole shaker of salt. Only time will tell. But let me tell you this, Geralt. I know you. And I have a pretty good handle on Ciri too. With both of you as his parents, he’ll be set on the right path. You and I both liked the man we saw twelve years ago despite the shroud of mystery. Avallac’h could be completely wrong, or just plain deceitful. Personally, this is utterly romantic, the stuff of true legends and I cannot wait for the proper time to record this in a song to be remembered for all time… Don’t look at me that way, Geralt, you know I mean the right time, not before. The displaced princess who lost everything fell in love with her guardian and mentor who is no ordinary man, mind you. A witcher… with superhuman abilities. Cirilla, the child of the Elder Blood births a son, an heir, an arch-prince with witcher abilities... Gods, this is good stuff! The son will be someone powerful and capable—”

“Enough, Dandelion. Don’t want to hear anymore.”

It fell quiet between them for a moment. Dandelion chuckled and shook his head as if a realization had just struck him. “I saw it… I did… just didn’t think it would be so soon. Didn’t think much of it at the time.”

“Not in the mood for guessing games. Saw what?”

“Can I have a drink of your stout? I’m parched.” Without waiting for a response, the bard took a long swallow and sat the tankard in front of him. “Ciri. Last year she returned looking for you, before you found her on the Isle of Mists. She sought me here because she couldn’t find you or Triss, remember?”

“I know, Dandelion.”

“Let me finish, will ya? Spent some time with her. Gave her room and board here for a few weeks. Told me some of the experiences she went through. The way she’d talk about you, remembered times with you... wishing she never had to leave you or Kaer Morhen.”

Geralt relaxed and watched his friend carefully. His words summoned pleasant memories of that year or two she had spent at the fortress. The most memorable years Kaer Morhen ever witnessed.

Dandelion continued, his voice wistful. ”Even then I could see, Geralt. Plain as day by the way she spoke of you, her desperation to find you. The way her eyes gleamed at the mere mention of your name. How she strives to be just like you... It was clear how very much in love she is with you.”

Geralt stared at him, careful to keep his expression neutral.

“Come on, Geralt. Don’t tell me you didn’t pick up on it, witcher senses or not. Anyone with eyes could see it. Don’t have to be a hopeless romantic like me to see the clues. I wager Yennefer saw it too.”
Probably why Ciri always called him nothing other than his name.

As if reading his thoughts, Dandelion continued. “Ever wonder why she never called you or referred to you as her father? You’ve told me that a long time ago. Never heard it myself. Yet, she spent a month with Yennefer and they’re mother and daughter.”

Geralt glared at the man. “Yeah, I know. I’m okay with it. Really. She knows who her father is. And she prefers me over him. She needed a mother, Yen filled that void in her life. Nothing wrong with that. Most importantly, Ciri filled the void in Yen’s life too.”

“Yennefer trained her in magic as a child, Avallac’h as an adult, yet she still only wants to become a witcher.”

“Dandelion…”

“What? What did I say?”

“It’s as if you’re trying to convince me of how Ciri feels about me. You don’t have to. I know. I know full well.”

"Right... Yes, I gather you would know now."

In the silence that followed, Geralt swiped a hand over his mouth and chin. Dandelion took another gulp and stifled a belch. Glancing at the lady dancing again, Geralt sighed.

“If you’d like to talk about it, I’m here, Geralt. You know that.”

“Yeah, I do. Thanks, Dandelion.”

Dandelion rose and watched the lovely lady dancing for a few moments. “You were clearly distraught that night at Chessa’s homestead, worried what kind of man you’d become to let this happen. You feared you’d turn into some monster who had lost his morals. Remember? I consoled you that we couldn’t know the circumstances that would bring you two together…” He paused and glanced at him. “Now you know the circumstances and when you’re ready, I’ll listen. I still know a noble man with a big heart. You’d never become a monster, Geralt. You may kill them, but you’d never become one of them.”

Stepping away from the table, the bard looked back. "Use my room upstairs for the night, friend. I won’t be needing it for a while. Help yourself to anything you want.”

Geralt dipped his head in thanks.

Grinning broadly, Dandelion headed towards the bar and stopped briefly before the dancing girl. Leaning down, he whispered something and she smiled beautifully and winked. He walked away and she made eye contact with Geralt again as she had kept an eye on him throughout their conversation.

Dancing her way seductively across the room in his direction, taking her time, drawing it out in a sexy tease, she ignored the men’s excited hoots, gawking eyes, and groping hands. Her sultry gaze, glued on him only, beckoned ripe with promise.

Geralt, done with churning thoughts, vague ominous prophecies, sages’ predictions and sour moods, was ready to celebrate Belleteyne with the rest of the northern kingdoms. After all, this was the best part of the night. Swallowing the last of the beer, he clanked the tankard back on the table and stood, all the while never taking his eyes off her and waited. For he certainly was her
destination. His nostrils flared at her musky scent as she drew near. He grinned. She was ready and willing.

Finally reaching him, she stood on her toes and threw an arm around his neck. In one swoop of an arm, he swept her off her feet. Carrying her up the stairs, he ignored the annoyed jeering of the drunkards and lost himself in blue eyes, fox-red hair and… apples. She smelled of refreshing sweet honey crisp apples.

Opening the door to Dandelion's apartment, she kissed his neck. Heat rushed through him and he relaxed finally able to enjoy himself. Exhausted as he was, he didn't plan on any sleep tonight.

Monster, he was not.

He kicked the door closed behind him.

But, by the gods, he was no pious man either.
Chapter Summary

In Vengerberg, Yennefer and Ciri have a heart to heart that could reconcile or destroy their relationship with each other as well as their relationship with Geralt. At the Chameleon, Geralt needs to warn Yen that Ciri is still in danger. He tells Dandelion his plans and heads south to finish something Ciri had started and to retrieve a meaningful item. As Ciri’s time draws near, Yen realizes Vengerberg is not safe anymore. Will they find a safe place for Ciri to deliver Geralt’s son?

Our beloved original character, Chessa the healer, reappears in this chapter. Since Yen had teleported her to Vengerberg twelve years ago, she has stayed with Yen as an apprentice and the two have developed a rare and special friendship during those years.

***Content Warning*** chapter contains a mild sex scene (not with Ciri).

Hope you enjoy! :)

Fan art by Erika-Xero

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE
Heat traveled up from her chest and neck to flame her cheeks. Ciri held her breath after she had finished her story, averting her gaze, searching for something other than her mother’s pale emotionless face to focus on. Describing leading up to the intimate experience with Geralt in such vivid detail was not something she had wont to do, but the telling of it allowed her to relive the tenderness and love that flowed so naturally between them. It brought Geralt closer again. Closer to her heart. Since Yen exiled him, no telling where he went or what he was doing now, but reliving it in her mind every minute of every day was one thing, but to share it with her mother was quite another. But she demanded it, so she laid it all bare before her.

Braving a glance at her mother finally, uncertainty made her forget the awkwardness of the moment. Yen stared out the window, glossy eyes lifeless, and only the occasional blink reminded her she drew breath, so still she sat in that rocking chair. “Mother? Say something.” Leaning closer, she laid a hand on her arm. Still, Yen did not move. “Please understand Geralt is the only man I could ever give myself to.”

The grayish-yellow tint of daylight rising above the buildings and trees diffused through the white lace curtains in the guest bedchamber provided more light than the single candle on the nightstand had. She clutched the covers in anxious fists, studying Yen’s paler than normal complexion. Shit. She hates me now. Disappointed, certainly.

"I'm not trying to steal him from you, mom. Please know that. He dreams only of you."

The muscles in her neck worked as she swallowed. “He was your first?” Yen's ragged whisper sounded as if it tore from her throat with the effort to speak.

At last, she spoke. For a moment, Ciri thought the telling of her night with Geralt would damage her beyond repair. "Well… in a manner of speaking, yes."

Yen’s glazed eyes slid to hers finally. “What does that mean? Ciri, I could just read your thoughts, but I'm too exhausted. Wanted to hear it from your perspective.”

Gathering her thoughts, her backside began to ache. Drawing the covers aside, she swung her legs over the side of the bed and stretched them, wiggling her toes. She took in a deep breath and considered her words carefully. “He was my first and only…” she looked at her mother squarely, “man.”

Blinking, Yen’s fingers toyed with the chunky knit blanket on her lap. “You lost your virginity
“With her breathless question, whether she was upset or not was difficult to tell.

Ciri raised her chin refusing to feel shame. “Yes. Before you get upset and judge me, mother, remember that every man I’ve encountered, save for Geralt and our close friends obviously, had tried to rape me or use me for their own purposes. Is it any wonder I find it extremely difficult to trust men enough to go to bed with them?”

Yen smiled her first smile in many hours, but it was short lived. “Darling, I’m not judging you. Merely wish to understand you better. We lost some time, dear… you’ve grown up and there’s a need to reconnect. I want to know the woman you’ve become.”

Breathing out, relief flooded Ciri’s soul. So much so, the torrent of pent up feelings overwhelmed her and the words tumbled from her mouth without the hope of stopping. “Being with women kept the men at bay. But only in the company of one girl in particular, really, was I able to relax. Was awkward at first, I admit, but then gave in when it kept the men from me. It wasn’t all bad once I got used to it. And Mistle… well, she made it a little easier for me.”

"Mistle?"

"Became friends with her while apart of the Rats Gang. She helped me feel safe by keeping the men away, by keeping me in her bed.” Dropping her gaze, she toyed with the covers. "Bonhart killed her in front of me. Really miss her.”

"I'm so sorry, dear."

Clearing her throat, Ciri continued. “Haven’t lost attraction to men, though, in case you were wondering. Just can't trust them. Not going to sleep with someone I don’t trust.”

Yen nodded, her waves coming alive again. “Understandable, dear. Trust is essential in any intimate relationship, especially a sexual one. I know what Vilgefortz and your father meant to do with you, Ciri. I also know there were others too, and I cannot blame you for keeping men at arm’s length. All the same, you were growing up, coming into womanhood so what else were you supposed to do? I’ve never believed anyone should live a celibate life, unless that is one’s expressed desire to do so. And I’ve long known Geralt is the only man you’ve ever trusted completely.”

“Yes, exactly,” she breathed, relieved. “So you see… I wanted to experience being with a man before I died and that night before the battle… dying was a great possibility, mom. With him I can be myself, completely relaxed and comfortable and…” Sighing, she pleaded with Yen with her eyes. “I needed him, mom. Wanted him. Had to express myself without words because words… were not adequate enough.”

A single tear splashed over Yen’s black lashes and trailed slowly down the crevice of her high cheekbone and dropped onto her lap. Reaching over, she extinguished the nub of the candle on the nightstand and folded her hands in her lap. Her gaze dropped as well.

“My Ciri... My beautiful daughter,” she whispered. “How difficult those teenage years were for you. Geralt nor I could be with you during that challenging time. At least you found comfort in a friend’s embrace.” Her voice trailed off and she glanced out the window again. Raven locks tumbled over her shoulder in sharp contrast against her face white as the lace curtains.

“Please don’t hate him, mom. He opposed the idea, told me it wasn’t going to happen. He wrapped me in my cloak to take me back to my tent, but I… I wouldn’t allow it. I was determined to see it through. Just needed to be with him in… that beautiful way... I just knew that night was my only
chance, please understand, mommy.”

“But he gave in. Figures,” she nodded as one who knew another well enough to be critical. “He always had difficulty saying ‘no’ to women, especially those he cares about.” The bitterness in her voice was clear. “Know something about that. So, the big-hearted fool allowed it to happen with my daught—”

“Not a fool, Yen,” she interjected harshly, purposefully addressing the sorceress by name. “Big-hearted, yes, but no fool. I’ve loved him since the moment he rescued me in the Brokilon Forest, you know. Knew our destinies were intertwined and after all he has done for me, that love turned into a deep passion as I became a woman. Is that so wrong, mother? So unheard of?”

“But that man is my lover, Ciri!” Violet eyes flashed in anger.

“I know, mom! But you taught me how to choose lovers wisely. And you cannot deny that Geralt and I have something uniquely rare and special. You saw it, sensed it - or else you wouldn’t have shown jealousy when we first met at the Temple of Melitele all those years ago. And I wouldn’t have either.”

Yen jumped to her feet, the blanket tumbled to the floor. “How dare you!” She turned her back to her, and crossed the room, her hand covering her mouth. After a moment of composing herself again, her voice sounded like it had aged a decade. "You two do share something very special. And yes, if you must know, I envied it at first. It's called the Law of Surprise, where he claimed you as his reward for performing a job for your grandmother while you were still in your mother's womb. His motive was to make you a witcher, to become his protege. Wanted to pass his knowledge on for he would never have a child to do that naturally. He had a law, or destiny, as you like to call it, on his side to take you as his own. He had finally found his adoptive daughter… a child of surprise.” Her shoulders slumped. "A child I could not give him."

The energy of the conversation changed with Yennefer’s murmured confession. The words on Ciri's lips, words that denied ever thinking of Geralt as a father died instantly with the realization which hit her with the force not unlike the Pendulum back home at Kaer Morhen. A pang sliced through her soul deeply. Understanding her mother now in a much deeper way, the gravity of their situation weighed on her like she carried a horse upon her shoulders. For one night with him, she conceived with a man who was not able to continue his bloodline, whereas before her was a woman who loved him for nearly two decades.

*What have I done?* Feeling awful, she drew in a shaky breath, and stood beside the powerful woman she viewed as a mother since her own had died when she was but a babe. At thirteen, in Ciri's eyes, Yennefer was larger than life, strong and intelligent, gorgeous, and a force to reckon with and even fear. Today, still all those things, Yen stood shorter than her now, but Ciri understood that underneath her power and reputation, deeply concealed a wounded woman from this harsh world.

Silence, suffocating as it was, pulsated between them. Ciri touched her shoulder. “How you must hate me right now. I’ll learn to accept it, mother. I’ll understand, after the babe is born, you don’t ever wish to see me again. I’ve wounded you deeply, and for that I will never forgive myself.” Eyes burning, she let the wetness gathering flow freely.

Yen turned toward her, her expression one of surprise, her large ice cold violet gaze thawing before her. Grasping her arms, her fingers dug painfully, but Ciri didn’t mind. “You will do no such thing, you understand me, girl? You are my daughter and although we don’t share blood, there is nothing you can do to change that. Nothing. We will get through this. All of us. This babe needs a family and we will give him one.”
Throwing her arms around her mother's shoulders, she buried her face in soft black curls smelling strong of lilac and gooseberries. “I’m sorry! I’ve hurt you, mommy. I’m so sorry!” Her tears soaked Yen’s hair and collar. “That night with Geralt meant everything to me. And... And... because of him, I have the courage to live fearlessly, to do things no other woman could.” Arms tightened around her. “And because of you... you taught me magic, how to find it within myself first and in the elements, and to be a lady.... Oh, I love you mommy, and I love Geralt... I love you both so much. Forgive me, forgive us both, please.”

“Shhh, hush child.” For several moments, they held each other tightly, crying on each other’s shoulders. Yen continued to stroke her hair and murmur comforting words in her ear. “I do forgive you, darling. And I forgive him. Please, don’t upset yourself, it’s not good for the baby.”

Sniffling, Ciri drew back and swiped at strands of hair that had plastered to her face. “Really? You really do forgive him? Please don’t say it to keep me calm. Do you mean it?”

It took her a moment, but Yen smiled through the tears, combing her fingers in her long ashen tresses. “I mean it, sweetling. I see now Geralt was not a pig as men often are. And I understand you in a much brighter light now and cannot judge you for the experiences you had when you were simply trying to survive while growing up. You mean the world to Geralt and I. He loves you dearly, as do I. I’m sure he understood the consequences of my anger, but your happiness and peace of mind meant more to him than the turmoil that would follow in his life because of it. I can forgive him for that. Reminded me of his true noble spirit and the soft heart he hides from the world so diligently." Pulling away, Yen's exotic violet eyes were wet with tears. Drawing in a breath, she shook off the emotion. "It’s a wonder, isn't it? A man so brutal in battle is so tender with those he loves.”

“Oh, mom...” Ciri choked, burying her nose in her mother’s hair. “I love you.”

“My sweetling, I love you too.” Breaking the embrace, Yen wiped her eyes and breathed in deep. “Let’s not have this experience separate us, dear, all right? Any of us.”

Ciri wiped her eyes and nodded. “You mean that about Geralt too... he can come back? I want him here, mother. I miss him. He needs to be here when the babe arrives.”

“I know, darling." She sighed as if in resignation and lowered her voice. "He needs to be a part of the boy’s life. Which means he has to be a part of our lives." Hands smoothed over her tresses and cupped her cheeks. Yen smiled wistfully. "He wouldn't have it any other way, dear. He has never spoken it aloud, but he had always dreamed of having a family of his own. And that can only happen if I forgive him. And I do. I would never stand in the way of him and his dream.”

Leaning in, Ciri kissed her cheek. "You're an amazing woman, mother,” she breathed.

"Not amazing enough to give a sterile man a child. That privilege was destined for you, dear.”

Yennefer drew Ciri into an embrace so she couldn't see the pain in her eyes. Squishing her eyes closed, she swallowed the heartache, jealousy, and the bitter nemesis of her inferiority brought on by her barrenness to reach deep inside her soul in places long left in the dark, to find true happiness for the young lady she loved as her very own daughter. And for the witcher who had always loved Yen for who she was.

Yen broke the embrace, holding Ciri at arm’s length. “He’ll have his dream. We have a family right here.” Caressing Ciri’s womb, tingling pulsing sensations she had felt for the past month grew in intensity. The babe approved, she smiled to herself.
Dear Friend,

Dearest Friend:

Yennefer,

Groaning, he crumpled another piece of parchment and tossed it in the trash barrel beside the desk. Snatching another one, he dipped the goose feather quill into the inkwell and tapped it against the side. Better try that again.

Dearest Yennefer-Yen,

No words came. Closing his eyes, he took a calming breath. Was never easy committing thoughts to paper. Damned frightening it was to say the least. So permanent. And when writing to Yennefer, well, probably the reason why he struggled. The last time he had penned her, her response was nothing short of scathing all because he had failed to address it to her liking.

Smoothing a hand over his head, he glanced across Dandelion’s apartment, mostly lost in shadows. All was dark except two candles lit on the nightstands beside the bed. And in a rumpled mess of luxurious and nauseatingly expensive sky blue sheets from Nazair, the fox-haired dancer slumbered peacefully on her belly, her hand tucked underneath the pillow, her amazing hair fanned out behind her covering his pillow. Silver rays beamed in through diamond-pane windows bathing her in glittering brilliance. Sighing blissfully, she turned her face toward the light.

Grinning, he admired her beauty, but that damnable restlessness returned. Settled in his gut and legs. Time to get moving, get back on the road. He had a big job to do that could set him up for retirement. He glanced again at the blank page.

The music permeating the city had not died down but continued its soft driving rhythms and sweet lullabies as pretty much the entire populace engaged in various stages of love making well into the wee hours of the morning. Distant voices of those out and about mingled with the flaring bonfires scattered throughout the city and in the surrounding countryside.

Belleteyn. That glorious time of year welcoming the summer and fruitful harvests it would bring. He picked up the quill again and pulled a fresh parchment closer. The flame from a candle
sputtered a bit.

My Dearest Yen,

Sincerely hope you’ll actually read this and not toss it in the fire. Please hear me out.

As the Belleteyne holiday draws to a close in an hour or so, my thoughts are centered upon you and Ciri, as they always are. The two most important women in my life both celebrated a birthday today and I wish you both the happiest and most peaceful holiday. Would’ve liked to have been with you to shower you both with gifts.

Hope Ciri is faring well. The memory of her quite ill before still lingers in my mind and worry about her often. Enclosed is a letter addressed to her. Be most grateful if you’d pass it along in my stead.

I trust you are all well, even Chessa, who has enriched your life, Yen. A rare and special friendship like that should be guarded with utmost vigilance. Give her my well wishes.

Miss you both severely, and hope someday soon to explain what had happened on Undvik. My only wish, Yen, if you cannot forgive me, find it in your heart to allow me to witness the birth of our child. Can’t imagine how difficult this has been on you, but try to understand that no other witcher has or will witness such a glorious occasion. It’s the single most important and anticipated event in my life right now. I beg of you, grant me this one desire.

Be vigilant, Yen. Stay aware. Have reason to believe Ciri may yet be in danger. Know that I’ll be there before she delivers.

If there is any way we can be reconciled, Yen, I will find it. You are too important to just let go. Won’t let go. Love you too much.

All my love,

Was that enough? The need was strong to warn her, but would be too risky to explain in detail why. Well, what he wrote would have to do and trust Yen would take his warning seriously. He’d fill her in when he arrived in Vengerberg.

Scratching his signature across the parchment in small script, he laid down the quill. Emotionally spent, he pinched the bridge of his nose and rested both elbows on the desk, his fingers rubbing his temples. Dandelion was much more eloquent with words, perhaps he should pen this for him instead. He stopped himself from crumbling the parchment. No, coming from his hand showed sincerity. All he could do was hope Yen would be of a forgiving spirit when she read this.

"You’re writing a letter at this hour?" Fully awake, the dancer sat up clutching a sheet to her chest. Her glorious hair tumbled over a shoulder and dangled to the top of the bed covers. She eyed him with a curious expression.

He grinned sheepishly, feeling a bit silly. How long had she been watching? “Ahhh, yeah. Can’t sleep." Truthfully, couldn’t stop thinking about Yen and Ciri… and his son arriving soon.

"Who wants to sleep on Belleteyne anyway?" Releasing the sheet, it tumbled to her lap exposing a pair of slender shoulders, lovely rounded breasts, and fair freckled skin. She glanced toward the
windows. "Not morn yet. Your letters can wait, Witcher."

Staring at her a few moments longer, the sight of her stirred him again, although did not ease the deep seeded restlessness. Glancing back at the parchments with his crooked and stilted script, he sprinkled sand over the ink and carefully folded the paper in quarters. He inserted the note to Ciri inside. Yeah, the missives could wait. He’d send them out later.

She was beside him in a moment, grasping the sheet to her chest, the rest of it trailed along behind her on the floor. Standing close, she stroked his hair peering at him and at the letters on the desk. Her eyes slid back to his and her expression warmed in understanding. “Miss her, do you? Your lady. It’s plain in your eyes, how you pine for her.”

Glancing at the letters, he was unable to speak of it. He wanted to, longed to, but sharing the deep secrets of his heart was reserved for only a few people he knew well.

“Wish me to go?” she whispered, tracing a finger over the top of his ear and down his cheek. “If you need some solitude, I’ll leave you be....”

“No.” Taking her hand, he gazed up and smiled, which left her clearly breathless. “Had plenty of solitude over the last several months and will have it again shortly.” He gently pulled her closer. “Don’t leave just yet.”

Smiling sweetly with her heart in her eyes, she let go of the sheet. It fluttered to the floor around her ankles. Raking a heated gaze over alluring womanly curves, he breathed in long and hard through his nose.

With hands on his shoulders, she straddled him on the chair, her thighs squeezing his tightly. Leaning in close, she tenderly took his lips with hers drawing him in a warm affectionate embrace as she sheathed him deeply. The tips of her breasts brushed against his mouth. He tasted them slowly, yet eagerly.

Golden rays beamed through the windows illuminating her light skin in warm bronze hues while she rocked seductively atop him, holding him close to her bosom. While palming supple breasts, a narrow waist, and a rounded bottom, the warm rays of morning rose above the tall buildings, radiating upon a city finally ready to rest after a night of uninhibited revelry. The sun shimmering golden on her red tresses dazzled him, excited him, and for a short while, pushed all other thoughts aside. Sinking deeper into her, he moaned, losing himself in her pleasing warmth.

Normally the sounds of a city starting its day was typical at this time of morning, but now it was quiet. Nothing stirred except the rhythmic clapping of the water against the docks in the harbor, the ringing echo of a few buoys across the water, and a single cry of a seagull rang clear from the opposite side of town. Nothing stirred except them, and perhaps the candle sputtering and flickering on the desk, the quiet chime of the inkwell rattling against something, and the feather quill splattered the last remnants of ink from its split tip on the corner of the letter.

Feeling spontaneous, he grinned, grasping her bottom and standing up. He’d put the desk to good use besides writing letters...

* * *

The tavern was pretty quiet, as expected, save for a few determined souls not hungover too much
from last night's festivities. Most people, probably like him, didn't rouse until about now.

“Sleeping beauty has emerged!” Dandelion, grinning broadly, set a tankard of cider before him and a steaming plate of scrambled eggs, roasted potatoes with onions, thick-sliced bacon strips, and jam-smeared toast. “Saw you come downstairs. Shall I get a plate for the mistress?”

"No need. She left before I woke." The steaming food made his mouth water. “Ah thanks, Dandelion. Just what I needed. Famished.”

"Well, it's no wonder - it's mid afternoon. Enjoy! You know, The lass does work for me. She'll be on shift soon. In case you're wondering."

He nodded. Eager to satisfy a growling stomach, Geralt dove into the hot meal, savoring the dried spinach, herbs, onions, and garlic pepper seasonings used. "Shit, this is really good."

"Thank you."

"Didn't have to do that, you know." He took a swig of cider.

Acting all innocent, Dandelion sat down at the table. "Do what?"

"You know exactly what I'm talking about. Didn't have to put me up in your suite or ask the lovely dancer to spend the night with me. Perfectly capable of luring a woman on my own, you know."

"Geralt. I'd never insult your... prowess, for lack of a better term. All the rooms were taken and merely wanted you to have a comfortable night's rest--"

"Then why'd you whisper to her just before she came over to me? It was a set up, admit it."

"You're wrong, friend," the bard shook his head. "Her shift was over and I told her to enjoy the rest of the holiday. Clearly she chose you of her own accord. I, however, had nothing to do with it."

Geralt glared at Dandelion, studying him, but the bard held his gaze innocently and he dropped it. "Fine. Appreciate the hospitality. I'll be leaving in a bit. Gonna get some supplies first and get back on the road."

"You always have a place to stay with food and drink here, any time, friend. Take my suite again tonight."

"Don't want to overstay my welcome and you need some sleep too. Besides, would rather get moving."

"My place is free one more night. Plan on spending the night with Priscilla anyway since I worked the holiday. But where you off to in a hurry?"

Forking some potatoes, Geralt stared at his plate, shoving the small roasted pieces back and forth on his plate. "Have some business south. Then going to Vengerberg."

Dandelion whistled low. "Whoa, that is daring of you, Geralt. Especially after hearing about The Cataclysm, that is now known as Yennefer’s wrath, that would’ve killed an ordinary man. Sure it's wise?"

“No, it’s not, but that’s not stopping me. Yennefer may never forgive me and I’ll learn to accept that. But I’ll be damned if I’m going to be a father and not be there with her, Dandelion, to experience what no other witcher could. Whether Yen likes it or not.”
Smiling, Dandelion clapped him on the shoulder. “Glad to hear, Geralt. And I am behind you one hundred percent. If there’s anything I can do to help in any way, I’m here for you. All of you.”

Geralt nodded in appreciation. “Actually, there is something you could do for me now. Have a letter for Yen.” He reached into the leather pouch on one of his many straps and belts and produced a neatly folded parchment addressed to ‘Lady Yennefer of Vengerberg’ scrawled across the front. “Could you send this out as soon as possible?” Reaching in the same pouch again, he withdrew a small coin purse. “This should cover the expense. Prefer a raven if possible. They are fast and intelligent creatures and acceptable to Yen. It will be awhile before I make it to Vengerberg, but she needs to see this right away. I’ll get there in time for Ciri to deliver.”

Dandelion took the parchment sealed with his own wax crest. “Absolutely. Consider it done.”

“Appreciate everything, Dandelion. If you can get away for a little getaway - Ciri would love to see you too. So would Chessa. Zoltan would look after the place for you.”

The bard smiled. “That may be a great idea. I do need to get away. Hmmm… Just might see you there. When is she due?”

Stopping his fork mid-way to his mouth, Geralt recalculated the math in his mind. “Figure about half-way between the summer solstice and Lammas.”

Nodding Dandelion added, “In two and a half months as Avallac’h said.”

Putting down the fork, Geralt made eye contact and spoke softly. “Don’t trust him, Dandelion. Not at all.”

The bard held his gaze with steady blue eyes. “I know, Geralt. Ciri trusted him though.”

“I know, but I never will. Why would he have come to me now, you know? With the Wild Hunt defeated? He wants something and it has to do with Ciri or… even our son. Or he wouldn't have bothered.”

His friend took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. “If you were anyone else, Geralt I’d say you were overreacting. But I know you. You sense things most people don’t. In light of everything that had happened and what’s going to happen soon, I’m tending to agree with you. Avallac’h hasn’t checked out yet. I’ll keep my eyes and ears open and you’ll be the first to know if I learn anything.”

Geralt lowered his voice to a whisper. “Keep news of Ciri quiet… Want no one else to know. Need to figure out the sage’s motives. Also don’t want word of it getting back to the emperor. When Ciri had returned from the Frost, I told Emhyr, lied to his face his daughter had died in the attempt. Not sure if he actually believed it, but if he found out his daughter is alive and expecting a son, a royal heir… then he is going to send an army for them and then kill me. I’m going south for more than one reason, Dandelion, but I’m keeping quiet. Need to secure a safe place for Ciri and our son. Think I can do that in Toussaint.”

“Toussaint?” Dandelion’s expression lost its cheerfulness. “You’re going back there now?”

Geralt glanced around making sure no one overheard them. “Yeah, the duchess sent for me. Apparently Toussaint is having a bit of a monster problem. A big problem. Wants to hire me to take care of it.”

“I see,” the bard mumbled, his brows furrowing. “Could be lucrative for you. See why you’d want to go. But what about Kaer Morhen? Seems a safe enough place to raise a son.”
Geralt took another bite and chewed slowly as he formulated his response. “That is always a possibility, not ruling it out, but not my first choice. Too isolated. There’s no one there now. If Vesemir was still alive, Lambert and Eskel would still be there and it may be different. Not like that now. We were so isolated when we grew up there, with no women… no others... Don’t want my son to grow up without women around him, without motherly affection like me. Want people around him, all kinds of people, help round him out. So, maybe when he is older, we’ll take him to Kaer Morhen so he understands his roots.”

“Sounds like you’ve thought this through, Geralt.”

“Had plenty of time alone lately to think, my friend. Actually, thinking about buying a place in Toussaint. Near Beauclair, but off the beaten path a little.”

“But Toussaint is a Nilfgaardian duchy… you sure about that?”

“Yeah, but the duchy is left alone. Duchess Anna Henrietta is Emhyr’s cousin, but she rules Toussaint, not him. There is a Nilfgaardian garrison present in the city, but they pretty much leave all alone for her to handle. Not only is it a beautiful country with a favorable climate, Ciri loved it there. As did I. Think it’s an optimal place to raise a son who also has Nilfgaardian blood.

“Only one problem.”

Geralt raised his gaze while taking a bite of potatoes. “What’s that?”

“I won’t be able to visit you.”

He swallowed, nodding. “Right. Almost forgot, you’re exiled, an undesirable. But I won’t be buying a house in the city - you could always come quietly. They’d never know you’ve come and gone. But let’s see how things go first.”

Dandelion nodded. “I’ll be damned. I would come and visit, count on it.”

Nodding, Geralt smiled at his friend. “Someday, I’ll make this up to you.”

“There’s nothing to makeup.”

Geralt slid his gaze over to the door and the fox-haired dancer entered. Smiling brightly, her curls bounced as she headed back toward the kitchen staff area. Her eyes found his and she lit up even more. “Heh, yeah there is.” Chuckling, Geralt looked back at Dandelion again and grinned a devilish smile that turned apologetic. “Your bed. Make sure to change the sheets. Oh, and you need more ink, and parchment. Maybe a new quill too.”

Dandelion guffawed. "Better not have ruined my sheets. Those were expensive! Was going to offer again to stay another night, now I’m not so sure... Good thing I’m staying with Priscilla tonight,” he mumbled that last statement under his breath.

Geralt grinned and laughed heartily. “Doesn’t matter, not going to stay because if I did, Dandelion, you’d never get your bed back and I’d never make it south. On a deadline, remember?”

Clapping him on the shoulder, Dandelion’s face grew serious, his blue eyes heartfelt and sincere. “I’ll send the letter out today, friend. I’ve not breathed a word about Garret since the day you swore me to secrecy. You can count on me. I’ll not speak a word of this either.”

Geralt clasped his friend’s outstretched arm in a warm shake. “See you later. Take care, Dandelion.”
“You too. Good luck in Toussaint.” The bard headed back toward the bar area.

“Oh, and… ah, give your desk a thorough cleaning too.”

Dandelion whirled and shot him a lethal glare.

“Sorry about that.”

* * *

Four Days Later

Crookback Bog

Southern Velen, 1273

Shoulders squared, Geralt strolled across the swampy grounds of the former orphanage in the swamps of Crookback Bog tall and proud, finally accomplishing something he’d long wanted to complete since Ciri’s return from confronting the White Frost. Taking his time, he kept his eyes on the bitch of a crone, the last living of the three Ladies of the Wood, groaning in agony, laying in a murky puddle of dirty water where she had landed hard, his steel sword skewered through her midsection.

A moment ago, he had chucked his sword like a javelin and impaled her through the back with his steel blade. The sword’s hilt at her back, the length of the blade stuck out of her chest.

Damn good throw.

Stopping beside her hideous and pathetic form, he gripped the leather bound hilt of his silver blade tighter. The steel sword merely prevented her from fleeing, this blade would end her miserable life. The familiar odor all beings emitted just before death stung his nostrils. The scent of fear.

"The whore!" the creature croaked, writhing in agony. But the tip of the blade protruding through her midsection stuck her to the ground fast. She was not able to move very much. "Killed my sisters!" About to say more, her sentence ended in a wheeze.

"Ciri was wounded and exhausted," he growled without mercy. "Instead of helping her, you and your sisters planned to kill her. Said I’d come back for you, remember? Here to finish what she couldn’t. But first, you have something that belongs to her." Curling a lip, he didn't bother to disguise the disdain edging his voice.

"Something different about you, White One," she gasped. Saliva bubbled at the corner of her mouth. "Not as desperate and hungry for a lead as you once were." She moaned pitifully. "No. Your confidence and arrogance exudes from you, I can smell it, but know not why. Watch that it’s not your downfall, Witcher."

“Where is it?”

Not answering, she continued her pitiful moaning and wriggled back and forth, but the sword
prevented her any movement.

“Tell me where it is,” he barked, prodding her backside, not gently, with a steel-toed boot.

“Don’t know what you want.” Her gnarled hand clawed the ground searching for a handhold.

“Cut the bullshit.”

A chilling laugh gurgled from her twisted lips. “You won’t kill me until I answer you or you won’t find what you’re looking for.”

“Wrong. Very good at finding things. And I’m in a hurry.” Gripping the hilt with both hands, he raised the silver sword, its blade pointing to the ground. In one swift motion, he plunged it through her mouth opened in a silent cry impaling her skull into the mud. Writhing, she gurgled one last time before going limp.

Not waiting for her last breath to escape her lungs, he tore at her neckline, ripping already frayed clothing aside. Nothing. Nothing! Patting her chest and then in pocket areas, nothing clued him she had the item on her.

“Dammit!”

Yanking the silver blade from her throat, he stalked over to the temple and entered. It was just the way he remembered it. The enormous floor to ceiling colorful tapestry depicting the three barely clad ladies in youthful human forms hung like an ominous all-seeing eye of the gods. He half expected the wall hanging to catch fire once he the last remaining crone had drawn her last breath.

Prowling through the house like a madman, he overturned tables, tossed chairs out of the way, swept items off shelves without a care. It didn't take him long to find it. Tucked away in a small wooden jewelry chest that had gotten knocked to the floor in his haste, its top open, revealed a glittering silver necklace. Breathing in deeply, he was not prepared for the host of emotions storm inside him at the sight of it. Yanking off his leather silver-studded glove, he gingerly withdrew the pendant from the chest. Fingering the cool metal in his palm, he traced its familiar edges, sensing the original owner’s essence within.

Homesickness once again reared its head, reminding him the only man he considered a father was gone from this world and would not witness the miracle that would take place in his life soon. Wetness pooled in his eyes and he blinked them away. This necklace had meant a lot to Ciri and wanted her here with him to retrieve it. It was what he had originally planned back in White Orchard and were they were headed when he made the sudden detour to Vengerberg to bring a very ill Ciri to Yen instead.

Bringing the medallion to his lips, he kissed it, remembering Vesemir and missing him like mad. But all the more fitting to present it to her after she had the babe. Imagining the surprise and joy on her face reminded him he was on a deadline. Two months would pass quickly and he had a big job down south and then get back to Vengerberg in time.

Lovingly tucking the necklace inside his pouch, he glanced around the shrine. The Ladies of the Wood were no longer. A satisfied grin broke across his mouth. He had avenged the final crone Ciri was unable to at the time. Now, to forget about this cursed place.

Roach cantered down the path and Geralt did not look back. Smoke and ash darkened the air, but they walked out of it soon enough not to impede their breathing. The crones’ shrine and house, engulfed in flames, heralded a new Velen. No longer ‘No Man’s Land,’ the people could now
shape the area as they saw fit without the influence of the witches.

Turning Roach south, he glanced up at thick black smoke erupting into the sky. Ravens and crows squawked piercingly above, circling around the place in wide arcs, avoiding the black clouds and angry flames clawing at the sky.

Smirking, Geralt straightened his shoulders and spurred Roach onto a fast gallop leaving the bog behind, never to return.

Yeah, that felt great. Now, on to Toussaint.

The witcher was back.

* * *

Vengerberg, Aedirn

Midsummer’s Day, 1273

Glancing up from the parchment she had been reading, Yennefer dabbed the sweat from her brow with a white lace scalloped-edged handkerchief and peeked out the front diamond-paned windows of her shop. The bright day only offered a slight, but warm breeze rustling the curtains and wavy wisps of hair that had fallen loose from her up-do, but didn't offer much relief from the heavy summer air.

She frowned. More damnable Nilfgaardian soldiers marched by again. Granted, they’ve had a presence here since the invasion and Demavend’s death, but her return from the council left her shaken and more soldiers prowled the city now than before, especially near the fortress. Each day, their numbers grew, and each day, her apprehension intensified. With the king assassinated last year, his son, Prince Stennis, would step in to rule, naturally, but some events delayed the process. Nilfgaard took an interest in Vengerberg and might not retreat so easily once Stennis was crowned. Vengerberg, unstable since Demavend's assassination, was too tempting for the emperor.

She huffed out an ironic laugh. Stennis had Geralt to thank for his life, for it was he who had saved him from the lynch mob in Vergen. The witcher had admitted once he was convinced Stennis had poisoned Saskia, the Dragonslayer and Virgin of Aedirn, but by keeping him alive and out of prison, the northern kingdoms would not suffer with one less ruler. Geralt knew Nilfgaard would subjugate the region that much faster unless there was a king in place to delay the empire's reach north. And Demavend's son was the only candidate. Even if he had tried to commit murder. By keeping him alive, Geralt had ensured Aedirn would have a rightful ruler.

She dropped her gaze back to the parchment, rereading the same sentences repeatedly. How many times had she combed through this letter that had arrived by a raven well over a month ago? If Geralt felt the need to warn her, he had good reason. Clearly, he knew something, just wish she knew what it was exactly. And now there were Black Ones crawling everywhere. The sickening feeling churning her belly reprimanded her daily for not acting sooner.

They hadn’t particularly kept Ciri a secret here. Why would they? She was not a prisoner. It was her home now. Her drafts of ginger root and other herbal remedies calmed her morning sickness
and able to keep food down, had regained her strength. As the winter gave way to spring, she grew restless and Chessa often took her around town for fresh air and a little shopping, both for her well-being and to replenish supplies. Her clients and customers had seen her in their comings and goings in the shop. Ciri always drew attention without trying. She was a striking young woman with memorable features. Much like Geralt in that respect. But in this blasted hot summer already, would be silly to walk around wearing a hooded cloak. That certainly would draw suspicious attention. Now heavy with child, she carried high unable to hide her swollen belly any longer. This boy would be a large one, and strong. Well, why wouldn’t he be considering his father?

Today was midsummer’s day and her time would come soon. Very soon. In a fortnight at most, another week at least, judging by the last examination yesterday. Already she had begun to drop. The babe was moving into position.

The last sentence of stilted script bore into her soul and she read it for the millionth time. He didn't want to lose her. Would do anything to reconcile with her. Maybe so, but…

Shaking her head, Yen folded up the parchment carefully, as she had a hundred other times, not to wrinkle it any more than it was already. That ink blotch on the corner drew her eye again. Sloppiness, Geralt. Ignoring the stain, she traced a finger over Dandelion’s wax seal before tucking it back into a pocket. Well, he had been at The Chameleon over a month ago, but that was all she knew. Sighing, she sat down. *Geralt, where are you? Imagined you’d have stormed your way here by now to be by our side at this momentous occasion, as you so clearly expressed in your letter. Have you run into trouble as you usually do?*

So preoccupied with her thoughts, Yen did not hear Chessa enter the shop from the back room.

“Yenna? Dear, you all right?” The healer, her long wavy tresses also piled on top of her head, laid a gentle hand on her wrist. Perspiration glistened her brow and upper lip as well. The bodice of her deep blue dress was undone a bit more.

“Where’s Ciri?” A moment of panic gripped her, sending her heart pounding.

“Sitting outside in the back. What is it, Yenna?”

Breathing out in relief, she wiped her brow again. “How can she stand it out there? This cursed heat! And to be that heavy with child… make sure she has plenty to drink.”

“Relax, she’s fine,” Chessa laughed, squeezing her arm. “She’s in the shade and sipping lemonade as we speak. But I am more worried about you right now. Something is clearly on your mind. Ever since that letter arrived from Geralt, you… well, you haven’t been yourself, Yenna. Let me help. I’m here for you both.”

Nodding, Yen drew in a deep calming breath and dabbed at the wetness at the nape of her neck. “A great deal is on my mind. The growing presence of the Black Ones is nerve wracking. They must be here because Stennis is not officially crowned yet. What the bloody hell is taking them so long to do that?”

Yen stood and paced the room, fidgeting with the kerchief. “It would only take one soldier to recognize Ciri and word would get back to her father, the emperor. He’d come for her immediately.” Yen turned and looked directly at her friend. “Recall Ciri told us Geralt returned to Emhyr and boldly lied to him, claiming she had perished battling the White Frost? They devised that lie to put an end to the search for Ciri. All would leave her alone. She could live in peace, finally. But if Emhyr found out she is not only alive but about to bear a royal heir… he’d steal her from me, Chessa…” Her voice taunted, she swallowed and cleared her throat softly before
continuing. Chessa hurried over and grasped both her hands tightly. “They’d take her, and us as well, and then… go for Geralt.” She swallowed hard. “And kill him…” Those last words escaped her lips on a raspy breath. *I’ve no idea where he could be…*

Sapphire blue eyes wide and sympathetic, Chessa drew her into an embrace. “Oh, Yenna… Had no idea you carried such burdens.”

Yen pressed her lips together, returning the warm affection. “Highly doubt Emhyr would take kindly when he finds out Geralt is the father of his grandchild and heir. There’ll be no hiding it… That and the bold faced lie - he would not tolerate. Emhyr would have him executed. I’ve always believed Emhyr was jealous of Geralt because Ciri preferred to be with him instead. And Geralt despised him for his inability to be the father Ciri needed and the disgusting plan he had once concerning her.”

“Yenna… Oh, my dear… “ Chessa smiled sadly with a warm expression on her face flushed from the heat.

Yennefer glanced at beautiful blue eyes filling with wetness and continued pacing. If Chessa cried, she would too. And that was not something she did easily.

The healer smiled sweetly. “Yenna… You do still love him. I knew as much. Understandably, you were very angry with him, but it kills you to think about any harm coming to him.”

Yen rubbed the back of her aching neck. “Yes, I love him. Still, dammit, despite all…” Blinking rapidly, she refused to let the tears flow. There was nothing more pathetic than a sobbing sorceress. “Don’t know I could go on if anything happened to him.”

She returned to pacing, anxiosity churning her insides. “Eternal Fire!”

“What is it?”

“Oh, it's all becoming clear. If the emperor found out about Ciri, Geralt would be hunted for life.” The realization tightened her throat, making it difficult to breathe and speak. “He'd get no rest, always be on the run… much like Ciri had been all those years. Shit!” She poked her fingers into her swept up hair damp with sweat. "Would he ever get to settle down? How he longs to... but even that dream might evade him! Gods dammit! So much has been taken from him, now this!” Turning, she glanced out the window as if Geralt could hear her words. “Look what you've done, you bastard! You'll likely pay for this for the rest of your life…”

Chessa clasped her in a fervent embrace. “Yen, darling, they haven’t been found out yet. You’re anticipating something that hasn’t happened, might not happen, and Ciri’s giving him a child… something he’d never dreamed of having…”

“But where is he?!?” Her desperate cry rang in the room. “He should be here by now… Something’s happened to him. Oh, gods, no! Even the babe could be taken away…” She bit her lip to keep the sob threatening to explode at bay.

Chessa’s arms were around her again, her hands, rubbing up and down her back, pressing the damp fabric to her clammy skin. “I’m sure all things will work out, Yenna. You two have something special that most people on the outside cannot fathom. You love each other more fiercely than any couple I’ve known. That kind of passion… people dream of possessing, and it doesn’t die easily. I don’t know what Geralt told you in that letter, and that’s okay, it’s not my business. But I know him too, Yenna. He is a powerful and capable man and I am certain he won’t let you go easily. Nor Ciri, either.”
Wiping beneath her eyes, Yen studied the healer. Chessa was a breath of fresh air who had become a dear friend. Her voice of reason, easy going manner, faith and optimism often raised Yen and strengthened her when things looked bleak. She was the softness to Yen’s hardness and the two complimented each other like two different pieces of art. And Yen was incredibly grateful for the gift of her friendship.

She inhaled a deep calming breath. “I nearly killed him on Undvik, you know. Oh, not really, he is quite capable of surviving anything, but in my heart, at that moment, I wanted him dead. That was the force of my rage. Now… now that time has passed, and after Ciri explained why they made love, I… I think I’m ready to accept it, Chessa, and forgive him. Mostly forgive him, anyway. Don’t know if I can forgive completely just yet, but it’s a start, right? For Ciri’s sake. I don’t hate him anymore, I love him, and miss him…”

A tear rolled down Chessa’s cheek and she smiled warmly and the sun came out from behind a cloud. At least that is what it seemed to Yen had happened in that moment. “And you worry for him. And yes, Yenna, it’s a start, a glorious start!” Chessa squeezed her in a tight embrace again.

Swallowing hard, she lifted her chin, decisive determination replacing the pangs of worry. “We need to leave, Chessa. The risk is too great here with so many Black Ones roaming the city. Ciri should deliver somewhere private, where few would recognize her. I’ll need all my supplies, a quiet and clean place where help is easily available should we need it…”

“Hmmmm…. Well, how about the witcher’s fortress?”

“Hell, no. Too isolated and filthy.”

“Alright… um… How about Dandelion's place?”

Yen shook her head. "A nice thought, dear. Ciri would be comfortable there, but he owns and runs a cabaret near the heart of the city of Novigrad. Too populated, noisy, and… public."

Chessa's smile wavered.

"Though I won't rule it out,” Yen added as an afterthought.

The healer stood and padded over to the window. "What about Triss? She’s a healer too."

"She went back home to Kovir. It is another possibility, but she is adviser to her king which makes her too visible as well. We need to keep Ciri out of the public eye as much as possible. We cannot take any chances, Chessa. The sooner we leave the better - for if we wait too long, she won’t be in any condition to travel even by teleportation.”

“I’ll start packing our things.”

“We're leaving?” Ciri wobbled into the shop and at first glance at her, rushed over. “Mother… what’s wrong? Everything all right??”

Composing herself, Yen grasped her handkerchief and stuffed it up a sleeve. “Well, dear. Things have changed. We’re leaving Vengerberg. Now, don’t argue with me. You’re going to birth that child in a safe place and Vengerberg is just not safe anymore, I’m afraid.”

“It’s the Black Ones, isn’t it? Think father is still looking for me?”

“Not sure. But we cannot risk him knowing you’re here and why.”
“Right. He believes I’m dead. At least, I hope he does.”

At a glance from Yen, Chessa intervened and changed the subject. “Dear, you should get off your feet. I’ll get you some more lemonade.”

Carefully and very slowly, Ciri sat down in a rocking chair in the same manner a woman did when heavy with child. Smoothing out long skirts, she huffed at the bother.

Yen ignored her huff. Approaching her worktable, she rifled through bottles, vials and dried herbs. Clearly uncomfortable, Ciri was not one to wear skirts since she’d been with Geralt. Used to dressing like a boy, it made sense for her to dress in such a way. The witchers did not have dresses at Kaer Morhen, and it would understandably be difficult battling creatures and traveling long distances on horseback bogged down in heavy skirts. But there was no way she would be able to wear trousers again until the babe arrived. Opening a medical bag, she placed several items inside.

Smoothing a hand over her greatly swollen belly, Ciri crinkled her brows. “Eternal Fire, this boy kicks hard! A warrior he is for certain. Kept me up most of the night last night, the little…”

Forgetting all about what she was doing, Yen approached Ciri and placed both hands on her womb. Strong pulsating sensations vibrated against her palms. Stronger than the last time. “My dear, this is more than just him kicking. It’s his magic you feel as well. Don’t ever feel this with anyone else.”

“Is that bad?”

Pressing her palms against her a little harder absorbing the sensation, she smiled. “No, just unusual. I’ve felt it for a while now, sweetling. Your magic is also working in him. He’s going to be a very special child, dear, much like you.” She pinched Ciri’s chin between her forefinger and thumb.

Ciri batted away her hand playfully. “He’s going to be something, that I know.” Growing serious, she became lost in a thought before speaking again. “How would I teach him, Mother? I still struggle myself… How could I teach when I barely have a handle on it? Would you help train him?”

Yen’s heart melted and light as bright as the sun filled her soul. This was one of those moments she had dared to dream… Ciri wanting her involved in the boy’s life. “Oh, Ciri, darling!” She kissed her daughter’s soft hair. “Of course I will. I will be as involved in his life as much as you want.” She cupped Ciri’s cheeks between her palms. “Sweetling, you’ve made me so happy right now!” Embracing her, she kissed her tresses when Ciri’s arms came around her tightly.

“Mother… why the surprise? Of course you’ll be a huge part of Garret’s life.”

Blinking rapidly, Yen broke the embrace and peered at her intently. “Garret?”

Ciri nodded, smiling. “Yes. I’ve decided on the name. Sounds like Geralt, doesn’t it? Want his name to be similar.” She reached for her hand. “I know both you and Geralt are unable to have children of your own and I want his name,” she rubbed a hand over her womb lovingly, “reminiscent of his.” She gazed out the window. “The name sounds familiar, somehow. Think I’ve met a Garret once… long ago. Dunno, it’s a vague memory…”

Unable to speak, Yen blinked back wetness and studied her face. While Ciri gazed out the window, her eyes, soft and shining glinted as if recalling a memory. Don’t remember when last she saw her as happy as she’d been these last few months. And she glowed like a night wisp! Of course, all expectant mothers gleamed with the promise of life growing inside of them, but there was more to
She turned and faced her again. “Do you like it?”

Nodding, Yen clasped her hands in her own. “Yes, sweetling, I do. You honor his father with such a strong name. It means, ‘rules by the spear,’ as does Geralt’s name. Sounds appropriate for the next emperor of Nilfgaard, does it not?”

Smiling, Ciri nodded. Clearing her throat, Yen became all business again. “We need to get moving. That babe is not going to wait until you find a comfortable and safe place first.”

Nodding, a worried expression clouded her eyes. “But how would Geralt find us? He’s coming here, mother, to Vengerberg, and we’re leaving.”

Letting go of her hands, Yen caressed her belly again. The same pulsating sensation trembled up her arms. This boy will have strong magic, stronger even than Ciri’s. They would need to protect this child as if he were the most prized treasure in the world.

Retreating back to her work table, she fingered through some dried herbs. “Yes, I am aware of that, sweetling, but we don’t have a choice. First and foremost, Geralt would, as do I, want you safe. I’m confident he’ll find us. Perhaps I could send him a raven. He’s likely on his way. When he gets here, he’ll figure it out.

Ciri gnawed on a fingernail. Yen bit her lip to keep from reprimanding her on that bad habit. No use now. Why waste the strength? “Ciri… darling… Forget about leaving a note. No one can know where we’ve gone.”

“So where are we going? Kaer Morhen?”

Yen stopped what she was doing and glanced at her daughter. She had always thought of Kaer Morhen as home. And though she had come to feel that way about Vengerberg too, it still pained her to see the light in her eyes at the mere mention of the place, as they did at any mention of Geralt. Don’t be jealous. She might be in love with him, but she calls me ‘mother.’ Yennefer shook her head. “No, dear. I’m sorry. We need to go somewhere Emhyr doesn’t know about or any place we’ve had a connection to in the past. So that pretty much leaves out everywhere you and Geralt have been. Even Skellige. Would prefer to stay on the continent, in a clean place, without a lot of people…”

“The Temple of Melitele would be a good place, wouldn’t it? Mother Nenneke would help. I know you and I have been there once, but the emperor doesn’t know that, does he?”

Yen dropped the stalks of two very different dried herbs on the table and rushed over to her. Pressing her lips to her clammy forehead, she hugged her daughter. “Ciri! A brilliant idea! Hadn’t thought of that. That would be perfect. Ellander is not too far, it’s off the beaten path, and Mother Nenneke and the novices would assist if needed. It’s protected and a sanctuary should any guards try to…” she stopped herself before she revealed anything more. Didn’t want to worry her. “It’s a perfect plan, my love. We’ll go to the temple right away.”

“Or…” Ciri’s eyes sparkled. “Or, I could teleport us all to another world altogether, into the future even.”

The healer returned with a glass of lemonade and handed it to Ciri.

“Chessa, dear. Gather our belongings. I’ll grab my medical supplies. We’re going to Ellander.”
Cir gave her a questioning look. “Well?”

“No, dear. Too much teleportation could be harmful. Not going to a strange far off place. We’re going to the temple. That’s final.”

“Fine. Thought it was a great idea, though,” she mumbled playfully.

Yen helped pull Ciri out of the chair. “Listen to me, my love. I can’t teleport you, Chessa, and our belongings at the same time. Teleport yourself to the temple and we will follow. It would be safer for you to travel as you naturally do, anyway. No harm will come to the bab…” stopping herself, she rephrased her words. “No harm will come to Garret that way. Go now and go directly there. No detours, understand, young lady?”

Ciri nodded. “Understood. See you shortly.” In a flash of green sparkling light, she vanished.

Yen didn’t notice Chessa had left the shop. She glanced out the window again. A small regiment of soldiers hovered on the street in front of her house. Dammit.

Turning her back to the window, she hurried to her work table and stuffed a large handful of clean gauze into the medical bag. Stopping for a moment, she pressed fingers to her temple. Don’t have time to perform a magical scan. Geralt, where are you? My big-hearted bastard, I need you. My love...

Glancing down, two very different stalks of dried herbs laid there forgotten. She smiled to herself. How apropos. Two very telling herbs to one who knows herbs. As Geralt did...

Chessa entered the shop, face flushed, hair mussed up and many strands of wavy tresses stuck out all over the place. She looked exhausted and overheated. “Believe I have everything ready to go, Yen.”

“Good,” she breathed, grabbing her bag. "I’ve got the medical supplies.”

Yen and Chessa stood near the pile of luggage in the center of the living area in her home. Chessa stood beside her and clasped her wrist.

Staring at nothing in particular, Yen’s eyes stung again. “She’s named him, Chessa.”

The healer gave her full attention, but remained quiet.

“Garret. After his father.”

Chessa squeezed her hand. “He’ll be honored.”

She smiled sadly. “Yes, he will be.”

Moving around in front of her, Chessa swiped a hand over her locks in a motherly-like and comforting manner. Inhaling a deep breath, Yen closed her eyes soaking in the warm contact long forgotten. “Yenna, why so sad?”

Raising her eyes to meet her friend’s gaze, she swallowed hard. It wasn’t easy admitting it. But if she were going to be emotionally strong for Ciri, she’d better get it out for good. And as soon as the words passed her lips on a shaky breath, the healer’s comforting arms encircled her in a tight and loving embrace. “After all my attempts… I’m not the one giving Geralt a son…” She pressed a black-gloved hand to her mouth. “What if…” She sucked in a shaky breath. “What if he doesn’t want me anymore?”
She was unable to say anything else.
With a couple months before Ciri’s due date, Geralt traveled to Toussaint, the fairy-tale duchy in northern Nilfgaard with its knights, tourney, a fair share of mysteries, and with hopes of finding a home there. The contract was to kill The Beast of Beauclair that terrorized the region. Gamers know the events of the DLC expansion Blood and Wine happen here and it’s assumed the reader has played through that awesome storyline.

However, things did not go as planned and Geralt faces the consequences of choosing the lesser evil. It's Midsummer's Eve and as Ciri's time draws near, a rather serious obstacle stands in his way in getting back to her. But in the midst of this struggle, he realizes his true feelings for Ciri. Will Geralt make it back to her in time to greet his son into the world? Readers and gamers alike will love the return of Geralt’s good friend Regis - a higher vampire from the good old days... :)

**CONTENT WARNING - SPOILER ALERT - This chapter contains spoilers regarding the Blood and Wine DLC expansion and follows one possible ending. Mild use of strong language.**
CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Shadow of Destiny

Duchy of Toussaint, Northern Nilfgaard

Midsummer Night’s Eve, 1273

Things looked different behind bars. And it wasn’t a view he cared for. Sometimes a witcher ended up in the clink. It wasn’t unheard of. Sometimes it couldn’t be avoided. Like when he was found leaning over Foltest’s dead body immediately after the king had been assassinated before his eyes and he got blamed for it. Of course, he didn’t kill the king, but was trying to prevent it. Then recently, he had killed a behemoth sized toad in the sewers beneath Oxenfurt to fulfill a contract - only to discover horrifyingly after the toad had turned back into an Ofieri prince. The prince had been cursed, unbeknownst to him. And the poor lad did not survive the fatal blow.

Geralt grimaced. However, the few times he had been imprisoned, Lady Luck had been on his side and he didn’t remain long behind bars. But this time, she had abandoned him.

He gazed out the small window between thick iron bars. On the opposite side of the mirror-like surface of the lake, the city of Beauclair thrived with flaming lights, music, of course plenty of wine, and savory delicacies. The graceful white-washed elven palace, cresting the highest hill of the city before the backdrop of the majestic Mount Gorgon, its soaring towers and arced buttresses lit the midnight sky in golden hues by many strategically placed roaring braziers. The harbor glowed with an army of bonfires lining the coast reflecting spiking flames in the lake's smooth surface. The citizens of Toussaint danced and made merry wherever they found their fancy.

Midsummer Night's Eve. Tonight's festival would linger on well through the night welcoming the first day of summer and all the romantic images that inspires: warm summer nights strolling by the water, music and feasting in the square until the wee hours of the morning, and finding that private alcove with a lover under the stars. All that, plus the expectations of a fruitful harvest in the coming months.
He huffed out a grunt. Never would have guessed three weeks ago, the city had suffered a surprise attack by The Beast of Beauclair as he had come to be called - the monster the duchy had hired him to eliminate. All was status quo in his investigation until it was discovered The Beast turned out to be an ancient vampire who walked amongst the citizens of Beauclair as one of their own, a human male in his early forties, though no guessing his true age. Scorned and betrayed by the human woman with whom he had fallen in love, he raised the city in revenge. To make matters worse, that woman was the duchess's own estranged sister, and as luck would have it, the vampire, a blood-brother to Geralt’s good friend, Regis - who also was an ancient, higher vampire.

The irony never ceased to amuse him. Many years ago, he, a witcher, a beast slayer, had found a loyal friend in a higher vampire - a post-conjunction creature that even a witcher could not fully vanquish. He had no idea Regis had made Toussaint his home. Well, more accurately, he had no idea Regis was alive let alone living near Beauclair in an old cemetery.

About ten years ago, Regis joined his plight in his exhaustive search for Ciri and the two, though understandably leery of each other, a vampire and a witcher, had soon come to trust each other and proved loyal friends.

At a culminating moment when they had found Ciri at Stygga Castle, they battled the wizard, Vilgefortz, and Regis met his end, melted into a puddle of blood by Vilgefortz's spell. They all believed that was the end of Regis. But that was before. Before Regis had explained vampires were immortal to the point that only another higher vampire could permanently deal death's final blow against his own kind. And in doing so, would bring the wrath of the other vampires, of all the varying species, down upon him. Vilgefortz was no vampire and Regis regenerated with the help of Dettlaff - who had become known as The Beast of Beauclair - and the monster he was hired to kill. It took a few decades, but Regis was alive and well and helped Geralt solve Toussaint's problem.

Resting his forehead against the cool iron bars of a small window, he closed his eyes, breathing in mouth watering aromas. Roasted mutton chops. And pheasant too, slathered with blackberry sauce, and a host of other savory scents wafted across the water mingled with other common smells of the sea. With sheer force of determination, he ignored his angry stomach.

Unraveling the murders and following trails led him to discover the duchess’s sister had been the mastermind behind it all. She had manipulated the Beast, otherwise known as Dettlaff, and his affections for her using him to murder four ducal knights of the realm in a revengeful scheme for mistreatment she endured as a child when exiled from the family and the region. When he uncovered her nefarious plot, Geralt’s goal was to protect the sister, prevent Dettlaff from killing anymore innocents, and in turn, keep Regis from exile, an anathema from his own kind, should he had felt the need to put a permanent end to his blood brother. Unfortunately, both Geralt and Regis had failed to protect Syanna from the vampire’s scornful rage.

He heaved a sigh that scraped from his toes. He had failed. Failed Syanna and in turn failed the duchess because he was not able to protect her sister. But… despite contrary belief, Dettlaff didn’t deserve his fate either. He had only acted with the emotional resonance of trying to save a woman he loved from harm. Any human would have done the same. Hell, he had killed many for Ciri… for Yennefer… just to find them. He couldn’t condemn the vampire for that or risk the consequences Regis would face if he had. Unfortunately for him, sitting in this fucking prison was the only option for choosing the lesser fucking evil.

Geralt slammed a fist on the sill. Dust and dirt puffed up in little clouds of particles and settled again.
The midnight blue sky twinkled with many glittering stars and the full quarter moon bathed the hillside of the capital city in molten silver. Calm and smooth as glass, the lake reflected everything. The silvery beams also lit up his cell in a fine shaft of light. What a beautiful night.

But it was the summer solstice, dammit! Ciri would deliver soon and he... bloody hell!

*Want to be with you, Ciri. Need to be with you for what you are about to do. Dammit! I cannot miss welcoming my son into this world!*

Shoving himself from the wall, he turned and chucked his mug against the wooden door with a guttural growl, spraying what liquid left in it in a streaming arc across the cell. The mug clang and rang as it ricocheted from the door to the wall and bounced several times before resting on the grimy floor at his bare feet. A crack split one side of the mug.

"Another temper tantrum, princess?" snarled the guard. His pockmarked face and black beady eyes appeared in the small barred window of the small arched door. "My, my, Witcher. Keep it up and we'll move you to solitary confinement. There are no windows there. If you ask me, should of done so already after your little display earlier. I'll tell you again, you don't eat until breakfast. And even that's a maybe."

Balling his hands into fists, Geralt bared his teeth in a vicious snarl that surprised even him. "You can keep your fucking food!" he hissed. Only care about one thing now.

Long and greasy unbound hair fell over his eyes. He raked it back with angry fingers, breathing out a long and slow breath. Closing his eyes, he willed his heart rate to calm, his breathing to become regular again. A witcher in the grip of madness was not pleasant for anyone, even for him, nor would it help him get out of this hell hole any faster.

The truth of the matter - he could leave any time. With abilities and persuasion skills, he could charm them all and walk right on out of here. He clenched and unclenched his fists, shaking them out. But he wouldn't. It wasn't the guards holding him here, it wasn't even the cell... hell, not even the prison itself for no prison held a witcher with any scruples for long.

Calmer now, he approached the cell door. "Wish to speak with de la Tour. I... I know Her Grace will not speak with me, but I request an audience with the Captain of the Royal Guard. Don't I get that much?"

The guard held his gaze seriously for a moment and then laughed. Heartily, from the gut, like it was the most humorous thing he'd heard all day.

Grinding his teeth, Geralt curled a lip. His fists balled up again.

"The disgraced witcher." The guard continued hooting. "You had the entire duchy under your command because Her Illustrious Highness hired you to do one job, Witcher. One. Job." He accentuated those last two words. Geralt wanted to throttle the man. "Kill the Beast of Beauclair," he continued. "And what did you do? Well, you certainly didn't kill him. You're lucky Her Grace simply locked you up and didn't have that pretty head of yours lopped off, Witcher. Despite her devastating disappointment in you, she showed leniency. I wouldn't of. Would've had your head if I were her." He spat, his spittle spraying the bars and Geralt's bearded chin.

He glowered at the guard. No point in wasting his breath with this whoreson.

"Heh. Sleep tight, Witcher. Don't let the bed bugs... heh, oh, they'll bite." The guard grinned with evident mockery.
All it would take was to Axii the shit out of the man just to wipe that arrogant smirk off his pockmarked face. He’d find his gear and forget about this place. The guard turned and swaggered back to the guard station.

As much as he wanted to escape, could escape, he would not. The duchess sentenced him until his hearing and he would see it through if for nothing else than to serve with honor. Maybe he’d find grace in her eyes again. After all, she had gifted him Corvo Bianco vineyard as a down payment for the job and desperately hoped she’d let him keep the estate after all that went down these past several weeks. Her gracious gift of the vineyard was his and for the first time, he owned property. A manor house and vineyard. He had never expected such a generous payment for a job. Saved him from having to purchase one himself. Real estate in Toussaint was not cheap. Ciri and Garret would be safe there. And Yen too if she chose to come along. Although Toussaint is a duchy of Nilfgaard, the Emperor did not concern himself with it. Ciri would have a safe place to call home and they could raise their son together. All relying on, of course, his final judgement from Her Grace. She could still repossess the estate while he rots here or... worse.

He strode over to the window again and stepped on a pebble, piercing his bare foot. Cursing, he hopped over and glanced up at the sky. The cheerful music drifted over the lake. When their boy was a little older, say, about seven or eight years old, they’d take him home to Kaer Morhen. Show him his witcher roots and train him on the Pendulum and the Killer Path, teach him the ways of the witcher, just like his mother had. In the meantime, of course, he would learn alchemy and train in swordplay. He’d teach him everything he knew.

The rattle of keys and the door clanged open. Three huge guards blocked the exit. What the hell? Pockmarked man stuck in his head, his expression sour as all hell. “Witcher. You have a visitor.” His tone matched his sourness.

Geralt remained skeptical. Who would visit at this hour on Midsummer’s Eve? Regis? The vampire had been strangely absent. He thought by now he’d visit. Help him out. Seems like Lady Luck hadn’t been the only one to abandon him.

“Well? Come on, then. This way, cocksucker.”

Two guards entered and clamped heavy iron shackles around his wrists and shoved him hard out of the cell. One of guards mumbled a curse about who the hell would visit in the middle of the night. Anxiousness twisted his gut. The corridor was lit with many torches and he squinted in the brightness. He followed the burly guard while one kept a vice-like grip on his shackles. The other followed with a spear in hand. They took him to the warden’s office on the top floor.

Most unusual. Prisoners were never allowed to the second floor, let alone the top floor.

The room was dimly lit with a few candles and a brazier. A desk, a table and a couple of chairs, two bookcases, and plenty of parchments and books all neatly organized. A rack housing a sword, a couple long daggers and a spear rested in the corner by the desk. Rings with many large iron keys hung on the wall behind the desk. Clearly the warden’s office. And the view of the lake through high arched windows and the city beyond was truly breathtaking. He stood utterly still and quiet.

A tall bald man, his height, dressed in the Toussaint captain’s armor turned and faced him. A proud mustache grace his mouth, his right cheek bore three deep gash wounds recently acquired from their recent battle in the city.

“Damien?” Geralt swallowed and nodded once. The man with whom he had requested to speak with, here? This late at night? Something was wrong. Damien de la Tour was not here because he
had made the request, that was for certain.

“Witcher.” The captain of the royal guard nodded to the prison guards and they left, only pockmarked man remained. Clearing his throat, Damien dismissed him too, although reluctant he was to leave. When he finally did, the captain's gaze dropped to his bound hands.

“By my word, Geralt, they have not treated you well here. Looks like, and ah...” his gloved hand rose to his nose as he grimaced, "smells like you haven’t... been treated well." His gaze swept over him from head to bared feet and back again. ”Are they not feeding you either?”

“Getting the royal treatment here,” Geralt nodded, not bothering to disguise the sarcasm lacing his words. “You know, working for the duchessa secured me the elite package deal at this resort.”

Damien scowled and smoothed a finger over his mustache. “You have a strange sense of humor, Witcher. But at least you have one.”

“Ah, see you wanted it plainly.” Geralt shifted his weight to his leg. It was an old witcher habit, one that made him ready for battle although he knew there would be no fight here now. “You think they’d treat me otherwise, Captain? I’m the most despised man in Toussaint right now. Bet you can barely speak with me without spitting in my face. But enough about me. How’s your cheek mending? Looks better since I last saw you, but will definitely leave scars, I'm afraid.”

Dropping his gaze, Damien crossed his arms. “Most of the pain’s gone, looks worse than it is. Think it’s healing rather nicely. That anika poultice you told me about worked wonders.”

“Glad to hear it. Forgive my bluntness, Captain. Why are you here? At this time of night on a holiday even?”

De la Tour gestured to a chair and took the one opposite and sat down, resting his hands on the table in front of him, steepling his fingers. He waited for Geralt to be seated. “Believe me, would rather be somewhere else now.”

Okay… so he was not here on his own volition. The duchess sent him? Great. Meant he had bad news.

The captain’s question came softly. “Why, Geralt? I want to hate you, see you suffer for it, but...” he did not finish his words.

Silence hovered over them. A distant barking order of a guard below drifted to them. Muffled heavily booted footsteps of many soldiers marched down in the courtyard as well. The changing of the guard.

Geralt swallowed. “Why did I not kill the beast, you ask? And you rightfully feel let down when I didn't. I understand.”

Damien nodded, his face grave. “We trusted you, Geralt. Granted, I did not at first, but in time, watching you work with attention to detail… you knew what you were doing. Earned my respect. Now this... “ he shook his head, disappointment evident in his eyes. “You are the only man who could’ve killed him. Rid us of the monstrosity.”

Geralt sat ram-rod straight, his hands folded in his lap, and dropped his gaze to the table. “I respect that trust, Damien, I do, really. Told you once The Beast was an ancient vampire. A sentient being. A thinking, reasoning being. A being who had been played, manipulated by another. Also recall explaining only another higher vampire can kill its own kind permanently. Might have killed him, temporarily, but he’d only regenerate and come back and declare war against all Beauclair later and
deal out a much more brutal punishment upon the city than he had this time. Got him to stop killing innocents by finding his lover. Couldn't anticipate she was Her Grace’s sister--”

“You understand then, Her Grace’s fury and disappointment at losing her sibling--”

“Of course I do, dammit.” Geralt moved to swipe away a strand of hair tickling his eye, but had to raise both hands to do so. “Never saw it coming. Didn’t anticipate the vampire would kill the woman with whom he was so passionately in love. Couldn’t have predicted that turn of events, Damien, and I swear to you, never wanted that to happen. If I could change it, I would.”

Silence reigned again. Damien scratched at the scabs lining his cheek, scabs that in time would flake off and reveal the deep gashes that would forever mar his face, but his gaze never left his.

“How is she?” murmured Geralt without looking at him, keeping his gaze focused on his hands on his lap.

Damien smoothed out his dark mustache again but took his time in answering. “Still grieving, naturally. But I imagine you wanted to know more specifically how she feels towards you now, is that right? Want to know if her anger has cooled?”

“Might I point out, Captain, The Beast has left Toussaint. For good. He’ll not return. His lover is dead and his cover was blown. Killing those innocents was never his intention while living amongst you. There’s nothing left for him here and Toussaint is safe again. If I may be frank, in that respect, Damien, I’ve done my job. I may not have killed him, but I've rid Toussaint of the threat.” He lowered his voice. ”Hope Her Grace understands that.”

Damien scowled at him, but remained silent. He opened his mouth as if to say something, but shook his head and closed it again. “Again, I want to hate you, Witcher... But... Dammit, to see Annarietta beside herself with grief...” He shook his head. ”Doesn’t matter what I think, Witcher. The duchessa sentenced you here while the ducal court deliberated your case. They investigated all and considered all before drawing a conclusion.” He paused a moment before continuing. ”They’ve come to a verdict earlier this evening. I wasn’t going to come until morning, but was ordered to come straight away.”

De la Tour rose and stood in front of the arched windows, clasping his arms behind his back. He gazed out over the lake.

Not good. Geralt exhaled slowly. De la Tour turned away and hesitated. The man’s heart rate increased as well as his breathing. This brought him anxiety… what he came here to tell him. Geralt’s own heart rate sped up a little. He swallowed.

His voice gruff and tight, Damien did not turn around. ”The truth of the matter is, you were hired to kill The Beast of Beauclair and bring Her Grace its head. That was not what you did, however, Witcher. The Beast has fled, true, but the terms were he was to be killed and his head brought to Her Grace.” He sighed, still staring out the window. ”You’re to be executed at first light. Her Grace leaves the method of execution up to you. She is not without mercy. I’m sorry, Geralt. Wish it didn’t have to end this way.”

Unable to breathe, a frigid chill raced down his spine, clamping closed his throat. Hands shook in his lap and his heart pounded in his ears affecting his hearing and clouded any ability to think.

**CIRI.**

“He’s all yours.” De la Tour turned and gestured at the guards.
Geralt did not even hear the warden enter nor Damien passing the orders of his execution.

CIRI!

No… NO! He couldn't die now, not when his son would arrive in a matter of days! He had to be there for it… witness it! He must be there for Ciri!

Rough hands gouged into his shoulders yanking him out of the chair. Shoving him out of the warden's office, he staggered down the steps, knees weak, feet numb. Slipping, he tumbled into the guard ahead of him knocking him forward. In a rage, the guard whirled and clobbered him in the jaw with the back of a studded glove, the force of the blow sent him reeling into the wall. Cracking his head against the stone, a sharp pain hammered his temples. Wincing, he regained his footing. Merciless hands clutched his arms, hauling him away.

Glancing behind, Damien de la Tour stood at the top of the steps, watching him with a grave gaze. The warden, behind him, rough and weathered, looked as if he had just been roused from bed, rolled up a parchment and tucked it away in a desk drawer. The letter declaring his death.

A silver glint caught his eye when the warden turned around. A silver chain with a wolf-head medallion dangled from a front pocket. Geralt still wore his medallion… the bastard had Ciri’s pendant - the one he had killed that crone to retrieve! It was a gift for her, the blasted son of a whore!

Shoved from behind, he stumbled down the rest of the steps and in another minute, bodily hurled inside his cell. Crashing to the floor, he slid across loose pebbles scraping knees, palms and elbows. The door slammed closed behind him.

"Sleep tight, Witcher," mocked pockmarked man and the other guards hooted along with him.

Sucking in air, Geralt curled up on the floor, struggling to breathe as the lock slid home and the jangle of keys rattled in his soul. The symbolism hit too close to home.

Bloody hell! This wasn't happening! He would not miss the most important and exciting thing to happen in his life! Fuck this place! To hell with Corvo Bianco and Toussaint! He was sentenced to death, he wouldn't need it anymore so why the fuck was he holding himself here?!

Hauling himself to his feet, he groaned at the throbbing pain in his jaw and temples. Clutching the bars of the window, he gazed out across the mirror-like surface of the lake, and at the city celebrating the arrival of summer. Music reached him, the smells of savory food, cheerful and laughing voices. The sounds of... Life. He had a hand in bringing a life into this world and he was not, by the gods, going to lose his.

It would be dawn in another couple hours. Clenching his teeth, he swiped back grimy hair and stood straight. No witcher died in his bed. Nor rot in prison awaiting execution. At least none that he knew of and he'd be damned if he were the first.

Eerily still in the prison at this late hour, Geralt flattened himself against the cell door and waited for the guard to come back around on patrol. A moment later, the faint clank of footsteps approached, and the dancing light of a torch swam in a dizzying manner against the walls and floor.

"Hey..."

The guard halted hesitantly and looked at him.
"Listen. Do you hear it? What is that?"

The soldier swung the torch close to the bars and Geralt averted his gaze, the brightness burning his eyes sending a sharp pain through his head.

“Hear what?” ground out the guard.

“You don’t hear it? Dunno, can’t describe it… a most unusual sound.” At the guard’s hesitation, Geralt formed his fingers into the Axii sign and cast the spell. The guard swayed on his feet and shook his head. “Remember, the warden told you to unlock this door, let me go. Don’t you think it’s time to do that?”

“What?” he stammered, raising a gloved hand to his helmeted head. “Right, yeah, that’s right. The warden did release you.”

Good boy.

Fumbling with his keys, pockmarked man stepped closer and inserted the key into the lock. Geralt breathed out in relief then stared in the corridor behind the guard as a black cloud wafted toward them. Alive, it shimmered in and out of existence until it took form. Geralt stared, stunned a moment, then grinned.

The guard noticed the black pulsating cloud and dropped the keys and almost the torch as well. “What the--!” he cried, plastering his back against the cell door. “What the hell?!

The black cloud coalesced into a form, a human form with a monstrous expression and red glowing eyes. Fangs as sharp as his witcher’s silver blade glistened in the torchlight. Claws almost as long as his swords raised before him and the creature howled a soul-chilling cry. The guard slithered to the floor, the torch clanked on the ground and rolled before it came to a stop, the flames sputtered, but did not die.

The hideous creature dissolved into a cloud again and slipped between the bars of the door’s window. The vapor passed him and took shape again inside the cell looking as normal as a human man in his later middle-aged years with graying hair, black eyes, and grayish skin. Adorned in a well worn brown doublet that once might have been finely tailored, long lost its luster. A myriad of aromas of many different herbs carried in an assortment of bags, vials and pouches filled the cell, overwhelming him. The vampire who masqueraded himself as a barber surgeon smiled at him warmly.

Lady Luck might not have abandoned him after all.

Relieved, Geralt clasped his arm in a firm shake. “Regis, am I glad to see you! Thought you’d ran into trouble. Trying not to believe you had abandoned me.”

“Ah, Geralt, friend." Regis lifted a hand adorned in fingerless gloves with a symbol stitched on the back of his hand. His fingernails, longer than men usually kept them, was a tell-tale reminder of what exactly he was. "Au contraire. Seems I have arrived in the nick of time. Had that guard let you out, you would have torn through this prison in true witcher style stealthily, or not, and walked out of here. Unfortunately, I cannot let you do that.”

Geralt blinked. “Come again? You’re here to help me...?” He was a vampire for fuck’s sake and he was going to leave him here?! He’d be damned! “Right?”

“Oh, goodness, no. That would do you a grave disservice, my friend. I came solely with the purpose of preventing you from escaping. You see, I knew you would attempt it eventually.
Surprised you held out this long. It was fortunate I arrived when I did.”

“What the fuck for?!?” Both men cringed at Geralt's sharp echo ricocheting through the cell and down the corridors.

“Keep it down, man.” Regis stood about his height and padded passed him to the cell door, looking out. “No one is coming. Yet. But they are sure to investigate once this gentleman awakes or they realize he hasn’t returned.”

Geralt slumped his shoulders, hands fell to his side.

Regis turned around and wrinkled his nose. “God’s teeth, Witcher. Haven’t you bathed recently?”

He crossed his arms. “See anything here which to bathe with, Master Vampire? My spit only goes so far,” he growled. “No, they haven’t bathed me, and barely fed me too. Apparently was their underhanded way of torturing me despite direct orders from the duchessa not to.”

“Mmmm. Yes, your stench alone would be torturous enough. So sorry to hear that, Geralt. Had I known you hadn’t eaten, would’ve brought along some food. In my eagerness to get to you, I had not considered that possibility. Forgive me. But we must make haste. Time’s running out.”

“Oh, this is good. Tell me why I need to make haste when you've made it clear I’m not to escape. Please, friend, I’m all ears.”

Regis stared at him. “Certainly haven’t lost your sarcasm. Glad to hear it, means your spirit is not broken. Listen, Geralt. I mispoke. I meant that I must make haste. You see, it took me this long to come to you, because I have just returned to Beauclair. As soon as you were imprisoned, I sought out the bard--”

“Wait… you found Dandelion?”

“The very same. Figured he’d be the only one who could convince Her Illustrious Highness to pardon you. Took some explaining to get him to return to Toussaint with a price on his head, you understand, but once he realized the grave predicament you are in, he did not hesitate. He is at the palace intervening on your behalf with the duchessa herself at this very moment.”

Geralt sighed, swiping a hand over his face. “Regis… the ducal court had reached their decision today. I was just informed shortly before you arrived that I’m to be executed at first light.” He glanced out the window. “In a couple hours now, actually.”

Regis fell silent, his usual cheerful face solemn. “Oh, dear, that is grave news. Your fate truly lies in Dandelion’s hands now.”

“Wonderful!” Geralt paced around the small cell, circling his vampire friend. "As much as I’ve learned Dandelion can talk his way out of any situation, gotta admit, not convinced he’d be able to change Her Grace’s mind once made up. True, they were once lovers, but still… he would have to do some serious boot licking… Hope he's not endangering his own life."

Regis raised a hand. “Let’s have faith in him, shall we? So you see, you cannot escape. For if you did, you would become a hunted man in all Toussaint, Geralt. You'd certainly lose your estate and like the bard, be exiled, become a persona non grata - an undesirable. Don’t want that fate for you, my friend. I know how much you like it here. A man such as yourself cannot afford to burn bridges, as the saying goes. Especially not after what you have shared with me.”

Geralt took a step toward his friend, clasped his arms in earnest. “I must get to Ciri, Regis! She's
going to deliver any day now and I…” he swallowed through a constricted throat. “I cannot miss this!"

Warmth graced the older man’s face. One clearly born of nostalgia. He winked with a pleasant smile. “Hmmm... sounds familiar does it not?”

Heh, yeah, it did. Geralt nodded. “Seems like that’s all I’ve ever done, hasn’t it? Always chasing Ciri.” He dropped his gaze. "Always needing to be with her. And enjoying it when I am."

Warmly, Regis nodded. "You've been a force in her life, Geralt. From the very beginning, before she was even born. You had declared and claimed her for destiny. And as you had once explained to me, a child born in the shadow of destiny creates a bond of destiny so powerful, even unbreakable, between the person who demanded the oath as much as the person to whom the oath declared. You had marked her by blind fate, and one such as her is usually destined for extraordinary things because of it. Not only Ciri, Geralt. But you as well."

A strong emotion engulfed him suddenly, gushing warmth from his heart at the same time clamping it tightly again without mercy. Was this how love felt? This strange conglomeration of swirling emotions? This fierce need to protect and hold her heart as close to his own so that it never experienced the trauma from which she had known while so young? Quite different from the feelings he'd experienced with Yennefer, who was more about possession and a deep seeded need for acceptance and approval. But who could decipher between them? With Ciri, he didn't need approval because he had it already, didn't need acceptance because she had accepted him from the beginning. He could be himself with her without fear of rejection and disdain. He had lifted her out of the despair her life once was and which could have continued if he hadn't been the bridge for her to cross into a destiny that had more in store than any of them could have ever imagined. Full understanding her love for him overwhelmed him - and at the same time his love for her dawned upon his heart and soul. He was marked too. For Ciri.

"I think I..." He raised his eyes to Regis's who was peering at him intently with deep understanding in his wise eyes.

"Yes, my friend?" he prodded gently.

Geralt drew in a ragged breath slowly. "I think I... I love her," he breathed. “By the gods, I do, Regis. I love her. I honestly do.” The weight of the world lifted and fell back on him harder than it had before. For it meant all the more to get the hell out of here! He wanted to be with her... always. Not just to see their baby born, but to be together, raise him together. Maybe... just maybe destiny would see his dreams come to pass. The dream of being a family.

The vampire clasped his biceps in a friendly grasp. "I'm relieved you've finally admitted it to yourself, Geralt. I've guessed long before tonight you are deeply in love with her. It was clear when you were telling me everything that had recently occurred. The way you spoke of her with such warmth and feeling, from admiration, to your fierce protection of her, the way you described your… beautiful moment together.” Regis patted him on the shoulder. "And who's coming soon. The culmination of destiny. The bond you two share created him and just as Cirilla was destined, so is your son."

Blinking, Geralt swallowed, nodding his head, at a loss for words.

“Your urgency to get back to Vengerberg is understandable and expected. I will personally see you get there in time to witness the birth of your son, Geralt. Just let the bard persuade Her Grace to pardon you first. I was meticulous in the details of all that has happened. Dandelion is well versed and he will bring up some very strong arguments that just might sway Her Grace’s decision.” He
dropped his hold on his arms suddenly. "They have not publicly announced your execution yet, have they?"

Geralt drew in a shaky breath. “Um… Don’t rightly know, but judging on the timing, the warden was just informed ah hour ago, late as it was, so probably not.”

“Good. Let us hope. In that case, it would be easier for her to rescind her judgment. I must go, Geralt. Need to eavesdrop on Dandelion and assist in any way possible. I will be… around and keep you posted on his success." Regis rested a comforting hand on his shoulder. "Either way, my friend, you will be at Cirilla’s side, this I promise you.”

Closing his eyes, Geralt, inhaled and exhaled deeply, a wave of emotion flooding him again. “Regis… Can’t express my need to be with her soon. And I’m grateful… for everything.”

The vampire smiled warmly. “No need, my friend. I’m grateful that you spared my blood brother, and in turn saving me from an eternity of fleeing from my own kind. I owe you for that. Besides, I wish to see my good friend enjoy the fruits of his labor.”

With a squeeze on his arm, he dissolved into a black cloud again. The vampire sifted through the prison window and glided over the lake toward the city. Then it dissipated all together. Regis would travel invisibly tonight.

*Hurry, my friend… Hurry.*
Chapter Summary

Will Dandelion's skill with words persuade Duchess Anna Henrietta to pardon the witcher? Will Geralt live long enough to get to Ciri and witness the birth of their son? Will Regis be able to help? Will Yennefer be there for her daughter when she's needed the most? And introducing Mother Nenneke - the beloved arch priestess at the Temple of Melitele we loved from the books - provides the setting and backdrop of a tension-filled climax of this beautiful journey.

**Content Warning - Use of foul language, a fight scene, and a boat load of tension and feelings! :)**

Enjoy the ride! :)

Many, many thanks to my beta reader VicofThor - my support, my courage. Thank you, friend!

And to the readers who continue faithfully with me - It's almost over. One more chapter to go and this concludes this story line.

Art by CatsyGreen
CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Destiny Born

Beauclair Palace Gardens, Toussaint

Midsummer Night’s Eve, 1273

Dandelion wiped his damp brow, clutching his violet silk beret to his chest. Was it from the tepid air or the fact that Geralt’s fate truly laid in his hands at the moment? Chalking it up to both, he gave the duchess his most endearing expression. Anything to break down her guard. Standing on one of the many round grandiose balconies overlooking the luxurious palatial gardens and lake beyond, Dandelion focused only on her. His former lover.

At least she was through screaming in a rage that lasted a full quarter hour. It unnerved him more than a bit - he’d never before seen her so furious. At first he thought that wrath was directed at him, after all, he was persona non grata as they called it, an undesirable, banished for life. The fact he was here standing in her presence, not once did she seem concerned about that fact. Had she forgotten she had banished him from the realm? Her fury that strong she didn’t care?

It did not take long to realize the epicenter of her wrath rested on Geralt alone. The White Wolf, the legendary witcher of Rivia. And his best friend. Bloody hell, he had to find a way to make her see sense! To put such a celebrated witcher, and one possessing a moral compass of humanity if you will, would be a grave mistake. Even for her.

Damien de la Tour stood several paces from her, looking a bit withered, to say the least. It had been a long night for everyone.

Clearly trying to compose herself, the duchess paced back and forth, a few stray strands of curls bouncing with each step. Occasionally, she swiped at a corner of an eye. “He’s your good friend, Julian! Can you believe he let my sister die?!”

He coughed softly and dipped his head in respect. The use of his official given name surprised him. Not that she used it, she always had. He was merely not used to it for everyone else called him by his stage name. “Geralt of all men, would certainly not just let anyone die. My lady, if I may, having Geralt put to death now would be a grave injustice for not only Toussaint, but for all society. That witcher…” he cleared his throat, suddenly gone dry. “He has done more for mankind than any king or emperor that sits or has sat on a throne. He alone stands between the defenseless and evil in all of its forms, be it man or beast. He’s even helped people with their own inner demons! What he goes through in the dark to protect us while we sleep… What would we do as a society without him? Would we want to live in one without knowing he is here ever on our side?”
Her eyes flared. “My sister would still be alive!”

Anna Henrietta stood with her back to the bard. Her hand brushed down the delicately embroidered silk gown, its hem whispered just at the tops of her feet. Her glorious dark blonde hair pulled up in a thick layer of curls around her head, woven through the thick gold crown, bounced as she moved. The gazebo on which they stood illuminated with several braziers spitting and roaring in the still pre-dawn air.

Dandelion swallowed and glanced at Damien de la Tour standing like a stone sentry near the duchess. His blue gaze met his, then dropped to the floor. He cleared his throat. No matter what argument he came up with, her response was the same.

“I am deeply, truly sorry for your loss, Annarietta.” It was a risk using her casual name, but he relied on their past history of intimacy. "I’m sure Geralt did everything he could. No other witcher, or man for that matter, has a reputation as he. He has that reputation because he’s earned it. The man is a master at what he does, with decades of experience under his belt. I’ve known him for a long time. He is thorough and certainly does not do shoddy work. That is not his style.”

“Maybe so,” she grated. “But does he let people die under his watch?”

“Your Grace, a man as impeccable as he is concerning his work… surely things… happen even out of a witcher’s control. He had no intention of letting Syanna die, far from it.”

Rolling her eyes, the duchess turned away and padded over to the balustrade, her heels clicking softly on the tiled floor. “The point, Julian, I hired him to kill the Beast of Beauclair. A murdering, moraleless, heartless beast. And that, he precisely did not do.” Her voice grew louder with each word spoken.

“Your Grace,” Dandelion came close behind her and spoke softly, in the velvety voice he used on stage and in his songs, and... in the privacy of a bedchamber with a special lady. “Granted, Geralt did not bring you the head of the Beast, but he did eliminate the threat from the city. Is not that the true matter here? The Beast has fled and will not return. He has no reason to. Toussaint is safe again. Surely, Geralt shouldn’t be put to death for one minor little detail. He has protected Toussaint just as you hired him to. No offense to the skills of your knights,” he bowed his head in de la Tour’s direction, “but if you thought your knights could have handled the situation, you wouldn’t have summoned a witcher in the first place. Name another man who could have stood up against an ancient vampire and survive.”

De la Tour took a step forward, face grave, bowing before the duchess. “Your Grace. I spoke with the witcher this night. He is remorseful regarding the fate of your sister and if he could change things, he would. Even after nearly a month of ill treatment in prison, he is still a man of deep honor and valor - traits that we as a duchy have always highly valued. Are we to punish a man possessing the virtues we hold so dear?”

De la Tour... You are brilliant!

Blinking, the duchess wiped at the corner of an eye and looked away, wringing her hands in that familiar mannerism that had become a trademark. She turned toward the captain. “You, Damien. You were spouting death to the witcher up until now. You wanted him hanged! Slowly! And now you are acting on his behalf as if you still admire him.”

“With all due respect, Your Grace, I was furious because the pain and grief losing your sister has brought you. For it indeed has pained me as well. But you are correct. Despite it all, I cannot help respecting the man." He met her gaze without wavering. "As do you.”
The duchess straightened and squared her slim shoulders. Her voice was clipped and authoritative. “That is quite a presumption to make, Captain.”

“Forgive, Your Illustrious Highness. I only speak of what I saw as the witcher performed his job. His grueling questioning, his investigative prowess… You had come to admire him like most of us had. But, it is understandable why you are angry with him.”

When the captain had mentioned the five virtues, Dandelion swore she dropped her guard, if only a little. Thank goodness he was on his side. Thought for sure he’d side with her. “My gracious lady, to have a man put to death because of your anger… is that the message you want to give Toussaint? That anger and grief rules over fair judgement?”

Coming along beside her, Dandelion gently grasped her wrist. She froze. Catching his breath, he feared he had made a grave error being so forward, but tenderly rubbed his thumb along the inside of her wrist the way he used to. She relaxed and didn’t pull away. “He had planned to stay here in Toussaint, you know, make Beauclair his permanent home for a while, if not forever. If you were to pardon him, he would be the best subject you could have. Think of the benefits of a resident witcher at your beck and call. Toussaint and the surrounding areas would be the safest places around. And you know he would do anything for you. Never would disappoint you again.”

A gleam, albeit short-lived flashed in her blue eyes. There it was, he found the sweet spot. Found that ideal that appealed to her and might, just might change her mind. He stifled any excitement from showing in his eyes resuming his grave expression, clutching his beret close. “Think how that would benefit Toussaint and it’s populace, Your Grace. And of course, how it would benefit you. The citizens already love you for your impeccable rulership of the grandest region in all the Continent, but they would adore you even more. Think of the repercussions if you had put the most effective and celebrated witcher to death. Why, the people might revolt against you.”

Anna Henrietta straightened and glanced at her captain of the royal guard a gleam alighting in her eyes and dissolving the solemnness of grief that had etched her immaculate face. “Perhaps I have judged the witcher too harshly. He might not have killed the Beast, but he did rid the duchy of the threat. And the benefits of having a resident witcher at hand could prove useful.”

Although delighted beyond belief his logic was moving her, something about her tone sliced a sliver of apprehension through him. Did he just save Geralt from one imminent fate only to bind him to a life of servitude to the duchy? Well if he had, the only thing that mattered was saving his life.

Anna Henrietta grasped his hands. Leaning close, she whispered, “I’m grateful you’ve come, Julian. Despite the circumstances which brought you here, I’m glad to see you. That a man has a friend that would risk his own neck for him. Not many would do that. I fully understand what you have done this night, Dandelion, and why.”

For the first time since he had arrived in haste tonight, he relaxed. She used his nickname, the name all his friends used. He smiled warmly at her, squeezing her hands. “It is so good to see you again, Little Weasel.”

Sparkles glittered in her eyes at the use of his old pet name for her, more so than the flaring braziers. “It’s been a long night…”

The captain took a step forward. “May I remind Her Grace, the warden has been informed that the witcher is to be executed at dawn. Shall I ride there now and tell them the witcher’s free to leave?”

She stood like a statue and her hesitation alarmed him.
“My friend…” Dandelion whispered in a serious tone. “Remember Cirilla?”

She glanced at him askance. “The child of destiny that you all were on the hunt for many years ago? Yes, I do.”

The bard nodded and smiled. “Geralt desperately needs to get to her again. For something very special is about to occur which he needs to be a part of. He could have gone to her before coming to Toussaint, but as always, putting his own life aside, he came to the aid of a city that badly needed his help first.”

Annarietta wrinkled her brow. “What is so important? Another contract?”

Frowning, Dandelion refused to let her sarcasm deter him. Turning, he looked down into her beautiful youthful face surprisingly unmarred from the stresses of ruling a duchy. “Cirilla is about to give birth any day now.”

"Give birth?"

"Yes. So you see, time is of the essence."

She drew in a ragged breath, and approached the rail. The view overlooked the sprawling palace gardens and the lake beyond. “I recall a time the witcher fought for your life, Dandelion. You two make an odd sort of friends,” she continued, "but clearly better friends than most could hope for. I'd like to believe I have friends such as you," she murmured.

He drew her closer and wrapped an arm around her slender shoulders. "You know you have such a friend in me, Annarietta." Emboldened now, he raised her hand to his lips and took his time feathering a kiss along her fingernails. Was that a flush that crept up her cheeks? "You can always count on me. Geralt needs to get to Cirilla as soon as possible."

She closed her eyes and drew in a deep breath. “It may be some time before I can forgive him, but yes, he is free to go. He can keep Corvo Bianco, but he won’t get the gold promised for the Beast’s head.”

Gracing her his most dashing smile, he bowed low before her. Straightening again, he kissed the back of her hand and turned his attention to de la Tour. The golden light of dawn gleamed on the white walls of the palace. "Sir, ride like the wind to the prison!"

As the captain rushed away, Dandelion glanced out across the horizon. The ruins of a castle settled on an island had been re-purposed for the duchy's correctional facility. The golden gleam of the early morning sun shone on it's gray walls as well. Hoping Regis was already flying there in his vaporous form, he could only hope the captain would make it in time.

* * *

The Temple of Melitele

Ellander, Temeria

Summer, 1273
The Temple of Melitele's proximity to Vizima, the capital city of Temeria, was one of Yennefer’s worries. For there the royal palace, once the seat of King Foltest, had housed the emperor since Nilfgaard invaded the weakened city not long after Foltest’s assassination. The temple, situated at the northwestern base of the Mahakam Mountains, was the half-way point between Vengerberg and Vizima. Although closer now to the imperial city than she cared, they would have to risk it for the temple was the safest place for Ciri to give birth. Hopefully, Emhyr was not actively searching for his daughter anymore after her and Geralt’s deceptive ruse. However, one was not an emperor for long if he trusted so easily. But now was not the time to dwell on such things.

Nenneke, the short statured rotund arch priestess with a heavy bosom, often referred to as Mother Nenneke, waited for them in the temple courtyard adorned in her usual gray robes. Her silver hair, pulled up in a bun at the crown of her head, was fuzzy with the heat, sticking out this way and that around her round face. Some of her notable features were enviable apple shaped cheeks plump and rosy, smooth skin without too many prominent wrinkles despite her age, and sky blue eyes that could be bright and warm, or sharp and authoritative.

"Yennefer, good to see you again. Ah, you’ve brought a guest.” She lowered her voice. “Though not whom I had expected."

Her hair had more silver streaks than last she saw the priestess and only the signs of a few wrinkles in her later middle-aged years. "Nenneke, you look well.” Yen laid a hand on the healer's arm. "This is my dear friend, Chessa, once a village healer and currently my assistant."

Nenneke’s kind eyes beamed as she smiled. "Pleasure is all mine, Chessa. The novices will transfer your luggage. Please follow Daphne. She'll show you to your rooms."

After Chessa left with the young blonde novice who couldn’t have been more than fourteen, Yennefer wasted no time. "Take me to her, Nenneke."

"Now, Yennefer, don't fret, she's fine. However, moments after she appeared, her water broke. Don’t be alarmed, she’s resting comfortably now."

Yennefer marched towards the entrance. "Must have been the teleportation. Dammit, we should have come here earlier."

Nenneke, despite her weight, kept up with her. "Even though her ability is an ingrained natural one of her blood, I believe it might have induced labor."

"Of course it did! Feared it might." Picking up the pace, Yen kept her attention focused straight ahead and the novices scattered out of her path, except for a couple of girls on the ground sopping up a puddle with a mound of rags. Must have been the spot where Ciri’s water broke. She circled around them.

"Now, Yennefer, everything is under control. Thought the witcher would have accompanied you.”

Yen stopped just before the overly large double wooden arched doors. Wisteria blossoms alongside the walls perfumed the air around them. “How much did Ciri tell you?"

“Not much at all. Once her water broke we rushed to get her settled. She mentioned you would follow shortly with another. That was all.”

Yen nodded, a breeze rustled long wavy tresses that had escaped her up-do, tickling her neck. “Geralt may or may not be here. Don’t know where he is.”
Laying a hand on Yennefer’s arm, she drew them both to a stop. “Is she in danger?”

“We’ll talk later.” Yen stepped inside the temple. Its dim coolness, after the bright glaring afternoon sun, was downright soothing. “I must see to her first.”

“Naturally. We settled her in the antechamber off my lab. At the end of the main hall, a small flight of steps takes you down there. It’s cooler in the cellar and close to everything we’ll need.”

Without another word, Yen strode hurriedly down the corridor with Nenneke at her heels.

* * *

“Mother!” Ciri groaned a moment after Yen and Mother Nenneke entered the room. The sorceress’ face, paler than normal, glistened with perspiration. “This babe’s coming now!” She almost bit her tongue in half at the ungodly spasm that racked her again.

Yennefer whirled on the arch priestess. “You said she was resting comfortably! She’s having contractions already, strong ones!” Yen turned toward a young novice hovering near the door. “Have Chessa bring my medical bags at once. I’ll need soap, boiling water, cold water, and plenty of clean linens. NOW.”

That was Mother. In charge and authoritative, even to the arch priestess.

To have all three powerful women with her during this time was comforting. She’d heard giving birth was no easy task and the chance the new mother not surviving the ordeal was great. But with the presence of her mother, the priestess, and the village healer, relieved most of the anxiety. Now if only one of them could give her something to dull this pain!

With a disapproving glower, Nenneke stood up straight and looked Yennefer eye to eye. “Might I remind you, Madame Sorceress, I do the ordering around here. I’ve also many years of experience. And Ciri did not have any contractions until now. This babe is moving fast apparently, much quicker than usual for a first time birth.” Nenneke addressed the novice who stared at her wide-eyed. “Do as the sorceress has requested, plus gather a needle, sterilize it well and thread it. Bring that to me.” Nodding, the girl took off in a hurry.

After several minutes, four young apprentices about fifteen years old entered the room. Two lugged a cauldron of boiling water, another a bucket of cold water from the well, and a fourth carried a pile of white linens, rags and gauze. Chessa rushed in, already wearing a linen apron and tied one around Yen’s back.

Yen tugged off her traveling gloves and dipped a cloth in the boiling water and carefully scrubbed her hands with soap, and rinsed. Pulling back the covers off Ciri’s legs, Yen gave her a look when she wouldn’t open them.

“Darling, let me examine you. Need to see how far along you are.”

“No, mother,” she gasped. “This babe’s not coming until Geralt gets here.”

Nenneke’s surprised expression was not well disguised. Yen saw it, ignored it, and opened her medical bag instead. “I’m afraid it doesn’t work like that, dear. You have no choice. The babe will come whether Geralt is here or not.”
“Not if I can help it!” Ciri panted. Tears, from exertion and regret, flooded her eyes. She blinked them away. Geralt, where are you?! “He needs to be here, Mom,” she sobbed. “He wanted to be with us. Where is he?”

Pressing an earthenware mug to Ciri’s lips, Chessa said, “Try to keep calm and drink this, dear. We need to keep you hydrated in this heat.” She sipped the cold water eagerly while the healer swiped strands of hair stuck to her damp face. Although it was much cooler down here, beads of sweat rolled down her cheeks. Chessa dabbed a cold cloth on her forehead. Its coolness felt wonderful.

Mother Nenneke came alongside the bed and laid a hand on her arm. “You are a stubborn and determined child, that much I remember.” She smiled warmly. “But this is one battle you will not win, Ciri. Babies arrive precisely when they mean to, not when it’s convenient for us.”

“Mother Nenneke…” came a soft whisper from the door. The girl was not one of the four that had brought supplies. This apprentice couldn’t have been more than eleven years old. Blonde and so sweet looking, she reminded Ciri of when she was that age. The girl’s cheeks were flushed, her brown eyes anxious and unsure.

Another spasm wracked Ciri’s midsection so powerfully, she couldn’t breathe for a moment. “By the Gods! Is it always this painful?”

“Yes,” all three women answered in unison. Ciri almost laughed but for the pain. Ironically, neither of them actually ever given birth.

Nenneke turned her attention to the young girl at the door. “What is it, child?”

She beckoned the arch priestess closer.

Crying out in agony, Ciri tried to curl up into a ball, but Yen yanked open her legs. She couldn’t hear what the little girl told Nenneke, but the look on the priestess’s face was enough to give her a sick feeling in the pit of her stomach. Or was that all part of the labor pains?

Nenneke approached Yen and glanced at Ciri with a blank expression before addressing the sorceress. “Yennefer. I’ll return momentarily. There is something I need to take care of immediately.”

“Chessa, go with the priestess, please. I have everything under control here.”

Maintaining her neutral expression, Nenneke shook her head. “No need, Yennefer. I can handle this.”

“Please, I insist.”

“Have it your way,” Nenneke clipped. The ladies left the chamber.

Ciri sucked in large gulps of air. “Mother…” she groaned. Perspiration wet her face and dripped from her temples.

Yennefer clasped her hand. “I’m here, sweetling.”

“I’m glad. Very glad. But…” Tears spilled over her lashes. “I’m afraid. Not for me… I’m afraid for Geralt… that he will miss the birth. In his letter, he expressed such desire to be here.”

“I know, dear. He would be here if he could.”
"That's what worries me. Doesn’t it worry you?"

Yen pushed the covers up over her knees and patted her leg affectionately. “Geralt can take care of himself. He is a very capable man. Neither of us can afford to worry about him now. Your job is to deliver this baby. Mine is to see him safely enter this world and see to you, my love. He’s coming fast and I need you to stay focused. You’re fully dilated, Ciri. It won’t be long.”

As if on cue, another contraction split her in two. Her scream echoed throughout the halls of the temple.

* * *

Pushing the long curtain of the foyer window aside, Nenneke and Chessa peered outside into the courtyard. The setting sun blinded her, glinting off more than a few steel plate armor of two dozen or more soldiers atop their steeds. Some had already dismounted, convening together in small groups. A bloody cavalry? Here?!

Letting the drape fall back in place, she hesitated before opening the arched wooden door that led to her small study where she usually met with guests. Nenneke glanced at Chessa, whose face had drained of all color at sight of the soldiers outside.

The healer grasped the arch priestess's arm, giving her an apologetic glance. "Mother Nenneke, we've not only inconvenienced you, but put you in a difficult position. But we didn’t know where else to bring Ciri. Vengerberg is overrun with the Black Ones... I fear these men have come for Ciri. The emperor might have been alerted that his daughter is alive and with child. If he knows this, he would demand possession of both heirs. And Geralt could be in grave danger as well."

Melitele, guide me. The priestess breathed in deep. "Geralt? What for? Chessa, is the General, now standing in my study, the father of Ciri's child, perchance?"

"No, he is not."

"You say that with certainty. That tells me you know precisely who the father is. Well, of course you would."

Chessa's face remained solemn. "There's no time to explain. Geralt is the father--"

"Geralt?!" Nenneke choked, not believing her ears. "But that's impossi--"

"There's no time to explain, Nenneke... So you see this situation is grave. Very much so. Should the emperor learn, first of all, his daughter's with child, and then discovers the witcher fathered him, a royal heir, we'd all be..."

Melitele, help me. Nenneke patted her hand. "I understand, dear. I now know why you've all come here. Seeking sanctuary. Stay here, out of sight, but listen in if you can. Oh, and let me have that apron."

Hurriedly, the healer removed the linen apron stained from use. She tied it loosely about her back. Smoothing out her robes, she squared her shoulders and entered the antechamber. A general, tall and adorned in a long black leather tunic with a gaudy gold chain emblem of the golden sun around his neck, nodded formally in her direction. The man's shoulder-length stringy brown hair was
pulled up in a half ponytail.

Giving a curt nod in return, she sat down stiffly in her armchair behind a sturdy desk of dark wood and studied the man. Poor complexion and a prominent slightly bent nose did not compliment him. However, the man was highly esteemed, privileged, and well established within the empire.

“Good Day, Madame Priestess,” heavily accented, his tenor voice resonated in the stone chamber. Again, he tipped his head.

“Greetings, General Voorhis. What brings you… and your army here to our humble temple on this lovely day? Clearly, this is not a social visit. The emperor leaves us well alone in peace at this sacred grounds. What can I do for you?”

A piercing wail rang through the halls. Groaning inwardly, she resisted rolling her eyes closed. Instead, she met the general’s gaze again without wavering, careful not to let any kind of emotion play across her face.

“Who was that? Is she all right?”

Nenneke kept her tone easy and conversational. “A young girl was brought here earlier seriously wounded. She was attacked and in a great deal of pain. Hate to think your men had something to do with it, General.”

The glare of the setting sun through the tall windows reflected painfully off the shiny black armor of the soldiers outside - the armor with a golden sun etched in the center of the breastplates. She held his gaze steady.

“I assure you, Arch Priestess, my men had nothing to do with it. With that said, I do hope the young lady will be all right. However, I am looking for a young woman, ashen-haired. She would stand out in a crowd. And green-eyed. Have you seen such a lady?”

In his outstretched hand, a remarkable etching of a young woman of Ciri's likeness detailed her features accurately as if she had posed for an artist, even down to the scar on her cheek. Nenneke swallowed. “No, have not seen the girl since she was here last… oh, about ten years ago, at least.” She kept her tone nonchalant.

"You know her then."

"I knew her as a thirteen year old girl once… She was a student here. She’d be a fully grown woman by now. I haven't seen her since, General. I admit, would be lovely to see her again, find out what she's been doing with her life. I pray she is all right?"

"Yes, I imagine so. The girl who was brought here earlier… Does she match this description?” His blue gaze bore into her.

Nenneke remained unmoved. "No. As I’ve already told you, I have not seen her. May I inquire about the nature of this search?"

“We’re merely trying to locate her. Bring her back where she belongs. Her rightful place, where she will be safe. Her father is … concerned about her well-being.”

"Well then, should she show up here, I'll be sure to inform her of such. Now, if you'll excuse me, you know the way out. I must tend to a girl in great need.” Nenneke stood and made to head for the door, but he stepped closer blocking her way. Another gut-wrenching scream pierced the air and a thunderous boom shook the floor. They both reached out to grasp the desk to steady themselves. It
was difficult maintaining a neutral, emotionless expression.

Suddenly, an understanding of the witcher alighted within and empathy eased her thoughts about him. She had gotten to know Geralt, as he would frequent the temple a few times a year, not because he was a believer or follower. No, he was a faithless man, only believing in himself and his abilities. But something always drew him here and she, often times more than not, had been harsh with him. Not allowing herself to become the mother figure he so desperately hungered for, she constantly reprimanded him, and reminded him of his inhuman nature. After all, he was a witcher, a man whose emotions were stripped at the time of the mutation process that turned him into one.

But... perhaps she had been wrong. He was so much more than a mere witcher.

Constantly disguising a well of emotion behind a mask of indifference was no easy task and exhausting, to boot. Yet, he did so to survive… not giving anyone or anything an advantage over him. For if he showed he cared… it would risk all… himself, his livelihood, and his loved ones. And he did it so well, so naturally, others often mistakenly believed he didn't possess any emotions at all. Until he let them show... which was what he had wanted to do while here all those times past. Had she failed him all these years?

The general looked at her questioningly.

"Novices… practicing alchemy," she lied easily, a bit disorientated after her tumbling thoughts. "Sometimes reagents don't mix and the result is… well, explosive. Happens all the time. Excuse me, Sir. I do need to attend to…"

"Hmmm, but we're not done here, Madame Priestess. We'll need to search the temple."

Bristling, Nenneke squared her shoulders and shot him a fiery glare. "You most certainly will not! There are young ladies and children milling about. I'll not have this peaceful temple desecrated by your men traipsing around making all sorts of noise and disrupting everything. This is a house of worship and learning. A sanctuary."

"I have my orders, Madame."

"This is a sanctuary, general, sacred ground. We have immunity here."

"Even a temple is under the rule of the emperor, Madame Priestess. Your temple is within the empire’s territory, is it not?"

"He wouldn’t dare…” she hissed cutting herself off before she said something she’d regret.

As he unrolled a parchment, her stomach churned. She didn't need to study the large flowing script and colorful borders to know who the orders had come from. Trying to keep her shoulders squared, she pursed closed her lips and slowly opened the door.

"You could do me one courtesy, General Voorhis. At least let me gather all the ladies and children into this room so I know they’re all accounted for and be out of the way."

Looking at her thoughtfully a moment, he nodded. "I'm not without reason. Make it quick."

Lowering her eyes in gratitude, she nodded. Voorhis turned and exited the temple and headed towards the other guards standing nearby. He already issued orders.

Nenneke met Chessa’s gaze. “Go quick and inform Yennefer. I’ll round up the girls. Ciri stays
where she is.”

Face pale, Chessa hurried down the hall, her skirts whirling behind her.

Clamping closed her mouth, Nenneke’s mind worked quickly as she offered up another desperate prayer to the goddess. Then she turned and hurried down the main corridor calling for the girls.

* * *

“Yenna.” Chessa’s urgent whisper drew the sorceress’s attention. At one glance at the healer's ashen face and worried expression, Yen squeezed Ciri's hand. "Give us a minute, sweetling. Continue breathing steadily as I’ve shown you."

Ciri nodded, her gleaming emerald eyes full of pain. Another spasm racked her. Yen lowered her head and clutched the bed struggling to breathe as the very air in the chamber vanished for a few heart stopping moments. The spasm passed and Ciri relaxed. The air returned with a rush. Gasping slightly, not wanting to make it obvious should it bring her more anxiety.

Chessa had grasped her throat and breathed in deep and rapidly as well. “What was that? I couldn't breathe for a few moments.” Glancing around the cellar, she looked questioningly at Yen. “And what’s happened here?”

With a hand on the healer's arm, Yen drew her away from earshot and guided her near Nenneke’s work table carefully avoiding countless shards of shattered glass, books, scrolls, other alchemical tools, candles, candle stands, upturned chairs and a small table, and not to mention, unidentified liquids scattered all over the floor. Yen kept her voice low. “It’s just started. With each contraction, some bizarre phenomena occurs. Earlier, while you and Nenneke had left to take care of whatever problem had presented itself, all the candles' flames in the cellar snuffed out instantaneously then re-lit themselves at the same time once the spasm passed. When another one claimed her shortly thereafter, a force of charged magic, much like one of the witcher's Signs really, blasted everything, including me, away in a radius around the bed. Like a rag doll, I was hurled back as if I weighed nothing more than a feather, as well as anything else unsecured to the floor or wall.”

Chessa reached for her. “My dear, you all right?”

“I'm fine. But what's wrong? Where's Nenne--" Yen closed her mouth, reading Chessa's mind as clear as if she had stood with the arch priestess in her study herself and heard the entire exchange between her and the Nilfgaardian general. "Bloody hell! Voorhis is here on orders from the emperor--"

Already, heavily booted footsteps echoed down the corridor above headed their way.

Yanking Chessa back closer towards Ciri, the footsteps were nearing the top of the stairs leading down into the cellar. They both watched in silence.

"What are we to do?" The healer whispered frantically.

* * *
Dammit, Regis! You advised me not to escape. And I listened. Still here, and now...

With a kick to the back of his legs, he dropped to his knees before the warden, his wrists shackled behind his back.

Where are you?! Time’s running out!

Exhaling heavily, Geralt stared across the empty courtyard, but no black mists wafted nearby. The early morning sun peeked out behind a dark cloud that settled over the island prison. Large raindrops splattered him, its coolness refreshing and haunting at the same time. A wisp of a breeze tickled the hair at the back of his neck as the rain came down much harder. Hair that was roughly grasped and tied in a high ponytail at the crown of his head. Hair pulled out of the way… exposing his neck for the executioner’s ax...

"Didn’t choose the ax, Warden," he croaked blinking raindrops from his eyes. "Chose poison and you know it."

The warden glowered at him with disgust in his eyes. “What makes you think you get to choose, Witcher?"

Of course. This didn’t surprise him. Why would the warden follow orders? “De la Tour. Said Her Grace left the method up to me.”

“Did he now? He shouldn’t have lied to you.”

“It’s in the orders he gave you… I have a right to choose!”

The warden sneered close to his face. “Right? You have no rights, mutant.” He spat in his face. As much as Geralt wanted to cold clock him with his head, he refrained. “You gave them up as soon as the duchess had you arrested.”

The executioner, a smaller man than he had expected, wore a black hood covering all but his mouth and chin. Cutouts for the eyes revealed a dark and emotionless glare as he shoved a large block before him. Geralt grimaced. Faint rust-colored stains covered its smooth surface.

He swallowed hard. Poison was the only way he might have survived this death sentence in the chance Dandelion failed to change the duchessa’s mind. It would have bought him time. His body had been inoculated since childhood to withstand poisons. Hell, witcher elixirs were poison! Certainly to humans! Granted, he might feel like shit for a while, vomit, maybe pass out, but he’d wake up, where the ordinary man would not.

Could stop this, right here, right now. But I’d be forced to kill every soldier in this place, and with my hands bound… would not be easy. If I didn’t stop it, would be dead in a matter of moments. His head pounded. REGIS! Just take me to Ciri, please!

The warden grunted out an unpleasant cackle in a gravelly voice. “Have any final words, Witcher? This is your last chance.”

Perhaps the poison now would not be a wise idea. Who’s to say once he ingested it, they waited for him to pass out then behead him anyway. Better to stay conscious and ready to act fast, but if Regis didn’t get here now…

Wait… voices… urgent ones. At the gate.
“Let me in immediately on Her Illustrious Highness’s orders!”

De la Tour?? Wait… Did that mean?

The warden tossed a rope over Geralt’s head and pulled the knot tight around his throat. What the--?

Giving it a sharp tug, he yanked his head down onto the block and held it taut not allowing him to move it at all or risk choking to death. This wasn’t typical of beheadings. Bloody hell, this couldn’t be the end… I was alive in Garret’s future!

The cold steel ax blade rested against the back of his neck. The executioner gauged the blow he’d land in a moment, marking the spot, making sure he’d hit the mark.

Geralt swallowed, his eyes burning. He had always figured he’d meet his death alone in a dark damp cave where some monster would finally best him. Never thought execution on account of treason would be it. But none of that mattered now. The manner of his death was unimportant. He swallowed the lump in his throat. Ciri. She was important. Any time now she would have his child and he wouldn't live to see him! Or be there for her!! Bloody hell!

Ciri… He sucked in a ragged breath. I'll not get to share with you the deepest parts of me. To tell you just how much you've meant to me all these years. How much you mean to me now. How you've changed me… made me a better witcher… no, a better man. A man who feels… and learning not to be afraid of it. Soon, you'll bring my son into this world and I'll miss it! Won't get to be there for you nor meet the son no witcher could ever sire. Can't express how much that kills me! How much it hurts… knowing I won't get to be a part of your lives. To watch him grow… to watch you continue to grow into the woman you desire to be… to know that dream… Family…

"No last words, then?” the warden interrupted his thoughts. “Fine by me. Let's get this over with. Nice knowing you, Witcher.”

The warden nodded and movement beside him was the executioner getting in place.

Ciri… I won't get a chance to tell you… how much I love you.

Exhaling a slow ragged breath, he closed his eyes. Rain soaked him, splattered on his face and hair. Meet death with dignity. Was what Vesemir would have wanted, expected of him.

The whir of the descending blade sent shivers down his back. The captain’s urgent cry muffled in his ears, heat overcame him, and a sparkling green mist enveloped him. The heat turned to cold and suddenly weightless, he floated… somewhere. The world disappeared and the green cloud carried him light as a feather. Regis?? But how? The vampire could not transport a physical object while in vaporous form.

"Father." A deep male voice, so much like his own, called to him. The voice was close, so close. "Don't worry, father. Everything will work out…"

* * *

Chessa clutched Yennefer’s arms. “What are we going to do? They’re coming!”

The pounding and clanking of several heavily booted feet above them started descending the stairs. Yennefer, her stomach in her throat, glanced around, thinking frantically. “They won’t find what
they’re looking for. Stay near Ciri. Now!”

Chessa scurried back by the bed. “Don’t worry, dear,” she grasped Ciri’s hand comfortingly. ”Your mother is in control.”

Grimacing in obvious pain, Ciri nodded. Another contraction wracked her and a force field exploded from her belly, hurting everything and everyone away from her in a powerful blast. Chessa, flung back against the wall, hard, had the wind knocked out of her. Yennefer lost her footing as she was propelled forward across the cellar and landed solidly on her belly at the base of the staircase. Protecting the back of her neck with an arm, debris of glass vials, bottles, books, candles, candle sticks, bunches of dried herbs, and a host of other things showered about her. A table hurtled through the air in her direction. Quickly casting a protection spell, it collided with her shield and ricocheted backwards, smashing against the wall. It shattered upon impact, wood pieces sailing everywhere just as the first soldiers entered the lab.

“Mother!” Ciri cried. “I’m sorry! I… cannot control it!”

“What the hell’s going on here?” the soldier growled, dodging a flailing section of table. It landed beside him, near his feet. He drew his weapon. A few other soldiers followed him. They spread out in a half-circle.

Yen struggled to her feet. Dammit, it was too late! She couldn’t cast the illusion spell in time! That spell would have hid them behind an illusion of a wall and the soldier’s wouldn’t have known anything different. They would have saw nothing and left. Now… Shit! Hiding Ciri was her only goal.

Standing in front of the knights, the leader’s eyes widened. “Madame Sorceress of Vengerberg. What are you doing here?”

As realization dawned in his eyes, she cast a blinding spell on all of the men. Immediately, their tough, cold Nilfgaardian resolve dissolved into sheer panic. Some yelled, others dropped their swords and groped for the stairs. A few made it up, screaming that they couldn’t see as they ran down the hall occasionally banging into the walls.

However, the first soldier, somehow maintained his wits about him, lunged for her. Grasping her wrists fast, he hauled her small form against his hard steel armored chest and shackled her with a pair of dimeritium cuffs tightly around her wrists.

“NO!” she hissed as nausea gripped her hard. Crying out, she sank to the cold stone floor, retching, her stomach twisting in sharp cramps. Gods dammit! Bound fast, the dimeritium, magically resistant metal, blocked her magical abilities, its effects on mages, highly unpleasant. She was helpless! Defenseless! How was she to protect Ciri now?!

The soldier rubbed his eyes and grinned. Apparently being bound by the shackles dispelled her magic. He could see again. Yen clenched her jaw and struggled to rise without fainting for the dizziness that assailed her.

“Well, well. What have we here?” The soldier prodded another much younger soldier, who had collapsed in fear against the wall. He could see again too. “You. Inform the general we’ve found the princess. Hurry!”

Staggering to his feet, the younger soldier nodded and took off upstairs.

“You will regret this!” Yen spat, driving her heel down upon his metal boot. The man flinched
some, more out of a knee-jerk reaction than feeling any pain. Laughing at the sorceress’s feeble attempt at physical harm, in turn, he backhanded her across the cheek.

The force of his blow sent her reeling sideways. Not able to use her bound arms for balance, she crashed to the floor, landing painfully on her side. Her head knocked against the stone floor, stars exploded in her eyes, and bit her tongue hard. For a few terrifying moments, she lost the ability to see. Blood trickled from her mouth. Ciri’s anxious cry muffled in her ears.

Struggling to remain conscious, her sight returned and she glanced toward her daughter. Chessa frantically blocked her body with her own; a brave and valiant effort, and she loved her for it, however futile the struggle. The soldier approached. Ciri, sweat and tears streaming down her cheeks, cried out again. Another contraction overpowered her. Just as the soldier reached out to grasp her, a glowing shield materialized enveloping her and Chessa in a small radius around the bed. The magically charged dome shocked the soldier and hurled him backwards. Crying out, he landed on the floor across the room. He clutched his hand close to his chest and did not rise.

The shield remained strong. If Yen hadn’t known better, she would have thought Ciri had cast that witcher’s Sign. Geralt had cast that shield around himself plenty of times, especially when she had unleashed her fury on him on the Isle of Undvik. That was the one spell that had kept him alive. But Ciri was not able to perform any witcher Signs, no matter how hard she tried and she certainly had not cast it this time… Yen gasped. The babe protected his mother! This babe was a witcher! Mutated in the womb, or just possessing his Geralt’s magical abilities, was anyone’s guess. But the babe’s magic protected her!

Oh, Geralt! Forgive me, my love. I need you here! Ciri needs you! Geralt!!!!!

“Mother!” Ciri cried, struggling to sit up. “Mother! Are you all right?”

Many more soldiers spilled into the lab. The men stepped aside, creating a path for General Voorhis to pass through the contingent. A pair of black shiny boots stopped before her, then he crouched down. His arrogant confident expression made her want to blast him with magical lightning, but she couldn’t! The shackles disabled her magical abilities.

"Why, it’s the emperor’s former adviser, Madame Sorceress,” he drawled in that confident, arrogant way of a man who knew he was untouchable because of his high status within the royal court. “I can see in your… stunning eyes how badly you wish to harm me right now--”

A roar of male cries and shouts from above stopped him from saying anything more. He glanced first up at the ceiling, then back at the staircase. The metallic ring of steel upon steel split the sudden stillness. From above them, heavily armored bodies thudded on the floor, screams from men like none she’d ever heard raised the hair on the back of her neck and down her arms. What the hell was going on up there? Hope flamed alive. Geralt?!

Ciri heard it too. She sat up, wet hair plastered to her face and neck drenched with sweat. Gleaming emerald eyes wide, she came alive. “GERALT!” she screeched in a surprisingly piercing, almost otherworldly scream that gave one the feeling her voice wasn’t entirely her own. “Down here!” All the torches’ and candles’ flames flared higher, fuller, and brighter.

Moments later, a shimmering green mist pulsed above the floor and a body materialized, a man… a white-haired man, a rather filthy and unkempt white-haired man landed gracefully like a cat at the bottom of the steps. A sword belt holstering two blades clattered onto the floor next to him.

Never was she so relieved to see him! He appeared disoriented, glancing around and spotting her and Ciri, and the Black Ones crowding the lab. Not wasting time, he crouched to the floor and
unsheathed his steel blade.

Why was he dressed in filthy rags and not his armor? And who teleported him here? That green shimmering mist… Much like when Ciri teleported...

“Geralt!” Ciri cried.

Chaos erupted as the soldiers turned on him with weapons ready. His steel blade, a blur of motion, whirled and arced through the air, clanging with multiple swords, using speed and strength deflecting their blows. Many bodies dodged in that oftentimes graceful dance of dueling blades, but the witcher was too quick for the highly trained Nilfgaardian knights. One by one, they fell, some dead upon landing on the floor, others groaning and bleeding out until they no longer breathed.

Sounds above still told of a fight going on up there… but Geralt was down here… Were others with him? Horror-filled screams of the knights upstairs chilled her to the bone. Who was up there? Or rather, what was up there?

Geralt’s blade whirled as he pirouetted aside and sliced off a man’s arm above the elbow. Blood sprayed everywhere and pooled on the floor from all the dead bodies in Nenneke’s once pristine lab.

The last soldier crumbled to the floor. With death in his eyes, an extremely filthy witcher, now covered in blood, strode slowly and purposely towards the general who had inched his way close to Ciri as the battle raged. Raising the tip of his steel blade, he rested it against Voorhis’s pulsating throat.

“Step away from her. Now,” he snarled so viciously, there was no question he meant business.

Voorhis raised empty hands, palms facing outward. “Now, Witcher… no need to be hasty. Cirilla is in no danger, I assure you.”

“I’ll be the judge of that.” Resting his blade against his Adam’s apple, Geralt risked a quick glance at Ciri.

She beamed at him despite her pain. True happiness and peace descended upon her the moment Geralt arrived. Yen’s gaze dropped to the floor, along with her heart. Yes, she saw it. It was plain in her eyes just how much in love with him she was. Now she understood. With her whole heart, she now understood her daughter.

Roughly shoving the general away from Ciri’s proximity, Geralt backed Voorhis up against a table. The magical shield surrounding her crackled and dissolved.

Yen staggered to her feet and Geralt glanced her way. Eyes softening, she nodded that she was all right. Holding her gaze across the chamber, he dipped his head in acknowledgement.

All went silent above. The fighting had stopped. After all that commotion, an eerie silence descended, almost disturbingly, all eyes focused on the witcher. The only sounds were now Ciri’s heavy panting and occasional groan.

Geralt did not lower his blade from the general’s throat. Voorhis stared at Ciri, a look of shocked betrayal written across his face.

Yen stood next to the witcher. “The look of a man whose dreams have withered and died. It was a lofty dream, Voorhis.”
“A probable one, at that,” he spat.

“No… Never,” Ciri ground out breathlessly through clenched teeth.

At Geralt’s raised brow, Yen straightened and gave the general an unsympathetic gaze. “The woman you dreamed of marrying. The woman who would gift you with a heavy title, one heavier than the one you carry now. Yet, here she is birthing another man’s child.” Yennefer kept her stony gaze upon the general, though the weight of Geralt’s eyes upon her tingled her core. His thoughts rang clear in her mind. He was grateful. Grateful she did not reveal he was that other man. “You and Cirilla were never formally betrothed, Voorhis. You now know her heart belongs to someone else.” Again, Geralt’s gratitude towards her was palpable.

Voorhis’s eyes traveled between the two of them. “Nothing’s written in stone,” he grated. “The emperor will have his way.”

“You’re so sure his way directly involves you? Go back to Emhyr,” Geralt challenged, pricking the point of his blade in a bit deeper. The general winced and froze. “And naturally, you’ll inform him his daughter had an heir. Or you may not. That’s up to you. Either way, the babe will remain with us, under my protection. Emhyr will have no influence over him until I say so. If I ever say so. And you can tell him I said that.”

Voorhis’s gaze bore into the witcher’s, as did Yen’s. The men stood eye-to-eye, each standing straight and tall, weighing one another with unwavering gazes.

A black misty cloud appeared and an older gray-haired man, vaguely familiar, materialized by the stairs. Approaching them, he nodded to Geralt, then dipped his head in respect toward her. “Regis Godefroy? How?”

Geralt smiled. “I’ll explain later.” He turned his attention back to Voorhis. “All but a few of your entire company are dead, general. Advise you leave the temple now. You’re outnumbered. There’s nothing for you here.” Lowering his blade, he let Voorhis inch away and head for the stairs. Upon reaching them, he stopped.

"Emhyr will possess that which he pleases. Either now or later, it does not matter, Witcher."

Regis prodded Voorhis up the stairs. With a final glance at them, Geralt nodded once, purposely toward Regis, as if giving him some kind of nonverbal message. The vampire nodded and left the lab as well. He would see him out of the temple.

Yen hurried over to the soldier who had shackled her. He lied upon the floor still. “The key… get these off me, now!”

The soldier blanched, saw the witcher approach with his blade, and fumbled with the key. The shackles fell off and clattered to the floor. Immediately, the cramping in her belly went away, no longer churning her stomach. “Leave now!” she ordered, shooting him her most fiery glare. The soldier left without question.

Ciri cried out and hunched over, panting heavily. "Mother, help me, please..." Her scream echoed through the temple. “It hurts so much!”

Nenneke rushed down the steps, visually paling at the bloody carnage scattered over her lab. “Melitele, have mercy! Is everyone all right? It looks just as awful down here as it does upstairs!”

A long drawn out scream froze everyone. "Nenneke! This babe's coming!"
Dropping his sword, Geralt removed his soiled shirt and was at Ciri’s side in an instant, slipping an arm around her shoulders. Wiping wet hair from her face, he whispered in her ear. "I'm here, love. I'm here."

Melting against him, she stifled a sob. “Thought you’d not make it in time…”

“Ssshhh… Moved heaven and hell to be by your side,” he whispered, pressing his lips to her sweaty forehead. “Now bring our son into our lives.”

Her muscles tensed - he felt the contraction grip her and she cried out, rocking back and forth, the power of her pain agonizing to witness. If only he could ease her suffering. He glanced worriedly at Yen. “Is everything all right? Is she…?”

Yen swiped a wisp of hair away with the back a bloody hand. “Nothing out of the ordinary. Keep pushing, Ciri! I see his head.”

Geralt shoved her up by the shoulders, she clutched the damp sheets with white knuckles.

"Keep pushing, Ciri!” Yennefer cried. “He's almost here. Push!”

Chessa waited beside Yennefer with a blanket ready. Nenneke wiped Ciri's forehead with a cool compress.

Seeking his hand, she grasped it, pushing with all her might. He leaned in with her encouraging her in a soft voice. “You’ve got this, Ciri. You can do it. One more…”

Grunting with determination, Ciri held her breath and pushed hard, a soul-crushing wail ripped from her mouth.

"Here he is!” Yen grasped the slick boy in her hands drawing him out and away from Ciri’s legs.

Ciri collapsed back against him and Geralt wrapped his arms around her from behind. “You did it,” he murmured for her ears alone. Grinning, although exhausted, she nestled against him breathing heavily.

Nenneke, ready with shears, cut the umbilical cord. Chessa wiped the boy’s nose and face with the towel while Yen patted his rear gently until he inhaled a breath and howled. His high-pitched wail filled the room.

It was the most beautiful sound in the world.

Yen sat down at the edge of the bed cradling the swathed boy in her arms. A tear shimmered on her lashes. “He’s the most beautiful baby I’ve ever seen,” she whispered in a thick voice.

Geralt’s heart swelled with so much love, he didn’t think he could stand the well of emotion bubbling over inside of him. This miracle… this experience would change him forever and the memory would live with him for all time. The boy was so tiny… tiny hands and feet, sweet little button of a nose… How could this have happened to him?

Looking at both of them with the warmest gaze filled with strong emotion, Yen presented the babe
to Ciri. Carefully, with obvious wonder, she took him, clutching him close to her breast. The babe stilled immediately, the sounds of his wails already a memory. Sniffling, she barely touched his soft skin with the pad of her fingers.

“He looks just like you, Geralt. He’s so beautiful,” she breathed. “And so soft.” Pushing the blanket away from his head, she gasped. Geralt widened his eyes. Thick tufts of white hair graced his crown. “He even has white hair!” she giggled, clearly amused.

“Ashen-haired like his mother, or white-haired like his father?” Chessa leaned in with an arm around Yennefer and hugged her. “Suppose it makes no difference, either way.”

Resting his chin on Ciri’s shoulder, Geralt, amazed at the miracle she held in her arms, was at a loss for words. His son… their son. He was perfect in every way.

Ciri hugged him gently, the babe’s lips pursed looking for sustenance. Glancing over her shoulder at Geralt, she smiled. This was the happiest he had ever seen her. “My gift to you, Geralt. His name is Garret. Garret of Rivia.”

Eyes burning, he blinked back hot tears. Finding it difficult to speak, he managed in a tight voice. “A strong name,” he murmured.

“After you,” she smiled.

“I’m… honored, Ciri. It’s a perfect name. And he is perfect in every way.”

Garret’s tiny eyes opened, slowly at first, then all the way. Both of them gasped as his pupils adjusted to the light. Squinting again, he looked around first, then settled on Geralt, staring at him a few moments, then found his mother.

Yen looked at them concerned. “What is it?”

“His eyes...” Ciri murmured, a smile spreading across her face. “The most incredible and beautiful eyes I’ve ever seen!”

Yen leaned in closer. “Well, well look at that. Somehow, after what I’ve seen today, that does not surprise me.”

“He has your brilliant emerald eyes, Ciri,” Geralt whispered.

“And your witcher eyes, Geralt. Look! His pupils… they’re slits - like cat-eyes! Just like yours when you narrow your pupils.” Gleefully, she pressed her lips on his small forehead. Garret wiggled his hands and reached for her hair.

He couldn’t help it. The preciousness of this moment, the beauty, being surrounded with loved ones and a gorgeous baby boy that was his very own son. The sweet way Garret reached for his mother, the way she kissed him… It was all too much. Too much for this witcher’s heart. Tears wet his cheeks, dripping onto Ciri’s shoulder. She glanced at him and wetness welled up in her glowing green eyes. A hand swept up, caressing his cheek lovingly. Turning his head, he kissed her hand tenderly.

Aware of a silent shimmering of the air by the stairs, Geralt glanced in that direction. Staying back, giving the family space, Regis materialized and at realization of this intimate moment, folded his hands in front of him and bowed his head in a polite nod. Smiling, Geralt waved him over. After a moment, his vampire friend approached, yet stayed off to the side just a bit.
“Congratulations, my dearest friends,” Regis murmured. “And Geralt, couldn’t be happier that you made it here in time to witness this miracle.” He looked at all of them in turn then settled his gaze on Ciri. “You have no idea what this man has been through to be here with you, young lady. He almost didn’t make it. Which reminds me Geralt, just how did you teleport here? You knew I couldn’t carry you in my vaporous form.”

Nodding, Geralt glanced down at the baby and then at Ciri. “It wasn’t you, Regis. It wasn’t one of Yennefer’s portals either. And Ciri was in no condition, nor did any of you know where I was. I know who teleported me. But that is a tale for another time. The important thing is because of that man, I am alive and here now. Which makes me wonder… Regis… That was de la Tour who arrived just before I was teleported out of there, right?”

“Yes, Geralt, you are correct. He was on his way to inform the warden that the duchess had pardoned you. Dandelion was successful in persuading her. You can keep your estate as well, however, there are conditions… but we’ll talk later. Just know, you are a free man again, my friend.”

Aware of all eyes upon him, he shook his head. “Like I said, a tale for another time. Right now,” he tightened his arms around Ciri, "I just want to love on my son and bask in this incredible moment.”

Shifting, Ciri held Garret out for Geralt to take. He hesitated. And with reason. “Never held a baby before.”

“It’s easy, like this,” Ciri placed the boy in his arms. "Support his head, like so.”

Drawing him close to his chest, Geralt memorized every line, every curve, storing this moment in his memory forever.

Turning, she pressed her lips to Garret’s little head. Peering up at Geralt, she caught his attention. “I love you, Geralt,” she whispered.

Leaning close, he whispered back, “I love you too.”

Yen rose from the bed. “Feed him, dear. He’s hungry. He worked hard to come into this world too.”

After another few moments of cradling the warm bundle against him, Geralt passed the boy back to his mother. Opening the front of her shift, she brought him to her swollen breast and he had no difficulty finding nourishment.

Geralt pressed his face into her neck, kissing the tender column of her throat. “You did it, Ciri… Thank you for the most wonderful gift a witcher could ever have.”

Slipping away, Yennefer and the others followed, leaving them with privacy. With another glance back at the two people she loved more than life itself, Yen teleported away before they witnessed the pathetic sight of a sorceress succumbing to tears.
Chapter Summary

The conclusion of this story line deals with the matters of the hearts of all involved. Yennefer and Geralt have the conversation that had been waiting for some time. Does Geralt and the Duchess reconcile with each other? Can she forgive him for her sister's murder? As Geralt and Ciri realize their new roles as parents and lovers, they've begun something beautiful - a family.

Be sure to Click to the Next Chapter to read the Epilogue

**Content Warning** - mild use of strong language, mature themes without sexual content, a host of feelings!

1/12/2020 - added a paragraph I felt was needed after Regis gave Vesemir's medallion to Geralt.
1/23/2020 - tweaked the paragraph regarding mention of Geralt's Last Wish and some more stuff with his conversation with Yen

Many thanks to my beta-reader VicOfThor - a wonderful and amazing supporter of which I couldn't have done this without him.
The gardens bathed in moonlight, the midnight sky twinkled with countless stars without a cloud in sight. A gentle warm breeze cooled him after a long soak in a hot bath. Leaning against the balcony's rail, Geralt sipped steaming chamomile tea in an effort to induce drowsiness enough for him to sleep. But the fact was, although exhausted, sleep would elude him a while longer. Far too much had happened today, it was difficult to turn off the mind replaying the events that led to the most incredible experience of his life.

The bloody carnage inside the temple and its courtyard was magically swept away by Yennefer and Regis as if the battle had never happened. The young novices put Nenneke’s lab back in order and Yen had made sure any damages had been magically replaced.

Ciri and the baby had been bathed and settled down for the night in one of the larger bedrooms on the main floor and shortly thereafter, the novices had retired to their bed chambers. Chessa and Yen shared another room together close to Ciri for they kept a close eye on both mother and son.

Sipping the sweet comforting tea, he identified the reasons why he was not ready to settle down. And there were a few.

Quietly as ever, Regis approached from Nenneka’s study and stood next to him. Geralt did not react only to offer a slight smile. The vampire handed over an already packed smoking pipe and without saying anything, brought an identical one to his own lips. Grinning, Geralt accepted the offering, and drew a long pull. The sweet cherrywood aroma engulfed them before blowing out a cloud of smoke. Regis followed suit a moment later. As they stood in amiable silence, neither one inclined to speak, they simply enjoyed the pipes and gazed upon the beautiful gardens highlighted in molten silver.

After several peaceful minutes, Regis broke the stillness. “Ah, Geralt. You’re looking like you normally do again. Bathed, shaved and dressed - it’s good not smelling you anymore. All jesting aside, I’m extremely glad everything has worked out for you. You’re a free man, own a winery in Toussaint, and now have a son. You certainly deserve this celebratory smoke, my friend. It’s the least I could do.”

“Mmmm. Haven’t had one of these in a long time. Didn’t know you smoked.”

“Took it up when I quit drinking blood. You know they say that one habit usually is replaced by another. Here’s to becoming a father. Congratulations, Geralt. How does it feel?”
At a loss for words, he could only shake his head. “Everything. I feel everything, Regis. Experiencing much more than I ever thought capable of feeling. Incredible joy, disbelief, happiness and…” he stopped a moment, holding his breath. “Yeah, and fear too. Now I ask myself if I am capable of being a good father. Being there for him. I’m still a witcher.”

Regis puffed on the piped and smiled. “Don’t think either of you have anything to worry about.”

“Do have one worry though.” Geralt’s tone changed, he heard it himself and surely his friend detected it as well. ”The emperor suspected she was here because of Avallac’h, I’ll wager.”

Regis nodded. “Yes. Had no trouble extracting that information from the general before he left.”

“Fuck,” he hissed. Not wanting the tea or pipe anymore, he placed them on the table. “Knew that cursed elf would interfere in some way. He has plans for Ciri still and I think Garret too, and now has the empire behind him. Dammit. The Wild Hunt isn’t around anymore so he went with the next best thing - the emperor with the largest army on the Continent.”

“Of course he has plans.” A ring of smoke materialized from the vampire’s mouth. “Only knowing about the elf you’ve told me, if he was that invested in Ciri before the Wild Hunt was eradicated, he still has plans for her. Maybe not now or next year. There is a more powerful person in this world besides you and Ciri. And it will take a decade or so before he comes into this power--”

“And Avallac’h will be most interested in him, for sure. Or try to possess both mother and son for his own plans. And Emhyr… Don’t believe he won’t try to get his claws on his grandson.”

“Either way puts you in a difficult position, my friend.”

Remaining silent, Geralt leaned on the rail. “It’ll never end, will it? Always living life looking over a shoulder wondering where the next attack will come from. After we had defeated the Wild Hunt and Ciri returned from her efforts against the White Frost, I dreamed of not having those worries anymore. She wouldn’t be pursued and we could settle down, wake up in the same bed each morning. Live in true peace, but there’ll always be that one slice of danger nearby, huh? Guess I really was meant to protect her, not just when she was a child, but throughout her life. And now Garret too. He’ll need protecting for a long time.”

“Ciri could take you three to another world, another time, isn’t that so?”

Geralt nodded. “Yes, she could. And that’s always a possibility, but this is home for both of us. It’s difficult to adjust to a foreign land. You of all people would know that.”

“Yes, and yes. It takes time and patience, but it can be done.” He clapped a comforting hand on his shoulder. “Know I’ll always be at your side, Geralt, whenever you need it. And you have other powerful friends who’ll do the same.” Drawing on his pipe, Regis glanced at the sky. “Couldn’t be more happy for you, my friend.” A few rings of smoke escaped his mouth. “More than one dream of yours has come true then.”

Quirking a brow, Geralt glanced at his friend questioningly, sipping the tea.

“Come now. You know what I’m talking about. You’re human, Geralt. Oh, of course you’ve been human all along, you’ve just finally allowed yourself to be one, admitted to yourself you can be human and witcher at the same time. ‘Tis nothing to be ashamed of.”

Giving a crooked smile, Geralt retrieved the pipe and drew on it again. “If only Nenneke could hear you now. She’d disagree, always reminding me of my futile attempts trying to be human--”
“And how wrong I was…” Both men turned around and tipped their heads as the arch priestess stepped onto the balcony, her round shape silhouetted from the light emanating from the study. “Oh, don’t give me that look, Geralt. I was wrong. I shouldn’t have been so unsympathetic regarding you. I should have comforted you, displayed empathy, and encouraged you to not be so afraid of being human. I see now that you might have finally let yourself be one, and that makes me… very happy.” Her smile rivaled the moonlight. “Come here.”

Draping her arms around his neck, he bent over into her embrace, wrapping an arm around her. Whoa, this was a side to the mother priestess he was not familiar with, but accepted her warm affection all the same. This was all he had ever wanted from Nenneke who really was the closest figure of a mother he had known.

“You’re a father now, Geralt. Congratulations. Don’t know how you did it, but I hope one day to learn of it.”

“Don’t think I had anything to do with it, really. It was all Ciri, her Elder Blood. Destiny had much more in store for us than any of us could have imagined.” And hopefully that same destiny didn’t usher the end of the world as Avallac’h would have him believe.

She glanced up at him, her head tilted a bit, her eyes warm and glinting in the moonlight. “Is there anything you need, Geralt? Anything at all?”

“No, Nenneke. We’ve inconvenienced you enough. Thank you for the bath and the delicious food. Hadn’t had a full meal in a month. As soon as Ciri is able, we will leave you in peace.”

“You’re always welcome here, Geralt, and can stay as long as you desire. That has never changed. Don’t stay up too late, gentlemen. The morning bell tolls early.”

Dipping his head politely, he watched her retreat back inside.

“Thank you, Regis. For this, for following me here and bringing my belongings.”

The vampire smiled, and nodded. “There is something else I have of yours, my friend. Wanted to present it at a time such as this: in a quiet moment, free of others’ gazes for I believe you had something planned for it.” Reaching into a deep pocket inside his doublet, Regis withdrew a silver chain, its pendant hidden inside his hand.

Geralt sighed in regret and overwhelming gratitude. The vampire laid the medallion in his palm. “Regis... I... cannot thank you enough for this... for everything.”

Grasping his forearm, Regis smiled warmly. “My pleasure, Geralt. Really. Try to get some sleep. See you in the morning.”

“Good night.”

Alone on the balcony again, he stared at the silver wolf-head pendant shining in the molten moonlight. Vesemir's medallion. The one Ciri had snatched from his funeral pyre before the flames licked it, the one she had wore until the crone stole it from her neck. It's theirs again. Closing his fingers around it, he gazed out across the gardens and sighed. Glancing up at the starlit sky, he grinned to himself. "What would you have thought of all this, Vesemir? A witcher became a father..." his whisper faded as he swallowed, his throat closing tightly. If only he was still with them. To witness this miracle, to offer guidance on this unknown path. Pain clenched his heart. "You're the only father I'd ever known. Because of your example, Vesemir, I can do this. I can be a witcher and a father too."
Heart swelling, he sat at the table and propped his feet up on the rail, enjoying the pipe in the stillness of the late hour. After about a quarter hour passed, his nostrils twitched. Closing his eyes a moment, he dwelled on the familiar scent before acknowledging her presence. Rising, he turned around.

The silhouette of long and loose curls spilled over her slender shoulders and shrouded her features in shadows, which he preferred. Not sure he could handle the detached imperial coldness of her glare after all that had happened.

“Thought you had retired for the night.” Thought it best if he started the conversation. Maybe set the tone on a lighter note.

“I had.” Surprisingly, her whisper was void of the chilling authoritative tone she usually used. Drawing a silken robe closer about her, she took a step forward. “I… needed to tell you something.”

He breathed in slowly and nodded, gesturing to the chair near him.

“I’ll stand, thank you.”

“Yen… I’m--”

An outstretched hand stopped him. “Don’t speak, Geralt. Please. Let me… before I lose the strength to do so.”

Her voice lacked the usual sharpness and the slight quiver in her voice betrayed the power of her emotions. He didn’t have to hear it, he could feel it. The struggle it took to speak with him. Still not able to see her eyes clearly, he wished he could now. But opening his pupils wider now would alert her.

“It is clear Ciri and you are destined to be together.” He glanced down at the floor, then up at the moonlight. For a brief instant, her violet gaze gleamed with wetness. “I know how happy and peaceful you make her, Geralt. I also see she brings you true joy. I know I couldn’t bring you tha-- I won’t stand in your way. No, Geralt. Don’t speak, nor reach out to me.”

He dropped his hand back to his side. “Never wanted to hurt you, Yen. Ever. Not before, not now.”

“We had our time, our chances to be together and I blame myself for us not working out.” Breathing out a long breath, the struggle remaining composed was real. He wished he could take away her pain. “I love Ciri. She’s the daughter I could never have. I want to see her protected, nurtured, and fulfilled in the way she needs. I also love you, Geralt, and wish you to have the family you’ve always dreamed of--” a crack in her voice prevented her from speaking anymore for a solid minute.

Watching her, he waited patiently, silently, filling his mind with the good memories they had shared over the decades knowing full well she could read them easily. It might help her relax, recover her will to continue.

Sighing, she closed her eyes briefly and swallowed. Some of the tension did leave her. “Ciri had asked me to help her with the child and in his magical training so I plan to be around, Geralt. After all, Garret is my grandson, you know. I will be a major part of their lives, I insist--” Stopping, she swallowed, looking at him with wide eyes, he could see now.

He offered a slight smile, still thinking thoughts.
“Say it, Geralt,” she whispered. “Wish to hear it with your voice.”

“Wouldn’t have it any other way, Yen,” he murmured, reaching for her hand. Her skin was cool, even cold. He rubbed the back of her delicate hand with his thumb. “You and I are also bound by magic, by my last wish. Perhaps that didn’t necessarily mean we’d be lovers for all time because frankly - that was not my wish, Yen. I would never manipulate anyone's feelings towards me. And I think you know that. Through that djinn's magic, I merely bound our destinies together so he couldn’t kill you--”

"I understand this, Geralt."

He raked his gaze over her pale face, her stunning features. "Our lives will always be intertwined in some way, Yen. With Ciri, and now Garret. They are the ties that will bind us together forever."

She released a slow breath. Her hand shook.

"It’s a different role, one you won’t be used to… but if you could live with this arrangement… I can too."

Silence fell between them. Resting a foot on the seat of the chair, he crooked an elbow on his knee gazing at her warmly. “I own property now, Yen. In Toussaint… just outside of Beauclair. A winery, actually. It’s a large estate. Planned on bringing Ciri and Garret there. It would be a perfect place to raise him for a long time. The winery will provide a steady income once the grape harvest comes in. I’ll operate as ducal witcher as needed in the area as well. So, you see, I’m set for life, Yen. I can provide for all of us. And there is plenty of room for you and Chessa too if she wishes to come along, hell, she’s part of the family.” He smiled. “You could open your shop if you wish…”

“Stop--” she choked. Drawing in a ragged breath, she withdrew her hand from his and swiped a curl away from her eyes, but it was the teardrop glistening at the corner of her eye she tried to hide. “How things have turned around for you, Witcher.” Her ragged whisper broke his heart.

“Never wanted to hurt you, Yen,” he reiterated in return. “Wished we could have found a way... Can't stand to see you in pain.”

“Say no more, Geralt…”

After several tense moments of silence, Yen turned, drew her robe closed again. “Have no doubt you’ll take care of them and protect them. But so help me, Geralt, if you hurt her… if you…”

“Have no intention of sleeping with other women, Yen. She is all I want and need.”

A pale hand rested at her throat, at the black obsidian star choker she never removed. Violet eyes glistened in the moonlight. The faint fuzz of her mind scan lifted as soon as it started. She saw all she needed. Curls bounced and swayed as she nodded her head for clearly her voice failed her. Turning, she padded back into the softly lit study and retreated back to her chamber.

Letting out a long slow breath, Geralt sat back down, cradling his head in his hands. That went far easier than he thought it would have. Had Yen... changed? Grown to accept things not of her will? Or would she find little ways to make his life miserable?

It wasn’t long before the hairs on the back of his neck tickled and his medallion jittered softly against his chest. Looking around, there was nothing, and no one. Only the typical sounds of nature at this time of night. He glanced back toward the study… empty. What was that? What did he sense?
Waiting around for another quarter hour, nothing revealed itself and his medallion settled. Slipping inside the study, he headed toward the bedchamber.

* * *

One small pillar burned on the nightstand, its soft yellow glow spilled over the small bed and wooden cradle positioned beside it on the floor. Propped up against a wall of plush pillows, Ciri lounged holding the newborn to her breast. The nightdress, its wide open neckline drooped over a shoulder, her unbound hair swooped over the side draped over her chest. Either she watched Garret or dozed during the feeding, he wasn’t quite sure for her eyes appeared closed and when he quietly opened the door, she had not stirred.

Grinning to himself, he leaned against the door jamb taking in the sweet and beautiful sight. The window, open to the night's warm breeze, offered a calming and soothing draft and it fluttered her hair gently as well as the lace edging on her nightdress. He didn’t want to move for fear of startling her. So he waited patiently, absorbing the moment. The sight moved him more than he was prepared to admit. Simply too precious to disturb the bonding between mother and son. An intimacy stirring deep within an ache he didn’t understand.

Glancing up, she smiled warmly. “There you are,” she whispered.

Kicking off his boots quietly, he padded across the room to the bed and eased himself down on the mattress edge. It dipped under his weight and outstretching his long legs, snuggled close. Leaning back upon the pillows, he drew her to lounge against him. He gazed over her shoulder. So sweet and innocent, Garret suckled sleepily with a tiny little fist resting against her breast.

Reaching around her, he presented his little finger to the boy’s fist and prodded it gently. “Hey there, little wolf…” he whispered. To his delight, Garret grasped his finger and squeezed, not letting it go. Ciri giggled and cooed softly.

Melting, amazed at the precious little bundle, his thoughts raced recalling the fully grown man who had come to them twelve years ago. This innocent boy… How could he become the avenger and destroyer of worlds? Was he already a witcher? Mutated in the womb? Was that even possible? Would his abilities manifest early in life? So many questions without answers. They were forging a new path… something new, territory uncharted. They would experience something no mere family had ever experienced. Mingled within one body, one soul: a witcher and a royal Elder Blood carrier. An offspring who could become the next ruling emperor, and potentially the destroyer of worlds.

Geralt rested his head against Ciri’s. “Still can’t believe this… We’re parents, Ciri. This would not have happened if it weren’t for you...”

Leaning into him, she whispered, “And I wouldn’t be alive and here now if it weren’t for you, Geralt. As much as the thought of bearing a man's child had always disgusted me, the fact this little one’s your son, makes me the happiest woman in the world.”

He squeezed her close.

“What?” he asked gently.

“I’m afraid, Geralt. Afraid you’ll leave because you need to do your job. And witchering takes you away all the time. I know how it is.”

“No need to worry, Ciri. I have everything we’ll need to live in peace, comfort, and safety in Toussaint…” He waited for her reaction. Ciri had loved the fabled duchy when last she was there just as much as he did.

“What?” she breathed, her eyes grew wide. “In Toussaint?”

“Yeah,” he nodded grinning. Reaching out, he gently rubbed his hand over the softest white hair he’d ever felt. Garret stirred slightly. “Performed a job there recently - actually, it was the reason I almost missed the birth. The duchess, remember her? My payment was Corvo Bianco, a winery. I own an estate now, Ciri. A beautiful vineyard just outside Beauclair. The winery will bring in a steady income and I could still perform my witcher trade as needed. The great part is, I’ll always have a home to come back to at night. That’s where I want to take you and Garret. It would be the perfect place to raise him for a while. Then we could take him to Kaer Morhen, you know, when he’s about six or seven, show him his witcher roots and--”

“Ssshhh,” she whispered pressing a fingertip to his lip. He stopped talking and kissed the soft pad of her finger. “I love it, Geralt. It’s a wonderful plan. Take us to Corvo Bianco.”

Smiling, with a hand to her chin, he turned her face towards him and pressed his lips against hers in a slow, deeply meaningful and tender kiss. “Yes, Yennefer can come too and Chessa if she wants to as well. We’ll all be a happy family, Ciri.”

“So you read minds, now?” she giggled playfully. "Good, because I need her there.”

“She plans on relocating just to be with you and Garret. Chessa will most likely join her. Those two have been inseparable.”

Shifting to the side a bit, she angled herself to get a better view of him. Her grass-green eyes, glistening in the candlelight, roamed over his face, reading him. She smiled, and to him, the sun came out. The world didn’t seem so bleak and harsh anymore. Everything seemed brighter with her smile.

“I’ve never seen you this happy, Geralt.” Her wondrous murmur resonated in his soul, leaving him quaking deep inside. “You’re smiling more now. I like it when you smile. It makes my heart light and I forget about the world.”

“I think…” he glanced down at Garret who had stopped nursing and slept peacefully in her arms with a tiny dew drop of milk on his chin. “I’ve never been truly happy until now.”

Angling the babe up against her shoulder, she rubbed his back until he emitted a tiny burp. Gathering the slumbering bundle from her arms, he rose from the bed and laid him on his belly in the cradle. After watching him a few minutes, he tugged off his tunic and stretched out next to her on the bed.

Reaching in his pocket, he withdrew something, but kept his hand over it until he was ready to reveal it. “Have something for you. My gift to you.”

Holding up his hand, he let the silver chain, glinting in the candle’s glow, spill through his fingers. The wolf-head medallion laid in his open palm.
Eyes growing wide, they instantly glistened with wetness. “Geralt,” she breathed, “is it the one?”

Nodding, he reached out and pulled it down over her head and lifted her hair out of the way. The wolf pendant nestled between her breasts. “Vesemir's old medallion. The one the crone stole from you on Bald Mountain. Took care of the bitch too, by the way.” He soaked in her expression, beaming as bright as the noonday sun. His heart overflowed with love. “Wanted you to have it. Knew how badly you wanted it, needed it. You're officially a witcheress now, Ciri. With your own medallion too.”

Her fingers caressed the pendant lovingly. “It means the world to me. Even more so because you reclaimed it for me. Thank you, Geralt. I love you.” Fingers tracing his jaw line, her lips lingered on his in a kiss that communicated everything she had felt for him.

“Love you too, Ciri.” Something inside him broke. The very words he wouldn't utter to anyone poured out of him like a cascading waterfall accompanied by the powerful emotion that came with it. It left him breathless for a moment. So this was what it was like to simply...feel love. God’s teeth, Yennefer was right. She once told him in a letter he lived a life void of sensation and how right was she. These last years and especially now, had shown him just how much he could feel if he allowed himself to. He wasn’t just a witcher anymore. NO, he wasn’t. He was a man, and a father now. Deep down the understanding that he had become a new man lifted his spirits higher than he could have ever imagined. And it was because of her. His Ciri… his destiny.

Leaning back, she gazed at him, eyes full of emotion. Had she sensed his thoughts just now? “That’s the first time you’ve ever said that to me.”

"It won’t be the last." Toying with her tresses, he stroked her soft hair. "I love you. Want no one else but you.”

She held her breath. "Truly?" Her broken whisper, her hopeful gaze, said it all.

He nodded. "Truly. I mean it, Ciri."

A barely audible whimper escaped her. A tear formed on her bottom lash and she climbed on his lap wrapping herself around him, clutching him in a full body embrace. Arms around her, he held her close against him. Neither spoke for several moments.

“You don’t know how happy you make me,” she sobbed into his hair squeezing him close. "But, I thought... you'd go back to Yen."

Sighing, he combed his fingers through her tresses. "Always have gone back to her, but it hasn't worked between us, Ciri. Never really had. We've tried to make it work, but we couldn't stop hurting one another. Now I think I understand why it wasn't working," he murmured more to himself than to her. "A wise old friend once told us that we were destined for one another but nothing would come of it. I know now what he had meant was that our lives would be forever intertwined, but not as lovers as we initially assumed." Gently by the shoulders, he held her away from him so he could look at her face. "You and I are the ones destined to be together, that's clear and undeniable because of Garret's existence. She'll always have a special place in my heart, but there comes a time when you gotta let go. I want a life-long companion, a steady one, someone with whom we would be good for one another, not constantly tear each other apart. You and I, Ciri. We already have that. We're good for each other--"

She interrupted his words with another kiss, an eager one, a joyful one. “How many times have I had to say it, Geralt? I'm your destiny."
Their gazes locked, unwavering for a few moments before he closed his eyes as tingles shot down his back. Pulling her close, he crushed her to his chest again. "You're more than that, Ciri." Smiling into her fresh scented tresses, he kissed the top of her head. "Much more. And I'm yours." It was the first time he had meant it. The first time he understood it. The first time he truly believed it.

All this heart to heart talk and her closeness affected him in a not so pure way. Burying his nose in her hair, he breathed in her fresh clean scent. "When can I make love to you again?" he whispered, becoming aware of warm liquid dribbling down his chest.

Pushing back away, she glanced down at her chest. "Umm… sorry." Cheeks reddening, she gazed at him sheepishly.

Two wet spots spread on her nightdress at the tips of her breasts, plastering the gown to her swollen curves. Averting his gaze, he swallowed convulsively. Shouldn't have hugged her so hard. Would have to remember that next time. "My fault," he smiled not wanting her to feel too embarrassed. But he felt it. Not so much embarrassment, but something else. Grabbing the edge of the bed sheet, he blotted her milk from his chest.

What she said was true. This was the happiest he’d ever been… so why did that deep seated churning in the pit of his gut rear its ugly head again? And why now? That feeling he never could put his finger on… some sort of deep longing that only presented itself when an image or something someone had said stirred it up. It happened the moment her milk leaked on him… A new mother, with swollen breasts functioning as breasts were meant. Why would that stir such deep longing and confliction?

Forcing the ache back down, he settled himself behind her as she nestled back against him, her curves fitting within his frame and draped an arm over her waist. “Sleep now,” he murmured against her silky tresses. Completely content, she did, and while he held her, tried to make sense of his conflicting emotions.

* * *

Two Months Later

The Slopes of Blessure - Toussaint

Mid Lammas (late August), 1273

Emerging from the dark dank cave that served as a vintner’s wine cellar, Geralt squinted his eyes in the bright daylight. Dragging the creature's body, he approached the vintner and dropped it on the ground in front of him. The vintner, having had waited anxiously for him to return visibly paled at the sight.

“Here’s your culprit. A kurolishek.” Geralt glanced around at several pairs of eyes studying him. “Only saw signs of one so your cellar is safe again.”

“A kuro… what?” The vintner balked at the carcass and took a step back.

“A cockatrice.” Geralt shifted his weight to his other leg. Most only knew of the ornithoreptile by
its common name. “There’s a hole in the ceiling on the west end, a sinkhole most likely, but that’s how the cockatrice got in and made your cellar its home. It likes cool dark places. Adding more light may keep others away, though cockatrices are fairly rare these days. Shouldn’t have a problem again in the future.”

The man visibly shook before him. “Uhhh... that’s good to know. Thank you, Witcher. Is... my wine...?”

Geralt held out a hand, palm facing upwards. “Your barrels are fine. Only a couple were smashed. Your little,” he amused himself with calling the creature ‘little’ for small it was not, “visitor here clearly enjoyed your vintage.” Clearing his throat, he glanced at his empty gloved hand.

“Oh, right. Yes, your coin, Master.” The vintner dropped a bulging drawstring bag in his hand. The clink satisfied. “What will you do with that... thing?”

“Don’t worry, not about to leave it here.”

“A pity.”

Geralt blinked. “What, you want me to?” Grabbing the kurolishek’s limp neck, he picked it up.

The man thought it about it for a minute. “Could have it stuffed... and hung in my...”

“Forget it. Taking it with me.” Trudging over to Roach, ever patiently waiting gnawing on very tall and very green grass, he lassoed a rope around the creature’s neck then secured the rope to the saddle and hoisted it. Checking the tautness, it wouldn’t do letting the carcass drag along on the ground. Having taken great care when he dispatched the beast, the feathers that would bring extra coin needed to stay clean.

“Uhhh... you don’t like the idea, Master?”

Geralt turned, not expecting the vintner to be so close behind him. Clearing his throat, the man took a couple steps back. “Not at all. You see, actually need the corpse. For something other than stuffing.”

“Oh, I see,” mumbled the vintner, “going to get more for the carcass. I can pay you more for it.”

“Yes, I will get more, substantially more than you can imagine or afford.” Glancing behind the vintner, the workers were all staring at them. The man’s expression dropped in disappointment.

“Good day, sir.” Geralt grasped the reins in his fine leather gloves. “If you ever have need of my services again, you know how to contact me.”

“Yes, and thank you again! Good day, Witcher!” The vintner and his entourage of supervisors and workers headed inside the cave to check out the damages.

Caves made great storage for wine and often vintners used them - and often Geralt was hired to clean them out. In fact, his cellar at Corvo Bianco was underground as well, beneath the hill his house perched upon, actually. The set-up worked quite well, it housed hundreds of barrels of wine and the dark and cool climate of natural cellars provided optimal temperatures for the fermentation process. A great climate produced great wine. He recalled the day he cleaned out the cellar of Corvo Bianco before it was deeded to him. A certain bruxa was after something there. Geralt shook his head smiling at the memory. Now that place was his.

Roach shook her head, bothered by the flies then eyed him as if she had enough of this grotto.
"Why did I let him talk me into this, Roach?" Geralt paused as if waiting for an answer. He combed fingers through her mane. "Said a peace offering would be a polite gesture." Massaging a kink in his neck, he sighed. "Ack, he’s probably right. She did rescind her punishment. Owe her a lot."

Fitting his steel toed boot in the stirrup, he swung up into the saddle. "Let’s go home, Roach." Prodding her flanks, she started down the path at a trot getting used to the extra baggage. "Home. Sounds wonderful, doesn’t it? Having a place to go back to at the end of the day? Feels great. Get to sleep in my own bed… a lovely comfortable bed. And knowing a very special young lady shares it with me."

Roach whinnied and shook her head.

"Yes, I know, you love her too."

She snorted, shaking her head again.

"Hey, I know you love having a home too you know, don't give me any lip. You have your own stable. You've got it good, girl."

Chuckling, Geralt kicked her sides gently and she took off towards Corvo Bianco. Wanted to get home before sunset.

An hour or so later, Geralt turned onto the avenue off the main road that led up to his estate. The path was wide and well traveled. Straight ahead in the distance, tall soaring turrets of Beauclair Palace stood tall and proud before the magnificent vista of Mount Gorgon partially obscured by fluffy white clouds. The stunning view greeted anyone who just turned onto the path that led to his home always stole the breath away. The setting sun bathed the western sky in multiple shades of yellows, pinks, and lavender hues, adding to the already picturesque view.

The avenue, framed by rows of purple magic myrtle bushes added a splash of color in all the green surrounding the area. Passing by the vineyards first on either side of the lane, rows upon rows of grapevines would soon wield a bountiful harvest. Another fortnight, the hired hands now milling about here and there would be busy plucking the grapes from the vines. They tipped their heads adorned with straw hats in greeting as he passed, some shouted out to him. He nodded to each in turn. The lane ever increasingly inclined, culminating with his house atop the highest part of the estate which provided the most pristine panoramic view of all of Toussaint. Truly, he'd never felt so blessed in his life.

Passing underneath the white-washed and textured plastered brick arch topped with terracotta tiles led to the manor proper. He did not need to guide Roach toward her stable. She knew precisely where it was. Aware of his butler heading in his direction, Geralt dismounted and grasped the rope bearing the creature’s carcass.

"My lord, master witcher. Glad to see you’ve returned unharmed." Barnabas Basil dipped in a polite bow.

"Something wrong, BB?" Geralt turned and… his eyes did not make contact with his butler, but at the group of… knights milled about his front door. The setting sun glinted off many a steel plate. "What’s going on?" Not the least bit offended by his continued use of his initials as a nickname, Geralt made eye contact.

"Don’t be alarmed, Master Geralt. Nothing is wrong, however,” Barnabas cleared his throat. “Just wanted to give you a heads-up, is all.” The butler looked him up and down. "Oh, dear. This shan’t
do… but, oh, alas, there’s not much that can be done about it now.”

Geralt held up his hand. “What the hell is going on?”

“You have guests, my lord.”

“See that clear enough.” Losing patience rapidly, Geralt unhooked the rope from the pommel of the saddle and he caught the carcass before it hit the ground. “Just whom are my guests? Please don’t leave me in suspense.”

All eyes on him, Geralt lugged the carcass of the rare cockatrice towards the house passing by a few richly attired steeds, their armor glinted in the fading sunlight. The bright colors of the duchy were all he needed to know who was visiting.

Glancing down at himself, at least he wasn’t covered in blood. He glanced at his butler.

“They are outback, my lord, along with Cirilla, Yennefer, and Master Dandelion.” Cringing, he held out his hands. “I’ll take that, my lord. If you think I would let you take this bloody thing… to the duchess… I simply won’t have it. I’ll hold onto it for you.”

Not reacting, he handed over the carcass, staring in the direction of the side yard. Heaviness had settled upon realization of his guests. It was not everyday he was graced by her presence and she came here… to his home on her own… Unless Dandelion had any influence over the matter. The last time he saw her she sentenced him to prison. This could go well… or incredibly badly.

The gruff captain of the duchessa’s personal guard approached and stopped a view paces before him. Tipping his head in a polite nod, he greeted the man. “De la Tour. Good to see you so soon.”

The captain nodded. “Greetings, Witcher. Likewise. You are looking… ah, healthy. Much better than the last time I saw you…” His scrutinizing glare swept over him from head to toe. “The duchessa would see you now.”

“How about I change first?”

Smoothing out his mustache, de la Tour frowned. “She’s be waiting long enough.”

“Right.”

Following the captain, he led him to the side yard where the duchess sat on a cushioned settee on a grassy knoll. The stream nearby that ran through the estate, bubbled and gurgled in soothing tones. The sky, streaked with pink and purple hues, made it easier on the eyes than the glaring harshness of the late summer sun.

Everyone stood their distance: Yennefer, Dandelion, de la Tour, and a few knights. All except for Ciri, who sat beside the duchessa as befitting the lady of the house. Hmm. She had changed her clothes. Apparently, such noble guests played on her self-consciousness. Now dressed in a pale yellow dress with light green accents, her hair pulled back on top of her head, she looked exquisite. Since they had moved here, she had shed the dark kohl liner around her eyes and with some cosmetic tips from both Yennefer and Chessa, her minimalist use of the stuff only accentuated her natural beauty. Sitting next to the opulent duchessa, Ciri looked every bit the princess she was, only now, a more secure and mature princess.

Approaching slowly with a heavy and solemn heart, Geralt made eye contact first with his lady, nodded to her, then at the duchess. As soon as she locked gazes with him, he uttered, “My Illustrious Highness,” and sank to a knee before her, head bowed to the ground. Staring at her feet,
he did not move until she bid him to rise.

Silence reigned all around except the sound of many crickets singing their songs and bubbling brook nearby. Heart pounding, he dared not move or speak. The one thing he never wanted to do again was offend her in any way. He was an arrogant fool before, but no longer. His brush with death reminded him he was not all powerful or untouchable, but as human as any other man.

A hand rested lightly on his head. “Sir Geralt. Witcher, you may rise.”

Slowly, he rose and a knight brought a chair and set it behind him. It would not do to look down upon the duchessa. Sitting, he kept his back straight and eyes downcast.

‘I congratulate you, Sir Geralt. The restoration of the estate is remarkable. Haven’t ever seen Corvo Bianco shine as it does now.”

He bowed his head again.

“My lady, it is a true honor that you grace our home with your presence. May I introduce my…” all eyes weighed on him, “bride-to-be, Cirilla.” Ciri’s smile outshone the beauty of the sunset bathing everything in a pinkish glow. He smiled in return. He couldn't help it. She was infectious.

“Yes, we’ve met, my dear. It is a pleasure to meet the lady that stole the legendary witcher of Rivia’s heart.” Smiling at her, Anna Henrietta patted her hand warmly. “A rare gem, Witcher. She’s riveting with an… ethereal quality. She will make an impeccable wife. I understand you two have recently become parents. My congratulations again, Witcher. When is the wedding? I am much looking forward to it.”

“Next month,” Ciri smiled, her gaze sliding to his. He nodded ever slightly. “On the Velen equinox.”

“That is a lovely time of year for a wedding.”

He smiled, bowing his head at her praise and interest, yet anxiousness gripped him. All he wanted was to get to the point of the duchessa’s visit and put the events of the summer behind them. Had she sincerely forgiven him? Or is she still angry with him? Dammit, he couldn’t tell. She’s guarded, for sure. Her heart rate increased when he arrived, but that could be from anything, nerves, anger, uncertainty...

“My lady, forgive my abrupt change of subject.” He looked at her with all the sincerity he could muster. And it was not a ruse, or a practiced gesture, or merely a mimic of emotion as another sorcerer had once told him regarding his reactions. No. He meant it and had the emotion welling up inside validating it. “I need to get to the crux of the matter before anything else. Please. Pardon my bluntness. I will never forgive myself for not preventing Syanna’s death. If I could do it all over again, I wouldn't bring her to the Beast like I had. I should have considered the possibility. Please know, I never wanted to hurt you. Disappointing you has left its mark on me and I will do my best never to fail you again. I am grateful beyond words for rescinding my death sentence--”

She raised her hand and he fell silent, eyes cast on the ground. Everyone held their breaths, including him. She gazed at him long and hard for a few moments. No one spoke, he dared not breathe. Heart thudding in his chest, his eyes remained glued to the ground. His sentiment was genuine and not easy to express, but he did anyway. They needed to clear the air between them if he were to truly live here in peace free from anxiety whenever the duchess was concerned. If he were to work as her court witcher, it was necessary to know now exactly where she stood in his regard.
"I forgive you, Witcher," she whispered.

Slowly, he raised burning eyes to hers. "Your Illustrious Highness, I am indebted to you."

"That you are. And I plan to make use of it. I allowed you to keep the estate for my resident witcher needs a place to live."

Geralt swallowed, his stomach churning. A court witcher at a sovereign's beck and call… could he stomach it? It was something he never aspired to be for a witcher's life was one of constant travel on the Path. But something had ended. Did he really need to spend so many months away on the Path anymore? He owned a permanent home now, a son that needed him to be around and… a wife to come home to each night. The knot settled and he relaxed. He wasn't hanging up his swords. Perhaps it was all right to embrace this new beginning. He had earned it. It was time to enjoy it. "I live to serve you, my lady. As a knight, as a witcher, and a token of my gratitude."

He glanced up at her then and her genuine warm smile eased the tension in his body. At last he believed her forgiveness was sincere. He breathed easier for the first time since his imprisonment.

Turning, he waved his butler forward. "I present a prize to my Esteemed Lady, a rare kurolishek, or cockatrice as they are commonly known." Barnabas Basil laid the expired creature at the duchessa's feet, bowed and backed away.

The duchess smiled warmly again. Perhaps they've finally put the unfortunate incident behind them.

"Julian, well? What do you think?"

Dandelion stepped forward offering a discreet wink at him and bowed low with flamboyance. "My lady, this is a remarkable kill. The body looks intact, the feathers clean and untouched."

Geralt cleared his throat. "The feathers along the rump are the most useful. They can be sharpened to a finer point than goose feathers and make exquisite quills fit for a duchess." Coughing, Dandelion stared at the carcass with a gleam in his eyes. Of course… that was why he insisted on the cockatrice as a peace offering. Who of all people would require fine quills that wrote more easily and prettier than ordinary goose feathers?

"Excellent," Anna Henrietta began, drawing him out of his thoughts. "I accept your exemplary service, Witcher. You embody the five Virtues we value so highly, as some have pointed out so earnestly." Her eyes shifted to the bard then next to him, then de la Tour.

"Now, I expect to help plan your wedding. You have use of the palace and the gardens should you desire. I'll provide anything you want and need. In fact, all of Beauclair shall participate in the celebration. It's a holiday already, but I'll declare it the holiday honoring the witcher - the brave protector of Toussaint."

A high-pitched gleeful cry split the air as Ciri grasped her highness’s hands folded on her lap. "My Esteemed Lady…" She glanced quickly at Geralt. He nodded ever so slightly. "We are honored and grateful."

Anna Henrietta patted her hand. "Well. That’s that. We have a wedding to plan! Julian, you will grace the wedding with your poetry and ballads." Dandelion bowed low before her. "No need to worry, dear, this will be the grandest wedding this duchy has ever seen."

Swallowing, Geralt dropped his gaze to the ground.
Dressed in finely tailored black velvet doublet delicately embroidered with silver thread on the
cuffs and along the neckline and shoulders in elvish scrolls and knot work patterns, solid black
velvet pants and matching elegant shoes were more than suitable for the occasion. Freshly bathed
and clean shaven, Geralt stood on the crest of the hill. The highest point of his estate - the one
overlooking the manor proper and vineyard beyond. Smiling, pride rippled through his heart and
limbs. Breathing in the fresh, cool but not cold evening air, the breeze rustled stray wisps of hair
from his half ponytail and the colorful leaves of the large tree behind him. Beyond his estate, in all
directions, the view of the countryside blazed in the sun’s setting glow, glinting off the foliage
once vibrant green, now bronzed with the browns, yellows, oranges, and reds of autumn. The sky
was a canvas of colors too rivaling the countryside with yellows, pinks, and lavenders smeared
across the sky by some cosmic artist completed the backdrop of the most beautiful day of his life.

Dandelion and Priscilla, standing underneath the tree strummed soft romantic melodies on their
lutes, and occasionally she would play the flute while he strummed. The music filled the stillness
brought on by anticipation and added an emotive and ethereal element to the moment.

Glancing at Anna Henrietta, she stood nearby, dressed in a simple, elegant gown in chocolate
brown and shimmering bronzes. She nodded, ready. De la Tour stood regal by her side in his finest
and shiniest ceremonial armor.

Nodding, Geralt glanced down at the path that led up to the overlook. There she was… he held his
breath and smiled. Ciri, accompanied by Yennefer and followed by Chessa… the three most
beautiful women in his life. He exhaled a shaky breath.

They crested the top of the hill and Ciri’s gaze locked on his. Everyone and their surroundings
faded before his eyes and she was the only one in his vision. The once lost and frightened princess
of Cintra, matured into a stunning and powerful young woman headed in his direction to take him
as her husband and lover.

She looked every bit the royal she was. Tall and proud, her luxurious ashen hair curled and pulled
up in pile at the crown of her head, loose tendrils of waves framed her beautiful face. Her eyes
resembled emeralds glinting in the sunlight, more brilliant than he’d ever seen. Her lips, stained
ruby from a mixture of grapes and berries accentuated their fullness. Cheeks, rosy from the air or
flushed from the preciousness of this moment pinked as he watched. She glowed from within and
without. Her dress, a simple, delicate flowing dress, embroidered with lace edges hugged her
bodice in a queen like style, low neckline giving enough of the promise of what lied beneath, was
both modest and tantalizing at the same time. And tantalize him it did.

Swallowing, he turned toward her and held out his hand. She grasped it, her warmth shot tinges
through his hand and up his arm. Smiling, he winked at her and she beamed even brighter than the
sun.
Turning to face the duchess of this land, aware of the music and all their friends standing in a half circle behind them overwhelmed him. Turning, he looked at each of his friends, those who had already been here in Toussaint, Damien de la Tour, Regis, Dandelion, Priscilla, Chessa and Yennefer... He was glad to see her, even her tight lipped smile and pale face - how hard this was for her, but she was here to support her daughter. He was grateful.

And to many friends who have journeyed long distances to be there to witness this most special occasion. His brothers from Kaer Morhen, Eskel, and Lambert accompanied by his lady, Kiera Metz. Even Zoltan was here, standing near the tree. The dwarf was partner of Dandelion’s cabaret, and now the official manager. Deciding to move permanently to Beauclair, Dandelion offered Zoltan the primary management of the cabaret. Paying him a grand salary, he had accepted. Dandelion, still the owner, only made the executive decisions while Zoltan carried out the rest. The bard and Priscilla bought a house near the palace and he continued as the court bard and they both entertain together in the entertainment district of the city two to three nights a week. Geralt smiled. A perfect setup for the two musicians.

Geralt made eye contact with Triss and nodded his gratitude. She had come all the way from far off Kovir, pushing aside her royal duties to her king to spend some time with them. It was good she came. Yennefer needed another close friend’s shoulder to lean on during this time. And Triss would always be there for her. Her blue eyes sparkling, she dipped her head in turn and smiled warmly.

Regis stood by his side and he wouldn't have had it any other way. He was grateful his vampire friend had become close with all his friends. He would continue to be a big part of their lives.

Still wearing the Blue Stripes uniforms, his old Temerian friends, Roche and Ves made it here as well. The two were never far apart and although they never made physical contact, Geralt wondered if the two would ever hook up.

Both Ciri and he were astounded and so very glad that newly crowned Queen Cerys an Crait and her brother Hjalmar had traveled the continent from the Skellige Isles to join in their celebration. From what he had been able to overhear, the isles would flourish under her rule, the first ever female to wear the crown. He was so proud of her.

It was incredibly sweet that Shani took time away from her front line medical duties to attend as well. She didn’t look any different, beautiful as ever, except perhaps a little more weathered. Goodness knew what horrors she had witnessed tending to the army’s wounded soldiers. Meeting her gaze, she winked at him, and grinning, he returned one of his own.

Dudu, their doppler friend, was present, finally able to be himself. With the war and racism ever a problem, dopplers assumed other’s forms to stay safe in a dangerous world. But here, he could keep his true form for there were no threats to his existence in Toussaint. Meeting his gaze, Dudu smiled and Geralt returned it.

But the most surprising guest, he didn’t know why it shocked him so much, was Olgierd Von Everec. The nobleman he had helped free from a wicked curse was here too to celebrate along with them. Wonder where he had gone, what he had been doing with his life since he had freed him of his immortality and heart of stone. He looked well enough. Would have to talk to him later.

Looking at Ciri again, he whispered, “You are the most beautiful woman in the world.” She beamed even more, her cheeks pinking with his praise.

Wait… where was...? Looking over to the side, he saw him. BB, the butler, holding baby Garret in his arms and standing next to Marlene, the noblewoman. He had also lifted a powerful curse from
her and in a debt of gratitude stayed on at Corvo Bianco as the official chef. All right, now he was ready. Everyone was here to make their lives complete.

With Mount Gorgon behind them, the mountain ranges tinted in all shades of blue, the sky glowing in that magical way at sunset, he squeezed Ciri’s hand and as the duchess wrapped the silken cord around their conjoined wrists, she pronounced them husband and wife. Focusing his attention on his wife, he drew her in his embrace and slowly, tenderly, covered her mouth with his. The grape and berry stain on her lips tasted sweet and he wanted more, but now was not the time. When they parted, their friends and family erupted into applause with Dandelion’s and Priscilla’s infectious and cheerful melodies.

Gazing at his wife, Geralt frowned. “You deserve a royal wedding, princess. Hope this humble one made you happy.”

Her eyes grew wide and emotion glistened in those green depths. “If I had wanted a royal wedding, I’d be in Nilfgaard right now and not here with you. This is everything I’ve wanted. Wherever you are, Geralt, where you go, there I wish to be. Simple as that. I couldn’t be happier unless we married at Kaer Morhen. I know that was where you wanted to--”

“But, it was impractical.” Gazing out over their estate and the countryside, the sun finally disappeared behind the mountain range leaving the sky with darker hues of purples, pinks, and blues. He sighed, fully content. “Glad we did it here. No other place matches the beauty and charm of Toussaint.”

“I love you more than anything, Geralt,” she whispered, resting her head on his shoulder. As they gazed over their land, he kissed her head and brought her hand up to his lips. “And I love you more than anything, Ciri. Welcome to your new home, Lady of Corvo Bianco. Not as esteemed as your other royal titles--”

“But the only one that means everything to me. Stop it, Geralt. Where is this insecurity coming from? I’ve never wanted anything to do with my royal heritage and you know it. Now let’s greet our friends who have traveled far and wide to be here tonight.”

“Well said, my lady.”

Friends surrounded them, patted him on the shoulders and back, shaking his arm. They all greeted Ciri with hugs and kisses to her cheeks.

Never thought he would ever marry. Strange how he never proposed to Yen. Maybe deep down inside he knew. But now, here he was, a father and a husband married on his own estate surrounded by family and friends…

Somehow he had the sense that Vesemir was near and witnessed everything. Breathing in deep, peace and happiness flooded him.

Yeah, this was the most beautiful day a witcher could have ever dreamed.
Epilogue

Chapter Summary

The Epilogue - Sixteen years have passed and as happy as Ciri and Geralt have been - darkness looms on the horizon. Blood and Wine DLC character Dettlaff (aka the Beast of Beauclair) makes an appearance!

**Content Warning** - Some readers requested another steamy love scene between our favorites! If this bothers you, please skip first scene.

To my readers who have stuck with this novel-length story with me all the way - I cannot thank you enough for receiving this non-canon story line as well as you have. I have received some sincerely heartfelt comments that have blown me away. I am now marking this WIP as a completed work. My first ever story - my first ever fan-fiction - It Is Done. A milestone in my life. I thank AO3 for hosting and for an open and accepting community - and to all the readers past, present, and future - and Andrzej Sapkowski for creating the characters and the world of the Witcher we have come to love so much and CD Projekt Red for a stunningly beautiful game series that brought these characters to life. THANK YOU from the bottom of my heart!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes
At dawn, she stirred.

Her warm smooth skin brushed against his, a whisper as light as a feather, but enough to wake him or at least drag him from a state of suspension lingering in a half-slumber, lazily coming out of an enticingly pleasant dream.

The first golden rays of sunshine lit up the bed chamber heralded another promising summer day. The birds’ sweet morning lullaby soothed the senses. A gentle refreshing breeze greeted them from large open windows.

He remained still soaking it all in. The soft feminine touch he knew so well pressed against his chest as her weight settled upon him. Straddling him, her thighs hugged his hips tightly. Peeking through lowered lashes, he grinned. Very slowly. Long, silky ashen tresses tickled his chest and shoulders. His heart and, well, something else entirely, swelled with her radiance. She smelled of the outdoors, of pine and a summer day with flowers in full bloom, and of a crisp lake in the mountain valley. Breathing in her scent - the familiar scent of home, he completely relaxed as heat surged through him in anticipation.

Leaning into him, the tips of her swollen breasts brushed his chin and lips while her hips commanded and communicated her desire. He responded in kind.

Straightening up, with delicate fingers she guided him inside her, encompassing him in her slick warmth, slowly, seductively… wholly. A breathy moan escaped him mere moments before she uttered one of her own.

A woman in charge of her pleasure excited him beyond measure and feigning sleep was pointless. With a low growl, he grasped her thighs, grinning at her surprised gasp. Smoothing both hands up along the rounded curves of her hips, her slender waist, up her rib cage… he caressed the irresistible mounds of her breasts until little pearl drops of milk formed on their tips.

Amidst breathy moans, she melted into his caresses. Decisively, she leaned forward, tantalizing him with her charms just above his mouth. Lapping her ripe buds clean, he savored the familiar creamy sweetness mother nature provided new mothers. It moved him beyond ability to define or describe. Fingers raked through his loose locks as she lowered her head close to his. He swore she hummed ever so softly. The closeness of the moment, the intimacy it evoked moved him profoundly, and simultaneously exhilarated him in an entirely different manner. It brought him a comfort he could not describe or explain, only that in loving her motherhood all these years had healed that deep longing which had plagued him all his life.

Raising his head from her breasts, he caught her gaze with a smoldering look that stole her breath and the strength from her limbs. Intoxicated by his need for her breasts, coupled with his heated gaze sent her over the edge.

Rocking him, she threw her head back with a triumphant cry, quaking in a release so intense it brought tears to her eyes.

Oh, he fulfilled her and completed her in every way. Even now, after all this time, felt like the very
first time they had lain together in that tent on the isle of Undvik, or their wedding night. Satisfied, she rolled off him and pressed herself close to his side. Her hand sought and found his.

Breathing heavily for a few moments, he wrapped an arm around her. Sighing, she closed her eyes, mumbling, “You always make me feel safe and strong, that I could do anything with you by my side.”

He grunted in sleepy agreement, but his arm crushed her closer against his hard frame. Then he removed his arm and got up out of bed and padded across the room to the large diamond-paned window.

Rolling onto her elbow, she gazed after him questioningly, then got up and joined him. Slipping an arm around his waist, she rested her head on his shoulder. “What is it?”

He gazed down into the inner bailey and courtyard of the fortress and pointed over to the far side. Toward the Pendulum. She followed his lead. There he was, training in the early morning of dawn, hopping and dodging the swinging Pendulum much like she did in her younger years.

“He’s determined,” she murmured, smiling.

“Yeah,” he grunted massaging the back of his neck. “Much like you were back in the day. Better get dressed and get out there. It’s good he’s training, but if he’s training wrong, he’s defeating the purpose.”

“Wrong!” She changed her voice, making it lower, mimicking Geralt’s harsh commands when he trained her on the Pendulum. “Footwork! Wrong! Do it again! What is this the circus?”

Chuckling, he squeezed her close. “Yeah, I remember. But you’re glad now I was so hard on you, right? Now I gotta be the same with Garret. Witcher training is a serious matter. One not to be taken lightly. You can sleep in if you want.” Turning, he grabbed his leather boots and trousers. Snatching a cotton tunic from the chair, he shrugged into it.

“You sounded like Vesemir, just now.” Approaching him, she draped her arms around his neck and kissed him while he struggled with the lace ties. She sighed. “Wish he were still here.”

“Yeah, me too.” He held her against him. “If he could see us now... At least this fortress is still getting some use. Think Eskel might have been here last winter."

“How can you tell?”

“Dunno. Just things. Remember that breached wall outside? Started repairing it a couple summers ago. Working on it now, but I swear there was more work done on it than when I left it last summer. Think maybe he worked on it a little.”

“Perhaps he did. So that’s what you are going to do today after training the kids?”

“Yeah, really want that wall closed up. We have precious ones living her for the summer, gotta make sure they are protected. Not that I expect anything to happen - it’s just that hole has been there for so long. Want it closed up. What do you have planned for the day?”

“Not sure.” She turned and stood before the window again. The sun peeked over the mountain range streaking its bright yellow rays across the sky. Glancing at him over her shoulder, his eyes ate her up from head to toe. Smiling, she stuck out a hip in a seductive stance. “Looks like a warm beautiful day ahead of us. Want to go to the lake, do some fishing with the kids.”
All he did was sigh piercing her with an unwavering brazen gaze.

“Witcher…” she warned. “You’ve had your fun already this morning. Garret’s waiting.”

Grinning devilishly, he unlaced the trousers he had just put on. “Think Garret can wait a few minutes longer,” he growled in a low voice thick with desire. He was behind her an instant later, gripping her hips.

Pointing a scolding finger at him like a school teacher, she narrowed her eyes. “You, sir, need to get your head out of the gutter and into trai--”

She was unable to finish her sentence.

* * *

Geralt crossed the large hall and was greeted by two white-haired boys sprinting right for him. One was fourteen, the other nine. Both tackled him at once. Laughing loudly, Geralt caught them both, one in each arm, and the three tumbled to the floor in a heap of flailing limbs and laughter.

“Ha! I win!” hooted Geralt struggling to stand with two bodies on top of him.

“No, you didn’t, Papa. I won!” Dandy cocked his neck and fisted his hands on his hips as if he were a foe to be reckoned with.

Vesemir straightened and clobbered him, not too hard, on the arm. “You wish. Clearly, I am the victor.”

“All, right. You both won.” Geralt grunted getting to his feet. “Both of you, come on, let's get some breakfast, then it's back to training. I’ll be with Garret for a while then you can help me repair the wall.”

Both boys, their shining green eyes, darkening, frowned. “Do we have to?” Vesemir looked downright miserable.

“Hey, Vez…” Geralt lowered himself to look him eye-to-eye. “You are the next eldest brother. Who’s going to protect your little sisters when Garret leaves for the academy next year, huh?”

Vesemir’s gaze hit the floor. “Suppose…”

“You know this is the reason we make these trips to Kaer Morhen each summer. The purpose is to expose and train you in the witcher way. The way I was trained at your age. Fun comes later.”

Sighing, the boys took off through the hall taunting each other. Just before they reached the tall wooden doors, Dandy shot the Aard Sign at his brother.

“HEY!” Geralt yelled, his deep voice booming through the hall. “What have I told you about using Signs on each other? Do it again and you’re in trouble!”

The boys barreled out the doors.

“Boys will be boys.” Ciri approached with eleven-year old Jenny next to her cradling nine-month old Cailyn in her arms.
Smiling, Geralt heaved a pleased sigh. Kaer Morhen, overrun with children… all five of them. And all his. If only Vesemir could see this now. He’d be beside himself with delight.

“Tell you what. When I finish training with the boys we’ll all go down to the lake for a nice swim. Then I’ll come back and work on the wall.”

“And while you do that, we'll fish. Sounds good to me.”

***

Wiping sweat from his brow, Geralt laid the last stone block in the wall breach and applied the mortar. Finally. After three summers of working on this, he finally got it done. Gazing up at the sky, the sun rested on the tips of the Blue Mountains and within minutes would dip behind them ushering dusk over the valley. Ciri back yet?

The hairs on the back of his neck stood up. Turning around, his gaze swept the inner courtyard. Focusing his hearing, he listened for any sign of Ciri and the kids. They were not nearby. Then a black mist appeared before and morphed into a human male. “Regis.” Approaching the vampire, he and the newcomer clasped arms in greeting.

“Geralt. We need to talk. Forgive my urgency. How are you, my friend?”

“Fine. We’re fine, actually. Couldn’t be happier. Why are you here? I mean, you’re always welcome here, Regis, but you don’t usually visit Kaer Morhen.”

“Quite right. I know what this place means to you and your family. Rather you enjoyed your time here with them in private. But,” he paused, “there is cause to come here now.”

Geralt dropped the trowel to the ground and tugged off his dirty work gloves. “What is it?” Even though he asked the question, watching Regis’s expression turn serious and grave, he knew.

No… not now.

Granted, the time would eventually come for Garret to jump the nest, but so soon?

Things head been going so well. For the past sixteen years they'd been a family. A happy one. Ciri and he were more in love now than ever, their passion for each other continued to deepen. He'd never been so happy and content in his entire life.

Their children were kids, yes, but good kids. Garret especially had proven incredibly resilient and gifted. He'll complete his witcher training at an earlier age than he did. Not to mention how close he and Garret had become over the years. He made sure they stayed close, that he would know the love and support of both mother and father. He was good around other people regardless of age or race. The duchess was generous enough to offer her royal tutors in his education. They made sure he stayed grounded and level headed and he believed he’d carry these traits into adulthood.

Although he alone bore the knowledge and responsibility Garret would potentially be the 'avenger and destroyer of worlds,' he handled his rearing and training seriously without suffocating the boy. He should be on the right path when he goes to the Academy next year.

Glancing up at dusk shrouding the mountains, a knot twisted his gut. A foreshadowing of what was to come?
Another misty cloud appeared near them and it too formed into another human male in his late forties. He was dressed in a long black trench style leather coat adorned with steel buckles. A moth pendant pinned to his right breast lapel was a curious accessory for an extremely dangerous being. His coal black hair and equally dark eyes gave him a foreboding appearance. For dangerous he could be. He was once the Beast of Beauclair.

Geralt pressed his lips together. “Dettlaff. Regis… what’s--?”

“Allow me, Geralt.” Dettlaff raised both hands to show his sincerity. “I’m here out of concern for you and your family. I am aware of the sacrifice you made on my behalf sixteen years ago that almost cost you your life. And for that I’m honor bound to you. I wish to help."

Geralt slid his gaze to Regis. “Help with what, exactly? Not aware I need any.”

“Not now, Geralt,” Regis added. “In time.”

Shifting his weight to his other leg, he pinched the bridge of his nose. “Would one of you please tell me what this is about? Enough pussy-footing around, all right?”

Regis took control of the conversation. “Since Dettlaff is not welcome in Toussaint since that unfortunate incident so long ago, he’s been wandering the world, looking for a new place to call home. Finding it better to not stay in one place for too long, he finds another place to live every decade or so. And recently, he’s been living in Nilfgaard.”

Geralt scowled not liking where this was going.

“While there, he has been hearing… chatter…”

“Chatter which concerns you, my friend.” Dettlaff added softly. “About your wife and firstborn son.”

Of course Emhyr would want to get his claws in his grandson. "The emperor…” Geralt breathed. “He’s coming for my son, isn’t he?”

“We believe so,” Regis looked at Dettlaff. They shared a look and Dettlaff turned his attention back to him.

“But not in the manner you may think. Emhyr has been patient. He’s known about your son since he had been born. Biding his time, he allowed him to grow with a loving family, something he could not provide. Knowing he’d be trained by the three most powerful people he knew… you, Cirilla and Yennefer, he let him be trained until the time was right to bring him home to his royal Nilfgaardian roots. He plans on Garret becoming his successor.”

Geralt turned toward the wall squeezing his eyes closed for a moment. “So he plans on sending an army here to steal him from us? Highly doubt he’d send an army to Toussaint.”

Regis stepped forward. “You’re quite right. He would not send an army to Toussaint. He respects his cousin’s territory too much to offend her in such a manner. He wouldn’t send one here, either.”

“So what, then?” Turning back around, he looked at both powerful men. "He expect me to just hand over my son?”

Dettlaff shook his head. “No, but he is not foolish enough to send an army against you, Geralt. He doesn’t want to further the rift between you, knowing if he did, Cirilla would never forgive him and take Garret to another world forever. He needs her to see reason.”
“Of course. He wants to try the diplomatic route first.”

Regis frowned. “We simply wanted to warn you, Geralt. And we’re here for you should you need it.”

“Both of us,” reiterated the former Beast of Beauclair. The ancient vampire the duchess had hired him to kill all those years ago. Because of his close bond with Regis, Geralt let the man walk away instead of bringing his head to the duchess. He doubted he could have anyway. Now he stood in his childhood home warning him and offering his aid. Strange how things work out in ways you never thought. Like his life for the past sixteen years. Who would have believed a sterile witcher had fathered five children? And all five children had pure white hair and natural born witcher mutations and abilities along with their mother’s gifts as well.

Geralt headed for the keep. Both men followed.

Regis grinned. “Your clan of new witchers are training well, Geralt.”

He looked at him with narrowed eyes. “Regis, I swear you read my mind sometimes. Yes, they are training well. And Yennefer has been doing an amazing job at training them all in their magic.”

“You have a witcher army, my friend.”

“Heh, yeah, guess I do.”

He spotted Ciri and the children heading up the path from the lake. He turned and looked at his friends. “So what now?”

“Now we leave you with your family. Enjoy the rest of the summer, Geralt. Know we will be watching over you all.”

“What about Avallac’h? He involved in this in any way?”

Regis glanced at Dettlaff. The other vampire frowned and met his gaze. “It is likely he is working with Nilfgaard discreetly.”

Knew it. Damn that elven sage! “Appreciate the warning, gentlemen, but I don’t want Ciri to know you were here.”

“No need to explain or apologize, Geralt.” Regis clasped his arm. “Take care, my friend.”

Dettlaff tipped his head in a polite nod and both vampires dissolved into mist disappearing altogether just as Ciri and the kids rounded the corner. Geralt watched them approach his heart swelling with love and pride.

“Geralt!” she called. “See you’ve finished the wall, honey!”

“Yeah, just did.”

They approached smelling of fresh lake water, and fish. “Have fun?”

“Yep. And got sunburned too.” She plopped the bucket of fish on the ground. Indeed she looked a bit redder than normal. Seeing his expression, she shooed the kids inside, but Garret remained behind with them. “Everything all right?”

“Yeah,” he said quietly, though not convincingly. To his ears anyway.
"You sure? Look like you’ve seen a ghost."

"Maybe I have."

She peered at him intently, concern etching her features. "Need to talk about it?"

Leaning in, he kissed her ashen waves. "Nope. Just want to enjoy the rest of summer before heading back to Corvo Bianco."

"Great. Let’s enjoy it then.” She entered the keep, looking back towards Garret who stayed behind. At Geralt's nod, she went inside.

Garret held back still, watching him, sensing him. His eldest stood eye to eye with him. Even now Geralt was amazed at how much Garret resembled him. Like looking in a mirror, really. Exactly the image of the man who had interrupted their timeline back at Chessa's homestead all those years ago, only a bit younger.

"Something's bothering you, Father. I can feel it."

"Nothing you need to worry about, son." Laying a comforting hand on his shoulder, Geralt smiled at him. "This might be your last summer training here. Give me your all for the rest of the season and by the time we're ready to leave… you'll graduate the witcher school. You'll be a true witcher, son."

Garret's back straightened and a broad smile pulled at his mouth. Clapping him on the shoulder, he entered the keep. Geralt followed him and closed the doors with a resounding boom that echoed through the hall. A witcher's and a father's worries never ceased. He would have to keep his eyes and ears peeled for how Emhyr would try to take Garret away from them. As much as he was determined he'd wouldn't allow it to happen... deep down inside he knew he had no choice in the matter.

It was destined.

He got halfway down the hall when Ciri's giggle floated to him, dragging him out of his tumultuous thoughts.

"Geralt?” she called. "How about a game of Gwent?’’

The End

Chapter End Notes

If the love scene at the beginning reminded you of a certain love scene - you are correct. In Sapkowski's opening short story Voice of Reason the very first thing we
read is an unnamed man getting very lucky in the morning with an unnamed woman. What a way to start out a series, right? So I thought it fitting to end mine with a similar love scene inspired by that opening scene. :)

I thought it fitting, anyway... I rather liked it. :)

And... Thought gamers would appreciate the nod to the in-game card game. Just had to. LOL

NOTES: for myself for possible future sequel:

Ciri and Geralt's 5 children in order of birth:

Garret (16) - named after Geralt and the prophesied 'avenger and destroyer of worlds'
Vesemir (14) - named after the chief witcher who had given his life to protect Ciri (Witcher 3 game)
Jennifer ‘Jenny’ (11) - named after Yennefer
Dan 'Dandy' (9) - named after Dandelion
Calanthe ‘Cailyn’ (9 mos.) - named after Ciri’s late grandmother, Queen Calanthe of Cintra

End Notes

Thanks for reading! Hope you enjoyed it. Feel free to reach out to me via Direct Message through Tumblr *use the link above in the Summary* if you wish to chat. :)

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!