More Than the Stars

by Demisses

Summary

A woman born with romance and adventure in her heart. A soldier fighting for the survival of his people. She only wants to find her way home and all he wants is the freedom he's fought for his entire life. Perhaps when strangers from far away lands come together, anything is possible.

Notes

Hey everyone, let me know what you think. Taking some liberties and immersing myself in the Witcher
Eyes of the Sky

Chapter Notes

New readers! Please continue to comment and let me know what you hated and loved. I love to discuss all you have to say and it will help me for when I continue this story in a different way later on. Please enjoy!!!!

The sun shone brightly one spring morning in the middle of Kansas when Wendy Amelia Jones made her way into the universe. She came on exactly the day that she was expected to two parents that would dote on her for the rest of their time.

With a kind and sunny disposition, her parents never failed to spread the word to complete strangers that their little Wendy was special. She had all the makings of taking the world by the hands and making it hers. Intelligence with a thirst for knowledge. The beginnings of a beauty that would make hearts stop and draw every gaze in the room. An ability to see the kindness someone needed even when they were by all appearances undeserving.

Yes, their Wendy was something special… Only not in the way they imagined.

For Wendy Amelia Jones was born with a destiny.

She would go on travels beyond anyone’s imagination, make discoveries that were impossible to believe and yes, somehow meet individuals that will bring her pain, joy, and the love unlike any could hope for.

But for the moment, she was just a girl from Small Town USA, content to read books on history, a love for romantic movies with happy endings, and falling asleep with moonlight shining through her window.

She had dreams of exploring lost cities and telling the story of those that once lived among their walls. Of reading about lost languages and unearthed treasures.

That is until the night she became the sole survivor of an accident. An accident that swept her beloved mother and father from her and she was taken in by her heartbroken Pop.

The love Wendy had for her Pop and his for her couldn’t be put into words. There were days where they went without a word spoken between them. They had no need to speak about their thoughts, because they already knew. Wendy knew that Pop grieved the loss of his daughter and before that the loss of his wife, and Wendy mourned the loss of her beloved parents.

Pop was left with an early teenage version of his daughter’s replica for it was her that Wendy had taken her strawberry blonde hair and cornflower blue eyes. Even her need for glasses had been taken from her mother. The only difference between them lay in her mother had sleek hair, whereas Wendy had her father’s waves.

Despite the pain she knew looking at her must bring him, Pop cared for her. He told her in the way he brought her a cup of tea while she studied her exams or drove her three hours to the nearest
museum for lectures.

She occasionally read to him stories of Troy or the Five Emperors and learned to make peach cobbler just as her Gran made. She learned to keep the account books as Pop raised sheep and sold them to local kids participating in the Four H club and agriculture classes at school.

It was an evening a year after the deaths of her parents when she and Pop were sitting on the porch swing, watching the sun set and the lightning bugs float around that Wendy made a decision. She sat with her knees pulled up and her head leaned on Pop’s shoulder with him humming Desperados Waiting for a Train when she realized that she could never leave him.

Maybe she could go to the closest community college to become a teacher at the same school she went to now. Or perhaps even work at the local nursing home as a nurse aid... that way she wouldn’t have to leave Pop for weeks on end.

Wendy didn’t know what she would do once she graduated but one thing was for sure. She was staying in their small town because despite their long silences and routines, all she had was Pop and she was all he had.

That evening, there on the porch swing, Wendy silently made a promise.

“How was work?” Pop asked from his usual spot at the kitchen table, riffling through the days mail.

Wendy with her hair falling from a slipping ponytail, dropped into her own usual seat across from him. She glanced down at the stain of some unknown substance on her scrubs, possibly mashed potatoes, possibly denture cream.

“Ms. Harris didn’t like the fact that Mr. Chevok sat with Ms. Gumbert during cards. She decided dinner was the best time to voice it and somehow my hair is what got pulled.”

Pop tsked and tossed another piece of mail into the discard pile.

“Ms. Harris wasn’t truly offended I think but she does enjoy reliving her days when she could liven the place up.” Wendy continued, pulling her scrunchie free and scratching her head.

Pop didn’t answer but stared at an envelope he’d paused on.

“Pop? What’s wrong?” Wendy couldn’t stop the knot of worry in her stomach.

“This is for you.” Pop said quietly before handing the envelope over to her.

It was thick and heavy, a multitude of international stamps, and addressed to her. The sender read one Freddie Snope. The last name Snope stuck out to her but she just couldn’t recall why. She flicked her gaze to Pop who had an impassive expression but nodded for her to open the envelope.

Wendy was tired. She liked working at the nursing home. The residents all had a fascinating history and loved to talk about their experiences with someone so young and lacking in her own. But that didn’t mean caring for them wasn’t exhausting.

She wanted to take her shoes off, change into something with fewer stains and turn on the newest Netflix documentary about murders in old timey London. But if Pop wanted her to read the letter just then… well then, she would.
Wendy didn’t get past Mr. Snope introducing himself as a professor at Cambridge before she calmly set the letter down and met the serious gaze of her Pop’s blue eyes.

“Read the letter Wendy.” He said in his level quiet voice.

She felt the sting of tears and shook her head.

“I can’t.”

“Why not?”

Wendy glanced at her clenched hands held tightly in her lap.

“I made a promise and reading that letter is going to make it difficult for me to…”

“To what? Sit there watching me get old and life pass you by?”

Wendy’s gaze snapped to his in surprise. She sat there at a loss for words, while Pop rubbed a hand over his brow, shaking his head.

“This is my fault, I know. I was content to have you to myself. You never formed close relationships in school, you ignored all the universities that ever attempted to even meet with you and now… I’m watching you waste that extraordinary mind on bickering old folks.”

At that Wendy sat up indignantly.

“I adore those bickering old folks, and I have no want to change my life Pop. I’m happy here.”

“No, you’ve settled. What are you gonna do when I’m gone? Keep playing it safe with helping Chevok juggle his ladies?” Pop dropped a hand onto the table. “Dammit Wendy, you should be out there digging up dinosaur bones and finding lost languages! Not… not here in Bumfuck Kansas ordering feed for sheep or wiping wrinkled chins. You have your whole life ahead of you. Twenty is too soon to give up.”

Wendy had never heard her Pop cuss a day in her life, never seen him express such frustration or make his thoughts so well known. But she crossed her arms and tilted her chin stubbornly.

“I’m sorry Pop but I’m not reading that. It was one thing for me to toy with the idea of going a few hours over for a teaching certificate but a whole nother burrito for me to even read a letter from Cambridge.”

“I’ve already paid for everything. Plane ticket is in the envelope. It’s just to meet up with Freddie, he and I go way back when he did his own touring the world as a kid. He’s followed your education for years through me and he wants to take you on an expedition, something about old German cave dwellers being found… See if maybe he can relight that fire you used to have in you before… well before.”

Wendy’s shoulders slumped, and she was sloppily putting together a rebuttal when Pop reached over and tipped her chin back up.

“You’ve gotta try Wendy. If you get there and it turns out that the old dreams you had are well and truly gone, then come back home and we’ll go back to being an old sheep herder and an old folk herder. But you’ve got to try.” He paused and took a deep breath. “Yo-your mother and father did not want this kind of life for you.”
She could see the strength it took for him to say that final sentence. It finally dawned on Wendy that this was costing him everything and he was right.

“I-I’ll go. But I’m calling to check on you every day. I want to know what you had to eat, if any of the babies have been born, and if-“

“Alright, alright, you have a deal.”

Wendy felt her heart twist at the smile on her Pop’s face. A mixture of relief, pride, exasperation, and more than a touch of worry. She sat there attempting her own smile, but it never quite reached her eyes.

Traveling half way across the state took a week of planning for her and here she was zipping half way across the Earth, leaving Pop behind to fend for himself... it wasn’t excitement thrumming through her blood- it was gut wrenching fear.

“Is Anne feeding Elizabeth well? I know in the past she ignored her lambs more than she mothered them.” Wendy said quietly into her phone, holding the hood to her raincoat securely over it.

“Anne is taking care of Elizabeth just fine. And so is Mary, Matilda, and Princess Kate.”

“I really should change her name to Duchess Kate, since technically-“

“Shouldn’t you be tracking down bones in a cave?”

Wendy sighed and looked at the small group of students and professors in the distance as they secured their gear and prepared for the rainy trek and descent into a newly discovered entrance to Pottenstein.

“Just finished hiking from the Pottenstein, it took us about sixteen hours total. Another five hours then we’ll descend, and it sounds like we’re going to be down there for several days. I may not be able to call you till we come back to the surface. I had a hard time finding service here as it was, and I imagine who knows how far below the surface will be even worse.”

“And when you do, I’ll update you on everything that’s gone on with the babies and their-“

A series of hacking coughs came through the phone followed by a quick clearing of Pop’s throat.

“You ok Pop?” Wendy asked, frowning.

“I’m doing fine. Now get in that cave and discover something new to tell me and everyone else about.”

“…Alright Pop. I’ll call you as soon as I can.”

“I’ll be waiting. Bye.”

“Bye Pop.” She said quietly, before turning her phone off and stashing it in her waterproof backpack.

She glanced up to where the small group of spelunkers had been and her heart stopped. They were gone.
Wendy quickly made her way up the slippery hill and found not a soul in sight. The rain fell harder, filling what remained of the faint footprints they had left behind. She turned every which way but only found trees and rain.

“Oh, come one, seriously?” She grumbled before settling on going what she hoped was straight from the last point she had seen them. They couldn’t be too far ahead, but then again, she had been on the phone awhile.

Rain and fog covered her glasses and she shivered against the cold German rain, her boots squelching in mud and leaves. It wasn’t long before each tree began to look the same.

“Can anyone hear me!” She called out in a barely higher voice than usual, and naturally no one replied. “Oh, this is not good…” She whispered. That sick feeling she’d had since receiving that damn letter, intensified. She sat on a fallen tree, staring around herself helplessly.

“I have exactly three granola bars, five dehydrated meals, and enough water for three days. I have no idea what in the wilds of Germany is safe to eat. I’m cold and wet and I don’t know where… I’m going to die out here.” Wendy whispered. Her hands limply between her outstretched legs. “Wait!” She cried out in excitement and fumbled with her backpack and pulled out her phone.

She bounced her knees nervously, waiting for it to power on before dropping her chin to her chest in a new wave of defeat. No service. With a sigh she heaved herself back up and pulled her pack back on, walking in erratic zig zags, hoping for a little higher being help, if there was one, and giving her even the smallest bit of signal.

Eventually Wendy gave up, turned the phone back off and stored it. By then however, the rain had stopped and so did she.

Hunger and exhaustion were beginning to set in and she sat below some random tree, mud soaking into her jeans and boots. She must have dozed for several hours for when a rustling sound woke her, what little light the sun had given was well on its way behind the tree line and hunger chewed at her angrily.

As the rustling continued, a new fear settled in her chest. There was all manner of wild predator in the German wilds. Bears, wolves, snakes probably. And all she had to defend herself with was a little fold out shovel and a headlamp, which she quickly pulled from her pack and scanned the trees nervously.

Nothing. But there was more rustling. And it seemed to be growing louder.

Wendy shifted on her feet, searching for the source of the sound but between limited light and spotty glasses, she was having very little luck. Just when she was at the point of screaming out of pure frustration, she realized the sound was above her and she looked up to see a bright red squirrel leap from a branch to, scurry along it then leap to another, rustling leaves as it went.

Relief flooded though her bones and she lowered her shovel.

“I should eat you for scaring me like that.” Wendy mused and smiled when the little creature sat still on a low limb, watching her. “Shouldn’t you be in bed? You’re likely to get eaten by an owl or something, messing about like this.”

Naturally the squirrel didn’t respond but it did zip down the trunk of the tree to snag a nut or seed of some sort.

“Good idea.” Wendy muttered and dug out her own granola bar. The squirrel watched her with rapt
interest. “Don’t look at me like that, I have limited food. You have an entire forest to munch on.” A
tilt of the head and flick of it bushy tail later and Wendy broke off a piece and held it out to her forest
companion. The offering was accepted and quickly devoured.

“You look satisfied… I don’t suppose you know where I could get a cheeseburger and fries do
you?” A black-eyed stare. “Alright how about, where I’m supposed to go now?” To her surprise the
creature suddenly zipped into the trees, disappearing into the shadows. “Was it something I said?”

Wendy shivered, it was going to be a terribly long night with as cold and wet as everything was. “I
need a fire. Fire will keep me warm and it keeps critters away…. Right?” She whispered to herself
and went over all the steps of lighting a fire, remembering reading about it once.

Nothing she did worked. Her zinc fire starter never even sparked, the kindling was too wet, and she
was too tired to keep trying. Again, she gave up and settled back into her spot against the tree.

Then extraordinarily the squirrel appeared again, right up to her muddy boot, making the sort of
noise that one would expect from a small furry animal.


The squirrel ran a short distance before turning and watching her.

“Oh- do you want me to follow? I’ve seen this in movies. Ok little Arthur, show me the way home.”
Wendy called in an overly cheerful voice. She didn’t truly believe the squirrel was making a
conscious attempt to help her but what else did she have to lose?

She groaned heavily and pushed herself back to her feet, the light of her headlamp guiding her along.
She followed Arthur through trees, around bushes and even across a rain swollen brook when
suddenly he zipped ahead and out of sight.

“Hey!” Wendy called and jogged a few steps before stopping and scanning the dark forest. “Where
am I supposed to be?” No answer except for the sudden loss of solid ground below her. “Wha-?”
Wendy looked down as the mud, tree roots, and rock gave way and she found herself falling. There
wasn’t time to scramble for solid ground, only for a quick shriek that turned into a choking gasp for
air when she landed on her back.

Fire erupted in her leg and she cried out in pain. Looking down she found her leg trapped beneath a
rock. Immediately she pushed at it, biting her lip against the pain sharp edges digging into her skin
brought. With a final cry she pushed the heavy rock from her leg and inspected the damage with a
shaking hand.

“First aid, first aid. What do I know about first aid?” She closed her eyes, picturing the doctor’s
office pamphlets she’d read or the YouTube videos during the flight to Germany. Once she had her
pack off she pushed her jeans to her knees before pulling out the small kit, proceeding to disinfect,
use butterfly tapes on the deeper cuts before wrapping her thigh in gauze. With jeans and supplies
back in place she attempted to stand and found that her femur might be bruised at worst.

“Thanks a lot Arthur.” She growled and glanced at the hole from which she fell. Her jaw dropped
when she found a ceiling not of natural rocky surface as expected but of cut stone bricks,
meticulously placed and mortared well over two stories high.

Sweeping her light down the stone and root walls to a matching floor to a tall statue of a robed
figure.

Her already racing heart sped up even more as she limped around the statue, her eyes wide. She took
in the features of the statue and unable to look away, fumbled for her journal in one of the pockets of her pack.

Quickly she sketched down what she saw. The impossibly high cheek bones, sharp jaw and unsmiling lips. Eyes that looked straight ahead and the ears… Wendy stared at the ears for a long time before finally sketching the pointed tips.

He was missing an arm and it didn’t take her long to figure out that she must have hit it first when she fell before it in sequence landed on her leg.

“Thanks for breaking my fall somewhat…” She whispered. “Sorry about the arm…”

Her sketch done she scanned the small room. There were three doorways, but her instinct told her to take the one the statue was eternally gazing at.

“I can’t believe this is happening… I’m actually exploring a- a *structure* that for all appearances no one has been in in centuries, millennia even. Sure, I’m lost, trying to ration my food, wounded, cold, wet, tired, will more than likely die down here… but…” Wendy felt a bit of that old dream come back to her as she adjusted her pack and adjusted her head lamp. “I’ll have one helluva story to tell you Pop.” She decided then that she wasn’t going to die down there. She would find a way out and back to her Pop.

The door Wendy chose led to more doors with more statues guiding the way. Stairs led deeper underground and many times she was diverted to a new hallway and set of rooms by collapsed stone and other rubble.

She found it curious that there was a distinct lack of artifact to be found outside of the statues. One would normally expect pottery and art to be found from the occupants but there was just… nothing. The mystery grew when the final doorway led to a small room with a glowing pool in the center. Arches adorned the walls in a beautiful manner and she took a moment to sketch one.

If she’d had a fanciful mind, Wendy nearly would have considered the glowing blue pool magical. The silence surrounding her almost sounded like music, a song she might have heard in a movie set in the medieval age. She shook her head, knowing it couldn’t be possible, and the music faded away.

There was something causing the water in the pool to glow, and something urged her to find out.

“But then… I’ll have to undress, and my bandages will be ruined…” She stood at the edge, staring down into the still water. Sighing she decided to give it ago and slipped her glasses off and stashed them in a pocket of her pack.

Someone who spent their time reading horoscopes in magazines would have told her that fate must have been impatient with her that day, for she’d barely begun to unsnap the pack from her shoulders when for the second time she lost her footing. Perhaps a stone came loose or maybe her boots weren’t as slip resistance as the description had claimed but the next thing she knew she was wind milling her arms in the air before falling face first into the impossibly chilly water.

Wendy never saw what caused the pool to glow almost magically. She could blame it on her terrible eyesight, the sudden rush of cold water, or just the absolute panic she felt, stealing the moment way from her but she did feel the pull of a current and she was absolutely helpless to fight it.

It took all of her will power just to keep herself from sucking in water instead of air. She just hoped
that wherever the current took her, it was somewhere with air. She felt herself swept away, twisted this way and that. Her shoulder hit a rock wall painfully, causing her to briefly open her mouth before she remembered not to breath.

Black dots began to blur her already blurry sight and her lungs burned.

Wendy didn’t remember surfacing, of dragging in that first breath of much needed oxygen. Nor did she remember the panic as her heavy pack began to drag her back under until she found something to hold onto. But she did do these things. She somehow hauled herself onto some drift wood and promptly passed out.

There were few things Iorveth would admit brought him genuine enjoyment. An arrow hitting its mark, a well packed pipe, and yes even a day without having to deal with a single dh’oine. Two things that Iorveth absolutely did not enjoy were days of travel spent on the back of a horse and in so the destination in which he was traveling. Novigrad.

Iorveth resisted the urge to shudder with dread as thoughts of Novigrad swept through his mind. A more pitiful place couldn’t be found in the Northern Kingdom, full of zealots, murderers, madness, and greed as it was.

But if Geralt was in as great of need as Zoltan had led him to believe, then Iorveth supposed he would put aside his revulsion for the cesspool and do what he could.

He checked the buckles on the saddle one last time, kicked sand over his fire and led his horse away from the edge of the river where he’d spent the night. He stopped, adjusted his scarf covering his hair and the worst of his disfiguring scar then glanced back at the river to find a curious sight.

He stood silently as a body, half submerged and half laying over a barrel, floated past. He had no desire to get his armor wet and he wanted to make it to Dandelion’s tavern before sundown, so he determined to leave the creature be.

Besides, they seemed to be holding on well enough and would eventually-

Iorveth sighed as naturally, the barrel knocked into a rock, jarring the creature from its security and beneath the surface.

“Well surely they will surface, face up, and continue on their journey.” It took but a moment for the Aen Seidhe to realize that the creature was not in fact resurfacing. “How much ale did you have…” he grumbled quietly and quickly splashed into the river. It was shallow but wide and moved swiftly.

This knowledge caused Iorveth to curse quietly. As luck would have it, the water was clear, and he could make out a dark shape just under the surface. Long hair floated across the surface, Dandelion would liken its color to some sort of fruit he was sure.

Within a moment, he’d thrust his hand under water, grabbed a handful of fabric, and hauled the body back to shore, dropping them unceremoniously. He rolled his one good eye to the sky and shook his head.

If the shape of the ear peaking through the wet hair was anything to go by, he’d just saved a human.

“Fantastic.”
Using the heel of his boot he nudged the humans shoulder till their face was visible. Feeling as if it were becoming a habit, he sighed again. A female dh’oine. He scanned her attire, a frown settling on his brow.

A black jacket of unfamiliar design, dark blue trousers ripped with a freely bleeding wound, sack strapped around shoulders and waist, and boots that were again of unfamiliar design.

Before he carried her all the way to Merigold, he supposed he needed to make sure she was even still alive. He shook her shoulder, which granted him a quick cough of water landing on his boots before she groaned and sky blue eyes squinted up at him.

“L-Lord Elrond?” She managed to whisper before again passing out.

Iorveth huffed before cutting the straps of her bag and then tying it to the horse. Next, he scooped her into his arms and after some juggling he managed to get them both seated on the horse and back on the road to Novigrad.

“N-No… you’re Yagari…”

Iorveth glanced down at the woman, her eyes already closed if they were even open again to begin with. The language she spoke was unfamiliar to him. She rode with her head against his shoulder, drying hair curling and covering most of her face. He noticed the dark shadows around her eyes, and the otherwise sickly paleness of her skin. When a sudden shiver wracked her body, the first arrow of alarm shot through him.

He urged the horse into a much faster pace for he needed to get the fruit haired lass to Merigold. Now.
A drowner dangled limply from a wooden beam, pinned by an arrow through the center of its grotesque skull. Another lay in a pile of sewer filth, innards spilling from the fatal slash to its gut.

Iorveth curled his lip at the scent, wiping his blade clean before pulling the *aevon beananna* from where he had propped her against the sewer wall. With every step that he carried her, his regret over taking on this quest increased.

Infiltrating Novigrad was simple enough when one was alone. But when an Aen Seidhe comes anywhere near one of those bastards of the Fire, particularly with an unconscious human woman slung over his shoulder, more than a few swords would be raised.

Another time perhaps.

Until then the path through the sewers would have to do until he could hand over the dying woman to Merigold and be on his way.

The weight on his shoulder unbalanced him when she groaned and began to struggle.

“Oh God-“ She whispered and began to push against his lower back. After dodging a foot to the chin he slid her down till she fell to her knees and stepped back, looking away as she retched. When she finished, he managed to grab hold of the back of her jacket before she collapsed face first into the filth.

Again, he hauled her up, this time into his arms. If it were possible, the shadows under eyes and cheeks had deepened and there was a blue tinge to her cracked lips. Her breath had become erratic and her body was constantly shuddering, despite her clothing having long ago dried.

Iorveth picked up his pace, having no wish for Aevon to die after all the work he’d put into her rescue. Her head rolled limply with every step that he took, causing him to pause to shift her high enough for her head to rest against his neck. The heat emanating from the contact nearly had him wincing and he could no longer deny the unexpected worry that twisted in his chest.

“Hold there Fox! What have you-“ Dandelion paused with a dramatic wave of the finger he had pointed at Iorveth. “Is this a Scoia’tael thing? I know we’re friends but please-“

“Where’s Merigold?” Iorveth said in a deadly tone.

Dandelion blinked then turned his finger to point upwards.

Iorveth pushed passed the bard and through the night’s crowd of drunken tavern patrons.

The ragged breath that had been hitting his neck had slowed.

His eye narrowed and he took the stairs two at a time.
“Room at the end!” Dandelion called, hot on his heels.

“Open the door.” He ordered, hardly waiting for the bard to move out of the way before he entered the room, his gaze immediately swept past Triss Merigold and found the bed.

“Iorveth! What is the meaning of this?” Triss asked with a voice full of steel.

Iorveth ignored her for a moment as he placed the dying woman on the pile of blankets and pillows. Once his arms were empty he was nearly startled at how high her body temperature must be for he now shivered at the loss of her body’s heat. He straightened and sent Triss a glance.

“You’re a healer no? Well she happens to need healing. And unless I’m mistaken she doesn’t have long. Might want to get started.” He noticed the dropped jaws of both the sorceress and bard, and an Aen Elle watching with interest.

“It would help if I had more information.” Triss finally said, sitting on the edge of the bed and brushing Aevon’s limp hair from her face.

“Found her in the river early this morning, she nearly drowned. Was already showing signs of illness. As you can see, she’s a foreigner and the few words she spoke were a language unfamiliar to me.”

“Someone said Iorveth kidnapped a human woman and paid Dandelion a hearty sum for- Ah hello there Iorveth.” Zoltan greeted the room after bursting in.

Triss threw her hands into the air and began to herd everyone out.

“Alright, there are four men too many in here. Incase everyone has forgotten, we have a war to prepare for and now I have a very sick woman to try and save.”

“I would also insist in keeping this woman’s existence… quite.” The sage added.

“Do you know her Avallac’h?” Triss asked.

He shook his head, but his gaze remained on Aevon.

“No. However if my assumption turns to be correct… she is quite unique.”

“This isn’t another child of elder blood thing is it?” Zoltan asked.

“No. I will wait until she is healed and can confirm. Please…” Avallac’h gestured for the door.

“So, is it true?” Zoltan asked over his shoulder.

“I’ll tell you down stairs.” Dandelion said out of the corner of his mouth.

“I would like to assist you.” The sage spoke, already examining Merigold’s collection of potions and ingredients.

“Thank you Acallac’h. Soon as we get her stable, we can continue trying to contact the lodge.” She began to examine the jacket Aevon was wearing, and the odd way it was closed without buttons or ties. “Iorveth, I meant for you to leave as well. Unless you know how much drowner brain to add and how long to boil it…”

Iorveth gave Aevon one last glance before taking his exit, closing the door firmly behind him. He immediately felt the stares of Dandelion and Zoltan as he descended the stairs to the bottom floor of
the tavern but he ignored their attempts to gain his attention.

His horse, supplies and the mysterious woman’s pack still awaited in the trees outside of the city and much longer, all of it would be gone.

“Pop, it’s the middle of July… why on Earth do you have the fireplace going?” Wendy stumbled downstairs, rubbing the sleep from her eyes.

No reply.

She glanced around, squinting.

“Where are my glasses? Pop?”

No reply. She fought a twinge of panic.

“Coffee, I need some coffee… Pop is just out with the sheep. Nothing is wrong- everything is fine.” She whispered and stumbled to the kitchen. Luckily she had done this exact same routine, with glasses and without. Within moments she had a pot of coffee brewing. After preparing a mixture of more sugar and creamer than coffee in her favorite mug with the slogan, ‘I heart Mr. Knightly’.

Taking a careful sip she stepped out onto the front porch.

‘For so early in the morning, it certainly was hot already.’ She thought and glanced down at her sweatpants and sweatshirt. “Well that could be part of the trouble. Coffee was a terrible choice.”

A cool breeze rolled through just then, brushing against her face and bringing relief.

“Much better… Pop? You out here?” She called from the porch. Again, no reply.

Wendy frowned and made her way to the sheep pens, wishing she had slipped on something more durable than her fuzzy slippers.

The pens were empty. Not a fluffy sheep nor her Pop could be found.

That twinge of panic returned full blown. She turned in circles calling for her Pop, her pitiful sight offering nothing but blurred shapes and colors.

As tears began to stream down her cheeks she tried to make her way back to the house. Pop was just sleeping. Maybe he sold all the sheep and he was just taking a lazy morning.

The cool wind began to come in strong gusts, pushing her towards a copse of trees instead.

“No stop! I have to find Pop! I have to get home!” She cried out against the wind, but she lost more ground than she gained. A sound lifted above the rush of wind, a lilting tune coming from the trees. She turned her gaze to the swaying of browns and greens.

As awareness slowly came to her, Wendy fought to remember the music and the familiar way it had floated around her. But the ache in her body was too much and she curled into a ball, groaning into a pillow. In that moment she wanted nothing more than to fall back into sleep, terrible dream or not.
“What happened to me?” She asked herself, her voice muffled by the pillow. The last she remembered… Getting lost… falling… Relief spread through her chest, briefly alleviating her various body aches. “I was rescued…” she snuggled deeper into the pillow, a little smile curling her lips, enjoying the quiet.

Then the sound of whispers reached her, raising her head as she tried to find the source. Perhaps it was Snope… she blinked her eyes when she made out five blurry faces.

“Oh- hello… did you rescue me? Did you find my glasses? They were in my pack…” She glanced around, her heart leaping when she recognized the black lump on the floor near the bed. With careful movements she fumbled her way closer to it. “Thanks.” She said with a little grunt when someone pushed it closer with their foot. When glasses were in hand she slid them on then collapsed weakly onto her back, closing her tired eyes and waited for strength to come back.

When she felt as if the Earth had stopped spinning she opened her eyes and looked for her rescuers. “Oh…” She whispered at the sight of the strangers.

Wendy almost, for the briefest of moments, thought she were in another dream. A woman with red hair, a brightly dressed man, and a bearded man with dwarfism were all normal, without the out of time clothing. But the other two men…

Wendy settled back against the pillows, ready to see where the dream was going. Then she remembered the throb in her leg and shoulder, the angry twist of hunger. The rawness in her throat and really her entire body. One would think there would be less pain in one’s dreams.

As realization finally dug its way through her fuzzy mind, she sat up with a gasp. She stared at what could only be described as elves. High cheek bones- check, obviously pointed ears- check, really-like really attractive- check.

She glanced toward the other one, the same checklist applying. He seemed different than the other one, at least going beyond his obvious lack of eye and scarring. He startled her when he suddenly moved further away to lean against the far wall.

“This cannot be real… I hit my head when I fell. Or some sort of hazing by those students. You can take off the…” Wendy paused and glanced at the attire…and the weapons the strangers were wearing. “Highly authentic costumes.”

The woman shared a glance with the first elf and spoke to him.

Wendy’s eyes widened as they began to speak in a language she didn’t recognize. All at once everyone except the scarred man began to talk. Normally she would have been fascinated by the new language, but she began to take in the room, with it’s abundance of candles, crystals, vials and various herbs drying from racks.

The lack of modern lighting and maybe even the lack of a television was startling but maybe she hadn’t been found by her traveling group. Maybe some eccentric anachronistic people found her. She turned her attention back to the strangers, finally listening to them.

They were not speaking German, she was sure of it. Her stomach twisted and fear for her safety began to set it. As slowly as possible she began to push herself up, ignoring the pain in her shoulder. The window was just on the other side of the bed…

The talking stopped, drawing a quick glance from Wendy. She followed the gazes of everyone in the room to her chest. The covers had slipped, revealing she wore a black sports bra. With a yelp she
snatched the blankets back to her chin and glared at everyone in the room

“Who did this? Who undressed me? Who are you people and where am I?” She bit out in a burst of embarrassed anger. “I want answers, or—or I’ll call the police!”

The gray-haired elf stepped forward and met her gaze with eyes that almost seemed to glow. He spoke directly to her, she knew, but she could not understand him. When she could only stare up at him he tried again, only this time the language was different, and it dawned on her that he was searching for a language they had in common.

A small part of her anger and panic turned into excitement and she sat up straighter, considering what languages she knew. English, of course but that was already marked off as a possibility. She knew a good portion of Spanish and had taken a class of French once. She had read countless books about languages and the death and birth of them but had never learned a language specifically.

But then he spoke in a language that sounded… familiar. Her eyes widened, and she gestured for him to repeat. When he did, she forgot her embarrassment and dropped the blanket to heave her pack onto the bed beside her. She was tired, hungry, more than a little scared and hurt all over but all that was put on hold for she felt she was onto something.

With shaking hands, she opened her pack and began to pull out items, her extra clothing and toiletries, fire starting kit, first aid. She paused long enough to rip open the package of a granola bar and bit off a massive bite. Several journals and pens joined the pile until finally she found what she was looking for.

A German translation book. Alternating between flipping through pages and taking bites off the crunchy bar, she waved a hand through the air. The elf seemed to understand her wish and repeated what he had said. It wasn’t a perfect translation but from what she could put together she had a promising idea.

“Wendy. My name is Wendy.” She answered, smiling in excitement when he seemed to understand her stilted chopped up version of the language.

He returned her smile with a small one of his own and after some more translating she learned his name was Avallac’h. With a gesture at each of the other strangers she learned the names of Triss Merigold, Dandelion- whose name rose an eyebrow when she translated ‘maskros’, Zoltan, and Iorveth. All except the last greeted her with smiles and nods.

“Where am I?” She asked Avallac’h.

“Presently, Novigrad.”

Wendy nodded, trying to place it.

“The date?”

“1272.”

Wendy felt nothing but shock.

“I- I traveled through time? But this is bad.” She whispered in her native language. Unable to stay still, she started to stand, only to find herself too weak and falling back to sit on the edge of the bed. “I’m going to be sick. I can’t go back in time… what if I spread some virus all of you have no immunity to?” She closed her eyes and tried to breath.
Avallac’h was speaking to her but she couldn’t find the strength to translate, her mind had turned to mush.

“This isn’t real. I’m in a coma. Oh god- I’m still in that old ruin, in a coma. I slipped on the stone and-“ She opened her eyes and frowned as the memory of falling into the water of the pool came back to her. She slowly took the translation book from Avallac’h when he handed it back to her and he began to speak.

“You are in a place called the Continent. There are… portals that connect many different worlds and I believe you traveled from your world into this one through one of these portals.”

Wendy sat in silence when she finished translating. She wanted to stand and pace while she thought, while she absorbed this insanity but all she could do was sit and allow the pieces to fall into place. Avallac’h must have been impatient for her story because he nudged the book with a finger. She spared the other occupants a glance as they too seemed to be sharing impatient and excessively curious glances.

All except the one named Iorveth. He watched with a rigid expression, running a finger over the hilt of his sword.

Wendy blindly felt around for her clothing and pulled on one of her extra shirts with the face of Garfield in the center, before picking up the book again.

“I was hiking, got lost and fell through the roof of a buried structure… there was a statue.” Wendy paused to show the sketch of the statue. “I eventually found a room with a pool of water… I slipped and fell in. Next thing I knew I awoke here.”

Avallac’h nodded. “Iorveth found you in a river and brought you to Triss. You were ill, and she saved your life.”

Wendy looked at Triss. “Thank you.” Triss seemed to understand the intention and smiled kindly. “Thank you as well.” She said to Iorveth who did nothing to acknowledge her. After a bout of silence, she turned her attention back to Avallac’h, pushing her glasses back up her nose. “How do I get home?”

“Zireael. She has the ability to open these portals at will.”

Relief rushed through Wendy and she released a long breath. “Oh, thank whatever gods you have here. Allow me to finish dressing and I’ll be on my way.” She had slipped back into English, but he seemed to have understood the excitement in her voice.

“I must apologize… we are preparing for battle and she will need all of her strength and focus.”

“But I need to get home! I- I don’t belong here where people wear swords and- prepare for battle and I must get home to Pop. He has to be out of his mind right now.”

Wendy wished she could blame her words on still recovering from nearly dying or maybe even interdimensional travel. But honestly, she was terrified.

“I’m sorry Wendy. Zireael has a destiny.”

A tear slipped down her cheek as Avallac’h knelt before her.

“She is a child of destiny… much like you. I cannot pull her from her path to send you home just now. If she survives the coming challenges, she would see you returned to your home.”
Wendy wiped at her tears and tried to think rationally. “What about the portal I came through? Can’t I return that way?”

Avallac’h visibly hesitated before his answer. “I know where, but like Zireael, I cannot take you there.”

“I can go myself.” Wendy said with far more confidence than she knew she had.

He studied her face for a long moment before slowly nodding. “As you wish. I will mark a map, and when you have fully healed, if it is your wish to go on alone then you should.”

“Thank you…” she whispered. The thought of traveling across an unknown land terrified her as much as it brought excitement.

The sage set a hand on Aevon’s – no, Wendy’s shoulder after he stood once more and moved toward one of Merigold’s desks, rifling through its contents.

“Have you a map Triss?” Avallac’h asked.

“Yes… here.” The sorceress handed one over. “What are you doing?”

“She wishes to return home. I am going to mark the path that will take her there.”

“Home? Where is she from?” Dandelion asked, peeking around Avallac’h’s shoulder.

“She is from another world, far from here. The portal she came through is… here.”

Triss set a hand in the middle of the map, halting his progress. “Avallac’h, we don’t have anyone to spare to take her there.”

The sage looked up from the map and met her gaze. “She insists that when she has regained her strength, she can go alone.”

Iorveth straightened from his place against the wall and looked over the woman watching him from the bed. Tears on her cheeks, wide terrified eyes, equipped with zero weapons and armor.

“She wouldn’t last a day.” He snapped at Avallac’h who sent him a calculating stare.

“That is her decision. As Triss has stated, we have a battle to prepare for. Zireael can get her there quickly but it will drain her strength, strength she needs entirely.”

Iorveth cursed and crossed the room in long strides, ripping map from the desk and shoving it into Dandelion’s hands. “You keep that away from her until Ciri is finished with her mission.”

Dandelion looked from the map, to Wendy, back to Iorveth. “How am I supposed to keep her here?”

“Figure it out. Geralt and Ciri should be here soon and with luck this will be over quickly. Ciri can then get her out of here.” He looked back at the small woman bundled in blankets with a ridiculous looking shirt on. “And find her something to wear, unless you want to give the witch-hunters a new target.”

“Pricilla will know what to get.”
Iorveth left the room, frustrated and ready to be done with the situation. As he turned for the stairs, Geralt and Ciri were making their way up. “I hope you’re both ready. I have important matters I left behind.”

“Hello to you too.” Geralt said, raising a brow.

“Imlerith is dead. We must gather a few more allies and then we will be ready.” Ciri added.

“Where is Triss?”

Iorveth tipped his head to the room he just vacated. “I warn you… the situation has changed.”

Less than twenty-four hours later, Wendy found herself alone save for Dandelion. After briefly meeting Geralt, a being with mutated genes- something she desperately wanted to know more about, and Ciri, everyone had left.

She didn’t know where as Avallac’h hadn’t divulged that information, only that they left her and Dandelion. She liked the flashy man who immediately retrieved multiple books for her and took up the task of teaching her their language.

As interested as she was in learning a new language, or delving into the history of new world, she had to give in to her body’s urges and rest. She ate a hearty meal, pleasantly surprised that this world and her own had many foods in common.

Dandelion taught her the word for bath when she made the motion for scrubbing her arms. She tested the word out, working through the syllables, smiling when Dandelion gave a little clap of encouragement.

When she was left with just a pitcher of clean water, vial of scented oil and square of clean cloth, she wasn’t surprised. It wasn’t ideal, but she took what she could get and began to wipe away sweat and grime before collapsing against the pillows and falling into a deep dreamless sleep.

Over the course of the following week of her arrival, she was introduced to Priscilla who took the time to help Wendy dress in her new clothing, allowing her to fit in well enough to make her first journey out of the room, though she didn’t get far. Walking was a painful experience that time didn’t seem to be helping, though she could now move her bruised shoulder with very little pain.

Determined to become strong enough to leave as quickly as possible, she spent a good part of her days pacing the room. The one time that she had ventured out of the room, she had nearly fallen down the stairs. Dandelion and Priscilla had helped her back with admonishing tones.

Without Avallac’h there to translate their language into a common language, Wendy was left scribbling down her own translation book with the help of her new friends. Memorizing the alphabet had been simple enough, primarily thanks to a startling amount of similarities.

When she learned enough to inquire about the map, Dandelion charmingly ignored her and instead tried to entice her with a song. As much as it upset her, she knew she wouldn’t get far with her injured leg, so she allowed the distractions to continue.

She hadn’t understood the words at the time that Iorveth had spoken but she supposed he had said something along the lines that she was too injured and had entrusted the map to Dandelion until she could make it down the stairs without falling on her face.
Besides growing impatient with her slow healing, small bits of Continental language she was picking up, she watched the citizens of Novigrad pass by from the window. Everything was very much how she imagined life would have been in her own homeland, with peddlers selling wares, guards and their watchful eyes, muddy streets and a lack of anything modern.

No planes or helicopters grazing the sky, cars and pickup trucks honking their horns… just the voices of people. She watched a couple of brawlers have it out after Dandelion must have had the kicked out. A man hardly old enough to have hair on his chin sweeping one of the tavern ladies from her feet when he proposed to her after a night of excess. An old man sharpened blades before selling them to a woman in a long-hooded cloak.

Wendy sketched some scenes, having no eye for artistry but she wanted to have images when she returned home. She had her phone still but with no way to power it Wendy was hesitant to turn it on, to take countless pictures. She would need that when she returned to Earth, to hopefully find service and call Pop.

Wendy sighed and hobbled away from the window to a seat by the candles. The sun had set with the streets slowly emptying. She missed Pop. She missed the sheep and all the residents at the nursing home. Her favorite slippers and- the porch swing and listening to Pop hum while they sat on it just like they would on an evening such as this.

Was Pop doing just that, wondering if she were even still alive?

Quickly she brushed a tear from her cheek.

“Get it together Wendy… all these people with their big swords, bows and arrows and- and battle scars will think you’re a weak nilly if you keep crying so much. You’ll make it back to Pop…” Her pep talk did nothing to make her feel better.

Wendy slumped in the chair.

“I’ve got to get out of this room, out of this tavern.” She sat up, her eyes on the door. “I’m sorry Dandelion, but I need that map.”

Lightning flashed as Iorveth pushed opened the tavern door, travel weary and battle bruised. Zoltan followed him in, shaking rain from his beard.

“Dandelion! A round of finest along with whatever is ready to eat immediately. Been ages since I’ve had anything other than Iorveth’s shite cooking. Priscilla! Lass how about a round of gwent?” Zoltan called out over the raucous laughter and talking of the tavern.

“Zoltan! You made it back alive- er did Iorveth- ah yes. There he is.” Dandelion paused his steps when he caught sight of Iorveth shaking rain from his cloak. “Look Priscilla… Iorveth and Zoltan are back…”

Iorveth continued to shake a clump of mud from his boot.

“Why the both of you look paler than Geralt’s arse?” Zoltan heaved his axe and blades onto the closest table. “How’s Iorveth’s lass?”

Iorveth shot Zoltan a quiet glare.
“Oh she’s great! She’s picked up some words, able to walk or more accurately hobble, curious as a little child and…” Iorveth caught the glance the bard sent to Priscilla. Priscilla twisted her hands and sent Iorveth a pleading look.

“And she’s gone.”

Iorveth took a step toward Dandelion, as anger flashed through him. But then he took a moment and considered the situation and shrugged.

“I believe Zoltan ordered food, drink, and was hopeful for some cards. It’s been trying week.” He ignored the glances his three friends sent each other as he took to his seat.

“You- you don’t care that she’s out there in all of this-“

“I’ve done my duty- my honor is intact. Like a witcher being offered a job with no coin- not my problem.”

“The bloody fuck it’s not!” Zoltan shouted, slamming a hand down on the table. “You took on the responsibility of that girl when you rescued her.”

Iorveth leveled a glare on the dwarf. “That is not how honor works. Traditionally speaking, I saved her life, therefore she should be bound to repaying me. Not I, chasing her around all of the North pulling her out of rivers.” His piece said, he patted his hip, searching for his pipe.

Zoltan snorted and began strapping his weapons back on. “This time it won’t be rivers that get the girl. It’ll be monster or man. Did she take the map?”

Dandelion rubbed the back of his neck. “It was on my desk… She left a note. She thanked everyone.”

“Tits on a hag…” Zoltan cursed. “How long has she been gone?”

Dandelion mumbled his response.

“Pankratz!” Zoltan snapped out his friends given name.

“A day at most.”

“Shite.” He shook his head, heading for the door. “You bastards keep sittin on yer arses. If the lass is alive, I’ll see her to her homeland.”

The door slammed closed against a gust of wind and rain, leaving Dandelion staring at Iorveth, Priscilla running a comforting hand on his shoulder, also staring at Iorveth while he stared at the door.

“She’s not my responsibility.” He said through clenched teeth. He glanced at the two bards when they didn’t reply. “I expressly made it clear that you were to keep her here until Cirilla could send her home. Apparently she felt well enough-“

“She can hardly walk across the room.” Priscilla snapped at him. “She nearly fell down the stairs the single time she tried.”

Iorveth leaned forward, narrowing his gaze. “Then how did she manage to infiltrate Dandelion’s room for the map and make her way down the stairs and into the street with neither of you noticing.”
Priscilla blushed and looked away causing Iorveth the huff before lighting his pipe.

“She misses her grandfather. She is alone and hurt and felt trapped.” Dandelion said quietly.

He held the smoke a moment, attempting to enjoy the taste of sweet tobacco before letting it out in a slow puff. He was left with a sour taste in his mouth. He recalled her blue eyes, expressing curious interest as she became aware of her situation. The excitement of being able to communicate with the sage. Her fear when learning just how far from home she was, how close she came to death.

“Your responsibility did not end with dropping her on Priscilla, Triss, or I. As eager as we are to help her in anyway possible. It ends with you getting her home. Ciri isn’t here to clean this up, if she’s even alive.”

Iorveth clenched his jaw, holding back a curse. He was damned if he was going to say it out loud, but they were right. Deep down he knew it all along, but that stubborn streak his mother had always lamented about was rearing its head, shouting that playing nursemaid to lost human women was not his purpose.

He had duties and obligations to his own… but… her groan of pain, easing into a smile as he played his flute… he dragged a hand down the side of his face. “Damnit. Did she take anything other than the map?” He tipped his still lit tobacco into a half empty tankard.

“Er… books? Journals that she sketched in and had been using to translate our language… her own belongings.”

Iorveth shook his head, attempting to comprehend a world where one steals books and journals instead of weapons. He stood and reached for his still wet cloak, quickly pulling it around his shoulders and opening the door.

The rain immediately stopped.


Iorveth squinted against the sudden brightness. “Indeed.” He muttered, lifting the hood to his cloak before stepping into the muddy street and heading toward the stable.

The rain had driven most of the city folk, save Flame guard, into whatever shelter they had access to, so it came as slight surprise when he’d not even gone the three blocks over to where his horse was stabled and saw a cloaked figure, hunch backed and limping in the distance.

He paused a moment and watched the figure hobble in front of a Flame guard who, in a loud voice, praised Radovid. The creature continued for several moments, paused, turned, and hobbled back. Once again, the guard shouted praise for the King. The third time, Iorveth felt a twinge of amusement as the creature was clearly doing this with express intent of having the guard call out each time.

When the guard began to grow red in the face, Iorveth decided to end their fun. He had his suspicions but would wait to be sure before he allowed any feelings of relief. He quickly covered the distance between them, slipping a hand around the thin arm beneath the cloak, ignoring her gasp as he pulled her behind him. She struggled against his hand, but he held fast.

He kept his identifying scar hidden by his hood from the guard.

“I’m sorry ser, she lost her mind after a sewing incident. Hit her head and haven’t been right since.” He said in a placating tone.
The guard sneered at him but waved him away. “Keep her out of my sight.”

Iorveth nodded graciously with clenched teeth, wondering when he’d become so soft. He spent too much time with d’hoines recently. Without another word he pulled her away from the guard’s post and into the nearest alley where she truly began to struggle.

“Let me go you- you- mouth breather- oh…” Her insulting ended with a breath when he stopped and pulled both their hoods off. She looked up at him with wide blue eyes full of relief, and a smile began to light her face. “Iorveth… you terrified me! But I forgive you. I got lost and then it started raining so I took shelter near that guard and I noticed that anytime someone came by he started shouting about King Radovid and I was bored and decided to have a bit of fun and I’m speaking English which of course means you can’t understand anything I’m saying.”

Iorveth watched silently as she rambled on excitedly, realize she was speaking her own language and blush in embarrassment. She hobbled over to a crate and pulled her cloak and pack off before digging out a book and flipping through pages. He crossed his arms, knowing what she was likely going to say but allowing it anyways.

“Ah! I was lost. Thank you.”

Exasperation. The only emotion he could recognize in that moment. “How does one get lost three streets over when they were right there by the gate to begin with!”

She repeated his words, listening for familiar ones and looking through the pages for the others, then answered with a shrug.

Iorveth shook his head and turned toward the stable. He could here her shuffling after him, calling out for him to wait. By the time she caught up he had the horse ready. When she saw the creature, she pointed at it and spoke her own word for it and waited for him to do the same. When he obliged in elder speech, she scribbled it down then frowned.

“Different language?” She asked.

He slipped the pack from her shoulder and tied it to the saddle, opposite from his own. Without replying he pulled himself into the saddle and reached down for her. When she failed to reach the stirrup after several tries he pulled her up and settled her in front of him. He didn’t have time to teach her how to mount a horse, if they were to catch up to Zoltan by nightfall.

Iorveth nudged the horse into a trot, Hierarchs Gate within sight. Aevon yelped and nearly lost her balance until he freed a hand and pulled her back upright until she leaned back against him.

“Oh…” He heard her whisper as they sped past The Rosemary and Thyme, with the gate directly beside it.
“What is that called?”
“A tree.”
“And that?”
“A signpost.”
“What does it say?”
“Oxenfurt.”
“Ah… what’s there?”
“Academy… scholars and artists.”

After Wendy jotted down everything he told her she twisted slightly in the saddle to look up at Iorveth, her eyes wide. “Can we go?”

Iorveth flicked his gaze to hers and guided the horse down the opposite path. “No.”

Wendy pushed her glasses up her nose and sighed. “Right. I have a mission, and I cannot afford to be distracted… what kind of flower is that?” She asked after looking away.

“Arenaria.”

“How pretty… Can we stop? I need to erm what is the word… you know…”

For the first time since leaving Novigrad hours before, Iorveth stopped the horse and quickly dismounted. He looked at her expectantly, watching as Wendy attempted to swing a leg over the horse and lower herself down.

“Allright Jones, just like they do in the movies.” She whispered to herself but her legs wouldn’t budge. “I think my legs have gone numb.” She looked down at Iorveth desperately until he placed his hands around her waist and guided her down. Wendy found it rather unnerving to have her hands on someone’s shoulders, to look them in the eye as she slid down, hands holding her waist. She was certain that she didn’t draw a breath the entire time.

Of course it was over within a second, but the romantic in her felt as if it lasted an age.

When her boots touched ground she let out a breathy thank you and tried to step back, forgetting that her legs were in terrible working condition and she stumbled back against the horse. Iorveth held her elbow for support until she was able to limp a few paces.

When she reached the bushes she stared at them, slightly disoriented with what she was to do. For some odd reason, doing her business in the bushes was different than back on Earth. Was it the unknown? The fact that she could hardly stand? Her dashing escort within hearing distance?

Wendy shook her head, told herself to stop acting like a child, and get it done.

With that business over and her clothing back in place she turned back to where Iorveth and the horse waited. She took a moment to take in the sun setting behind them, the trees waved with the
light breeze rolling through. Iorveth lifted a hand and gave the horse a few pats on the neck.

It was terribly picturesque and romantic and before she could stop herself she had her journal and pen out.

Wendy had but a few strokes drawn when Iorveth glanced in her direction.

“What are you doing? We have hours more of travel.”

“Don’t move! Allow me to get a rough sketch and I can finish it later. The sunsets on Earth are beautiful as well but here… I don’t know… They just seem sunsettier.”

His face was shadowed by the sun’s light but she had a feeling he was frowning stoically. As seemed to be his default expression. She drew a couple of swoops for the feather sticking out of his hat? Scarf? Eye patch bandanna? Wendy huffed, wondering if she could invent a more appropriate word.

“Patch-hat…” She whispered, trying to keep her mirth hidden. Something told her he would not appreciate her humor.

“Time to go.”

Wendy snapped the journal closed, giving in. Within moments they were both mounted and on their way. Almost immediately Wendy felt her legs go numb once more, no matter how much she adjusted her seat, she was uncomfortable. It didn’t help that she had to fight the need to just lean back and fall asleep.

“How is it you come from a world with horses, yet have never ridden?”

“What?” Wendy asked in surprise. Since they left Novigrad, she had been the one to ask questions. Added to the fact that no one had yet asked about her home… “It’s difficult to explain. Especially without coming off sounding as if I find Earth in any way superior to here.”

“Try and I will resist becoming offended.”

“All right… When I first arrived, I thought I had traveled backwards through time to a period in Earth’s past. I thought this because there are great similarities between this place and that particular age of Earth. Centuries before we too rode horses everywhere, fought with swords and bows, and so on. Fast forward and we began to make incredible progress in the sciences. Electricity harnessed, combustion then solar technologies. Medicine that doubled our life expectancy. And in all this we invented a new form of transportation. We call them many things most commonly we call them cars and trucks. They don’t need horses to pull them. We still have horses around but for the most part only wealthy people can afford the upkeep it takes to have them for pleasure or competition. Some are still used for taking care of livestock.”

At some point in her explanation Wendy relaxed and leaned back. Her eyes were growing heavy as exhaustion caught up to her.

“How does this make yours superior?”

“We walked on our moon. Have ya’ll?” She said around a yawn.

If Iorveth had anything to say to that, she fell asleep before he could.

Wendy’s dream came in flashes. Brief moments of children playing and flowers blooming. A tower
burning as flaming arrows rained from the sky. Rope tightening around her neck.

She awoke with a gasp, her hands at her neck. When she found her neck was rope free she let out a long sigh, taking in her surroundings. She frowned at the small blurry fire.

“Where am I?” She asked herself aloud.

“Are you truly so blind without these?”

“Oh!” Wendy yelped, sitting up slightly to find Iorveth resting against a tree, his legs stretched out before him. He held her glasses out toward her which she took and quickly put them on. “I’m not the only one with impaired sight… I fell asleep on a horse and woke up next to a fire after having a horrible dream.” She muttered grumpily.

“Well we’ve hours yet before sunrise. Go back to sleep.”

Wendy lay on her back, examining the unfamiliar moon and stars. “I don’t want to.”

“Suit yourself.” Iorveth muttered along with a few other words that she suspected were meant to be insulting.

When her stomach growled, she crossed her arms. She had stuffed as much food in her pack as she could get her hands on but…

Wendy glanced toward the other side of the fire where her pack lay. Every muscle in her body ached from riding that damn horse all day and now she lay on the hard ground. Just when most of her aches and pains had left her, here she was again, feeling as if a ton of rocks had fallen on her.

An apple landed on her stomach.

“Eat.”

Wendy sighed. She didn’t want an apple. She wanted something greasy and salty… not her least favorite of the fruit family. But her stomach growled again while she lay there glaring at the offering, forcing her to concede. Iorveth was going out of his way to deliver her home, so she wouldn’t fuss at him about food.

With her stomach satisfied for the moment she tilted her gaze over to Iorveth, kinder thoughts now filling her mind. She felt he must be quite the hero, having such a scar. She couldn’t help wondering how it happened… did he partake in some great battle? Taken prisoner? The possibilities were endless and she wanted to know desperately.

Black hair peaked from beneath the ‘patch-hat’, and a vine like tattoo traveled up his neck. With one green eye visible, chiseled bone structure, dashing scar with hints of a tragic past… she knew it was depthless of her, but she realized as she lay there watching him as he slept… she just might have a thing for him.

Wendy dragged a hand down her face, knocking her glasses askew.

It was pathetic of her to allow herself to stoop so low… she was a modern woman, with a stable job that while not her dream job, she was damn good at it and enjoyed. She helped Pop raise sheep and handled all the finances. But that was the extent of her life. She never felt the need to act wild and party.

She had needs of a more carnal flavor but outside of telling Aaron that Coach Lewis was looking for
him back in the ninth grade, she’d never even come close to flirting. And now here she was drooling over high cheekbones and an indomitable personality.

It’s like she wanted to get hurt… of course that was another pathetic line of thinking… who knows a guy for a total of six hours and is already preparing for heartbreak.

Wendy rolled her eyes to herself. She would just have to get home as soon as possible, and get her life back on track.

Nearly, just nearly, the smile Iorveth had been fighting since Aevon awoke, escaped. It seemed as if there was an end to her seemingly endless supply of sunny disposition. Lack of sleep and missing meals had quite the effect on her.

When she sighed and rolled around for the fifth time, he decided to have a little mercy on her and offer some distraction, after all it had worked once before.

“Tell me more about the similarities between our worlds?”

His voice must have startled her for she twisted quickly to stare at him.

“You’re awake…” She said quietly, blinking several times.

“As are you.” He grew… curious when a blush spread across her cheeks and she looked away. Her hair gleamed in the firelight and he was near enough to see a dusting of freckles across her nose, no doubt the result of so much time in the sun.

He waited while she maneuvered herself carefully to sit more comfortably beside him.

“The similarities are something which I have thought about a great deal. I’m not an astronomer but the likelihood of viable planets to sustain life are unknowable at this point. I’m not very well versed in the outer sciences… I was more focused on Earth’s history. And I’d barely scratched the surface on that…” She paused and glanced up at him, pushing her glasses up her nose. “Sorry… that wasn’t what you asked.”

Iorveth continued to watch her from the corner of his eye.

“Avalac’h knew about other worlds already… is it common knowledge? On Earth we know of many planets but have never found one which was inhabited with sentient beings, or any life form at that. We knew the possibility was there but had yet to find evidence. I’m still not convinced that this is real. More likely I suffered major head trauma when I fell the first time.”

“The Sage would be better able to answer your questions. Yes, it is known that there are other worlds and walks of life but like you my expertise lies… elsewhere.”

“Right. So back to our similarities… we both have the same foods and animals from what I’ve seen so far. Hmmm oxygen, atmosphere, water… I don’t know about the elements here and chemistry was never my favorite class in school but I see weapons and armor made of steel and culture that is a mix of middle and renaissance ages. On Earth most countries have moved on to democratic governments and anyone with a royal title is more for appearances and novelty. A few monarchs have power but mostly we have elected officials now. Not a terribly perfect system either as corruption still happens but…” She paused to yawn. “We’ve explored most corners of the land with the exceptions to the deepest oceans and the ice shelves… the deep rain forests. Every day we uncover
more of our history, the evolution of life, the growth of civilization and now we’ve turned our eye to beyond earth.”

A sudden weight settled on his shoulder.

“I almost wish I had more time, the ability to map where your world is in relation to mine, to uncover the whys and where’s. I want to know everything about this world, to see every mountain and ocean. Every detail of history but… there just isn’t time.”

Iorveth had to admit to himself that he shared a sense of… curiosity.

“What of your people?"

There was a long pause and he began to wonder if she had finally fallen asleep. He was on the verge of easing her from his shoulder when she spoke again.

“They’re… people. They’re beautiful and awful at the same time. Manipulative and charitable. People are a series of conflicting virtues, always have been.”

“I meant are there Aen Seidhe? Dwarves, Halflings to name a few.”

“Oh… we have legends of elves, originating from Germany which makes sense… that’s where I found the ruins and the portal. We have humans that carry the genetics that cause dwarfism, but they are human. One of the differences between our worlds I suppose. As for Halflings, I’m not certain as I’ve not seen one.”

“A world just for dh’oine…” Iorveth wandered if he could lobby to send all of the bastards to this far off world with the promise of wealth and power, to find a way to destroy their way back. After centuries of being slaughtered he would at last be taking his home back from their grasping fingers. Not all of them would go of course but the greediest of the lot would… the rest would be easy enough to control.

He scoffed and rested his head back against the tree.

“Fanciful dream.” He whispered. There was little doubt in his mind the sort of life he was doomed to live. The infinite battle to end the suppression and open annihilation of his people, and there were no swift solutions. Luring millions of dh’oine into traveling to a new world… he nearly let out self-loathing laugh.

Aevon heaved a long sigh, her arm came to rest across his waist and she leaned against him heavily, drawing his gaze. Her glasses were slipping from her downturned face and copper blonde hair covered her cheek. He thought briefly on the way she used whatever words she’d learned from Dandelion or himself, filling in words which she didn’t with her own. It complicated their understanding, but he rather enjoyed her own unique blend of the three.

He shook his head with a huff.

Iorveth was riddled with conflicting emotions. His instinct was to despise her, to place every atrocity that her people had forced onto his, at her feet and demand that she answer for it. The damned rational part of him argued that she wasn’t a part of such cruelties and to be honest, it sounded as if she came from a world that didn’t know such nightmares. To have such a fragile innocence… Iorveth had to ask himself what he was getting himself into.

He shouldn’t allow himself to feel such pleasure and comfort from the weight of her body against his… it had been too long, that was the only explanation he would accept.
“Damn Witcher.” He whispered, watching the fire die down to red embers. If it hadn’t been for Geralt, he would still be preparing for his assault on Vizima, working to free his people.

Instead…

He felt twisted inside. A desperate appetite and the only way to stop it was to get this woman back to her side of the universe and hope that it was far enough away.

“Aevon- wake up.”

Wendy pushed at the hand roughly shaking her shoulder. “Bite me…” She muttered and curled into a tighter ball.

A yelp escaped her when she felt herself being dragged, her eyes popping open. Her hands fought for purchase on the hand twisted in the back of her shirt. She heard a rip, doubling her fear and she opened her mouth to scream. It never came for Iorveth dropped her behind a tree and knelt to her level.

“Stay here and stay quiet. Don’t move.” The seriousness in his gaze and the clench of his jaw didn’t leave much room for questions but she managed a jerky nod.

Without another word of explanation he stood and swiftly pulled himself into the tree limbs above her. Wendy twisted to watch him move from limb to limb, fear and confusion still clouded her mind and yet the sound of raucous laughter registered.

Slowly Wendy peeked around the tree to see four men with dirty faces and battered armor walk into their camp. One broke away to study the dead fire while the other three began to dig through hers and Iorveth’s belongings, frightening the horse.

“You sure this is him?”

“That’s his horse. Grey with black socks. Fire’s still warm, he can’t be far off.”

“Not just a he, look here.” One of the men called out, swinging a pair of her underwear above his head.

Wendy felt her face burn while the intruders laughed loudly.

“Now we know where the son of a whore’s at. Ploughing his own whore out in the bushes.”

Laughter roared through the trees.

“Anything of worth in there?”

“Naw just food and books.” He dropped the books and journals into the dirt. “What’s this?”

Wendy felt horror spread through her when she saw her phone in one of the men’s possession, and when he started to bend it, she lost herself to her panic. That was her best means of making it home once she had her feet planted firmly back on Earth.

“Stop it!” She shouted, pushing herself around the tree. She limped to the man holding her phone and snatched it away from him, then proceeded to pile her books and clothing in her arms. “Do they not teach manners here? You don’t touch a ladies belongings, you don’t throw books into the dirt,
and you don’t touch someone’s phone!”

“What did she say?” One of the men asked, not taking his eyes from her. The others took a step closer to her, heads tilted in confusion.

Wendy took a nervous step back. “If we were on Earth, I’d be calling the police on you, but seeing as we’re not, I’ll settle for demanding that you leave.” They took another step. “Now.” She begged her voice to stay steady but failed miserably.

“We’re not here to hurt such a pretty lass as yourself. Tell us where the Scoia’tael butcher is and we’ll be on our way.”

Wendy frowned up at the man speaking to her. “Who?”

His forced smile didn’t reach his eyes as he leaned down to meet her wide eyed stare. “Iorveth.” He hissed.

“Why do-“ Wendy cut herself off too late, but she recognized her mistake immediately.

“Now don’t grow shy on me.” He sneered, taking another step forward, forcing her back to hit the tree.

Wendy felt she was going to be sick, but she pressed her lips together tightly and forced herself from looking up into the tree above.

“Hunting. He’s hunting.” She whispered once she had control of her reactions.

“Then we better-“ He cut off when a sword blade pressed into this throat after Iorveth dropped from the tree, landing silently behind him.

Wendy dropped everything in her arms, her shaking hands flying up to cover her mouth when a trickle of blood ran down the man’s throat, his eyes wide and frightened staring into hers.

“Drop the knife and I’ll consider allowing you and your men to live.”

Wendy chanced a look at the three other men, their swords drawn while they waited for instruction from their leader. She met Iorveth’s gaze next and the cold hatred that faced her froze her more than the four intruders.

She wanted nothing more than for this to be over, for the men to drop their weapons and leave. She wanted to pack her stuff and leave in the opposite direction, not stopping until she found herself back on her porch swing.

When the man threw a lethal looking knife that she hadn’t even realized he was holding into the dirt, her relief was marginal and short lived. As he raised his hands and ordered his men to do the same, Iorveth narrowed his eye and Wendy just knew…

She shook her head, the words to plea for their lives barely on her lips, yet Iorveth swiftly pulled his blade across the man’s throat. His blood doused her shirt, hot and thick, soaking the white linen immediately. Blood shot eyes remained locked on hers as he slumped to his knees while, much like the dying man, she struggled to breath.

Within the time it took for Iorveth to finish off the other three, he was dead at her feet and all she could do was turn away and heave into the grass. The scent of blood and body fluid saturated the air, the gasp of one of the men could still be heard until it stopped abruptly on a cry of pain.
Adrenaline, panic, and horror had her body shaking to the point she could no longer stand and she slid down the tree when her heaves subsided. She wrapped her arms around her waist, staring at the blood draining from the dead man beside her, tears streaming down her face.

Eventually she dragged her gaze to follow Iorveth as he examined each man’s weapons and armor. He pulled a bracer from the arm of one of the bodies and pulled it onto his arm, lacing it quickly. Next he unbuckled the leather vest, rolled the body out of it and held it out to her.

Wendy froze, her eyes locked on his outstretched hand.

“Put this on, it’s the only armor that will even come close to fitting you.” He said gruffly.

Wendy met his gaze, brushing a tear from her cheek. She didn’t want to put on a dead man’s armor. How, she wondered, could someone with such beauty and heroism do something so cold? She wanted to ask him plainly, why? The man had done as told and yet still…

Iorveth sighed and moved to put the vest on her himself but stopped when she jerked it away from him and did it herself. If it got her out of here quicker, she would do what she had to, she resolved. She sat silently while he finished looting the bodies for whatever was useful, primarily food and coin.

A few moments later, Wendy forced her body into mounting the horse by herself and sat with a stiff back while Iorveth took his place on the horse behind her. As they left the horrific scene behind, she couldn’t help sending one last look at the bodies left where they had fallen, the gentle glow of a sunrise glinting off their armor.

What kind of world had she fallen into… this world with its beauty and diverse life. A world where elves existed, magic wasn’t and illusion, and portals were links through the cosmos. And a startling cruelty that she’d only just had her first taste of.

Suddenly, this world… this hero of hers no longer felt like a dream to her. At last she was very much aware that there was a darkness in this fairytale.
Wendy missed the kind of silence where after a long day, she and Pop did their chores, made dinner, and settled down for the evening with never a word said. There was no need to fill the air with mundane going-ons’ of the day. They each knew if there was no reason to talk, then enjoy the silence. Spend the time being in the presence of a loved one with your thoughts to yourself.

That was not the kind of silence which Wendy was suffering now. There was a great deal that she wanted to say, no, better yet yell. She wanted to vent her fear and anger at the man behind her, to tell him that this distrust she felt with him was his fault. She’d built up this heroic image of him and in the span of one moment, he had completely obliterated it. She’d watched four men die in a bloody and horrific way. Could smell the blood staining her shirt, and how it was making her sick to her still empty stomach.

But she didn’t.

She swallowed the words and struggled to find a way to break the unbearable silence. If it wasn’t the comfortable quiet she enjoyed with Pop, then she would try to fill it.

An hour passed.

Then another before she found a suitable ice breaker for attempting to get past watching someone you trusted murder four people.

“What is the name of your horse.” She asked in a hoarse voice.

“He doesn’t have one.” Iorveth answered immediately.

“Why not? Everything deserves a name.”

“He may have had one given to him by the Temerian soldier I slew on my way to Novigrad.” Iorveth stated.

Wendy flinched, as her heart sunk ever farther. To draw herself from tears she focused on naming the giant beast. “Sorry I asked. Xalvador.” She whispered, leaning forward to run a hand down the black mane. “Pleasure to meet you Xalvador.”

“Xalvador?”
“It means savior.”

The silence stretched again until an idea came to Wendy.

Speaking in her own language, “Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition, seemed to unite some of the best blessings of existence, and had lived nearly twenty-one years in the world with very little to distress or vex her.” Wendy paused her recitation to pull the worn map from her belt with little bags and compartments. “She was the youngest of the two daughters of a most affectionate, indulgent father, and had, in consequence of her sister’s marriage, been mistress of his house from a very early period.”

“What are you doing?”

“I’m studying the map while reciting my favorite novel.”

“You have it memorized? A novel. Memorized.”

Wendy gave a sniff, and chose to ignore him. Instead she searched for landmarks but only found dense forests.

“Her mother had died too long ago for her to have more than an indistinct remembrance of her caresses, and her place had been supplied by an excellent woman as governess, who had fallen little short of a mother in affection.”

“Why is it your favorite?”

“Emma spends her life trying to help the people she cares about find love and security-“ Wendy cut off when she realized she was about to delve into sharing intimate information about herself.

“Are you truly so angry about the loss of a few murderous humans? You did not know them-”

“I want off. Now. Xalvador, please stop walking.” Wendy cut him off and once he reigned in the horse to a stop, she pushed his arms from around her. In a rush to be free of him she slid off sideways, letting out a yelp of pain when most of her weight landed on her still healing leg.

“Aevon… get back on the horse.” Iorveth said between clenched teeth, watching while she pulled herself back to standing.

“My name- is Wendy. His name is Xalvador. And I’d rather walk.”

“You will ride.”

Wendy was spoiling for a fight, she knew this. Knew if she antagonized him, perhaps he would take his sword to her too, and the thought both terrified her and fed her anger together. She shouldn’t have to be afraid and was unused to the feeling. Before she said something more, she returned to comforting herself.

“Sixteen years had Miss Taylor been in Mr. Woodhouse’s family, less as a governess than a friend, very fond of both daughters, but particularly of Emma. Between them it was more the intimacy of sisters. Even before Miss Taylor had ceased to hold the nominal office of-“

She limped her way down the path until Iorveth pulled Xalvador to a stop in front of her, blocking her path and she glared up at him angrily but he spoke before she could demand he move.

“I have soldiers to lead, a people to save from the brink of annihilation. And instead I’m escorting a
human to the other side of the North. I don’t wish to use force on you but I will if necessary.”

Wendy blinked in surprise. “What do you mean annihilation?”

“Not your concern. You only have to follow directions such as, ‘get one the horse’, and I’ll be able to get back to my life’s work all the quicker.”

Wendy set her hands to her hips and did her best sneer, to match his fury with her own. “I never asked you to deliver me anywhere. Am I grateful that you went out of your precious way to save my life? One hundred percent yes. If you feel some sort of misplaced obligation to be here when you have somewhere more important, then I absolve you.”

“You would rather risk rape and murder than be in my presence, you mean.”

Wendy stared at him with a dropped jaw until her shock wore off.

“Do not think yourself the victim Iorveth! I thought you to be someone with honor and integrity! Those men had done as you said and dropped their weapons!” Wendy’s voice raised and the tender threads holding her emotions together began to fray. “You murdered them!” She brushed a tear from her cheek.

“As they would have done to you… eventually.”

“You don’t know that.”

Iorveth looked away with a laugh so cold and humorless she could hardly consider it as one.

“Believe me Aevon… I know. Perhaps things are different where you come from but here… no one is innocent. Not the frailest grandmother, not fairest maiden.”

Wendy felt her heart twist painfully at the bitterness in his voice but she shook her head at him. “And instead of becoming a beacon of hope and change, you feed off the ugliness around you and spread your own brand of vile atrocities.” She felt drained and exhausted, her anger slipping away. “I’m not afraid of you or what might happen to me here. But I do feel sorry for you and I wish- well there’s quite a lot I wish.”

Wendy stepped around Xalvador and untied her pack from his saddle. Before she walked away for good she stared up at Iorveth, meeting his gaze steadily. “You don’t know me, and you don’t know what life is like on Earth. You and your world don’t have ownership on cruelty and sadness. But I do choose to see the world with my own eyes. And again, I absolve you of any obligations.”

With a strength she honestly had no idea she could have ever been capable of, she turned her back on Iorveth and walked. For the first time since he shook her awake and slew four men before her eyes, the silence was bearable. Her piece was said.

Until she heard the slow clops of a horse behind her.

She shot a look over her shoulder to which Iorveth answered with a shrug.

“Fine.” Glancing down at the map she wondered how much further to the river. She wanted desperately to take a bath and change. She would be back in her ‘Midgardian’ clothes but she hardly cared about fitting in anymore.
When she came to a split in the road she paused, examining the map and her surroundings. She took two steps down the path on the right when an unexpected chuckle stopped her. She swung a glare at Iorveth who had a genuine smile, small as it was.

“How is it you continually get lost? First, you get lost in your own world and find yourself here. Then you don’t even make it out of Novigrad without getting lost. And now, at your first crossroads, again you take the wrong path.”

“What do you mean **wrong** path? This is clearly the path on the map.”

Iorveth dismounted in a smooth motion and quickly stepped to her side, placing a finger on the map.

“You are thinking that we’re here when actually we’re over here.”

Wendy shot him a suspicious look.

“I’ve already invested a great deal of time and energy into you, I wouldn’t unravel it now.”

His comment didn’t ease her suspicion, but she corrected course, pausing long enough to whisk out a jerky like sausage from her pack. While chewing her first bite she glanced at Iorveth and Xalvador, watching as the elvan man offered the horse a couple of carrots. When he didn’t eat anything himself Wendy felt that damn part of her that can’t help but care, telling her to step up.

With a long, self-suffering sigh she offered him a sausage which he eyed sharply.

“Just take the sausage before I eat it myself. Perhaps you’ll feel less murderous if you ate something.”

Iorveth rolled his eye and took the food. “I’ve taken lives for comments less offending than that one.”

Wendy looked away from him, shaking her head. “Please… I’m barely keeping this food down as it is-” She cut off when a movement in the trees by the path caught her attention.

“Stay here.” Iorveth ordered, drawing one of his swords.

The last time he gave such an order was still fresh on her mind, and though she hated the thought of him repeating his actions, she obeyed, stepping closer to Xalvador’s side.

That is until the sound of a childlike whimper sounded through the rustle of the trees.

“Put it away Iorveth.” She whispered and limped past him as quickly as she could.

“Aevon-“

She felt his fingers brush her arm but she pulled away and into the forest. Weaving through, she followed the whimpers until she found a massive tree, long dead and hollow. A rustle and whisper came from within the shadows.

Wendy eased herself to her knees and peered inside to find two filthy children, a little girl of no more than five holding the hand of a toddler aged boy. The sight of their terrified faces and threadbare clothing had her choking on her words of comfort and reassurance.

Holding her hands up to show she meant them no harm, she whispered “My name is Wendy and I’m not going to hurt you. I only want to help.”

The children huddled together tighter, their wide eyes staring at the blood on her shirt and leather vest.
Wendy looked behind her to find Iorveth watching with interest and sword still drawn.

“Put that away Iorveth.” She hissed, waiting as he did so before spying the still uneaten sausage tucked into the belt around his waist. “Give me that.” She held her hand out expectantly. To her surprise he didn’t hesitate, and she quickly tore it in half before offering the food to the children.

The boy quickly took the food followed by the girl who watched Wendy warily. When they had finished eating, Wendy offered her hands to help the children from the hollow tree, whispering words of comfort and reassurance.

“Can you tell me your names?” She asked, her heart beating rapidly.

“Sonja.” The girl whispered then pointed at the boy. “Kace.”

Wendy summoned the most reassuring smile that she could. “Lovely to meet you Sonja and Kace. This is Iorveth, and back on the road is our horse Xalvador.”

“Wendy?” Sonja asked, pointing at her.

“That’s right, I’m Wendy. Can you tell us where your home is?”

Sonja pointed through the trees in the opposite direction from Wendy’s destination.

Wendy nodded and set a hand on each of the children’s cheeks. “We’re going to get you home. You’ll be safe then.” When Sonja nodded silently, Wendy stood and, though her body protested, and she felt as if a knife were digging into her wounded thigh, she lifted Kace to her hip and held a hand out to Sonja.

She blinked in surprise when Iorveth stepped forward and lifted the boy from her arms and turned to lead them out of the forest.

“I know which village the girl speaks of. It’s not far but you should prepare yourself Aevon.”

Iorveth placed Kace and Sonja on the back of Xalvador and took up his reigns.

“What do you mean? Prepare myself for what?”

Iorveth led the horse into the forest on the opposite side of the path. “The reason behind these children hiding in the woods.”

If there was one thing that Iorveth despised the most about himself, it was his weakness for children. Aen Seidhe, dh’oine, all of them. He knew the atrocities of his past were many and there would be no welcome to Nirvana when death found him. But what haunted him the most were the children he’d slayed under orders for the Empire.

He glanced at Aevon when she asked the children if they were comfortable. Her kindness baffling and strange, he’d been caught off guard when, despite her obvious revulsion toward him, offered him food. He’d never met someone who’d never witnessed death, who didn’t understand the unwritten laws that governed survival.

Ever more baffling was that he’d felt a twinge of guilt, an urge to defend his actions… something he’d never done in all his cursed life. And her pity… Iorveth curled his lip. People do not pity him, and he was damned if he was going to allow her to look at him like she did the two forest waifs.
“I’m sorry… for coming between you and your own mission again.” She said quietly.

Iorveth bit back a sigh. “The village is on the way.”

The sound of quiet giggles drew his gaze and he found her covering her mouth with a hand. The sound was as pleasing as was the glint of mirth shining behind her glasses.

“I knew that wasn’t true.” She whispered after dropping her hand.

Iorveth set a hand to his chest with a sarcastically shocked expression.

“Do you call me a liar?”

“Oh absolutely.”

“I’ve taken lives for less.”

The smile on her lips slipped and there was that look... that sad look that came over her whenever he mentioned his wretched past.

“You shouldn’t do that Iorveth.”

He held his irritation in check, partially because his name said with her accent twisted something in his chest. “Do what precisely?”

She kept her gaze locked on the forest before them.

“Brag about taking lives.”

That irritation he’d been holding back found a crack in his will.

Iorveth pulled Xalvador to a stop, turning her to face him with a hand around her arm. “Do not think to try and change me.”

She stared up at him, her gaze tracing his features before settling on meeting his angry stare. “Just as you shouldn’t think to change me.” She glanced down at his hand still around her arm until he released it. “I may be young and new to this world, but stubborn assholes exist in both our realms.”

Iorveth narrowed another look at her before resuming their journey.

“Just how old are you.”

“I turn twenty-one in a few weeks.”

“No more than a child!” Iorveth barked out a laugh, shaking his head.

Wendy nudged him with an elbow to his side. “I’m old enough thank you! What about you? You can’t be more than thirty, if even that close.”

“One hundred and twenty-three. Hmm seems you were nearly correct, give or take a few.”

He took pleasure on the thoroughly shocked expression on her face.

“But you look so young!”

“By Aen Seidhe standards I suppose I am, after all we live close to half a century.”
“That’s… actually rather sad.”

Iorveth spotted the trees beginning to clear and the sound of voices. “Why do you say that?”

Aevon glanced toward him for a moment. “Forget it, I shouldn’t have said anything.” She looked toward the girl on the horse, Sonja. “Is this your home?”

Sonja nodded, looking towards the village fearfully.

And her fear was rightfully placed.

He heard Aevon’s gasp as they were met with the sight of multiple mangled bodies strewn across the clearings, several houses were still smoldering from fires. Processions were tossed into yards and most were destroyed into uselessness. Livestock pens were empty, their gates wide open.

The villagers still alive huddled over their slain loved ones or cradled their own wounds.

Aevon looked about the chaos in horror. “What happened?”

Iorveth waved a hand in an arc before them. “This is what happens with cut throats are in need of food and coin. They take it, doing whatever needs to be done before continuing their way. On until they come across their next victims.”

She looked at him with wide eyed understanding. “You mean…”

Iorveth didn’t reply but helped the two children from the horse, watching as they ran to an older woman holding her arms out to them with tears streaming down her face.

“We have to help them.” Aevon whispered.

“There is nothing more to do here-“ He uttered a curse as she limped to the closest villager and examined the head injury they appeared to have, ripping a strip of cloth from her shirt and pressing it against the wound. He glanced around impatiently before unstrapping all the supplies he’d picked from the raiders.

In the center of the village he dropped a sack of food, coin, and several weapons. In the meantime, Aevon had moved onto the next wounded person. Iorveth met the gaze of an old man watching him from the entry of his shack.

“I know who you are! You’re that criminal!” He screeched, followed by spitting at Iorveth’s feet. “We don’t need charity from an elvan monster like you.”

Iorveth ignored him, and instead turned to find Aevon watching as she helped someone stagger to their feet. “I’m done here. Are you coming?” He bit out.

She glanced around before shaking her head. “No. Their livestock are missing.”

He threw his hands into the air and turned away. “You do what you must. The horse and I will be at the edge of the village.” Within moments he’d pulled himself into a sturdy tree, obscuring himself from the distrustful glares of the humans. Once he’d settled he crossed his arms and watched Aevon stalk into a scorched field a wooden bucket swinging from her hand.

In a short amount of time she had a small herd of sheep, a muddy pig, and two cows, all following her back to the pens.

Iorveth straightened in interest when he noticed she kept glancing toward one of the villagers rifling
through the pile of supplies he’d left for them.

“What… are you doing Aevon.” He whispered, narrowing his gaze.

She penned the cows and the sheep, enticing them with the grain in the bucket. But the pig she did not lead to its muddy pen. Instead she led it to a certain villager’s shack and closed it inside before making her way back toward where he waited.

Several times she was stopped by a villager who offered their thanks, including Sonja and her grandmother who hugged her. When she reached his tree, she scrunched her nose and looked up at him.

“Did you leave a mud and shit covered pig in that old man’s house?”

“The poor pig’s pen was too small.”

Iorveth dropped from the limb and found himself standing close enough to hear the catch in her breath and see the flecks of stormy grey and violet in her blue eyes. He searched them, looking for answers to questions he didn’t have words for.

“We should go before-“ Aevon had begun but the sound of shattering glass and angry squeals cut her off and they both looked to find the old man who had hurled insults at him shouting from within his shack followed by more squeals and splintering wood. Aevon looked up at him with mischievous excitement and grabbed one of his hands. “Run!” she cried out with a laugh and pulled him towards Xalvador.

With a lightness in his chest he hadn’t felt since his days at his mother’s side he followed suit. She let out a peal of laughter when the man’s shouts became directed at them, urging Iorveth to place his hands around her waist and swing her up into the saddle. Before he joined her a thought occurred to him and he twisted away.

“Iorveth what are you doing?” She called after him, but he didn’t reply, and instead pulled a clean shirt from a nearby broken clothesline.

He shoved the garment into her hands and quickly mounted Xalvador and urged him into a fast-paced gallop, leaving the recovering village and shouting old man behind.

The sound of a choppy river could be heard after at last getting back on track. The day was nearly gone, and little ground had been gained but Wendy swore that she would go a month out of her way for a bath in that moment.

A thought occurred to her as the sparkling blue river came into view.

“This is where you found me?” She asked of Iorveth, already pulling a journal out and penning down the fluid lines.

“It is. My old camp is right there, where we’ll stay again.” He pulled Xalvador to a stop and held his hand out toward her. After putting the journal away, she clasped the offered support in one of hers and used his steady strength to balance herself and pull her leg over the horse’s neck before sliding down to the ground.

“All I’ve wanted for days now is a decent bath. Looks cold but I’ll take it.” Wendy glanced about the
river, searching for a secluded cove that offered a semblance of privacy.

“I wouldn’t recommend that.” Iorveth muttered while fastening his quiver of arrows to his back.

“Right. You may be used to the stench of unwashed bodies and blood, but where I come from its widespread practice to bathe after being doused with blood.” Her stomach turned at the thought and her crassness surprised her into guilt. “Are you going somewhere?” She asked when he unbuckled his bow from the saddle.

“To hunt. And for once, do not ignore me on this. Stay away from the river until my return. There could be drowners about.”

Wendy followed him to the forest edge. “What do you mean drowners?” She called after him.

“See to the horse Aevon!”

“Why do you call me that?” She kicked at a rock in frustration, hissing at the sharp pain the motion caused and turned away from where the elvan man had disappeared.

“I’ll take care of Xalvador but I’m sure as hell not waiting to take bath.” She growled and quickly went about unbuckling saddle bags and saddle belts. The saddle was heavy, and she let it slide to the ground without care and drew the horse over to a patch of lovely grass.

Her tasks done she quickly dug out her travel size shampoo, clean underwear and shirt that Iorveth had given her. She sent one last glance at the trees where she’d last seen him then made her way to the river bank. A short way down river the camp could no longer be seen, dubbing it private enough for her to strip down, leaving her glasses folded on top of the clean clothes and splashing her way into the frigid river.

“Oh cold- so cold. Alright- all at once then.” Wendy whispered and held the bottle of shampoo tightly before holding her breath and dunking below the surface. A moment later she resurfaced and allowed herself time to grow accustomed to the cold.

After pouring a small amount of shampoo into her hand she threw the bottle back to the bank and proceeded to scrub her hair vigorously, her nails scratching into her scalp. As she washed herself, watching the blurry sunset, the events of the day caught up to her.

Was she still in a sense of shock and frozen horror? Wendy suspected that yes, she was. Staring into the eyes of someone as they breathed their last… A shudder wracked her body that had nothing to do with the chilly water. Had she learned hard and valuable lessons? Without a doubt but she was also left with questions.

Those bandits had been looking for Iorveth. Why? That old man, as insulting as he was, had called him a criminal. What had he done? She knew she shouldn’t trust him, but still… he’d helped with the children and had even returned the villagers their stolen supplies. Had ignored the nasty old man’s insults while she herself had sought her own brand of revenge in his name.

With her body feeling clean for the first time since arriving in Germany, she floated on her back and closed her eyes. She was more than confused and lost. Missed Pop and her old life. And yet… she wanted to understand this world and the people shaped by it.

She sighed and distracted herself, wanting just a few more moments of feeling clean.

“When your feelin sad and low, we will take you where you gotta go. Smilin dancin everything is free all you need is positivity.” Wendy drew a deep breath for the chorus. “Colors of the wind spice
“up your life! Every boy and every girl, spice up-“ Wendy’s heartfelt rendition of *Spice Up Your Life* was cut short when a sudden splash of water cascaded over her, turning her screech into an opera of garbles and sputters.

When she surfaced, she spit water from her mouth and shoved her hair from her eyes, her heart racing. She recognized the blurry shape and dropped down until the water met her chin.

“What the Hades are you doing!” She screeched at Iorveth.

He stood in the waist deep river and glanced around with an exaggerated gesture. “I returned to camp with a couple of hares to cook only to find Xalvador with his nose in the food stores. Curious, I followed a set of foot prints, one deeper than the other indicating I was following someone with a wounded leg. In the distance a lass sang the song of her people. I assumed to scare away the drowners. Seeing as it was safe enough for a bath, here I am.”

Wendy swallowed deeply and crossed her arms across her chest. “Your teasing is hilarious. See? I’m laughing so hard I can’t see straight... You didn’t see anything… did you?” She couldn’t resist dragging her gaze down from his face, past his crossed arms.

“Less than you.”

Wendy’s gaze popped back to his. Call it foolish and reckless but she felt like teasing him back. “Seeing as I left my specs on the shore, you must have seen nothing at all. You left your ‘patch-hat’ on. Can hardly wash your hair that way.”

The teasing glint in his bright green eye dimmed and he looked past her.

“If you’re done you should return to shore. It isn’t wise to linger in the water.”

Wendy wanted to kick herself for bringing up the stupid patch hat. But instead she focused on the curious case of ‘drowners’.

“Ah yes… just what are these drowners you keep warning me of.”

“Creatures that prey on young maidens bathing in rivers.” Iorveth said before he splashed water over his face and chest as he moved through the water toward her. She watched him silently until stopped even with her, the smooth skin of his unscarred side facing her. She was still ducked down till the water reached her chin and in order to keep her gaze on him she had to tip her head back to an awkward angle. Her arms tightened across her chest and she bit her lip to keep her shivering in check.

With him standing so close, she had a clear view of the tattoo running from his neck down to cover this shoulder. The need to trace a finger across every leaf and vine was a genuine problem that she knew she would need to talk to herself about later. Much later, she surmised if she was still able to feel the heat of a blush on her face despite the cool temperature.

“Hold this.” He said and slipped his patch hat off and held it down to her, an offering that forced her to stand slightly. “Don’t get the feather wet.”

“Alright but... thought I was supposed to return to shore.” Her teeth were beginning to chatter lightly but she was left rolling her eyes when he dived under the water. “I find it really irritating when you do that!” She called after him. A moment later he popped up in the distance, nothing more than a shadowy blob. In that moment she cursed herself for leaving her glasses behind.

“Don’t be such a creep Jones.” She muttered before dropping her gaze to the garment left in her
care. Slipping the leather strap over her head to keep it dry and with fancy maneuvering involving her chin she kept the hawk feather dry while she scrubbed the crimson cloth.

“How is it I’m washing his clothing.” She muttered to herself when she squeezed the water from the cloth. Call it independence or whatever one wished too but she and Pop had always washed their own belongings and she’d never imagined washing someone else’s stuff. Especially something that was a touchy topic already. It took a certain amount of intimacy to care for someone else’s belongings and yet, she’d done so without thought at first.

“Where is he…” Wendy whispered, realizing a great deal of time had passed since he again sank beneath the surface so far down the river. She nervously swept her gaze across the river, the sunlight now a faint glow. There was a dark shape near the bank and she sighed in irritated relief. “I can’t get out until you leave Iorveth!” She called out toward the shadow.

He didn’t reply which didn’t necessarily surprise her but the feel of something brushing her leg did. She yelped along with a hop backwards.

“Iorveth, there’s- there’s something in the water I think… It felt… slimy…” She called out, her eyes searching the dark river while she slowly backed toward the shore. Her grip around the cloth tightened as she remained unanswered. “Iorveth?” She whispered. Fear gripped her chest tightly and she turned toward the river bank, wading for it as fast as she could.

No longer did she care about modesty, all she knew was that something terrible had happened to Iorveth. She had to get to her glasses and get to his weapon’s- she froze halfway to shore and rubbed a hand across her disbelieving eyes.

In front of her, just above the surface she could swear were a pair of white eye like orbs watching her. A moment later the human like figure rose from the water, a garbled hiss coming from a mouth of piranha like teeth. There was little room for doubt that this was not a friendly creature.

Wendy didn’t know what to do as she had few options to begin with. She was terrified for one which was doing nothing to help her think clearly. The creature was clearly at home in the water, no doubt meaning there was no way in all of eternity she would be able to outswim it. Naturally, she had zero weapons or armor.

The creature lifted hands with long claw like fingers into the air, letting out another garbled hiss and a moment later a second monster joined the first, damning her survival chances into the red.

The only thing keeping her sane in that moment was the hope that this wasn’t real. She was in a nightmare, trapped within her mind as it conjured horrific encounter after horrific encounter. And yet the disappearance of Iorveth spoke volumes, bringing rationale to her muddled mind.

A tear slipped down her cold cheek and she jumped back when one of the creatures took a small lunge toward her. The scent of rotting flesh saturated the air and despite the threat to her life, she nearly gagged.

“This isn’t real. I just wanted to wash the scent of blood away…” She brushed another tear away and closed her eyes. She thought of the fuzzy memories she had of her parents. Her father’s deep laughter as he chased her up the stairs of their house amid a family wide tickle war. Braiding her mother’s long hair and giggling over how one chunk was chunkier than the others. Pop gently pushing the porch swing and humming his favorite songs. The way she felt when-

“Do not move Aevon.”
“Iorveth…” Wendy whispered and opened her eyes. With the sun long gone and the light of the moon dimmed by clouds she could just make out the glint of an arrow head with a shadowed figure on the river bank.

The monsters were thoroughly distracted by the appearance of the threat he posed against them and without hesitation lunged, drawing a startled scream from Wendy before she clasped both hands over her mouth, Iorveth’s patch hat pressed against her cheek.

With quick succession, Wendy saw the glint of four arrows let loose into the monsters, two each. She heard the sickening squelch of slimy skin and bone broken and the dying screeches as they fell into the water.

The cloud cover broke from the moon and she watched as the bodies, arrows protruding from their skulls, float past her. She wanted to move away, to draw her gaze from the horrifying appearance of their suspiciously human like features but she was strangely fascinated. Slowly she lowered her hands from her mouth.

“Aevon, they live in packs. There will be more.”

“Of course…” She said listlessly, her gaze locked on the floating bodies still. “Your drowners I suppose?” She whispered.

“If the threat of more won’t get you out of there then perhaps the fact that you are very much exposed will.”

That did get Wendy to blink and glance down at herself. True to his word, the water stopped mid-calf and all she had to cover frigid skin was the leather strap angled across her forehead and the crimson cloth clutched tightly against her chest with both hands.

When she looked at him, a small smile graced her trembling lips. “I was about to say how unfair but instead I’ll say, ‘as are you.’” Though in the time he had left the river to, she supposed gather his weapon, he had donned his long breeches, his scar remained uncovered.

“All the more reason for you to leave the river. Here.” He turned his back to her and gestured to her pile of clean clothing.

The fear and adrenaline releasing its hold on her body and mind she began to become aware of the situation more and more. She was standing in a river, butt ass naked, having just barely survived an apparent monster attack with the possibility of another attack at a very high percentage. And she’d just gifted a guy with full on frontal nudity after only knowing him for a couple of days if you don’t count the first week after initially meeting him.

Full frontal nudity that, when her mind calmed she would realize he had little reaction to. Disappointingly so if she were to be honest with herself. Cruelly honest, but that would be another one on one conversation with herself at another time.

Shaking her head, she slipped the leather band from her head and placed his belongings in his outstretched hand after reaching the bank. As quickly as her shivering body would allow she slipped into underwear and jeans before pulling on the surprisingly well-fitting linen shirt and buckling the leather vest around her torso. With glasses perched on her nose, feet tucked into wool socks and heavy boots and remaining processions held securely in her arms, she sent a look toward Iorveth and found his back still facing her but he’d once more hid his black hair and scar.

The funny feeling in her stomach at the sight of his tattoo twisting down his back came back full
force and Wendy swore she must be the maddest woman across both his and her worlds. How can one go through so many emotions in one day and not be on the verge of hysteric...? To go from fear, to revulsion and panic... sadness and humor. Flat out arousal. Back to bone freezing fear and accepting she was about to die. And then back to flat out arousal.

Thor’s fucking beard she had to get out of here.

Wendy closed her eyes. She wanted to melt into the ground with the embarrassment that was beginning to settle in.

“Are you done?” He asked gruffly, turning his head slightly.

“Yes.” She replied quietly and crossed her arms across her waist and walking in the direction of camp as quickly as her limp would allow. “Oh Xalvador.” She closed her eyes and threw her arms around the warm neck of the horse once she reached him. She felt the ripple of muscle against her cheek when he turned and settled his muzzle against her shoulder for a moment.

After hearing the strike of a match, she peeked opened her eyes to watch Iorveth light the campfire before pulling on a shirt. When he picked up one of the rabbits he’d hunted down earlier, Wendy stepped away from Xalvador, releasing his neck. After a moment of watching how he skillfully skinned the carcass, she swallowed the part of her cringing at such a cute critter coming to such an end.

But the painful growl of her stomach told her that it was just how nature worked and she picked up one of the remaining hares. She wanted to help. She had to.

“Have you a second skinning knife I could use?” She asked with a slight tremble to her voice that she despised. She almost expected him to scoff and tell her that she was too fragile. That she was barely holding it together at the sight of himself seeing to the gruesome task.

But instead he met her gaze, the flickering firelight turning his eye from green to amber.

It was a moment that last for an age to her, that piercing stare. She wanted to know what he thought in that moment... was he wondering if she was about to snap? Because those threads weaving together her emotions had frayed and rewove together thousands of times since her arrival already. Did he think less of her because she continued to need to be rescued? When you grow up where the only crime is teenagers cutting fences to get to your Pop’s water hole for skinny dipping, there is hardly the urge to learn how to swing a sword or draw a bow.

And yet if there was one person in existence other than Pop that she didn’t want to think less of her... it was him. Something that surprised and frightened her nearly as much as blood thirsty bandits and sharp clawed monsters.

Perhaps that is why the small gesture of handing her his knife before pulling out another from a nearby bag, meant more to her than the offering of a thousand book library or an endless supply of Jane Austen movie adaptions.

With the barest of smiles she watched his movements carefully, and though her stomach churned, she copied his process for preparing the hare to cook.

Sometime later, when their bellies were full, and the remains of their meal buried outside of camp, it was almost the most natural thing to do to lean against the tree side by side as they had the night before. She knew he watched the fire dance while she watched the stars appearing and disappearing through the passing clouds.
Wendy had thousands of questions, with every second, another piling on. But with exhaustion and reality numbing her mind she settled on just one. Well two if she were to be exact.

“Is it always like this here? This constant fight for survival?” She asked quietly.

There was a deep silence broken only by the wind in the trees and the babble of the river. He was silent, but she knew his answer. Accepted it, held it close in her mind. His silence was his answer and it spoke volumes for the life he’d lived for the past one hundred and twenty-three years.

She slowly allowed her head to drop to rest against his shoulder.

Every breath, every moment.
AN/ Hmm I wasn’t sure about this chapter but by the end of it I think it grew on me. I’ve invented events and people and places to fill in for the story’s needs. I’ve also worked as best I can with the maps available but there are inconsistencies with every map out there so bear with me if you’re super familiar with every single detail of the Witcher-verse and it what I’ve written doesn’t make sense. Please remember this is a romance/adventure before anything else and takes place after game/story events, and everything that’s happening is to encourage those two elements to happen. Thanks for reading and enjoy!

Little one you must be patient, time your breaths to the flow of the song and you will weave together a beautiful melody.

At his mother’s urging, a young Iorveth tried to play the song again, and just as before, his fingers moved faster than the flow of the song and became tangled. With a growl of frustration he shoved his mothers flute into her hands and stomped from their house.

When he reached the tree in their yard, nimble as a squirrel, he climbed and climbed until he could see the surrounding city. See how the desolation and impoverished state of their side abruptly changed to pristine and affluent once you crossed the river.

A door slammed down below and from his perch in the tree he had a clear view of the dh’oine man next door backhanding an Aen Seidhe woman into the mud and filth. He shouted obscenities while she pleaded with him to stop.

Iorveth’s hand tightened into a fist, wishing he could do something… to be the hero. He pulled his sling shot from his back pocket, considering his options. If he missed, he risked the man beating his mother. If he hit his mark, then he saved everyone around them from the man’s abuse.

He thought of the curses the man hurled at him and his mother anytime they passed by, minding their own business. The time the man had twisted a hand in the front of his shirt, spit flying from the mans mouth as he told Iorveth that he was useless and came from a diseased race.

He thought of the dh’oine children ordered not to play with him and coming home from working in the fields to find his puppy, a pitiful creature that he had begged his mother for mercilessly, had taken on every job he could find in order to take care of, hanging from a tree.

Iorveth brushed at the tears slipping from his green eyes.

He hated them. All of them.

The fire he imagined burning the city to the ground would be set by him.

Iorveth, you must have patience.
He blinked and found himself grown and scarred, back in the only house he’d ever truly lived in. A house that had burned to ashes long ago.

He found the painful image of his mother standing at the window, tilting her face toward the sun with arms wrapped around her waist.

You cannot kill them all my son.

I can try.

You would loose so much if you did.

Iorveth laughed and looked around the four walls surrounding them.

I have nothing to lose.

In the journey to come you will find that you have much more than you ever hoped.

Unless it is Emhyr’s head, I don’t care.

His mother clucked her tongue and gave a little laugh.

You care. Tell me… what do you think of the blue lotus?

Iorveth tilted his head, watching as she picked a flower up from the window sill.

It’s a flower. I’m certain it has a useful purpose important to a sorceress or witcher.

Mmm hold it, examine its colors and petals and then answer again.

Iorveth accepted the bloom from his mother, waiting as she turned back to the window.

With a sigh of impatience he held the blue flower. Considered how the grey in the center eased into bright blue then onto the slightest bit of purple on the tips.

It reminds me of something.

He narrowed his eye at it.

Have patience.

The scent floated around him, teasing him with its familiarity but the lightness he now felt…

A sense of serenity and acceptance.

Ah you are going in the right direction little one. Keep following that path and will not lose your way again.

What do you mean?

When his mother didn’t reply he finally looked away from the blue petals, he found that she was gone and he now stood in the blackened remains of his childhood home. A rain drop landed on the blue lotus, then another on his cheek.
As awareness slowly came to Iorveth, his dream faded, giving way to reality. Almost immediately he noticed that his hand was numb, his arm wrapped around the warm body of Aevon with her pressed against his side. Her cheek nestled against his chest and a hand tangled in the linen of his shirt and he nearly cursed at the realization that he’d slept without his armor on.

He hadn’t meant to sleep more than a couple of hours to begin with and yet here he was, just waking from a long night completely defenseless. To a rainy morning no less. A rain drop landed on his cheek, much like in his dream. A mixed scent of rain and something else calmed his irritation and he closed his eye, reveling in the foolishness of the moment.

There were a thousand reasons to wake the woman nestled against him… they were losing valuable daylight, cloudy as it was. At any moment they could be set upon by many manner of bandit or beast and he would be near to useless with just his fists. The light rain could turn into a dangerous torrent of lightning and stinging rain.

There was also the matter that the longer she lay in such proximity to him, the more he became aware of her and the memory of her… well just her period. The obvious curiosity in her eyes when she looked at him while bathing in the river.

As slowly as he could, he pushed her knee from atop his hips. If his eye had been open, he would have rolled it at himself. He may be a murderous bastard, but he did have a line drawn at taking advantage of innocent women. It didn't take having witcher senses to see it in her, but it was there and of course there was the obvious knowledge that she must have a life waiting for her.

One where monsters didn’t exist and you didn’t have to fear your neighbor for death.

In that moment, Iorveth decided that he would get her back to there as unchanged as possible for it was rare for one to have pleasant dreams after days of horror. And yet...

He opened his eye and looked down at her face to see the slight curving of her lips.

A pleasant dream she was indeed having.

--------

Wendy felt her pillow shifting way from her, causing her to tighten her hold and protest groggily. “Don’t move… I’m just getting to the good part.” It was warm and had the most pleasant scent.

“If we leave now, we will arrive at your portal by late evening.”

Iorveth’s voice rumbled through her muddled mind but his words had her breath catching in her chest she slowly opened her eyes, becoming aware of the tangled state her body was in. Blushing fiercely, she pushed herself up until she leaned over him.

Dressed in only a shirt and breeches, his long dark eyelashes casting gentle shadows… he looked stunningly vulnerable.

“Late evening you say?” Wendy whispered after clearing her throat.

Her heart twisted painfully when he reached a hand up and tucked a few loose strands of hair behind her ear. Her mind conjured all sorts of explanations for his action but only one that she wanted to be true.

“If you’ve needs, take care of them and we’ll be on our way.”
It was on the tip of her tongue to blurt out that yes, she had some damn inconvenient needs, which were in every way heightened by the way he said the word needs. And there was this voice in the back of her head that told her she was hours away from leaving the enigmatic man behind forever so what was the harm in a little fun… She may be naive in many endless ways or it could just be her own mind making that look in his eye into more… but it seemed as he had a similar set of thoughts.

Wendy swallowed a sigh and reluctantly moved away from his side, found her glasses tossed onto a stump and walked to her backpack to dig out her toiletries.

It wouldn’t be just a little fun. Already she was going to be haunted forever by her time here, why add fuel to the fire? Not that she put sex and ‘first times’ on some sort of pedestal to be coveted but when feelings were involved, well she’d seen plenty of movies and read many more books addressing that exact thing.

Hearts got broken.

Despite her contentment with taking care of Pop, she’d occasionally entertained the idea of children much further down the road and if she gave her heart to someone in parts unknown well that would be unfair to everyone involved.

After a trip into the bushes, teeth brushed, and hair pulled into a topknot, Wendy set about bagging up their supplies. The cool misty rain, though it was a nuisance when it came to her glasses, but it did wonders to cool her heated skin. It was rather hard to keep her focus on her work with Iorveth buckling his leather and chainmail armor back into place. When he tried to toss a strap up and over his shoulder, missing it with his other hand three times in a row, Wendy stopped behind him. He held still while she picked up the strap and moved to stand in front of him, pulling it over his shoulder and buckling it snugly.

When she finished she remained standing there, eyeing the various coats of arms. “What are these for?”

“You already know.”

His answer drew her gaze to his and Wendy supposed she did know… even before putting the question to voice.

“What is your cause?” She suddenly needed to know. Needed to rationale how she could feel this magnetic pull towards him despite repeatedly being proven that he was dangerous.

“Knowing my cause will not make you feel better.”

Wendy frowned, not exactly thrilled with his answer.

“We should see to your journey.” Iorveth said quietly, then stepped around her to saddle Salvador.

“I’d like to make a bet.” She said, twisting to watch him pause in his work to glance at her.

“What sort of bet?” He asked, resuming his task.

“If I guess your cause correctly, you tell me about your scar.” Wendy felt a moments panic, unable to believe she’d just said such a thing. She was absolutely one hundred percent not the sort that went around asking people to divulge obviously painful stories but she was feeling reckless and nervous.

Time was running out with him and she would rather have to ask terrible questions then to be
haunted by them forever.

“And if you don’t guess correctly?”

“I’ll tell you about a single moment that changed me forever too.”

She waited while he finished the last buckle before helping tie their belongings to the saddle.

Before helping her mount, he faced her. “I think you over estimate either your mysteriousness or my curiosity.”

Wendy held a hand to her chest. “I am very mysterious thank you very much. I come from a world with-

“Horseless carriages.”

“Automobiles, yes but what I was going to say-“

“You walked on your moon.”

“Well not me but someone else did. Which proves my point! You know nothing about me and soon I’ll be out of your hair forever and when you and your friends tell tales about the girl from another world, what will you have to tell? She didn’t know how to ride a horse and took a bath with drowners?”

Iorveth smirked, actually *smirked*, and leant down to her eye level. “Why do you think we would tell stories of you?”

Wendy’s hands flew to her hips in indignation. “Because I’m interesting! How many people have you met from other worlds?”

Iorveth straightened and folded his arms across his chest. “Ciri is interesting, she carries the elder blood, granting her great magical power, for example creating portals.”

Wendy sighed. “That is pretty interesting. But can she tell you intimate details of the eleven successful revolutions which each happened in the span of seventy five years? As well as how some of the greatest rebellions failed?”

“I’m certain Ciri is well versed in our own history here… Alright Aevon, you have your bet, but fist mount up.”

“I may not be interesting per se, but I know a library’s worth of interesting things.”

“Of course you do.”

Wendy didn’t like the placating tone in his voice but waited until they were both mounted and heading onward at the maps direction.

“Alright so allow me to start at the beginning. You’re leading or at least high in the ranking, a rebellion to grant your people- Aen Seidhe freedom from prejudice and slaughter. From humans. This makes you a criminal in their eyes and I would say you have a lovely price on your head.”

There was a length of silence until she tapped him on the knee impatiently.

“Why do you believe this is a rebellion against humans?”
Wendy sniffed in irritation. “I know my own race. We have a long history back on Earth where the same story plays out repeatedly, only it’s against our own.”

“So… you know my cause from picking up pieces up here and there. From what you know, do you think it just?”

Wendy bit her lip to give herself time to think. She couldn’t condone all-out war… could she? “To be honest… I find atrocity fought with atrocity breeds more, and much of history has found this to be accurate. I suspect you will call me foolish, but I believe in conversation rather than bloodshed. So many lives are lost while those in command spare less than a thought to the innocents, the honorable, the brave.”

“A noble sentiment Aevon. You are correct that it is foolish, but here, in my world the only way to be heard is to take the head of the loudest king and take his place.”

Wendy looked over her shoulder, meeting his gaze. “How well has that worked out for you?” When he curled his scarred lip she turned away from him. She knew it was futile to try and sway him and she figured she aught to take a page out of Star Trek and stick to the prime directive, what was left of it for her that is.

“Pay up.” She said when he didn’t immediately start his story.

“War is not fond of wet behind the ear boys who ignore orders, who get themselves caught by enemy chains. Those enemies are not fond of those who do not easily break, even after a morning-star takes their eye and half their face with it.”

Wendy was silent a moment, trying not to picture the horror he must have gone through. “I’m sorry. No one should have to go through such cruelty.”

“Save your pity Aevon, I disobeyed with a purpose.”

“…You allowed yourself to be captured on purpose… why ever for?” Wendy cried out and again looked at him over her shoulder.

“That is a different story.”

Wendy crossed her arms and turned away. “Turn down the interesting factor a few notches or I’m going to have an anxiety attack trying to piece it together myself.”

“As you wish.”

As she told herself to let go of her insatiable curiosity, telling herself that he’d upheld his end of the bet and that was that, in the distance a fantastic sight caught her attention.

With her eyes locked on the castle in the distance atop a hill, she blindly hit his thigh lightly before pointing toward the structure.

“Before I go, I’d like to see a castle.”

“Aevon, even a small delay will have us arriving as the sun sets. Most of it will be by foot as we must climb to where the Sage marked.”

“Then we use torches. And It won’t take long, I just want to draw a quick sketch.”

“Does Earth not have castles?”
“It does but *that’s* not an Earth castle. That’s an-“

“Ancient Aen Seidhe ruin. You won’t find anything interesting there.”

“And you have no idea just how *interesting* I find everything about this place.”

Her smile brightened when he urged Xalvador from the path and toward the castle in the distance. Her gaze already taking in the details of long crumbled walls and vines climbing every surface. With the misty clouds for a perfect backdrop, Wendy fell in love with the place immediately.

“This is like that scene from Leap Year… where Anna explores Dunamase with Declan and it’s all so romantic and beautiful- here this is close enough, I’ll walk the rest.” Wendy could hardly contain her excitement as Iorveth stopped Xalvador and they dismounted. “When I was a child, I was going to go all over the world, visit every castle from Ireland to Peru. How absolutely mind boggling that the first castle I actually visit is one on a completely different planet. I mean I was in freaking Germany for Thor’s sake. I also mean you can’t go to Germany and *not* see a castle there, but I did!” Wendy chattered on and on, glancing between the ruin and her journal as she sketched.

“Let’s go inside shall we?” She took a step towards the door, though it was doing a poor job of being one when an arrow zipped past her cheek and embedded in the rotting wood with a thump.

“Aevon step away- now.”

Wendy attempted to swallow her shock, her eyes staring at the arrow still vibrating in the wood as she stepped away and to Iorveth’s side before he pulled the arrow from the door.

“Wait here.” He said and began to walk back toward the tree line.

“What?” Wendy yelped before noticing that he did not have any weapons drawn. “You know who that is don’t you? Who shot an arrow at me?” She shouted trying to catch up to his much longer stride but her short limp was not of significant help.

“They did not aim for you for if they did, you would be dead. They were saying hello.”

Wendy paused mid stride before doing an awkward hop run after him. “Who- says hello- like that!” Iorveth didn’t reply as he came to a standstill, a man, elvan to be precise, stepped from the tree.

“Iorveth, you are as difficult to find as ever.” The stranger called out.

“Cevan, you lost something.” Iorveth replied, handing the man his arrow. A moment later a handful more stepped from the line of the woods, each greeting Iorveth either by name, rank, or plain nod.

Wendy felt their glares and distrust aimed toward her, saw it in the way Cevan ran his gaze down her before flicking his gaze back to Iorveth.

“I would speak with you privately.”

She could almost see the change coming over Iorveth, being around his people once more. Probably remembering that he’s been in the presence of a human for going on three days now, and how it must look to them. Before he could order her to do so she stepped forward with a trembling smile.

“I’ll retrieve Xalvador.” She said and turned away.

“Really Iorveth… is this another Saskia thing?” Cevan spoke plainly, more than likely intending for her to hear.
“Leave it Cevan, that’s an order. Now… what’s wrong enough to have you leave Adhart defenseless?”

Wendy was no longer within hearing distance and when she reached Xalvador she took a moment to watch the meeting. It was a strange feeling to her, to not be included because of distrust and hatred. Did she understand? Now that she had pieced together more of the underground war going on, absolutely. Did she ever think she would be seen as the enemy to anyone ever? No. She was one of the good guys!

The underdog, the down trodden, and the abused… she’d always thought to have been an ally if the time had ever called her to be one. And yet here she was, firmly placed on the sidelines, whatever was being said, she knew only one thing. Iorveth was not going to put off helping his people to drop her off at the nearest portal to Earth any longer.

It was impulsive and already she was swallowing regrets as she made a decision and led Xalvador back to the gathering. She picked up words of sickness and heads on pikes by the time she reached Iorveth’s side once more, silence falling between the two. She was not one to flourish in center stage, but she had little option other than to charge forward.

“What are we waiting for? The invention of jet fuel engines so we can fly there?” She attempted in a cheerful voice, looking from Cevan, who looked at her as if she were mad, to Iorveth though Iorveth’s look of understanding quickly swept in.

“You don’t know what you’re asking Aevon. This isn’t a short detour to return lost children or explore ruins—”

“Which I didn’t get to finish so you still owe me that.” She interrupted, crossing her arms and sending an arch look toward an impassive Cevan.

“This will take weeks. And I can’t stay to take you any further… if we had found Zoltan, he could have continued on to get you to your home.”

Wendy sensed the agitation in his voice and set a hand on his forearm. “Iorveth, I get it. I’m the record holder of most lost person on two planets with zero survival skills beyond exceptionally skilled at finding trouble. I know my own weakness and acknowledge it… I can’t make it home without you and you have a great duty to help your people. That leaves only one option. I go with you and help in any way that I can.”

“One of my soldiers can finish what I started.”

Wendy shook her head, glancing around at the riveted faces. Apparently their commander coming up with reasons against dragging a human along with him was great entertainment. “I would not ask you to take them away from helping their own to see to my minor needs.”

“What of your people, your life waiting for you?”

At this Wendy hesitated, dropping her head to look down at their feet. “All I have waiting for me to return is Pop and he would understand.” The realization that he thought she couldn’t handle this certain part of life here occurred to her, spurring her to squeeze his arm and meet his gaze with a solid stare of her own. “I can help. Whatever needs to be done, I can do it.”

Just as he had last night when she’d asked for the skinning knife he studied her, searching her eyes for what- she did not know. Deceit? Strength? As he sought his answers as did she. Why was she so willing to undertake what was sure to be a harrowing experience? Was she acting selflessly and truly
wanted to help his people with their troubles? Or was it that part of her that had been put up on the
top shelf of her heart that hungered for adventure? When he tilted his chin stubbornly but offered
no more objections, Wendy stepped away and offered her hand to Cevan. “Hi, I’m Wendy.”

Cevan glanced from her hand to her face then over to Iorveth who reached out and pushed her hand
back to her side.

“I hope you’ve grown used to riding because we only stop to water the horses from hear on out.
Cevan, you will ride with us until the mountain pass then break to the south to call in remaining
units.”

Wendy figured on a scale of one to one thousand it was on the greater end of inappropriate to think
that as much as seeing Iorveth as sleepy and vulnerable was incredibly pleasing to her sensibilities…
having the chance to hear his commander voice was insane.

While the others returned to the forest to gather their horses Wendy turned to Xalvador, preparing to
mount.

“What exactly has happened?” She asked and then with some aid from Iorveth, pulled herself into
the saddle.

“There’s a village near the border of Kaedwen,” Iorveth began but paused to take his place in the
saddle. “A home to Aen Seidhe fleeing slavery and persecution, and yet disheartened by Francesca’s
willingness to accept whatever bone the most powerful dh’oine king will offer her, so they chose the
mountains instead. A plague has begun to ravage the village and we suspect foul play.”

Wendy leaned back against his chest, squeezing her eyes tightly closed as he whistled to Xalvador,
urging the horse into a much faster pace than she was used too. “Iorveth, I’m going to fall.” She
called out, her hands gripping his knees. Her hair began to fall from her elastic and she sat tormented
between holding onto his knees or rescuing the much-needed hair accessory. When he wrapped an
arm securely around her waist, holding Xalvador’s reigns in one hand, she had to admit that she felt
safer. “Thank you.” She whispered and slowly opened her eyes again, raising her hands to her hair
and rebanding it in a braid over her shoulder.

“You will get used to it.”

“Right.” Wendy said sarcastically and tried to concentrate on breathing. A motion from the forest
catch her attention and she turned her gaze to watch as the warriors, led by Cevan, emerged from
the trees, their horses catching up to Xalvador. “What do you call yourselves?”

“Scoia’tael. Or in common speech, squirrels.”

Wendy huffed out a laugh. “You’re kidding right? A damn bushy tail squirrel is the whole reason
I’m even in this place!” She was pleasantly surprised by the feel of laughter vibrating in his chest.

“They are meddlesome creatures.” He paused a moment before continuing on. “Which was our
prime purpose in the war. We did the battles, the suicide missions that no one else would do and in
the name of peace, it was our execution requested and accepted.”

Wendy felt more of the puzzle pieces slipping into place for her at this bit of information. She knew
her words of horrified apology would be of little comfort so she remained silent. Apparently Iorveth
knew her better than she thought.

“Do not fret… there will not be peace until Emhyr has paid the blood price.”
“Is there ever peace? Someone else will take this Emhyr’s place.”

There was a pause, filled only by the sound of the beating horse hooves surrounding her before Iorveth spoke again.

“Perhaps you are learning Aevon.”

They continued in silence for some time, Wendy doing everything she can to not fall from Xalvador, and Iorveth occasionally switching arms around her waist. She watched the other riders, the Scoia’tael as they were called, would come into her field of vision every so often before falling back.

“I’m not going to be easily accepted… am I?” She asked in a voice hardly above the pounding hooves.

“No you will not. Another argument which I did not raise before while in front of so many. Few of them have had a favorable encounter with a human.”

“I had suspected as much. So I don’t have much experience dealing with being hated. I mean, I wasn’t Miss Popularity in school, but I didn’t have nasty rumors about me written on the bathroom walls or my books knocked from my arms.” Wendy took a deep breath. “What I mean to say is… as someone who hates humans yet has for some reason not treated me terribly… any advice for me?”

“You’re about to meet many sick and dying people, grieving and angry. If someone refuses your help, respect that and move onto the next.”

“I can do that. I take care of elderly people for a living, many of which are extremely unhappy with being taken care of by me rather than their family. Not to say it’s the same but it’s a similar enough situation for me to work with.”

He hummed an agreement in her ear.

“Do you have experience in healing?” Wendy questioned, curious as to his role in helping the dying village.

“No, I’m not going to be there to heal them.”

The cold finality in his voice told her exactly what he was going to do. “I see.”

True to Iorveth’s word, they rode fast and hard. Ran merchants carrying their wares on their back fleeing from the road. Farmers working in the fields stopped their toil to watch as they flew by, shaking their heads in bewilderment. With a quick scan of their surroundings, he noted that while they had made good time, they would need to stop at the next creek to water the horses before the final stretch to the mountains. If they continued at this pace, Cevan and his Scoia’tael would diverge to the forests of northern Vizima while he and Aevon continued in the southern Kestrels.

He didn’t like pulling back from Vizima or Redania, as they were gathering the intelligence they would need to separate Emhyr and Radovid from their heads and then burn the Church of the Eternal Fire down in the flame they worship. But he knew he would need every man and woman possible to snuff out the most immediate threat against their civilian population.

Iorveth was pulled from his thoughts as it suddenly occurred to him that the further north they rode, the less Aevon spoke. Her questions, her observations, her cheerful complaints had ceased. Iorveth
was not one to be fond of mindless chatter but her silence worried him. And if that wasn’t enough… his awareness of this concern was well… rather concerning.

When Aevon failed to comment on a nekker a soldier removed its head from with the swing of her blade from horseback, for the first time in memory, Iorveth found himself searching for words to distract her from what were surely thoughts of regret.

“Tell me of the song you were singing last night.”

There was a pause while her shoulders shook with quiet laughter before she stilled.

“Don’t worry Iorveth, there’s no need for you to force yourself to fill the silence with talk. If you were Dandelion asking such a question, I might have believed in your interest.”

“I happen to enjoy music.”

She leaned forward against the arm around her waist in order to look back at him with an insultingly surprised look.

“You mean to say… you have interest outside of sword fighting and terrifying others with that brooding glare?” She pushed her glasses back up her freckled nose.

Instinctively Iorveth pinched the spot just below her ribs causing her to yelp and turn back around, one of her hands flying to cover his.

“Stop that!”

There was a certain amount of pleasure in learning that she was ticklish, not that it surprised him that she was. She reacted fully to everything as it was. What did surprise him was the thought in the back of his mind that he was somewhat relieved that she seemed alright after all. He wouldn’t pretend that her acceptance of putting her return home on hold in order to help protect his people didn’t mean anything to him. He would never say that he judged humans too harshly, but he was growing more accepting of the few who proved themselves to be less of monstrous than others.

Over the next hill, Iorveth knew would be their last chance to water the horses so he released his hold on Aevon and signaled the others with a fist in the air. The sun was almost gone, and the chill of the mountains had crept down to the valley. When he and the others stopped the horses he offered his hand to Aevon and helped her down from Xalvador.

He watched with the barest look of amusement while she walked in circles, occasionally shaking a leg or cracking a joint. When she finished easing her aches she joined him at the water’s edge, resting a hand on the horse’s neck before sending him a crooked grin.

“You should know that just when all my aches and pains seem to be getting used to whatever grueling activity you have me doing, you think of something else and they all come rushing back.”

Iorveth didn’t reply but instead dug her cloak from Priscilla out of one of the saddle bags and held it out to her and watched as she shook it out.

“Thanks. I suppose those are the mountain’s your home is in?”

He followed her gaze to the range in the distance, and considered his answer. His home… “I hadn’t considered it my home, more of a starting place for my people outside of the farce Francesca is sitting on. But yes, that is where Adhart lies.”
“They’re beautiful.” She said in a breathy whisper.

He took a moment to watch the mountains in the distance, the forest covering the sides with rocky ledges eventually leading to soft valleys. If it weren’t for the heir presumptive, Atkin and his lose control over Aedirn and its forces, it would be the ideal place to give the Aen Seidhe a safe place to flourish. But Aevon was correct. The view of the rising moon glowing over the mountains was beautiful.

“Soon the first snows will hit.”

“I could see the mountains from my home… never did go to travel them though- oh!” She surprised him with a finger on his chin, turning his gaze away from her. “I must have washed your patch hat a little roughly. Your feather is coming loose and needs to be reinforced.”

Iorveth lifted a finger to inspect the stitching. “You should be able to find needle and thread when we reach Adhart.”

“I beg your pardon?”

He looked back at her, dropping his hand to Xalvador’s reigns to lead him away from the creek. “You’re the one who damaged it.”

“I don’t know how to sew! Oh don’t arch your eyebrow at me.”

“What makes you think I’m arching my eyebrow, I know you’re half blind but my eyebrows are covered. Both of them.”

“I’m half blind? I’m half blind?” She poked him in the chest with every word she spoke, her eyes sparkling with laughter. “You. Are. Hil. Arious.”

“And it’s not called patch hat.”

“Then what do you call it?” She countered with hands on her hips

The sound of a clearing throat captured their attention and they both looked over to find Cevan and his unit watching them with stony faces.

Iorveth knew what they were thinking and he couldn’t blame him. He’d grown rather familiar with the little dh’oine in the short time since he’d dragged her from the river, something that was rather unexpected, especially as none of them knew the story. Something he would have to address with her once Cevan and the others broke off.

He didn’t have to see Aevon to know her smile was gone and the laughter fell from her gaze. He felt it in the sound of her hitched breath and utter stillness. Their open distrust of her was something he’d warned her about but like many of her experiences since arriving here, she never quite believed him until she saw for herself.

Without word he turned to help her back onto Xalvador and within seconds they were moving once more.

Bundled in her cloak, and her gaze watching the picturesque mountains grow closer and closer with every step their party gained, it was always in the forefront of Wendy’s thoughts that she was riding
further and further from her way home.

She would be lying if she said that she wasn’t nervous about meeting an entire race of people that would hate her on sight. That she didn’t feel guilty for abandoning her quest to return home… And not for selfless reasons. It was true that she would have ended up helplessly lost, if she’d attempted to go on without Iorveth. Of course there was always the chance that she would have come across some kind hearted soul that would have gladly helped her… but experiences so far have shown that the opposite was more likely.

But there was a tension she felt that had nothing to do with her anxiety and guilt. It was almost this need to keep going. A voice in the back of her mind that she hadn’t fallen into this world just to immediately go home. And though she missed her Pop, morning coffee, and working a double shift keeping old folks in line, it almost felt right.

A feeling that was both made better by what she hoped was a growing friendship with Iorveth if not at least some repartee. It was already a terribly lonely situation to be in, not that she couldn’t handle loneliness, but it did help with just dealing mentally.

The crisp breeze reminded her of the early mornings of feeding the lambs before riding her bike down the dirt road to the bus stop. Wendy would have sighed if she’d had the capacity to draw a deep breath, but it was rather difficult to with the rough motions of a near galloping horse and a well-muscled arm wrapped high around her waist.

Eventually Cevan and the others continued while Xalvador eased onto a rocky path, his speed now greatly reduced allowing Wendy a moment to ease her strict posture. She tilted her gaze up to watch the stars blink between the tree branches, wondering what lay in Iorveth’s Adhart. What sort of illness was sweeping his village and why was he gathering Scoia’tael forces? It was on the tip of her tongue to ask when a yawn creeped up on her.

“If someone were to ask, I will not lie about it. I found you and am returning you home. As for just where your home is, that information is yours to divulge.” Iorveth said.

“Mmmm. Probably best if the fewer who know the truth the better. I’m not fond of the idea of someone coming to Earth and- well from experience sake, interplanetary or interdimensional planetary travel is not recommended. I’m trying to get to Oxenfurt.” Wendy paused for another yawn. “How’s that?”

“It’ll do… you’re use of three languages will probably help with that as the residents of Oxenfurt are… eccentric. We have hours yet to travel. You should sleep.”

Wendy felt her eyes close just at the thought but forced them back open with several blinks. “Nope, that sounds like a bad idea. Besides it’s not fair if only one of us gets to sleep. Unless…” Wendy slid her head down sideways to look up at him. “We could take turns… You could sit in front while I keep Xalvador on the trail.” She laughed when he nudged her head with his shoulder and straightened back up. “What do you think we’ll find there… in Adhart? What did Cevan say had happened?”

“The people have fallen sick and it’s suspected that Atkin, acting Regent on the grounds of distant blood to Stennis and Demavend, is allowing his lords, primarily Duke Iohn, to do as they see fit in allocating resources. And Adhart-“

“Has many desirable resources. A tale as old as time.” Wendy said quietly. “What about this illness? Did Cevan tell you anything about it?”
“No. In a few hours we shall know the extent of Iohn’s attempt to drive them out.”

“Why do you believe this Iohn had anything to do with what’s happening to Adhart?”

“Why would you believe he has nothing to do with it when he has everything to gain with the eradication of the Aen Seidhe from the mountains he claims belong to him?” He bit out behind her.

Wendy felt a spark of anger at his tone. “I’m not willing to be judge, jury, and executioner with zero evidence supporting the crimes. Sometimes people get sick Iorveth! Now I’m not going to argue any further while I can’t even look you in the eye.” She crossed her arms and pressed her lips into a thin line, holding her back away from his chest.

Iorveth was not as willing to let it go. “Again, you continue in your blindness when it comes to your kind. Despite hours before agreeing that they are monsters.”

“My kind? I have no kind here! I may share the same features and biological make up of your so-called humans, but I do not share your human’s experiences. I will not be held responsible for them as I have my own experiences to deal with. And I’m pretty sure I said that I wasn’t going to argue this. Didn’t I say that?”

“Believe me dh’oine when I say that if it were not for that single fact, you would still be on the streets of Novigrad.”

Wendy pulled her cloak tight around her body and hunched her shoulders. She didn’t want to admit that his words stung, that somewhere between Novigrad and Adhart she’d come to look past his kill first- ask questions later- personality type and had been drawn to his surprising ability to care and nurture. Apparently, it was not the same for him, with his inability to separate her from his experiences with humans.

Spite, as well as a mixture of anger, disappointment, and an unhealthy amount of sexual frustration, gave her the fuel she needed to stay awake, Wendy kept her sight on the moonlit path until they left the trees and mountain cliffs behind.

And in the barest of morning light, still angry and hurt- in body and in heart-, with the kind of exhaustion that only came with loneliness and regret, she caught her first glimpse of Adhart.
Staying True

Chapter Notes

AN/ A reminder that certain recognizable things are not mine and I hope you like it. I’m pleased with it and the pacing and seriously excited for what’s coming next. Enjoy!

Everything was still. Still and utterly quiet, not at all what Wendy associated with a village that should be teeming with life. There should have been early risers seeing to the chickens, hunters preparing traps and arrows, the windmill stationed on a hill grinding grain, smoke spiraling out of the stacks and the scent of baking bread. Instead, she found herself standing in a morning lit village where every curtain was drawn and not even a breeze disturbed the tree she stood under.

It was nearly ghostly how the morning mist had settled over the various walking paths that connected each house to each other. With vines growing over the red brick walls and sun aged wooden doors, everything looked older than she had expected. It was almost a proper village too with its pub off to the outer edge and various stalls to serve as a market place near where she stood.

With the mountain cliffs to one side and forests to the other, the single path through hinted at being reasonably defendable though she would consider defenses on the forest side. Atop the cliff, if she craned her neck enough she could just make out the crumbled wall of possibly a defense tower. In the distance she could make out a reliable source of water, a small river coming from somewhere in the forest where it eventually met a wheelhouse.

All around were trees in the beginning stages of turning their leaves, a field of grain in mid harvest, and vegetables in serious need of weeding and picking. Lantern posts lined a dirt road, yet none were shining.

Wendy pulled the cloak tight around her, her heart aching with the loveliness and potential of Adhart. She turned in a slow circle, searching the dark windows and making it a point to ignore Iorveth while he led Xalvador toward what looked to be a barn, possibly a stable.

Then the first flicker of movement caught her attention.

Something small and dark moved through the grass, along the wall of a nearby house before disappearing around the corner. Curious, Wendy quietly made her approach, pushing her glasses up her nose and leaning around the corner. It was difficult to tell in the dim light, but she was almost certain she’d just seen the pale tail of a rat disappearing into a hole under the house.

“What are you doing?” Iorveth unexpectedly spoke from behind her.

After she’d straightened and turned to look past him she was saved from asking the rather obvious question of where everyone was by the appearance of another person. A woman with aged lines around her eyes, iron grey hair twisted in a long braid that hung over her shoulder and wearing a long-sleeved dress that matched the dark blue of her eyes.
She walked with her head held high and her eyes taking in every detail of first Iorveth and then swept over Wendy before lingering on her. Beneath the folds of her cloak, Wendy twisted her hands nervously as she waited, wondering what she should do. Should she step forward and introduce herself or wait or just turn around and march herself back to where she came from.

One thing Wendy knew for certain was that she was not being welcomed with an open embrace and engaging smile. There was little doubt of the older elvan woman’s feelings towards her presence and it shone clearly from her cold gaze.

“Iorveth. I’m pleased Cevan was able to locate you so quickly.”

“Solana.” Iorveth greeted with a nod. “I’m here to rest my mount before I leave for Ryre.”

“What?” Wendy blurted in surprise, looking at him. “Shouldn’t we stay and see to the sick?”

“You are not going with me. You wanted to help so then ‘see to the sick.’”

Wendy stood there a moment, staring at him with parted lips and wide eyes before using a hand on his arm to force him to look at her. “What of their needs? Are you not going to check to be sure everyone has enough blankets, enough food? How about helping with a damn cure or helping to lay those who don’t make it to rest! Or are you so thirsty for ‘rolling heads’ that you can’t spend a day helping instead of killing something?”

She stood there angry and breathing heavily while glaring up at him.

“Mm my thoughts exactly. Tell me young one, what is your name?” Solana spoke up drawing Wendy’s surprised attention.

“Oh! I’m Wendy. Apologies for the outburst ma’am…”

Solana waved a hand dismissively. “Never apologize for being correct. Iorveth must be forgiven for his ruthlessness. It comes from years of such a lifestyle where saving lives was never what he was called upon to do. Come, I’ll bring you up to date.”

Wendy glanced at Iorveth, rather taken aback at the whole about turn of Solana but he only narrowed his one eye at her before following the other woman.

“I’m right you know.” She said quietly, hopping forward to catch up to him. “You didn’t deny being sort of a leader when we spoke about it yesterday and even if you had, your people see you as one otherwise why would they have sought your help before anyone else? And as a leader, the needs of your people come before your needs to avenge them.”

“And what would you know of leading?”

“I’ve read plenty of books on various world leaders through history. I know what made them successful and loved versus what made them hated and eventually led to their assassinations or invaded by foreign power. Which one sounds like you right now?”

Iorveth stopped abruptly and stood over her with anger emanating from his every cell. “I do not claim to be some piss poor king. I have no illusions of grandeur or seeking to have monuments made of my visage in marble, but I will demand a price be paid all the same.”

Wendy took a careful step back but shook her head slowly, her anger dissipating only to be replaced with sadness. “You still see yourself the same way that Emhyr fellow saw you. A killing machine. Your people need and deserve more than that.” She turned away to see Solana waiting by a bleak
house, watching them closely. “I suppose I will just have to do your job for you.” And she picked up the long cloak from dragging in the wet grass and swept away.

Solana waited with rapt interest, until Wendy reached her side. “This is where we have been bringing the sick… if you have delicate sensibilities—”

“I’ll be fine.” Wendy interrupted, still riding the wave of take charge energy from soundly putting Iorveth in his place. If things were as bad as she was beginning to suspect, then she didn’t have the patience for stubbornness and irrationality.

Solana gave her a long look before pushing the door open and leading them inside the dark building. “We have a population nearing a hundred with more arriving every day. But over the past week seven have fallen ill and yesterday was the first death.” She said quietly.

“I’m sorry for your loss.” Wendy replied. “May I see the patients?”

Solana lit a candle, the warm glow easing through the entryway. “Are you a healer? Is that why Iorveth brought you?”

Wendy felt a light blush heat her cheeks. “No… but I’ve read countless books over various plagues and illnesses that have affected my homeland.”

Iorveth let out a sound similar to a snort and waved a hand through the air. “You cannot mean to miraculously cure these people simply because you read a book.”

She sent him a quick look. “I mean to use whatever knowledge I have gained from the written experiences of the past. Is there something wrong with that?”

He stepped closer, crossing his arms over his chest, looking down his nose at her. “Perhaps not everything can be learned from a book dh’oine.”

“Perhaps the merits of learned knowledge versus learned experience can be debated at another time?” Solana added in, looking from one to the other.

“Yes ma’am, I think that is wise.” Wendy bit out, hating how upset he could make her. It had only been a few hours, but she missed how easy it was to tease him and the little curve of a smile made crooked by his scar. Feeling frustrated and sad, Wendy blinked back tears and turned to follow Solana.

The smell of sour body fluids saturated the air, driving Wendy to press the back of her hand against her mouth for a moment before swallowing down her instinctive revulsion. Laid out across six pallets and makeshift cots were six people of various age, and as Solana lit more candles, revealed to be in various stages of a severe illness.

Wendy quickly moved to the first person, taking in the blood oozing from the corner of their eyes. A quick touch of her hand to the woman’s forehead confirmed her suspicion of fever, before picking up the woman’s hand and examining the purple skin. The movements must have woken the woman for she cracked open her eyes and studied Wendy.

“My name is Wendy, I’m only examining your symptoms—“ She broke off as the woman, with more strength than Wendy had expected pulled back her hand and push Wendy away. “I apologize, I’ll let you rest.” The woman eased her eyes closed, drawing in a rattling breath. “Who has been caring for these people?”

“Primarily myself. Most others are too afraid to leave their homes for fear that they will fall ill. It
Wendy was cut off from asking her next question when the front door suddenly opened, and a voice called from down the entry.

“Solana! Three more have fallen ill over night!” A woman called out before running into the room before she stopped abruptly at the sight of Wendy. “Who’s this? And with Iorveth no less.”

“Wendy lost human traveler from a place very far from here. But I’m here to help no less. Where are the new patients?”

The woman didn’t answer right away and instead flicked her gaze to Solana.

“Go ahead Eloen.”

“Artin, Melarue, and… Lasei.”

For the first time since meeting her Solana’s cool demeanor cracked and a hand flew to her chest.

“Iorveth and Wendy, go to the house next to the stable, there you will find Artin. Eloen, you bring in Melarue, and I will see to Lasei…”

Wendy nodded along with Eloen. “Oh course. We should also bring in fresh water while we’re down there. Is there any firewood ready? We’ll need to boil blankets and clothing as well as scrub down all surfaces. What were their first symptoms? The fever?”

“The firewood stores are on the way to the wheelhouse. Yes, the fevers are the first. Do you know what is wrong? We have no healer, as you can imagine, there are few who would take on someone with pointed ears as an apprentice for something that requires such trust between healer and patient.”

Wendy led the way to the exit speaking as she thought. “From firsts glance, I’d say this is some variant of a hemorrhagic fever. Tell me, how long have there been rats?”

This brought up the three following her to stop just outside the house, drawing her to look at Solana and Eloen sharing a look. “A few weeks, month at most.” Solana answered.

Wendy scrubbed at her tired eyes, knocking her glasses askew. “What about cats?”

“Cats?” This time it was Eloen.

“Some plagues are spread by fleas, which live on rats, which infest those fleas in our homes. Cats on the other hand fantastic for rat control. In the Viking days, cats were given as gifts to newlyweds not only as symbols of fertility but because of their great skills as vermin hunters.” She paused when Iorveth cleared his throat, giving her that look that made her think he was arching an eyebrow at her. “Right… anyways, if you don’t have any cats, we need to come up with a plan commandeer some. And blankets. Lots of blankets. Also does anyone have any books of um… alchemy and botany or anything to do with healing? Chemistry was not my strongest and the genetic makeup of the plant life here is foreign to me. I wonder…”

Wendy turned away, walking and thinking over everything she knew about viruses that caused severe hemorrhaging. She could remember word for word, the hantavirus article she’d read while on lunch one day. The fevers, bleeding, difficulty breathing. There were also severe body aches which she suspected but hadn’t had time- or a willing patient for a full examination.

She vaguely heard Iorveth joining her, but he gained her full attention when he spoke, and for the
first time since arriving, there was little anger in his words.

“I will only stay long enough to see Adhart stabilized but then I must see this threat against them is stopped.”

Wendy didn’t reply for she didn’t wish to accept that he would leave period.

“Aevon, I cannot help these people by wiping their brow and boiling their linens.” He said with exasperation.

“Why? Are your fingers broken?” Wendy paused mid-step to stare at him. “Look just… give me some time. Help me help them and then I will help you look for proof that this Iohn in Castle Ryre is guilty of biological warfare. Can we do that? Please?”

He crossed his arms, thinking over her offer. If he refused she knew there was little she could do to stop him. All she could hope is that somewhere deep inside that stubborn head of his, he valued her opinion in some way.

“I will wait a week. No longer.”

Wendy smiled in relief and gave his arm a quick pat. “I’ll take it. Besides, I’ll need time to learn how to thread a needle and fix patch hat’s feather.” Her smile widened when he rolled his eye at her. “Hey- want to hear a rhyme about a feather in a hat?”

Iorveth began to walk away. “No.”

“The correct answer was yes!” She cleared her throat and began to sing. “Yaaaankee Doodle came to town a ridin on a pony, stuck a feather in his hat and called it macaroni!”

“Why couldn’t it have been my ears they took rather than my eye.” He muttered but a quick glance showed the smile, that small barely-there smile, she’d come to miss in the hours since their row.

After Iorveth returned to Solana’s house with Artin, Wendy set about carrying buckets of water, quickly tossing her cloak and vest aside and rolling up her sleeves. Since arriving there had been a few more signs of life in the village, primarily a handful seeing to the livestock and the grain, but the stalls stood empty, clotheslines were bare and the quiet continued.

Eventually Eloen joined her with nary a word spoken beyond Wendy’s quiet thanks. The elvan woman was stunningly blonde with her hair cropped and pulled straight back into a cute little ponytail. Her dark eyes were amazingly mysterious, but the lethal looking daggers strapped to her thighs said she was much more than all those adjectives put together.

“Are you Scoia’tael?” Wendy asked as they filled their latest round of buckets.

Eloen didn’t look at her but she smirked and waved a hand toward Adhart. “We’re all Scoia’tael. What about yourself?”

The question startled Wendy so much that she nearly dropped her buckets. Once she had a firm hold on them she offered a slight chuckle. “Oh, I’m not a fighter. In fact, I’m very much against taking life period unless it falls in line with natures natural order. You know, antelope eat the grass, lion eats the antelope, lion dies of injury or natural cause and becomes one with the grass… circle of life.”
Eloen shook her head with a haughty glare. “Do you think Solana goes into battle swinging a sword? Scoia’tael isn’t an army, it’s an idea. And we’re not mindless killers and criminals.”

Wendy stopped short with a stunned expression. “I—I’m sorry… To be honest I know so little of you and having spent the last half week in Iorveth’s company… well I made assumptions and not that Iorveth is as you say a mindless killer and criminal, he’s just stubbornly unwilling to consider other options.”

The anger seemed to have left Eloen’s shoulders and she rolled her eyes. “Yes, he’s rather skilled at what he does. But you still didn’t answer my question.”

Wendy knew there was a deeper meaning to Eloen’s question, but she still didn’t know quite how to answer leading her to choose her words carefully. “I… I want to help in any way that I can for the time that I’m here. I just don’t know if I have the ability to do whatever it takes to achieve such a feat.”

Apparently, her answer was the wrong one for Eloen narrowed her gaze before leaving her behind abruptly. She stopped again after several steps and swung back around to face Wendy, bearing on her with the full force of Elvan anger.

“If you’re not here with every fiber of your being invested in our survival then why are you? Because for some reason Iorveth didn’t slit your throat… You dance in here, seemingly with all the answers but do not dare believe that you are exactly what we need when we needed it. Dh’oine have done enough to us… if you truly want to help then leave… now.” Her piece said, Eloen left Wendy standing by the river’s edge.

The sour tasted in Wendy’s mouth had nothing to do with her lack of hygiene routine for the past two days and everything to do with Eloen’s words ringing in her ears. She stood there, a heavy bucket in each hand, staring at the water gently rolling by. Watching as the powerful force turned the waterwheel much like Eloen’s powerful words were turning her mind.

The elvan woman was right… What the hell was she doing there, telling Iorveth how to be a leader, Solana how to heal her people… she knew nothing of anything except for what could be found in a book. She knew nothing of protecting people from genocide. Instead, Wendy knew which lambs to keep for breeding and how to teach an agriculture student to pick the perfect sheep for show. How to talk Ms. Espinoza into dressing for physical therapy on Mondays and Thursdays… There was always that article about Lepsuis publishing some of the Book of the Dead.

If only her knowing the Weighing of the Heart spell could serve in any useful way… ever. Osiris would judge her as the ridiculous little human who thought she knew how the world worked… and all she knew was how to meddle and get lost.

“I don’t belong here. I belong where Pop sending me a text about Princess Kate needing vaccinations is all the responsibility I can handle. Where I’m not asked if I’m willing to die or murder for people, as much as I feel for their plight… I just can’t do this.” Wendy whispered to herself. She felt the burn of tears, and tilted her head back, fighting to keep them at bay.

The green and orange mix of leaves waved above her, the rustle like whispered words, telling her she knew what she had to do. 

Gently she set the buckets back on the ground and slipped the map from her back pocket and unfolded the worn paper. She examined the mountains drawn along the edge, searching for the river she assumed to be the one she stood beside. If she took the path she had arrived on, she wouldn’t come to a fork until halfway back to the point where Cevan had intercepted them.
“I can do this. I have to.” She said firmly.

With a deep breath, Wendy folded the map and stuffed it into her back pocket. Eyes kept straight ahead to avoid looking over at Iorveth as he swung an axe over his head before bringing it down in a smooth arc, splitting a log of wood. Promising silently to thank him one last time as she said goodbye. That was one person who would be more than relieved to see her go, despite the newest reconciliation. Or maybe he would be disappointed in her which admittedly terrified her almost as much as relief or nonchalance.

As quickly as possible she carried and then poured the water from her buckets into the large tub stationed over a fire behind Solana’s house where once the water had begun to boil, every piece of cloth in her house would be sanitized. She felt a twinge of guilt knowing she was quitting before the true work in helping the people of Adhart had even begun.

Taking a deep breath for strength she silently walked the short distance to the stable. Wendy kept her gaze from meeting the occasional glare carving its way into the side of her skull and slipped into the dimly lit building.

“Hey sweetie.” She said quietly after walking up to Xalvador and giving him a hearty pat. “Thanks for all the miles you helped me cover.” A quick glance around and she’d located his saddle but her backpack, along with Iorveth’s were no longer with it. “Blast.” She whispered and quickly apologized to Xalvador for the language.

The next likely location for her belongings happened to be the place she least wanted to look, but she needed her backpack if only for her toothbrush and first aid kit inside because she was surely going to fall and sprain an ankle and she wanted to have clean teeth when it happened.

After one last neck pat for Xalvador, Wendy left the stable. Iorveth continued to work on his wood pile in the distance, and if the concentration in his expression said anything, it was that he was full focused on turning the sizeable logs into as many firewood sticks as possible.

Solana’s house sat eerily quiet when Wendy entered, but after a moment of waiting in the entryway, the sound of ragged breathing and whimpers could be heard from the direction of the room she knew housed the ill elves.

The guilt began to creep up from her stomach, nearly choking her, causing Wendy to clench her hands and force herself to focus on finding her belongings. She lifted the nearest candle and found hers and Iorveth’s bags laying in a heap by the door leading to the sickroom.

Sighing in a mixture of relief and panic she quickly moved to the pile and swung her pack over her shoulder after setting the candle down on a small round table, and before she could change her mind, turned toward the door.

Only the flash of candlelight illuminating a pair of light brown eyes stopped her in mid spin.

The eyes watching her prepare to flee, were only just visible through the cracked open doorway, and appeared to belong to a girl child of only six or seven, and nearly stopped Wendy’s heart. She could see the pained and fevered look in the girl’s face, but there was also rapt curiosity and interest.

When she noticed Wendy’s attention, she opened the crack some more and leaned out, staring up at Wendy intentsly.

“Are you human?” She asked in a voice that sounded tired and raspy.

Wendy didn’t know if she would be able to handle the derision and hatred of someone so young, but
she knew for certain that she couldn’t ignore the child. Trying not to wince at the pain in her leg, she knelt to meet the girls gaze at her level and held out a hand.

“I’m Wendy.”

The girl immediately took Wendy’s offered hand in her small, burning hand and gave a small shake. “I’m Lasei. Would you like to see something?”

Wendy didn’t have to think about her answer for she immediately said the words without thinking of anything other than how very much she wanted to make the sick child smile. “Absolutely.”

Lasei then pulled her hand from Wendy’s and laid it out palm facing up. She watched as the girl focused on her hand, lightly chewing on her bottom lip before a small golden flame appeared in her palm.

Wendy gasped lightly, mesmerized by the sight. “Magic… I knew it existed here but had never seen it before. It’s incredible and so very beautiful.”

Lasei gave her a smile so beautiful that Wendy felt as if she had truly been given a precious gift. A moment later the flame disappeared, and the girl wobbled slightly, her skin now looking pale and waxy, spurring Wendy into action. She dropped her pack back to its original spot on the floor and stood up. She would see to the girl’s comfort and then… then she would leave. In the distance the sound of hoofbeats could be heard but Wendy paid them no mind.

“Lasei, how about I help you back to bed for some rest. Being able to conjure something as fantastic as magic must take a whole bunch of strength.”

The hand she held out to the little sorceress was accepted and Wendy led her back into the sickroom. “Which spot is yours?” She asked after swallowing thickly. There were two empty pallets, one for the person who had died earlier before her arrival and one next to the woman Wendy had attempted to examine.

Most of the patients were laid down but a few were sitting up, their knees crossed or drawn to their chest, watching cautiously as Lasei led Wendy to the pallet next to the woman.

“This is momma. She’s really sick…” Lasei swept the woman’s stringy hair from her forehead, watching her mother crack open her eyes and summon a weak smile for her daughter before closing them once more.

“You look like her, so very pretty. What is your momma’s name?”

“Ayda.”

“It’s an incredible pleasure to meet you and your mother. Have you eaten anything yet?” Wendy asked while she eased Lasei onto her makeshift bed. At the child’s shake of her head Wendy gave her a brilliant smile. “I know just the thing… When I was your age, my grandmother would make chicken soup and even though it didn’t make my cold go away, it always made me feel better. I’ll make enough for everyone but while I’m doing that I need you to do something for me.” Lasei nodded with her brown eyes wide and Wendy quickly went back to her bag and pulled out one of her journals and pens and brought them back to the little girl. “During my journey I’ve been drawing interesting things that I’ve come across… But I haven’t had time to draw anything about Adhart yet… could you help me out?”

Lasei quickly accepted the job Wendy offered, allowing Wendy to quickly leave the room and hunt down Solana who was in the beginning stages of hanging freshly washed linens to dry.
“Solana, ma’am, may I have use of your kitchen to prepare a meal for the patients?”

The older woman didn’t look away from her work but nodded quickly. “Yes. Atkin is who had been preparing everyone’s meals for the past week and now with him sick... Check the cellar for anything that you might need.”

With the permission she sought received, Wendy set about locating the cellar and piling ingredients into a basket. She was once again reminded that she was in a world not of her own by the distinct lack of refrigerator with a nicely cleaned and ready to cook chicken waiting for her to drop into a pot.

By the time she heaved the supplies from the cellar and into Solana’s kitchen, she’d begun to feel the sharp edges of panic. How was she going to get her hands on a chicken and- When she entered the kitchen she was startled into stopping mid-step.

Eloen waited with a dead chicken already in hand. Without a word, the two women got to work, Wendy doing the best she could to stick to her grandmother’s recipe. While the soup simmered over the fire, they both tackled the other chores, gathering everything in the sickroom and carrying it away to be cleaned.

Wendy checked on Lasei often, offering words of encouragement over her drawings, while running a cool cloth over the foreheads of those who would allow her to. Eloen saw to those who refused the aid of a human. When the soup was at last ready and dished out, Lasei watched as they worked together, Wendy supporting her mother as Eloen spoon fed the dying woman.

Her stomach twisted at the thought of the little girl watching her mother die, it brought her own memories from deep within rushing to the surface. And as much as she wished she knew exactly what to give Lasei’s mother, she knew it was very much too late for the woman. She was in the final stages of hemorrhagic fever, if the blood coughed up after every bite were anything to judge by. The mother was beyond exhausted after her meal, when Wendy eased her back down where she immediately fell back into a deep sleep, before helping Lasei with her own.

Eloen and Wendy had just finished cleaning up the kitchen when Iorveth strode in, immediately putting Wendy on edge. She hadn’t expected to see him until she left and now that he was there before her…

“Iorveth- hi.” She offered awkwardly.

He gave her that look he was so good at, the look where he just knew every thought in her head but instead of confirming it he nodded once and held out the sack.

“Aevon. Solana mentioned a farm between here and Ryre which might have the cats you required. Just as she said, they did and parted with several in exchange for a sack of grain.”

As if on cue, the sound of meowing came from the bag causing Wendy to drop a bowl into the washtub. “Iorveth! Don’t tell me you are carrying cats around in a- a burlap sack like they’re potatoes!” She cried out in dismay and pulling the sack away from him.

Iorveth looked from Wendy to Eloen with bewilderment. “How else am I supposed to carry them on horseback?”

“Like this.” Wendy murmured as she pulled the half-grown cats from the sack, handing one to Eloen, one to Iorveth and kept the last two for herself. She cuddled the black and white poofs of fur up to her cheeks, delighting in the noses and whiskers brushing her skin, the gentle purring causing her to coo over them. There was the barest of thoughts in the back of her mind. She could leave after
the cats had made their home, after the dishes had been done and the patients made comfortable for the night. Yes, then she would leave.

The day waned as Iorveth helped Solana to empty the wash tub, and to carry in the last of the wash, stacking them on a shelf in the sickroom. He caught the eye of Aevon who offered him a tired smile as she sat in front of the child named Lasei who ran a hairbrush through her hair. A movement from her lap drew a quick glance to one of the cats curled in her lap.

“Do you know any stories?” The child asked.

“I know many, many stories… would you like it if I told you one?” Aevon replied then waited for the child’s sound of approval. “What sort is your favorite? Dashing heroes on adventures, something funny, or whimsical?”

“Momma likes heroes.”

“Then she would love this story. This is the story of a young farm boy named Luke who dreamed of traveling the stars. One day, a series of unexpected events would send him on a journey beyond his imagination and it all started with the arrival of a secret message from a princess in dire need.”

Iorveth crossed his arms and leaned against the doorway, watching as Aevon pulled away from the child as she spoke and helped her to lay down.

“It all began in a galaxy far, far away… It is a period of civil war. Rebel spaceships, striking from a hidden base, have won their first victory against the evil Galactic Empire. During the battle, Rebel spies managed to steal secret plans to the Empire's ultimate weapon, the Death Star, an armored space station with enough power to destroy an entire planet. Pursued by the Empire's sinister agents, Princess Leia races home aboard her starship, custodian of the stolen plans that can save her people and restore freedom to the galaxy.”

One by one, as Aevon told her story of aliens and things called droids, the other room occupants turned their attention to her, listening in, and even occasionally offering comments and questions to which she answered patiently. None of them had any idea what a tractor beam or proton torpedo was and even after a quick explanation it was an odd concept.

“Where exactly did you find her?” Eloen asked quietly from his side.

“A river.”

“And…”

Iorveth shrugged a shoulder. “I couldn’t see her home until Adhart is made safe once more. She decided to come along to help. She is easily lost. It was the smart move for her survival.”

At that moment Aevon look up at him before Lasei asked her to do the voice of the Chewbacca character again and her blue eyes darted away.

“Are you so certain it was only her survival influencing her?”

Iorveth had no intention of replying to the meddlesome question but he was further saved by the sound of horses and quickly departed the house to intercept the new arrivals.
He found Dain with four other Scoia’tael, one of which was a dwarven woman, dismounting near the stable.

“Iorveth! Cevan mentioned that he had found you. Tell me, when do we ride for Ryre and show the dogs what happens when they take the lives of our people?”

Iorveth swung his right arm out and caught Dain’s in a quick shake. Of all the miserable soldiers he’d fought alongside, Dain with his fiery hair and blue tattoos along with more than his share of crudeness, was one of his most-liked.

“Six days.” He said, remembering his deal with Aevon.

“Six fucking days? What are we supposed to do for that long?” Dain grunted out while heaving the saddle from the back of his horse.

Iorveth looked around at the mostly empty firewood piles, neglected fields, as well as a rat scurrying from the stable. “How are you at catching rats?”

Dain and the others gave him a look that spoke more than words.

“Adhart is in a bad way. But the faster we stop this illness, the faster we get to Ryre and we need reinforcements anyways. Set up by the wheelhouse unless you feel as if you need a featherbed for your… delicate sensibilities. Tomorrow Dain, you and I will go hunting. The rest of you… there is a woman here, a dh’oine. Speak with her about the rats and whatever else Adhart needs.”

His orders lifted more than one set of eyebrows, but they kept their thoughts to their selves and carried weapons and food to the area he spoke of. All except Dain that is who dropped a hand on his shoulder heavily.

“A dh’oine woman eh? Is this a Saskia thing?”

Iorveth rolled his eye and shrugged the mans hand off. “No. Saskia was nothing more than another extinguished flame of hope for a life of equality.”

“Right. How about some sparring? Too long in the saddle.”

Iorveth agreed and spent the next hour swinging his swords, enjoying the familiar sing of steel striking steel, and the resulting tension running down his arms and back. When Dain at last called off the match he settled by a fire one of the others had made with his whetstone and honing oil. The rhythmic sound of the stone sharpening the edge of his sword relaxed him as it always did.

The past forty-eight hours were weighing on his mind heavily. Death was nothing new to him, having brought on a great deal of it himself, but the role of caretaker was all together foreign. Aevon had spoken the truth about how he’d yet to break the chains Emhyr had around him. He’d been used by the emperor and now even when the only orders he follows were his own and yet they’re the same orders.

Find the target, kill the target, burn everything around them to send a message.

He was the same regardless of the banner flown above him.

Iorveth watched the fire as he moved the sword over the stone.

He’d never stopped- not after the Northern Wars, not after escaping execution, not after countless victories and defeats- to consider what life would be like as someone who did just as Aevon had
said. Helped first, avenged second.

He huffed a quick breath. Just thinking it felt ridiculous.

“Hey there…”

Iorveth glanced up to find Aevon standing on the other side of the fire, her arms piled high with books, and both their bags weighing heavily on her shoulders and watching him a bit nervously.

“Finished your story?” He said and waved a hand for her to join him. With a tired sigh she dropped to the ground and stacked the books beside her.

“I did. Tomorrow I’ll tell the sequel.”

Iorveth nodded and watched while she scanned the titles of the books before opening one up. “What changed your mind?” His questions startled her just as he’d hoped, and she stared at him with her lips parted. “I know the look, Aevon. You are hardly the first to second guess such a decision as entering a hostile environment.”

“I’d hardly call it hostile but… I did over estimate just what my role here should be.” She dropped her gaze to the fire and sighed. “I’m not all together certain if I’m staying but I keep finding reasons to. And Solana went through all the trouble to locate every book she could find…”

Iorveth held out a hand after sheathing his sword and wrapping up his whetstone. “Here, hand me one.”

“It is especially difficult to watch Lasei and her mother. I don’t know if we’ll find the remedy in time to save her mother… and it’s very difficult to think clearly with that knowledge on my mind.”

“You cannot save them all. But you will save even fewer if you leave.” Her gaze burned into his, the torment she must have been feeling for some time twisted something in his stomach. “If I’m to stay and round up infested rats then I’d say it’s only fair that you do as well.”

She breathed out a small smile and roll of her eyes before glancing at the village around them. “It’s not the job I find daunting. I’m afraid of…” She paused and took her glasses off to rub at her eyes before replacing them. “Eloen asked me earlier if I was Scoia’tael… if I was one of you. And I was faced with the reality of where I am. I feel for you and everyone that has ever been made to feel unsafe, as if they were less than worthless but I just don’t know if I’m comfortable laying my- my morals or sense of humanity on a stack of dead bodies.”

“Aevon, no one has asked you to kill for us.”

She moved closer, kneeling beside him to meet his gaze directly. “But what if you’re right and we find the proof that Iohn did this to Adhart… did this to Lasei and her mother? What if I fall in love with- well with everything here and it were put into harms way and suddenly I’m the one calling for Iohn to pay and learning how to-to remise and riposte! Can you imagine me with a sword Iorveth?” She frantically held up one of the books and shook it under his nose. “This is what I’m good at which you so kindly mocked me for! I can’t make people pay for their terrible atrocities with this!”

The panic in her voice spurred him to drop his own book and lean forward to cup his hands around the back of her head, fingers threading into the soft hair and silencing her abruptly while he brushed each of her cheeks with his thumbs. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath before opening them once more.

“What if this place changes me and the Wendy that returns home to her unremarkable life isn’t the
same?"

And suddenly his mind was flooded with images of life after she left, and the twist in his chest slowly intensified. But not as much as the knowledge that he was already going to break the silent promise he’d made. She would return changed, shaped by his world.

“That is why I sharpen my blades. You will not be forced to slay for anyone and if it makes you feel better, I will order everyone to keep their weapons far from your reach should you decide to wield. Though I see you as more of a dagger thrower.”

Aevon stared at him a moment longer before a slight smile broke free. “I can confidently say that you would be incorrect. I tried darts once… didn’t even hit the wall.”

Iorveth laughed, his hands falling away from where they had been resting against her skin. It had been sometime since he’d laughed. Not a sarcastic chuckle or light huff of amusement but an actual laugh that shook his shoulders, but it quickly died away when the light humor in Aevon’s blue eyes turned to intense panic. Perhaps it was the damned part of him that was still ridiculously vain and abhorred his disfigured smile, but he tilted his head slightly to the side, hiding that part of him once more.

“What’s wrong?” She asked nervously.

He knew it shouldn’t matter, after all she’d already seen everything there was to see but… it did. He hadn’t wanted to admit it for a long time, but it was becoming increasingly difficult to deny that she was a beautiful woman with too much kindness and innocence for a world like his… and for his own special brand of ugliness as she’d said once. But he’d secretly come to wish for the moments when she looked at him as something more… as when she’d thought he had honor and integrity.

With a shake of his head he tried to divert her attention. “You said there were legends of elves on Earth… tell me of them.”

She eased from her knees to sit directly next to him, holding her hands out to soak up the warmth of the fire. “That would take ages to cover just how ingrained legends of elves are in our society. I’ll stick to my favorites. There is a work of literary masterpieces called the Lord of the Rings where much like here they are magnificently beautiful, long lived, and wield incredible power and influence.”

“I think I would rather enjoy this literary masterpiece.” He said, more than pleased about this legend from her world. He glanced at her however when she chuckled and sent him a crooked grin.

“And then there are the Christmas elves.”

“What… are Christmas elves?”

She folded her legs and wrapped her arms around her knees. “Christmas is a holiday… winter solstice and a tradition for this holiday is to give gifts to your loved ones, just something that says you care, or something you know they needed or wanted. And a prominent symbol of this gift giving is…” She paused the cover a laugh which had him glaring as menacingly as he could to encourage her to continue. “Santa Clause.”

He waited for her to continue but she broke down in peals of laughter and rolled onto her back.

“I don’t understand the humor… is Santa Clause an elf?”

Her laughter had finally begun to die down only to be rev up again with his question. “Sorry- sorry.
Some legends say he is human, some say elf. But that’s not alright. Let me finish.”

“Aevon, you must think you have a lovely laugh, but it is rather thunderous. Please, for the sake of Adhart…”

She swallowed another roll of laughter and eased herself back up to sitting and stared intently at the fire. “I’m sorry but I can’t look at you right now. Okay, so all year long Santa Clause keeps track of every boy and girl on earth, making list of who’s naught and nice and—” She stopped for a quick giggle before clearing her throat and straightening her spine. “He um he checks it twice. And if the kids were good all year long he delivers toys to them on Christmas eve. And these toys were made by—um—by little elves about yey high.” She held her hand out a few feet above the ground. “They all live at the north pole wearing pointy little hats and shoes with bells on the ends.”

Iorveth didn’t know what to think or say for a long moment and he noticed it was taking everything in her willpower to keep from bursting into giggles. “You are telling me that of all the stories and legends of my people, there is one where we are reduced to toy makers wearing pointed shoes?”

“With bells—mustn’t forget the bells… Would you rather hear legends of fairies?”

Iorveth sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Yes, yes I want to hear… what is a fairy to you people.”

She rested a hand on his knee in comfort and gave him an apologetic smile. “Basically, little elves, smaller than my hand, with wings and a magic dust called fairy dust. I’m actually named after a character who is taken to a far away land with the fairy dust from a fairy named Tinkerbell.”

Iorveth dropped his hand and cat her glanced at her with a pained expression. “It’s worse than I thought. We have to get you back to Earth so you can begin correcting all these terrible wrongs.”

“You must be the dh’oine Iorveth spoke of earlier!” Dain called out as he joined their fire, effectively halting his conversation with Aevon. Iorveth watched as she nervously stood and dusted her hands on her thighs before holding one out to the new arrival which he gave a firm shake.

“I’m Wendy.”

“Dain. Apparently, you’re the one to talk to tomorrow about the rest of the miserable lot over there rounding up rats and playing nursemaid.”

“Oh!” Aevon looked down at him with a glare before meeting Dain’s gaze once more. “I’m not even sure…” Iorveth waited, dropping his gaze to the fire, knowing that she was either going to decide to leave come morning, on her own… or she was going to stay and see this through with him. “The rats need to be eradicated. The cats will keep them from repopulating, but we need to get rid of them first or more people will continue to get sick. Solana needs help caring for the sick, food stores need to be resupplied. No one is prepared for winter and the harvest is still incomplete. Not to mention we need to find a remedy for those that are already sick. I’m not asking or ordering anyone to help… these are just basics for helping Adhart survive and if you and anyone else are willing to help… Solana is the one to speak to. Not me.”

Dain looked from Aevon down to Iorveth who leaned forward to dust some grass from his leggings, finding no help he looked back to Aevon.

“And what is it you will be doing?”

She bent down to scoop one of her abandoned books and held it up. “Research. There are eight dying people right now, a ninth has already been lost. I’m going to do what I do best and read.”
Iorveth couldn’t stop the huff of a laugh that escaped, and he paid for it with a nudge to the thigh from the heel of her boot. “Don’t forget Iorveth, you offered to research as well.”

Dain gave Aevon a wide smile and helped himself to a spot near the fire and picked up the nearest book. “I can’t have Iorveth outdoing me. He’s got a day’s head start but I’m going to be the hero this time around.”

Aevon answered Dain’s smile with her own and quickly resettled back at Iorveth’s side, leaning across him to whisper to her new friend. “I should very much like to hear about how Iorveth out ‘heroed’ you.”

Iorveth rolled his eye.

“It’s actually a very grand tale… almost as equal as the one you told inside.”

The three looked up to find Eloen easing herself down on the other side of Aevon, a plate of food which she passed over to Aevon. The two women shared a long glance before Aevon accepted the plate and in turn handed a book to Eloen. “I look forward to hearing it.”

The four of them sat around the fire, passing the food around and searching the worn pages of book after book for answers.

When the moon had risen high into the night sky when the familiar weight of Aevon’s head began to rest on his shoulder, but her eyes remained open, if only just. She continued to scan the page, but it was easy to tell that the exhaustion of the past two days had caught up to her. A flick of his gaze and he met Dain’s who heaved a yawn and rolled to his feet.

“I’ll read this after I kick Iorveth’s ass in the hunt tomorrow. G’night Eloen, Wendy.”

“Her name is Aevon.” Eloen pipped up with a meaningful glance at Dain who in turn rolled his eyes.

“Of course, he gave you a name. I’m going to my bedroll…” He said before turning away muttering something along the lines of ‘Damn romantic fool.’

“I’m off too.”

“Good night.” Aevon murmured. “I thought they would never leave.” A moment later she’d dug out a blanket and stretched out using a book for a pillow. She laid there with her eyes closed for a moment before peeking at him from one eye. “How are you not collapsing right now?”

“I have the endurance of a hundred humans.” To which she rolled her eyes and patted a book resting beside her. It hardly registered to him that Dain was going to have more than his fair share of words to grief him with over this, but the sleepy smile that greeted him when he finally laid beside Aevon was well worth any amount of mocking.

“Why do you sleep with patch hat on?”

“Keeps me warm.”

“But the feather…”

He assumed she was in a delirious state of lack of sleep, but he sighed and pulled it off anyways. “There.”

She answered him with another smile before slowly reaching a hand out. He watched as her touch
grew nearer and instinctively closed his eye when she ran her fingers over his hair.

“You have lovely hair.” She drew a deep breath and let it out slowly. “You know… dark hair, green eyes, and cut cheekbones are a deadly combination.”

He gazed into her sleepy blue eyes… now he knew she was delirious. “Go to sleep Aevon.” He said, slipping her glasses away and laying them in the grass above her head.

His stomach clenched painfully when she closed her eyes but wiggled closer until her forehead rested under his chin and her hand slipped from his hair and down to his neck.

“Go to sleep Iorveth.” She whispered.

With her so near, he’d expected sleep to elude him for some time but the last thing he remembered was the feel of her breath on his neck. When he next awoke it was to the sound of Solana’s approach and the beginnings of dawn filtering through the trees.

Carefully and painfully reluctant he eased himself back from Aevon’s warmth and moved to greet Solana, pulling his cap back into place over his disfigurement.

“Ayda passed.”

Iorveth nodded once. “I’ll wake Dain.”

“What about Aevon? She will nee-“

He shook his head, cutting her off. “She needs to sleep.” With a final glance at the sleeping woman with hair that made him think of the blushed white wine Dandelion was fond of, spilling over her face. Yes… let her sleep every moment she can for the news that awaited her when she woke…
Wendy knew from her own experience that grief wasn’t like they portrayed in the movies. Grief had many facets and edges. For some it was mourning the loss of a loved one or the unexpected change their lives suddenly took. The loss of an idea or sense of self. Watching someone you hoped would lead, defeated by their opponent.

Sure, there were silent tears and comforting hands on shoulders, but true bone shattering grief was messy and painful. The headaches and difficulty breathing, the loss of control and just wanting to understand what any of the pain means.

As Wendy stood watching Iorveth and Dain place stones over the grave where Ayda would lay on her journey to Nirvana, she was reminded of her own memories. Now instead of Pop at her side, she had Lasei perched on her hip with her small arms wrapped around her neck. She could feel the dampness of the girls tears from where she rested her check on her shoulder.

It shouldn’t have come as a shock, or been as difficult as it was, for Wendy’s rationale that she hadn’t even known Ayda and had known the chances of the woman’s survival had been dismal from the moment she’d seen her… but it had been both of those.

She remembered just hours before, the rustle of leaves drawing her to awareness. The yawn and stretch, acknowledging that she’d not nearly had enough sleep and a swift disappoint of waking alone. Deciding not to dwell on it and instead see what she could do at Solana’s. The absolute delight in the sight of a scarlet patch hat and feather and the man below it carrying a shovel. He didn’t answer her wave with one of his own but did change course to intercept her.

The smile slipping from her lips as he broke the news and her first words. “I have to see Lasei.” And she’d brushed past him and into the house. It was the moment she’d also been hit with the reality that Lasei was doomed to the same fate as her mother. The girl had sat beside her mother, running a hand over their matching hair.

The other patients watching with fevered and panicked gazes at the newest reminder that their days were limited to less than a week. And then there was the arrival of four new sick.

The panic Wendy felt was choking, stealing her breath but despite the shaking of her hands, she’d reached for Lasei and wrapped her in her arms. She knew the loss of a mother, whether it’s sudden or known as an inevitability, it hurt.

After Iorveth laid the last stone he guided her back to Adhart with a hand wrapped around her elbow, keeping her steady with her weak leg and added weight of Lasei. It had been obvious by the lack of a male appearance other than Iorveth and Dain, that Lasei lacked a father and now she’d lost her mother. Someday she would tell Lasei about loosing her own parents. It wouldn’t be proper to
try and comfort someone’s grief by bringing about her own, instead she would do everything she
could to help.

As the days rose and fell into the next, Wendy and Iorveth etched out a routine of waking early to
start the most pressing of the chores, seeing to the immediate needs of those housed in the sickroom,
before she ensconced herself to a desk in Solana’s house where she scoured books, while he saw to
food and issuing duties to his soldiers. She’d even sent a raven to Novigrad, hoping Triss had
returned and could offer insight. The potion mistress hadn’t however and Wendy continued her
search. After hours of research, she would join Lasei’s side to end the day with a story, before
dragging books to the campfire Iorveth always had ready.

His day had little variation from hers except for the majority of it was spent hunting and training with
his soldiers, when there was little left to do for the patients. He never mentioned the nearing end of
the week, but it was always in the back of her mind and the line between her reasoning of her
resistance to him leaving was beginning to blur. It had less and less to do with his need to avenge
Adhart without irrefutable proof and more to do with the fact that he would be leaving… and often
the thought of what if he didn’t return haunted her… just as she’d feared, her reasons were becoming
selfish and the knowledge caused guilt to gnaw at her.

Lasei was growing worse, more were falling sick every day, and two were in the final stages of the
illness. The only good thing to have happened in the days since their arrival was the efforts in
eradicating the rats from the villages. With the increasing arrivals of Scoia’tael, they helped where
they could and prepared for a battle Wendy hoped she could stop.

One by one the houses had been treated with a remedy of lemon and salt rubs and would continue
the treatments for months to come. Word had spread through the village of her presence and while
she was still met with the usual cold stare when she introduced herself, none had outright refused her
help since the first day. Though Iorveth and Lasei were the only two she really felt comfortable
around, with the possible addition of the quietly regal Solana, she had a feeling that she was growing
on Eloen and Dain.

Dain joined her in the evenings for when she told the patients stories and became an active
participant in asking questions or to tell a certain part once more while Eloen plied her with food
when Wendy would forget to do so herself.

By the fourth days ending, Wendy began to lose hope. Lasei no longer had the strength to sit up on
her own and three more of the original seven patients had been laid to rest in the forest. The suns
light was waning through the trees, turning Solana’s small study a neon orange and Wendy snapped
another book closed, it’s pages offering recounts of a wasting disease similar to the one that affected
deer back on Earth, but had no clues to stopping a body from hemorrhaging throughout.

All she wanted to do was press her palms into her eyes and cry but she couldn’t… Lasei and the
others were downstairs waiting for the story of Shrek two. Lasei had enjoyed the first in the series so
much and Wendy had promised to continue on. But how could she go down there, force humor and
cheer into a voice and keep it from breaking?

She knew she was tired, having slept less and less every night since the first. She spent the time
watching Iorveth sharpen a sword or attach fletching to arrows or listening to Dain for the man could
talk deep into the night despite the silence from his two companions and the occasional presence of
Eloen. Eventually the warmth of the fire and the rustle of the leaves would lull her into pulling out
her blanket and staring at the stars or moonlit clouds until Iorveth slipped her glasses from their perch
and lay with his head next to hers.

Wendy sighed and straightened the scattered books, scribbles of notes, and journals into neat stacks
and pushed herself back from the desk and left the tiny room. As she passed the kitchen Eloen pushed her two bowls of rabbit stew, one of which she fed to Lasei and the other sat on the table growing cold.

“Did you draw anything in the journal today?” Wendy asked, gently dabbing a spot of stew from Lasei’s chin.

“I did. Do you like flowers?”

“I absolutely do. I have many, many favorites such as sunflowers and daisies. What are some of your favorites?”

Lasei pointed to the journal resting beside Wendy’s stew. Wendy quickly picked it up and flipped to the latest drawing. The lines were childlike and shaky, a result of Lasei’s weakening state but there was little doubt that she had drawn a flower. Long lines for the stalk with the bloom consisting of thin petals that spread outwards in to points.

“I wish I had paints and could show you how pretty and blue it is.”

Wendy traced a finger over one of the petals and gave Lasei a warm smile. “It’s lovely just the same. What is it called?”

“Ummm blue something. Momma knew. They grow near the waterfall in the forest and after picking mushrooms, would bring one home to me.”

The sadness in Lasei’s words and expression shattered Wendy’s heart but she forced herself to keep her tears at bay and instead asked if Lasei was ready for the second Shrek story.

Much later when the tale was done and Lasei as well as the others were as comfortable as they were going to get for the evening, Wendy couldn’t bare to sit still. She couldn’t face another night doing nothing but listening to Dain fill the silence. But then again, she found it odd that the red-haired man hadn’t been at Solana’s for the story… She shook her head and dismissed the thought as another occurred to her. She had an idea, one that filled her with purpose.

In the cellar of Solana’s house, she found a lantern and carried it out to her usual campfire. The flames were already stoked though Iorveth’s presence was missing. Using a twig she lit the lantern and followed the river up into the forest. She didn’t know how far to Lasei and Ayda’s waterfall but it shouldn’t be too difficult to find.

After all, rivers and waterfalls kind of went hand in hand. It did occur to her that it was a foolish idea to enter the forest alone at night armed with nothing but a lantern. But she wanted Lasei to wake to a vase full of her mother’s flowers and she wasn’t helpless… despite her past encounters. Waiting around for someone to escort her seemed childish and she had enough trouble gaining even a modicum of respect as it was.

She’d hiked for about forty minutes when two sounds reached her. The distant roar of water hitting rocks and the equally distant howl of wolves. One sparked a high of excitement warmed her blood, the other sent a shiver of trepidation down her spine. But Wendy firmly shook her head, for once she was going to accomplish something she actually set out to do. With this in mind she quickened her pace and in short time, the glow of the stars and moon illuminated a small but perfectly respectable waterfall.

Just as Lasei had said, there were mushrooms and to her delight, beautiful blue flowers. They had to be the ones the child had drawn so Wendy quickly picked as many as her hands could hold, silently
reprimanding herself for not thinking of a basket. But it was a fleeting thought as she stood near the falls, enjoying the feel of the cold spray wrapping around her.

Many things were weighing on her mind and in her moment of solitude and quiet, she struggled to focus on only one. It helped, standing in such a lovely place, as much as it distracted. She had more than one problem but she’d narrowed down her thoughts to the two most terrifying. The fever taking over Adhart and the other… call her hopelessly romantic but she couldn’t help it. As much as she felt guilty for seeking out the pleasure of making someone smile in a time when so many were suffering, she just couldn’t help it.

Her only respite from the choking panic that came with the fear of failing so many were the nights under the stars with Iorveth. The butterflies in her stomach when she first saw him after hours apart… the massive amount of time she spent thinking of ridiculous stories and comments and watching to see if she’d made him smile.

Wendy tipped back her head and groaned. There were countless reasons as to why she shouldn’t be thinking about just what that crooked smile did to her. Every brain cell was fighting tooth and nail to remind her that she wasn’t supposed to grow attached, it wasn’t right or fair or ever going to amount to anything more than heartbreak and guilt and more than likely a bone shattering disappointment if her growing feelings weren’t returned.

If she hadn’t been human then maybe he’d look at her twice… but she wasn’t. She was everything he hated and his tolerance was balanced on the fact that she was not only a stranger in a strange land but utterly harmless. Wendy Amelia Jones was of no danger to anyone whether it be their lives or their hearts.

Which led her to thoughts of self-loathing. How could she stand there and feel sorry for herself because she had heart eyes for someone when so many were at that moment wondering if they were going to die. For the hundredth time, she had to remind herself that she wasn’t here to form attachments and think with her lady parts. She was there to help save a few lives and hightail it back to home.

Iorveth was a distraction she couldn’t afford. She was a modern woman with a realistic view on her place on Earth and she knew her happiness didn’t rely on the thoughts and opinions of others… or at least deep down that’s how she wished she felt. Instead she was shamefully desperate for the quiet moments when it was just the two them after Dain and Eloen sought their own beds. Wishing to know his every thought and feeling, his past and his hope for the future.

Could he ever see a day where he didn’t feel the drive to live such a life of danger, or had he steeled his heart against anything other than a soldier’s existence. To some day be felled by a sword just as Loki knew how many himself.

Wendy shook her head and rubbed her hands along her arms, fighting the brisk night air and waterfall mist. Even if in her wildest dreams she never went home, such a life couldn’t be for her. After two weeks in this land and she already felt altered. The weight she’d lost from the irregular meals, the monsters that could be stalking her at this very moment, the constant warring… She’d stared into a mans eyes as he died, his blood soaking her clothing.

On Earth she had the good fortune to live a quiet life, far away from the horrors that so many suffered. She donated to charities and voted, but she had wide open eyes to the fact that she was still removed from the actual atrocities. Yes, a simple and unremarkable life is what she led and here it was anything but.

The multiple times she’d already nearly died was enough to make her stomach churn. And every
time, Iorveth had been there, pulling her away from death’s door just in the nick of time.

Wendy’s eyes widened as a thought occurred to her, bringing on the greatest wave of relief that she had felt for some time. She admired him because he’d saved her many times over and being the romantic that she is, of course she had thoughts of the more amorous nature. She sighed at her silliness.

For days she had agonized over falling in love and turns out she had nothing to worry about. Admiration and fondness were perfectly normal feelings to have for someone who had saved your life. Finding that person attractive in a devastating way was simply hormones and chemistry.

Wendy frowned however when she didn’t have a ready reason for the need she felt to make Iorveth happy, to see light shine in his green eye over a teasing comment. To feel fear that he simply tolerated her while she was increasingly beginning to think he hung the moon. The man brought in one of the kittens for Lasei to play with every day for Hades sake! What child bearing woman didn’t find the sight of a stern-faced man making an effort to put a smile on a child’s face an absolute game changer?

Her groan of frustration was a result of having come full circle with her tangled thoughts. She had to stop this. What would Captain Janeway do? She would set aside her feelings, concentrate on the mission, and get her crew home. Only in this case, the crew was Wendy herself.

Another sigh.

With the light of the lantern she caught sight of her dirty hands and tried to examine her reflection in the pool of water. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d seen her reflection and the last time she’d had an actual bath, horrifying as it was, had been days ago.

Wendy had never taken any particular care of her appearance beyond the norm of pimple cream for the oily spots on her face or lotion for the dry spots. She’d had the usual phase of makeup wearing with dragon lady blue and glittery lip gloss but had eventually grown into shades that complimented her coloring.

In a moment of lightness she remembered her Pop’s face when she spent her chore money on her first supply of makeup. He’d told her that she was too pretty for the stuff but looking back on it now, he’d probably had more sense than she did on the sagacious of her choice and she’d been too stubborn to listen. Besides, when you spent your life with your eyes behind a pair of thick glasses, one had to do everything they could to make them stand out.

Even in the lantern light she could make out the greasy hair and dirt smudges across her skin. By the end of the day, changing was usually the last thing on her mind and her clothing showed it. Wendy began to wonder how deep the pool was, considering that perhaps all she needed to refocus her mind was a long soak in the cold water.

With a sigh she pushed herself back from the water’s edge and shook her head. If she bathed, she didn’t want to pull on dirty clothes, meaning it would have to wait. The trek was long and the weariness of heart and mind just would not allow her the motivation of walking back to Adhart to gather supplies, walk back to the falls, and then the return.

Soon though… Wendy turned away with the blue flowers for Lasei in one hand and the lantern held high in the other. As soon as Lasei was better, she would return for a well needed bath.
The thunder of Xalvador’s hooves drowned out all sound as Iorveth gave him reign to gallop through the canyons. He leaned low over the horse’s neck, teeth clenched against the exertion of staying seated and the pain every hoofbeat made. The arrow lodged low in his side radiated pain through his body with every breath and every movement.

He held on tightly, leaning with the horse when he rounded a curve, bracing for leaps over fallen trees. A glance over his shoulder showed the shadowed Scoia’tael riding with him at break neck paces, weaving through the forest just as he was.

Another turn and they would hit the path back to Adhart with fifteen additional horses for their soldiers, coin for food, and weapons. Perhaps a few more scars but well worth the raid on a camp of deserters, especially when it became known what they had planned for the Scoia’tael they’d been holding.

He nearly laughed at the look on their red-faced leaders face when he’d dropped from the roof of his pitiful shack. Iorveth had to admit, it felt good to strike fear into dh’oine’s face. To see the that telling gleam of fear, the knowledge that they knew… oh yes, they knew they were going to die.

Iorveth and Dain along with their men and women burst from the forest, disturbing the peaceful night. Only then did they reign in their mounts to a steady pace.

“Was that fucking glorious or not?” Dain called out from beside him.

It hurt, almost to the point where he saw stars, but Iorveth raised a fist in agreement. He’d had an itch under his skin for days, a need to do something other than watch sick people die. He needed to punish and take the rewards of ridding the land of vermin.

And punish and take he did. Of course, he’d relished in the battle but also was paying a price for his negligence in underestimating the stubbornness in one bandit’s refusal to die when he was gifted the release of his blade.

And therein lay the slight chill to the thrill of victory coursing through him. He’d be lying if the thought of Aevon’s reaction hadn’t weighed on his mind. While he’d originally only sought to acquire supplies, he’d stumbled across quite the advantageous situation to which the only solution was to lay waste to the camp.

There would be words said, he knew. Had already prepared mentally for the argument he knew would be waiting once she learned what he’d done. He didn’t want a falling out, not with an arrow needing to be pushed through, men and women to train, and a battle to be fought. Perhaps the books he’d thought to bag would offer enough distraction for her to stay her thoughts on his more violent methods.

Or perhaps he did want her angry. Maybe that’s why he’d taken such relish in the swing of his blades. The small camp hadn’t truly called for him to use both, but he’d had a need to use them, to dance the ageless dance as he spun them with a flourish. He wanted a reaction out of Aevon, to see her eyes glow with a blue flame as she raged that he was a murderous fool.

There were benefits all around for her to do as much. First, it would be a distraction from the hopelessness he’d seen creeping into her gaze as each day passed and those of Adhart grew worse and worse. Second, he’d be privy to a magnificent show of a usually calm and collected woman unravel. And last, he’d remind her that he was a monster and undeserving of the gentleness of her lingering gazes.

He didn’t know if she even knew, but every emotion she felt showed as clear as a spring day. And if
she continued looking at him as if he were anything more than the dishonorable murderer she’d once thought him to be, he’d lose that control he was oh so fond of.

He couldn’t live the life he led without unbreakable control.

Before long the glow of firelight welcomed them and Iorveth slowed Xalvador until he could ease himself from the saddle, tossing the reigns to a soldier standing nearby. Before looking for Aevon he slipped the books from a saddle bag and bid the horse goodbye with a pat on the side.

Walking toward his campfire, he noticed a surprising lack of strawberry blonde dh’oine sitting near it. A glance through around the what was visible of the village showed no sign of her. Thinking perhaps she was still seeing to Lasei and the others he shrugged it off and dropped his gift to the ground and began to remove what he could of his armor.

“Iorveth, what have you done?” Came the chiding voice of Eloen and he glanced up to see her approach with Dain.

“Rule number one of battle, always be certain that you give a killing blow. Make it two just to be safe.” Dain said with a chuckle.

“Just get over here and push it through.” Iorveth bit out after easing his sword belt and pieces of his armor off, dropping them onto the ground.

“Alright there, let’s just slow down.” Eloen said, holding her hands up in caution.

Iorveth touched the arrow shaft sticking from the back of his lower side, hissing slightly at the intense burn of pain. “It’s at an angle, not lodged in bone and nothing vital is touched. Break it off and push it through.”

Eloen crossed her arms and shared a glance with Dain before staring at Iorveth with an arched look. “You know all that just from touching it huh? You can’t even see it. Dain, help me with his armor. Arms up tough guy.”

Knowing it needed to be done, Iorveth did as instructed and closed his eye, waiting as his two comrades worked to unbuckle and unlace him from his mail and padded armor. He held his breath as they pulled it back from his shoulders, slowly easing it with the angle of the arrow. He felt the tug as if an iron poker were digging inside of him.

“Do you have to move it so fucking much?” He growled through clenched teeth.

“Such language. Good thing Aevon isn’t here to see or hear.” Eloen said with a teasing voice.

Iorveth popped open his eye and glanced over his shoulder. “What do you mean she isn’t here?”

Eloen didn’t answer right away as she and Dain had successfully removed his armor. Quickly she pulled one of her daggers from its sheath and began to cut away the shirt still covering him. “She lit a lantern and went into the forest, following the river.”

Iorveth spun around as Dain whistled. “Who went with her?” He demanded.

Eloen followed the arrow. “Hold still would you? No one.”

Too many questions began to race through his mind, all of them convoluted with panic but he managed to spin around again, this time grasping Eloen by the shoulders and forcing her to meet his gaze. “Why didn’t you stop her?”
Eloen rolled her eyes and shrugged his hands from her. “Because she’s a grown woman and I’m not her nursemaid? What’s the big deal, so she needed some time alone… after everything that’s going on here and putting up with you, who could blame her.”

“Eloen, woman of my heart, is the dh’oine growing on you?” Dain said with waggling eyebrows.

“Anyone who helps empty chamber pots and keeps their mouths shut for lengthy periods of time will earn my respect after some time… Of the three of you, she fits that criteria spectacularly.” Dain gave a slight pout to which Eloen ignored. “The arrow isn’t deep. It would be easier to cut it out rather than push it through and risk nicking something. And your armor needs repair.”

Iorveth rolled his shoulders in impatience. “I don’t care, just get the bastard thing out so I can go find her.”

Eloen nodded to Dain who quickly left for his own pack. “You want to tell me why?”

Iorveth glared at the woman hotly. “She has the survival instincts of a newborn. Has zero skill in defense and very prone to getting lost. Now she’s out there in the middle of the night—”

“Here, drink this.” Dain said before taking a deep swig of the whiskey bottle and passing it to Iorveth who followed his lead. The golden liquid burned his senses and would soon curb the edge of pain. He nodded to Dain who then pressed a leather strap into his hand.

After biting into it Iorveth walked to the nearest tree and stretched his arms over his head, gripping a low branch tightly. He took a deep breath and glanced over his shoulder to Eloen who immediately set blade to skin.

It wasn’t the worst pain he’d felt, but it wasn’t the most pleasant experience either. But more than the pain of Eloen digging her knife under his skin, widening the exit for the arrowhead, was his impatience to be done. The longer this took, the longer Aevon was out there alone in the cold dark, where wolves, leshens’ and countless other horrors could take her before she’d even drew breath to scream.

Eventually he felt the arrow jerked free from his side, followed by the burn of whiskey being poured into the wound. Eloen counted the stitches up to eight before she deemed him finished. She’d barely said the words before he was walking to his pack and pulling out his only remaining linen shirt and strapping his sword belt back around his hips.

“Your welcome!” She called after him sarcastically to which he ignored. Along with his disregard, he didn’t see the arm she held out before Dain, halting him from following his dearest companion. “He won’t need your help for this Red.”

Dain grinned at her. “What game are you playing?”

“The Commander is distracted and tense. Perhaps whatever happens tonight will help.”

“You mean they aren’t already…”

Eloen rolled her eyes and began to lead the way to her house. “When would they have? With you hanging around…”

“So you let her-“

“She’s a grown woman, I didn’t let her do anything. I also didn’t chase after her to ask.” Eloen paused to swing open the door to her small but modest house. “Now, stop being so concerned with
the Commanders lovers or lack of them, and see to your own instead.”

Dain growled playfully and kicked the door closed.

The journey back to Adhart was taking much longer than Wendy had anticipated, perhaps because of her heightened level of exhaustion. Her stomach turned rebelliously, reminding her that she’d only had a few bites of her cold stew.

“C’mon river, you guided me to the waterfall, now guide me back home.” She whispered to the peacefully flowing river. Wendy was growing nervous as the light of her lantern was growing dim and the sounds of the forest were growing louder.

A moving shadow in the trees ahead caught her eye, freezing her in place. After taking a deep breath she raised her lantern higher and leaned to the side, searching the shadows for the movement once more.

When she saw it again, her fist tightened around the blue flowers, and was just considering how to use the lantern to fight off whatever lurked in the darkness when the Iorveth stepped into the light. It wasn’t just relief that swept through her at his familiar presence but an intense level of happiness as well. The thought of being ridiculous didn’t register as she felt a smile spread and she happily jogged to meet him. The sight of him without his armor gave her quick pause as it was rare that he even slept without it.

“Iorveth! Fancy seeing you out here. You won’t believe-” She was cut off when he pressed both of his hands against her shoulders and turned her till her back collided with the nearest tree. There was a mixture of two parts apprehension and a hell of a lot more arousal than she’d been prepared for.

“What are you doing?” She asked, finally recognizing the intense look in his eye as anger.

The silence grew between them to the point where all she could hear was the turbulent beat of her heart. The longer he stared at her with that stormy expression, the more panic began to set in, for the only reason she could fathom for him to seek her out.

“It’s not- please tell me Lasei is okay!” Wendy cried out, her eyes widening in panic and fear.

“I’ve no news about the child.” He said in a low voice.

Wendy frowned. “Then why…” She trailed off with her breath catching in her chest as Iorveth stepped closer. Tilting her head back against the tree, she was quickly reminded of just how much taller than her he was, the angle dragging her gaze from his and down to his lips. The only thought running through her mind in that moment was how much she needed to taste them.

He was close, so very close… it would take very little effort to sway forward just the smallest, tiniest bit, to press her palms on his chest and run them up past his shoulders, to feel his soft hair spreading over her fingers as she pulled him down to her. He had to want this too- why else was he standing so close, his hands still pressing into her shoulders, holding her in place. Another moment passed and Wendy decided she couldn’t take it anymore, she was going to drop the flowers and lantern and-

“How could you possibly be the most idiotic woman not only in your world but in mine as well and have lived this long?” He snapped. His words had the same effect as a bucket of icy water dumped over her head, freezing all thoughts of dragging his mouth to hers. “Not only did you leave Adhart, but you did so alone, at night, and without weapons. Were you trying to get yourself killed? What
“Could you have been thinking?”

Wendy frowned, her mind beginning to work enough to comprehend his words. “Why are you so upset? Am I prisoner?” She shook his hands from her shoulders. “You didn’t seem to object when I’d nearly left four days ago!”

“That’s because I knew you wouldn’t actually leave! And then I was under the impression that you were intelligent enough to know that you wouldn’t last more than a day before something or someone dragged you off.”

Her anger was rising, to the point of matching his, only hers was from hurt and confusion. “Step away from me.” She bit out through clenched teeth.

“Not until you’ve learned a lesson in this.” He countered.

Wendy tossed her hands out, the lantern swinging wildly. “What lesson? How I have to seek out your permission to leave your sight? So, I am a prisoner until you can dump me off back on my own planet?”

“If it means you actually live to see your return then yes!”

Wendy pushed past him. “I’m not your possession.”

“You’re my responsibility!” He called after her causing Wendy to whirl back to glare at him.

“No. I’m not. And I shouldn’t have to tell you all the reasons why!” She hated the sting of frustrated tears burning her eyes. “I wanted to do something beautiful for a wonderful girl who is dying right now while you rant at me! I was so—” Wendy paused when her voice broke and rubbed her fist full of flowers against her temple, seeking to ease the pounding headache there. “I found these and enjoyed a moment of quiet while I sorted through feelings of- of you and her a-and everything and then I came back and—”

She forced her gaze away from him, searching out the stars peeking through the trees. “I’m tired and filled with a constant feeling of dread because not only are people dying, I’m trying to keep you from going to war. And I was walking back home and there you were and for one heartbeat- those feelings were gone, replaced with indescribable happiness.” She dropped her gaze back down to him and shook her head, saying more than she’d meant to. “I released you long ago from your respons—”

His hands wrapping around waist, lifting her till his nose brushed hers, effectively cut her off. Instinctively she dropped the flowers and lantern both to steady herself, her hands instead fisting in his shirt. For the longest moment she couldn’t breath as he hovered over her, all she could do was feel his heart beating against her fist, watch as his moonlit gaze became hooded. An ache in her chest cried out for her to breath, to finish this, whether by pushing herself free or pulling him all the way in.

She was saved from making the decision for at last he caught her lips with his, eliciting a sound from her throat that she’d never made before as the taste and feel of him consumed her. It seemed to spur him on as his grip tightened and he slanted his mouth at an angle that parted her lips, granting him entrance.

Their groans mingled as the burn of pleasure and desire created from such a simple change heightened every place they touched. Wendy followed his lead until she found the courage to do something she’d only done in her dreams. Inhaling a deep breath, she pushed herself up onto her toes before dragging her tongue along his upper lip. The sound of his moan nearly sent her spiraling out
of control.

It was impossible to conjure a coherent thought beyond thinking she wanted more, needed more, if she didn’t touch all of him then she might fade away into mist. Slowly she moved her hands down to the tails of his shirt and slipped them beneath the linen, seeking out the smooth skin.

Wendy pulled back a breath as her fingers brushed something rough, provoking a hiss of pain from Iorveth. Drawing her hands away she felt something warm and wet coating her fingers and in the pale light she made out the dark color of blood.

“Iorveth?” She said breathlessly. “You’re hurt!”

“It’s nothing.”

Wendy ignored him and quickly leaned around to his back, pulling his shirt up. Easily she made out the blood running down from a stitched wound a few inches long. “Shit- hold still.” She whispered and ripped a strip from the bottom of her shirt and pressing it against the laceration. “What the hell happened? Why didn’t you dress this- are you trying to die of an infection? Really? You came out here to yell at me for being reckless and now- no first things first- who did this to you?”

She was in emotional overload, to the point where she was nearly dizzy but at that particular point in time she was worried and pissed. She needed answers, to make sense of what was happening and when he didn’t answer immediately she looked up at him with wide eyes, speaking without words her need to understand.

“I led a party to gather supplies. Learned of Scoia’tael being held to turn in for ransom before they were executed.” He looked down, meeting her gaze. “I killed the deserters, all of them. But not before one got off a final arrow.”

With every word, Wendy felt her as if the stone in her stomach were growing and growing. “You- You could have been killed.” She whispered. Carefully she took his hand and moved it to replace her own, allowing her the freedom to stand up straight before him. “Still might if you don’t see to that wound properly. Saving your people is admirable but- was that the only way?” As if in a trance she glanced at his blood smeared over her fingers. All she could think about was the fact that he could had died today…

In the corner of her eye she caught sight of the blue flowers she’d picked for Lasei, the petals broken and wilted from the two of them standing on them in their moment of passion. The lantern lay broken from her dropping it suddenly. All Wendy could do was shake her head and turn away.

The remainder of the walk back to Adhart was filled with unsaid words and a roaring silence. She didn’t look over her shoulder, but she knew Iorveth followed at a distance and when they reached their belongings she dug out her first aid kit. She caught sight of his pile of bloody armor, the arrow laying on top, sending a shudder down her spine.

Avoiding his gaze, she set about cleaning up the blood with shaking hands, forcing herself to distance herself from the fact that the arrow had hit him half an inch below his right kidney… if the angle had been different, a broadhead instead of a bodkin… The twist in her stomach nearly had her running to the bushes to vomit. The kit didn’t have a large supply of dressing, but it would do for the immediate moment.

Stepping away she quietly gathered her things and walked the short distance to Eloen’s house. Iorveth didn’t ask where she was going or try to stop her, and Wendy didn’t know if it helped or not. After several solid knocks the door swung open to reveal a very naked Dain with an almost as naked
Eloen coming down the stairs holding a sheet to her chest.

Wendy didn’t react more than a couple of slow blinks as it was the least shocking thing to happen upon in the past thirty minutes. “I’m sorry… I need- Can I stay here for a few hours?”

The two lovers shared a glance but must have seen something in her that let them know that she needed to be inside in that moment so Eloen reached out a hand and drew her inside.

“You can stay in here. Warm yourself by the fire, use the blankets, and get some sleep.” The woman said quietly.

“Thank you.” Wendy whispered and set her pack on the floor, picked up a scratchy but warm blanket and laid down. She watched the fire, too exhausted and scared to think and sort through her emotions so she allowed the calm flames to ease her into sleep.

Heavy footfalls dragged Wendy from a bloody dream ending with her burying body after body. Placing stone upon stone of the people she loved after having watched them die one by one before her. She cracked her eyes open, realizing she’d forgotten to take her glasses off.

She took them off then and rubbed her palms into her eyes and shying away from the memories of the night before. She didn’t have time to dwell on them as there were more important things to worry about. She’d just pushed herself to her feet when Dain and Eloen appeared in the doorway, causing her to drop her gaze from their curious ones.

She instead twisted her hair into a knot at the top of her head, replaced her glasses and went for the front door without a word, only to pause at the sight that waited on the other side.

On the ground sat a beaten tin cup full of the blue flowers, still fresh and shining prettily in the early morning sun. Two books lay next to them, one titled *Enchanting Blooms and Other Magical Curatives*, the other *The Duchess and the Vampire*. The sight of them terrified her as much as they delighted her. What was the meaning behind him doing such a gesture? For there was only one person who could have left them in a place she was sure to see them.

“Ah! Blue lotus. A flower with magical properties!” Dain spoke from behind her.

Stepping up to them, she slowly knelt and ran a finger down one of the petals. The small smile she felt itching to spread was nothing compared to the ache in her chest. She wanted to ask him what this meant, why did he kiss her, why was he angry at her for putting herself in danger, why-

But not yet. A glance at their- his cold fire showed that he’d already left to do whatever he deemed necessary and she wanted to have the flowers to Lasei before she awoke. So, with the flowers and books in hand, Wendy quickly made her way to Solana’s.

She paused in the doorway at the sight of several more tin cups holding even more of the blue lotus placed on the table next to Lasei. The child was awake and laying on her side, a small smile gracing her face as she looked at the flowers.

Wendy felt as if she were going to fall to pieces in that moment. Her breath caught, and her hands trembled with the items she still held. She didn’t have to be standing next to a picturesque contemplating complicated thoughts and emotions. What she felt was something that she’d felt since the moment she opened her eyes in Novigrad what felt like a lifetime ago. But she didn’t have time to completely comprehend what was happening to her as Lasei looked at her, her smile widening.
“Aevon!” The child cried out hoarsely. “The flowers momma would bring me. How did they get here?”

Wendy smiled and sat on the edge of her bed, setting her own cup on the table. “Perhaps someone wanted to remind you that your mother will always be with you in the form of the flowers. They were special to the both of you.” Wendy glanced down to one of the books resting in her lap. “I learned what they are called. Blue lotus. Apparently, a magical flower. Shall we read to find out just what is so special about them?”

At Lasei’s nod, Wendy opened the book, searching for the chapter specific to the blue lotus.

“The blue lotus is a truly remarkable flower not only in beauty but in their ability to sooth ailments of the mind and the body. Suffering from insomnia or nightmares, the blue lotus when dried and inhaled through smoke, will ease the mind into relaxation. But the exceptionally magical property of healing bodily trauma from the inside out makes them shine. A tea, brewed for three hours, while not a pleasant taste, will turn the tide on infection and most diseases.”

Wendy’s voice trailed off as she read the last sentence over and over. It didn’t mention whether the diseases caused by viruses such as the viral hemorrhagic fever… but…

“Lasei… may I please leave you? There’s something I have to do.”
“I officially deem you on the mend!” Wendy said, her hand on Lasei’s forehead finding the skin dry and cool. A mere eighteen hours after the child’s first sip of blue lotus tea and her fever had receded, her nose and ears were free of blood and the bruising around her small fingers was beginning to fade slightly. Each of the other patients, including the few in significantly worse state than Lasei, were well on their way to recovery.

For the first time in days, a piece of the suffocating weight from racing against time had been lifted from her chest. This freedom to breath, to heave a long sigh of relief was like walking out into a crisp winter morning. There was also no small amount of satisfaction that books hadn’t let her down. The answer had been out there, it just took a series of certain events in order to find them.

Lasei picked up one of her flowers from the cup and held it up beside Wendy’s cheek. “They remind me of your eyes.”

Wendy felt a twinge of sadness as she reached up to take Lasei’s hand in hers. “Perhaps whenever you see one, you’ll not only think of your mother but spare a thought for me as well.”

Lasei’s hazel eyes widened. “Are you leaving?”

“I am… I made a promise and if I’m to keep it that means I have to leave. I only wanted to make sure you and everyone else in Adhart would be alright before I did.” Her heart ached when the child’s lower lip trembled, and the sheen of tears trickled down her cheeks.

“But… who will tell everyone stories? Who will brush my hair and ask me about my drawings?”

Wendy had to tear her gaze from Lasei’s for if she didn’t she’d be promising that she would never leave her side, not even to return to Earth. She wasn’t meant to want to stay so desperately, wasn’t meant to keep finding reasons not to leave. But she had to leave and this was the first step in breaking the hold this place had on her. Saying goodbye for the first time… it was already painful, but it made her realize that it was only going to hurt more the longer she stayed.

Using the sleeve of her shirt she dried Lasei’s tears and summoned a smile, forcing it to shine from her eyes. “Perhaps you can be the story teller. And Solana has such long pretty hair, I have little doubt she will know her way around brushing yours. Eloen is particularly fond of art, I saw many paintings in her home, so perhaps you could show them to her.”

Lasei didn’t seem to perk up at her suggestions but she nodded slightly, prompting Wendy to press a kiss to the top of her head. She cared for Lasei in a way she hadn’t expected, whether it was the child’s immediate acceptance of her when so many had treated her with disdain, or the lonely little
girl still in Wendy recognizing the one before her as someone in need of love, she didn’t know.

But much like Adhart and Iorveth, Wendy was drawn to her on a painful level.

Drawing a deep breath for strength, she stood up from Lasei’s bed. “Go to sleep little sorceress.” She whispered and waited as Lasei twisted onto her side and closed her eyes, the flower still clutched in her small fist. Wendy forced her legs to work, to carry her from the room and out of the house. In the cold autumn night she took a moment to fight back the tears.

There would be time enough for that once she finished the mission and returned to Pop. First, she had a bath to take and she was not waiting for it any longer. She needed to peel this past week from her like Patrick removing his coat of filth. With her tears successfully locked away along with any thoughts and feelings of… well everything, she walked up to Eloen’s house and gave a quick knock to which the door was opened quickly.

“Hey Eloen, I’m just here to pick up my belong- oh thank you.” She said when the other woman held out her pack through the entry. Once she’d slung it over her shoulder she nodded and began to turn away.

“Why did you help us?” Eloen asked, drawing Wendy to turn back toward her. “Sure there are a few decent humans out there but even fewer are the ones that would actually loose sleep over whether we were dying of some illness.”

“Aw you think I’m decent!” Wendy’s smile was as sincere as it was teasing. “I don’t have a reason, not beyond just doing what was right.”

Eloen nodded, accepting her answer before crossing her arms and leaning against the doorway.

“What’s next for you?”

“I’m going to Ryre to see if I can keep Iorveth from waging war on innocent people, and then I’ll return home.”

“Let me guess... because it’s what’s right?” Eloen’s smile was small but genuine.

Wendy hesitated, studying the toe of her boot. “It- it might be a bit more selfish than that.” She glanced back up at Eloen. “He can only survive battle after battle before an arrow is angled just right, or a sword swings a breath faster.”

“Watch yourself in Ryre. To the people of Aedirn, being an elf or dwarf is bad enough but to be a sympathizer... that makes you a traitor in their eyes and they’ll make you pay for it.”

The small amount of relief she’d found in Lasei’s recovery was quickly turned to a horse stampeding over her chest with Eloen’s words. “How charming. Goodbye Eloen...”

“Bye Aevon.”

Wendy readjusted the strap of her pack and put one foot in front of the other, carrying herself to the familiar campfire and the two men seated by it. Dain looked up from digging dirt from underneath his fingernails with a knife while Iorveth looked to be packing tobacco into a pipe. He did not look up at her approach.

“Ah my partner in heroism, arrived at last.” Dain crowed to her with a wide smile.

“Hero partners?” Wendy asked, scrunching her nose in confusion.
“Of course! You found the flowers, I told you what the flowers were, you read your little books and put some puzzle pieces together! I have officially heroed Iorveth. Thanks to you lass.”

Wendy smiled down at him, bowing her head graciously. “I truly couldn’t have done it without you Sir Dain.” She dropped her pack to the ground and knelt to dig out what she needed. “I’m leaving to take a bath. I suppose we’re leaving at first light?”

“We?” Dain asked and she caught the glance he sent Iorveth.

“That is assuming the lot of you are still after Iohn for his alleged crimes.”

Dain snorted a laugh. “You mean to accompany Iorveth?” At her confused nod he continued. “I don’t mean to diminish you, Lady Aevon, but Ryre is no place for the likes of you.”

“As much as I’d enjoy staying in Adhart with Lasei and exploring the ruins and everything, I made a deal and I intend to honor it.”

“Tell her Commander, deal or not-“

“She goes.” Iorveth said, glancing at her through his lashes.

Wendy couldn’t help the irritation that swept through her. Maybe she was cranky after Eloen telling her about the target she would have on her back or maybe her emotions were hormonally heightened, but she didn’t like anyone giving her leave to do something she’d already planned to do. “How fortunate that your permission isn’t required, from either of you. I’ll return whenever I’m done.” A secret part of her, deep inside, was more than mildly disappointed that Iorveth didn’t follow after her, but the part of her that was rational pushed it down. She wasn’t going to the waterfall, just to the other side of the wheelhouse where most of the Scoia’tael took a quick dip to clean up. Along with that she didn’t plan to take long as the hour was already late.

Once she arrived at the wheel house she walked around to the side opposite Adhart and stripped down, leaving two different piles of clothing along with her glasses. Taking a deep breath she quickly lowered herself into the cold water, loosing her breath for a moment. There would be no adjusting to the frigid temperature, so she quickly began to soap her hair.

As she scrubbed the grime away her thoughts turned back to her and Iorveth. The fact that he had stayed behind was what she wanted. She needed to put space between them… and as much as she hated being cold to him, it was necessary. She couldn’t tell him that she was worried about him being hurt, that she loved the gesture with the flowers and books, that deep down she understood what he’d done… that she was just scared and didn’t want to get hurt.

Drawing a deep breath she submerged back beneath the surface, enjoying for the briefest of moments, the surrounding cold. When her lungs began to ache for air she stood back up and pulled herself from the cold river to the hardly warmer night air and pulled on her clean clothes, wishing she had a big fluffy towel straight from the dryer.

Wet jeans were never comfortable and her linen shirt stuck to her in an annoying way. She took a moment to dunk her soiled clothing in the river, rinsing them as much as she could then made her way back to the fire. Immediately she noticed that Dain and Iorveth had both left meaning she had another moment of solitude. Second she saw the plate of what smelled like ham and boiled potatoes, prompting her stomach to growl ravenously. But before she could dig in she had to free her arms.

Days before she would have never laid her panties out to toast by the fire for everyone to see, but there was something about living in an army camp where all manner of privacy was not only rare but
to be embarrassed about such trivial things was meaningless. No one cared about her lady garments just as she could care less about theirs.

Her brisk bath had brought a sense of clarity as she sat with her legs crossed and quickly began to tuck into the food. She was going to be fine. Tomorrow she would give Lasei one last good bye and mount a horse, hopefully her own this time, and put Adhart behind her.

Then all that was left was to prove to Iorveth that not all humans were monsters, effectively putting a stop to his need for vengeance and making her way back to the portal that would take her home. Yes she could do all of that while keeping her feelings from growing beyond what they already were and especially not thinking about a certain kiss.

Wendy smiled proudly as she chewed. Yes indeed, she could do all of that.

“So… she came back.” Dain said, causing Iorveth to bite back the sigh. Dain was nosier than a fishwife, and he damn well knew it making comments as such.

He looked up from examining the repair work done to his mail, his gaze searching out where he’d spent nearly a week now, watching as Adhart quickly fell apart and then slowly began to build itself back up again.

Despite the late hour, the people were relieved and happy, encouraging many to stay out and about much later than was the norm. He watched as one such villager approached Aevon and gifting her with a shawl of pale gold weave before scurrying away, leaving her looking stunned as she ran her fingers over the garment.

She looked a picture of poetic loveliness, flickering firelight highlighting the contours of her face while long strands of damp hair hung over her shoulders in an appealing way. Her linen clung to her, bringing about the equally appealing memory of what lay beneath the linen.

He couldn’t help thinking that he was in trouble, that he was slowly approaching an edge and if he were to get too close, he would fall into something he didn’t know how to deal with. For the first time in long memory, he felt the need to talk and think about… certain unfamiliar feelings, but there was no one he trusted enough to open that tightly reinforced gate to.

Every time his mind brushed up against thoughts of not wanting her to leave, he immediately shied away, slamming down a tightly controlled fist and pushing the thought away. It didn’t matter that he was effected by everything from her genuine concern for his people to the way she’d reacted the night before. It only mattered that he return her to her home before he did something truly foolish.

“You just going to stare at her?” Dain whispered mockingly.

Iorveth tilted his gaze to Dain’s. “I wasn’t staring, I was thinking and I happened to be looking in that general direction.” The excuse sounded weak even to his own ears and he walked away before Dain could do more than laugh at his expense. Sometimes he didn’t know why he bothered being around others, all they did was find ways to annoy him, whether it be Geralt and his lot or his own damn people.

As he approached the fire, Aevon carefully folded the shawl and packed it away then dug out a hairbrush and began to struggle with pulling it through the long tangled strands. Against his will, for the second time in minutes he was reminded of another time when her hair had been wet, hanging in dark ribbons along moonlit curves. He fought against the instinctive reaction of his body.
But some part of him must have been seeking out to be punished because once he’d dropped his armor beside her, drawing her to glance at him, he held a hand out for the brush. After a moment of staring at his hand she slowly placed her brush in his palm, the tips of her fingers grazing his skin and sending a spark of electricity down his spine.

He couldn’t explain it, knew Dain was going to never let it go, but it was just something he wanted to do. So he knelt behind Aevon and slowly began to draw it through the heavy strands. “My mother kept her hair long. I helped her brush it countless times.”

She began to turn her head slightly, but he pressed a hand on top, stilling her movement. He continued on in silence, listening to the crackle of the fire and the light sound of voices still awake.

“I did the same for my mom. Only her hair was super straight and felt like silk. We had the same color of hair but mine is wavy and thick. Like my dad’s was. Ouch.” She said with a wince when a particularly nasty knot was caught in the bristles.

“She has something in common, we both lost our parents at early ages.”

“I was. A brand-new teenager. For my birthday, the three of us traveled to see the birthplace of Amelia Earhart. She was a famous aviator- uh an aviator is someone who flies something called airplanes which are a type of vehicle that flies through the air. Anyways I’m named for her and for my thirteenth birthday, we went to see a museum dedicated to her. She disappeared mysteriously- a bit ironic now that I think about it. But I digress… on the drive home there was an accident. Icy roads and a drunk driver are a deadly combination. I survived and they didn’t, and now I haven’t celebrated my birthday in almost eight years.”

“Irving watched Aevon’s typically light-hair-turned-dark slide across his hand as he lifted sections to run the brush through. It brought a certain amount of pleasure, doing something for another with no demands or exchanges. Other than an actual conversation for once.

“You said you did this for your mother… is she…”

“Yes. Something we have in common, we both lost our parents at early ages.”

“Imagine that… something besides our bad eyesight.”

He tugged lightly on her hair. “I can see better with one eye than you can with four.”

“Again… you’re hilarious.” She said sarcastically but the shaking of her shoulders gave away the fact that she was laughing. When she stilled, Iorveth decided to tell more of his past, after all she had
revealed quite a bit of information about her own.

“My father died when I was a boy just beginning to form memories of him. He entered a shop intending to purchase something, perhaps a gift for my mother… we were never told. He did not see the sign banning elves from the premises and was strung up for it not much later… mother said I favored him more than her, though I took my temperament from her.”

Aevon tilted her head into the palm of his hand when he went to run it down to smooth the strands. He was nearly done but for a moment he almost had the urge to muss it up just to prolong the contact.

“So he had that devastating combo I mentioned once hmm?”

Iorveth pushed back the feelings of pleasure and flattery and handed her brush back to her. “If you mean to compliment me there’s no need.” He watched as she adjusted her seat to face him and twisted her hair into a braid. “I know what I look like.”

“Two things, as someone who is terrible at taking compliments myself, I forgive you for not easily accepting them. And, life’s too short to not tell someone they have attractive qualities. Physical or otherwise.”

“And you favor green eyes, dark hair and what was it… ‘cut’ cheekbones?”

With her hair done she leaned back with her palms pressed into the grass behind her and sighed wistfully. “There’s this one actor… his natural hair color isn’t black, but he plays this one character with black hair and its long and kind of shaggy. Green eyes.” She sighed again. “Plus he’s tall. Like dumb tall… did I mention that?”

“But does he have the ‘cut’ cheekbones?”

She laid on her back with her arms spread out. “Ooooh yea he does. His could cut cheese. I mean yours are great and could probably cut something softer like butter but his…”

Iorveth chuckled lightly enjoying her teasing. He hadn’t expected her to be like this after their row the night before. He’d just been about to tell her so when she sat back up, pushing her glasses back into place.

“Your turn.” She said, picking her brush back up and waving it at him. When he removed his ‘patch hat’ she walked on her knees to kneel behind him. “How’s the arrow wound?” She asked, running the brush through his hair.

He had to swallow down a groan at the feeling, and force himself to remember that she’d asked a question. “It’s an arrow wound- it hurts.” He paused, waiting for her to run her fingers through his hair again. Once she did, his eye closed for a brief moment and a sigh slipped from between his lips. “I’m rather surprised that you’re speaking to me so soon.”

As his hair was much shorter, just barely brushing his collar, she finished much quicker and took up her seat beside him facing the fire.

“We’re talking about last night…” She said quietly and seemed to give herself a quick shake before nodding. “Of course I’m… disappointed? Saddened? Terrified? No- look, I thought I could talk about it but talking about it is going to make things difficult… more than they already are so-“ She raised her hands, waving them firmly. “We can pretend last night didn’t happen.”

There was a sting to her words that he hadn’t expected, a twist in his chest that urged him to force the
conversation... he wanted to know her thoughts and feelings but he also had a voice in the rational part of his mind telling him that she was right.

She took a deep sigh, letting it out slowly. “What of your mother?”

Iorveth allowed the subject change. “She was slain, a civilian caught in the onslaught of another nation. I witnessed what happened to her, remembered the face of her murderer. The city fell to the invasion and I made certain that I had the opportunity to face the dh’oine who took her innocent life.”

“You’re speaking of how you came about your scar.”

“I have many scars but yes the one that most are keen to mention.”

“No need to brag, I have scars too you know?”

He blinked at her in surprise. “I saw no scars when-“

She cut him off with a hand over his mouth, her eyes wild. “Woah there! We are not talking about that particular moment either!” Satisfied that he wouldn’t speak of it further after he rolled his eye, she released him and sat back and rolled her pant let up past her knee. “Eight years old, lost control of my roller blades.” She pointed out a pale scar the size of a coin. “There’s also the scar from my fall but that’s um too far up to roll the jeans to.”

Iorveth’s eye widened as the image of her bathed in moonlight flashed through his mind once more. “Ah yes I remember it now.”

“Nope! You don’t remember!” She cried out in a panicked voice.

He knew he shouldn’t be doing this, allowing himself to want and need. To try and cause the same reaction in her as he was currently feeling. Something inside him wanted her to want him as much as he acknowledge that he wanted her. At some point he stopped seeing her as just another mindless dh’oine with a knack for finding trouble.

The night before, he’d been terrified for her safety that went beyond a sense of obligation. He’d cared for her safety but that didn’t mean he harbored feelings of fondness. Iorveth mentally shook his head, he wouldn’t use the word love because it was ridiculous and no such emotion actually exists. It was used by poets like Dandelion to earn coin from fools.

But he did desire her, to the point where he was considering going back on his word to leave her untouched. And for the longest time he had let her be. But then she’d put herself in danger and she’d looked at him first with... joy... then desire followed by a hurt he had caused. And he’d lost control, allowing himself his first taste of her. Perhaps in hope of pushing her away, to show her that she didn’t want him.

He had anticipated her pushing him away, of calling him a bastard and soundly slapping his face. But instead she’d come apart in his arms and he’d thought of nothing else since. The worry in her voice at learning he had an arrow wound, her silence after learning what he’d done, it weighed on him but the sound she made when he parted her lips pushed them to the back of his mind.

“I don’t like this you know.” She said quietly before covering her mouth with her hand and yawning. “How easy it is for me to look past certain things that should be tearing me up inside. But when we get to Ryre... I’m going to do everything I can to keep it from coming to bloodshed.” She looked at him over the top of her glasses. “Not because they’re human but because it’s what’s right.”
The ferocious seriousness of her expression drew him to shake his head slowly. He knew she was going to be disappointed. That damn part of him that was drawn to her was already aching at the look that would be on her face as she learned. He had to admire the way she continually tried to find the good, foolish and pointless as it was. His Aevon was like a candlelight in a world of darkness, seeking to push the shadows back once and for all.

But it was an impossible task, and all he could do was be there as she learned again and again that humans will always let her down. That she is an anomaly and didn’t belong in his world. But if she did manage to find proof that he was wrong, he would accept it.

Rather than reach out to her, cupping the back of her head and urging her to meet him halfway for a repeat of the night before he silently kept watch as she eventually stretched out. He heaved a deep sigh and slipped off her glasses, using the tail of his shirt to clean the smudges from the lenses. She murmured a thanks, her eyes already closed and settled a hand on his knee, squeezing it lightly.

The next morning, Wendy dragged herself through the morning routine with countless yawns and heavy eyes. For living without an alarm clock she certainly did a lot of waking up before dawn after only a handful hours of sleep. She’d grown used to sleeping on the ground, content with a fire and blanket… as well as Iorveth, to keep her warm but she quickly told herself that that was one of the untouchable thoughts and to put it aside.

It was with a petulant expression that she ate her breakfast of apples and porridge, wishing desperately for French toast and coffee. After this little visit to Ryre, she swore that she was going to take a full day to hunt down everything she needed to make her wish come true but first she would sleep as much as she wanted.

“What’s with the sour face Lady Aevon?” Dain asked as he joined her with his own bowl of breakfast.

“Of all the fruit… apples are my least favorite. I was hoping if I glared at them enough it would turn into French toast with a big cup of coffee.”

Dain nodded in understanding, or as much as he could, having no idea what French toast was. “I don’t much care for apples either. As for coffee perhaps if you steal some in Ryre, it would be a welcome treat.”

Wendy glanced at him with wide eyes. “I can’t steal!”

“Why not? Do you have coin to buy it?”

“Well no I don’t have coin but I have no wish to steal it either! Someone worked hard to harvest the beans and deserve to be given a fair payment for it.”

Dain shrugged. “Iorveth has given all the coin we looted from the bandit camp to Solana to use for Adhart but perhaps he has more stashed somewhere.”

“Why would I go to Iorveth for money?” Wendy couldn’t help but ask in a quiet voice, her gaze focused on her glue like breakfast.

“You’re his woman are you not? Of course he should be giving you coin for whatever you desire!” Wendy shot him a shocked glare. “I most definitely not his woman. We’re just… a pair of unlikely
traveling companions.”

Dain snorted a laugh. “Unlikely- true, but I don’t know of many traveling companions who brush
each other’s hair, share the same blanket, and stare at the other longingly.” Wendy felt her cheeks
warm and shook her head but he continued before she could voice her excuses. “These are hard
times in a hard place. You want him and he wants you and any second of happiness should be taken
and savored for it could be the last. Why do you deny yourself and him?”

“Because-“ Wendy set her bowl on the ground by her knee and picked at the fraying rip in the knee
of her jeans. “I’m not staying… after Ryre I’m going home and if I were to follow through with such
a thing… it’s not in me to do something like that and keep it trivial. Not with how I already feel.”
Wendy heaved a deep sigh, finding it much too early for such a deep conversation. “If it were
anyone else and there weren’t feelings involved then sure, why not.”

“What’s the saying that poets are always spouting? It’s better to have loved and lost than to never
have loved at all?”

Wendy smiled at the familiar saying having to admit that his argument was very strong. “I don’t think
I would be able to give myself to another after loosing such a love. It wouldn’t be fair to anyone in
the end.”

“Ah but love isn’t meant to be fair. It’s selfish and consuming, and always worth the pain.”

“Dain are you a romantic?”

“I may have a fancy for flowery poems and long walks by the water’s edge.”

Wendy’s smile turned into a grin before it faded away. “As a fellow romantic who has read countless
novels, never was there a happy ending when the lovers were separated by distance and
circumstance. It’s a slow death.”

“Why must you leave at all?”

Wendy tugged on the bottom of her braid, twirling it around a finger. “My Pop is there right now,
alone and has no idea where or what happened to me. I’m all he has.”

Dain nodded, his eyes shining with understanding. “Family is important, and it’s an admirable
quality to place him above your own happiness. Still… I say a roll in the hay or two is better than
none at all, whether you love someone or not.”

Wendy tried to be shocked but she was just amused. “Does Iorveth know you’re here as his wing
man?”

“If a wing man is someone that tries to see that two people he thinks should fuck already then no he
does not know I’m here as his wing man.”

Wendy laugh came out in a loud burst, her arms wrapping around her waist as she struggled to
wrestle herself back into control. “I have to admit Sir Dain that if I were in your place I would be
trying to do the same. And I also must admit that I do find him majorly attractive… I just don’t want
to get hurt.” Feeling a kinship she’d never felt with someone before, she shifted to face Dain fully
and leaned in close. “Say I do decide to try and go through with- it- what if it turns out that he isn’t
interested? I mean he hasn’t tried to kiss me again.”

Dain looked thoughtful. “Again you say? I see Eloen’s little plan did amount to something other than
you asleep on her floor. Listen Lady Aevon… Iorveth is a difficult person to like. He’s a right
bastard and ruthless and more of a legend in this place than you realize because of those things. Which is why it’s surprising to find him traveling with you… much more so that he named you, remains in your company when there is no one forcing him to. And the fact that he is willing to allow you the time to prove whether Adhart was intentionally targeted or not is very telling. I’ve zero doubt that if you were to walk up to him in this moment, he would deny you nothing.”

Wendy felt herself sway more and more into his side of reasoning. What if she didn’t pursue anything and when she made it back to Earth and still she never found love… she would have missed out on something that could be amazing for nothing. Life was about taking chances and hoping for the best and she’d done very little living in her twenty years.

“What do you mean by naming me?”

“Aen Seidhe or Aen Elle do not go about naming humans in the language of the elder. I notice you speak a great deal of common with elder and I suppose your native language mixed together. He calls you river, it must have some significance in the bond between you.”

Wendy blinked, suddenly, terribly panicked. “Sir Dain- I can’t do this! What if he loves me and encouraging a relationship only causes him pain in the end? I can’t do that to him!”

“Or what if you bring him a bit of happiness- for however much time you have left with him- for the first time in his miserable life.”

Wendy scrubbed her hands over her face, searching for clarity. “I just don’t know…”

“I’m telling you- walk up to the son of a bitch, take that chiseled jaw of his between your hands and show him just what a dh’oine woman can do when she takes what she wants. You might get hurt, he might get hurt but trust me when I say it’s worth it.”

Wendy shot a nervous glance over her shoulder, seeking out the form of Iorveth leading Xalvador from the stables. “He’s so tall.” She said breathlessly.

“Yes he is, and dangerous…”

“And he has tattoos…”

“And scars… maidens love scars.”

“He has that lower ‘V’ muscle thing going on too.”

“This is true.”

“And he’s nice to animals and children.”

“Okay sure…”

“And lets me tease him for having one eye.”

“Well, surprised that you’re still alive but okay.”

“Dain I’m pretty certain I fell in love with him when I saw him for the first time and everything since then is just piling onto it… I’m going to hurt no matter what happens…”

“Exactly.”

Wendy finally peeled her eyes from Iorveth and gave Dain a pleading look. “What if he doesn’t find
me attractive, that he’s only interested because I’m there and willing?” She’d never truly realized she harbored all these insecurities until she was suddenly running through every possible scenario.

But Dain only waved a hand dismissively. “I would never lie to you unless your life depended on it Lady Aevon, so my words you may believe them wholly. You are well formed in every way that would turn any head. But besides those qualities you have a scholarly appearance with the intelligence to back it up which alone is one of my favorite fantasies. Soldiers really get going when someone can take them down a peg or two…”

“Thanks… I think. So… I can’t believe I’m going to do this.” She took a deep breath and then shook her head. “I don’t know what to do- I’ve never-“

“As much contact as possible. Which you’re about to spend three hours in the saddle with him so use that.”

“I had planned to ride my own horse now that there’s the option.”

Dain snapped a finger in her face. “Do you want to seduce him or not?” Again, Wendy couldn’t believe it but she nodded eagerly. “Then get over there and put that sweet ass of yours to work in that saddle.”

With a firm nod, she stood and walked several paces before a sudden thought occurred to her and she rushed back to Dain, dropping to her knees with wide eyes.

“What about contraceptives? As much as I think Iorveth would make a pretty amazing father, I’m not bringing a child into this equation. I’m not on the pill and not in the habit of carrying condoms around with me!” She whispered harshly, glancing around to be sure she hadn’t been over heard.

Dain closed his eyes and gave her a peaceful smile. “Lady Aevon, as not only my commanders wing man but yours as well, leave it to me.”

Wendy gave him a wide smile and quickly pressed a kiss against his cheek before pushing herself to her feet.

“Don’t forget your belongings.” He said, pointing to her pack.

Feeling flustered and excited and pretty damn turned on at the level of acceptance of what she was going to do, she swept up her pack and strode toward Iorveth and Xalvador with a sense of purpose. Silently hoping that her expression showed zero sign of her current state she focused on tying her pack to the saddle. However she felt Iorveth scan her face from the other side of the horse and immediately blushed.

“What did Dain have to speak with you about for so long?” He asked.

Wendy froze in her task, her mind struggling to form a coherent answer. “Um… advice about Ryre.” Her gaze barely landed on him before skittering away. “You know… don’t let people know I have a thing for um helping elves…”

He hummed in reply, still watching her intently. “I assumed you would ride on your own.”

She followed his nod toward a mare of honey colored cream. The horse was lovely and if it weren’t for her newest mission of seducing Iorveth, she would have been delighted to ride the horse. But Dain was correct, she’d increase her chances if she stayed in close contact. “I don’t have the proper training and we haven’t time for it. Unless you object to riding together- you know what- I’m so sorry for assuming…” Call it manipulative but truly she called it a test. A test that got promising
results when he put a hand over hers, stopping her from untying her pack from the saddle.

“Leave it. I’ll teach you on the way to Ryre.” It was a gruff and practical answer but it pleased her none the less and she let it show with a blinding smile. He eyed her cautiously but nodded. “If you’ve any you wish to bid goodbye then now’s the time to do it.”

Wendy’s smile dimmed and she glanced over to Solana’s house then back to Iorveth. “You should come as well. Lasei adores you.” He didn’t reply but joined her when she began to walk toward the house. Her stomach twisted nervously and before she could change her mind she slipped her hand into his, watching from the corner of her eye as he surreptitiously looked at their joined hands then back forward. She called it a little victory and was silently pleased she didn’t have to defend the action with an excuse.

Before the doorway she pulled him to a stop before releasing his hand and fussing over his appearance. He stood still, watching her silently as she reached up to straighten patch cap and smooth down the feather. The tuffs of black hair that poked out around his ear she smoothed as well and wiggled the wide collar of his coat.

Deciding she’d done enough she patted down her hair and straightened her glasses, check the tails of her shirt to be sure they were tucked into her jeans and pulled her leather vest down. “Alright, do I look presentable?” She asked, looking up at him with wide eyes. She wanted to look nice when she said good bye to Lasei and Solana, as well as the others.

Wendy waited while Iorveth looked over her appearance and to her horror he used a thumb to wipe off a small smudge of porridge near her cheek. Her first instinct was to die of middle school level of embarrassment but then his lips quirked up the smallest bit in one corner, encouraging her to let it go with a return smile.

She turned away and slipped into the house and leading them into the room where the sick were still recovering. Most were still asleep as the hour was terribly early but Lasei was already awake and sitting on the edge of her bed.

“Lasei, how do you feel?” Wendy said quietly, drawing the girl’s attention.

A somber smile flitted across Lasei’s face. “I feel much better. Solana is readying another cup of tea… Is it time for you to leave?”

Wendy wrapped her arms around her waist and nodded. It was painfully difficult for her to think the words that she wished she was staying forever, if only to make Lasei smile. “I need to help Iorveth, and then I must return h-home to my Pop.” She felt a hand wrap around her elbow when her voice broke. “I’m all he has now and he’ll be missing me.”

Lasei nodded before a bright smile lifted her lips and she stood up with a bounce. “But we can write to each other, and someday you could come back to Adhart to visit… or I could come to you!”

There was no stopping the tear that slipped down Wendy’s cheek and she drew in a ragged breath. She didn’t know what to say… she couldn’t leave Lasei with false hope of receiving letters that would never come. “I-I’m sorry Lasei… Where I’m going, it would be impossible for any of that to happen.”

The girls face crumbled and when Wendy opened her arms, Lasei collapsed against her, wrapping her arms around Wendy’s legs. “I will never be able to forget you sweet little sorceress. I promise to write and if ever there is a day where the letters could be delivered to you, I promise to send them.”

“Then I’ll do the same.” Came the muffled reply.

“Tell Iorveth that you promise to care for all the cats.” Wendy suggested, attempting to move the goodbyes along. She couldn’t take much more without a full on breakdown and sobbing promises she couldn’t keep.

“I promise.” Lasei answered and pulled back. Iorveth reached a hand out and brushed one of the girls tears away and Wendy gave her one last trembling smile. “Here.” Lasei said and picked up the journal Wendy had given her to draw in. After she accepted it, Wendy quickly pressed a kiss to the top of the girls head and left the room. She passed by a waiting Solana who gave a small nod and smile.

Once they were both back outside Wendy took a deep breath and tilted her head back. “That was hard, I’m not good at goodbyes. Especially ones that are so final.” She was ready to call off her little plan altogether.

“It was the right thing… not giving her false hope. Someday she will understand.” Iorveth said from beside her drawing her to look at his profile. She was reminded of his unexpected tenderness in a moment of unhappiness for her, a reminder of just why she wanted to do this in the first place.

“Thank you.”

He glanced down at her in confusion. “I did nothing to be thanked for.”

Wendy gave him a small smile. “You did… shall we go? Who all is coming with?”

Iorveth glanced at the sky and then at the road leading in from the mountains. “He should be here any moment.” He began to walk back to the waiting Xalvador.

Wendy paused a step when she noticed Dain walking away from said horse, sending a wink over his shoulder toward her. “Uh… who?” She said and rushed to catch up to Iorveth’s long stride. Before he could answer the pounding hooves of a new arrival caught her attention and she looked to see a man riding in. It took only a moment to recognize the white hair and double swords on his back as the man named Geralt whom she’d met only briefly.

“You want to find the truth, well Geralt is very good at finding just that.” He pulled out her cloak and held it out to her.

“Thank you.” She smiled brightly while swinging it around her shoulders. “I remember from our short meeting and a quick summary from Dandelion. Is he a detective?”

“Of a sorts.”

They both fell silent as they watched Geralt dismount his horse and walk to them and held his arm out to Iorveth. The two shared a forearm shake.

“Squirrel.”

“Butcher.”

Their greeting ritual seemingly complete Geralt then looked to her, recognition in his yellow cat like eyes.

“Wendy… the woman from another world.”
Wendy shot Iorveth a nervous glance then met Geralt’s piercing gaze once more. “Geralt whom I met briefly.”

“And Merrigold?” Iorveth asked, drawing Geralt’s attention.

“Waiting for us in Ryre. Preferred to take a portal.”

This caught Wendy’s immediate attention and she looked from one man to the other. “Portal?”

Iorveth shook his head at her. “Not the sort you’re thinking. Merrigold is a sorceress and can create portal’s using them to travel from one place to another but only in this realm. Geralt is not fond of that particular form of travel so I asked him to meet us here.” He looked back at Geralt. “Any word on Ciri?”

“None. I don’t even know if she’s alive, much less made it back here.”

“And the Sage?”

“Missing as well. After Ryre…”

Wendy noticed Iorveth hesitate, for half a breath before answering Geralt’s unsaid question. “After Ryre, we’ll find them. Aevon’s way home will be on the path to Skellige.”

“What can you tell me about all of this?”

Wendy stepped between them. “The people of Adhart were infected with a viral hemorrhagic fever spread by fleas which were carried in by rats. The incubation seemed about seven days before first signs of illness showed and death another seven days later. Every structure was treated to kill the lice, rats were exterminated and cats brought in to keep them gone.” Wendy glanced over her shoulder to Iorveth to give him a quick glare then back to Geralt. “While it’s certainly possible that someone could have purposefully brought in the rats with the express intention of killing most of Adhart’s population before driving the rest out with little effort, it is just as likely that the rats were carried in by a merchant’s cart or they migrated here from somewhere else.”

Geralt listened to her carefully before nodding his agreement. “And you suspect Iohn?” The question was directed to Iorveth.

“Atkin may not have the rage of Demavend or the outright deceitfulness of Stennis, but he is young and new to the game and makes up for it in his inability to control his lords. Iohn’s father lost Adhart and it would only make sense that it is he that wishes to reclaim it now that his father is dead. If Iohn went to Atkin, Atkin would not deny him his favor.”

“Ryre is small, their primary trade being wool… respectably defensed and very picky about who they let roam their streets.”

Iorveth reached around Wendy to clap a hand on Geralt’s shoulder. “Which is where you come in. It seems they are all those things but they also have a problem that only a witcher can solve.” He pulled a rolled parchment from the back of his belt and handed it over to Geralt.

“Damnit. I hate griffins.” Geralt muttered and stuffed the parchment into his belt.

Wendy leaned against Iorveth’s arm. “Where did you get that?”

“Not all of us sit in a stuffy room reading all day.”
Wendy scrunched her nose at him. “No apparently some enjoy being shot with arrows.”

Geralt cleared his throat, drawing their attention back to them. “Triss is already there, hopefully with a place to stay. Is Zoltan with you? Dandelion mentioned that he’d left to find you Wendy.”

She shook her head, a slight blush staining her cheeks. “I was lost in Novigrad when Iorveth found me. We never caught up to Zoltan, I’m sorry.”

Geralt shrugged it off. “He’ll make his way back eventually. You ready to ride for Ryre?”

For a moment Wendy felt her heart freeze and her gaze was drawn to Solana’s house. She then swept over the quaint houses which were just beginning to stir. Dain as he leaned against a tree speaking to Eloen. The campfire now banked and cold. The river with the lovely little waterfall hidden away in a forest. She shared a look with Iorveth and gave the smallest of nods. She was ready.

Geralt turned to make his way back to his horse, leaving Wendy to look up at Iorveth through her lashes. “Help me mount? It’s been so long…” Which wasn’t untrue. Granted she could have fought her way into the saddle but she remembered Dain’s words. Touch was important, as well as something in which she wasn’t used to in a more than friendly way. But he didn’t deny her the request and placed his hands around her waist and helped her into the saddle.

Iorveth took up his usual place behind her and immediately she leaned back against him as she waited for him to whistle for Xalvador to begin his pace. Her gaze swept over Adhart, the window Lasei slept under and the gentle river. She only wished that her time in the little village hadn’t been a constant struggle, but the little moments, the stories told, the relief on everyone’s faces mixed with the grief of the loss from those that didn’t make it, made the sleepless nights worth it.

Wendy let out a sigh as they rounded a curve and lost sight of the sleepy village. Her next adventure was beginning and very clearly the thought of how much she missed this ran through her mind. The fast pace of the horse carrying her to a new place where a new challenge awaited.

There also happened to be the familiarity of Iorveth’s arms and thighs on either side of her, controlling Xalvador with a nudge from his knee or tightening on the reigns. Not for the first time, she thought about what a proficient horseman he was. As was Geralt, Wendy noticed as he caught up to them.

She slid her head back along Iorveth’s shoulder to look up at him. “So, is Geralt like your best friend?” Like a magnet her eyes slipped down to his lips, marveling at how they could look as if an artist had carved them out of stone so perfectly shaped they were and yet they were soft. Wendy bit down on her own lips, remembering just how soft.

He answered with a light huff. “Geralt is tolerable… as for friend, outside of a round of Gwent and excellent to have on your side in a battle we have little to bond over.”

Wendy thought he might be downplaying his feelings for the other man but decided to work with the opening he gave her. “So… does that mean you have an opening for best friend?”

He spared her a glance before focusing on the path again. “I have no idea what that means, but I feel like the answer is no.”

Wendy scrunched her nose and sat back up straight. “What’s Gwent?”

“A card game.”
“I enjoy card games… will you teach me how to play this one?” Though Wendy did indeed enjoy a few of the more less competitive card games with Pop, she thought perhaps if she kept him talking, he wouldn’t think much of her drawing a finger in a circle around his knee.

She was nervous to the point when the finger in question was trembling, and the twist in her stomach urged her to change her mind. But she couldn’t. This was going to happen, she just needed to work her way towards it.

“How about I teach you something else instead.” His must have bent his head close, for his breath brushed against her ear, sending a shiver down her spine. Before she could form the simple question of ‘what’ he held Xalvador’s reigns in one fist before grasping her wayward hand in his now free hand.

Wendy held her breath, eyeing her small hand in his leather clad one, having absolutely no idea what he intended to do. Had he caught onto her lascivious intentions? Was he going to outright reject her or, Odin forbid- or not forbid- encourage her? The thought had her breath rushing back and closing her eyes in anticipation.

They popped back open when she felt the leather straps of what could only have been Xalvador’s reigns pushed into one hand, quickly prompting the other to join. She’d hardly registered his intent when she felt him grip her waist, his chest pushing against her back as he leaned forward to balance. There was something primal in her reacting to the movement, the inability to draw a full breath, and the desire to arch her back…

It was only after Xalvador pulled against the reigns, against her did she manage to comprehend that she was in control of a two thousand pound horse cantering at a respectable pace.

“I’m driving a horse!” Her eyes widened. “I mean, I know driving isn’t the correct terminology, but I can’t think-” It was a completely different feeling from being merely the passenger. The wind brushing her face felt crisper, she was more aware of Xalvador’s movements.

“You’re giving him too much lead, remember to be the one in control.”

“How do I do that? I’ve seen movies and read books, but this is one of those learned experiences.” There was a slight panic to her voice.

“First, you stop panicking. Then pull back on him, just a touch.”

Wendy was torn between exhilaration, panic, and wondering if the feel of his thumbs moving back and forth along her ribs was intentional. Biting her lip to keep any instinctive noises at bay she slowly managed a bit of control over the horse and the reward of Iorveth making a hum of approval next to her ear went straight down her spine.

Somewhere deep in her mind she wondered if she were now the one being seduced, and if so it was working spectacularly but was going way to fast. On the back of a horse with Geralt only a few paces ahead, the setting was completely wrong, well not entirely as she’d read an erotica once where the back of a horse had been where- “Stop it Jonesy.” She whispered harshly, shifting the slightest bit in the saddle.

“Did you say something?”

“Um… I’m feeling competitive with Geralt in front… I have the sudden need to race him… not a clever idea I know it’s just… what I was thinking.” Wendy wanted to hang her head in shame at the lame cover.
“You’re right, not a clever idea. Though it does pain me to see him ahead of us. Lean low and hold tightly to the saddle.”

A trill of excitement ran through her blood as he took the reigns back from her possession and leaned low against her. A laugh was startled from her as he whistled next to her ear and urged Xalvador to take lead. She hadn’t been serious, just attempting to deflect from the fact that she’d been in or near a constant state of arousal for quite some time now, and steadily growing since he dragged her in for that kiss.

But here they were, overtaking Geralt and his horse with a recklessness she’d never felt before. They could have been racing from an army five thousand strong, each intent on taking their heads with a sword… or desperados having just robbed a bank on their way to their hideout… whatever they were in that moment, she was doing something she’d never thought to do.

The lyrics from a song she’d heard once, reach for every moment, sang through her memory. And even though she was afraid of what would happen when the time came to leave… she was learning to do just that. Wendy tilted her head just enough to brush an impulsive kiss on his scared cheek, and though she had to strain her neck some, she moved her lips next to his ear.

“Thank you for this.” She said before turning back. Perhaps it was the way Xalvador took a turn, but she felt more than heard a catch in his breath.

“What is that hanging from his saddle?” Aevon asked after a long bout of silence. Iorveth had long ago slowed Xalvador down to a safer pace and ignored a long look from Geralt. She now sat relaxed against him, that damn finger of hers running circles in the middle of his thigh while watching the scenery- and apparently Geralt, as they rode.

“A fiend trophy. A witcher’s way of saying that indeed, they are monster hunters.”

“Just how many types of monsters are there? Are they native to this world? How do you become a witcher?”

“I’m certain Geralt has a bestiary for you to memorize. Some might have been native, most are not. And do you wish to know so you can undertake their trials and live a life slaying beast and monster for coin?”

She nodded. “Mm a life on the road, making a name for myself as well as gold, leaving a trail of broken hearts because a life of quiet just ain’t for me.”

“The battle scars you could actually brag about with pride.”

“Nah, I’d be too awesome to ever be injured enough for battle scars. Where is he going?”

Geralt had taken the path to the left while Iorveth kept them on the path to the right. “To Ryre to accept the contract on the griffin. We’re continuing to the nest.”

“Oh, course we are. Because griffins are real and require super human strength and skill to take down.” She said just loud enough for him to make out the hint of worry in her voice.

It was on the tip of his tongue to reassure her, but just as many things had had the need to be set free lately, he held back the words. He didn’t know what changed, or if Aevon even knew what she was doing, but the messages he was receiving were not helping his cause. Every time she looked at him
over her shoulder, the linger of her gaze on his lips, holding her waist and the catch in her breath.

At just that moment she arched her back and gave a lengthy groan. “Definitely not used to riding so long and hard.” She said as she relaxed back against him. Within an instant Iorveth had played a very specific scenario involving her arching back against him again, this time her head laying back on his shoulder while he ran his palms over her thighs, grazing over her stomach and up her sides before cupping her breasts. She’d make that noise again, the one that made him want to strip every piece of clothing from her…

“Iorveth.”

His name whispered at first and then cried out over and over when he-

“Iorveth! I think we need to find shelter!”

He blinked, mentally cursing himself for falling so far into a fantasy, and that’s all he could allow it to be. Once he had some semblance of control and he was certain there was enough space between his hips and hers, he checked the skies.

The dark clouds were rolling in quickly, urged by the wind pulling at Aevon’s hair and cloak. The darkness lit up with a bolt of purple lightning spreading across the sky. Xalvador shuddered, alerting Iorveth to his nervousness about storms

“Don’t get me wrong, I’m all for a thunderstorm, but I prefer to enjoy them when surrounded by four walls.”

“I have to agree.” He scanned their position, trying to remember if there were any abandoned buildings nearby.

The wind was beginning to howl as the first drops fell upon them eliciting a squeal from Aevon. “It’s so cold!” She pulled up the hood of her cloak as the rain began to fall faster. Within moments they were both soaked. “Iorveth, is there anywhere we can go to wait this out?”

He began to shake his head in frustration when he remembered a place, just through the trees. It was small but would be dry and safe for the duration of the storm and near where Geralt would eventually catch up to them.

Several moments later Iorveth pulled Xalvador to a stop at the mouth of a cave, an old mine shaft to a more complex cavern system if he remembered correctly but this particular part had collapsed and should be free of an undesirable infestation.

Quickly, before the chill of the rain and wind could get to him, he dropped from the saddle and reached to help a shivering Aevon down before leading them both into the cave. “We will be fine here.”

Aevon pushed back her hood and looked around with a gleam of excitement in her gaze. “Cozy. I like it.” She rubbed her hands up and down her arms, a shiver wracking her body.

“Take all of that off, I’ll start a fire.” He said with more bite to his tone than he’d intended.

“Oh…” He heard her whisper but didn’t get a view of her expression as he’d turned away to search out broken timber from the collapsed tunnel. What he should have done was freed her from the cold wet clothing himself, since that’s exactly what he wanted to do.

Calling himself a fool he shook his head and gathered an arm load of dusty old wood splinters to
build up a fire that should last the duration of the storm. He stopped short and frowned when he saw she’d made no effort to remove anything at all. She just stood there with strands of hair framing her face, water dripping slowly from the clothing with an expression that had him rethinking his reasons for leaving her untouched by him.

“The water has expanded the weave of the fabric, making the knots impossible to untie.” Her cheeks bloomed but her gaze remained steady and he at last knew for certain that she knew what she was about.

“Give me the flint and we’ll get the fire warmed, then—” He attempted to make some semblance of a rational and wise decision but was cut off when she spoke over him.

“I was hoping maybe you could help… now.” She stepped until she was just a breath apart from him and eased the wood from his arms and dropped it to the floor of the cave. He stood still, waiting whether in anticipation or curiosity to see just how far she was going to allow this game of hers to go. He dropped his gaze to her hand as she lifted one of his and with a slight tremble to her hand, unbuckled the vambrace before dropping it to the ground with a thud.

Next, she pulled the leather glove from his hand before repeating the action with his other hand and raised them to the knotted ties of her cloak. True enough the ties were swollen and if her fingers were icy, she’d indeed have a challenging time with them. How fortunate for him it seemed that he’d been wearing gloves.

The knots held stubbornly, stoking a pit of frustration in him before they finally gave way and he pushed the heavy wet cloak from her shoulders, but rather than step away, his hands rested on her shoulders, waiting to see what she wanted next.

Her expression seemed unsure and confused, as if she’d been expecting him to continue, but she was cleverer than that for she bit her bottom lip and lifted a hand to his cap before hesitating. “Is this okay with you?”

He didn’t know why that question was enough to send his hands digging into the hair at the back of her head and urging her to meet him half way and frankly, he didn’t care to think on it in that moment. Her hands went to his hips and she gave very little resistance in leaning up, a sigh escaping her lips a heartbeat before meeting his own.

When her tongue swept between his lips, felt her pushing him backwards a step until his back bumped into the wall giving him a moment of clarity that she was seeking dominance. He grinned against her lips, and relaxed against the wall, granting her what she desired for a moment. Her hand slipped up his shoulder, followed his neck before pushing his cap from his head and running her fingers through his hair.

He groaned, tilting his head into her grasp. There was something about her hands in his hair that nearly had him loosing what control he’d managed to grasp. The thought echoed through his mind that he needed to slow her down, that she was going to send them over the edge before they even got to enjoy the act. It had been a very long time since he’d felt more than the natural urge to sate a baser need, since he’d felt anything close to this amount of passion.

“Iorveth…” She whispered as she dragged her mouth to his jaw, nipping at him before he nudged her away and returned the ministrations to her neck. She drew in a shuddering breath as his hands pulled at the wet material of her shirt, slipping his hands beneath to run them over her smooth skin.

He opened his eye when he felt her draw away, watched as she adjusted her skewed glasses and looked at him with a hunger in her blue eyes.
“This- this is going to happen- j-just not here. It takes forever to get you out of that armor a-and already the storm is dissipating meaning Geralt will be by and I haven’t taken any sort of contraceptive.” He listened to her ramble, silently acknowledging the sageness behind her reasoning when suddenly her eyes widened. “Oh Thor, what if I’m being presumptuous? I never asked you if this is something you want! I just–” She quickly pushed herself back and paced away from him.

“Aevon.” Already he missed her touch.

“I just, I’ve been working up the gumption, the courage to even consider it because–”

“Aevon.” He tried again.

“I have certain feelings and a part of those feelings is wanting to run my tongue all over your body and have you do the same to me but–”

Deciding that words wouldn’t stop her he caught her arm with his hand and leaned over her. Unlike their previous experiences he didn’t kiss her with raw unfulfilled passion, but with a painfully slow meeting that twisted him up more and more the longer he held her.

Finally, certain he had her undivided attention he pulled back, and impulsively wrapped her in his arms, resting his head on top of hers. He watched the disappearing storm drift away, sighing when he felt her arms wrap around his waist. He hadn’t expected it to be like this, whatever it even was. As far as he could determine right then it was still coming to terms with her race, but finding it was rarely that he even remembered the shape of her ears was different from his. It was realizing that he was coming to crave moments like these where the horrors of the world were far away as if they were the only two in existence. It was finding her belief there was good in everything frustrating but wanting to be there for when the world truly lets her down.

“I want you to know… I wasn’t upset with you for what happened with that camp of bandits. It was to save your people, I can understand that.” She said quietly and shifted closer against his chest, tightening her hold around him. “You could have been killed, and I was suddenly very terrified for you.”

Iorveth let out a long sigh.

It was wondering if when the time came for her to leave him, would he be able to let go?
“Arms relaxed… Signal with your knee to guide him this way.”

“I have to say, as much as I enjoy riding with you… I think you should ride with Geralt from now on. Xalvador and I’ve got this.” Wendy said with a grin as she signaled the horse and to her delight he followed her lead.

“I’ll make him aware of the new arrangements.” Iorveth said dryly causing a bubble of laughter from her chest.

Falling into silence, Wendy continued to circle Iorveth with Xalvador as they waited for the arrival of Geralt now that the storm had passed. Her clothes were still damp, and the breeze chilly but she hardly noticed anything other than the sense of lightness and overall happiness.

There was something to be said in knowing you were not only wanted but cared for. She hadn’t been avoiding romantic relationships and had actually harbored a few crushes though it never went beyond daydreams and melding her name with theirs. But this was new and it opened a gate with a great red banner across it that said ‘I get to kiss someone whenever I want!’ Not that she had since the moment in the cave, but it was in the front of her mind that she could. With him standing there, arms crossed and expression serious, she was seriously considering taking advantage of the newly acquired freedom.

The sight of Geralt cresting a hill however had her sighing that playing out a romantic scene of trotting Xalvador to stop beside Iorveth, leaning down as he leaned up to capture her lips in another blindingly sensual kiss would have to wait. “It would have been perfect too.” She whispered with a slight pout. She stayed seated on Xalvador as she and Iorveth watched the witcher’s rapid approach and his smooth reign of his horse.

“Of all the contracts out there you had to find one with not only a Griffin but an Archgriffin.” Geralt said to Iorveth who merely shrugged his shoulders. “This is where it was last seen just as the contract stated but the shepherd’s farm is further on. From there I can track it to its nest.” He scanned the skies before glance at Wendy who was taking it all in with rapt fascination. “It would be safer if you waited here with the horses.”

Wendy immediately shook her head and held up a finger. “Absolutely not. Allow me to explain why, first off I get seriously lost, ask him.” She hitched a thumb at Iorveth. “Second, you said you were hunting a griffin. Those are only fabled beasts where I come from and there is no way in Hades
am I missing out on an opportunity to observe one. I’m not entirely on board with watching you
slaughter it but… I get it. It sounds dangerous and if it saves lives then of course I get it. Also—“
Wendy pressed her palms together and stared at Geralt with wide eyes. “Are dragons real?”

A corner of Geralt’s mouth lifted. “I take it they don’t in your realm.”

Though the knowledge of all these fantastical beasts in fact being quite real had excitement singing
through her veins, she couldn’t help but feel disappointed that Earth had only myths. “Again… only
legends. In fact you would find Earth very boring. Don’t misunderstand, Earth has many merits such
as a long history and ever advancing technology. Most of us have bonded with the lesser beasts and
have an awe for the more dangerous. But a crocodile or mosquito hardly compares to griffins and
dragons.”

“Good thing that I’ve had enough portal and realm traveling to last three lifetimes.” His expression
turned serious and nodded toward the direction he wanted to go. “Let’s get this over with.”

Wendy smiled down at Iorveth when he reached out to adjust the stirrups to accommodate his longer
legs. “Ah not going to follow through then?”

He gave her that look that she knew meant he was arching an eyebrow. “Was that in doubt?”

“Coward.” She winked then made room for him to pull up and join her.

They left the path and in a matter of minutes had a view of rolling hills dotted with fluffy white
sheep. The sight pulled on Wendy, bringing the ache she had for her home, her Pop, and their life, to
the forefront of her thoughts.

“Something amiss?” Iorveth asked, alerting her to the fact that her entire body had stiffened, even
down to her clenched jaw.

“Pop is a shepherd, and by extension so am I.” Wendy said quietly, watching the nearest sheep raise
their heads, eyeing them before moving on to the next munch of grass. “Seeing them brought about a
sudden homesickness.”

“Fortunately Gwynbleidd is very good at what he does. If the truth comes to be that Iohn pays for the
lives he took with that of his and his men, we Scoia’tael are very good at what we do, and your
journey home will be complete in a matter of days.”

She knew his words were meant to be- in his own way- comforting. They were not, but Wendy
forced herself to relax and pay attention as Geralt pulled his horse to a stop and knelt near a bush.

“He’s hunted recently. We’ll leave the horses here and follow the trail by foot.” He sent a look to
Wendy after they had dismounted. “Stay in the trees. Archgriffins can spit acid a short distance.”

Iorveth silently buckled his quiver to his hip and pulled his bow from its scabbard and held it with a
comfortable grip.

As they walked, Geralt leading the way and occasionally pausing to examine traces of blood, Wendy
couldn’t help but admiring Iorveth’s weapon. “There is a type of bow on Earth, invented by a
member of the Wabanaki Confederacy. It resembles yours, a type of cable backed bow and very
elegant. Not used very often other than for novelty and looks I suppose, as instead we now have the
compound bow which is capable of seventy pounds of force but with its let off of only thirty-five
making it ideal for aiming and the archer is also able to shoot with better endurance. It looks bulky
and mechanical, but more than makes up for it in power.”
Geralt glanced over his shoulder. “I hadn’t taken you as a warrior. No offense.”

Wendy waved him off. “No need to be. I am the furthest thing from a warrior that you’ll find, just ask him. Unless you count my ferocity on the dodge ball court in elementary. Uh dodge ball is where you have two teams with a whole bunch of people positioned on either side of a court and there’s a limited number of rubber balls- shit- have you learned to make rubber here?” Wendy paused in her rambles to pull herself up a rocky ledge before continuing. “It’s a bouncy material made from the latex of rubber trees and used for countless things… such as balls. And both teams race for these balls and you throw it, aiming for your opponent. If it hits your mark, you defeated them. If they catch the ball, you’re out. I was never athletic but I tell you what… I could chunk a dodge ball with some accuracy.”

Wendy chuckled to herself, recalling the fond memory of the sound the ball made when it hit Austin in the middle of his back, his crumbled expression when he spun around afterward to see her triumphant grin, thus winning her team the final game she ever played.

“Is this a training exercise for children?”

“Oh no, we don’t- well some countries use child soldiers but dodge ball is just a game. We do however have early military training for those who wish to make a career of it.”

Geralt grunted. “These bows you speak of, must be valuable in a battle.”

“Oh we don’t use any type of bow any more, not for a long time. They’re just for sport now.”

That drew glances from both men, their expressions equal parts confused and curious.

“Then what do you use for long range warfare? Anything else is impractical outside of a siege.” Iorveth said from beside her.

His comment brought Wendy up short as a sudden, horrible thought came to her. The technology and weaponry of this land would have zero chance against that of her own. And this was a place ripe with possibility for a species greedy for a new world. And then there was Iorveth. If she told him of such weapons, would he seek to try and enter Earth, acquire even a handful of modern yet deadly weapons to bring back here to achieve what he needed? And what if he lost control of those weapons and they were then used against him?

Wendy was saved from dodging his question until she could spend a good amount of time considering every possibility the impact of her answer could have had, by the sudden gesture of Geralt lifting a hand in the air before slowly pulling a sword from its sheath. It was then that Wendy noticed the utter stillness surrounding them. Not a bird could be heard singing its song, nor an insect buzzing by. Even the breeze seemed to have been driven away.

“Aevon, stay low and to the trees.” Iorveth said quietly, scanning the cloudy sky, an arrow already nocked yet aimed at the ground with a comfortable grip.

“Iorveth, what are you doing?” Wendy hissed, following his directions and putting a hand on the nearest tree to steady herself. “You’re not a monster hunter, and on top of that you’re already hurt.”

He sent her a small grin. “I’m bait.”

Wendy’s stomach churned but the time for arguing that that was a terrible idea for reasons that were entirely selfish, had run out. A terrible screech echoed through the air and Wendy covered her ears, her wide eyes searching for the source.
“She knows we’re here.” Geralt said and rolled his shoulders.

The pounding of heart was nearly unbearable as she watched the two men, with slow, prowling strides, left her behind, stepping from the shadows of the trees and into the clearing, Iorveth taking point.

He didn’t have to wait long before there was another screech, this time closer, and quickly followed by a fury of scarlet feathers and sharp talons diving from the clouds. Wendy had to move her hands from her ears to her mouth to keep from crying out as Iorveth dodged to his left at the last moment, spinning to face the trees and backing up. The maneuver was meant to encourage the griffin’s position to face away from the witcher but the creature leapt for the skies once more and began to circle the clearing.

Wendy craned her neck, following its movements, taking in the glint of the occasional beam of sunlight on the crimson feathers. It had a sort of terrible beauty, and it saddened her that it was a creature to be feared and hunted rather than like it was in the movies. No she, preferred the gryphon rather this beast.

Iorveth had lifted his bow and arrow, following the flight of the griffin, waiting for the right moment. Geralt went in the opposite direction, keeping to the shadows. All Wendy was terrified that they were going to die at any moment, ripped apart and she was helpless to help them.

The griffin circled one last time as these thoughts began to tear at Wendy, and then it dove, a screech following in its wake. But Iorveth was calm and collected as he released his first arrow, his mark striking it in the neck. It didn’t drop to the ground but it did flinch before continuing its course, talons aimed for Iorveth’s chest.

Smoothly he aimed his next arrow, hitting it in the chest and dodging as the griffin gracelessly slid across the grass. Before Wendy could blink, Geralt spun with his sword over his head before slashing downwards at its neck. The creature heaved itself backwards in a weak leap, reared its head and spewed a stream of what she supposed had to be the acid Geralt spoke of.

Both Geralt and Iorveth moved out of range, with Iorveth aiming another arrow and striking it again in the neck. With this new opening, Geralt advanced another onslaught and landed two more strikes before a sweep of its wing knocked him back.

Quickly, Iorveth replaced his bow for his swords and leapt at the long wing, driving his swords down to pin it to the ground. The griffin roared in pain and fury and slashed its beak at him catching him in the chest and throwing him to the side. Wendy felt her panic increase three fold and couldn’t keep a whimper from escaping at the sight.

She didn’t even notice Geralt gain his footing once more, and with the griffin no longer able to escape his blade, quickly finished the beast off. She was frozen. She couldn’t comprehend what had just happened beyond the sight of the griffins’ lethal beak slashing at Iorveth’s chest.

And then something astonishing clicked in her mind. Geralt was laughing, the sound just barely reaching her across the distance, as he offered a hand out to the body of Iorveth. Her breath escaped her chest when he clasped a hand around Geralt’s forearm and was pulled up to standing.

The ice holding her prisoner thawed and she raced across the clearing before stopping abruptly beside the two grinning men. Frantically running her gaze of Iorveth’s chest, searching for some sign of a fatal blow but all she could make out was a deep scratch in the leather harness. He was pulling his swords free while she felt as if her bones were going to melt in relief. Taking a deep breath she bent over, bracing her palms on her knees.
It was only then, now that the fear and worry had begun to ebb that wonderment and thrill began to take their place. She dragged her eyes from Iorveth and studied the slain creature lying beside her. The breeze seemed to have been set free now that it was dead, and lightly ruffled its feathers and dark red mane.

“I’ve never seen feathers that big… of course I’ve never seen a griffin other than our imaginings. It’s cruelly beautiful…” Wendy straightened and pulled her journal from her back pocket, clicking her pen open and began to sketch. “What are you doing?” She asked when Geralt knelt by the head and drew a knife.

“Taking proof that the job was done.”

“Oh…” It was a grisly affair, but she supposed it wasn’t any worse than skinning a rabbit. Her sketch was barely started but she decided that the image would be left in her mind for days to come and instead circled over to the wing Iorveth had damaged.

Putting the journal back in her pocket, she knelt and ran a hand over the feathers, just barely grazing the crimson barbs. It was a lovely color, like a shade of lipstick she’d once tried to pull off. From the corner of her eye she saw Iorveth come to stand beside her. “I thought this thing was going to kill you.” She murmured.

“Worse things have tried.”

A corner of her mouth quirked up. He kept saying comments like that, comments meant to calm her but had quite the opposite effect. But, let him believe that she was strong enough to find solace in the fact that he lived a break neck life and leave it at that.

“We need to get back to the horses. Ryer is not far but I could use a lager and several whole chickens.” Geralt said, slinging what looked to be a meat hook into the griffin’s eye with a sickening sound.

“Um yes, just let me…” Wendy scanned the many feathers before settling on one of the smaller ones and plucked it free and standing.

“Souvenir?” Iorveth asked.

Wendy smiled at the feather. “A trophy.” She turned her smile toward him. “For my first monster hunt.”

The thought occurred to her, as they made the trek back to the horses, that it could be argued that she hadn’t hunted anything. Hadn’t searched out the trail, hadn’t drawn its attention allowing for the final blow to be felled. Could she truly call it a trophy if she hadn’t been the one to face the creature?

Perhaps not a trophy of battle but one of experience. She’d watched as two men, albeit one with mutated ability and the other a grace and skill that said most definitely not an Earthling, take down a creature that very few would have had the bravery nor ability to face. That was not something she would ever experience on Earth.

True to Geralt’s word, they were not far from Ryer. A lovely, and somewhat familiar creation in the distance of white stone towers with conical rooves. With mountains to the north and south, rolling hills perfect for raising sheep making up the scenery, Wendy found it painfully picturesque. There were dark clouds left over from the mornings storm, trees growing in every free place in various stages of changing colors.

“Wendy, I have to warn you… the people of Ryer will not like your use of elder speech.” Geralt said
as they ambled closer to Ryer at a slower pace now that they would arrive soon.

“I’m sorry, I have a difficult time knowing exactly which is which now… though I can when I’m learning a new word. Everyone I’d spoken with in Adhart just went along with it. What I couldn’t understand, I used context clues to fill in. What do you suggest unless yourself and Iorveth- a.k.a. the person responsible for this mess in the first place- are able to give me the full dictionary of common speech in the next hour…” Wendy felt mildly irritated, having incomplete understanding of anything as annoying to begin with but now that it was becoming a hinderance? Next level annoying.

“Iorveth will not be allowed through the gates without documentation, which even if he did, he would be tossed into the dungeon. Pretty sure he wouldn’t even be asked to present it before that happened.” Wendy felt her stomach drop painfully at the thought and her hand wrapped around his knee. “He’ll do what he does best and find another way in. You shouldn’t speak unless absolutely necessary. Pick up common as best as you can but otherwise, leave the talking to Triss and me.”

Wendy was having a difficult time associating such a lovely place with all the ugliness she’d been told awaited her there. Her life was in danger because she spoke the language of the elves? Iorveth had to sneak his way in or face the ultimate punishment? That part of her that was still bright eyed and bushy tailed couldn’t help but think the small thought that everyone was exaggerating. But she would do as they wished all the same.

This was their world and that certainly gave them the advantage over her.

A short time later they paused long enough for Iorveth to swing down from Xalvador and as he was adjusting the stirrups back to her size, Wendy watched him with an intense feeling of worry. “Be careful… alright?”

He met her gaze with a surprising hint of humor in his green eye. “I know this will be difficult for you, but do as Gwynbleidd says.”

Wendy quirked up a small smile, mentally making a note to remember him in this moment. It was easy to set her fear and worry aside, to just enjoy the warmth she felt with just the slightest softening of his expression. It made her feel decidedly triumphant and smug that he only- however incredibly recent it began- looked at her like that. Towards anyone else, Geralt included, his expression was carved of stone and unapproachable.

She thought of Mr. Darcy and though she could hardly see such a stuffed shirt ever slaying anything more than insufferable acquaintances with aloof words of censor, there were similarities in their personalities. Both were cold to everyone but the absolutely closest to them and even then gave little away. Shaped by their past and the weight of responsibility, doing what few could handle and very well at that.

Wendy desperately wanted to kiss him, to the point where her chest ached and her breath refused to release. But this was new and foreign to her and with an audience at that, she couldn’t bring herself to make the first move. And Iorveth hardly seemed to be fond of the idea of blatant p-d-a. Instead, she forced herself to breathe and to put some cheer into her voice.

“You’re correct, it will be difficult. But I’d already decided to go along with it. Race you there?” Wendy winked down at him to which he rolled his eye. “What? Jealous that you can’t wink?”

Iorveth answered by smacking Xalvador on his rump. His sudden lurch forward had Wendy scrambling for control of her seating and the reigns. It was on the tip of her tongue to look back and yell that she would pay him back for that but Geralt catching up to her with an odd look in his eye kept her from doing anything of the sort.
Instead she made the promise silently and focused on following Geralt into the castle town of Ryer under the guise of collecting his reward.

The security of Ryer had been pathetic to the point where Iorveth was sorely disappointed as he easily made his way through the town. Other than the guards at the gate, he’d only had to dodge two patrols before he reached the only tavern there, an ugly little place called The Burnt Billy. It was very much possible that he could have simply disguised himself and none would have looked at him twice, but he’d long ago learned the folly of such disregard to caution.

Instead he quickly found a stable place to climb onto the taverns roof and waited in the shadow until the sound of shutters opened below him. Taking the invitation, he lowered himself to the window and slipped inside.

Triss spared him a nod, Geralt waited near the door with an impatient expression- clearly still waiting to eat his meal- and Aevon had her back to him as she dug through her pack.

“First, we’ll want to question civilians, see if there are any rumors floating around about Adhart. Then if we get a hit, we’ll follow the trail to the source. They would have rats, perhaps even experience in biology. We would also need to confirm their motive.”

Iorveth had long ago realized for someone who could claim to find silence preferable, Aevon could speak endlessly. However, he found it rather fascinating how her mind worked… talking herself through the entire scenario as if that would guarantee its success. He leaned against the window frame and listened, his lips curling in silent amusement.

“Were they black mailed? Worked alone? Have other places they intend to attack?” She paused after pulling out one of her many journals and tapped the end of her pen on her chin. “I honestly doubt the lord here would carry out such a task with his own hands so we would need irrefutable evidence linking him to it. Honestly, where is Iorveth? You don’t think he was caught do you?”

“I don’t know. Triss do you think someone snagged the squirrel?” Geralt said in a deadpan voice.

“Perhaps we should ask him?” Triss replied her arms crossing over her chest and barely holding her amusement in check.

“Ask him?” That seemed to have caught Aevon’s attention and she looked over her shoulder to find him. The happiness that lit her beautiful face, the soft gasp of her lips parting followed by his name, all were jagged daggers piercing him in the chest. He hardly deserved such a reaction after only being separated for a few hours, but it was pleasing all the same. He’d never received even a false look of happiness to his presence, it was usually fear, revulsion, and hatred. Begrudging acceptance at best.

Not that she hadn’t looked at him with such emotions when he revealed his nature and that of his world’s to her, and he truly did not know how she was able to look past it so quickly when it was in such conflict of her own. But more and more he was beginning to crave the way she looked at him now. There was power in the feeling it granted, a power he hadn’t realized existed and was curious to see how far it could go.

The only thing- well two things holding him back from fully embracing the pleasure she offered was how this next chapter of her story would end for her, and seeing her safely back to her home. For how could he truly fall over the edge when he knew both were going to bring her pain? He hadn’t
expected to feel a twinge of guilt over the pain his quest for vengeance would bring her, but he did. And he knew he must carry forward regardless.

Perhaps she would finally recognize the monster he truly was when he burned Ryer and everyone in it, shattering that unfamiliar look in her eye from ever lighting on him again. It would certainly help when it came time to send her home.

“There you are! As you can see, you lost.” Aevon said with a teasing grin that did nothing to pull him back from that edge he stood upon.

Indeed, he must carry forward.

Unlike The Rosemary and Thyme, the tavern in Ryer was relatively hush, with more shadows, and an array of grisly patrons. Wendy kept her cloak wrapped around her as she followed Geralt and Triss to a table far from the fire but near enough to other people to listen in on their conversations.

Geralt drew a few glances but none outright objected to his presence as word had already spread of him slaying the archgriffin that had plagued their flocks. She glanced at Iorveth as he took to the chair beside, unable to believe the effect Triss’s glamouring spell had had on him.

Most of his scar was hidden by magic and what remained along with his race identifying ears, his magically grown hair covered. He’d removed the outermost of his armor, leaving him with his shirt unlaced at the neck and only a single sword slung low on his hip.

She made the mental note to tell him that he looked heart stoppingly amazing with rock star hair reminiscent of the late Chris Cornell. He may be despised here but back on Earth he would turn countless heads.

“You’re staring.” He said quietly while Geralt signaled for a maid to come take their order.

Wendy cleared her throat and leaned nearer to him. “Sorry, just trying to not objectify you right now with that amazing hair.”

“I feel exposed and suffocated at the same time.” He said in a pained voice.

Wendy nodded with an understanding look. “Hopefully this will not take long and we will be on our way to our next destination.”

“How about Gwent while we wait?” Geralt asked and Wendy smiled a bit at the puppy dog hopefulness he exuded. This scarred and gruff man was afraid that no one would play his little card game with him and it was absolutely charming. As was his grin when Iorveth told him he’d play.

As the two men played, Triss explained quietly what was going on in each round, the different factions and card types. Geralt had won the first round with Iorveth set to win the second when their food and drink arrived. The platters of roasted whatever fowl Geralt had decided on smelt pleasing and turned her stomach hungrily. Her attention was captured by the tankard settled in front of her and she cautiously leaned toward it and sniffed. It made her eyes water but she was more than curious for the taste.

Geralt had already tipped his back for a hearty gulp, Triss wrinkled her nose but gave it a sip anyways, with Iorveth taking a perfectly normal sized swig. “Uh… what’s the drinking age here?” Wendy whispered. She felt absolutely silly but she was weeks away from her birthday making it
legal to drink on Earth. She knew the laws were still relatively new when compared to the age of the
country and in each the age was different. It occurred to her as her three companions gave her an odd
glance that they wouldn’t regulate something like that here increasing her embarrassment for even
bringing it up to begin with. “Where I’m from the legal age to consume alcoholic beverages is
twenty-one which I’m just shy of so I was just being cautious.”

“You’ve never had anything with alcohol before?” Iorveth asked with obvious surprise.

“Of course not, it’s against the law for me to do so.” Wendy couldn’t help stiffening her back and
going into self-defense.

“And you never had the urge to do something like breaking such a trivial law?”

Wendy was getting angry, and quick. “Not really. Doing so would have not only gotten me into
trouble with the law, one which is actually not trivial at all considering alcohol is one of the reasons
for my parents early death, but it would have disappointed Pop and when you care about someone
you don’t want to disappoint them!” She’d had to lean toward him in order to keep her voice a
hushed hiss of angry words. “But since I suppose Pop isn’t here and no one in this place is going to
give two screws as to what I do, why not?” And with her eyes narrowed in an angry glare she
pressed the tankard to her lips and gulped down a heavy amount of bitter and sour tasting liquid that
she wouldn’t wish on her worst enemy.

She set the tankard down with a solid thunk and shook her head, swallowing repeatedly trying to
erase the taste from her mouth. “This is terrible. Why are people obsessed with this nonsense?”

Triss leaned across the table with a napkin and dabbed at Wendy’s chin with a sympathetic look. “I
agree and so does Iorveth if he’s being truthful. We both prefer wine but unfortunately this place has
a very specific clientele.”

Wendy felt a bit of her anger ebb into amusement as both Triss and Iorveth turned their gazes to
Geralt as he waved his empty tankard in the air, signaling that he was ready for more. She decided to
move past her embarrassment and anger seeing as how Iorveth couldn’t truly understand the effect
alcohol had had on her life and how she’d never had the urge to seek it out. But this was becoming
one of those experiences that she’d never thought to have and took a more cautious sip of the brew.

Again, it tasted horrible but rather than concentrate on the negative she felt the pleasing warmth that
began to spread through her veins.

“Eat something or you’ll find yourself affected much more than you’ll be wanting.” Iorveth said and
slid her a plate piled with fowl, vegetables, and cheese.

“Thank you.” She said quietly, her feelings still twisted and her forgiveness still fresh. After several
bites and the game resumed, Wendy allowed her attention to wander to those around them. Mostly
men of obvious working class were gathered around various tables, and none of them particularly
dangerous looking. A few had weapons but as did her companions so no true fear sped up her heart.

It was difficult to make out what any of them were talking about and when a bard began to pluck at
his lute, she could hear even less. She did enjoy the gentle notes flitting around her, the alcohol
coursing through her was relaxing, and her gaze was drawn repeatedly to the man at her side. She
rested her chin on her elbow and watched as he battled Geralt in a game of wits and strategy. The
narrowing of his eye when Geralt played a powerful card, the small curl at the corner of his mouth
when he gained the upper hand.

She was just beginning to playout a daydream involving him, her, and swaying to the tune of the
bard when a hand on her shoulder had her popping up to attention, her eyes struggling to focus on the incredibly beautiful Triss. “You’re so pretty…” Wendy said dreamily.

“You’re very sweet and I admire your looks as well, but we must return to our room.” The other woman said with a small smile.

Wendy immediately nodded. “Of course! Just allow me to…” Her gaze was drawn back to Iorveth who seemed to be packing away his deck. “You’re not as pretty as him.” When all three of her companions looked at her, she began to giggle. “It occurs to me-“ She had to pause and giggle some more. “That I might be a bit tipsy.” She drew a deep breath and focused on a serious expression. “But that’s okay! I am fine and ready to go.”

Palms flat on the table she pushed herself up and immediately slipped sideways as everything tilted. If it weren’t for the arm wrapping around her waist as she stumbled into a solid wall of muscle and vengeance. She had to crane her neck back to meet his vivid green eye. “How tall are you? Like six foot?” When he rolled his eye, her jaw dropped. “Taller? Tell me when to stop, six-one? Six-two. Six-three? Holy burrito, Six-four?”

“Come on Aevon, we need you with a clear mind. Let’s go.” Iorveth said and began to guide her to the stairs that would lead them back to the room. The moment the door closed behind them, Triss released the spell glamouring Iorveth’s identity and his hair returned to his normal short yet shaggy length.

“Aww I miss it already.” Wendy murmured and ran her fingers down the side of his face where the dark strands had once lay just seconds before. He remained quiet as he helped her to a wooden chair and pulled on patch cap once more.

“Here, this will help clear your mind.” Triss said, thrusting a vial into her hand which she blinked at with heavy lids.

“I’m not sure-“ Wendy yawned, suddenly wishing for a soft cozy place to lay her head. But the sorceress silenced her with a finger under the vial, pushing it to her lips. “Alright, alright…” She drank the concoction, coughing around the taste but within moments she had to admit that she was still tired just not the heavy, warm tired that came with inebriation. She couldn’t consider herself sober, as her thoughts still dragged more to the daydream side rather than the reality side but she felt as if she might be able to comprehend what was going on.

“I guess the first attempt to overhear anything useful was a bust.” She murmured and rubbed at her eyes.

“What do you mean? We have a very promising lead.” Geralt said, stripping off his weapons and leaning them against the wall.

“We do? I couldn’t hear anything.” Wendy said with wide eyes. Triss sat on the edge of the bed and unbuckled her boots and Iorveth checked the shutters, perhaps making sure no one could overhear them.

“Neither could I but that’s why we have Geralt.” Iorveth said, turning to look back at her, after which everyone looked at Geralt expectantly. He eased off a greave before noticing everyone was waiting for him to fill them in.

“Table closest to the fire. Three men, one was an off duty guard, one a traveling merchant, and one the guards brother. Merchant said he had been warned to make a detour, avoiding trade with Adhart. The guard filled him in, which isn’t all that telling. He did say however that it wouldn’t be long and
Adhart would be safe once again."

Wendy processed the information with a frown. “That can be foreshadowing I suppose and maybe I’m still a little cotton brained but how is any of that going to help us?”

“More was said. The merchant asked if Ryer was at risk to which the brother assured him that everything had gone to Iohn’s plan and Ryer was safe.”

“That, only with more derogatory language that Geralt I’m sure is leaving out.”

Wendy couldn’t believe it. She wanted to argue that those were merely words, and entirely too convenient. Her eyes flicked over to Iorveth, to see his face expressionless as he waited for her to do everything her entire being screamed at her to do. To tell them that this isn’t over and she wasn’t about to sentence all these people to death over a few words said in a tavern.

“Our next move then, is to find who did this and under whose orders.” She said, struggling to keep her voice level and calm.

“Tomorrow, I’ll gather information about the castle and who is employed. Every castle has an alchemist of some level. Just need to see if this one has any pet rats.” Geralt said and laid back on the only bed in the room.

“I want to go with you.” There was a slight tremble to her words, a panic simmering just below the surface.

“I work quicker alone.”

“Aevon.” Iorveth said, seeking her attention. He’d opened the shutters and stepped out onto the ledge and held out a hand to her.

The room was stifling, and Wendy truly was desperate for an escape, so she didn’t think twice about accepting his invitation. Even as he wrapped an arm around her waist to help her reach the ledge of the roof and pushed her even further with a palm on her curvy business, she didn’t hesitate. The cool air of the early night brushed her face as she crawled further up the roof to sit atop the ridge. She wrapped her arms around her knees while Iorveth joined her, stalking lowly rather than crawling.

He sat beside her, still with just his attire and sword from above, making her wonder if he ever got cold. He’d drawn one knee up with his arm stretched out over it, and with the sleeves rolled up to his elbows she could make out various scars crossing the skin. A thin line across his forearm… the twisted knots over his knuckles.

Wendy drew in a deep breath of cold air and forced her gaze to the sky. The clouds of the day had long ago drifted away and left behind a night sky full of countless stars and a bright moon with unfamiliar shadows but comforting all the same.

“I don’t want it to be true. I’m not ready to accept that any of these people did anything wrong.” She said quietly.

“The only reason they are still alive in this very moment Aevon, is because of you. Do not feel sorrow for them… none of them deserve even these moments that have been granted to them. And they will certainly not feel sorrow for the noose they place around your neck for the aid you gave to my people, for your use of my language, and for your presence at my side… they would issue you a swift execution, if they are feeling merciful.” His fiery words paused, and he reached out to run a finger along the outer shell of her ear. “This is always how these things play out here. We find a small semblance of safety and normalcy, and dh’oines try to claw it away. For so long we didn’t
fight back, we just moved on to the next safe crack in the wall.”

He looked out at the castle, with its glowing lanterns and overall sense of being a sleepy old castle. “Ryer was once aen seidhe. As with most cities in the realm, they were our creations. Then starting with Novigrad, one by one they were taken. We didn’t wish to fight so we ran. And before long we had nothing.”

Wendy felt weary and beyond saddened, and truly she felt angry at the suffering he and his had endured for so long. Like she’d said forever ago now. A story as old as time.

“If things were different… If you were just a handsome lad living out a life without worry and struggle, what would you do?”

He continued to gaze out at the castle as he considered her question. “You’ll think it foolish.”

Wendy felt her heart twist and for the first moment in her newly acquired position as significant other to someone, she found her first duty in caring for them. Scooting closer until her hip bumped his, she reached for his closest hand and palm to palm, traced circles across the fine bone ridges and scars.

“I asked the question because I accept the responsibility of your answer. I would never try to make you feel foolish and truthfully, you’re the direct opposite in my opinion. Smart and sensible- at least in most situations where vengeance isn’t on your mind- and I’m certain that who you once saw yourself becoming is the same.” When still he hesitated, she laced her fingers through his and gave him a reassuring squeeze.

“A farm I worked at as a child had a litter of puppies and one of my duties became helping to care for them. It was the happiest I had ever felt, caring for those energetic, noisy, and messy creatures. And with the promise to work hard, I had been allowed to carry one home to have all to myself. All I wanted was to train it and play with it. I suppose my life would have been centered around breeding, raising, and training dogs.”

Wendy sat silent for a moment, absolutely astounded. It had not been the answer she’d expected, not at all. Weaponsmith, bossy lord over some estate, or even a sailor had all been options, but dog breeder had not been one of them. “That’s pretty amazing. Dogs are loyal and intelligent, not to mention incredibly playful and comforting. I never had a dog since Pop and my mom were both allergic. I’m not even sure if I am… What was its name? What did it look like? What did you teach it to do?”

Iorveth chuckled warmly. “My imagination was not lacking as a child and I named her Laelaps. Solid black with one ear pointed up while the other flopped over and a tail that never stopped moving. I had just taught her to come when called and chase crows from my mother’s little garden when…”

“When?”

“When I found her hanging from the tree outside my house.”

Wendy managed to bite back her cry of dismay and instead pressed her forehead against his arm and struggled to hold onto her tears. The tightening of his hand around hers and the slight hint of pain in his voice were not helping her to hold her emotions in check for sake but he slowly eased up on her hand.

“It was a long time ago.”

It felt wrong to argue that his pain was still justified, and that he had no need to play it off as nothing,
so instead she tamped down her hurt and anger on his behalf and lifted her head away from his shoulder. “It takes a massive amount of patience and dedication to properly train any animal, and it’s a pretty respected career on Earth. Dogs can be taught so much, from helping people with disabilities to acting out scenes in entertainment.”

“I would have been content with training them to hunt with me.” He drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly and tilted his head to look down at her. “What about you? If you were just a pretty lass… You mentioned traveling once before… did you want to be a scholar?”

Wendy hummed a yes before going into detail. “I didn’t have one specific passion as I was interested in everything history. Some kids want to be paleontologist and study fossils, or become inspired by Indiana Jones and Laura Croft and dream of exploring tombs as archeologist. We even have those that study the history of art!” She felt excitement coming to life in her veins, and she sat up straighter. “I couldn’t settle on one, though I was particular to cultural history. How a civilization developed and how its people crafted and molded a culture around it. Their myths and legends, the influence of their environment…” Wendy drifted off as a bit of sadness worked its way through the excitement. “I would have found your history, before humans, if I could. If this was my home and I was just a pretty lass, I would have been drawn to explore every tomb and crumbled city to find the past glory of your people.”

Iorveth snorted lightly and shook his head. “I doubt I would have felt anything for it. We were scholars and politicians once, but we were hardly glorified… if we were we would have fought harder for our homes and our future. We weren’t warriors so we ran.”

“There is valor and glory in learning. In making a discovery which no one else has made.” Wendy heaved a sigh and looked out at the stars. “It’s the same back on Earth. Who do you think earns the most in salary? A Professor who has spent decades becoming an expert in their field of study and now passes that knowledge on to the next generation or the Coach, the commander of the sports team training and directing their players in games of skill and strength? Both take dedication but knowledge is severely undervalued though everyone benefits from it.” Wendy scrunched her nose. “Sorry if I sound bitter. What I wanted to say is this… the goal in every form of sentient life ought to be peace… and it sounds as if your people may have had that for a moment. You had no need for warriors because you were a content people, free to focus on what made you happy. That is nothing to be ashamed of and is actually quite envious. But somehow, perhaps through portals like mine, humans colonized in the way they did on Earth. Laying waste to everything that was already there.”

“If you know their nature, why are you so determined to believe the good in them?”

“Because despite it all, we have made progress to the level of peace you once had. We still have war and strife, suffering, greed, corruption… but every day people fight these things with their voices, their platforms, their votes.”

“I see. That is not the case here. The louder the king, the louder his peasants, the more eager they are for the blood their king demands. Lay the blame for the failing of crops and plague at the feet of entire races, and they’ll do it with smiles on their faces, knowing they rid the world of something so filthy.”

Wendy laid her head back against his shoulder, wishing his words weren’t true, but deep down she could see that they were. “What was the moment you realized you weren’t going to have that dream? When Laelaps was taken from you?”

“Shortly after. The first time a dh’oine tried to kill me.”

She bit her lip and tightened her hand around his but kept her outburst contained while she waited for
“He lived next to my mother and me. A violent and angry man, he took it out on the aen seidhe woman who lived with him until one day she wasn’t there anymore. Then his attention turned to my mother but first he wanted her whelp out of the way.” His voice grew quiet, and the thought that she needed to stop him, that this was too much for one person to let out in one moment, but she couldn’t.

He continued on and she admired his strength in doing so. “I woke to his hands around my neck. I was small, malnourished as you can imagine though my mother did her best, so his hands easily held me. But he didn’t get to for long as the vision of my mother standing over him, a blade to his throat. She whispered, ‘close your mouth precious one’. It was difficult to do but I managed to press my lips together and she dragged his head back and put a stop to him. It was the middle of the night as several others had come to help mother dispose of his body and I helped clean up the blood from my corner of the house that I knew what sort of life I was destined to live.”

“Iorveth… that is- how? How can you stand to be in my presence…” Wendy shook her head in bewilderment. “I am rather forgiving by nature and principle… but I am having a difficult time seeing how- I mean. Why?” She pulled her hand away, suddenly feeling undeserving of any sort of kind feeling he might have towards her.

“Had I come across you just a few years ago, I would have left you to drown in that river. But I seem to be getting soft in my old age and have a habit of collecting a few of the dh’oines that have yet to earn a place at the end of my sword.”

“Why are you so open… I have past trauma and by no means is this a competition, but I have yet to have an actual conversation with Pop about what happened, it hurts both of us that bad. And you—“

“Spoke about it with very little prodding? While you have been waiting to speak for eight years, I have been waiting over a century.”

Wendy, her guilt set aside for the moment grinned up impishly. “And…”

“And what? That was the end of what I wished to say.”

She bumped her shoulder into his. “You trust me.”

He rolled his eye away from her and shook his head. “Don’t be absurd. I could never trust the likes of you.”

“Nope, it’s too late now. All I have to do is wag a finger and you spill all your secrets. You trust me.”

“Why would I trust you? You have done nothing to earn it.”

Wendy shrugged her shoulders with a smug smile. “I just have one of those faces.”

He smiled that smile of his, the one that made her toes curl in her boots and reached for her hand. “What about your moment?”

“A year after the accident, Pop and I were on the porch swing, taking in the night. I couldn’t envision a life were I left him to be alone and I decided that I never would. I didn’t until he urged me to fly to Germany, trying to inspire to find my spirit of adventure. I felt guilty, still do in fact… if I hadn’t dragged my parents across the state to see an hour tour of a little museum, they would be alive. I’d have my parents and Pop would have his daughter.” Wendy rubbed at her nose and straightened her glasses a moment. “I know it’s not rational, people die every day. They could have
died some other way, I know this. Screamed it in my mind more times than I could count… But to a thirteen year old girl, it was all on me.”

“Did your grandfather’s plan for you work? Were you inspired?”

Wendy settled back against him and gazed out at the town. All around them the people were settling into the quiet of the night, lanterns were lit and the rustle of leaves filled the air. It never once occurred to her that she might be afraid of heights, especially given her history of failing two stories, but she was far from it. She was content and restless at the same time… but was she inspired?

“No. When I get to that portal, I’m returning to Pop and I’m not leaving him again. And someday when he is gone, I’ll still have sheep to herd and elderly to take care of. I’m not inspired.”

“You don’t wish to start a family?”

Wendy’s heart twisted painfully and she forced her gaze to meet his with a smile that didn’t quite reach her eyes. “After being here, and feeling what I feel right now for you? It wouldn’t be likely I’ll find that again and if I tried and forced it into being… well that wouldn’t be fair. It’s better to keep to my original plan and plenty of people live whole, fulfilled lives, completely alone.” Perhaps a bit of alcohol remained in her system, granting her the courage to speak so openly about the concerns of her heart… Perhaps she just merely wanted this man with a lifetime of scars to know that he, in that moment with her and for even after she was long gone, was cared for beyond imagination.

“I- did not expect that.”

Wendy’s smile turned genuine. “Iorveth? Speechless- or near it? I’m feeling very smug just now.”

His smile answered hers before slipping away. “How are you so certain that you feel such a way? Dandelion keeps himself in the latest peacock fashions off of people like you I suspect.”

“Mmm true, I’m a desperate romantic. I was raised on romantic fairytales where the hero and heroine always ride off into the sunset after overcoming every obstacle and declaring their never ending love for the other. There’s love at first sight, enemies to lovers, and my favorite- star crossed. And I’m not sure which category we fall in, at least on my part… And I’m completely laying myself on the line right now… But it is the way you care when so desperately you don’t want to give a damn.”

Wendy shifted until she face him fully, kneeling over one of his legs and holding his arms for balance. “Like you said earlier… If it weren’t for me, this place would be a smoldering pile of ash right now. You gave me a chance, and even if I turn out to be wrong, that alone means more to me than a garden full of roses each intended just for me. Little things like stomping out into the cold dark with a fresh arrow wound all to berate me because I put myself in danger. Taking my glasses off because I forgot to. Making a dying little girl smile with cuddly kittens.”

She snorted lightly and shook her head. “Call me young, foolish, and Dandelion’s biggest patron, but those are the things that drew me to you and are what is going to make leaving you so incredibly hard. I don’t expect you to return any of this, it’s enough that you respect me enough to give me a chance, trust me enough to speak about your past.”

Her piece said she laughed a small bit glanced around them. “That was quite the confession and I completely dominated the conversation… I just wanted to say these things before- well tomorrow is a whole new day and you have a penchant for getting show with arrows and facing down monsters.”

Indeed, he did not return such a heartfelt confession, and indeed, she hadn’t expected him to. His mother and dog were probably the only two creatures he’d even considered having such deep
connections with and she was but a human who liked to play peacemaker, more on her way home than her arrival.

No, he did not fill her head with confessions and declarations, but nor did he berate her for hers. He didn’t tell her that she was wasting her time, that other than her body he wanted nothing from her. Instead his hand lifted to thread into the loosely braided hair at the nape of her neck and urged her closer to him.

She went gladly, sinking against his chest as their lips met, eyes closed and a heat that not even the cold night air could touch began to rise. But it was over before it could truly begin, much to both her dismay, and her relief. One part of her wanted to make this happen right then and there while perched precariously on top of a tavern roof, while the other was exhausted emotionally and physically, still a little drunk, and wanted nothing more than to fall asleep.

“Those two will be done by now if you’re ready to go back into the room.” Iorveth said quietly, holding her forehead against his a moment longer before pulling back to search her gaze.

Wendy felt her mouth drop in surprise. “You mean they were… Oh.” She looked up at the stars, the moon now resting high in the sky. “Actually, I’m growing pretty fond of sleeping outside and have no desire to argue Geralt out of that bed now. If we move to the wall where the tavern meets the inn rooms, think we it will be safe enough to sleep there?”

His smile warmed her more than a toasty fire. “One way to find out.” He stood and reached out a hand to help her stand up steadily.

“Don’t worry, I’ll keep you from falling… and I’ll share my cloak with you. Can’t have you catching your death.”

He lightly eased himself to the roof of the tavern before reaching for her and before long they were both resting in the shadows. He leaned against the cool wood with her nestled against his chest, his long legs stretched out on either side of her while her cloak draped comfortably around them both.

“I’ve never been ill a day in my life.”

Wendy closed her eyes, smiling as she felt her glasses being lifted away. “But you’re also nearing your dotage. Old people get sick easily.”

“Hmmm think Geralt and Merrigold would notice if I spirited you away back to the hole you crawled out of?”

Her eyes popped open and she sent a scrunched nose look over her shoulder. “I floated, thank you very much. Now hush or I won’t share my cloak.” She felt him press his nose against her hair and a pair of lips smile against her neck.

It was odd, being in love. She hadn’t been prepared for just how affected she would be by the heaviness in his life, and in no way did she see herself as the savior of his happiness, but she was deeply affected and did desperately want for his happiness. She was angry at her own people, far removed as they were. She wondered how this world would have shaped her had she been born there. Would she have hated elves as desperately as he hated humans though he had true right to do so?

What if she’d lost her family in one of the attacks he and his warriors had done? Would she have had true right to hate him then? She wanted to believe that she would have still seen past the walls he had meticulously built around himself, but more than that she wanted to be the adventuress come to his
little corner of the world where he raised dogs without a care in the world.

She would have been charmed by his patience and tenderness for his doggy wards, and he would have been entranced by her spirit and worldly experience. But instead he was a soldier ensnared in an endless war, and she was untapped potential content to living a stagnant life.

And then there was the problem with proving Ryer's innocence... The threat Earth posed.

“Stop thinking so much and go to sleep.” Iorveth’s voice rumbled in her ear.

A light gust of wind had her wiggling back against him until his arm wrapped around her waist. She didn’t argue that there was entirely too much to think about, that now that she was at sleep’s door she could no longer drift through it. But it was just as she had that thought that she did, in a river of warm contentment.
Ryer True

Chapter Notes

A/N So I’m just going to leave this here. ajksdhfkajhf

Awareness came to Iorveth slowly. Awareness of the brisk morning air and yet the beginnings of a warm sun rising. Awareness of his chin resting against perfectly soft hair, of a warm breath grazing his collar, arms wrapped around his waist and legs tangled with his. Awareness of one of his hands resting comfortable and high along the inside of a warm thigh… that if he moved his thumb…

Aevon sighed deeply, murmuring something in her own language, before shifting against his chest. He couldn’t see her face but the slow rhythm of her breathing said she still walked through the land of dreams. He learned early that she was a deep sleeper and did not enjoy being roused… it had to be her idea or she would have a glare in her eye for hours.

But the longer she lay there pressed against him, his awareness deepened. Her position was similar to when she’d arched against him as they rode for Ryer. She may have only been trying to ease cramped muscles but the memory still had him clenching his hands. He hadn’t meant to press into the softness of her thigh, or her waist where his other hand lay, and he certainly didn’t intend to wake her. But with the arousal beginning to rush through his blood, he wouldn’t object if she did.

If she woke, he’d be free to run his palms up from her thighs and waist… over her rib cage… he was curious as to the sound she would make when he cupped her breasts. Would she moan or whimper? He secretly hoped she would sigh his name.

“Iorveth…”

Exactly like that.

It took a moment for Iorveth to realize that she truly had said his name, it hadn’t been in his head. He became aware of everything then. Just how tightly his fingers pressed into the fabric of her clothing, of the steadily increasing speed of her breathing as she slipped from the world of dreams and back into his. She shifted again, her palm sliding along his waist, trailing a path of heat that nearly had him involuntarily move his hips in the same direction.

A raw need had turned his frame solid and he was at conflict within himself. He wanted to follow his desire, to explore the woman in his arms and test the limits of how far he could push the both of them. To hear her sigh his name in one breath and then scream it in the next. To take his pleasure and to give to her as well.

Perhaps it was the smallest part of him that was still civilized that had him holding his hands barely in check, but the roof of a vile dh’oine tavern wasn’t where one took a woman such as Aevon, rutting about as if she were nothing more than a common whore.
Iorveth mentally ran curses through his mind at Geralt for defiling the bed.

He had just thought of a clever one when Aevon slid her head from beneath his chin to rest on his shoulder. When he brought his gaze down to examine her state of awareness and found her blue eyes hooded but watchful he thought she might say some sort of sleepy greeting or even muster up one of her -its to early to be breathing- glares. At the very least she should set a boundary and remove his hands from her.

Instead, she dropped her gaze to his lips, her hand twisted in the fabric of his shirt. “I really want to kiss you.” She said quietly. “But neither of us have brushed yet…” She trailed off and he watched silently as her mind began to turn and her gaze traveled down. “However…” She whispered.

He didn’t have the same qualms about the taste left in ones mouth after hours of sleep, but then again he doubted she’d ever had to go weeks at a time with the sour taste… an enemy didn’t exactly care about prisoner of war hygiene. But he also wasn’t going to argue that and instead he waited. There were very few situations in which he easily relinquished control to another and to be honest that included satisfying carnality as well.

He knew himself, knew he was dominate and relished in it, whether taking control of someone’s fear and using it for his gain or taking control of a woman’s lust and again, using it for his gain. Not that she didn’t gain anything from it as well, he was a cruel bastard but he did take satisfaction in leaving a woman begging him to return again.

But when it came to Aevon… something was different. He wanted to wait and see what she would do. For her to have control over whether he ignored his own internal debate and have him take her there on the roof or be the sensible one and go back to the room where Geralt and Triss would be awakening.

His Aevon did not leave him in suspense for long for a moment later she ran the tip of her tongue long her bottom lip before arching her back and drawing it lightly along the curve of his neck before nipping at the skin below his jaw. The sensation had him closing his eye and his hold on her tightening.

In response, her hips rocked forward in just the smallest of movements but it was enough to grant his hand the permission it needed and slowly moved upward until his knuckles brushed against the apex of her thighs. Her unique mixture of gasping whimper had him hard and nearly dripping and not for the thousandth time since he met her did the thought cross his mind that it had been entirely too long, and his answering groan broke her concentration on his neck. She tilted her head back bringing him to watch her blink up at him.

This is when she would realize exactly where they were and just what it was she was encouraging. And certainly enough she swept her gaze to the side before bringing it back to him, a look of hesitation coming over her. He couldn’t say he wasn’t disappointed, it would be a long walk to the nearest secluded place to have a moment and ease his cravings… but as he’d already acknowledged, it was the sensible thing to do and it was his own fault for not taking control earlier and ending it before it even began.

“We should return to-“ He began but she cut him off in a sudden rush, her eyes wide and a slight waver in her voice.

“I honestly cannot allow my first time to be on top of this horrible little pub. And I haven’t had even a moment to drink the tea… but I’m perfectly okay with third base. In fact-“ She shifted against him restlessly. “I want that pretty badly.”
Iorveth tilted his chin downward to get a better view of her. “I have no idea what third base is.”

The corner of her mouth quirked up for a quick moment before she dropped her gaze to his neck. “Its slang for- um-“ Instead of telling him, she pushed the cloak from her shoulders and reached for his hand nestled between her thighs and guided him to the waist of her trousers. “This-“ She flicked her gaze back to his. “is third base… I get something…” Her hand released his shirt and she hooked a finger over the waist of his own trousers. “You get something.”

This had to be something she’d read about in one of her books, but the husky waver in her voice, the yearning in her blue eyes told him she was driven forward by a need he recognized all to well.

And just like that, he wrested control from her with a lift of his hand to her shoulder, urging her to settle her back to his chest and nudging her head to tilt back against his shoulder which she did with a sigh. Her attempt to gain that control back was briefly allowed as he was already planning to pull her shirt from the waist of her trousers, but then she dragged his free hand to cup one of her breast.

“Do you know how often I’ve imagined this? So much I thought I was going to go insane.” She whispered, following with a low moan.

Iorveth decided she was talking too much, which told him he wasn’t doing a proper enough job. Deftly he pressed against the inside of her thighs, widening them until her knees were bent and he slipped his hand below her waistband until he could finally touch her, his groan at finding her slick and ready mingled with her whimper.

It left him curious as to what she had been dreaming of to already be in such a state. Not that he was in any way disappointed. It was incredibly arousing and did nothing to aid in his rapidly fraying control.

“Oh-“ She managed before pressing her head tightly against his shoulder and arching her back. Her hips rocked back against him, reminding him of his own desire, the dizzying amount of heat spreading beneath his skin. He drew a single finger against the center of her heat, repeating until the rocking of her hips matched the increasing tempo of her moans.

The weight of her breast was satisfying and molded in his palm perfectly. He rolled a nipple slightly and her moan became a cry. “I-Iorveth!”

He pressed his lips against her ear, taking a moment to drag the small lobe between his teeth, wishing it was her breast instead. “As much as I delight in the sound of you crying out my name as you come undone- it wouldn’t be wise to bring unwanted attention.”

He ended his admonishment by inserting a finger, slowly yet deeply. Both of her hands rushed down to hold tightly to his forearm and wrist.

“F-fuck em-“ She gasped and ground her hips against his hand. “Let em- hear.”

Iorveth moaned against her neck, delighting in her inhibition, in the evidence of her need for him easing his finger.

“A-another one.”

He didn’t have to be told twice but he needed control, he was already fighting the need to rub his still tucked away cock against her undulating arse.

“Another what?” He growled, palming her breast.
“Finger. Now.”

He rewarded her demands and was thusly rewarded as well.

“Iorveth- fuck-“

“Soon…” He promised and closed his eye as she began to drag in ragged breaths, her body rising. He’d never had to hold back from pushing trousers down and finding his release and yet as she neared hers, it’s all he could think of doing. Of replacing his fingers with his cock and driving into her until neither of them could stand.

He curled his fingers in her and rubbed the heel of his hand against the top of her center. Her breathing began coming in smaller drags, the bite of her nails against his skin showing promising signs of a hellion. He decided to test a limit and slipped his hand from her breast, smiling wickedly at her whimper of disappointment. He thrust it into the tangled hair at the back of her head, her braid all but destroyed long ago, twisted his fingers in the strand and lightly pulled her head back until he could see her face.

“I want to watch.” He said lowly, his smirk still in place as she whimpered again. Her eyes were closed, and brow furrowed. Hair that wasn’t long enough to be held back by him spilled across her cheeks, floating as her breath escaped rapidly from slightly parted lips. “Open your eyes.” The need that twisted in him when she obeyed, was only lit on flame as her blue eyes, glassy with desire, looked up at him.

“I- I’m fuck Iorveth.” She groaned, her hips moved in an uncontrolled wrench against him and her center clenched sound his fingers in a sensation that would have milked him if they were anywhere else. He eased his pace as her body began to still, her eyes becoming heavy lidded and filled with emotion. A moment and a sigh later her grip on his arm loosed and he slipped his hand from her trousers before gripping her hip and turning her to face him.

“My turn.” He said fiercely. He’d been painfully erect, throbbing, and tucked away for far too long, and watching her come undone had stretched the limit of his control. It occurred to him that she might be one of those simpering sort, might have taken offense to his brashness but… Here he sat with his hand still fisted in the hair at the back of her head, a virgin, and being told that it was time for her to grant him release.

And she answered with a quirked up crooked smile as she shifted to settle over one of his thighs and reached for the hand gripping her hip. After wiping his hand clean with the tail of her shirt, she lifted up until just before her lips. A brief hint of hesitancy flitted across her face before she placed his middle finger in her mouth, her gaze watchful as she slowly drew it back out, swirling her tongue around the tip. He couldn’t help wondering which book she read this in as the sight and sensation went strait to his cock.

“And your turn.” She whispered in agreement, dropping her gaze to the laces of his breeches. He nearly whimpered like a boy just discovering a woman’s touch when she tugged on the laces and slowly slipped a hand inside. Her soft brush against him released a shuddering breath he hadn’t known he’d been holding. His head dropped back against the wooden wall when all at once she had him in hand and had pulled him free of the confines.

Iorveth was not a self-conscious being. He knew what he looked like, recognized that while the lustful looks he’d gained in his youth had been replaced with curiosity and mild disgust… that is until they had something else to look at.

But he’d never had a woman look at him quite like this. A mixture of determination and
apprehensive awe.

“Um-“ She began and paused to lick her lips, her gaze moving from his and then back down. “I’ve never done this so- show me.”

He felt a wave of possessiveness well up in him, something he’d never expected. He didn’t put stock in monogamy, he never stayed in a place long enough to even entertain the idea, but he found the idea of Aevon looking at any other man with anything close to how she was looking at him in that moment, left him bitter.

He was watching her as she watched his hand wrap around hers. She was wide eyed innocence and eager to learn… just as she was with everything. He nearly could have chuckled at how he shouldn’t have been surprised… Aevon didn’t do anything halfway. She was curious and refreshingly knew what she wanted. And just then she wanted to learn how to stroke a cock… his cock at that and he was a most willing teacher and subject.

He tightened his grip, signaling that she should as well, the tightness eliciting a small groan from his chest. Then he drew her hand up along with his, twisting at the wrist slightly at the head then drawing back down. After a few more demonstrating pumps she shifted on his thigh and angled her shoulders with a determined tilt and steadied herself with her free hand on his shoulder.

She flicked a nod to him, signaling that she had the confidence to take over. With a sigh he slipped both of his hands to her hips then slid them down to cup the soft curves of her arse. Her hand continued sliding along his cock with a teasing slowness that had him restlessly thrusting his hips to find more soft friction.

She had an understanding light in her gaze as she studied him and quickened her deliberate pumps. The twisting pleasure was like fire in his stomach, making every muscle in his body simultaneously rigid with tension and relaxed with pleasure. Her hips moved against his hands and thigh, signaling that she had a new need building and the groan that escaped his chest was almost animal.

He nearly closed his eye but when she smiled a surprisingly seductive smile and leaned forward enough to drag her mouth along the edge of his jaw. “Do you know what that sound you just made does to me?” She whispered against his skin,

He had an idea, but he wanted to hear her say it. He tightened his grip on her arse and drew her up along his thigh, nearly coming loose when her breath caught in her throat and her steady ministrations on his cock faltered. “Tell me.” He growled tightly, urging her hips to rock against him.

“I-It makes me- oh fuck-“ She began to move against him, riding his thigh and dropping her head to rest on his shoulder.

He was close- if she just finished her sentence- it was taking all his concentration just to remember to breath.

“Tell- me.”

She dragged in a breath, her hand still sliding up and down, she ground her center against him in short circles. “I-it makes me wan-want to-“ She whimpered. “Neve-rrr stop doing th-this with you. I want to ri-ride you.”

Morning breath be damned but he had to feel his mouth on hers. In a rush he twisted a hand in her hair and groaned openly against her mouth, his tongue swiftly exploring hers. His cock jerked against her hand and instinctively he wrapped a hand around hers, showing her how to finish him
“Keep going.” He whispered against her mouth, knowing she was close to finding her second release.

“M-make the sound.”

He didn’t have to force it, his guttural groan came naturally as he dived over the edge of release, spilling over both his and her hand and a moment after her hips jerked in timing with her whimpers. She sank against him, a shudder wracking her frame. He pressed light kisses along her jaw, whispering whatever words of contentment and praise that came to him.

A slight stiffness refused to release his cock, a testimony to the fact that this had been a temporary release and it would take very little encouragement to have him ready to seek complete satisfaction, if not for that sensibly civilized part of him shouting that they had already tarried far too long.

“Mmm I know what you’re thinking and it’s a no. I’m not moving.” Aevon murmured against his neck. She tightened the hand that still held his sensitively pulsing cock, pulling an answering groan from him and quickly he calculated just how long they could do this before Geralt and Triss came looking for them.

He glanced at the steadily rising sun, realizing they’d been at this for near half an hour.

“Trust me when I say the last thing I want to do is to end this so soon. But... it’s that or put on quite the delicious show for our companions... No doubt they will be looking for us soon.”

Her sigh of resignation had his lips curling into a rather wicked smile and he rewarded her with a tug on her hair to tilt her head back and take her mouth with his own. She eagerly responded, biting his bottom lip lightly.

“If you don’t stop me now Iorveth, we’re never getting off this roof. And I could use some time cleaning up and clearing my head from all the mush you’ve turned it into.” She moaned, rising against him to kneel above.

It took a significant amount of willpower to draw her hand from him and tuck himself away, and the lingering touch of her lips on his, did nothing to give him strength. If he didn’t get her to a suitable place to have her soon he was going to sink into madness, driven there by the constant pain of need burning in his body and the reflected emotion in her heated gaze.

“Here... it’s already soiled so might as well.” She said, offering the tail of her shirt for him to clean off his hand while she did the same.

Finally acknowledging that the moment was swiftly coming to an end he pressed one last kiss to her neck then helped her to stand. He watched as she fixed her cloak around her shoulders, slipped her glasses on and rearranged her hair into a knot at the top of her head, all with a little smile hovering over her lips.

There was power in knowing you could do something like that to another, to have them look blissful and content, and his smile began to mirror hers. He didn’t recognize the emotions for what they were... blissful and contentment were not something he felt often. There wasn’t room for them but here he was... on the edge of considering himself happy. It wasn’t because he still had waves of release rolling over him, easing the tension within. It wasn’t because she’d found her own release in his arms. It was just her.

She looked up from tucking her shirt into her trousers, her blue eyes shining as they met his. Her
smile grew and his heart twisted. She stepped close to him and his breath caught. She jauntily raised up on her toes and threaded both hands through the hair at the back of his neck and he caught her hips to steady her.

“Aevon… what are you doing?” He whispered in admonishing curiosity.

Her grin widened, her eyes moving between his gaze and his lips. “Invoking my rights. My right to kiss you as much as I can.”

He huffed lightly. “I am the last one in the land to get in the way of someone’s rights… at least so long as they coincide-“ She cut him off with a deep kiss. He was getting dangerously close to happiness.

A moment later when they could at last keep their hands and mouths in check, he lowered himself to the open window to the tavern room. She slipped down into his arm with that trusting smile of hers, never hesitating that he might let her slip.

Once she’d ducked inside he followed her to find Geralt already gone and Triss examining the supplies.

“Good morning Triss!” Aevon called out cheerfully and kneeling to dig in her pack while Triss returned the greeting. She pulled out several articles of clothing and toiletries before heading to the door. “I’m going to get ready. Anyone need anything while I’m gone?” She asked with a glance over her shoulder.

“I’ve already requested food for breakfast. It should be here when you return.” Triss answered.

A look a relief spread over Aevon’s face. “Excellent. I’m starving. I’ll be back.” And just like that she was gone. There was a nervous twist in his gut as he stared at the closed door. He didn’t like the idea of her alone out there and he realized he should have given her a weapon of some sort, even if she didn’t know how to use it.

“It’s only down the two doors. She’ll be fine.” Triss said, alerting him to the fact that he’d been scowling at the door.

He forced himself to relax and stalk over to his own supplies, pulling free fresh clothing and his own hygiene items.

“Iorveth…” Triss began and he rolled his eye, already knowing what she was going to say. But she was an alright sort so he waited for her to continue, standing to face her. She wrapped her arms around her waist and her gaze was full of concern. “What are you doing? And don’t bother pretending otherwise. That girl is walking around in a cloud of contentment and I’ve seen the looks…”

“She’s hardly a girl, innocent in ways sure. As to what I’m doing… nothing that hasn’t been asked for.”

Triss frowned. “That’s not what I mean. I get seeking pleasure and comfort where it can be found. But Wendy is the ever after sort… what happens when she leaves?”

Iorveth shrugged his shoulders. “She leaves and I continue on.”

“What if she doesn’t leave?”

“She will. She has something to go back to.”
And if she didn’t?” Triss countered fiercely. “How would you treat her knowing she was staying?”

Iorveth didn’t reply. It wasn’t something he’d particularly thought about. Would he have given her a second glance if she’d been trapped there? She wouldn’t have been his problem that was certain, left to earn her keep helping Dandelion possibly. Other than his occasional pass through Novigrad once a decade, he wouldn’t have seen her.

“Just as I thought. I’m telling you as a friend… don’t play with her because she’s leaving and it’s the easy way.”

He gave a humorless laugh and shook his head. “Do you plan to tell her the same? No? What do you want to hear Merrigold? That this isn’t a game I’m playing with her and we are both perfectly aware of the consequences? Or are you looking for me to make an emotional confession?”

“You do have a reputation preceding you. I can think of five humans you can stand to be in the presence of for more than five minutes without putting an arrow through their eye and none of them have anything in common with Wendy.”

Iorveth sighed and glanced toward the door. “It wasn’t easy. I didn’t have a sudden change of heart and am embracing humanity, if that is what has you worried. But as you said… she is different. And she expects nothing of me.”

“How convenient.” Triss snapped.

“This discussion is over. What she and I do has nothing to do with you or why you’re here.” Iorveth bit out, a glint in his eye.

Triss let out a sigh and shook her head. “I just want you to know that it’s alright to care for someone and… I don’t want to see either of you get hurt.”

“As I said before. We’re aware of the consequences. If either of us are to be effected, it was by our own choice and we will bear it.” He blinked in sudden confusion as a sad smile flitted across her face and her expression turned almost pityingly.

“As you say Iorveth. I’ll leave it.”

Any time spent allowing consideration over her words was cut off when a knock at the door signaled the food had arrive and he moved out of sight of the door accordingly, only to emerge back when the door closed once more.

A tray piled with sausages, rolls, and apples now waiting in the center of the table drew him near and he’d taken a bite of sausage along with Triss snagging a roll when the door swung open and Aevon entered. He acknowledged the wave of relief and remembered Merrigold’s words that it was alright to care. Leaving him to wonder… did he care for Aevon already? He didn’t wish for her to be hurt, whether physically or emotionally… he wanted her happiness. He gave a long mental sigh, forced to acknowledge how much had changed for him in recent years…

Iorveth shook his thoughts away and studied her as she made her way to the table, her face pink from being scrubbed, hair brushed up into a tight knot, glasses cleaned and perched on her nose, a shirt with green sleeves from her own world tucked into her trousers with the ripped knee, the legs tucked into her boots.

He almost thought she looked perfectly herself if not for the smile she sent him failing to reach her eyes and the slight tremble of her hand as she reached for a sausage, stuffed it into a roll and concentrated on chewing.
“Mmm this is almost like a koblasniky. The roll is a little different, not as sweet. But that isn’t surprising as American’s put sugar in everything, including bread.” She paused to pour water into a cup before drinking deeply. “How long has Geralt been gone?” She asked, setting the cup down and looking to Triss.

“He left hours before dawn.”

“I hope he’s alright.” Aevon said quietly before taking another bite.

“Geralt knows how to lurk. If anything happens, it will be because he wanted it to,” Iorveth said.

“Right.” She whispered and began to tap her finger on the table. He had the feeling something had happened while she’d been gone from the room.

“I’ll return in a moment.” He said quietly as he stood and carried his belongings toward the door. He felt her stare as he left, but he opted to ignore the look and slipped into the shadowed hallway. He found it deserted, as well as the wash room where Aevon would have been.

Moving quickly, he changed and readied himself for the events of the day, an anticipation singing through his blood. The familiar feeling of bloodlust just waiting to be released, causing his hand to twitch to rest on the hilt of his sword once he’d strapped it on.

His thoughts went back to Aevon’s behavior a moment ago… something had happened. Something had left her shaken and bothered her to the point where she hadn’t spoken about it openly. A glance around the wash room revealed nothing out of the ordinary but he didn’t have the luxury of a full investigation. He didn’t fear discovery but the success of his mission there required him staying invisible for a time.

Before someone else arrived to use the room, he slipped back into their own. Triss watched out of the window and didn’t react to his entrance back into the room. Aevon however nearly dropped the cup she was holding, her eyes staring at him just as when he’d left.

“What?” He asked, joining her back at the table.

She dropped her gaze to the cup, drew in a deep sigh and tipped it up to her lips. “Nothing! Everything is perfectly fine.” Her gaze barely grazed his before she twisted in the chair to look at the woman standing at the window. “Triss… I have some questions if you don’t mind.”

Triss turned away from the window with a small smile. “Of course.”

“How does magic work here? Is there a magical life force you draw from? Do you manipulate molecules? Is there a ‘price to be paid’? What laws of magic are there? Is everyone born with the potential to use magic?” Aevon asked, writing in her journal as she asked question after question.

“Your world doesn’t have magic?” Triss asked with raised brows.

“Oh, no.” Aevon shook her head. “We have imagined it. Some cultures have legends of magical beings but if it exists today, it’s very well hidden. There was a period when many innocent people were executed for the mere rumor of being a witch. What we call magic these days is nothing more than a great skill of illusion and manipulation of the mind of the viewer.”

“That’s terribly sad. As for your questions…” Triss paused to rummage in her pack and pull out a worn leather book and handed it over to Aevon who took it eagerly.

“The Art of Magic.” She read aloud.
“There is a great deal to magic, it takes years to begin to grasp just what it is, but this will give you an idea. As for being born with it, not much is truly understood how some are and some are not. Some believe it takes elvan blood in your ancestry.”

“Iorveth?” Aevon turned her questions on him.

“I’m not a sorcerer, nor have I studied it. You would be better suited speaking to the Sage.” He said, turning his attention to donning his armor, setting the sword he’d worn all night and morning to the side.

“How do you know if you’re capable of magic?” She stood and gave him pause by shaking out his coat and mail and holding it out for him to slip into.

“Typically, a child, such as Lasei, use it accidentally.” He said quietly, studying her as she pulled the coat closed across his chest and buckled it tightly. “They begin their tutelage immediately, as you can imagine an untrained hand, unable to control Chaos, is not a promising idea.”

“Not to mention the madness that comes along with the uncontrollable Chaos.” Triss added.

“Madness?” She adjusted the mail over his chest and reached for his leather harness.

“The kind that does not end well.”

“How sad. Why would they not seek help in learning to control this Chaos?”

Iorveth spoke then, adjusting his bracer while Aevon shook out his sash. “It’s not a popular occupation to have. Much like the witches of your Earth, anyone with the barest association to the arcane are being cut down.” He tied his sash around his waist. “In Novigrad, you would have eventually come across two such unfortunate beings, still smoldering above the bed of ash.”

“Iorveth.” Triss said with a harsh whisper.

He flicked his gaze from her to Aevon who waved off the concern, but the sound of the door opening drew everyone’s attention as Geralt entered. Upon immediate inspection, the witcher appeared to be free of injury and wore his usual emotionless mask.

“Geralt! What did you find?” Aevon asked, stepping away from Iorveth.

“Iohn has invited everyone to an audience.”

Silence rang through the room for a moment before Aevon shook her head in apparent confusion.

“Why? What happened?”

“Yes Geralt, I thought you were sleuthing for information not breaking bread and wine with the dh’oine whoreson.” Iorveth said in a deep voice and secured both of his swords around his hips.

“I did. And what I found and what Iohn has to say is of fair value in your cause…” He turned his yellow gaze to Aevon, a flicker of sympathy. “I am sorry little river.”

She took a step back, coming up against his chest and he raised his hands to hold her upper arms, keeping her steady.

“You mean… it was intentional. You’re certain.” There was a tremble to her voice.

“Yes- But-” The yellow eyes turned on Iorveth. “Before you call the squirrels to arms, you need to have this audience. Iohn is not the one at fault.” Geralt picked up a sausage and bit off half in one
Iorveth felt he had been doing very admirably, keeping his anger and hatred in check. Certainly, his patience had been pushed and stretched, but it was quickly running out and he was eager to have this done with.

“I care not if it was his fault. One city or one man, they all deserve it.”

Aevon stepped away from him, a glance over her shoulder showed just how troubled she was. “I want to hear what he has to say.” She stood beside Geralt now, facing him with a stubborn tilt to her chin.

“This time old friend, they don’t.” Geralt said quietly, watching him carefully.

Iorveth clenched his jaw. “I grow tired of compromises, old friend.”

“What about negotiations?” Aevon said, her eyes wide and hopeful. “Did you tell this Iohn that there would be an Aen Seidhe coming?” At Geralt’s nod she waved a hand in an excited motion. “Whatever has happened, it’s serious enough that he’s willing to talk. How many humans, particularly those in a position of power and influence, are actually willing to do that?”

Iorveth curled his lip and jerked his gaze to the side. He remembered the lingering words of his mothers, echoing from the land of dreams. Patience. He couldn’t kill them all. Patience. He flicked his gaze back to Aevon, watching him anxiously. She was still trying to save every life she could… and he still couldn’t fathom why.

“What would you negotiate?” Triss said with deep interest in her gaze.

A small smile briefly passed Aevon’s lips. “Safety for Adhart. An alliance. He wants to talk, I’m to assume he needs something and we need allies. And this could be an opportunity Iorveth.” She stepped back up to him, her gaze tracing his features. “I’m not standing in your way, however…” Her voice dropped to a whisper. “The path to true freedom requires alliances. And leadership willing to adapt and take chances.”

Sometimes he truly wanted to hate her.

“A false word, a false glimmer in his eye, and I put an arrow through it. I will not bother negotiating with a liar.” He said with a glare, hoping to convey just how much he despised this turn of events.

She surprised him with a mocking glare and a quick peck on his scarred cheek. “I’ll do the talking. I have the feeling your diplomacy could use a few brush-up’s.” She spun around and slipped her cloak around her shoulders as did Triss.

Geralt departed first, with Iorveth closing the door after everyone had vacated. His hands rested on the hilts of his swords, and he kept his shoulders loose. The morning had waned quite a bit, but the tavern and inn remained for the most part quiet. The few they passed took one glance and kept their distance.

Once they were walking the cobblestone road that would lead them to the castle Ryer he felt a hand settle on his forearm.

“It will be alright Iorveth.”

He snorted and dropped a brief glance at her before angling his gaze to the various shadows lining the street, watching a curtain swing back into place in one window here, a door quickly close there.
“This is a trap.”

She hummed. “The thought crossed my mind.”

“And you would stroll in with a spring to your step and a smile singing from your lips.”

She gave a delighted gasp and spun to take several backward steps, grinning up at him widely. “Iorveth! That was practically poetry!”

That dangerously fond feeling, despite his unease with strolling into an enemy hold, was returning swiftly, dragging a corner of his mouth into a smile. “I’ll deny it till my last breath.”

She scrunched her nose and twisted back to tuck her arm through his. “I won’t tell Dandelion. But I am going to write that one down. I quite liked it.”

“You shouldn’t walk with me in such a familiar way.” He said tightly, that fond feeling twisting confusingly with frustrating apprehension. “To the people here, I’m a disease, and you will be seen as one as well. That’s why we shouldn’t be wasting time with pathetic attempts of diplomacy.”

“The worst they can do is say hurtful things with hurtful looks. And of course, it will hurt. I mean look at me. I’m adorably lovely, have never been spoken to harshly in my life, and doing everything I can to keep them alive and happy.” Her hand tightened around his arm. “But we wont change minds by screaming that they are the ones diseased, nor will we by hiding…” She shook her head, looking forward determinedly. “We do this by having a solid front. I’m not afraid of you, and you don’t despise me.”

“In this moment, I absolutely do despise you.” He said dryly, his lips twitching at her outraged gasp.

“I can absolutely prove that you don’t.” She said with a challenging gleam in her eyes as she pulled him to a stop, Geralt and Triss walking on. “Stop arching your eyebrow. If you’re going to do that, you need to uncover at least one eyebrow.”

Iorveth forced his expression to turn blank. “Exactly how could you prove that I don’t despise you. If it weren’t for you, I could be displaying at least three heads of three former emperors.”

She scrunched her nose at him again. “Three? Really?” She said in a high-pitched voice.

“And my loathing for you continues to grow.”

She slipped her fingers around the leather straps on his shoulders and pulled herself up to capture his bottom lip between her teeth. In the back of his mind, it occurred to him that they stood in the middle of the street, their backs exposed and defenseless, but she did that damned beautiful moan of hers and instead of pushing her away, he wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her hips tightly against his own.

“You so don’t despise me.” She gasped against his lips a moment before he swept his tongue against hers.

“There is the trope of love-hate, is there not?” He said, not caring how husky his voice had grown, and easing his hold on her slightly when the sound of Geralt clearing his throat reached them.

“Aww you love to hate me? I’ll take it. And look at you all knowledgeable of romantic tropes. Are you a closet romantic?” She bit her lip around her smile.

That persistent feeling was welling up and settling heavy in his chest. “No. Now stop attempting to
distract me from using this spoiled little lord for target practice.”

As they began to walk again, her blasted arm rested comfortably through his, and she indeed walked with a spring to her step. “I’m actually quite eager to get there. I’ll finally step foot inside a real castle.”

Iorveth huffed a laugh. “Was that your true motive all along?”

“Well but of course! Every girl imagines of exploring idyllic castles, dinners with stuffed up lords, and twirling across the ballroom.”

“I doubt you will be invited to explore, nor twirl across the ballroom.”

“But I’ll rub elbows with a stuffed up lord. One out of three is not a total loss.”

“Ever the optimist.”

“I prefer starry eyed dreamer. Pessimist.”

“The correct term is long sufferer of fools.”

“Wow… it’s even more beautiful up close.” She whispered as they approached the gate to the castle where Triss and Geralt waited for them to arrive. “How much of this is elvan architecture?”

“None of the front. Our buildings were wide and sprawling, not towering. One of the courtyards I believe remains.”

“I hope to see it.”

“Focus Aevon.”

She took a deep breath as the guards allowed them to pass, their gazes never leaving his face, and their hands wrapped tightly around the grip of their swords.

“Right… focus…” She whispered, her hand clenched around the leather of his glove. She twisted her neck to look up at the towers once they passed through the gatehouse. Even under threat of having their heads removed without a moment’s notice, she couldn’t resist being insatiably curious.

“Lord Ryer will see you in the Great Hall.” A bald little man said from the top of the stone steps. “This way.” And he snapped his gaze from Iorveth’s ears, turned on his heel and marched through the great doors.

“It will be fine. Everything will be fine.” Aevon whispered, more than likely to herself.

“I will not let anything happen to you.” He said quietly, the need to reassure her despite she being the reason she was even in the situation to begin with. “Geralt and Triss as well.”

She didn’t reply for a moment as they followed the little man through the castle. Her blue eyes continued to take in the details of décor and the presence of guards watching them with hands resting on their swords. “Not necessarily myself that I’m worried about.” She said at last.

“I will not make the first move on them Aevon.”

She huffed a quick laugh. “Not necessarily them I worry for.” She pulled him to a stop and turned to look up at him. “I dragged you into here. If something were to happen to you…” She shoved a hand beneath her glasses to rub at one of her eyes, something he’d learned she’d done when she was
feeling particularly worried and upset. “All I’ve wanted to do since we deviated from our original quest, was to keep you safe. To keep you arrow free. And here I am placing you on a silver platter.”

There was emotion glittering in her gaze as she held it steady on his. Honest and open, he nearly felt guilty for being able to witness it. She feared for his life. No one feared for his life, not even himself, and it was an odd bit of feeling entangling with his fondness for her. Growing ever closer to not wanting her to ever leave his side.

“This way. If. You. Please.” The little man called from the end of the hall, glaring at them from around Geralt. Aevon gave him one more determined smile before they caught up to the others.

The great hall was nothing special. You’ve seen one, you’ve seen them all, in Iorveth’s opinion. However, the same couldn’t be said for Aevon for she gasped in delight, tilting her head back to view the highly arched ceiling, the chandeliers, and several murals painted in, sceneries of landscapes and richly dressed dh’oines in various regal poses. He found them pompous and over exaggerated. She found them ‘magnificent’ was the word she said breathlessly.

“Geralt! Thank you for returning so quickly. Please, introduce me to your companions.” A young man with golden hair, surprisingly practical clothing if not expensive, and a single sword strapped to his hip called out, standing from a lower table one wouldn’t typically expect a lord to sit. Across from him and moving to stand as well was another man of opposite coloring but still as practical looking.

Geralt waited until he had shaken the hands of both men before waving at each of them. “This is Triss, Wendy, and Iorveth.”

Iorveth detected no hostility in the men’s expressions as they nodded at each of them, though they did linger on Triss and in turn Aevon, longer than he would have thought good breeding allowed in their manner rule book. He did not return their greeting once Triss and Aevon said their hellos.

“This is Ouen, the captain of the guard, and we are honored to have you here.” Iohn waved a hand toward the benches. “Please make yourself comfortable, and I’ll begin.”

Iorveth remained standing, crossing his arms across his chest and moving to an easily defensible position near Aevon once she sat down beside Triss. Iohn moved to the other side to sit beside his captain and produced a scroll from the back of his sword belt.

“Allow me to begin with my sincere condolences for the events at Adhart. If… if I’d known what was happening, I would have sent aid.”

Iorveth resisted the urge to roll his eye.

Geralt, still standing at the head of the table placed both palms on the surface and nodded. “As Ryer already knows, I entered the castle and found a surprising amount of evidence linking him to the deliberate release of plague carrying rats in the settlement of Adhart. So much evidence that it became suspicious. So, I continued to search. What I found was this.” He waved a hand toward the parchment Iohn had set on the table.

“My cousin far removed but cousin no less… Has been urging me to do something about the elves that had begun the make their home in Adhart.” He paused while Aevon picked up the parchment and handed it over her shoulder to Iorveth. “The word around Aedirn is that my father lost Adhart to the elves because of Scoia’tael. It’s not so. My father once had quarrel with elves, true. But then he fell in love.”
Iorveth held the scroll, waiting to here where this utterly predictable story was going.

“As with most titled marriages, he didn’t love my mother, and nor she him. But he did fall in love with an elvan woman. She worked in the gardens as a servant. He began to change his views and began to pass that on to me. After all, she was kind and never faltered in that kindness despite the treatment she received from humans. He wanted her happiness and a safe place to call home, so he allowed her Adhart.”

Having heard enough, and able to see how Aevon nearly swooned at the golden man’s story, Iorveth read the scroll which turned out to be a letter. John’s cousin - Reimond - stated that if he didn’t do something about Adhart, then he would.

“Why does he want Adhart?” Aevon spoke up then quickly pressed her lips together, darting a nervous glance toward him.

John and Ouen looked at her and to his surprise, John seemed to understand the Elder speech she used.

“Because he does not harbor a kindness to the elder races… Adhart is a land of rich promise, and Reimond would see that it is his to use as he sees fit.”

Iorveth handed the scroll back to Aevon who quickly read over it. “Your life is being threatened is it not?” She asked, no longer hesitant to speak up.

“He’s your heir?” Triss added.

“Indeed.” John nodded sadly. “I have little doubt he intended to wipe out the elves of Adhart, with enough evidence to link me to it. No doubt Iorveth and the Scoia’tael were to see that I pay with my life, leaving Ryer, Adhart, and my other lands, to be laid at his feet.”

“He didn’t count on us investigating.” Aevon said, looking over the top of her glasses after reading the letter once more.

“Which- I’m eternally grateful for. My heart nearly burst at the sight of a witcher standing in my bedchamber demanding that we speak.” John chuckled, glancing at Geralt. “I’d known Reimond was eager for Adhart, but I never imagined he would have truly gone through with anything, much less frame me for it.” He sighed and shook his head. “I was naive.”

“You want our help.” Aevon said thoughtfully. “You want this threat removed… we’re not assassins. Why don’t you simply have him incarcerated and taken to trial?”

John tilted his head, examining her thoughtfully. “He has sympathizers that would have him free before his first prison meal. If you think I feel some familial connection to him, then you’re mistaken. He’s a rabid animal and must be stopped before he succeeds in not only taking my life, but more elves as well.” He flicked his gaze from Aevon to Iorveth. “You may not be an assassin, dear Wendy… but I have the feeling he is more than capable.”

Aevon glanced at him, a question in her eyes. He saw the hesitation, the guilt, and the sadness.

“Aevon, this man took Lasei’s mother and very nearly took her as well.” He said quietly. The other emotions remained swirling in her blue eyes but now a flame of understanding lit behind them and she nodded once before turning back to John.

“As a representative of Adhart, we have terms. I need them copied, signed, sealed and delivered to the appropriate laws.”
Iohn smiled and waved a hand toward a page standing in the distance. “When working with a witcher, one must always be prepared to negotiate. I suppose that is true for a witcher’s companions as well. I will hear you.”

“In return for eliminating the threat against your life and any heirs you should one day produce, I would like Adhart to be formally recognized as its own. It will no longer belong to Ryer, formally. Trade routes between yourself and Adhart established and protection should the need arise. Adhart would do the same if you came under attack. You will foster goodwill toward elves, teaching your people to embrace them rather than fear them, this is best achieved in honest trade, festivals, and friendly competition. It won’t be easy at first, it takes years, but you must try and keep trying.”

Iorveth nearly laughed as Aevon reached for the moon with her demands. He wasn’t pleased at having been wrong about the true culprit of the crimes against his people, but he did like seeing Aevon made happy, immersing herself in negotiations for the behalf of a people she would soon leave behind.

As Iohn, Aevon, and Triss continued to discuss possible trades, Ouen left the table and nodded Geralt to join them.

“Where is Reimond?” Geralt asked.

“Gwynbleidd, this is not a monster contract, however monstrous the man may be. I’ll handle this on my own.” Iorveth said quietly but Geralt only shook his head and rolled his eyes.

“Ouen?”

“His manor is an hour ride west from here.”

“His men?”

“Fifteen swords, ten bows.”

“Iorveth, call your best archers. Ouen how are you with that sword?”

“I would like to know why he and his men are in need of help in stopping Reimond.” Iorveth said, leveling a hard look at Ouen.

Ouen leveled a hard glare back at him, his dark eyes sweeping down Iorveth’s scarred face and a flicker of something twitched at the corner of his eye. “Reimond has more than simply swords and bows to protect him… he’s a sorcerer. He’s intelligent and ruthless. Who do you think cultivated the plague that swept your village?”

Iorveth sighed. He didn’t trust Ouen, but he didn’t doubt he spoke the truth in that moment. He hadn’t anticipated having to take down a sorcerer. “I’ll need a raven. Scoia’tael will meet us there and at midnight we sack the manor.”

Ouen held his stare for another moment before gesturing toward the pile of blank raven scroll on the table. Quickly Iorveth scratched out a missive to Dain, tied it with string and handed it over to the waiting scribe.

“I invite everyone to stay here in Castle Ryer for the duration of your stay.” Iohn spoke up, drawing their attention.

Immediately Iorveth noticed the way Aevon straightened her back and sent him a somewhat smug look.
“By tomorrow, there will be no need for us to remain. However, Aevon will need to stay behind and under your explicit protection until we return.” He said, ignoring the look on her face as she comprehended his words.

“A word Iorveth. If you please?” She said in a perfectly cheery voice. Then stood and walked to the empty end of the table.

Geralt arched a brow at him but turned to discuss the plan with Triss, leaving him to join her and prepare to argue all the reasons why she should absolutely not join them this evening. She stood with arms crossed and a hard glare in her eye.

“I’m not watching you ride off into the dark. I’m not going to sit here, darning socks and wondering if you’re dead or not.”

“Such faith in my ability.” He drawled, matching her stance and glare.

“I don’t know your ability! I don’t know theirs!”

“And how would you stop their sword?”

She huffed and ran a hand over the top of her hair. “I would at least be able to watch your back… or something.”

“And I would be too distracted by watching yours to be effective.” Iorveth sighed, dropping his angry glare and stepping close to her. The only thing that would reassure her enough to stay where it was safe was honesty… he owed it to her. “Aevon… I need you to be here where I don’t have to wonder if you’re safe or not. I have been doing just this exact thing for a long time. Geralt is stubbornly attached to me and will have my back as you say. Triss will as well.” He lifted a hand and cupped the side of her neck, running a gloved thumb across her cheek. “I will return. I need you here, writing treaties and securing Adhart’s future with Iohn, while I see that both Adhart and Ryer are safe and united.”

She closed her eyes and leaned into his touch, drawing in a ragged breath. “Fine. I’ll stay here being absolutely useless.” She muttered and drew away from his hand, opening her eyes. “I’m sorry… that wasn’t fair.” She sighed and leaned forward to rest her head against his chest. “I’m terrified. Please come back.”

That fondness… that twisting need to see her happy lashed out at him for putting that tremor in her voice. It had him raising his hands to wrap around her, one settling in the hair at the back of her head.

“…Is that the only reason?” Came her muffled reply.

It wasn’t. He recognized that, but it was the easiest reason to voice. Rather than open that chest of confusing vulnerability, he said nothing at all.

“Iorveth.” Geralt said from the doorway.

“Do not leave Iohn’s side. Adhart is in your hands in the meantime.” He had bent low to speak against her curve of her ear. At her nod against his chest he stepped back from her and stepped around to join the others at the door that would take them to the main hallway. He paused to glance back and found Aevon had walked back to Iohn’s place at the table.

He didn’t like the idea of leaving her alone with the golden man. For all he knew, this in itself was a trap. He was relying blindly on that fact that he had a violent reputation for eagerly killing titled
“I’ll have a servant deliver your belongings.” Iohn said quietly once the great hall doors had closed behind Iorveth and the others.

Wendy had flinched at the sound the doors had made, her stomach twisting nervously. She attempted to distract the worry and sense of helplessness welling up within her by nodding her thanks to Lord Ryer and reread what he had written so far regarding an alliance with Adhart.

Soon, Adhart would sell grain to Ryer, and Ryer would sell wool. There would be more goods to trade as Adhart became more stable and a more diverse population took root but there was promising room for growth. Iohn seemed excited at the prospect and had a wonderful grasp at terms and what seemed the best for both cities.

As they worked, Wendy couldn’t resist glancing at the windows, watching the sun reach the peak of the day and begin to descend. Platters of food had been delivered, as well as everyone’s belongings. Wendy didn’t have an appetite but forced herself to nibble on crackers and cheese. When she felt exhausted of idea’s and was satisfied with this fledgling alliance she sat back and offered Iohn a tired smile.

He responded with one in kind and began to press his seal into each of the copies. One for him, one for her to deliver to Solana, one to be sent to the sitting king of Aedirn’s vaults.

“I have to admit… I’m more than curious as to your role in this. You weave our language as well as theirs. Some I don’t understand at all.” He said, sitting back once the scribe had taken the treaties to be sent out or stored away safely.

She sighed and rubbed at her eyes then settled her glasses back on her nose. “It’s a long story. But needless to say, the people of Adhart are near as close to my own in my mind and heart, and I would see them safe.”

He nodded his understanding then studied her contemplatively. “I couldn’t help but notice… you seem close with the one called Iorveth. I’ve heard of him and his blatant hatred toward humans. And yet…”

Wendy felt her face heat up, a blush no doubt turning her red and she dropped her gaze to her hands. “The circumstances involving our alliance is… complicated. It basically boils down to… You know-“ She lifted her eyes suddenly really confused. “I don’t know how it happened. His trust isn’t easily won but I supposed my honesty and the work I put into helping Adhart recover must have meant more than flowery promises. He believes in action and I showed him I was someone he could trust with those actions.”

“I suppose your underlying message is that if I want to be successful with Adhart and your Iorveth, I should be honest and follow through.”

“One hundred percent. More if you have it in you. I only know a fraction of what he and all the Aen Seidhe have been through at the hands of humans. As much as I wished it were different, I’m appalled on their behavior. I wanted so much for humans to have not had anything to do with the terrible things that happened in Adhart… and I was wrong.” Wendy shook her head sadly. “Innocent people dying because of one man’s greed.”

“You’re an idealist though… are you not?”
Wendy smiled, her gaze drawn back to the window. “I am an adamant supporter of world peace. Of talking and working together. Too many people here… people like Reimond and yes even Iorveth are too willing to ignore the power in words.”

Iohn smiled, his blue eyes twinkling back at her as he held a quill up above his head. “People like you and I however will show them all.”

Wendy, a feeling of relief over taking her, scrunched her nose and laughed. “Indeed, we shall!” Her smiled dimmed as the shadows had begun to lengthen. Soon Iorveth and the others would be following up on their end of the agreement. “I’m sorry about your cousin.”

Iohn grew somber as well and nodded once. “Thank you. We were not great friends and I shall not miss him but…”

“He was family.”

“Exactly. We could have been great together. He has the sort of brilliance that draws people rather than sends them running but rather than use it to help others, he only sought his own gain.”

“You have a wonderful opportunity Iohn… I’m sorry it takes the death of your cousin and his men to see it come through.”

“In truth, I had long harbored a wish to strengthen Ryer’s bond with Adhart. As I said before, I have no quarrel with elves and aught to have attempted to make that more well known long ago.” He sighed and drank deeply from his tankard. “It took Reimond snapping and murdering several innocent people, framing me with my head as the price, to actually push me forward and out of what was comfortable.”

“I wouldn’t disagree just to save you any uncomfortable feelings. Instead I’ll mention that it was a harsh lesson, one that all leaders learn eventually, and leave it at that.”

He mulled over her words with a slow nod then sat up with a snap of his fingers. “I agree. Now… How about a tour of the grounds? It will just be the two of us for dinner, but we’ve time before then.”

Part of Wendy wanted to sit exactly where she was until the moment Iorveth returned, hopefully arrow free. To stubbornly stare at the window as if that would help matters at all. But the other part of her that knew he was going to throw himself into danger regardless of what she did an hour away, he would still arrive back at the same time. And truthfully, she desperately wanted to explore Ryer.

“I would love a tour. What I have seen of Ryer in so far has been absolutely beautiful.” She managed to say calmly, keeping her eagerness in check. She stood when he did and offered his arm out to her.

“Thank you. Ryer has been in my family for several generations. A gift from a great great something grandfather to his daughter and her husband upon their marriage. The title however was created when that husband saved the kings life in some such battle or another.”

He led her through halls lined with portraits, up and down staircases to towers with views of the land around them. She told him of raising sheep with her grandfather and how well cared for his flocks seemed. Eventually he led her out to the sprawling garden which she fell in love with immediately.

“You’ll have to pardon me Lord Ryer, I’m terribly romantic and this garden is just about as romantic as it gets.” She took in the vine covered statues and fountains. The gently swaying trees with leaves turning amber.
“No need for titles amongst allies. I’m Iohn and it pleases me that you are fond of the garden. I expect you’ll be here quite often when you visit from Adhart.”

Wendy froze in middle of reaching to touch a leaf of a low hanging branch before turning her gaze back to Iohn. “I’m sorry Iohn… Once the business with Reimond is complete, I’m returning to my home.”

He gave her a curious smile. “I thought you lived in Adhart.”

“I’m merely a passerby, a long way from my home but I’m on my way there. Adhart needed my help so I put aside my own journey to do so. Now that it’s almost complete… I’ll continue on my way.” Wendy felt tears just beneath the surface as the sudden realization caused her a lash of pain.

Iohn nodded his understanding. “Part of the incredibly complicated story you mentioned.”

“Yes.” She said with a wobbly smile.

“The invitation still stands, if you ever find yourself on this side of the Blues.”

Wendy nodded her thanks, secretly wishing he’d never brought it up, for she’d done an incredible job in pushing her departure to the back of her mind. She went back to exploring the garden, taking in the unfamiliar plants and wishing she’d brought her journal.

“In the spring, this place really becomes something. And I agree about it being romantic. After all this is where my father fell in love after having given up on such a thing.”

“Does she still work here?”

“No. She, along with all the elvan servants left for Adhart. I do much of the tending out here now, a man from the castle town comes to help when the seasons change.”

“Well you’re doing lovely- what is that?” Wendy gasped as a stone and glass building came into view. A rectangular building with a small tower only about three stories tall on one corner was partially hidden behind a vine and stone wall. Not waiting for an answer, she slipped beneath the arched doorway, brushing low hanging vines from her hair.

It was old. Incredibly old and beautiful and she knew without being told, this was the original Ryer, or what was left of it.

“A guest house of sorts. Though no one has stayed here since before my mother died. One of her friends was fond of staying here.”

“Can I stay here?” She blurted, stepping close to run the tips of her fingers down the aged stone wall.

“Well I suppose so. I will have someone stationed here to see to your safety.”

Wendy opened the wooden door and stepped into the shadowed interior. Sunlight filtered through the many windows, illuminating the various settees and tables. There were bookcases and a platter of mismatched teapots and cups. A surprising lack of dust and cobweb told her that Iohn still saw to its care.

“Sleeping quarters are up the stairs to the tower. There are also stairs that lead down to a washroom. For as long as you’re here, it shall be your home from home. And if you ever visit in the future.” Wendy smiled at him. “That’s incredibly kind of you Iohn. Thank you.”
“Think nothing of it. Come, dinner will be ready. No need to clean up or such formalities.”

Wendy liked Iohn. He was nothing that she had expected, in fact all Ryer had been like that. It nearly made her cry at how terrified the people of Adhart were of Ryer and Iohn. And if someone had just stepped forward to talk, perhaps they wouldn’t be so afraid.

She was further saddened that she wouldn’t see their relationship grow, would never know if Lasei grew to make a friend with another little girl, one who was human and spent time feeding little lambs. But that was what good people were supposed to do. Plant something beautiful even if you knew you would never see it to grow into maturity.

All she could do was trust that what she left behind, would stay strong. That Iohn could be a strong voice and ally and that Adhart would learn to accept him and become stronger for it. So, she spent the days waning hours eating what her nervous stomach would allow, smiling as Iohn spoke fondly of his home and his dreams for increasing his contributions to the world. They shared stories of raising sheep and bragging about the number of lambs they’d had born in a year.

When her yawns began to come more often he waved a servant to deliver her belongings to the guest house, despite her protests that she could carry them herself. Iorveth’s were taken as well when Iohn asked, a hint of embarrassment staining his cheeks. Triss and Geralt’s were taken to a room somewhere within the castle.

“I rise early, so do not hesitate to join me here in the morning. I assume our companions will have returned by then and we will wish to know how everything went. Until the morning Lady Wendy.” Iohn said and bowed over her hand.

“Sleep well Lord Iohn.” She said quietly then turned away and followed the servant back through the garden and to the guest house. After whispering her thanks to the young woman, she stood silently in the main room. Alone for the first time since her near panic attack in the washroom.

A moment she had been pushing back against with all her might. She hadn’t had many moments alone in recent days and when she did, she found herself faced with thoughts and feelings she wished she could just ignore.

Wendy sighed and dragged the packs up the darkened stairs and into the top of the tower, finding a well blanketed bed, dresser and a window covered in vines. She sat on the window seat and moved the vines out of the way to a view of the garden, a sea of stars looking down from above and a crisp breeze making the leaves dance.

The morning had been shattering for her. In more ways than one. From the impulsive yet oh so worth it hands play with Iorveth, to the ugly voice mocking her in her head that she was going to break when she got back to Earth. She’d fallen in love. Not just with a man of this land… But the land itself. This man and this world were both broken and hurting, but she’d fallen in love with them. She felt as if her happiness was directly tied to the success of Adhart and Ryer, of its two people uniting against the rest. Of Iorveth finding a piece of the life he’d once thought he’d have.

She should have hated it here; its cruelty had twisted the Iorveth’s life and so many others. Its magical portal had torn her away from the only family she had left and threw her into its chaos. But she loved it all the same and she could at last say without hesitation but with a great deal of sadness that she would stay if she didn’t have Pop waiting for her.

Wendy sighed and rested her head back against the cold stone wall of the window. No doubt Iorveth was raining hell on Reimond for his crimes. Not so long ago, she would have demanded a trial. That he should pay for what he’s done, but with law and order not bloodthirsty vengeance. How quickly
this world shaped her as it had done to Iorveth. She’d not only put up very little argument, she felt relieved that Lasei’s mother would have the ultimate justice when her murder was killed.

A yawn overtook her, but she stubbornly held on. She wanted to be awake when Iorveth and the others returned. By the light of stars and the moon, she flipped through the book on magic Triss had given her. Learning about Chaos and the powers granted to those able to sense it. Before long, she fell asleep with the book forgotten in her lap, her head cradled in the crook of her arm on the windowsill. Her glasses sticking out in an angle.

She dreamed a familiar dream. Of raining fire, and the burn of rope around her neck. Only this time there was the scent of blood mixed with rusty metal. Cheering crowds and Iorveth shouting the name he’d given her.

She came awake with a startled jump and a gasp. Her sleepy hazed eyes sweeping around the dimly lit room. After rubbing the sleep from her eyes, she found the sun just beginning to rise and before she could form another thought she was off the window seat and sprinting for the stairs.

Her heartbeat had only increased since waking rather than slowing and as she grew closer to the Great Hall, adrenalin raced through her blood. She burst through the small entryway and skid to a stop. Just as he’d promised, Iohn was there.

But he was alone.

He met her panicked gaze from across the distance and answered her unspoken question with a single shake of his head.
How long does it take to travel one hour, fight through twenty men and a sorcerer, and ride back one hour? I mean the shortest battle where I’m from was little more than half an hour! Of course… the longest was ten months, but that’s not the point!” Wendy whirled from her pacing to stare at Iohn who sat watching her with a hint of amusement. “Are you sure no one has sent word? Anything?”

“I wouldn’t hesitate to tell you, good or bad.” He replied sounding mildly offended.

Wendy closed her eyes and drew in a deep breath. “I know… I’m just panicking. I honestly thought this would be done with by now. And I’m wishing I wasn’t so useless. If I had some sort of skill, I could have gone with them. Even if it was just as a healer! But I know rudimentary first aid at best. CPR. How to place a tourniquet.” She sat down on the nearest bench with a huff. “Fuck.”

When Iohn cleared his throat, Wendy winced. “Sorry… I don’t usually curse… only in certain situations and unfortunately this seems to be one of those situations.”

“I understand. You care deeply, and are used to being there for your friends… To pass the time would you like me to teach you a few things with a sword?”

Wendy’s eyes widened and she found herself nodding eagerly. “I’d never thought I’d need to, that I would be home long before it came to it but… yes, please, anything to take my mind off this awful waiting.”

“This way then.” John stood and led the way to the armory. “I don’t like to fight and fortunately have never had to take up arms against someone, but I was trained from a young man in swordsmanship and continue to practice often. Here, let’s see how you do with a short sword.”

Wendy accepted the sabre with her right hand. It felt light and gave her very little resistance when she raised it up to give it a better look over.

“Feel alright?” At her nod, he waved her to stand straight then unsheathed his own sword and stood at her side. “When you bend your lunging knee, keep it straight or out. Never tuck it inward as that will affect your balance.”

She watched as he bent his knee as so and nodded for her to follow his lead. Iohn went on to describe the importance of loose elbows yet firm wrists. Blocking, retreating, advancing. The importance of footwork and reading the opponent. She’d read most of what he said in his instruction, had even watched a few YouTube videos but it was completely different holding the steel and learning to wield it.
He instructed her through several lunges and when she grew tired, not having ever done weight training and her only bit of fitness being a series of erratic jog sessions, she sat out watching as he continued the practice. He was quite good if she gave her untrained opinion. And not to mention he cut a striking figure that no doubt would turn more than a few heads.

Golden hair that curled and flopped, sparkling eyes and an easy smile… and he was easy to like. If she had been staying, she would very much have liked to have played the matchmaker and found him a lovely mate that was just as kind and passionate about helping as he was.

He finished his practice with a spinning slash that had her clapping. “Very well done! Someday, I hope to be just as fancy footed as you!” She spoke without realizing she’d spoken as if she were going to continue sword training once she returned home.

“If you take up the sword often enough, your endurance will lengthen. If your stay were longer I’d look forward to sparring with you.”

Wendy’s smile dimmed but she held her sabre out for him to put away.

Instead of taking it he shook his head and brushed his slightly damp hair from his eyes. “It’s yours. How are you to practice if you have no weapon?”

Wendy’s eyes widened and she looked from him to the sword. “That’s much too kind!”

“Nonsense! As you can see, I have plenty.” He swept a hand toward his wall of swords and short axes. “Here, you’ll need the sheath and I have a sword belt from when I was a boy that should fit you. Why don’t we separate for now to clean up? Meet me in the Great Hall for lunch. Do you play Gwent?”

Wendy accepted the sabre sheath, already in love with the dark leather with steel accents. “I’ve only ever seen it played and given a rough idea of the rules.”

“If you have a deck, bring it with you and we can waste a bit more time. I also want to discuss with you your ideas on something.” He said over his shoulder, leading her away from the armory and training room.

“Ideas for what?” She asked, her curiosity piqued.

“Later. I need to wash this sweat from my eyes, if I ever hope to be able to see properly again.”

Wendy smiled, “I wouldn’t know anything about that.”

His eyes widened when he looked over her. “Oh! Lady Wendy! I hope I didn’t offend.”

“Not at all, it’s actually something Iorveth would have said in a sarcastic jest…” And just like that her smile was gone and her worry rushed back all at once. Only this time game guilt that while he was out there possibly hurt or worse, she was here wasting time with swords and about to dig out his deck of Gwent cards.

“Now we can’t have that. He will be alright… his sort don’t just fall in a small insignificant battle.”

Wendy mustered up a short smile and nod and turned away to make her journey to her little guest house. That is exactly how his sort go. Warriors rarely get taken by old age or sickness… no they go with a sword in their hand, a battle cry in their lungs, and blood.

Her dream flashed back to her as she stepped up to the door of the guest house, prompting her to
look over her shoulder at Castle Ryre, finding its similarities to the burning castle in her dreams. It filled her with a deep sense of dread, and without truly understanding why, a tear slipped down a cheek.

Dragging in a breath she turned away and determinedly strode through the door. She didn’t have much to change into, her culture appropriate shirt soiled, blushingly so. Her Garfield shirt wouldn’t do with her present company, but she had another long sleeve in navy blue, hopefully no one would notice the odd design of buttons and chest pockets. The stretchy tights she had been avoiding since her arrival were her best option and truthfully, no more revealing or out of place than what Triss wore.

Wendy opted to drag her soiled clothing back to the castle and see about borrowing a washtub and after changing she decided she would do the same for Iorveth’s clothing. It felt… not invasive like she thought it would to go through his pack, but intimate. She dragged out his dirty clothes, her inner modern woman rolling her eyes, but the part of her that was beyond worried and in need of distraction told her to hush. She wasn’t turning into what the movies tried to sell as a post-world war two wife but doing something because she cared to.

She blinked in surprise at the flute, or more accurately a recorder nestled deep in the bag. It brought a smile to her lips at the increasing evidence of his closet romantic self. If- when he made it back, she wondered if there would be a way to nudge him into playing something for her. The thought gave her a wicked grin and pushed back some of her worry.

At last she found his deck of Gwent cards wrapped in a square of leather and tied with string. After tucking them in the front pocket of her shirt, stuffing her feet into her boots, and wadding all the soiled clothing into her arms she made her way back to the castle and the great hall.

“Err Iohn, before we begin, is there a washtub I could borrow? I have a few items that need to soak before scrubbing.”

Iohn looked up from his cards, freshly washed, brushed, and dressed. “Absolutely. In fact, Ira can have them cleaned, dry, and pressed before dinner.” He waved a hand to a servant wiping down a chandelier near the entrance.

“Oh no! I can take care of these!”

“Wendy, as my guest please allow me to see to your comfort. I pay Ira well and she does good work.”

“Please miss, I do not mind.” Ira said quietly with a pleasant smile.

Wendy bit her lip, still hesitating.

“Wendy, I would hate to take your clothing hostage… I promise Ira will take good care of them.” Iohn said admonishingly.

She sighed and gave in, handing the clothing over to the waiting woman. “Thank you, Ira, I truly hope I’m not putting you out.”

“I assure you, this is perfectly fine.” She dropped her voice and leaned closer. “Please keep Lord Ryre company, he receives so little now that his parents are gone, and his childhood friends have married.”

Wendy gave Ira a small smile and left her to her new duty. “I found Iorveth’s deck of cards. I can’t promise I’ll be a challenging adversary but it will keep our hands busy while we discuss whatever it
is you wished.” She slipped into the bench across from him and slipped the cards from her pocket.

“Interesting fashion where you come from…” He said eyeing her rolled sleeves.

“Yes.” She kept her eyes down and popped her lips on the p.

“Here is the sword belt, go on and try it out.”

Wendy stood and slipped the dark leather belt through the loop on the sabre sheath and strapped it around her hips. “I have to admit, I feel really awesome right now. Like a damn bad ass, pardon my language but this is one of those situations…” Wendy went on as a rush of excitement warmed her blood. “It feels… familiar and comfortable.” She with a surprised voice.

“Perhaps you were an accomplished swordswoman in a past life… I was hoping to hear your thoughts on a celebration. A kickstart to the alliance of Ryre and Adhart, upon the successful return of our companions that is.”

Wendy now sitting once more paused in organizing the cards and sent him a look with raised brows. “That is actually an excellent idea. I would endeavor to keep it small. I doubt few would come anyways but so long as your people remain as nonthreatening as possible and plenty of Scoia’tael are invited, it should be a success.”

“Right. Start small. What of entertainment?”

Wendy placed her first card after reading its effect. “Biting frost… lovely. During my time at Adhart, there wasn’t much enthusiasm for entertainment thought they did enjoy listening to my stories. I imagine a bit of music would go a long way to keeping everyone relaxed.”

“Would you be willing to tell stories? What sort do you know?” Iohn laid down his turn, a Brigade which Wendy picked up briefly to read its effects.

“I would love to and I know countless of them. I have a pretty good knack for remembering things, especially if it’s something interesting and enjoyable. What about your people? What do you enjoy?” She studied her cards, not exactly sure on what she should play next.

“We at Ryre never miss the chance to dance. Do you dance?”

Wendy looked over the top of her glasses and snorted a laugh. “I have seen countless displays of ballroom dancing but never engaged in it myself.”

“Perhaps you will save me a dance, after Iorveth has his of course. Do you have any ranged?”

“Oh yes.” Wendy slipped out a bomber card and placed it in the correct row. Her gaze turned contemplative. “I wonder if Iorveth dances.”

“Once he sees you in a lovely dress, how could he not?”

Wendy blinked at Iohn in surprise. “I’m afraid what I have on is about as lovely as it gets. I have three sets of clothing to my name at the moment.”

“Then I suppose it was a good thing my mother was of slight stature. Her clothing may be a few seasons out of date, but she had wonderful taste and I had yet to find a suitable home for them.”

“Iohn, I can’t keep accepting all this kindness.”

“I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable… and its simply on loan. And you will be doing me a
great service in making this a success…”

She felt a bit guilty for snapping at him but agreed with a nod. “If they make it back…” The game was forgotten as she glanced out the window. It was well past a full day since Iorveth and the others had departed and she was beginning to feel sick.

“How about something to eat, you haven’t had anything since last night.”

“I doubt I could keep it down… how long should we wait before sending someone after them?”

“Tomorrow. If by morning they have yet to appear, I will send a scout. Wendy, you’re not alone for I worry as well. I have someone I care for out there.”

Wendy gave him an unsteady smile, admiring his strength in offering her so much comfort and distraction while he himself was worried. “How about we discuss catering ideas while we attempt to eat?”

“Spot on idea. Then afterwards I’ll show you to my mother’s room. Triss would more than likely fit into one as well.”

“I have to admit, I’m pretty excited at the thought of dressing up… nothing too lavish though. I wouldn’t wish to stand out. I’m here as a representative of Adhart and if I’m dressed as some grand lady, I will seem like I’m power hungry and that will only alienate them.”

“Very wise and I shall adopt the same. I don’t wish to lord over them with extravagance.”

“My lord.”

Wendy looked over to the man who had led them into the castle the day before, watching as he dipped his head respectfully.

“Yes Alan?”

“Riders approach… from the west.”

Wendy felt her heart leap and after a shared glance with Iohn, they both made for the castle gate. “How many?” She called over her shoulder, the unfamiliar weight of her sabre hitting low against her thigh.

“More than what left.” Came Alan’s reply.

“Are they Reimond’s?”

“Unknown at this distance. Sir I would offer caution in case they’re hostile.”

Iohn and Wendy both ignored Alan as they raced up the stairs leading to the top of the gatehouse, bracing their hands on the stone wall and watching the riders approach. She easily picked out Geralts’s silver hair and double swords riding near the front.

“It’s them.” She breathed but relief was still withheld as she continued to search for a familiar set of shoulders with a great black horse.

“I see Ouen.” Iohn said, relief in his voice.

“I’m glad he’s alright- Iorveth…” She felt lightheaded as she found him at last cresting the hill. Xalvador must have been injured for he was some distance back but they were alive, Triss included.
as her bright hair stood out.

They closer they came, the more she recognized as Scoia’tael. Once they were on the road that would lead them into the gate yard, she and Iohn quickly made their way down the stairs to meet the party.

“Triss… I’m so relieved.” She said to the other woman and gave her a quick embrace before holding her back and looking for injuries. “Are you alright? Geralt?”

“We’re both fine. Iorveth too though his horse took a sword to the leg.” Triss said, brushing a loose chunk of hair from her face.

“Poor Xalvador…” Wendy anxiously looked down through the gate.

“No greeting for your wingman?” The familiar voice of Dain called out to her.

“Dain!” Wendy called back and made her way through the three additional warriors dismounting to the burly elvan man, pulling him into a quick hug.

He leaned close, a wide grin engulfing his face. “How goes the chase?”

Wendy had to bite her lip to keep from laughing and gave a quick glance around before making an obvious hand gesture which resulted in Dain tossing his head back with a hearty laugh.

“I thought he might have had a bit of a sparkle in that damned eye of his.” Dain whispered with a conspiratory wink.

She stepped back to glance over him for injury. “How long will you be here?”

“Only long enough to water the horses. With Reimond gone, there’s no longer need for us to remain and we must return to our original stations. There were more but the rest went on to Adhart, pushing their mounts.”

Wendy snapped her attention to the gate when the sound of slow uneven clops reached her. She thought her heart might burst in that moment, as Iorveth stepped into sight, leading a heavily limping Xalvador.

All in a heartbeat she had scanned his appearance, finding him dirty and disheveled. His wellbeing appeared nearly injury free but for a gash upon the side of his neck, the blood now dry. His expression alert and steady as always. And in the next heartbeat she had caught his gaze, that little smile of his appeared and she was lost.

She covered the distance quickly and wrapped her arms around his waist, holding him to her. Her glasses were knocked askew but she hardly cared when his arms wrapped around her in return. She’d thought she was going to lose him, just as she had her parents.

“It’s over?” She asked quietly.

“It’s over.”

Wendy reluctantly stepped back to look up at him, her eyes locked onto the wound on his neck and she felt physical pain at the angry redness. “We need to see to that.”

“Somehow I thought you might want to mess with it.” He straightened her glasses.

She rolled her eyes and looked to Xalvador next, examining the deep slash to his front leg. “Oh my
poor sweetie, what have they done to you?” The horses eyes rolled and his nostrils flared in obvious pain. “John, do you have someone that can see to Iorveth’s horse?” She spoke out over her shoulder. John looked from Ouen and Triss to nod at her before waving forward the nearest guard.

As Xalvador was led away, Wendy slipped her hand into Iorveth’s and lightly pulled him to the entrance of the castle.

“Hold lass, I’d better say goodbye here. We mustn’t tarry.” Dain said as he intercepted them.

Wendy blinked. “Of course Daine. Before you go… who was the hero this time around?”

Dain chuckled, his gaze sliding over to Iorveth and then back to her. “He didn’t get that neck wound for nothing. Be well lass.”

“You do the same Daine.”

He nodded and waved for the warriors to mount up. They quickly disappeared out of the gate yard, leaving Wendy to pull Iorveth inside, followed by the others. John called for medicinal supplies and offered to have a healer tend to Iorveth’s wound. The offer was quickly denied.

When they were seated back in the great hall, Wendy quickly packing Iorveth’s cards back into the leather wrapping and shrugging at his arched look without the arched brow. “Had to do something while you were away.”

“And the sword?”

Wendy smiled fondly at the weapon resting against her thigh. “A gift. With practice I might be able to hold my own someday.”

He didn’t reply but tilted his head to the side when she dabbed a wet cloth at the dry blood.

“An inch lower, and you would have messed up this pretty tattoo of yours.”

“Mmm it is pretty isn’t it… what a relief that I nearly lost my ear instead.” He said dryly.

Wendy grinned as she continued to clean the gash. “Which is just as pretty. Let me guess what happened… Dain saw the arrow aimed at you and pulled you back just in time, leaving you with just a nick instead of mortal wound.”

“Incorrect.”

Geralt spoke up from seeing to his own wound near his knee. “He fell. Through a hole in the floor.”

“We both fell.” Iorveth said.

Wendy scrunched her nose at him. “I’m relieved that you both managed to survive the fall… were there any losses?”

Iorveth straightened his head when she sat back, the wound clean and no longer bleeding. “One Scoia’tael.”

Wendy knew he wouldn’t want an apology, they were warriors, soldiers, who knew what they were doing when they joined the ranks. Instead she nodded and rubbed his knee.

“And Reimond? How- how did that end?”
Triss leaned forward with eyes shining with sympathy. “He was powerful. He had managed to barricade himself using a powerful shielding spell. But that was nothing to my hailstorm, Geralt’s steel, and Iorveth’s killing arrow.”

“The Manor was a loss though. Burned.” Geralt added.

Wendy sighed. Strangely at a loss now that it was over. She hadn’t wanted it to come to this, but it had, and despite her fears, Iorveth and the others returned. But that left another matter… “How long until Xalvador will be able to travel?” She looked to Iorveth who watched her steadily.

“Tomorrow evening, Dain will send a scout with two horses so that we can continue on from here. Xalvador will be taken to Adhart for his recovery. Perhaps once Ciri is found, I’ll return for him.”

Wendy sighed with an understanding nod. “Iohn if you want that celebration, it needs to happen tomorrow.”

Her new friend nodded eagerly. “I’ll see to the arrangements and send out the invitations to those you suggested. I leave you all to clean up, fill your bellies, and relax. Ira should have your fresh clothing back to you.” As he moved to speak with Alan and a scribe, Wendy pulled Iorveth to his feet.

“Wait until you see where we’re staying.” She whispered up to him, watching as Geralt and Triss were led to the stairs that would see them to their room.

“As long as there’s a bed far away from Geralt, I don’t care.” He replied.

Wendy chuckled to herself, leading him toward the garden. “You know what… I had full access to my first bed since Novigrad… and I didn’t sleep in it last night.”

Iorveth took in the greens and ambers as the stepped into the waning evening. “Why not?”

“I fell sleep by the window, reading.” She grew solemn as again she thought of her dreams. “I’m beginning to have a recurring dream.” She pulled him to a stop before the stone courtyard wall and nodded toward Ryre. “I dream of Ryre burning. Of rope burns and blood.” A shiver raced down her spine.

“You should speak with Triss about them. There’s power in dreams and she might have insight.”

“It’s just a silly dream… probably brought on by stress. Come on, let’s get you to the wash room and a nap before dinner.”

“I don’t need a nap.” He argued drily but less than an hour later Wendy looked up from the book she was reading to the sound of the barest of snores and a fond smile spread across her lips. He was freshly washed and sprawled out in his clean shirt and breeches. His hair, when scrubbed and yet to be pressed flat by his patch hat, had a bit of wave and flopped across his forehead.

His dark lashes were long and gave him a vulnerable look that would never be seen were he awake. Which she would need to do soon. He’d yet to eat and the sun was already nearly gone. When he shifted on the bed, rubbing his cheek on the pillow Wendy thought her heart was going to stop and she decided to award his unexpected adorableness by allowing him to sleep a bit longer. She was so… glad, happy, delighted and every synonym out there, that he was back.

But most of all she felt content. That restless worry had been laid to rest now that she could hear him breathing. See his aristocratic nose and lips relaxed and for the moment he didn’t have to be strong or commanding. He slept peacefully and that was all she wanted for him.
She read another chapter in the book of magic, this one focused on oneiromancy but it offered little information in how to interpret her recurring dream. With a sigh she snapped the book closed and moved from the window seat to the wake the softly snoring Iorveth.

“Hoveth, my love, time to wake up.”

Unlike herself, he woke easily, his eye opening to study her as she leaned over him. Unable to resist, she reached forward and ran her fingers of his soft hair, brushing it from his brow. Next, she ran a fingertip over the eyebrow of his scarred eye, drew a knuckle down the line of his jaw before rubbing her thumb across his scarred cheekbone.

“Are you certain you should be looking at me like that Aevon?”

“How am I looking at you?” She whispered, her voice borderline husky as she felt the need to tell him how beautiful he was.

Rather than answer he raised himself to lean back on one elbow and raised his other hand to cup the back of her head. He didn’t have to nudge her hard for she went quite eagerly, leaning down to press her lips against his, her eyes closed for a brief moment before she pulled back a fraction. “This is why you’re not allowed to ride off to battles. It’s been far too long since I’ve had my rights.” She whispered against his lips.

He sighed against hers before capturing them in another brief kiss. That sigh twisted her up inside nearly as bad as his raw, needy groans.

“How irresponsible of me.” He said, pulling back and laying on the bed, resting his head in his hands. The setting sunlight filtering through the swaying vines over the window turned his green gaze to an impossible glow. His lips had yet to turn firm with irritation and instead were slightly rosy and swollen, a hint of a smile curling the corner.

There was so much she wanted to say in that moment. But that ugly voice in the back of her mind shouted for her to hold them back. She was just a couple of days before leaving and she was wrecked enough as it was. Saying anything wouldn’t make things easier for her, it would only make them worse… so painfully she swallowed the words away and pushed herself to her feet.

Forcing a smile that she hoped didn’t tremble as much as her hands were she nodded toward the door. “Come along lazy bones. I haven’t had a proper meal since we arrived in Ryre. And it’s your fault.”

He rolled to sitting on the side of bed and reached to where patch hat laid on the window seat next to her book. “How is this my fault?” He asked and followed her from the room.

“How isn’t it? It’s certainly not my fault that I could hardly eat, not knowing if you were alright or not.”

He surprised her by being the one to slip his hand into hers, and her heart nearly jumped from her chest. She forced her mile-wide grin into a content and serene smile but couldn’t resist giving their hands a little swing.

“Would it make you feel better to know that I couldn’t eat either?”

Wendy snorted lightly at his sarcasm and walked into the great hall. “I imagine it was difficult to snack on steak and potatoes while you had your hands full of swords.”

“I’ve managed before.”
“He’s telling the truth.” Geralt said as he and Triss joined them.

“He did not eat in the middle of a fight… did he?” Wendy looked from each face as they nodded, Iorveth shrugging.

“It was taking too long.” He paused and jabbed a thumb toward Geralt. “Correction- he was taking too long.”

“I was distracted by the sight of you with a grilled chicken leg in one hand and a sword in the other.”

The sound of Wendy’s and Triss’s laughter rang through the great hall.

“I still managed to fell more than you.” Iorveth continued the banter while the four of them settled near Iohn.

“Those three with the arrow do not count! I nearly had them and you interrupted.”

Iorveth leaned forward with a mockingly serious expression. “One arrow Gwynbleidd. One. Arrow.”

Wendy’s smile turned soft as she watched him go back and forth with Geralt. She’d never seen him like this… he was just this side of almost possibly happy and her heart twisted in her chest. She wanted him like this forever… not focused on the next battle, his next target, or everything broken in his world.

She missed what Geralt said next and desperately wished she did, for whatever he’d said caused a genuine smile and short laugh to escape from Iorveth, but she watched it happen. Knowing she must look the perfect image of a heart eyed school girl watching the boy she just knew was the love of her life do something amazing, she rested her chin against her hand and simply let her self-fall in deeper.

She wondered if Triss was a mind reader for the other woman elbowed Wendy in the arm and mouthed the words ‘tell him.’ Wendy did want to tell him… had to tell him something at least. She sent Triss a tremulous smile and once the others were distracted with the arrival of food she leant forward. A hand on his shoulder to hold her steady, she pressed her lips against his ear.

“You’re beautiful. When you laugh I nearly swoon.” She whispered then retreated back to her seat and sent him a lopsided grin. She’d meant it all those days ago when she said she believed in complimenting others and despite his otherworldly confidence she saw the hesitancy in his gaze while she studied him.

He took his time in taking a bite of food, chewing slowly and swallowing before leaning over to her side, brushing the tip of his nose across her cheek, sending a shiver down her spine. “I’m nothing compared to you… and as soon as we’re done here, I’ll show you.”

Wendy managed to bite her lip against her gasp and met his hooded gaze with her wide eyes. The moment her mind began to function, a spark of wickedness lit within her. There was no way she was going to pass up the opportunity to have a bit of secret fun in polite company. He was not going to out flirt her, not when she had been studying it for years.

She straightened her back and dragged her gaze to her plate and began to eat while pretending interest in whatever Iohn was saying to Triss. She took a bite, then another. Then slowly her free hand slid from where she had been holding tight to her knee under the table and settled it low on Iorveth’s thigh. If not for the slightest tightening of the muscle there, she wouldn’t have had a reaction at all… which was perfectly how she wanted it for the moment.
After another bite, and interested hum to Iohn, she pressed a nail into the thin fabric of his breeches and grazed a line up the inside until she was dangerously high and cupped her hand along the curve of his thigh.

She nearly choked on her seasoned carrots when instead of a rounded thigh, she felt a very distinct hardness straining against the fabric. She drew in a deep breath to keep herself from glancing downward and instead, ready for a reaction from him she ran her palm along the length.

What were the chances that this would be the leg he shoved his cock down when he dressed… Wendy puffed out her cheeks with wide unfocused eyes… not certain why she went with cock when referring to his eh hem -you-know-what- of everything she could have called it in her mind, she had the feeling that was the word he would use. He certainly wouldn’t use something stuffed up like ‘man-hood’.

“You’re thinking too hard… and I’m waiting.” He whispered in her ear, causing her hand to clench around him. His answering hiss along her neck was erotic to the point it should be illegal, and just the sort of reaction she’d hoped for.

This was quickly becoming one of those cursing moments, what with her own arousal, the unexpectedly early arrival of his and that absolutely hot way he just demanded more. Well she could make demands as well. After one last draw of her nail from head to as close to base as she could get, she removed her hand to reach her goblet for a drink of what seemed to be decent wine.

She cut her eyes to find a light glare being sent her way and couldn’t help the little smirk that came to her lips. Another bite, a light chuckle at Geralt’s rolling eyes at a joke from Triss at his expense. A slow look through her lashes and she mouthed the words ‘I’m waiting.’

He set his fork down and turned to look at her fully, his expression interested and yet at the same time conveying that he was pretty certain he had indicated that he had been enjoying that and wanted more. Wendy merely shrugged and speared a tomato from her salad and deliberately popped it into her mouth, trying not to smile when he rolled his eye and turned back to his plate.

Enough time passed that she began to grow disappointed at his lack of follow through. Nearly everyone had finished their food were now simply sipping wine and passing the time with genial conversation. Wendy had just begun to feel her shoulders slump when she felt his hand finally take its turn settling high on her thigh. That’s when it occurred to her that he couldn’t exactly stay subtle with eating and feeling her up with the same hand. This was quickly followed by her shooting him a wink and pressing herself against his side.

She wrapped her arm around his and let her head rest against his shoulder, the small amount of wine she’d had making her feel languid. The feeling didn’t last long for the hand on her thigh inched upward… yes she quite liked this, her body turning tense with anticipation, waiting to feel his touch against the apex of her thighs.

But he merely skimmed her and though he had to angle his arm awkwardly to keep the others unaware, she felt a long finger search out the waistband of her tights and Wendy sat up straight, the sudden movement drawing four pairs of eyes.

“It’s been a crazy long day… and I really want to finish that book you gave me Triss so… ciao.” Wendy rushed to say and swept from the table amongst several surprised farewells and one whispered about time. She couldn’t tell who said it and frankly she didn’t care. She agreed, it was about time.

“Well that was rather anticlimactic.” Iorveth said, leaning over her shoulder once his long-legged
stride caught him up to her.

“I eagerly threw in the towel since you decided to cheat.” She said with a look over her shoulder, the garden door swinging closed behind them. In a split decision she pivoted and threw her arms around his shoulders, diving her fingers up under patch hat and tangling them in his hair. He swiftly angled his mouth over hers, not bothering with teasing her lips apart. He took. That was the only word her quickly fading ability to think could conjure up to describe what his lips and tongue were doing to hers.

His hands slid down her back to cup the bottom curves of her ass, pulling her hips up tight against his. She moaned against his tongue as the motion spread her and his fingers brushed teasingly close. She was dangerously close to letting out a colorful curse when he ground his stiffened cock against her thigh.

Driven by a primal instinct she drew a bent knee up the outside of his thigh, practically purring when he wrapped a hand beneath it and pulled it up over his hip. She gasped against him when in a smooth motion he repeated with her other knee, urging her to wrap her legs around his waist while he held her high.

Wendy loved this angle, having his long neck tilted back while she had her turn to take. Her fingers tightened in his hair searching for that moan that turned her to fire. She earned it when she bit his bottom lip and pulled back just enough for him to feel it.

“Aevon… what book did you learn this from?” He said in a husky voice.

She opened her eyes, looking down at him with a small grin. “A lot of different books.”

“For educational purposes?”

“Enjoyment. And I’m an avid reader. And a romantic remember?”

“I remember.” He growled lightly and pulled her neck down for him to reach. He sucked and licked at the sensitive spot just below her jaw causing her to shiver and drop her eyes closed.

“Think we can make it fifty more steps?” She murmured, running her nails against his scalp.

“I can have us there in half that.” His hot breath spread across her skin in sharp contrast to the cold night air.

“Make it so. I’ll be counting.”

She tried to keep count, really she did. But she kept getting distracted by the fact that his palms were rubbing in circles against her ass and she shamelessly circled her hips with them. The rising pressure of arousal, that burning need for release was settling low in her stomach. She swore that if she didn’t get some honest fucking friction soon she was going to lose her mind.

The sound of Iorveth’s laughter had her blinking in surprise as she hadn’t meant to say out loud, but there wasn’t time to be embarrassed as he nudged the door to the guest house open and immediately turned for the stairs.

Wendy dropped her hands from his hair and grasped the back of his shirt and pulled it up, pausing for him to lift each arm in turn so she could pull it freely from his head. When she started on the buttons of her shirt she sought his mouth, finding the taste of him addictive.

“I’m not looking for slow, lingering, you spend two hours getting me ready ridiculousness alright?
I’m more than ready. We can take it slow later but right now, I just need you in me.” She said against him.

“If you insist.” He pushed them up the last few stairs as she pulled her shirt from her shoulders and dropped it to the floor. As soon as they reached the bed, she unhooked her legs from his hips and he lowered her down, both immediately moving to shove their remaining clothes off.

It helped ease her modesty having already been seen very much naked by him though she did have a moment of hesitance where she had the urge to cover her breast. However that was immediately forgotten when he pressed a hand to the center of her back, arching her chest up while he dipped down to draw one of her nipples into his mouth.

“I wanted so badly to do this yesterday morning.” He said against the sensitive skin while she struggled to drawn in a deep breath. She didn’t recognize the sound she made as her own but somehow she found enough air to ground out his name.

“I-Iorveth!”

“Mmm that’s what I hoped you would do. Say my name again.”

Wendy tightened her hands around his shoulders, lightly digging her nails into the smooth skin. “Make- me.”

He growled at her changed and spun her around till she landed on the bed, him immediately following after her. He ran his tongue down her neck to her other breast, biting lightly at the skin, pulling her nipple deep into his mouth and lashing the bud with his tongue. He’d settled low between her thighs and ran his hands up the backs of her thighs, spreading her knees wide.

She didn’t know what she wanted to do more, grind her hips against him or arch her breast to press more deeply into his mouth. She was hardly aware of her hands pulling at his hair while simultaneously holding him to her.

“Give me what I want Aevon.” He said roughly against her. He looked up through his lashes while she smiled. As much as she wanted to give in, she loved it when he talked like that. It was utterly him. At her refusal he released a knee and reached between them and a heartbeat later she felt him shift his hips, brushing her center with the head of his cock.

The sensation was electric and caused her hips to roll. He did it again, this time sending her eyes rolling closed and she knew he was playing dirty but fuck it. Let him have his victory. He moved back to her other breast, tangling his tongue around her.

“Iorveth!” She cried out and was immediately soothed by his low rumbling growl of approval.

“Look at me.” He said in that same low tone, freeing a hand to pull her glasses off and tossing them to the dresser before running the hand down her side and back to her hips Slowly she blinked up at him, the shadows broken by little moonlight allowed to enter through the window. There was an intensity in his expression, matching the tense way his jaw clenched and with the barest of a tremble to his arms. “If you’ve a sudden sense of rationality, this is your moment to voice it.”

There was little doubt in her mind that he was a closeted sweetheart… in another life he would have been the perfect stuffed up lordly gentleman. But instead he was cruel to those he felt deserved it, merciless, and almost everything a gentleman was not. Except in rare moments like this. Moments that did nothing but have her falling deeper and deeper in love with him.

Smiling softly she lifted a hand to his cheek, running a thumb across the fine bone and deep hollow
below it. “Iorveth, since you’re being so polite, allow me return the favor and warn you that I’m about to use some colorful language if you don’t finish what I started in the Great Hall.”

His grin was crooked and genuine and turned her already jellied bones all the way to putty. It didn’t stop her from beginning to analyze the situation however. The moment was upon her and there would be pain. She knew that, everyone knew that… supposedly. But she was also beyond excited, fully aroused, and with someone she trusted. There was nothing to fear. It would hurt, but only for a moment… but then there would also be blood and blood was a terrible lubricant.

“Are you finished?” He said drily, blinking down at her.

Wendy realized she must have had her thinking too much and about to panic face so she bit her lip and nodded, bracing herself. In reply he took her mouth with his, reminding her of just how much she loved the taste of him, the tug of his teeth on her lips, the shiver his tongue sent down her spine when he tangled it with hers.

She wanted to kiss him forever, and told him so with a long moan. To keep him from pulling away she held him to her with her fingers tangled in his hair, wondering if he wanted to remove patch hat. She hardly noticed him readjust his body, holding himself above her with one elbow braced by her head. She hummed in approval as his hands swept through the loose strands of her hair.

But she did notice the feel of his cock pressing slowly against her. This was no mere teasing brush like before but the beginning of something she’d wanted with him for days now. He reangled his head above her, renewing his efforts in making her forget her name and pressed forward further and further.

The feeling, the intensity, the ache, all welled inside of her, drawing her to whimper restlessly and roll her hips up. She needed more, needed all of him, the pain and discomfort be damned. But he released his hold from guiding himself to grip her hip tightly, holding her still.

“Don’t- whatever you do… don’t move yet- fuck-“ He said hoarsely, dropping his forehead to the crook of her neck.

“Wh-what’s wrong?” She asked.

“Its been awhile-“ He cut off with a groan when she pushed against his hand. “Don’t, let me- let me find some control. You’re tight- so fucking tight.”

Wendy whimpered, the need to move was clawing at her. She needed to- she dropped her hands from his hair to cup her breast, seeking to ease at least one of her aches, hoping to distract herself long enough for Iorveth to steady himself.

She didn’t have to wait long as he began to slip further forward, stretching her, filling her. She moaned, whether from pain or pleasure, she couldn’t tell anymore. Just when she didn’t know how much more of him she could take, his hips snapped forward, seating him fully within her.

Her name was a groan against her neck while he ran a free hand up and down one of her thighs he’d hooked over his hip. He held himself still within her a moment before dragging in a ragged breath and lifting his weight from her chest to rest on one forearm. “When you’re ready my light…”

Raising her eyes to his, finding that intense look in his eye that she loved so much and finally gave into her need to move her hips, ternately at first with nothing more than a small wiggle. When the movement caused just a small amount of discomfort, she drew in a ragged breath and rolled her hips into his, finding the sensation of discomfort quickly turning into one of pleasure.
A deeper roll this time, his jaw clenched, and she grew restless. She slid her hands across his wide shoulders, dragging her nails lightly down his strong back. Lifting her knees high she cupped the smooth rounded curves of his ass and pulled him against her.

He released a sigh of relief, the message she sent, received. Immediately he pulled out, his back arching deeply, before sliding back within her. Before repeating the long, slow thrust, he circled his hips against her in a short grind.

Her eyes rolled closed, all discomfort was forgotten. There was only him filling her over and over. The fire in her stomach growing out of control. She forgot to move with him, focused on just remembering to breath, until he raised to his knees and lifted her hips.

“Watch.” He said in is deep voice.

She opened her eyes and immediately moaned his name at the sight of the moonlight illuminating them, of his hands lifting her hips to meet his. To watch as his abdominals tense, rippling as he thrust into her. A new thought chanted in her head, touch him. So, she ran a hand down those muscles, down to the base of his cock, finding him slick with her arousal.

His moan wrapped around hers as her fingers continued to run along him, and she felt him increase the pace of his hips. She needed more, and she found it when he snapped his hips against her in a hard thrust, trapping her fingers between them.

She pressed her head back against the pillow, crying out as his movements circled her fingers against her clit. She was ready to snap, to shatter, burst into flames. Her lips moved but what she said, she couldn’t be certain. All she knew was they must have had spurred Iorveth on because he was setting a near punishing pace.

Almost without warning every muscle of her body locked and she mindlessly rocked her hips against him. “I-Iorveth- I’m fuck-ing coming!”

He dropped her hips and covered her mouth with his, sweeping his tongue against hers, his cock continuing to slide in and out, but the thrusts were becoming shorter, growing as erratic as his breathing. At his first guttural groan and hard snap of his hips, she fell over the edge, crying out his name against his mouth, the knot of pleasure low in her belly finally beginning to unravel.

His groan repeated in time with his next hard thrust. By the third, his arms had wrapped around her shoulders and his mouth dragged from hers to run down the side of her neck. “Fuck Aevon… tight- and beautiful-“ His hips stilled, pressing tightly against her throbbing center.

Dragging in a deep breath, she slipped one hand over his shoulder, her other dived into his hair while she held him as he shuddered against her. She pressed her lips against the patch of forehead no longer covered by patch-hat, pushed askew at some point. With legs still tangled together, he shifted to his side, eliciting a whimper from her throat as his cock slipped out of her.

He chuckled and brushed his nose against her ear. “If I had my way…”

Feeling languid and relaxed, Wendy opened a single eye to meet his gaze with a small grin. “Endurance of a hundred human men, right?”

He nipped at her jaw and pressed his semi erect cock against her hip. “You think I’d exaggerate?” He growled, the timber sending a shiver across her skin.

“Mm how disappointed you must be that I’m just a mere human.”
He ran a hand up the side of her ribs to cup one of her breasts. “Not how I would describe it… just know that after a brief recovery period, I do intend to test that human endurance of yours.”

Biting back a grin with a mocking look of wide eyed seriousness she nodded slowly. “I had better get on with that recovery then.”

After pressing a kiss against her temple, he tucked her head under his chin. She sighed deeply, wrapping an arm around his waist she settled comfortably against him, more content than she felt she had any right to.

“I did something that I never do unless there is a very good reason.” Iorveth said thoughtfully after a brief time of listening to Aevon breath, of feeling her heart beat steadily against his hand. He hadn’t jested when he’d implied that he could have continued… and if it hadn’t been her first time, she could have as well.

“Does this something have to do with taking human women to your bed… or well any bed that is?”

“No. I swore, back when our journey was just beginning, and I found my thoughts and eyes lingering on you, that I wouldn’t touch you.”

Aevon tilted her head back, a barely contained grin shining at him in the moonlight. “How honorable of you… what changed your mind?”

He used his chin to tuck her head beneath his and didn’t answer.

“It’s fine to say you don’t know. I had made the same promise… I so desperately wanted to force my feelings away. Until Daine decided to open my eyes to all the reasons on why I should.” She pulled away to sit up and looked down at him. Instinctively he lifted a hand to brush her curtain of hair from her face, tucking the strands behind her ear. “Would you like to hear my reasons?”

Iorveth held his breath, for a moment he felt… fear. And desperation. He wanted to hear what changed her resolve towards him, to hear her speak of her feelings. But he also feared them. “No matter what you feel… you have to return to your home.”

Her expression turned to one of sorrow, but she managed a small smile. “I know, and I will.”

“Then yes… I’ll hear them.”

Her sorrow remained but a hint of happiness mingled with it now. “I didn’t really accept this place as reality at first… as you well know. I was off on a fairytale journey to find my home, and you the dashing hero at my side. You’re handsome and strong with an air of complicated mystery.” She paused to draw her knees up to rest her chin on while she watched the vines in the window sway. “And then the morning those bandits came into our camp, you shattered this fantasy I’d created to help me deal with this impossible situation.

I was afraid and disappointed. You were no longer someone I saw as trustworthy, and I felt foolish for my naivety. But our journey continued, and I began to discover the little pieces of you that made you… more. More than that two-dimensional hero that all the girls dream of. You had a complicated past, a brutal future, and a love for your people. And I began to realize that you would die for them and that made me even more terrified than when you cut those bandits down before my eyes.” She smiled ruefully and shook her head. “I was falling in desperate love and needed it to stop because nothing was going to keep me from returning to Pop, but I also didn’t want to get hurt. So, I made
the promise, to keep you at arm’s length while trying to keep you close at the same time.

And then you came along and wrecked me with a single kiss, hinting at what could be... followed by Daine, with his words of happiness being rare and to embrace it while I could. And I was eager to break that ridiculous promise. I’m going to hurt no matter what, why not make it worthwhile by giving you everything I have to give with the secret hope that you would do the same.” Her gaze dropped to his and she reached out to run a finger down his nose. “A song lyric if I may? ‘Let’s take a breath jump over the side, how can you know it if you don’t even try?’ fits quite nicely.”

Iorveth’s chest felt tight as her words washed over him, giving him a glimpse as to how she saw him. His fist tightening in the bed sheet at her mention of love and he wondered if it could be true… did such a feeling beyond admiration and respect exist? He couldn’t mock her for having a romantics heart, tell her that such a feeling didn’t exist.

“What will you do after I’ve returned?” She asked, her voice tightening just a hint.

He didn’t know about love, but he did know, now that her departure was soon descending upon them he felt an ache in his chest that he hadn’t felt for a long time. An ache he didn’t wish to feel, because with it came a weakness he couldn’t afford. But still… that ache was addictive and he felt it when she smiled or rambled every detail when she spoke of something she found interesting. When she looked at him with a glint in her eye that said she wanted him.

And he found he liked being wanted.

“I’ll continue to fight for the rights and safety of my people.” He said simply.

“And if that were to happen tomorrow… would you find you corner of the world where you could be happy?”

He knew what she wanted… saw it in the way her eyes looked at him with a wistful hope. She wanted to know that he would be content, to live a long life without her, free of regret. But he couldn’t lie to her, just as he was quickly realizing he couldn’t lie to himself. He would live a life of regret for watching her walk out of it. Was this what she called love? Wanting his happiness, even if it was a happiness without her?

Did he want the same for her?

The vines rustled in the light breeze but did nothing to hide the sound of a door creaking open, snapping his mind and body into high alert.

“What is it?” Aevon whispered as he slowly sat up, his gaze watching the shadows where the entrance from the stairwell were. Slowly he nudged her behind him and pushed the sheet against her chest. When he felt her take it from him, her quickened breath now the only sound to be heard, he cautiously reached for his breeches.

He hated to frighten her, but history had proved that it was wiser to be cautious. He continued to watch the darkness. He knew precisely where his weapons lay and calculated his movements should it prove needed. He could have both swords in hand in three steps.

“I have two crossbows aimed at your heart, and one at hers.” Came a threatening voice from the darkness. “Don’t. Move. Elf.”

Iorveth bared his teeth in a snarl, recognizing the voice of Ouen.

“Ouen? What are you doing?” Aevon whispered with a panicked voice.
“Arresting a criminal with a very lucrative bounty. Dead or alive.” He answered.

“What? He helped you!” She cried out over his shoulder, moving to stand.

“Secure them.” Ouen snapped and three men, crossbows aimed carefully stepped into the dim light and moving to strategic positions around the room. Three more with swords, followed by Ouen himself moved inside.

He heard Aevon gasp and set her hands on his shoulders when they reached for him. “Don’t touch him!”

Ouen chuckled. “I gave you plenty of time to try out his cock. I felt that was awfully generous of me when I could have taken him the moment he showed that ugly face of his.”

“It’s not going to happen.”

“Are you going to stop me? Fear not, I know just what to do with the whore of a monster such as him. Arrest her for aiding and abetting a known criminal.”

Everything in him screamed for him to lunge for the nearest weapon, to slaughter every one of them but he was outnumbered. It was wiser to bide his time, to wait until he could be sure Aevon was out of immediate danger and then, he would strike.

“May we at least clothe ourselves?” He drawled, forcing a sense of calm into his voice.

“No. You have trousers on, that’s more than enough for where you’re going. You can have a nice-looking bit of jewelry however.”

He handed a pair of manacles to a soldier who approached him cautiously. Iorveth mentally cursed as he’d been hoping for rope. Iron made the situation more difficult, but not impossible.

“Stop that, don’t touch him!” Aevon moved to push the soldier away but a sword at her throat forced her back behind him.

His heart jumped, and he nearly forgot his plans of waiting for a better moment, but he forced himself to stay still except to look over his shoulder. His chest ached at the sight of a blade pressed against her throat, her wide blue eyes shining with fear. He nearly allowed his mask to fall, for his own fear to show but he managed to clench his jaw and signal her with the smallest shake of his head for her to stand down… he was going to keep her safe but for the time being… just do as they said.

“There, now be a good elf and hold out your arms… there we go.” Ouen cooed, with a bit of mad giddiness. The weight of iron around his wrists was familiar and Iorveth felt acid in the back of his throat.

A blade pressed sharply in the space between two of his ribs, nudging him to stand.

“Now for his whore. Arms out.”

He glanced at Aevon, watching as she tied the sheet around her body before stretching out her arms, her hands shaking slightly and her eyes never leaving him. The sight of manacles snapping around her delicate wrists tore at his chest, laboring his breath.

“Let’s take a walk.”
Aevon stepped up to him, her bound hands reaching to touch his arm before a sword separated them.

“Tsk, none of that.” Ouen chuckled and led the way down the stairs.

“You won’t get away with this. Geralt- Triss- even Iohn will not let this stand.” Aevon said.

“Then it’s a good thing they’ve been handled… the two of you were so eager to depart the table like a couple of dogs in heat, that you missed the best part of dinner. Of course, I tried to save them before your pet monster murdered them and set Ryre ablaze.”

“Ablaze?”

Ouen only grunted in answer and led them through the garden and into the castle. Once in the great hall, Iorveth could smell smoke, felt it in his eye but he’d yet to see flame. Until a soldier joined them from the stairs and began to light tapestries lining the walls on fire. A second soldier began to douse the tables with what smelled like oil. Iorveth briefly felt afraid for Geralt and Triss, and hoped they found a way out.

“You’re mad!” Aevon cried out.

Ouen motioned for the soldiers leading Iorveth to continue from the castle but stopped to grab Aevon by her upper arm and pulled her to the center of the room. “Unfortunately for you, there’s not a reward for fucking him. As commander of Ryre’s forces I’m prepared to deliver your punishment to you for your crimes. The same as for the witcher, the sorceress, and sadly, Lord Ryre himself though the officials will write he was murdered by a monster.”

“No!” Iorveth’s resolve broke and he lunged for Ouen. If he could wrap the chain of his manacles around the bastard’s neck, he could strangle the life from him, with relish. He almost reached him when he was tackled by two armored bodies, forcing him to stumble to his knees. He fought against the arms looping through his, pulling his shoulders back tightly.

“Get your hands off him. Don’t touch him!” Aevon screamed, fighting against the hands holding her back.

Time slowed to a painful crawl. A tear ran down her cheek before her disheveled hair caught it. She was so beautiful, even when full of anger and fear, fighting not for her life but for his, just as he was fighting for hers. The smoke and fire billowed around them. Her voice was lost in the sound of roaring flames.

Ouen slid him a sickening smile and that’s when Iorveth finally saw the knife in his hand, something he should have noticed long ago. It had been quite some time since he’d felt horror. Disgust, anger, hatred… but there was very little out there that could stir up feelings of horror and fear.

But as he realized what Ouen intended to do with that knife, he was consumed with it. And all he could do was press against the sword points threatening to pierce into him. If it got him to her, let them do as they will.

But it was too late. Time sped up, and all at once, Ouen thrust the knife into her stomach. Iorveth shouted her name. Watching as pain and surprise filled her beautiful blue eyes, shining with tears. A blossom of red spread across the red sheet and Ouen stepped away, allowing her to stumble.

“Aevon-“

She fell to her knees, her gaze locked on something over his shoulder. But his were on her… he never saw the soldier swing the sword, the solid steel hilt catching him in his temple.
Through the blur and sting of hot smoke, Wendy watched helplessly as Iorveth, his head hanging limp against his chest and blood coursing down the side of his face, was dragged from the great hall. She tried to scream after him, but her lungs and throat were too raw to manage more than a whimper. Every cell in her body screamed for her to stand, to go after him… to do something other than kneel there dying of blood loss and smoke inhalation, alone.

Wendy flinched when the sound of the great doors slammed shut, their echo thundered over the fire surrounding her. She closed her eyes, hoping to ease the burning and the tears but instead the scene of the sword striking Iorveth played through her mind, crushing her ability to breath.

Again, she tried to use a hand to push herself to standing, but all she managed to do was smear precious blood on the bench. Squeezing her eyes tightly shut she leaned her head against the wood, frustrated, terrified, and heartbroken. She just couldn’t make sense of why… why she couldn’t move. Sure, being stabbed hurt, the pain radiated down every limb of her body, but it didn’t compare to the pain of a cracked skull on a passenger window or the feel of a broken leg trapped under the weight of a car…

It was just a quick little jab… the pain in her lungs and the ever-approaching flames were more discomforting… she felt herself grow lightheaded, her eyelids growing heavy and faint before stubbornly shaking them open, tilting her head back to squint at the hazy ceiling. She couldn’t pass out. How was she going to stop Ouen if she passed out? Listlessly her neck lost the strength to hold her head up.

At first she thought the red on the white sheet looked beautiful… like a deep red rose. She liked roses. Had laid them on her parent’s graves for years. Pop would leave her a rose beside her coffee cup on her birthday. His were always a different color but she preferred the romantic red. The kind of red that was seductive and dangerous. It was only when her hand lifted to brush against the red rose that she remembered that it was blood.

Wendy couldn’t help but shake her head, exasperated with herself.

Perhaps that was why…

“One day I looked up and he’s pushin’ eighty… and there’s brown tobacco stains all down his chin. To me he’s one of the heroes of this country… So why’s he dressed up like them old men?”

“How about something a little cheerier Dad?”

Wendy looked up from her copy of The Book of Five Rings as she turned a page. “It’s his favorite.”

Her mom rolled her eyes and took a sip of tea, her bare feet propped on the porch railing, long silky hair hanging over the back of her rocking chair. Her dad, seated in a matching rocking chair held his glasses aloft, studying the lenses before rubbing off a smudge.

The dim porchlight flickered.
Pop nudged her with his shoulder and continued the song with his perfect hums. As they sat on the porch swing, he on his side, she on hers, he gently swung them. The motion reminded her of summer evenings with watermelon and grilled hot dogs. She almost expected fireworks to light up the sky at any moment. She looked out past the porch railing, but it was pitch black. And silent… if it was summer then where was the sound of cicadas? The song of waxwings?

Wendy leaned against the arm of the wooden swing in an attempt to view the night sky… if it were summer, where were the constellations of Lyra and Ophiuchus? Or any stars at all at that. “Dad? What’s the date?”

Her dad settled his plastic rim glasses back on his nose and shook his head. “You know me with remembering dates and times.”

“Try not to worry about it sweetie. Wherever you need to be, it can wait a little longer.” Her mother said with a grin.

Wendy sat up straight, her book forgotten in her lap. “I wasn’t worried before but now I am… Where am I going?”

Pop’s hums turned back into the soft lyrics of the song.

“Where do you dream of going?”

Wendy rolled her eyes and picked up her book. “I don’t dream of going anywhere. You know that… not since…” She closed her eyes. The scream of tires, metal and glass shattering, a sense of weightlessness… “You’re dead.” Her eyes snapped open and she twisted to look at Pop.

“I’m still walking the Earth for a time more Wendy. Just enjoying the peace with you.” Pop said in his quiet voice, his eyes on the door as if he expected Memaw to join them. Maybe it was because she didn’t have clear memories of Memaw that she didn’t come through the door but she felt present all the same.

Wendy turned her gaze back to her parents, watched as her dad moved closer to her mom and began to braid her hair. This is how they had been, a modern day fairytale of small town girl rescues city boy just passing through with a blown tire. He fell in love with her witty resourcefulness and she with his obliviousness and wide eyed energy.

“So… where do you dream of going?” Her mom spoke again.

“I don’t.”

“Sure you do.”

“No- I don’t!” Wendy felt guilty for raising her voice, but it was frustrating in a rebellious teenager way to have your parent tell you something opposite of what you know you feel. You never really grow out of that feeling she found.

Her mom chuckled and slipped her hand into her dad’s when he’d finished braiding her hair. Now he looked at Wendy of the top of his glasses.

“How about we think of little details. Somewhere with rain?”

Wendy’s memories went to a very specific time when it rained.

“What about a beach? We really should have taken you to the beach…”
Wendy… didn’t have any desire to see the beach. In fact her thoughts went to mountains.

“Is there a forest?”

Wendy closed her eyes… the sound of branches and crackling and leaves rustling. She could feel a leaf brush against her cheek as it fell free from its limb. “It’s autumn.” A melody joined the song of the forest. At first, Wendy thought Pop and begun to hum a different tune but when she opened her eyes he was silently watching the door to the old farm house. “Do you hear that?”

“Sure do.” Her mom said, closing her eyes with a smile. “It’s a nice tune. Makes me think of something out of one of those period dramas you enjoy.”

“It sounds older than that.” Her dad added.

“So let’s recap. You don’t dream, but if you did, it would be of rain, mountains, forests, and medieval tunes.”

Wendy sighed and shook her head. “I know what your saying. But it doesn’t matter. I’m-“ A flash of hot flames danced before her eyes and a pain close to shocking your finger on a door knob only amplified a thousand times spread across her body. She shook her head to force the memory away. “I’m dead- or dying. My friends are dead or dying. And Iorv-” She closed her eyes and swallowed thickly. “Will be soon.”

“You most certainly are not dead yet- close yes- but not all the way.” Her dad said.

“I know the probability of my survival is impossibly slim-“ The volume of the song increased, drawing her gaze out into the darkness. “Where is that coming from?” She had to raise her voice slightly.

“Why don’t you go and see?”

Wendy turned frightened eyes on the each of them. “But… it’s dark and I can’t see. And if I’m still alive, I need to wake up.”

“You’re here for a reason, this dream world. Since when have you been afraid of the dark? The unknown?” Her mom said, her eyes still closed. “I really like this song.”

“I do too…” Wendy whispered. It made her heart ache and think of vine covered castle ruins and gardens in the fall. Sunlight and lazy rivers with crisp water.

“I really think you should follow it.”

The yearning in her chest was leaving her breathless.

“Maybe a quick look.”

“We’ll be here if you change your mind.” Pop said. “But, I think you’ll want to see where this ends.”

Wendy nodded solemnly and stood from the swing. Immediately she felt a forlorn sadness. She loved that old swing, and to see Pop now sitting there alone left her feeling ripped to shreds.

“Go on, you already took the first step. Don’t stop now.” He nodded toward the porch stairs.

Wendy took a last look at her parents, their entwined hands and twinkling eyes and slowly stepped from the porch. She realized she was barefoot as the cold grass sent a shiver up her spine. She
looked at her clothing, smoothing a hand down a red summer dress, the kind she would have admired on an internet advertisement but talked herself out of actually purchasing. It fluttered around the bottom of her knees, giving her the desire to twirl.

One step in front of the next.

“Heart’s desires, sweetheart. I expect nothing less than for you to seek your heart’s desires.”

Wendy looked back to that old porch with its peeling white paint but solid wood. Her family watching her, gently illuminated with the porch’s golden light. Pop hummed his desperado song, her mom sipped her iced tea, and her dad played with the tail of her mom’s braid.

She wanted to tell them that they were her heart’s desires. She wanted days where she made her mom watch Pride and Prejudice with her for the six hundredth time, and her dad asked her to help him with his crossword puzzle. Pop texting her a picture of Princess Kate standing in the middle of a food bucket while she ate her hastily put together sandwich during her lunch break. It hurt, missing the moments they should have had together.

“Reach for every moment, every heart’s desire.”

Wendy didn’t know where the words came from, for none on the porch had moved their lips. Perhaps they were a melding of lyrics to go along with the melody she now followed.

Another step on cold grass, led to another and another. The darkness seemed never ending and Wendy began to falter in her bravery. She wasn’t afraid of the dark, in fact she preferred it most days. Cloudy skies and drawn curtains. The only light in her room the little charge light on her phone. But she wasn’t afraid of the light either. Of open windows and sunny breezes.

Then there was the unknown… her mother had been wrong about her in that regards. She was terrified of the unknown. The unknown kept her from leaving Pop until he’d corralled her into it. The unknown meant every hope and dream could fail at any moment. Hearts could be broken and lives lost because of the unknown.

Wendy turned her head in all directions and found nothing but the unknown.

But that wasn’t entirely true she realized. She knew the grass was cold beneath her feet, just like when the first snows were getting restless. Surrounding her, though she couldn’t see them, was a forest. She could hear the wind in the branches, feel the leaves brush her arms.

And then there was the melody.

Once, that had been an unknown, but as she followed it she knew she’d heard it before, in another dream.

The darkness continued, with every step it spread out further, as did the yearning. The melody pulled her along, brushing against her senses, mingling with the trees that were just outside of her vision.

Wendy blinked, pausing mid-step. It took a moment for her mind to process the sudden glow in the distance. Another blink and it was still there, a little orange dot surrounded by darkness. Under a strange compulsion to continue forward, she began to move, one hesitant step at a time.

She was breathless.

And afraid.
It was some time before she was able to place just what the light was.

Firelight.

Wendy pulled up short for a breath. Fear of it was irrational, it wasn’t the fires fault it was killing her... but she did have to pause and summon a bit of strength to finish approaching it. Growing closer she could begin to make out shapes touched by the flickering glow. There were jagged branches and trees, softened by leaves, red rose bushes nestled against the trunks, the kind of bushes that looked messy and wild.

She rested a hand low on her waist where she knew in the waking world, the red bloom of blood was draining from her, wondering how much longer she had. Here in the dream world, she didn’t suffer the signs of dying. However she remembered, once she’d realized she was in a dream. There was an urgency to try and wake, but also a yearning to just let it be.

But Pop was right... she wanted to see where this ended. This dream.

Another step, the fire grew brighter. The next, warmth chased a shiver away. Then the melody faded, but sound still filled the air. A rhythmic sound which she could now recognize as easily as Johnny Lee Miller’s Mr Knightly in his confession to Emma, calling her dearest, most beloved. The sound of steel on whet stone and oil.

Another step, another heartbeat skipped. A shape beyond the flames, wide shoulders moving in rhythm, head tilted to watch the blade carefully.

By now she could make out the curve and hollow of cheekbone easing to jaw smoothly, a serious mouth below an aristocratic nose. She couldn’t see the glow of his green gaze for he had it lowered and focused on his task, but she knew...

She stopped just beyond fire’s glow and just watched with an ache in her heart and guilt clouding her thoughts.

He was gone, taken to his execution, because of her. Every decision she’d made or guided him into, had led to his capture. Blinded by a hope, a desire to see a semblance of peace between his people and hers... and they had been so close. Iohn had the same drive as her but lacked initiative and opportunity. She delivered that to him at the price of all their lives, including Iorveth’s.

If she’d never come to his world...

Wendy closed her eyes, no longer strong enough to watch him.

“You’re thinking too much.” He said in his low yet firm voice, drawing her to lift her eyes to see him watching her through his lashes.

“There’s a great deal to think of.” She said, stepping closer.

“But not on what’s done. Cannot change it, so why continue?”

“How can I not? It’s my fault!” Wendy began to loose a bit of tightly wound control over her emotions. “And now, instead of finding a way out of this mess before I die or you die, I’m walking around in la la land.”

“How will you stop it?”

Wendy began to pace, feeling his faze follow her. “If I could... I’d wake up, walk from Ryre, find the
nearest horse and follow you to the nearest capitol. Find a way into the prison and break you out.”

“Aevon, you would be lost before the first meal that they purposely fail to deliver to me.” He set his sword and whetstone aside and gestured to a stool next to him that she hadn’t noticed before. With a sigh she sat and leaned her head against his shoulder. “Consider this,” he continued. “There is more than one reward for my capture.”

Wendy mulled his words, her breath quickening. A spark of hope…

“I need to wake up. But I’ve been here for so long, how could I possibly still live?”

“I’m not an expert in dreams, Merrigold or the Sage could answer with a more in depth explanation, but time is different here.”

Wendy watched the flames dance, felt the warmth spread against her skin. With a deep breath she could catch the scent of fine tobacco and something like cloves… probably from his sword oil. The familiarity brought her a comfort she didn’t feel she deserved.

And a need to wake up.

But she found herself shying back from the urge to let go of the dream. As much as she wanted to… she wanted to stay.

“Why?”

A tear escaped unchecked, she hadn’t even realized that her vision had blurred with unshed tears.

“I like this… being here with you. I know it isn’t real, but it could be.” Without lifting her head she settled a hand on his forearm where it rested on his knee, her fingers twisting at the linen of his sleeve. “I can feel you, hear you breathe, smell all the things that remind me of you. Even this campfire. My family is here, on the other side of the darkness… what more could I want?”

“Aevon, you’re selfish in an unselfish way. You want it all and you will not find that here. You want your dreams and hopes, most of which involve so many others living. But they won’t if you don’t wake.”

Wendy scoffed, brushing at a tear. “How could I have any such affect? I can’t even save myself, much less you and countless others.”

“Because as much as you resist it, you are a warrior.”

“No, I’m a scholar. I study and ramble on about facts no one cares about.”

“You’re afraid.”

“Absolutely. If I wake, I leave this unknown for another. But not all of it is unknown… there will be pain. Fear. Desperation. Failure. All of which I already feel in various degrees but out there, I’ll be alone.”

“I wouldn’t be so certain about that.”

Wendy swallowed deeply, her hand tightening around his arm. “If I fail… will you be here when I return?”

“It is your dream.”
“Is that what happens when we die? Walk the dream world for eternity? Can I travel to others dreams? Control what happens?”

She heard the smile in his voice and quickly lifted her head to be sure she caught a glimpse. “Again, questions better saved for Merrigold and the Sage.”

Just as she’d anticipated, his smile, small and fleeting as it was, turned her heart painfully. This painfully complicated person who had every right to despise her, perhaps even did as his current behavior was all in her mind, deserved to live, to continue living freely and fighting for the same for his people. But who would go after him?

Geralt certainly, if he knew where to start, and if he survived. Dain and the Scoia’tael as well if, again, they knew where to start and even then, how long before word even reached Adhart? But then Wendy recalled that Dain was meant to return with mounts.

Wendy knew the who and the why. The where was a bit more complicated and would be greatly aided by the survival of Iohn. Surely a scholar, witcher, sorceress, sheep farming lord, backed by an army of fearsome Aen Seidhe could save him.

“I told you that you were a warrior.”

“Am I truly able to…” Wendy’s words drifted off. She thought of all the reasons to take a life, and even now, after Adhart and Lasei, after Ryre… she found herself backing away from the thought of asking anyone to kill anyone.

“How has any alternative worked out for you?”

Wendy recognized her own question, one she’d lashed at him before. “Do you know what your asking me? To abandon my principles? I know I’m arguing with myself, I’m torn, wondering if I could take a life to save yours.” She rubbed at her eyes, dragging a hand down her cheek.

“And if the blade weren’t yours?”

“It would be. It would have to be.” She said without hesitation. “I said the backing of an army because I knew they would fight for you without my asking. I’m not in the equation in that regards. I’m not going to ask anyone to take a life I wouldn’t be willing to take myself.”

“And you are not willing.”

“There has to be another way.”

“You will see… “

“This is going to break me.”

“You’re stronger than that.”

“If this is a dream, how do I know my Pop is still alive?” Wendy changed the subject abruptly.

“There’s power in the dream world… It is curious that you are so affected by it.”

“Why?”

“Have you walked the dream world before?”

Wendy thought about all the dreams she could remember. “None like this.”
He didn’t reply.

The conflicting need to wake and stay began to overwhelm her. She had to make a decision soon. But deep down she knew it was already made. She couldn’t leave Iorveth to face his execution. She couldn’t leave Pop, living with the unknown of what happened to the last of his family.

Wendy lifted her head to trace her gaze over his features, doing everything she could to remember every detail. From the length of his eyelashes to the exact shade of red of his scar.

She closed her eyes… had to go.

But first…

“Around the fire, my heart’s desire.” She whispered. When the sound of familiar mixed with unfamiliar laughter surrounded her she opened her eyes, taking in the scene.

Yes… she had to go.

“Geralt do you have her?” A voice cried out from nearby as Wendy’s consciousness returned to her. Through a haze, she’d expected pain, but she was only left with a sense of suffocating nothing. The ability to breathe was gone, her body didn’t exist, and all she had were her thoughts and emotions.

She was equal parts relieved that Triss and Geralt had somehow survived, and panicked at her inability to move, even to breathe. She shouldn’t have been surprised that Geralt and Triss were coming to her rescue for they were physical embodiments of magic and superior survivability, whereas she was fragile and weak.

“I’ve got her. Iohn?”

“Already safely outside. Dain saw to him. We need to get out of here.”

Wendy vaguely noticed Geralt lifting her in his arms, she was concentrating on trying to drag in breath after breath, she wanted to cry when she at last managed to bring that first gasp.

“That’s right keep breathing. Triss, keep that barrier up. She can’t take in any more smoke.”

A curious feeling overcame Wendy as she laid her head against the warm steel of Geralt’s armor. She felt… cool. As if she’d just stepped from the barn and into a midafternoon day of fresh fluffy snow. It wasn’t unpleasant and began behind her eyes, easing across her face and downward. There wasn’t any pain, and her lungs drew in breath after breath, each easier than the last. She even managed to open her eyes, blinking several times at the blurry sight of what had to be a magical barrier surrounding the three of them as they neared the great doors to Ryre.

Once outside Geralt laid her in the grass beside Iohn who looked pale as death despite the smudges of soot coating his skin. Geralt and Triss then immediately joined the efforts to put out the fire, with magic and muscle, they mingled with the Ryre folk… and a couple of Scoia’tael.

Strength to move, to do more than follow the movements of Dain and his soldiers as they took their turns running in with buckets of water. There were no long glances sent their way or hesitation when they reached for a fresh bucket of water from a human, they just worked as one. Wendy was quite proud of them in that moment, even though it had taken murder and betrayal to get there.
A woman knelt at Iohn’s side before waving for another to see to Wendy. She had forgotten her own wound and was astounded that she was even alive. Perhaps that was the cool sensation that had spread through her body… her loss of blood.

She felt the sheet wrapped around her tugged this way and that and wondered if she should feel embarrassment at the brief exposure of her body before the woman was able to rearrange them while searching for her wound.

A finger dragged across the skin of her abdomen, tugging the skin this way and that. She rolled, feeling like a ragdoll when the woman gently pushed her to her side.

“Where were you hurt?” The woman asked, easing Wendy back to her original position.

Wendy blinked and opened her mouth to speak. When nothing came out but a gasp, she swallowed thickly and tried again. Summoning her strength, she looked down. A rush of adrenaline lifted her hand to press against a thin scar, the skin red and stained with dry blood.

She dragged her gaze to the woman kneeling over her, trying to convey that she didn’t understand. But she was forgotten as Iohn coughed and was pushed onto his side, so he could safely retch. The women whispered words of poison and how lucky they were to have gotten to him in time, and Wendy shared their relief quietly.

Iohn was kind in a world that needed a great deal more of what he had to offer. And selfishly, she needed him if she were going to find Iorveth in time. With the remainder of her adrenaline and confused strength, she eased herself to lean against an abandoned wooden crate. Her body felt heavy and her eyelids began to fall but she forced them back open. She couldn’t slip back to sleep now. There was too much to do, and it burned on the edge of her mind, the need to shout at Geralt and the others to leave Ryre to burn. Iorveth needed them more, but all she could do was sit in frustrated silence, watching as they battled the flames in the early morning light.

“Around the fire, my heart’s desires.”

Iorveth came awake with those words whispering through his mind, and for a moment, he’d forgotten all that had happened in the hours since his capture. In fact, he opened his eye, fully expecting Aevon to still be seated next to him.

It took that one glance at the damp stone walls to remind him. Dim sunlight filtered through a grated window high in the wall. A stream of water ran down the wall, pooling in on a filthy and moss-covered floor. His wrists were still wrapped in iron and chained to the wall behind him. There was a thunderous ache in his head and his skin itched with dried blood, but they were nothing for the cold rage stabbing through his chest. He locked his jaw and pressed his nails into his palms to control it and his breathing.

For the moment, he was alone. Something he needed if he wanted to find a way out of this, and loosing control of his emotions, slamming his fist into the stone wall at his back as if it were Ouen’s twisted triumphant face, would only attract attention. So, despite knowing what he would see when he did, he closed his eye and tried to lock the anger away for the moment.

His vision of Aevon standing in a strangely lovely red dress in the glow of firelight did indeed consume him until he felt stable enough to open his eye and study his situation with a rational and calculating mind.
Everything gave clues and whispers of promise. From the saturated walls, to the crumbling grout. Rust on the chains and the echo of water dripping slowly into a pool far below.

The sound of a wooden door crashing into a stone wall alerted him to his next round of either torture by Ouen’s hand or by his conversation. So far, he’d only talked, taunting Iorveth with how rich he was going to be and how satisfying it had been to leave his lover and friends behind to die. But Iorveth recognized the look in his eye when the man had left him with a strike that had sent his head slamming into the stone.

Ouen felt powerful, having captured someone such as he, and a lust for blood was beginning to unhinge inside of him. Iorveth recognized it, had felt it in himself before… and knew just what to do with it.

“Wendy, take a drink.” Triss said as she knelt beside her, the fire at last managed though the castle still smoldered and would need months if not years of repair.

She took an obeying sip, her parched throat soothed for the moment. When Triss eased the cup away, Wendy allowed her head to fall back against the crate with a sigh and waited as Geralt and Dain joined them.

“O-Ouen… has him.” She said softly. Her symptoms smoke inhalation, much like the stab wound were nearly gone, leaving her with an almost listless exhaustion.

“Vengerberg? Do you think Atkin even knows there’s a reward for Iorveth?” Triss said, her gaze moving to meet Geralt’s.

“Emyr would be my first guess with Francesca a close second before I’d assume Atkin.” Geralt answered.

“That is where you’re wrong witcher. Atkin needs to make his claim more solid if he’s to be king. What better way than to put the North’s most wanted man, of Aen Seidhe or dh’oine both, on display before all who oppose him and have our favorite angry squirrel drawn and quartered?” Dain added.

Wendy flinched, feeling the burn of rope around her neck. “Dain is… right. I th-think Atkin. But… Ouen w-will want the largest of-offer.” She swallowed and turned her gaze to Iohn who listened with glassy eyes and cracked lips. “Where- where would he go wh-ile he waited?”

Iohn licked his lips and closed his eyes for a moment. “Ouen’s family once owned land in Dol Blathanna. On the border. It’s less than half a day’s ride if you’re in a hurry like he would be. Though the manor there hasn’t been inhabited in over a century-” He paused to take draw in a deep breath. “it’s close enough to quickly communicate with Aedirn, Dol Blathanna, Nilfgaard, and even Novigrad if he had a raven and thought the Flame would pay for Iorveth.”

Wendy sat up and pushed herself to her feet, sitting a moment on the crate.

“Wendy, let Geralt carry you-“ Triss began but was cut off when Wendy shook her head.

“I’m alright, feeling st-stronger with every moment. I need to get dressed, while Iohn marks a map. We need horses. Dain?”

“Done.”
“Please Wendy, you need to stay here. You nearly died and are still recovering- the fact that you healed quickly is astounding and another conversation for later, but you can barely hold your head up right now.” Triss said gently, setting a hand on Wendy’s knee.

“I’m going. I’m the reason he’s in this and I’m going to fix it.” She forced herself to stand, stubbornly refusing to allow herself to waver despite the lightness of her head. “Like I said, I’m feeling stronger and stronger.” Triss held her tongue after that but stood and wrapped her arm through Wendy’s and offered her strength.

None of the others voiced any objections but moved to get ready.

The entire walk through the still smoldering remains of Ryre and into the garden, Wendy had tried to prepare herself for entering the guest house. In fact, she didn’t even pause when she stepped through the door, waving Triss’s offers of helping her dress away. She took the stairs as quickly as she could, loosing her breath easily but continuing until she shut the door behind her and leaned against it.

Immediately tears of frustration, fear, guilt, and panic came. Thoughts of how useless allowing these tears to continue were, followed did nothing to stop them from escaping.

“Wendy, do you need assistance?”

She brushed at her cheeks and dragged in a deep breath for strength. “I’m alright Triss. Just another moment.” She called through the door, before pushing herself away and to the pile of clothing. Her shirt from the day before still lay on the stairs, so instead she dragged the ruined sheet from around her body and quickly pulled on the closest pieces of clothing. Her tights, long sleeved green shirt, vest and boots. She pulled her hair into a tight ponytail and slipped her glasses on and turned toward the door with a sigh.

She paused at the sight of Iorveth’s swords leaning against the wall. His bow and quiver laid across a chair, ready for him to buckle across his back. And then she saw her own sabre from its place on the window seat. She knew it wasn’t likely she’d use it especially with just a bare bones lesson with it, but the thought of having it with her gave her a sense of strength, something she needed now more than ever.

Moving quickly, she buckled it around her waist and added the smaller belt securing it to her thigh. It did make her feel better, she realized as she lifted Iorveth’s much heavier weapons into her arms left the room without another glance.

“Do you need to get anything from the castle?” Wendy asked as she joined Triss at the doorway leading to the garden.

“No. Geralt already has his weapon’s and I’ve need of nothing.” Triss said, her worried gaze running over Wendy.

“I’m alright Triss.” Wendy said quietly, leading the way back through the garden. “I’ll be even better when I- we- get him back.”

“And we will, but I’m not willing to trade your life for his in the process. At the first sign that you’re not as alright as you seem, I’m portaling you back to Novigrad.”

Wendy managed a small, genuine smile. “That’s fair.” She adjusted her weapon laden arms and rested a hand over where should have been a serious, life threatening wound. “I don’t understand what happened… I remember it Triss. The fire, the smoke, the feel of steel cutting into me and the effects of it all. I remember being unable to breath… the symptoms of blood loss… Now other than a
desire for a long hot bath and a day of sleep, I feel fine.”

She felt Triss settle an arm around her back, holding on to her upper arm as they walked through the great hall. “After we find Iorveth, maybe we can find Avallac’h and see if he knows more.”

Wendy stopped abruptly and shook her head. “No. We save Iorveth and then I’m returning to Earth. I’ve fucked up his life enough and I need to get home. I want to know what happened to me but if it means delaying my return, then forget it, I’ll just keep on without knowing.”

Triss blinked at her vehement reply but nodded in understanding.

“*Hearts desires...*”

Wendy pulled away from Triss, the words echoing in her head. She had many desires and knew the only way for any of them to happen, was for her to leave. But only once assured of the continuing survival of one. Then she would leave.
“I vote for the element of surprise. Ouen believes he killed us and no one is going to follow.” Wendy said quietly, eyeing the crumbling ruin in the distance. It would have been rather pretty and tragic looking as the days shadows lengthened behind the weathered stone, but all she saw was a prison.

“I vote we return the favor and smoke him out before filling him with arrows.” Dain added from her side.

“Or we take a more indirect approach.” Geralt said, a touch of exasperation in his voice. “The map shows a cave marked near here. Often, old dungeons and sewers connect to them.”

Wendy tilted her gaze toward him. “That’s a promising idea. I like it. But we’ll need to keep Ouen distracted and away from said dungeons.”

Dain held an arrow up, grinning at the glinting point. “I’m good at distractions.”

She rested a hand on his arm, drawing the arrow back down. “Let’s just keep it to threats if we can please… I’ll do the talking.”

Before the two men could begin voicing their objections regarding Wendy’s involvement, Triss pointed toward what was once a manor. “A sound plan, now we better get to executing it.”

They watched silently as several riders approached the manor from the opposite direction and were waved through. “Aedirn delegates, they want proof of Iorveth’s capture and to negotiate. The other nations will be doing the same soon enough.” Geralt said quietly.

Wendy bit her lip against the need to curse and tried to keep her panic at bay. As much as she wanted to walk in there and do this without bloodshed, she knew that hope was quickly fading away. She had a choice to make, and for once she was growing weary of having to make them.

“Triss and I will go through the cave. Give us twenty minutes, then make you’re approach through the fallen wall to the east. When we have him, Triss will signal. It does not matter what is going on in that moment, all of you get out of there.” His yellow eyes glinted into Wendy’s. “If you want to avoid a war, you get out of there. Use that sabre if you have to.”

She was shaken by his words, but she nodded. “Just get him out of there. And take his weapons… he’ll want those.”

Before they left, Triss gave Wendy’s hand a quick squeeze and then disappeared through the trees, leaving Wendy and Dain with his warriors. She swallowed nervously and wrapped her hand around the hilt of her sabre, taking surprising comfort in its presence.

“Let’s move into position.” Dain said quietly and nodded toward the wall Geralt had spoken of.

She took a deep breath. “Let’s.”

When the longest twenty minutes of her life had at last passed, Wendy shared a look with Dain and
the others and at their nods, darted from the tree line and to the crumbled wall. Dain arrived first and quickly flattened against the highest part of the wall with Wendy and the others following his lead.

Wendy felt as if a boulder was sitting on her chest, the grip on her sabre felt slippery with the clamminess of her palms, and she struggled to keep her breathing even. Everything in her told her to run the other direction, that she was going to be cut down for good this time… well nearly everything in her told her that. There was also the whisper that she had to do this, to give Geralt a chance to save Iorveth. She had other reasons, ones she wasn’t ready to think about in that moment, and truly she didn’t have time, for Dain gave the signal that all was clear and ducked inside.

Wendy took a deep breath, pushed her glasses back up her nose, and followed suit.

The rusted hook holding the chains to the stone wall held stubbornly solid, causing Iorveth to hiss a curse at it and releasing his grip from the iron. He glanced at his fingers, raw and aching from the effort of attempting to loosen the hook.

Deciding to change tactics he leaned forward as far as the chains would allow, momentarily enjoying the stretch of his muscles, and searched the shadowed dungeon for any visitors. Finding none, he twisted to again face the rusted hook, pulling the iron cuff as far down his wrist as it would go with his other hand then stretched up and slammed the iron against iron.

The sound echoed against stone, and vibrated painfully through his wrist and arm, but Iorveth repeated the motion several more times before the old mortar finally began to crumble. He curled his lip in silent satisfaction.

He was going to escape yet another prison, and when he did, he was going to come back with steel and take his would-be prisoners head.

The sound of the dungeon door opening had Iorveth dropping his hands and turning to lean back against the cold wall just as Ouen and a man in Aedirnian colors came into view. He clenched his jaw and tilted his head back, looking down his nose at the excited glint in both men’s eyes.

“I can’t tell from here.” The soldier said, tilting his head.

“Let him see your scar.” Ouen snapped, before drawing his sword when Iorveth refused to move. He unlocked the door and quickly pressed the point along Iorveth’s jaw, forcing him to turn his face toward the soldier. He used the sword again, this time pushing the fabric of his cap from over his blinded eye.

The foolish notion of testing his speed against Ouen’s and attempting to disarm him did indeed run through his mind, but Iorveth was of sound rationale enough to know that sword would be through his eye before he’d done more than lift a hand.

“It’s him… well done Sir Ouen… King Atkin will be most anxious to negotiate for the transfer of him into Aedirn’s custody.”

“Sir Ouen… there’s a situation upstairs.” A new voice spoke quietly from the doorway.

Ouen sneered triumphantly at Iorveth and quickly withdrew from the cell. “I’ve already received offers from Dol Blathanna and Nilfgaard, though Aedirn is the first to send delegates. I anticipate our negotiations will go very well.” He sent one last look at Iorveth through the bars, his smile thin but pleased.
And then Iorveth was alone with his anger and hatred. His hands lifted above his head and wrapped tightly around the chains, the iron biting into his palms, and pulled.

Wendy watched with an impressed raise of her brows as Dain and his men bound and gagged the last of the soldiers they had come across. They didn’t know how many there were, having counted at least ten arriving on horseback, plus Ouen himself. So far, they had four Aedirinians and two of Ouen’s, with very little blood and chaos.

With a thrill, she remembered the rush of adrenalin as one of the enemies beard down on her, his sword raised high over his head as he slashed it downward at an angle, his aim for her neck. She’d recalled Iohn’s bare bones instructions and lifted her sabre, not with the intent of overpowering the soldier for she knew she didn’t have a strength that could match his, but to keep her sword angled enough that his momentum slid his strike uselessly away and off balance.

She’d heavily dropped her boot heel on his knee, weakening his stance even more and allowed Dain the moment to strike his sword hilt against the back of the soldier’s head, knocking him out. The mixture of words such as ‘I can’t believe I did that’ and ‘I’m a damn badass’ floated around her rushing head, encouraged even more by the proud wink Dain tossed her way.

A hope that they might actually be successful began to tease the edges of her thoughts, but she rushed to push them back, a firm believer in such thoughts jinxing the outcome.

“Where do you think Ouen and the rest are?” She said quietly as the others joined her and Dain once their tasks were done. Presently they were in what was once a dining room, though little remained of the trashed furniture.

“Word will have reached him, wherever he is. We will draw him to here. We know our exit is at our back and we can easily watch for the signal since most of the roof is gone.” Dain said quietly and turned to watch the only door their enemy could approach from.

Wendy wanted to say she should have known this and figured it out on her own, with how many times she’d studied the art and strategy of combat, but it was entirely different to live it. This was one of those things that she could readily admit you couldn’t learn from a book. She knew to look for every possible scenario all at once and judge the best outcome but unless you were used to making such decisions, you wouldn’t be able to as quickly as Dain just had, as Geralt had just awhile before.

As Iorveth had with the bandits that morning so long ago now.

She made her own decision just then and moved into the shadows on the far side of the room where most of the ceiling had fallen or hung nearly to the floor. Dain nodded his approval before focusing again on the door.

They weren’t kept waiting, as several heartbeats passed and then the door burst open and one of Ouen’s men, followed by two Aedirinians swept into the room their swords drawn. Dain immediately signaled for his men to lower their weapons.

“I have to admit… you showed up much sooner than I’d expected.” Ouen said in a quiet voice as he stepped into the dining room. “How?”

Dain shrugged and cautiously stepped around Ouen, turning the man’s stance away from Wendy. She was immediately filled with a surprising amount of anger and hatred for this man. For his betrayal and inhumanity. What he’d done and what he still planned to do. She adjusted her hold on
her sabre and waited.

“We never left. Call it a paranoid nature born from decades of dealing with humans.” Dain replied once he’d stopped moving.

“Ah. Tell me then, how fares Ryre?”

“Gone.”

“And Iohn?”

“Nothing was left.”

“That nearly makes me sad, after all Iohn’s grandfather took in my great grandfather when he lost everything. And it’s all thanks to him that I have this glorious opportunity to do a bit of good for my country.”

“Are you not going to ask after Aevon?”

“Who? Oh! The bastards whore. She would have been dead before we barred the doors.”

Silently, Wendy raised her sabre and stepped to his side, leveling the blade against his neck so tightly he didn’t dare turn to look at her. She felt a sense of power she’d never felt before, seeing the look of fear in his face as he watched her from the corner of his eye. She felt terrified of the feeling but in that moment, she needed it, held onto it with a tight grip as she faced the man who’d left her for dead.

She’d had several clever comments saved up for her moment, snappy retorts such as ‘I should have been dead’ or ‘You want to negotiate, let’s negotiate.’ But all those unnecessary words left her, and she tightened her hand around the hilt of her sabre.

Within moments of Ouen’s departure from the cell, Iorveth had the hook pried from the wall. Just as quickly he used the long end to pick open the latches on the manacles and dropped them to the floor with a careless toss. He’d just unlocked his cell door when the sound of footsteps echoed from deep within the darkness and he quickly pressed against the wall, waiting for his moment to strike.

A soldier, one of Ouen’s, paused and faced the opposite wall. A moment later the sound of a stream of liquid splattering on stone had Iorveth rolling his eye but he knew an opportunity when he saw one. Moving quickly, he knotted a fist in the hair at the back of the soldier’s head and smashed it forcefully into the wall. He stepped back, satisfied as the soldier crumbled into the pool of his own piss.

“You know, just once, I’d like to actually get to rescue you.”

Iorveth whirled at the sound of Geralt’s voice, watching as he and the sorceress stepped into the light. “You take too long.” He said quietly, reaching for his weapons. He was only dressed in his breeches, leaving him feeling exposed and vulnerable, but having the familiar weight of steel hanging low on his hips and the feel of his bow in his hand eased the feeling to bearable.

He turned to head to the stairs that lead to the main part of the manor.

“We need to leave Iorveth. Wendy and the others are waiting for our signal that it’s safe for them to
“get out of here.” Triss said quickly, rushing to catch up to him but her words stopped him abruptly.

His relief and shock that Aevon was alive was overshadowed with the knowledge that she was presently there. “What do you mean, waiting for a signal?” He said in a dangerous tone.

“We weren’t certain of the situation, and had little time to do any recon, so she and the other Scoia’tael created a distraction, keeping Ouen and the Aedirinians occupied.”

“This ends. Now.” Iorveth growled and took the stairs two at a time. He was tired of playing this game of advance and retreat, and now that Aevon was in the middle of it… he was just done. He had the advantage and he was going to exploit it until his blade sank to the hilt in Ouen’s chest.

The familiar feel of bloodlust coursed through him, taking over with every step, and when he faced the first of the Aedirinian’s it was with the immediate release of an arrow.

“How-“ Ouen swallowed noisily. “How are you alive?” His gaze dropped to her waist, where he knew he’d stabbed her.

“The important question right now is how you could?” Wendy said quietly, clamping down on her emotions. “You betrayed Iohn… tried to kill us all. All in order to sell Iorveth to the highest bidder?” She shook her head. “You’re a monster.”

He bared his teeth at her. “That’s where your wrong. Do you know who you opened your legs for? Do you know what he’s done?”

Wendy swallowed and pressed the blade tighter against his skin until a thin line of blood began to race down his skin. “I know enough.”

He let out a humorless laugh. “I don’t think you do. Use your imagination… you think he only killed soldiers? Think old women and children. Mother’s on the brink of childbirth. Humans simply living but he cut them down anyways.”

Wendy truly already knew but to hear it still brought the sting of tears. “And it’s the same for his people. Humans have done the same to his and his to ours. It’s exhausting, this world, and there’s never anyone willing to admit that they did wrong. That they hurt the other. Too concerned with their own anger and pain to open their eyes to the bigger picture that it doesn’t have to be this way.” She silently begged for Triss to signal that this was done. That Dain and his warriors could lift up their arms and they could escape into the darkness just as planned. But the signal had yet to light up the sky.

“You’re wrong. They are a plague, and while some have their uses, the special breed that is Iorveth and his band of murderers, deserve what King Atkin is going to deliver to them all. Beginning with Iorveth.” Ouen bit out.

Wendy’s gaze watched him, more saddened than angry now. Even if she did get out of this with Ouen still alive, he now had a thirst for capturing Scoia’tael and he would never rest until every last one was gone. She remembered the conversation with Eloen, about if she were one of them, and how she’d faltered in her answer. She no longer doubted her place amongst humans or elves.

“Scoia’tael were an army that has turned into something greater. They’re an idea. A promise that freedom will come to those who are oppressed and live in fear, so long as the breath exists in just one still left and willing to fight for it.” Wendy said quietly, her heart beating erratically in her chest.
“Are you claiming your allegiance to them? You would betray your own people?”

“You don’t have to be Aen Seidhe to be Scoia’tael. And yes I am. You’ve made it very easy for me to decide.”

“Then you’ll enjoy the same fate.”

Wendy started to shake her head in annoyance, tell him that he’d already tried that on her, but she grew distracted by the sound of swords clashing from outside the room. The moment she turned her head she knew her mistake, but before she could tighten her stance against Ouen he slammed the back of his hand against the side of her head, effectively knocking her aside.

She fell to her hands and knees and shook her head against the painful throbbing radiating through her. She’d barely blinked before a kick caught her in the stomach, forcing all breath from her body and rolling her to her back.

She hazily acknowledged the fighting going on around her, Dain swung his sword, spinning out of the way of one of Ouen’s men. At some point, someone must have cut the other soldiers loose for they were now severely outnumbered. One of her arms felt heavier than the other and she blinked, remembering her sabre. Just in time too, for she blinked again at the vision of two Ouen’s bearing down on her with his sword and with nothing more than instinct guiding her she lifted her sabre and put every ounce of strength into stopping his downward blow.

The vibration of his steel striking hers was like fire racing down her arms and her strength gave way until his blade was mere inches from her neck. Wendy couldn’t breathe, couldn’t think. All she could do was stare into the mad like gleam in Ouen’s dark brown eyes. But she knew he wasn’t crazy, he had a thirst for power and he thought killing her and those she cared for was going to grant it to him.

Her arms ached and shook with the strain of holding him back and vaguely she wondered if he was toying with her. Holding back his true strength in order to create fear in her eyes, or perhaps give her a false sense of hope that she might be able to fight him back just before he crushed her, but she didn’t have the strength to show any emotion at all.

Whatever his reasons for not following through immediately, they were his downfall for with a heartbeat later, a body crashed into his, sending him sprawling into the pile of ceiling debris. She gasped in a breath as her arms fell uselessly to her side but she’d barely begun to comprehend what was happening before a familiar touch cradled her cheek and a face she’d only last seen in her dreams appeared above her.

She tried to say his name but her throat was closed with emotion, and really, he was gone again before she would have been able to. She turned her head, searching for his lithe form amongst the chaos in the dining room. Taking a deep breath she painfully rolled to her knees before bracing her hand on a broken bench and pushing herself to her feet.

It occurred to her as she finally caught sight of Iorveth fighting against Ouen, Geralt aiming his crossbow, and Triss throwing a soldier into the nearest wall with magic, this was not the plan. But it was what they had to work with now. She had to accept that lives were being lost today, and she could feel guilty for it later but she was damn if any of the lost would be theirs.

She focused her sluggish gaze on Ouen as he danced away from Iorveth, shoving one of his own men into his path. Iorveth quickly dispatched the unfortunate man, his predator like stare never leaving his prey. He’d nearly reached the obviously frightened man when his body stumbled forward, the sudden impact of an arrow high in his shoulder knocking him forward.
Wendy cried out with wide eyed horror and twisted away to look over her shoulder. On the roof and aiming down was an Aedirn archer, and he’d already knocked a second arrow.

“Geralt! The roof!” Wendy shouted, already turning back to Iorveth and Ouen. He was the only one with a ranged weapon at the ready that she could think of and she tried to sprint forward. Geralt’s bolt released just a second after the second arrow hit Iorveth close to the first, bringing him to his knees for a moment.

It was enough for Ouen to see victory was in his reach and though all she had was a view of his profile, she saw the excitement in his expression. She was going to be too late, Wendy realized as his blade lifted and came down but Iorveth wasn’t done yet. He slammed his sword upward, and though his position weakened his effect, it was enough to push Ouen back a step and give him the space needed to stand.

But in a blink, Ouen was on the offense. “Atkin will be disappointed that he didn’t get the chance to kill you and you’re worth less to me dead, but I’ll take it.”

Wendy was close enough to hear the words bit out from bared teeth, and with her heart pounding painfully she realized she’d reached that point. Come to her crossroads. Ouen was going to kill Iorveth, could see it in his eyes. Was no better than the man who had ordered the annihilation of an entire village since he’d gladly see anyone associated with Iorveth and his warrior’s dead. There was no one else in the room to her other than the three of them. She’d lost track of how many had fallen and by who. She didn’t even know if Geralt had successfully taken out the archer as her vision had become tunneled and her only goal, reaching the both of them.

Ouen used a hard side slash in an attempt to break Iorveth’s grip but he held tight and countered with an upward hit which Ouen easily spun away from. He paired the spin with a blow of his fist to Iorveth’s blind side, the hit snapping Iorveth’s head to the side and dropping him to a knee. Having finally learned his lesson in taking time for grandiose comments and cold stares, Ouen didn’t hesitate this time and readying a killing blow, with full intent to follow through this time.

The amount of time from the moment of Iorveth’s appearance to her lifting her sabre firmly to her side had to have only been seconds, but it felt as if a lifetime had passed. And now that she knew which path she was taking as she stood at her crossroad, she didn’t hesitate. Guilt and regret would no doubt come for her, dragging her roughly into a hell she would have to claw her way out of, but the decision was made.

She thrust her blade into Ouen’s back, as far as her strength and momentum could send it. She hardly noticed as Ouen’s body went taught, as she had already wrenched back from him. With wide eyes she watched as Iorveth quickly sank his own blade into the stunned man’s stomach, pulling away when Ouen began to slump forward onto his shoulder.

Wendy couldn’t tear her eyes from the sight of Ouen crumpling to the floor. Someone pushed her from behind, sending her stumbling forward a couple of steps but she didn’t notice, so entranced by the sight of blood spreading across the fabric of his padded armor. She became lost in the memory of how less than a day before, she’d been just as entranced by the same sight.

A voice in her head screamed for her to snap out of it, that Iorveth needed her, that there was still a battle to be fought, and for a moment she felt a sense of hollow darkness sucking her strength from her. But somehow she found the will to close her eyes, to turn her head away from the finality of what she’d done and drag in one deep breath.

Upon opening her eyes once more she caught the sight of Iorveth staggering to stand and stalking slowly toward Dain and the soldier he was currently trading strikes with. Her attention became
caught by the quick approach of an Aedirnian. He had a bleeding shoulder with an arm that hung useless at his side, but the feral look in his eyes paired with the glinting dagger in his hand said he was anything but useless.

He’d assessed the situation carefully, knowing his wound meant he was no longer a match for any of the more formidable opponents but as for her… Wendy knew she was an easy target. Small and obviously inexperienced the soldier no doubt expected he could easily take her down. And he was probably right.

She felt sick to her stomach and wanted nothing more than to fall to her knees and cry, but her fight or flight instinct was screaming for her to fight. She was bone weary, her exhaustion from the night before still weighing on her heavily. Emotionally drained with a world of guilt laden baggage to sort through and a fear for Iorveth as he continued to fight with two fucking arrows imbedded in his back, she knew she had to continue on as well.

There was so much for her to prove, to herself, to her friends, and to this insane world she’d found herself in. And she wasn’t going to let this murderous asshole single her out just because he thought she was weak and an easy kill. And she knew she was. She was everything he saw and more. Not only small and inexperienced, but terrified and exhausted.

It was going to take very little effort for him to strike her down but she didn’t have any other choice but to try. So, with a mix of dozens of books, movies, and YouTube videos added into everything Iohn had taught her in a three-hour period, she dropped into a defensive plow ward.

Perhaps it was his use of his non-dominate hand but she was able to parry with surprising ease, though she had to clench her jaw when his higher leverage pushed her back. One thing she did have in her tool belt of advantages was her ability to move quickly. She was winded and tired but he was wounded and angry which made his swings sloppy and easy for her duck under until she managed to connect a slice diagonally up his chest.

Before she could think of what she’d done, she used his surprise against him and for the second time within mere minutes, thrust her sabre forward with a pitiful excuse for a lunge but her blade sank into his chest all the same. It vaguely clicked in the back of her mind once she realized that the blade didn’t go very far, that the reason was because she’d hit bone, and the thought twisted through her mind causing a mix of horror and fascination.

So lost in watching the blood bloom around the steel protruding from the soldier’s chest, she missed his last attempt of taking her down and his dagger caught her on the cheek, slicing upward with the point catching on the bridge of her nose, barely missing her glasses.

Wendy stumbled back with a cry of surprise more than pain, but it only lasted a moment before she rushed forward again and caught the sword handle with both hands and put the last of her strength into shoving it forward, past the soldier’s ribcage and into whatever organ the blade could reach.

With blood running down her face, she stared into the mans eyes, startling blue like her own and finally empty of rage but now filled with horror. When his strength finally left him and he fell to his knees, Wendy went with him, still holding tightly to the hilt. She felt her heart twist painfully as he struggled to breath and blood trickled from the corner of his mouth.

In her mind she screamed that she was sorry, she hadn’t wanted to kill him, to kill any of them. That she was going pay for it dearly, not that it would be of any consolation to him… but these were useless words locked inside her mind and he was already dead.

Her arms began to shake from the exertion of holding his full weight and though her stomach turned
painfully as she did so she pulled back on her sabre. It was difficult, perhaps even more so than when
she’d thrust it into his chest but a hand wrapped around hers and with the added strength she
managed to pull it free before letting it fall into a bloody mess on the floor in front of her and
watched as the soldier slumped to his side, his eyes staring through her.

Blinking, she glanced around listlessly, catching sight of Triss throwing up a barrier between Geralt
and one of the final soldiers, giving the witcher time to drag his sword from the chest of one soldier,
spin and slash with a two handed swing, sending the soldiers head flying from his body and
smacking against the stone wall with a sickening crack.

Everywhere she looked there was blood. A Scoia’tael walked up to a soldier still clinging to life,
used his foot to roll the man onto his back before piercing the man’s heart in a smooth move.
Surprisingly she didn’t flinch, but she blinked and searched for Iorveth. He was knelt beside her and
it was then she realized, he must have been the one to help her remove her sword.

All at once, every detail from the battle fled and were replaced with the current state he was in. The
arrows were still lodged in his back and his breathing was coming in labored drags. His head hung
low and it seemed as if every ounce of his strength was put into staying upright and breathing.

“Triss!” Wendy cried out frantically as she hastily shoved her sabre into its scabbard and pulled
Iorveth’s head onto her shoulder, wrapping her arms around his waist in an attempt to take some of
his weight from straining his back. His breath was hot and uneven against the skin of her neck and
his arms hung limply at his sides.

Within a heartbeat Triss was at her side. “I have to get him out of here. I think one of the arrows may
have reached a lung.” She looked over her shoulder to Geralt as he strode toward them, Dain and his
warriors watching on as well. “I’m going to Novigrad by portal. Follow by horse if you wish but
Iorveth won’t last long enough to the nearest village much less somewhere we trust.”

Geralt nodded. “I’ll be there after I return to Ryre for our belongings.”

“Wendy?” Triss asked without looking at her, instead she moved to the center of the room and
closed her eyes.

“I’m going with you.” She said in a voice so clear she almost didn’t recognize it as her own. There
was absolutely zero scenarios in any universe where she let him out of her sight in that moment.

“We’ll leave him in your capable hands Aevon, Merrigold the Fearless.” Dain said quietly before
kneeling at Wendy’s side. When she met his gaze he winked at her with a small smile. “I’ll return to
see to our people in Adhart and await the commander’s orders.”

She swallowed with difficulty and nodded her acceptance. With a pat on her shoulder Dain and the
others followed Geralt from the room while Triss cast her spell, summoning a portal. With her eyes
locked on the fascinating sight she pressed her lip against his ear.

“Triss and I are going to help you stand. We’re taking you to Novigrad, alright my love?” She
whispered, her heart clenching painfully when he nodded, his forehead still pressed into her
shoulder.

Triss slung his bow over her shoulder and knelt beside them. Together, the women eased one of his
arms across each of their shoulders and helped him stand. Being slightly taller than Wendy, Triss
held more of his weight than she did but his head rested on top of hers and as they led him through
the portal and into Triss’s room at the Rosemary and Thyme.
As quickly as they could manage they eased him onto the bed, Triss snapping her fingers and every candle in the room lit up instantly. Wendy didn’t have time to examine him as Triss immediately set about gathering supplies. Knowing she would need help, Wendy quickly pressed her lips against his damp temple and followed after the sorceress.

She wanted nothing more than to curl up beside him and sleep for three days before having to face herself but first she had to help him survive the next twenty four hours. She knew enough about lung injuries to know that they had to work quickly. A collapsed and damaged lung was serious even by modern standards.

“Triss! We expected you to be gone longer and who- Wendy?” Dandelion called out from his place near the tavern bar. The main floor was crowded and noise, enough so that none paid any attention to the two bloodied and tattered looking women.

“We’ll explain later. I need a bucket of boiling water in your cleanest bucket and your freshest linen.” Triss said quietly, coming to a stop before him.

He shifted his gaze quickly between them for a split second before pointing in two directions. “Water in the kitchen, linen in the basement.”

Wendy shared a glance with Triss. “I’ll get the water.” She said and at Triss’s nod quickly pushed her way through the crowd followed by Dandelion.

“Bucket.” He said, holding one out to her while he held a second. Quickly they dunked them into the large kettle hanging over the kitchen fire and made their way back to the stairs, just as Triss appeared from a trap door in the far corner of the room.

“Oh Iorveth… what have you gotten yourself into this time?” Dandelion said with a concerned smile once the three of them made it back into Triss’s room.

“Have you treated punctured lungs before?” Wendy asked, twisting her hands nervously as Triss cleaned a small knife.

“A few. Luckily lungs repair quickly and Iorveth’s a stubborn elf. They heal quickly as it is. But first we need to safely remove the arrow… and I’m going to need help. Can you keep him calm while I begin?”

Wendy quickly nodded and moved around the bed to kneel next to his head. His ragged breathing and quickly paling color worried her to the point where she thought she might get sick and it was with a trembling hand that she reached out to wrap around one of his. His eye was closed but she noticed the fluttering of his eyelid as he recognized the touch as hers.

“Here, he’s going to need this.” Dandelion said from across the bed, holding out a leather strap.

She quickly took it. “I need you to bite down on this. I’m sure you know the drill, seeing as this is becoming quite the habit for you.”

The corner of his lip curled up in a brief smile before unclenching his jaw just enough for her to press the leather between his teeth. She took a deep breath and shared a look with Triss who nodded and quickly and set the knife to his skin, widening the opening in order to dig the arrow from his body.

Wendy bit her lip to keep from whimpering and tried to keep the tears back but failed on the later. His hand tightened around hers painfully though he gave no other indication of his level of pain. Feeling her stomach turn at the sight of Triss working as quickly as she could Wendy laid her head down beside his.
In order to do so, the long cut on her cheek was pressed painfully into the blanket but she welcomed the burning sensation. It was nothing in comparison to her previous days wound and even less so than Iorveth’s but it helped her stay focused.

“I walked the dream world.” She whispered breathlessly, her gaze watching him struggle to breath and a muscle jump in his clenched jaw. “My family was there, just as I remembered them. And as I was with them the loveliest song filled the air. I followed the melody through the forest and there you were.” She broke off as his body tensed and his teeth bared in a silent growl.

“That’s one.” Triss said quietly.

“I saw something in that dream, many things actually. Things I want for myself, things I want for others. As soon as this is over and I’ve had a long bath, I’m going to make one of them happen.” She ran a finger down his nose, feeling herself going slightly cross-eyed until she blinked her eyes back into focus. “Now, I know you’re curious, but it’s a surprise.” She smiled when his eye opened into a narrow green gaze. “And you can’t refuse.” It was difficult to tell but she could have sworn his eye rolled instead of merely falling closed once more. And it distracted her from the cool sensation spreading across her face, replacing the sting of irritated skin pressed against fabric.

“Second is done.” Triss added, drawing Wendy to sit up. Dandelion handed her a square of linen so she could wipe up a thin line of blood he couldn’t easily reach. “The nick to the lung looks shallow and nothing else was hit. Just a couple more scars.”

Wendy sighed, deeply relieved that she wasn’t going to have to figure out a way to fashion a sort of chest tube, and that he would be able to heal on his own. Feeling stronger and more stable with the knowledge she watched as Triss quickly stitched the wounds closed and with some assistance from Wendy and Dandelion, wrapped his chest with linen.

She followed behind as Triss and Dandelion helped Iorveth to stand and walk him to a clean and vacant room. He didn’t have his own as Triss did, but Wendy recognized it as the one she’d stayed in during her previous visit. Gesturing that he was fine enough to sit on the edge of the bed, Dandelion left to send up a tub and buckets of hot water. Triss remained a moment and approached Wendy who allowed the sorceress to tilt her chin this way and that.

“Remarkable.” She whispered, a curious gleam in her eye.

“Will it need stitches?” Wendy said without fear. She’d had stitches before and really they weren’t as bad as some expected.

“I think that will not be necessary… whatever is happening to you Wendy… it’s turning out to be an extraordinary gift. Rapid healing is not something unheard of here, but it’s usually associated with beings with magical blood or witchers. And seeing as how you’re neither…” Triss allowed her words to trail off as Wendy lifted a hand to run along her most recent wound.

The skin dipped slightly on a new seam that ran in a straight line from near her jaw up to her nose. It was not a free bleeding wound like she would have expected but a fully healed scar. Wendy’s hand dropped to her side and she shook her head wearily, a renewed wave of exhaustion crashing down on her.

“Perhaps you can speak to Avallac’h once I’m gone. Until then I’m about to pass out and need to collapse before I go anywhere.”

“Not before a bath.” Dandelion called out and waved in a few maids carrying a large tub and buckets of water. Once done, they left to repeat the same for Triss in her room.
“Dandelion… Triss… Thank you.” Wendy said, fighting back a yawn. Triss squeezed her shoulder and Dandelion rocked on the heels of his slippered shoes, desperate curiosity shining brightly from his eyes but he allowed Triss to grasp his wrist and pull him from the room, closing the door soundly behind them.

Wendy released a breath she hadn’t even known she was holding and quickly knelt before Iorveth, easing his head up with a hand on the side of his jaw. Her breath caught in her chest as his exhausted gaze met hers, a silent emotion resting inside that she couldn’t recognize. She was at a loss for words just as thousands of them tumbled messily through her mind. He was alive and for the most part in one piece, and there was so much she had to say, needed to say for her sake but wasn’t so certain it was something he needed to hear.

Instead of saying anything, she pushed everything down, locking it away for another day when neither of them were practically dead on their feet. She pulled a bucket with water still inside closer to them and dunked a strip of linen into the hot water before running the cloth across his skin, wiping away smudges of soot and blood. His pallor was still pale and his breath ragged but he was no longer gasping. She continued to wipe away the horror of the past day from his skin. She eased patch hat off and set it aside on the dresser. Cleaning his hair was a bit trickier but with an extra length of linen wrapped around his shoulders she managed to do a decent enough attempt.

The entire time, he watched her silently, that mysterious emotion still shining out at her, making her breathless and nervous until she deemed him clean enough to rest comfortably. Leaving him to lay on his chest after removing his swords and leaning them against the wall next to hers she turned to the quickly cooling tub of water.

It didn’t take her long to strip down, toss her glasses onto the dresser where they landed on patch hat, and settle into the tub. Dandelion hadn’t left them with any soap, but Wendy didn’t particularly care, she just wanted the blood and ash washed away. After the shortest bath of her life she dressed back into her soiled yet not to an unbearable point clothing and tied her hair into a tangled braid.

Her body was weak with the need to rest and the sigh that escaped her as she at last joined Iorveth in the bed, sliding the cool blanket up over her was long and deep. However, sleep eluded her long enough for her to wait for Iorveth to fall asleep, and it was only when his breath had eased into long takes with just the slightest roughness that she closed her eyes and allowed the exhaustion to overcome her.

It never occurred to her to be afraid of dreaming again.

Chapter End Notes

A/N So let me know what you think of the action. I think it’s where I do the worst and am open to constructive criticism
Iorveth awoke to the feel of fingers running lightly through his hair and humming floating through the air. A hand rested high on his shoulder and occasionally a thumb would trace a random circle across his skin. A small sigh escaped him and he pressed the side of his head deeper into his pillow, only realizing when the pillow shifted that he was resting on a lap, and one of his hands lay curled around a bony blanket covered knee.

For the moment, the events of the previous days didn’t exist. He didn’t feel the ache in his back, didn’t notice the small discomfort when he breathed. Anger and hatred had melted away to contentment and he allowed nothing in his mind to exist outside of the unfamiliar tune. He was alive and free, Aevon was alive and in remarkable health, and another enemy lay defeated. Her song continued on, lulling him nearly back to sleep.

“Are there words to sing with this song?” He murmured in a voice slurred by sleep.

Aevon paused her humming and her hands stilled for a moment before resuming. “I have a terrible singing voice, so you have to swear that you won’t laugh.”

“I’ve heard your singing before and fully swear.”

“Mmm not good enough. You have to pinky swear.”

“I would like to add that I have no idea what a pinky swear is but yes, I pinky swear. And I would also like to add the stipulation of food being requested. With these wounds, I’ll be laid up for a week at least.”

She reached for his hand resting on her knee and quickly held it up. His hum of disproval when her other hand left his hair was instinctive but he peeked open his eye to watch as she hooked their pinky fingers together, giving them a little shake, before laying all their hands back where they were supposed to be.

“That was a pinky swear. As for food… so long as you keep that swear…”

The notion was ridiculous and he failed to see how his honor was now at stake any more than it had been before the ‘pinky swear’ but he smiled slightly all the same and closed his eye once more.

Aevon cleared her throat and began to hum the same tune as before, only now the thumb on his shoulder tapped against him rhythmically before she stopped abruptly. “I’m not skilled enough to translate and work out how to keep it all in tune so this is just going to be all in English.”

“Great. Quit stalling.” He didn’t know why he was eager to hear the words, even if he wouldn’t have a clear understanding of them. Perhaps it had to do with the knowledge that for the first time in years, he didn’t have to immediately face the world. Or perhaps he knew that soon, Aevon would need to talk, and with it came all the ugliness she’d had to face, and the surprising amount of guilt he felt for it. Whatever his true motivation, it had been a very long time since… well just a long time.

She drew in another deep breath and began to hum and tap in rhythm. “Look at the stars, look how
they shine for you, and everything you do… Yea they were all yellow…” Her voice was no Priscilla but it was calm and soothing, dropping and rising with the syllables of her native language. She continued on through the verses and he picked up a thick layer of emotion to her voice. “Your skin, oh yea your skin and bones turn into something beautiful, you know, you know I love you so... you know I love you so…” He’d expected her to stop then as her voice wavered but she continued on.

He had the desire to see her face, to see the emotions for himself, so he slowly eased himself to his back, pleased that she didn’t pause in her song and her fingers continued to comb through his hair. She leaned against the wall with her eyes closed and glasses missing. His gaze lingered on the scar standing out against the unusual paleness of her skin. He reached a hand up to graze a finger across the mark, her eyes opening at his touch.

“I drew a line, I drew a line for you, oh what a thing to do… and it was all yellow... Your skin, oh yea your skin and bones turn into something beautiful, and you know for you I’d bleed myself dry... for you I’d bleed myself dry…”

Her blue eyes were dark with pain and when she closed them, a small frown remained. He dropped his hand back to rest on his chest, but he continued to watch her as she sang.

“Look at the stars, look how they shine for you... and all the things you do...” She drew in a long breath as she ended her song. “That was Yellow by a band called Coldplay.” She whispered.

“So- here’s where you could improve-“ It was a feeble attempt to make her smile, to fight back some of the darkness he knew she was feeling, and as miracles would have it, she let out a light chuckle and pulled lightly on his hair. “Sing another.” He said in a serious tone. Just a little longer before he had to think...

She squinted a single eye down at him. “Mmmno. In fact you now owe me a song on that fancy flute of yours.”

Iorveth arranged his expression into one of pain. “I think my two, deep, and aching arrow wounds need to be checked…”

Her expression turned worried for a hesitant second before she rolled her eyes. “Fine but now you’re in real musical debt to me.... How about The Old Ways by Loreena McKennitt?” She closed her eyes again and began to tap out the tune on the arm laid across his chest. “The thundering waves are calling me home, home to you. The pounding sea is calling me home, home to you... On a dark new year's night on the west coast of Clare, I heard your voice singing. Your eyes danced the song, your hands played the tune. 'Twas a vision before me... We left the music behind as the dance carried on, as we stole away to the seashore... We smelt the brine, felt the wind in our hair.”

The words were gentle and as she sang, that same level of emotion from before wavered her voice. He could feel it in the way her fingers would tense in his hair until she remembered to relax them once more. He wondered if she would explain the meaning if he asked, or if she preferred the safety of him not knowing. He almost preferred not knowing, as they sounded... sad. He was finding he didn’t understand feelings of contentment or fondness as well as he thought he did for they were tinged with sadness. He did not do sadness.

“And with sadness you paused, suddenly I knew that you'd have to go. Your world was not mine, your eyes told me so. Yet it was there I felt the crossroads of time, and I wondered why...”

He closed his eyes, as much as he’d wanted to push it away, the memory of fighting his way to her mingled with the sound of her voice. ‘You don’t have to be Aen Seidhe to be Scoia’tael. And yes, I am. You’ve made it very easy for me to decide...’
As we cast our gaze on the tumbling sea, a vision came o'er me, of thundering hooves and beating wings, in clouds above... As you turned to go I heard you call my name... “

Those words had echoed with him as he’d flung Ouen away from her. As he fought with his back on fire and drove his sword into Ouen’s stomach. As she worked to clean the remains of the battle from his skin.

“You were like a bird in a cage spreading its wings to fly. "The old ways are lost," you sang as you flew. And I wondered why...”

The battle was won and now there was no longer anything keeping her there.

“The thundering waves are calling me home, home to you. The pounding sea is calling me home, home to you. The thundering waves are calling me home, home to you. The pounding sea is calling me home, home to you.”

She ended the song but continued to tap the rhythm into his arm, silence taking its place. He vaguely wondered how much time had passed since their return to Novigrad, how long until Aevon brought up everything that had happened.

He felt strangely hesitant, something he was not used to feeling. Instead, as he usually did with Aevon, he waited. He opened his eye again and grazed over the sight of the dark circles under her eyes, the dryness to her lips, and hovered on the scar. He wondered how she felt about it, if she considered herself flawed or damaged...

“I’m sorry.” She said quietly, her eyes opening to meet his.

He didn’t ask for what she apologized... he already knew. Anyone else, or even a short time ago, he perhaps would have sought to make them or her suffer for what their mistakes had cost him... but for once he didn’t have the energy nor the anger to place the blame on her shoulders. Another sign that his... fondness for her was beginning to become more apparent. Her mistake in trusting others had already cost her dearly, more than it had him, and that was what mattered to him.

“I had already free myself from Ouen’s prison before Gwynbleidd and Merrigold arrived. It was not my first prison escape, and I doubt it will be my last.” He watched curiously as she gave the smallest flinch.

“How did you sleep?” She asked quietly, her gaze moving to the door, confirming his suspicion that he’d said something wrong.

“How did you survive?” He ignored her question. He thought she had died, had not yet considered how he’d felt about that significant fact for at the time he’d had one thought other than escape, and that was to kill Ouen. He’d focused on that objective, locking all other thoughts away.

She directed a pointed stare down at him. “I don’t know. I- I saw them take you, heard them closing the doors. And I blacked out. I dreamed an incredibly lucid dream, one that felt as if I were dreaming for hours.” She frowned, tilting her gaze toward the window at her side, sunlight shining through brightly. “I knew I was dreaming but I also learned... things, things I couldn’t have known. Such as Pop being alive or O- Ouen waiting to see who would pay the greatest sum for your capture.” She drew in a deep breath before exhaling slowly. “I wanted to stay there. But in the end I woke to Geralt and Triss saving the day.”

She looked down and raised the bottom of her shirt, exposing the red scar low on her abdomen that hadn’t been there during their night together in Ryre. “I felt the effects of smoke inhalation, of blood
loss and pain. But by the time we had a rough plan of where to find you, I suffered nothing but exhaustion."

"Have you considered any theories?"

She hesitated before lowering her shirt. "All I can come up with is a world ingrained with magic is somehow affecting me. Changing me perhaps." An intense sadness crossed her face before she managed to lock it behind a mask of impassiveness. "All the more reason to return to Earth."

It was an odd feeling, the pain in his chest. A difficulty breathing that had nothing to do with taking an arrow to the lung and more to do with the panic and longing he felt at her words. But she was right. This world was changing her, taking everything that she had once been when she first arrived. Some she’d given willingly, most had been stripped away by force. And he’d allowed it time and again despite his promise to prevent it.

"Do you think Triss will be willing to open a portal near the waterfall?" She asked in a voice just above a whisper.

"She will, if you wish it."

Aevon nodded, closing her eyes and resting her head back against the wall. "Good to know. I need to wait for Geralt to return with my belongings before I leave, and I’d like to know how Adhart and Ryre fare before I leave."

"How long since our return to Novigrad?"

"I slept for most of a day, you woke a few hours later."

"Gwynbleidd will arrive tomorrow in the night."

She sighed deeply before nodding. "In that case, I have one last quest to see to before then." She dropped her gaze to his, running a thumb high along the hollow of his scared cheek. "I’ll see what I can do about food."

"Where are you going?" A few weeks ago, he wouldn’t have asked such a menial question. It wouldn’t have been his business and frankly he wouldn’t have cared. But he recognized the worry he felt at the thought of her going anywhere without him.

"Just out for a moment." She said vaguely before carefully easing herself from beneath him as he sat up and took her place against the wall. Silently she slipped on her boots and knotted the laces before pushing her glasses onto her nose. She looked a disheveled mess but he was more concerned with the lack of color to her skin and the hollow that came with multiple days without a full meal.

"Aevon." He said when she reached for the door, bringing her to pause without looking back at him. "Take the sword with you."

She didn’t move for a long moment, to the point where he thought she either had not heard him or was going to ignore him. But finally she glanced at the weapon blending in with his own at the foot of the bed before quickly picking it up and buckling it on. He picked up the slight tremor in her hand and again that unfamiliar weight of guilt settled on his chest.

He moved to the edge of bed and caught her hand as she moved past and drew her to stand between his knees. He looked up at her and released her hand to rest on the back of her knee, frowning when she looked past him over his shoulder.
She was holding onto what had happened, trying to lock it away, and honestly he couldn’t blame her. It was something he’d done himself many times. And sometimes it’d worked for him, most times it hadn’t. But he had decades of time to allow his experiences to twist and change him into someone who could slash a throat without a blink and enjoy a round of Gwent in the span of a heartbeat. Aevon however was a different creature all together. She saw beauty and hope in everything, even him. Vibrant and fiercely alive even as she stood afraid, yes, she was going to be shaken.

With a deep sigh she slid her fingers into his hair and held him as he leaned his forehead against her stomach. “I’m not alright… and I knew I wouldn’t be… First it was Ouen or you… and then it was a nameless soldier or me. I’m allowed to not be okay though. Just tell me it gets easier.”

Iorveth couldn’t answer immediately. No doubt she just wanted hope, something to make everything alright. That something however, did not exist, and he was not fond of useless lies. “For me, it came to mean less and less to me. What is another life to me when that life was used to bring oppression and annihilation to our people? But for you? It will not get easier.”

Her silence was long, but she did not pull away. When she did speak it was with resignation. “They always say when it stops haunting you is when you’ve lost your humanity.”

“I suppose humanity has to do with being human?” He leaned back in order to arch a brow at her.

“More to do with being compassionate and caring towards others. If something, a dog for example, is suffering then it would be the humane thing to end its suffering. Or if someone is starving and you willingly give them your food. You have humanity still, though how about we call it ‘elfyness’.”

He quirked up a sardonic smile. “Humanity does not exist here. There are terrible people who you tolerate, and those who you kill before they kill you.”

She pulled lightly on his hair. “It must be exhausting being so terribly jaded. Which category do you fall in?”

“The later.” He said without hesitation, feeling a bit prideful as her hint of a smile grew slightly, chasing some of the shadow from her gaze.

“And me?”

His expression grew more serious. “You have the potential to be the later, if you continued with proper training.”

“I don’t suppose you could just invent a category just for me?”

“That would be playing favorites.”

“And unfair to Geralt?”

She yelped delightfully when he pinched the curve of her arse. “Indeed.”

The smile on her lips, the emotion in her eyes as she gazed down at him, though still tinted with sadness, turned something in his chest. He realized that he felt… cared for and had no idea what to do with it. He couldn’t very well tell her that he was coming to crave her attention, her support. That once he actually took a quiet moment and thought of his feelings when he thought she’d died, he was almost certain he’d find himself well and truly over that mystical ledge that Dandelion used to fill his pockets with.

She was returning to her world where she was safe and had a family, just as she should. He’d say
nothing that could possibly jeopardize or make the journey more painful for either of them. And it was she leaned down and pressed her lips to his brow before silently leaving without another word, for the first time he acknowledge that it was going to hurt.

He sat with his hands hanging loose between his knees, his heart pounding, and a panic closing this throat, wondering what had he done.

With silent steps, Wendy descended the stairs to a tavern already full of rowdy patrons with raucous laughter and lively music. “They start early here it seems.” She said to herself as she searched for a familiar face. She recognized Priscilla near the stage strumming her lute and singing a tale, a small crowed gathered around her and singing along completely out of tune but it seemed to only make her smile more.

Dandelion had his own crowd near the fireplace, shouting numbers and names at him while he scribbled in a book and Triss seemed to be in deep conversation with an unfamiliar man from an unfamiliar race. At her approach, Triss’s gaze lit up at the sight of her and she paused in what she was saying.

“Hi.” Wendy said uncertainly. She felt… different, being around other people. With Iorveth, in that tiny little room, though she had her new basket of demons to contend with, it had been peaceful and almost as if everything was going to be alright. But out here with the noise, the strangers, that ever looming unknown… she suddenly wanted nothing more than to march up those stairs and back under the blankets and never leave. With Iorveth in them of course.

But if Triss found her behavior awkward, she was at least kind enough to not mention it and instead nodded toward the stairs. “How’s our favorite outlaw?”

Wendy relaxed slightly and summoned a small grin. “Using his status as invalid to gather favors. Speaking of… I’m sorry for interrupting but can someone send up some food and clothes for him?”

Triss waved a hand in a general circle. “Help yourself. Dandelion won’t mind.”

After sending Triss and her companion a nod she turned away and followed the sounds that usually came from a kitchen and proceeded to ‘help herself.’ A washroom between the kitchen and a door leading outside had a basket of clothes, some colorful, some plain. She opted for a colorful red shirt with laces, and though it had yet to be ironed it was clean and would go well with Iorveth’s patch hat.

With it tossed over her arm she dodged several people cooking and preparing plates who sent her curious looks and piled what looked like a type of shepherd’s pie, a good serving of potatoes, and a vegetable covered with cheese. Balancing it in one hand she picked up a freshly poured tankard that had yet to be delivered to its drinker and quickly made her way back to the stairs and up to the room.

Biting her lip she carefully set her cargo down on a wooden chair at the end of the hallway before moving it to sit in front of the door then paused to stare at it. As terrible as the past forty eight or so hours had been, she was still… excited to see him again. Despite the nightmare that had followed her into her sleep, the weight of her looming departure, the guilt of nearly getting four people she cared for killed as well as actually taking a life with her own hands… it all faded just the slightest amount when he’d asked in that sleepy voice of his for her to sing to him.

It had reminded her that she was changed yet he was alive. She was leaving and he liked her horrible
singing. She loved him and he had a smile that she knew was just for her. Her heart was simultaneously whole while shattering apart, constantly on the brink of breaking all together. But she couldn’t yet, not here. She would lock all of it away until she was back on her little farm with Pop out and about. Then she could fall apart…

Until then, she still had something she wanted to do, so she gave a firm knock then quickly darted away. No one paid her any mind as she entered the kitchens again and though her stomach twisted at the thought of eating, she made a small sandwich to take with her and slipped out into the back alley.

Wendy felt apprehensive, venturing out into the city knowing very well she would be lost in a matter of minutes but she now had a better grasp of the language and felt she could at least manage. As for the deviants, hopefully the sabre would offer some sort of deterrent. She’d been hesitant to bring it, to acknowledge the existence of something so destructive. More because she could easily feel it becoming an extension of herself, of relying on it to keep her safe. But Iorveth was right in encouraging her to have it with her. Out here, she did feel safer, aided by the knowledge that if she had to use it, she knew she would at least be passable with the weapon.

As she nibbled at her sandwich and searched for her target, the streets passed her by as well as the people. Merchants waved her over to show off their wares, hoping to entice her to purchase anything from grilled fish that smelled so delicious she nearly forgot about her upset stomach and recently downed sandwich, to beautiful fabrics that had her imagining that ballroom dance she never got to have.

But nothing she came across were what she was looking for and had decided to travel deeper into the city when the sound of distressed barking caught her attention. Wendy leaned around the corner of the shop she stood next to and there under a wooden porch cluttered with tools and weapons sat a black and white dog that looked similar to the border collies of earth. It had teeth bared at a man who had a handful of rocks and a nasty smile twisting his lips.

His words were lost on her as he chunked a rock at the dog, causing the dog to scramble to its feet and lower into a defensive position, hair standing up on its neck. It was then that she also saw the three puppies huddled between a couple of crates, but Wendy was already striding forward, anger in every step and her glare ready to set fire.

“Hey asshole! Why don’t you try picking on someone your own size?” She called out, not even considering the man had several inches and pounds over her own. But her words had him hesitating to throw his next rock and he sent her a confused glance. “Why would you want to hurt that helpless momma dog? She probably barked at you because you were too close to her puppies and you’re a stranger, one who smells really fucking awful at that and- are you drunk?” Wendy watched as the man’s gaze went in and out of focus on her and his confusion turned back into his nasty smile. He took a step toward her, saying something in common speech about not understanding a word she spoke but he liked her spirit.

Wendy realized she must have been talking in English as she wrapped her hand around the hilt of her sword and carefully spoke in his language. “See this?” She snapped her fingers before his eyes and pointed down at her sabre. When he nodded with a sloppy jerk of his head she continued through clenched teeth. “If you hurt another animal ever I will stick you with the pointy end.” Maybe it was her heaving shoulders as she clearly voiced her threat, or that he was just drunk enough to have already lost interest but he handed her the rocks before wandering off.

She dropped the rocks with a glare over her shoulder before drawing in a deep breath and turning back to the dog watching her cautiously. “Are you alright little one?” Wendy said quietly, kneeling on the edge of the porch and sitting on her heels. The dog slowly laid down and as soon as she did
her three puppies hurled out from behind the crate to tumble around her. “You did a lovely job protecting them.” She couldn’t help smiling at the playful growls and ear tugs the poor momma dog was receiving, eyeing one in particular with a skip to her heartbeat.

“You use elder speech.” A voice came from the doorway and Wendy looked up to find a tall elven man with twinkling blue eyes and arms well-honed no doubt from years as a blacksmith.

Wendy at once felt at ease and stood with a hand held out. “I’m Wendy- or Aevon to some Aen Seidhe.”

He shook her hand with a firm grip. “Hattori. My thanks for stepping in. I thought a dog would offer some protection, and don’t get me wrong, Luna is fierce and loyal, but then came along the pups.”

Wendy smiled down at the now content looking dog and her playful puppies. “She did spectacular. I’m glad to step in but actually I was wondering…” She turned her glance back on Hattori and adjusted her glasses nervously. “I should very much like one of Luna’s puppies. I can’t pay you but if you need any work done, I’ll happily do so.”

Hattori crossed his arms and gave her thoughtful look. “Do you know anything about blacksmithing?”

“I’ve read about the process but have never done any work in a forge before.”

Hattori shrugged and waved her in. “I’m still searching for an apprentice and the workshop could use some attention. Maybe I’ll even have you swing a hammer a few times. When the sun sets, you can have your pick of the litter.”

For the first time since the fire, Wendy smiled with her whole face, excitement spreading through her body. “Truly?”

“You seem as if you would be a good match for one of her pups. As fierce as she is.”

Wendy tried to ignore her blush and looked around the shadowy workshop. Immediately she picked up on the general disarray of the tools and supplies and set about organizing the them by size and type, wiping down the shelves and tables as she went.

“Have you raised a dog before?” Hattori asked as he stoked the coals in the furnace.

“No, I’m more of a cat person. Someday when I’m old I want a house full of cats.” She bent over to push a few empty crates near the door and out of the way. “The puppy is a gift… for someone special.”

“Oh?”

Wendy smiled to herself at the obvious interest in his voice. She had a feeling the burly blacksmith was a gossip. “Yep. He had a puppy once, when he was a boy. I have to return home soon and wanted to leave him with a parting gift.”

“Here, come work this steel.”

Hattori nodded to a thick pair of hide gloves which she slipped on without question and held the clamp and hammer firmly. She smiled at Hattori as that first sing of hammer striking steel vibrated up her arms and he nodded encouragingly. Following his instructions, she continued to shape the steel into what had the vague resemblance to a knife.
So enthralled with the work that went into creating something from almost nothing, Wendy hardly noticed the hour grow late. It was arduous, consuming, and rather filthy work, and other than Hattori’s guiding instructions, they worked in silence. At some point Luna and her puppies joined them inside and slept on a pile of hay in the corner. Her mind remained clear of her troubles and heartbreak, until the moment Hattori stretched his arms and began to wash his hands in a bucket.

"Ready to pick out your pup?"

And just like that, Wendy was reminded of what awaited her the next day. She didn’t answer him immediately, instead she continued to put away the tools and even tried to sweep the floor before he gently eased the broom from her hands.

“I take it this parting for your home is not a joyful one?”

Wendy sat next to the sleeping dogs before reaching out to run her fingers through Luna’s soft fur, the dog opening an eye cautiously before easing it back closed. “I can’t help feeling that so long as I stay away from the tavern, this night will keep going and tomorrow will never come.”

“How long until you return to Novigrad?”

“I’m not. I’m not from here and I have someone waiting for my return.” She leaned forward to pick up one of the sleepy puppies with white uneven socks on all four of her paws and a small white line in the black fur on her forehead.

Hattori knelt beside her to scratch the puppy behind her ears. “None of us are from here except maybe gnomes… but we’re here all the same and have turned it into our home. Would you bring your someone with you? Maybe they could make their home here as well.”

Wendy looked up with startled eyes and shook her head frantically. “Absolutely not. This world is dangerous and wild. I’m not dragging Pop here and away from the land where his wife and daughter are buried…” She blinked back tears and held the puppy close. “I have to make a choice and I’ve made it.”

Hattori stood and walked toward the door and Wendy finally accepted that it was time to go. Her demons had caught up with her and it was growing time to face them. When he followed her outside, closing the door behind them she turned to thank him, but he waved it off.

“You said tavern, I take it you mean the Rosemary and Thyme?” At her nod he began to walk. “I’m in need of a good pint if you don’t mind my accompanying you.”

The puppy licked at Wendy’s chin sending a little tickle down her spine that she couldn’t help but smile at before nodding at Hattori. The street lamps were lit and the closer they came to the tavern the more people they came across in various stages of blissful inebriation, something that set Wendy on edge but thankfully none came near them and they reached the tavern without issue.

Before they went inside Hattori set a hand on her shoulder and though his eyes were kind they were serious as he met her gaze. “I wish you a safe journey Aevon but you say you have made your decision. You made it for this ‘Pop’ as well.”

“I did. He has no idea where I am or what has happened to me and I will not be telling him.”

“What a terrible burden for you to bear.”

Wendy’s smile was sad as she stepped away. “I know.”
Their paths split once they were inside the noisy building with little waves of their hands, Hattori heading to a table near the corner and Wendy to the stairs. She no longer saw Triss but Dandelion and Priscilla were still making their rounds and keeping everyone entertained but neither saw her as she made her way to the second floor, pausing in front of the door.

She was suddenly nervous of Iorveth’s reaction to what she was about to dump on him and then leave. It had been an impulsive thing to do, find a puppy and then leave with nothing more than a brief moment in a dream for encouragement...

Wendy looked down at the puppy and ran a finger down the white mark of her forehead… closing her eyes she recalled her dream. “*Around the fire my hearts desires…*” There had been several things seen in that moment. Some expected, some unexpected. And one of them had been a shaggy black and white dog curled up next to Iorveth as they sat next to the fire.

The knowledge made her stomach turn in an unpleasant way. If her dreams were linked to reality… Flashes of her most recent dream had her feeling dizzy and she stepped back to lean against the wall and pressing her forehead into the puppy’s fur.

There had been fur in the dream, soft and fighting off a biting cold. Salty air vibrating with a terrifying scream and a burning need to breath.

She pried open her eyes and tried to calm her breathing. If indeed this was more a premonition than a dream, then she needed to return to Pop as soon as Geralt returned. It made sense that the only way for these things to stop happening was to leave the place where they were happening. But not until she made sure at least one came true. She could sacrifice all the happiness she saw and felt around that fire if she could just be certain that look of contentment on Iorveth’s face remained.

Wendy gazed down at the little brown eyes watching her curiously and her apprehension began to melt away. Since waking she’d been consumed with finding this little dog, hadn’t known when she was supposed to appear in Iorveth’s life but had just felt the pull to try.

She drew in a deep breath and stepped forward, reaching for the door when it swung open suddenly. She yelped in surprise and stepped back when Iorveth appeared in the doorway. He froze at the sight of her, his gaze moving from her, down to the puppy, then back up to her.

“You’ve returned.”

Wendy quickly took in the red shirt, sword belt, and bared feet, a slow grin overtaking her face. “You were coming to look for me… weren’t you?”

Iorveth crossed his arms and leaned against the doorway. “You’ve been gone for hours. It seems that I waited too long.” He gave a pointed stare at the wiggling fur ball in her arms.

Taking a leap, Wendy promptly shoved the puppy into his arms as she passed him into the room. “She needs a name. And probably some potty training. Oh perfect!” She cried out at the sight of some potatoes still left over and proceeded to sit down and begin to eat. After two bites she heard the door close. The room was lit with several candles and at some point Triss must have visited and dropped off a couple of books. The title of the open one resting on the table read *Tristianna and Isador.*

“What is this?” He asked in a quiet voice and walking into view. He held his chin tilted toward the ceiling in an effort to avoid the excited licks coming from the little wiggling puppy in his arms.

“A puppy. Or dog if you want. Or there’s *canis lupis familiaris.***
“Aevon.”

“I had a dream about her.” She said as if that was the perfect explanation and continued her chewing.

“You had a dream about her and…”

“My dreams seem to have a habit of coming true.” Her voice had lost its confidence, the memory of terrible dreams over taking the good. It wasn’t necessarily true… she lifted a hand to her neck, the feel of rope tearing at her skin still vivid as the first time she’d dreamed it. Rope that had been meant for Iorveth.

“What else have you dreamed Aevon?” He asked quietly and set the puppy to the floor while he took the wooden chair next to hers.

She slowly finished her bite, her appetite disappearing as quickly as it had appeared. “Before, I was left with images. This time I have only darkness. But I feel warmth and cold brushing my skin. The taste of salty air. The sounds…” Wendy paused as a shudder snaked down her spine. “They’re horrible and I can’t breathe. It leaves me feeling crushed.”

“You’re afraid these will come true.”

Wendy rolled her eyes and pointed the fork in her hand at him “Well said Captain Obvious.” He tilted his head at her with a narrow gaze. He could look quite threatening, even with the laces of his shirt loose and his feet bare, when he wanted too. “What will you name her?” She asked, changing the subject.

The skin around his lips tightened just the slightest. “She is not mine to name.”

“Of course, she is. You can’t honestly mean to refuse her!” Wendy couldn’t help the panic in her voice and the sudden way she sat straight and alert.

“Aevon, I have no time to raise her.”

Wendy stood suddenly her hands on her hips. “Not true! I know very well of dogs raised in a life of travel. They would ride on the backs of their master’s horses until they were big enough to keep up. Cowboys particularly.”

“I have no idea what a cowboy is.” His voice remained low but the glare in his eye was anything but calm. “Take her with you or find her another home. Just because I had this fancy as a child does not mean it remains.”

Wendy’s mouth parted, and she struggled to keep the horror and hurt hidden away, clawed for the anger that would keep her fighting for this one thing. “You don’t get it! I dreamed of her. She’s important to you to- to- I can’t explain it! You have to keep her.” She knew her voice was rising and on the brink of breaking, but she had to make him understand. It was a pathetic thing to fight about she knew, and if circumstances had been different would have never even dreamed of doing such a thing… but like she’d said. It was a matter of immense importance that this dog be a part of his life.

When he stood, using his height to try and say what he wouldn’t with words, that he was stronger and could force the issue completely if he wanted, Wendy tried to ignore his arrogance and moved to cross her arms across her chest.

“Just because you dreamed I had that dog with me does not mean I am obligated to raise it.” He took a step toward her and she hated herself for it, but she took a step back, if only so she could keep her head level. “Have you even considered the danger she would be in? I live a bloody life Aevon and
you would subject her to that.”

Wendy gave a humorless laugh because honestly, she couldn’t believe his words. He was making her feel a bit crazy, arguing over something so… domestic. She loved it when he was angry, though usually not at her and she couldn’t help but wonder how it was possible to be simultaneously sad and aroused because of the same person. “Would you like to know how I found her? A drunk was yelling at her, her mother, and siblings, throwing rocks at them!” She poked a finger in his chest. “At least with you she would be cared for. You wouldn’t let anything happen to her just as she would do the same for you.” Wendy closed her eyes and drew a deep breath before opening them to stare into his gaze. “Please… just trust me. She’s special.”

He growled low in his throat and before Wendy could blink she was wrapped in his arms and his mouth slanted against hers, kissing her deeply. Every thought outside of how much she missed him was pushed aside as her hands twisted in the fabric above his hips and she put everything she had left into kissing him back. She had a finite amount of time left with him and honestly squabbling was the last thing she had in mind.

Fortunately, he seemed to be of similar minded because suddenly things began to move rapidly, and it was mere seconds before their clothing hit the floor. Swords were unbuckled hastily and clanged loudly as they were tossed aside. Glasses landed somewhere near the leftover food and boots barely unlaced before pants were shoved down.

Wendy was flat out achingly and crudely titillated and running her hands across his shoulders while he bit and sucked at her neck and shoulder, was just not enough. The feel of his arousal pressing almost painfully against her hip did nothing but make her need and want of him greater. His back was facing the bed, she remembered hazily and knew she had a sudden advantage. “Watch your back.” She whispered in that voice she’d only ever used around him before pushing him backwards until he sat on the beds edge. His hands dived into her falling braid and pulled her down until she kissed him deeply yet briefly.

She had other things in mind at the moment, so she dropped to her knees and broke the kiss. A quick glance showed the yet to be named puppy was chewing on the leg of one of the chairs and paying them no mind. Wendy wasn’t certain just how far intimacy and sexual relations went here. There were some cultures on Earth that thought oral stimulus was unnatural whereas regular old intercourse was of course a given. For the briefest of moments, she hesitated as she began to take him in hand, wondering if this was something done here in this world. What if he wasn’t into that? She bit her lip… What if he wasn’t into doing that to her?

As much as she wanted to suck his cock, see if she could make him loose some of that tightly coiled control, she wanted the same. The thought of his tongue on her alone was enough to make her wet and achy.

“Stop. Thinking.” He said between closed teeth.

It was at those words that Wendy noticed just how tightly his first held her hair, of the predatory gleam in his eye. Her stomach fluttered at the realization that yea… he wanted his cock sucked. She couldn’t stop the knowing smirk that stole across her mouth before summoning every little bit of naughty romance smuttiness she’d ever read and attempting to put it into practice.

Her gaze slipped from his, tracing the tattoo and scars that crossed his body. He’d removed the bandages, hopefully a sign that he was healing as quickly as Triss had mentioned. She continued down over the defined muscles that came with a lifetime of battle, to his lean hips and-

“Is everything alright in there? Iorveth? We heard yelling and a crash!” Dandelion’s muffled voice
came through the door.

Wendy froze, her gaze jumping from the cock in her hand to his annoyed yet unsurprised face. For a moment she felt like a teenager caught doing something incredibly embarrassing and scandalous before remembering that while she was still new to this, she was well within her right.

“Fuck off Dandelion!” She called over her shoulder just as Iorveth opened his mouth to hopefully yell the same thing.

“Oh! Wendy’s back. Triss! Wendy came back. I have the feeling I interrupted something inspiring!” The bard yelled, no doubt on purpose, hoping to be heard by them. Wendy met Iorveth’s gaze with an amused grin before focusing back on her quest.

Moving her hand in a quick experiment, just as he’d showed her, she was immensely satisfied when she had the desired effect of him closing his eye and sighing in pleasure. Ready for the next step she licked her lips before taking him in her mouth, just his head at first. His groan was long and guttural, and the sound sang through her blood.

Encouraged she took more of him and quickly found that he was more than she could take with such a weak gag reflex. Using her hand to make up for the rest she found a rhythm. The taste of him was addictive, as was the sounds coming from him. When she dragged the flat of her tongue down the bottom side he released her hair and laid back with a panting groan and began to thrust into her hand and continued on when she took him back in her mouth.

It was the hottest thing she thought she would ever experience, feeling him move his hips like that, prompting her to increase her pace. Her jaw ached slightly but she found it completely worth it when he whispered her name.

She’d just paused to switch hands when he suddenly sat up and pulled her away, causing her to protest. “Hey, I was doing some-” He silenced her with a kiss before laying back again, pulling her up until she knelt above him. Breathlessly she realized what he was about to do, his hot breath brushed the sensitive skin between her thighs, and she leaned her hands against the wall to hold herself steady as the anticipation and excitement made her dizzy.

The first brush of his tongue delving against her folds had her crying out and her hips bucked against him.

“Dandelion might hear.” He paused to say.

“He can write a sonnet about the sounds I’m going to make for all I care.” Wendy said, silently begging for him to keep going.

And he did. His mouth turned her body into fire, and the sounds that escaped her should offer plenty of inspiration to their bard friend. His hands were wrapped around her hips, pressing deeply into her in an effort to hold her still but the ache and need were becoming too much to possibly not move her hips.

When he sucked on her lips her head dropped back with a long, panting moan. It was becoming too much too fast and she opened her mouth to try and tell him, but he was already pulling her back and sitting up in a swift movement.

Wendy barely had time to drop her hands to his shoulders before she felt him lining up with her entrance. There wasn’t some brief pause where she cataloged everything she knew about riding cock, no time to feel anxious and hope she was doing everything just right. She was running on
instinct and that instinct told her to kiss him and let him guide her hips down.

With her arms wrapped around his neck she tangled her tongue with his deeply, the vague thought whispered at the back of her mind that she could taste a hint of herself before it was chased away by the feel of him easing into her.

Their moans mingled as he stretched her, this time with anything but discomfort, but the need to adjust was still there. When he filled her completely he dropped his forehead to her shoulder and tightly gripped her ass before moving her hips. The friction of her sliding up his cock before dragging her back down sent a need shuddering through her.

A need to rock her hips tightly against his, to tug on his hair, to bite his ear were becoming pressing matters. He tried to pull her hips up, but she ground against him, she shoved patch hat away and twisted her fingers tightly in the long dark strands, pulled on the lobe of his ear with her teeth, delighting at the hiss that spread against her shoulder.

Slowly she raised herself before slowly lowering herself, a rush to repeat the feel of him sliding in and out of her over and over was becoming consuming. His breathing was short, and his body trembled as she held him, and Wendy realized this sort of power was addictive but as much as she enjoyed teasing him, she was torturing herself as well. She needed release, her stomach was twisting painfully, and her center throbbed to an almost uncomfortable extreme. Iorveth bowed his back with a hand slipping from her hips to cup one of her breast and began to suck deeply on her nipple, causing Wendy to slide down his cock quickly and buck her hips against him almost uncontrollably.

“F-Fuck Iorveth-” She closed her eyes tightly, feeling herself growing so close to the edge. “I’m g-going-”

“Going to what dreamer?” He said in a harsh voice against her skin before he dragged the flat of his tongue from her nipple and up her neck.

Wendy didn’t even try to quiet her cries of pleasure as everything finally sent her over the edge. She clung to him as her release pulsed through her, every muscle in her body too tight to move except for her hips as she continued to undulate against him, his cock deep within her. He didn’t give her time to even think of recovery as he reaffirmed his grip on her ass with one hand, lighting her just slightly before leaning back to brace on his other hand.

She managed to watch him through a lazily narrow gaze as he bit his lip and began to thrust up into her. He was watching himself slide in and out and she didn’t know what was hotter, that little fact or his lip bite but she knew that if he didn’t finish soon she was going to want him again in a matter of minuets despite the ache that was now fulfilled yet newly sore.

His thrusts were becoming almost frantic before he slammed into her one final time, sitting up to bury his face in her shoulder and using both hands to grind her against him. His moans were that delightful animal like sound and she felt his teeth bite into her shoulder. The pleasure had her jerking her hips against him of her own accord until his own shudders finally began to subside.

Wendy pulled his head back just enough to kiss him sleepily. “I could stay like this forever.” She whispered against his lips. He trailed a kiss down her jaw before easing her from on top of him. She couldn’t help the whimper that escaped but she was more than willing to relax against the pillow for a moment, watching with a blurry haze of contentment as he stood and plucked up a folded cloth from next the wash basin which he tossed to her before picking up his own and cleaning himself off.

After doing the same to herself and storing the soiled cloths out of reach of the puppy before picking the puppy up and dropping her on the foot of the bed and settling herself under the blanket with a
sigh. She giggled lightly as the puppy wiggled up under her chin and licked at her ear causing Wendy to close her eyes.

“Aevon- no.”

Wendy grinned and held the puppy to her chest. “Iorveth- yes.” She felt the bed dip and opened eyes as the puppy scrambled over to Iorveth and bounced on her back legs in her quest to obsessively lick at his chin. “She adores you.”

“She’s a menace.” He said lowly and held her up with outstretched arms.

“An adorable menace.” Wendy cooed. He sighed and leaned over to set the puppy on the floor, which was immediately followed by wines and little tugs on the blanket as she no doubt was attempting to climb back onto the bed. “Aww Iorveth- don’t be heartless. This is her first night away from her family and you still haven’t even named her.”

He ignored her and instead stretched out beside her and pulled her close to take her mouth in a deep kiss, likely in an attempt to distract her and probably himself as well. She allowed the temporary distraction and sighed into the kiss, cradling his jaw between her hands, quite certain that feeling like this level of need mixed with satisfaction was illegal.

As he continued to lavish her with his lips she tangled her legs with his and pressed her thigh against his half soft cock. Her body was at odds with itself, the need she had for him quickly twisting deep within her mixed with the tenderness between her thighs letting her know that it probably wasn’t wise to go again so soon. It was with a sigh of regret that she pulled away simply gazed at him instead.

“Name the puppy my love.” She couldn’t keep the sadness from her voice as the silent thought that she needed him to accept this little piece of her. Tomorrow night or perhaps the morning early after next, she would be walking out of his life. She was suddenly riddled with the fear that she was going to be forgotten.

The puppy continued to whine mournfully, a sound that echoed inside of Wendy’s chest as she felt the same sense of sadness. For the first time since she arrived, she could admit with absolute certainty that she would have chosen to stay if she hadn’t had Pop to return to. As she lay there, staring into Iorveth’s sea green eye, his face illuminated by the single candle that had yet to burn out, and the brush of his fingers through her tangled hair, she thought about how drawn she was to him, to the land and magic around them.

She felt a terrifying curiosity about her dreams, the comfort she found in the weight of her sabre at her hip. The wish to explore every corner of this dangerous land and absorb every detail... to help bring safety and security to those in need just as the true Scoia’tael did every day. So many little things telling her to stay and she wanted to. Desperately.

But she couldn’t do that to Pop. He had already lost so much and even though her resemblance to her mother was a painful reminder, she knew he would rather have that resemblance than have nothing at all. He loved her, and she missed him. His quiet strength and his indulgence of her weekend binges on the television. He didn’t much have any interest in any genre outside of westerns, but he would sit in his lazy boy chair just as long as she did while watching the latest season of some comedy or British sci-fi.

She loved Iorveth, painfully so. Loved this insane, barely possible world. Loved the place she had already found in it, as if there had been a Wendy shaped hole just waiting for her to drop into. And though she was afraid of being forgotten, she had to go, and finding that little puppy had been her
last attempt to leave her mark. That her dreams were indeed supernatural and not her losing her mind.

Wendy was surprised when Iorveth suddenly pulled away and picked the puppy back up and dropped her at the foot of the bed before laying back.

“Azlin.” He said simply, ignoring the furry body bounding back up to their faces happily.

Wendy’s smile took over her whole face, her previous sadness and fear forgotten. “Azlin.”

The elder speech word for dreamer.

Chapter End Notes

A/N So there is an elder speech word close to dream, but it didn’t exactly fit so I looked into names that mean dreamer. Hope everyone enjoyed this little break from the stress of the last few chapters haha. The next chapter might be a bit slow in coming because I’m going to marathon some games, but I’ll still be writing in between. I’ve written over 110K words in the past almost two months and while the story isn’t near complete, I do want to slow down for a few weeks to continue developing plots and characters. Please continue to comment and like because that shit is like coffee to me. Cheers.
After a long, restless yet thankfully dreamless sleep, Wendy did everything in her power to stay that way. When awareness began to ease into her she stubbornly kept her eyes closed. A clap of thunder let her know a storm had made its way in but she urged the sound of rain on the window to lull her back to sleep. But it was finally natures urges that told her she couldn’t lay about anymore so she regretfully rolled from the bed and set about getting ready to face what was already shaping up to be a miserable day.

Wendy had long ago come to realize that she was alone which both disappointed and relieved her. Disappointed because to lay in bed next to Iorveth with only the newly named Azlin to bother them would have been the preferable way to spend such a day.

However she was also relieved because she could feel the oncoming signs of one of nature’s less enjoyable burdens, primarily waking with a pounding headache, an achy bloatingness, and a need to consume as many calories as she could find which is exactly what she planned to do.

She glared at her dirty clothing as she pulled them on, annoyed and ready for something clean that didn’t smell like smoke, blood, and sweat. The room lacked a mirror so she didn’t bother with her hair, hoping leaving it down would ease the headache. In no mood to pull on her heavy boots she left the room barefoot and made her way down to the deserted main floor.

In the shadowy kitchens she came across a cherry pie with only one slice cut out, a basket of muffins that smelled like honey, and a string of sausages hanging from a hook. Wendy knew it would be physically impossible to eat all of it but she carried everything out to a table next to a window anyway. The only thing missing she thought as she took her first bite of pie was that she could be happy if only there were coffee.

She sighed and watched the storm ease into a gentle rain in the early morning light. Not a soul stirred out in the street and Wendy almost wished it would never stop raining because of it. Right now in this moment, everything was at peace. No battles, no schemes, no torture. Just a sleepy city with rain washing away worries and troubles.

Wendy rolled her eyes and moved onto one of the muffins. That was foolish, romantic thinking spurred on by hormone driven emotions. Of course somewhere out there a battle was fought, a war waged, and torture continued on but it had been nice to imagine it didn’t. This was her last day in this world and she wanted to remember the beauty of it all. It was a good thing she enjoyed rainy days then.

“Mmm delightful spread you have here.” Triss said, coming up beside her. “May I join you?”

Wendy swallowed nervously and nodded. Once Triss was settled and pinching off a chunk of muffin, Wendy decided to bring up travel by portal. “Triss… once Geralt has returned with my belongings, can you create a portal near the one that will take me back to my world? Iorveth suggests that Geralt will be back this evening some time, so perhaps in the morning?”

Triss blinked widely in surprise. “Oh I thought…” She paused with her eyes darting to the kitchen as
a rain soaked Iorveth holding articles dry clothing and a muddy Azlin walked in.

Wendy’s chest clenched painfully as he paused a step when he met her gaze. The storm had left his clothing plastered to his skin, somewhere he’d come across a pair of boots with small remnants of mud speckling the sides. There was the smallest hint of a smile letting her know he was pleased to see her before he continued up the stairs. Muddy Azlin however bounded over to her table and bounced around on her back legs in excitement until Wendy cooed and scratched her on the head. Either satisfied or distracted already, the puppy loped off to another area of the tavern, allowing Wendy to turn her attention back to her friend.

“You thought what?” Wendy asked before taking a bite of sausage.

“I doesn’t matter… Of course I will teleport you to your way home if that is what you want. Where did the dog come from?”

Wendy sent a fond smile to the puppy now pulling a firestick from its pile near the cold fireplace. “I dreamed of her. On a hunch I went looking for her and now she’s here. Iorveth’s named her Azlin.”

Triss lifted a brow. “Interesting.” She took a deep breath and her expression became concerned. “Wendy, I feel as if we should seek out Avallac’h before you leave. Aen Elle have a vastly superior knowledge of anything magic related… and the arrogance to go with it but Avallac’h is at least willing.”

Stubbornly Wendy shook her head and watched the rain on the window. “I have to leave. The dreams will stop and hopefully cease coming true if I leave. It’s this place affecting me somehow and I need to get out of here before something terrible and out of my control happens.”

The two women fell into silence, working their way through the pile of food on the table. Triss looked as if she wanted to argue but thankfully decided to change the subject after finishing her muffin. “As your last day here, what is it you wish to do?” She had a cheery voice and overly bright eyes that Wendy supposed were meant to in part cheer herself up.

“Aevon, duel me.” The sound of Iorveth’s voice coming from the stairs drew their attention. He carried her sabre and boots, now changed into dry clothing and one of his swords belted around his hips.

Wendy sent a glance to Triss. “I supposed I’m practicing with a sword.” She said with very little enthusiasm.

“Is it what you want to do? Iorveth is a soldier and his idea of fun always has to do with something sharp and deadly.”

Wendy’s gaze moved back to the elvan warrior, watching as he moved chairs and tables aside to make enough room to swing swords. “I just want to spend as much time with him as possible.”

Triss huffed a laugh. “Words I never believed I’d hear in regards to Iorveth.”

“It surprises me as well. Our views on… certain things are at complete opposite. As you know, despite my recent experiences, I’m not violent. But I admire his vision and dedication. He refuses to give up hope on a better life for others.” Wendy sighed. “I wish people had sense… on your world and mine. Sense to see how much we’re hurting. Ourselves and others… I’m sorry for being melancholy.”

Triss covered her hand with one of her own and shrugged. “Don’t be. People with sense are in short supply… and I’m certain that if you were of this world you would have changed it. Perhaps you still
will in a way, even after you’ve left.”

Wendy wanted to humbly disagree but instead she managed a smile before slipping her hand away and standing. Exercise was the last thing her body wanted but if it brought happiness to Iorveth then why not? Not much was going to make her happy that day, short of a long soak in a hot tub, so she would do her best to bring it to someone she cared for.

Silently she accepted her sabre from him and buckled it on before slipping on her boots and joining him in the center of the tavern. What followed was a series of grueling lessons in sword combat. Where Iohn was patient with showing her the basics, Iorveth moved quickly through his instructions and the only reasons she knew he was holding back was that she was still alive.

The lessons had only been going for just short of an hour when he stopped to shove a cup of water into her hand which she drank quickly. After wiping her mouth and brow on her sleeve she sent him an arch look. “I think it’s time to do something that I want to do. Like read.”

He finished his own cup before leaning against the edge of a table and crossing his arms across his chest. Triss had departed at some point back up the stairs, little Azlin lay sprawled across her stick sleeping, and Dandelion and Priscilla had taken over eating the food on the table with stacks of books and papers spread before them.

“I read yesterday, and I meant it when I said you had potential with a sword.”

Wendy shifted restlessly and settled a hand on her sword hilt. “I’m leaving in less than a day. I won’t have any need to know how to fight with a sword.”

His expression turned startling blank before he looked toward the nearest window. “You’ve no wish to remember anything from your time here. You will walk away and take nothing with you, not even the basics in defending yourself.”

Wendy’s stomach twisted as she realized she’d hurt him and shook her head. “Of course not- I meant-“ The sudden sound of the front tavern door opening and the appearance of a young, wet, and shabbily dressed boy bounding in cut her off. Dandelion and Priscilla didn’t look up from their work while Wendy and Iorveth watched as the boy quickly studied each person in turn, leaning to the side to see their ears it appeared.

His eyes widened at the sight of Iorveth’s and he quickly scampered up to the silent elf and held out a rolled and sealed parchment. “Message for you.”

“Sir.” Wendy automatically said, her deeply ingrained manners kicking in. When Iorveth and the young messenger glanced at her she shrugged. “Well you are old. Need to teach them young to respect their elders.” His gaze lowered into a scowl but the boy just looked back at Iorveth and gave a hesitant ‘Sir.’

When he continued to stand there glancing between the two of them, Wendy picked up on what he wanted and pointedly met Iorveth’s gaze and nodded toward the table of food. “Pick something from the table and take it.” He said a bit more gruffly than Wendy would have liked but the boy was probably used to brusqueness and skipped off to the table happily, picked a sausage and darted from the tavern.

“Now the next time he encounters an elf, he is less likely to be rude. Teaching manners and offerings of food have that effect on people.” Wendy said, satisfied with herself despite the conversation before the boys arrival.
“Or he’ll come around more often expecting a free meal.”

Wendy rolled her eyes and sighed. “It wasn’t free and if he does then so what? Feed him without expecting something and perhaps he will one day grow into a healthy person with respect towards others.”

“Or expect everything to be handed to him his entire life.” He muttered and focused on the message.

Wendy despised his cool tone and blank expression as well has how quickly this was turning into a nature versus nurture debate. It only reminded her of how different their lives were and how stubbornly he held onto his less desirable views. “And you suggest the solution is starving him?” She took a step closer and shoved her slipping glasses up her nose in order to glare up at him. “Earth may not have perfected empathy yet, but we’ve come a long way since the dark ages where we turned our backs on those in need.”

In her mind she berated herself, this was not how today was meant to go. She was supposed to be if not happy, at least content in her last hours spent with the man she loved until she was to be parted from him forever. Instead she was about to start her monthly, tired from practicing an art she had no desire to learn more of, and arguing with said man she loved. But she was not about to let this matter of starving children drop.

“Empathy?” He rolled his eye. “You mean humanity. As I’ve said once before, there is no humanity here. You claw and fight for everything you get, from the smallest babe to the most ruthless of kings. That means if you want to eat, you earn it, whether doing as your told or with the skill of your sword.”

Wendy angrily fought back her tears of frustration. She was already an easy crier but now that her hormones were more than heightened it was very well a threat she faced. “And if that child were yours? Would you have him or her doing the most despicable of things in order to survive or would you wish them a life where they could count on a stranger to see them well without any expectations?”

He looked at her stunned but remained silent, allowing Wendy to continue with her voice dropping to a harsh whisper. “My child as well as any child did not asked to be born and given such a terrible world. They are innocent until adults twist that innocence with ugliness and selfishness. Your mother nurtured and loved you and you have forgotten.”

His expression turned down right lethal, a glint in his eye that she hadn’t seen since the morning of the bandit attack, and quickly she was reminded that he was dangerous. “Do not speak of my mother.”

Wendy held her back stiffly. She could be dangerous too… he’d avoided the question about his own child and if there was one thing dangerous about her it was that she was willing to ask the difficult questions if she felt it was needed. “Fine. But am I wrong or are you just stubborn? And answer me. Would you hold your own child to the same standards as you do a strangers?”

“I would not have one to begin with.” He bit out between clenched teeth.

Wendy threw up her hands and paced away a few steps. "Frustrating, stubborn, asshole.” She muttered in English before stalking back to him and standing close enough to see the gold flecks in his green eye. “Imagine a world where you’ve done the impossible and murdered every king and queen. You’ve found a fair lady who laughs at your jokes and gives you contentment. You’ve built her a quaint little cottage and along comes a little Iorveth. And everything is perfect. Only here then comes a terrible accident and you and your lady are no longer there to care for little Iorveth and now
he must rely on others. Does he deliver messages to someone who thinks he’s no better than a flea or
does he find someone who gives him opportunities and safety, no questions asked?” Wendy felt
more than a bit unhinged, projecting her own secret desires minus the tragedy, into this twisted
scenario.

“I know what it is you wish me to say and you will be disappointed.” He said in a low voice, his
gaze never leaving hers as he leaned closer, stepping away from the table. “I have changed in many
ways but I will always believe that strength comes from carrying our burdens. Did my mother go
hungry so that I might eat? Perhaps, but I have no clear memory of her doing so. But I do have clear
memory of my own hunger… Of setting up trap after trap in the alley behind the house, hoping that
mayhap today there will be a nice plump rabbit, only to find yet another rat.” Wendy couldn’t help
the shiver that speared down her spine at the thought of being forced to consume rats.

“In a perfect world, the world of my ancestors, no one starved. No one grew up expecting empathy
and instead were given cruelty. Thus when the dh’oines arrived, they were not strong enough to
withstand humanities own special blend of greed and savagery… And now their descendants are
paying the price for their weakness.” He straightened and raised his fist now crushing the rolled
parchment. “I have a matter to attend to. As you said, I have kings and queens to slay if I’m ever to
have that fairytale.”

Wendy wished she hated him. It would have made watching him leave so much easier if she did. He
left her feeling hurt, angry, and beyond disappointed. He had empathy in him but instead allowed
ancient history to rule him, causing him to lock it away with merciless disdain. Never before had
Wendy despised history. She’d never had to feel the negative effects of some long ago occurrence.
She had voting rights and freedom to cross the street into whatever business she wanted. Other than a
cautious eye on strangers, she’d lived a life where the suffering of her ancestors had no effect on her
personality or treatment of others. She brushed at a tear that finally escaped. The same could not be
said of Iorveth and the others of this land and she was exhausted of it.

“The Fox would never let a child starve.” Dandelion said from his seat at the table, drawing her
attention to both him and Priscilla. Both wore sympathetic if not entertained expressions. “He’s just
had to be the tough guy for so long he probably wouldn’t know what to do if word actually escaped
that he was as soft as this cherry pie.”

Wendy huffed a laugh and wiped at another tear before taking a seat beside Priscilla and watching
the rain outside of the window. “I know. I just want him to find happiness but I’m afraid that he
won’t allow that to happen unless he allows himself to just… be like pie.” She sent a small smile to
the bard. “Perhaps you should write a ballad about him as a fairytale prince, saving damsels in
distress and helping the poor. He’s saved me more than once, and I’ve witnessed him returning
stolen goods…”

Dandelion and Priscilla shared a quiet laugh. “You know, I’ve been looking for a good way to get
under that thick skin of his and I believe that would do the trick nicely.”

To distract herself from the fact that she would never hear it she turned her gaze to the couples work.
“What is this?”

“Working on the accounts from last night.” Priscilla said.

“If someone had told me there would be so much tedious and boring work involved in running a
business, I would have kept to my old life.” Dandelion muttered.

Feeling inclined to repay their kindness, something that was in short supply with most people it
seemed, Wendy sat up straight and peeked at one of the books. “I kept my Pop’s accounts in neat
order, if you’d like for me to take over.”

“Absolutely not.” Triss said, stepping from the stairway. “This is your last day and Iorveth has already ruined it, unsurprisingly. I put forward that, Priscilla and Dandelion willing, we dress you up and throw you the farewell party you deserve.”

Dandelion sat up straight with a wide smile. “I say aye! We’ll take you to my favorite tailor, dress you in something the color of sangria that will have the squirrel wishing he’d tossed that famous stubbornness out the window and kept you in his bed all day instead.”

Wendy smiled sadly at these wonderful people, and she knew she couldn’t say no. Iorveth said this place and its people were cruel, and perhaps for the most part he was right… but there was a great amount of caring as well. “I never did get to dress up and dance at Ryre, and who says the Rosemary and Thyme is anything less than a castle.”

Immediately Dandelion and Priscilla packed up their accounts and locked them in a chest with Triss holding her hand out to Wendy and helping her to stand. Azlin, sensing something going on woke from her nap and scurried over to Wendy. After brushing a few clumps of dried mud from the pup’s hair she picked her up and held the wiggling critter tucked under her arm.

“Ah look at that! The rain has stopped and the sun is beginning to come around.” Triss said, wrapping her arm through Wendy’s once they stood outside, Priscilla on her other side.

“This way! Ponce will no exactly which style will enhance the hips and lengthen the neck.” Dandelion called out from several paces ahead of them.

“I’ll thank you not to comment on my hips and neck!” Wendy called back, the excitement beginning to take affect on her and driving some of her sadness away.

“Oh but they shall be the inspiration of all manner of art form after tonight.” He retorted over his shoulder before turning the corner.

“Nothing inspires Dandelion more than beauty… primarily if it’s in the form of a woman.” Priscilla said with a hint of amusement.

“Never forget ladies that we have the power to bring men to their knees with our long elegant necks and round hips.” Triss said with a teasing tilt of her chin.

Wendy had never felt female comradery. She’d had a friend that moved away in the middle of seventh grade that had been best friend forever potential but never had the opportunity to grow into such. A few girls at the same lunch table, one of which had been a great study partner, but nothing lasted outside of school… Something Wendy had been content with as friendship would likely have gotten in the way of her life with taking care of Pop.

But here… after a month of riding through forests and mountains, nearly dying and facing down murderous soldiers, she readily counted Triss and Priscilla amongst her small circle of friends. Iorveth, frustrating as he was, was no doubt her best friend. He was someone she could tease and tell every detail of her life to… well nearly every detail. They’d shared fears and dreams, tragedies they’d suffered and challenged each other’s faults.

Geralt, she hadn’t had much opportunity with but knew she could count on his gruff strength. Triss seemed to always have her side whether in regards to her concern towards her dreams and newfound healing ability, or her happiness. Dandelion and Priscilla had taken her in, no questions asked, both times and treated her as family.
Without warning Wendy felt the burn of tears and sniffed quietly. Naturally the sound immediately drew two concerned pairs of eyes with Triss pulling her to a stop. “I’m fine, I promise.” Wendy immediately tried to wave off their concern. “Just been a trying few days, all of you are so wonderful, I’m surprisingly crushed about leaving tomorrow, and I’m about to start my period… I’m a major crier on the best of days but on a day like this?” She knew she rambled but the words just tumbled free.

“Period?” Priscilla asked in curiosity.

“A term that became popular for referring to menstruation.” Understanding and sympathy shinned in the other women’s eyes.

“Try not to think about tomorrow Wendy. Today is about allowing Dandelion to spend a vulgar amount of money on clothing, drinking merrily, and dancing with handsome men.” Triss said with a wicked smirk.

“And hopefully making a broody elf jealous!” Dandelion said from the doorway just ahead of them, prompting the three women to share a laugh before following him inside. There was some fuss over the presence of Azlin but thankfully the tailor had a young daughter who happily took over watch of the puppy.

What followed were several whirlwind hours spent in a room filled with dresses of every color and style. Dandelion knowing which would fit well into a ballad and which would fit well into the back of a wardrobe. Priscilla voted on the shorter tunic of forest green with blue accents and tights… but then Priscilla was able to pull off such a look unlike Wendy she felt she would be dressing up for a Renaissance Faire.

Triss picked out something with lots of gold threading and was promptly told it washed out Wendy’s skin and clashed with her hair. Ultimately Dandelion had the right of it and Wendy chose a shiny grey underdress with black embroidered designs and a soft violet overdress that laced tightly over the bodice before falling open over the grey underdress, allowing one to admire the superior weaving of the intricate design. Dandelion said it heightened the violet and grey of her eyes but really, Wendy just wanted it because it came with a hood, and the skirts were short enough to show off the black boots that Triss insisted had to go with it.

When she’d tried everything on and stared in the mirror, Wendy had a moment where she didn’t really recognize the woman staring back at her. She hadn’t had a good look at herself in days now and drew a finger along her new scar. It was thin and red, and Wendy had to remind herself to be grateful she hadn’t lost an eye. Her hair was in dire need of a brushing but Priscilla already had thoughts on a hairstyle for the evening. It was easy to tell that the changes in her diet had caused a thinness to her face, something that didn’t sit well with her but there was a distinct lack of fast food restaurants and heavily sugared coffee.

The dress was actually rather serviceable beyond simply being pretty. There was nothing constrictive about it and lay against her legs gently. The boots had buckles that she wasn’t really sure what their purpose served but they made her feel adventurous and the heel was low enough that she didn’t feel as if she were in danger of rolling an ankle. The neckline was low and bodice gave the Illusion of more bosomly curve than what was actually there, without the constant danger of spilling from their confines.

Wendy jogged in place to test the theory and grinned triumphantly at Triss when it proved true. “I could actually wear this dress out and about! Not simply for parties.”

The tailor turned red in the face until Dandelion stepped forward to discuss payment. Triss stepped
forward and lifted the grey hood up over her head and nodded approvingly. “A pair of black leather gloves and your sabre around your waist, you’ll be ready to take on the world.”

Forcing herself not to think on tomorrow, Wendy pushed her glasses up her nose. “How about just a party instead.”

“Speaking of, we better head back and get the Rosemary and Thyme ready!” Priscilla said with a clap of her hands.

Wendy watched herself in the mirror as she did one last twirl, enjoying the swish of fabric on her thighs and feeling every bit the renaissance scholarly adventuress. With a deep breath she stared into her own eyes and nodded firmly. She was going to dance with everyone she wished, even if she didn’t know the dance, drink her fill of wine with no care to the consequences, and have fun with her very dearest of friends.

It would be all the better if Iorveth were there, at least she hoped it would be, but her happiness was not reliant on his presence. This was her last day there, he knew that, and had chosen to spend it elsewhere. Well she was choosing to move beyond that… if he arrived then splendid, she would happily set aside their quarrel and dance the night away with him. If he did not then he was seriously missing out because she looked amazing, or would once Priscilla had her hair sorted out.

Out of sheer boredom, Iorveth began to reorder the things he most disliked. There was traveling for long tiring distances, yes. Novigrad was still highly ranked and one mustn’t forget the idiocy of dh’oines. But political meetings with said dh’oines was quickly gaining a place in the top three.

How he found himself seated in the office of Dijkstra in his bathhouse, listening as the crime boss turned would be ruler of Redania offer him a bargain that he assumed was too good for Iorveth to turn down, Iorveth was still curious on. He did rather enjoy the long bath, though he’d been more annoyed at having to wave away more than one of the bathhouse’s working ladies.

It had given him time to think about his actions in the morning, his regret in quarreling with Aevon. He’d seen the tears in her eyes and felt the lowest of low for having caused them, but he’d stubbornly held onto his conviction. He couldn’t afford to grow soft and take on starving children every time one showed up. Already she had him agreeing to keeping a dog. She was changing too much too fast and all before she waltzed out of his life, leaving him with dogs, and children, and feelings.

He couldn’t do what he had to do if every time he looked into the eyes of the man he was about to kill and wonder if the poor bastard had a wife and children relying on him bringing in coin. He just couldn’t, as he’d learned long ago when he’d found the useful talent of coldly locking those thoughts away. And he’d done a rather admirable job of it too.

More than he wanted to admit, there had been a moment no longer than a heartbeat when Aevon had asked her impossible question, where an impossible moment had flashed through his mind. A child… with his ears and her blue eyes, laughing as the boy tugged his hand toward a creek, a fishing pole in his other hand. The sound of barking followed by a familiar laugh drew his gaze. He’d actually felt as if he had just sparred with Geralt and the witcher had landed a solid blow to his stomach.

Afterward, the image of Aevon far along with child, had stayed with him… haunting him with a life he had no right to even if she were of his world. He was at war, and would likely die either in battle
with a sword to the gut or at the end of a rope. There was no place in his life for Aevon beyond seeing her returned to her world. And she wouldn’t wish that life anyways.

Iorveth sighed and watched as, now that he was dry and clothed, Dijkstra joined him in the office.

“The time for piss poor monarchs is coming to an end, Iorveth. One by one, they are falling, Demavend, Stennis, Foltest, Radovid… and in their place are Interrex left scrambling to secure their right to the crown.” Dijkstra said from his side of the desk dominating the room, his hands flat on the surface as his narrow eyes watched Iorveth’s blank expression.

“I had a ruler in mind once, for the most part it went splendidly.”

“Until the ploughing sorceresses got involved.”

Iorveth inclined his head slightly. “As you say. I’m not finished with the dh’oines and their crowned heads, but I am finished with political maneuvers and kingmaking- or in my case queen making. Whatever your schemes, myself and my army are not to be involved.”

Dijkstra straightened and rubbed a meaty hand across the stubble shadowing his double chin. “You do have an army. What is holding you back from marching on Vizima and crowning yourself?”

Iorveth huffed. “Taking on Emryr head to head, are you mad?” He sat forward and leaned an elbow on one of his knees. “The only way the white flame dies is with stealth, a slit throat while he sleeps. Then, with luck his armies eagerly return to the bosoms of their women back in the south where they came from. Then that just leaves the war ravaged civilians, dh’oine that have hated Aen Seidhe for centuries and you expect them to be ruled by one?” Iorveth gave a mocking laugh. “Short of killing every last dh’oine in Temeria, there would be no peace. I want Emryr’s head, not his kingdom.”

“And say if Temeria were no longer a kingdom but a state.” Dijkstra had a calculating tone that Iorveth recognized easily, it set him both on edge and piqued his interest.

“Who’s state?”

“Mine.”

Iorveth had to bite back outright laughing in disdain. “You would rule what? Redania and Temeria once… Nilfgaard has been chased away and Dol Blathanna quieted? Then what? Aedirn and Kaedwen? Are you going to be an expansionist?”

“Perhaps we should start small. You and I, we’ll start by ridding Novigrad of those whoresons the Flame, easily making Redania more mine than it already is. I believe you’re right about dealing with Emryr quietly and without Ciri as his heir, Nilfgaard will fall in line as will Dol Blathanna. Temeria will be mine but you would rule it as you see fit and yes, will aid me as I expand for all the North.”

Iorveth stood and immediately turned toward the door. “They said I was mad, and here you are twisting schemes that would put any sorceress to shame.”

“I hear you’ve found a pretty lass… a human one no less.”

Iorveth stiffened and looked over his shoulder. “She has no part of this. Any of it.”

“Aedirn thinks differently. She could be useful in bringing the Temerian human’s under your control. Think about it Iorveth.”

“If I do this, it will be without her. She is merely a traveler and will be on her way.” Iorveth looked
away and set a hand on the doorknob. “I have previous obligations to see to. When I return, I’ll give my answer and you will accept it.” He said in a biting voice before swinging the door open and departing the bathhouse.

The sun was well on its way down when Iorveth had emerged from the building, irritating him further. He’d have to avoid the main streets to the other side of the city if he wished to remain unrecognized, putting him arriving back at the tavern after dark. It bothered him, to have left Aevon in anger especially when his time with her was coming to a rapidly approaching end.

He’d had a choice, push Dijkstra’s message to another day and distracting Aevon from their quarrel with a kiss, or push her away- allowing the image of his reputation as a ruthless monster to fester. He’d chosen the later and now he regretted it.

Dijkstra’s plans were not surprising and truthfully Iorveth was slightly tempted. He’d readily corrected Geralt when he’d been accused of seeking to make himself King Iorveth the First. And he’d been honest with Aevon, he’d no dreams of grandeur. He simply wanted a land where they were truly free… where they didn’t live in Nilfgaard’s shadow to be used when Emryr deemed them worthy of dying for him.

And he’d almost had it. Vergen. A city where the elder races were amicable if not cautiously living with humans. Of course that hadn’t lasted long and now Dijkstra was implanting thoughts of- if you wanted something done, perhaps you had to do it yourself rather than lay the pieces on someone else’s board and hope they play out the way you wished.

Iorveth shook his head with a deep sigh. He didn’t enjoy feeling uncertain about his next move. He was a strategist, knew every player and every move each player could possibly take. Too many times he’d been blindsided by betrayal or someone out maneuvering him, and he’d been left to pick up the pieces and reevaluate the situation. This time when he made his choice, if he decided to put in his lot with the crime boss, it would be with every detail precisely planned, as well as a hefty amount of leverage to keep Dijkstra in line. Geralt knew Dijkstra… perhaps he would have valuable insight into the dh’oines plans.

When at last Iorveth neared his destination he slowed to a stop and watched curiously as garishly dressed people streamed in and out of the tavern’s doors, music and loud laughter bursting from the opening. Most nights the Rosemary and Thyme was rather boisterous but tonight it was especially wild.

He wrapped a hand around the hilt of one of his swords and began to finish his trek. When taverns grew wild, they also grew violent, especially when some burly seaman newly arrived from months at sea decided to see how many he could take down before the sour ale caused him to pass out.

Vaguely he hope the noise wasn’t disturbing Aevon too terribly and she was still willing to at least be in the same room as… Iorveth lost his train of thought as he shoved his way into the crowded tavern, his gaze immediately drawn to the woman on stage with a very recognizable pair of glasses holding a wooden spoon close to her face as she sang.

“- I'm looking like class, and he's looking like trash can't get with a deadbeat ass. So no, I don't want your number- no, I don't want to give you mine and- no, I don't want to meet you nowhere. No, I don't want none of your time and- no, I don't want no scrub. A scrub is a guy that can't get no love from me- Hangin' out the passenger side of his best friend's ride trying to holla at me. I don't want no scrub-“

The crowd around cheered her on boisterously though none of them could possibly know what she was singing about. Her words seemed rushed and left her breathless but she had a wide grin as she
walked from one end of the stage to the other.

Remaining on the edges of the crowd, Iorveth crossed his arms and leaned a shoulder against the wall. He hadn’t expected this side of her, in midst of one of Dandelion’s drunken soirees, pausing her song to reach out for a goblet of wine and taking a long drink before continuing on with her performance. The last time she’d been near something alcoholic, she’d been apprehensive and easily effected. However the lass twirling in a pretty dress, her hair up in pinned braids, was anything but apprehensive and no doubt effected by the wine. She was rosy cheeked and bright eyed… happy.

When her song was apparently over she wobbled slightly over a low bow, grinning widely at the drunken cheers and tossing the wooden spoon carelessly over her shoulder. Iorveth straightened from the wall, intent on intercepting her when he noticed her accepting a hand held out to her and with her ever present smile she hopped from the stage and became lost in the crowd.

In her place, several of Dandelion’s troubadours began to play something more recognizable with many people coupling up and beginning to dance. Call him mad, but he could pick her laughter out of everyone else’s, and certainly enough the crowd parted enough for him to see her dancing, or at least attempting to, in the arms of an Aen Seidhe he did not know.

It took him a moment to recognize the stab of jealousy in his chest, followed by the slight panic in its wake. He did not get jealous and even if he did, was rational enough to realize there was no need for it. She was not his and if she choose to enjoy the attentions of another then that was that. She would be out of his life officially anyways.

But the voice in the back of his head snarled that she was indeed his… even after she was long gone, she was his and bloody fucking hell he was hers. Iorveth dragged his gaze from her smiling face to the blur of unfamiliar people around him. He felt overheated and as if his skin had shrunk and he no longer fit within his own body. The music, the talking, the laughter… it was beginning to weigh on his shoulders as he realized… what a place to finally admit to oneself that they loved another.

Dandelion would delight in the knowledge that it was his shitty little tavern where Iorveth finally pieced together his feelings, his unrelenting wish- and regret when he chose differently- to just be in her presence even when she was so painfully naive in how his world worked. The comfort he’d found in sharing some of his past and his childhood dreams with her. Craving the way she looked at him and only him… even now as she danced with another man, she was open and friendly but it wasn’t how she looked at him. Then there was the desire to toss his misgivings and uncertainties aside and to just simply exist with her at his side.

There was an ache in his stomach caused by the acceptance that it wasn’t to be. After tonight, no longer would he see her love and desire for him shining from bright blue eyes. Wouldn’t feel her fingers running through his hair or go on endlessly about some fact she found interesting. Instead he would be left trying to build an empire of safety and freedom alone and out of blood and steel while he wished for that brief vision of children and contentment… with her.

It was enough to have him close his eye for strength before turning toward the stairs, intent on laying in quiet suffering until the morning came to take her away. He’d been so certain that this wouldn’t happen. When all of this began, when he began to see her as more than an honor bound duty, he’d allowed himself to feel friendship and admiration followed quickly by desire and fondness. But those were still well within the safety of remaining unaffected.

Such feelings hadn’t been unfamiliar to him, after all he’d felt similarly towards Saskia. And he would always think fondly of Saskia he knew… after all she had been a symbol of hope for a better future. But all of that had crashed down in a spectacular blaze. Iorveth could not say he would remain as unaffected with the loss of Aevon.
“Finally! Where have you been Iorveth?” Priscilla said loudly, cutting off his path to the stairway.

“Business.” He said simply and tried to sidestep the bard but she again blocked his path and looked at him with an arch look. “I have no wish to move you from my path by force, bard, but I will if I must.”

“Don’t you think you ought to ask Wendy to dance at least?” Priscilla waved a hand out at the crowd. “This is her party after all.”

“No.”

“What he means to say is that he hasn’t had any liquid courage.” Triss said, joining them and shoving a nearly overflowing goblet into his hand. “Now listen here you stubborn old goat. All of us care for both you and Wendy and right now both of you are hurting. Behind that smile of hers is a woman who is miserable. Tomorrow she has to say goodbye to the man she loves and all she wanted to do today was see him happy. Instead she feels guilty for dragging the both of you into a ridiculous quarrel and chasing you way. She has danced with nearly every man and several women here but her gaze has never stopped glancing toward that door.”

Iorveth despised it how Triss knew exactly what to say in order to get what she wanted. And even more so when she was right. His chest already ached and he hoped to hold off the morning as long as possible, so why not spend their remaining hours, however bittersweet that they were, together.

“Drink up, you’re at least two cups behind.” Priscilla added with her gently understanding smile.

Out numbered and out maneuvered- a motto for his life it seemed- Iorveth downed his wine and took a deep breath, his gaze searching once more for Aevon.

“Women find it rather dashing to have the one they truly wish they were dancing with interrupt and whisk them away.” She added and Triss nodded in agreement.

“So they do now?” He said lowly and began to make his way through the crowd, tossing his empty cup to someone nearby who clumsily caught it before cheering drunkenly. Aevon and her partner laughed as they missed their steps though just as Triss had mentioned, Aevon’s gaze did indeed dart to the tavern door, and the sight went straight to his chest.

His pace increased as did his heartbeat, his misgivings shoved aside by a sudden excitement that he only felt around her. He stepped around the last person blocking his path and a heartbeat later he was within arm’s length. Just as the dance had her turning towards him, his shoulder brushed her partner away, and he quickly wrapped his arms around her waist and lifted her up high on his chest, spinning her away from her partner as she clutched his shoulders and squeaked in shock.

He stilled to a stop and looked up at her, that feeling of contentment and desire washing over him as she smiled down at him. He wondered if she expected him to apologize for walking away this morning, to tell her in detail what he’d done all day instead of laying about in bed with her. But she didn’t say anything. Instead of demanding explanations and apologies she moved her hands up his neck to mold around the edge of his jaw and neck before leaning down and kissing him deeply.

He closed his eye, the ache in his chest became nearly unbearable, and he sighed into the kiss. She tasted of sweet wine and honey, an intoxicating combination especially when her moan mixed itself in. There was an unnecessary amount of roars and cheers of approval and no doubt word would begin to spread to more than just local crime bosses of his presence in Novigrad. But her thumbs were brushing the lines of his cheeks, her mouth moved against his slow and sensually, and he just did not care about anyone else in the room.
When she drew away he eased his hold on her until she slid down his chest to stand, leaning against him.

“You interrupted my dance.” She said and slipped her hands down to rest on his hips.

“I’ll make it up to you.” He replied, his lips matching her grin.

“It’s not a ballroom, but I love it just the same.”

“More wine for the love birds!” Dandelion said from beside them, breaking them apart slightly in order to hand over goblets of wine. “Spectacular display by the way- there was urgency and desire with hints of agony! You my friends are anything but prose.” The bard sighed wistfully and with a dreamy- or perhaps just drunk look in his eye began to urge the band to start up another song.

“What in the bloody cockatrices ass is this all about?” A voice exclaimed over the sound of the crowd.

“Zoltan! You made it to Wendy’s going away party!” Dandelion called out as his close friend came stumbling through the crowd of primarily humans.

“Ah I found you at last lass! And back in Novigrad no less.” He said gruffly with a curious look at the close proximity of Iorveth and Aevon as well as the new scar across her face.

“It’s quite the tale my friend, and best told with more wine- or in your case vodka.”

“Hello Zoltan… I’m sorry for you going on such a wild goose chase…” Aevon said before taking a deep drink of her wine.

“Think nothing of it, just glad to see Iorveth found you.” Zoltan replied.

“Me too.”

A moment of silence dragged before Dandelion ushered everyone to a table with just enough space for the four of them, snagging Zoltan a large tankard of vodka from someone before diving deep into what he knew of the Tale of the Two Foxes as he’d dubbed it.

Iorveth half listened to the bard give his exaggerated version as Zoltan sometimes interrupted with questions and comments and Aevon doing her damndest to correct the inaccuracies. He was content to sip his wine, enjoying the spread of warmth through his blood and forgetting his worries. He had Aevon at his side, her hand laced with his and her smooth voice surrounding him.

It was something he could happily, eagerly even, become used to. To every now and then catch her sending him a smile, the shine of her own happiness when she caught him looking at her instead. As an outsider he would have been more than righteously annoyed at their very obvious displays of mutual affection… how odd it was to be on the inside instead.

By the time Dandelion finished a contest of knife throwing had begun behind them and he was called away to begin taking bets, leaving Zoltan free to poke his dwarven nose into more intimate matters.

“So… you two taking the baldheaded gnome for a stroll in the misty forest now or what?” Zoltan said with lifted brows.

Iorveth groaned while Wendy looked between the both of them in a moment of confusion before focusing back on Zoltan. “Oh do you mean is he dipping the stinger in the honey? Then yea- we’re
doing the four-legged foxtrot. I mean not right this exact second- but will be pretty soon and sometimes it gets kind of loud… Dandelion will fill you in on that later I’m sure.” She took another deep drink of wine while Iorveth and Zoltan stared at her, one with amusement and the other one with surprise that quickly turned into delight.

“Good to have you back lass, if only for a short time.” Zoltan said with a chuckle.

“Iorveth! Come show these Redanian’s how to hit a target!” Dandelion shouted unnecessarily.

His first reaction was to decline but Aevon bounded up from her seat, pausing to finish her cup of wine before waving at Dandelion. “I want to try!” She shouted and shoved her way over to their friend. The moment she stepped away and Iorveth began to rise to follow her Zoltan clapped both his hands flat on the table and leaned toward him a gleam in his eye that was reminiscent of their battle against Henselt.

“What the ploughing horse’s ass has gotten into you?” He hissed. “You were supposed to send her home, not seduce her into your bed much less the Scoia’tael!”

Iorveth finished his wine and dropped his own hands to the table to lean forward and meet Zoltan’s glare. “No one makes Aevon do anything she does not wish to, trust me, it’s a rather infuriating trait of hers. I’ll admit to acting on certain interests but only when her own were very apparent. As for seducing her into the Scoia’tael, I did nothing to encourage her sympathy for our plight.”

“Right… no stories of tragic freedom fighters or dark heroism?”

“None. I was needed in Adhart and she couldn’t be left on her own to finish her journey. Anything she feels for our people is on her own.”

“Iorveth! Look at how close I came to the wall!” Aevon called, drawing the gazes of both men to the sight of a dagger sticking out of the back of an abandoned chair.

“We’ll speak later Zoltan. It’s good you have returned because I have been offered an interesting proposition. But it must wait or I fear she might truly injure someone and she takes that sort of thing terribly.” Iorveth said quietly, watching as Aevon pulled her dagger from the chair with a clumsy jerk.

“Aye… I’m going to hunt down some food and more vodka.” Zoltan replied and the two parted ways.

Immediately after his arrival in the noisy circle of primarily human men, Dandelion excitedly began to call out bets and Iorveth was faced with his opponent. A limber looking man with a cocksure attitude, charming grin and a flair for twirling his throwing knife nimbly through his fingers.

Iorveth eyed the target as well as the length of the throw and was already bored. “Aevon, more wine!” He called out and blinked in surprise when in addition to hers, two other hands held out full goblets of the red liquid. With a pleased smirk he accepted each in turn. “If you want this to be a challenge bard, I’m going to need to be properly sloshed.”

Those around him, possibly so deep in their cups already they forgot he wasn’t human, clapped hands on his shoulders and pushed up to the throwing line. Aevon appeared before him with her bright eyes and wide smile and twisted her hands in the shoulders of his shirt and pulled him down into a deep if not messy kiss before breaking away.

“For good luck.” She said with a grin then released him to stand next to Dandelion. His gaze remained locked on hers, admiring the way her dress wrapped tightly around her breasts down to her
waist before the shirts flared softly around her hips. Short enough for him to easily toss up…

A finger snapped in front of his eye and Iorveth blinked with a shake of his head. The wine was quickly taking over as well as the need to pull Aevon away from the crowd but first he supposed he better win the bet and give her the dance she deserved. He grinned when she blew him a kiss and then forced himself to focus on his target.

He’d already missed his opponents first throw, one that was surprisingly good, but after a quick aim and release, Iorveth found that his was just a mark better. He wouldn’t say he easily won the challenge as his opponent was well aimed but Iorveth was just better and he basked in the pridelful cheers coming from an obviously tossed Aevon. After accepting his winnings from Dandelion his opponent shoved Iorveth in the shoulder on his blind side.

“I demand a rematch! The whoreson must have cheated somehow!” He shouted

Iorveth stepped toward him with lowered shoulders, immediately spoiling for a brawl but Aevon appeared between them shoving her shiny little dagger up under his accusers chin…. Hazily Iorveth wondered where she even got the dagger.

“How the hell was he supposed to cheat? He—“ She gestured behind herself in his direction with a wild arm that had the other man nervously leaning away from her. “—has one eye! Accept that you lost before I even the advantages.” At this point she slipped back into her native tongue and he could no longer understand the set down she was giving the increasingly panicked dh’oine.

If he could have one thing in his life and in that moment, it would be for them to immediately be alone so he could indeed toss those skirts up and ravage her until neither of them could stand. Honestly- he didn’t know if he could make it to the stairs before having her, he was so instantly filled with desire as he watched his would be foe stumble away and she tried to shove the dagger back into its sheath belted at her hip- how had he missed that- after her third missed attempt he took the sharp blade from her and secured it safely in its sheath.

“Thanks! It kept moving.” She said, scrunching her nose as she turned to look up at him. “Do you like it? I helped make it with Hattori yesterday and he finished it up and gave it to me just awhile ago. The handle is um… ebony? Super pretty.

“Nothing more beautiful in existence.” He said, hardly recognizing the slight slur to his words nor how horrified sober him might have been for all that mattered was that her eyes brightened in delight. “Dance with me?”

She bit back her grin and attempted a serene expression as she inclined her head slightly in acquiesce, holding her hand out for him to take. The song had already started and was more of a fast paced jig but neither of them were inclined to study the dancers around them to learn to steps so instead he held her waist with his hands while she clasped hers behind his neck and rested her cheek against his chest.

“'We dance for laughter, we dance for tears, we dance for madness, we dance for fears, we dance for hopes, we dance for screams, we are the dancers, we create the dreams…' Albert Einstein… What a lovely poem.”

Iorveth hummed into her hair, wondering at her reaction if he began to pull the pins free.

“Let see… what’s another one… oh! 'Life's a dance you learn as you go, sometimes you lead, sometimes you follow. Don't worry about what you don't know, life's a dance you learn as you go.' That one’s actually a country music song but still… so true.”
He didn’t have it in him to tell her that he had no idea what she was going on about. He was delightfully drunk and painfully aroused but had to bear simply holding her for just awhile longer. To keep his hands occupied and in more public appropriate areas- even if they were in a tavern- he tested his theory on her sensitivity to her hair being mussed and began to pull pins free, allowing them to drop carelessly to the floor.

“What are you? Hey! Priscilla worked for hours taming this rats nest.” She cried out once she noticed the braids falling down her back. She now leaned away with him with a feisty glare to which he responded with a smirk and another pin pulled free. Her expression turned to giggles and she swatted him away.

“I might as well finish, you look ridiculous now.”

“Hmm I should force you to endure being seen in the presence of one with such a ridiculous hair style… it is your fault after all.”

Feeling as if he’d held off long enough he pulled back against his chest and slanted his mouth over hers. She met him willingly and deeply, smiling against his lips when he began to pull the remaining pins free.

“Such a rogue.” She whispered breathlessly. “Of course if you were a true villain, you’d have already tossed me over your shoulder and had your way… but I suppose the knave of fancy hairstyles is a menacing title.”

He growled low in his throat and cut her laughter off with a kiss the force of which arched her back over his arm, and her hands clutching at his shoulders tightly.

“Geralts’ back!” Dandelion’s voice called out over the tavern causing Iorveth to groan as reality came crashing back… the same as it did for Aevon as she stiffened in his arms and opened her gaze to his. There wasn’t enough wine in Novigrad to chase away what the witchers arrival meant for the two of them.

Aevon cleared her throat and smoothed down her hair as he eased her from him a step. “We should go find him… ask about Adhart and the others.” She whispered, her gaze searching his with an almost panicked intensity.

All it did was remind him of one of the reasons for his fall over the edge and into the impossibility of love. Despite it all, her fleeting time with them, the danger she’d been in, how against her very nature her life had been with him, she’d chosen him and his people. Even now she worried after them and he was suddenly angry… if she had been of his world she could have helped him and so many others and his mind flashed back to his meeting with Dijkstra.

His initial reaction had been that her presence in the crime boss’s ambitions, even if she were to stay, would have been impossible. But it wasn’t. Not really. She was caring and strong and had shown the ability to do what needed to be done even when it went against her very nature. He sighed in frustrated longing and held her hand in his as led her away from the dancers.

“There he is.” Aevon whispered, her hand tightening around his. On the table Geralt was seated at lay her bag, his as well, but hers had been the last thing keeping her there. He stood aside as Aevon greeted Geralt quietly and thanked him for bringing her belongings. In the meantime Triss arrived with a plate heavy with food and a tankard overflowing with ale. Zoltan thunked his own down on the table and slapped a hand on the witcher’s shoulder in a hearty greeting.

“How fares Adhart and Ryer?” Aevon asked, once Iorveth pulled her down onto the bench beside
him and greetings were finished.

“Both are doing fine. You’ll be pleased to know Adhart has sent aid to Ryre, helping Iohn with the rebuilding efforts. Not much comradery between the two but the human’s seem to be at least willing.” Geralt paused to bite into a chicken drumstick. “Adhart continues its own recovery and prepares for winter. The Scoia’tael were preparing to depart, I’m assuming they were just waiting for orders.” His golden gaze met Iorveth’s.

He did not acknowledge that he had indeed sent orders this morning. Though Geralt had shown an affinity for Scoia’tael affairs on multiple occasions, he was still a neutral ally. The white wolf’s advice was invaluable and would be sought after as soon as he could manage, but the witcher hardly needed to know the day to day plans of his army.

“So then… what’s the plan for Little River?” Zoltan spoke up.

“Tomorrow morning, I’ll open a portal to the place Avallac’h marked on the map. Wendy and I, as well as anyone who wishes to accompany us will arrive and ensure she makes it safely through to her home. Then we’ll return and prepare to search for Ciri.” Triss said, her tone as strong as any generals.

“Ach, no offense lass but I’m with Geralt on teleporting. I’ll offer my goodbyes come morn.” Zoltan said with a grimace.

“I understand Zoltan.” Aevon said kindly before lifting a hand to cover her yawn. Iorveth knew Dandelion’s parties could go well into the early morning, something he had no wish to experience himself so he stood, pulling Aevon with him before slinging both their bags over his shoulder.

“Va faill.” He said to his companions. They said their own round of farewells to himself and Aevon as he led her to the stairs. His heart thumped painfully when she slipped an arm around his waist and rested her head against his shoulder. It made their steps clumsy, of course the wine helped that along as well, but instead of straightening her, he wrapped his own arm around the top of her shoulders.

Once inside the room and after greeting an excited Azlin who, disappointingly enough had made a mess in the corner, Aevon passed to the bed.

“You dog, your mess.” She said with a small grin over her shoulder.

“I train and lead hundreds of hardened warriors. Have tasted the wine of those I have defeated as their families wept and you expect me to clean up dog shit?”

After sitting on the edge of the bed Aevon began to unlace the front of her dress. “You should worry less about training hundreds of hardened warriors and more about potty training her. I spent all day with her and despite all the time outside, she never went. Your turn oh master trainer.”

“Leave the dress on.” He bit out between clenched teeth to which she answered with dropping her hands paired with lifted brows. Shaking his head and mentally bitching about how he hadn’t even wanted the messy creature, he cleaned up the mess and washed his hands in the basin.

Once done and with nary a word he stalked up to Aevon who watched him with a hooded gaze, pulled her up by the hand. Instead of meeting her mouth with his as she’d anticipated by dropping her gaze to his lips, he spun her away from him, her gasp of surprise exactly what he’d wished to hear.

Smoothly he brushed her hair from her neck and with a hand splayed across her stomach he pressed her back against his front before grazing the skin of her neck and shoulder with his teeth. His free
hand slid along her other shoulder until he gently held her neck. A moment and a moan from her later she used her own hand to slide two of his fingers into her mouth where she sucked on them lightly.

The memories of her mouth doing just that to his cock, had him groaning against her skin and grinding his stiff length against the soft curve of her arse. She answered with an arching of her back and a bite on the tip of one of his fingers. He knew right then that this wasn’t going to take long. There was too much wine in their systems and their time was already limited to just a handful of hours.

Deftly he slipped his hand from her waist to clutch her skirts until he cloud slip a hand underneath. “You minx.” He purred against her ear when he found her perfectly bare and more than ready. She slipped his hand down from her mouth to cup her breast and leaned her head back against his shoulder. “Call it a power move. For myself if you didn’t return… and again for myself if you did.”

“Wench.”

“Rogue.”

Iorveth growled and promptly pressed a hand to the center of her back, bending her over the bed and doing what he’d been dying to do all night. He tossed her skirts up onto her back, pausing a moment to admire her rounded arse, spread thighs and delightfully heeled boots lifting her to the perfect height.

“Iorveth!” She called out in a voice that was two parts demanding and one part whimper and it spurred him into unbolting his sword belt and dropping it carelessly, unlacing his trousers and freeing his cock form the confining fabric.

He pumped himself quickly with one hand and ran his other over the smooth skin of her arse before lining himself at her entrance. He briefly noticed the tremble of her arms as she held herself at a direct angle, something he noted to adjust once he’d eased himself inside.

Their moans mingled and he pressed himself forward. He watched as long as he could as her wet heat took him in, that is, until the aching need to thrust into her quick and hard threatened to break his control, so he dropped his head back and closed his eye tightly.

Once she’d taken him fully, he blindly pressed against the center of her back. “Lay down.” He said in a hoarse voice followed by a guttural groan when she did, taking him deeper.

“Oh- oh fuck Ior-veth.” She cried breathlessly.

When he’d firmly grasped the remainder of his control he looked down at her and immediately lost a bit of it. She’d tossed her glasses to the other side of the bed and her eyes were closed. Before he could lean forward to brush her hair from her face she rolled her hips against him restlessly and he lost even more of his hard won control.

He held tightly to her hips and slipped from her before thrusting forward deeply. The sound of her dragging in a ragged breath and pressing against him, seeking desperately for friction sapped the last of his willpower and he quickly began to move her along his cock, groaning heavily each time her arse slapped against his hips.

At some point it registered in his lust haze mind that she’d slipped a hand up to rub her clit and every few thrusts she pressed a finger along the underside of his cock. The pleasure was consuming and was quickly sending him hurtling over the edge. The fiery ache tightening in his balls and cock was
becoming too much but he forced himself to hold off.

She was close, her cries were becoming constant despite her biting her lip to try and control them. Desperately he slammed her arse against his him and ground against her roughly. Wrapping an arm around her waist he lifted her forward until they both knelt on the bed. Wrapping his hand in her hair he pulled her head back and sucked along the sensitive skin, intent on leaving it bruised. His thrusts became shallow and erratic and just as were her cries.

“I-Iorveth” Was all she got out before falling over the edge and taking him with her. His shout was muffled against her neck as he continued to thrust in and out through his orgasm. He never wanted to stop, he’d thought hazily as he became too sensitive and was forced to still himself. Releasing his hold on her hair he rested his forehead between the blades of her shoulders, enjoying the sound of her slowing breath and content sighs, the tremble of her body against his.

He imprinted this moment into his mind, hoping to carry it with him in the time to come as he adjusted back to his life with out her, and slowly slipped his softening cock from her with a long sigh. He knew they both needed to clean themselves but all he could do instead was curl around her as she moved to lay on her side, his chest clenching when she rubbed her cheek against the arm he lay beneath her head.

“I should really get dressed.” She whispered, the edges of sleep already creeping into her voice.

Unable to resist, he ran a palm from her hip, over her ribs and up to cup her breast before kissing the spot beneath her ear.

“Mmm yep, definitely better get dressed.” She muttered but he could hear the smile in her voice, followed by her easing first from his arms and then the bed. A moment and a sigh later, he followed suit, cleaning himself off and dragging on a pair of clean trousers from his pack.

When he looked over his shoulder he found her dressed in black leggings and her shirt with the creature resembling a cat taking up most of the front. Almost as if they’d been doing this same routine for years, she dropped her glasses onto the dresser next to his cap, swopped up the excited Azlin and placing her at the foot of the bed before crawling herself under the covers and dropping against the pillow with closed eyes and a sigh.

Moving slowly he sat on the edge of the bed, running a hand over Azlin’s soft fur when she poked her cold nose against his arm.

“Will you go with me tomorrow?” Aevon asked quietly, drawing him to meet her gaze in the flickering candlelight. She looked… frightened.

“I’ll be there.” He said, though he knew it would be easier if he stayed. He began this journey with her and it was only right that he finish it properly.

“What are you thinking?” The panic in her voice was very prevalent now and he wondered about it just as he wondered if he should speak freely about other things. Deciding confessions while one was still in the haze of drunken and euphoric bliss was unwise, especially since emotions were already strained over her imminent departure he went with the less dangerous of his thoughts.

“Sigismund Dijkstra… the current self-proclaimed king of Redania and Novigrad though truthfully he’s nothing more than spy and crime lord has come to me with an offer. One that could mean everything for the Aen Seidhe as well as the other nonhumans, if it were successful.”

“What happens if this offer does not succeed?” She asked quietly and he felt her run her fingers up
and down his spine.

“The same thing that has been happening for centuries. Many die for naught.”

“Knowing just that, the answer seems clear. Nothing will change if you fail or don’t make the attempt. And everything changes for the better if you do.”

“Success comes with its own new challenges. Some I’ve experienced before and because of outside influences, they were heard learned lessons.”

She didn’t answer for a moment, just ran her hand over his skin, avoiding his quickly healing wounds. “What is holding you back from rising to these challenges?” She asked at last.

“It’s not what I wanted but it’s come down to who else is there to do it instead?” Iorveth sighed roughly and ran a hand through his hair. “Just a year ago, I’d found, planned, and perfectly executed almost the exact same scheme as Dijkstra only on a much smaller scale than his. Saskia was the Queen so many nonhumans and humans alike craved. Inspiring and strong and they wanted to believe in the land of freedom she promised.” He huffed and shook his head. “That is until it became known that she was actually a dragon with the ability to take on a single human form. Their faith in her became tenuous at best and disintegrated all together when she lost control and killed those she’d meant to protect. When Emryr arrived, what remained of the free Upper Aedirn was quickly torn to shreds and here we are.”

“And now instead of you choosing someone… someone has chosen you.”

“I don’t trust Dijkstra. Just as I don’t trust any of them, and I refuse to be anyone’s puppet. I had already planned to slay Emryr for his own betrayal and continued interference against the Scoia’tael as well as the captivity of Dol Blathanna. But I had no wish to take his place- not of Nilfgaard nor any country he currently occupies. And certainly not with the backing of one such as Dijkstra.”

“Can you do it without him?”

“Drive a dagger into Emryr’s heart as he sleeps? Yes. Drive the black ones out of the North? No.”

“Wait… “ She sat up and leaned against his back, resting her chin on his shoulder. “Who is Emryr’s heir?”

“Cirilla Fiona Elen Riannon… Ciri.”

“Geralt’s daughter?” He noticed the surprise in her voice and laughed dryly.

“Adoptive. It’s a long story best told by Dandelion, but yes, that Ciri.”

“Well surely she would pull the invading forces back to the south once she became Empress.”

Iorveth shook his head. “Just as I, she has no wish to be a ruler… also she is currently missing from her prophetic battle.”

She sighed deeply before laying back down. “I suppose her temporarily ruling and the abdicating to someone else would be out of the question as well. They would simply rally the troops again and try to continue on Emryr’s quest for total domination.”

“Perhaps so. The North is in no state to withstand much more. Though it is rather fascinating to see the dh’oines doing just as I said they would. Tearing each other apart with no end in sight.”
“You need time to rebuild.”

Iorveth at last stretched out beside her, watching the shadows dance across the ceiling. “We could rebuild quickly but repopulate? Too many young are fighting and dying. Aen Seidhe have long lives but we pass the time of fertility quickly in comparison. Dol Blathanna has allegedly been a safe place for six years and little more than a dozen born in that time.”

“Feeling safe and secure takes time… no one- at least no parent worth their salt- wants to force a child to live in uncertainty. Once your people no longer have to look over their shoulders in fear or wonder where their next meal is coming from, they will begin to flourish once more.”

He turned his head until he could meet her gaze. “What would you do Aevon?”

“I- it sounds as if I wouldn’t want this Dijkstra fella as an enemy but I also wouldn’t wish to be beholden to him either.” She lifted a hand to brush his hair back from his brow. “Help Dijkstra gain what he wants in the immediate… something that says he clearly owes you, and I would speak to Ciri. She is an ally and a potentially powerful one at that. She may feel as you do not only in her desire to not run an empire, but that despite it all, she’s the only one left that can do it and bring peace to the people. And then… once the kinks have been worked out, our people are well on their way to being fat and happy, abdicate to someone just as strong and just as driven as you are.”

“And when another war comes along?”

“You’ll either be too old to do anything other than advise, or you’ll dust off your trusty bow and do your part… I can’t believe I just said that but there it is.”

Silently he tucked her against him, pressing his nose into her hair and inhaling the scent of flowers. It was on the edge of his tongue to tell her- to beg her- He closed his eye as he held her. He didn’t know if he’d made a decision regarding Dijkstra but he did feel better having spoken to her about it. Now all that was left for him was to say their final goodbye in a few short hours.

Sleep was a long time in coming.

Wendy wasn’t certain she ever fell into the final stages of REM sleep, her mind was just that much of a mess. Her apprehension and excitement on her return to Pop mixed with everything Iorveth had revealed, was a cocktail of constant thinking. And then there had been the way he’d looked at her all through the night… She’d felt the tipsy effects of wine but she’d had enough of her wits about her to see that something was different. Despite the rough morning, the evening had turned out perfect.

She knew sleep had eluded him as his breathing never truly slowed and when the first rays of early morning light brightened the room, followed by Azlin whimpering, Wendy rolled from the bed. Where yesterday she had been merely showing signs, now there was no doubt about natures war on her body and she was glad to have already been wearing protection…

Silently yet unsurprisingly, Iorveth followed her, moving about the room and dressing. She was ready much quicker and helped him with his armor. Once every strap was buckled and every lace tied, Wendy folded her dress and new boots as carefully as she could and packed them into her now bulging back pack before following Iorveth from the room, Azlin darting ahead of them.

Originally she’d intended to join the two of them outside but at the sight of Geralt speaking to Triss, she was reminded of a conversation she needed to have with the witcher and veered away from their path, smiling slightly at Iorveth’s curious look.
“Good morning Wendy.” Triss said when Wendy pulled up a chair to join them and helped herself to the spread of food. "How are the after party effects?"

“Headache but no nausea though. Not hungry either but if I don’t eat then I know I will end up nauseated.”

“Here, have some water.” Geralt said and passed her a waterskin.

“Thank you.” She said after taking a long drink. “Geralt… Triss even, I have a problem.” She took a deep breath and began to explain her fears of an open portal between their two worlds. “Do you think there is a way to close it so that your world couldn’t be invaded by mine?”

The witcher and sorceress shared a quick look before Geralt dug out a few small balls from a sack tied to his belt. Upon closer inspection Wendy deduced that they were bombs.

“These are dimeritium bombs… they disrupt magic.” He said, holding them out to her which she carefully took and placed in a small pocket of her backpack.

“Just light one and toss it inside… once I’ve crossed?”

He grunted acknowledgment while Triss set a hand on her arm. “Wendy… that means you won’t be able to return- ever.”

Wendy smiled sadly. “I know… I had entertained the idea. But then it began to feel as if I was only returning to watch Pop die which wasn’t fair to either of us. And this way, all of you are just that much safer. Your magic is beautiful and powerful but it would not be a match against a single bomb powerful enough to raze a city ten times the size of Novigrad.”

“You are taking this rather well.”

Wendy dropped her gaze to her hands. “I’m not… not really but I promised myself not to let it show until I was back in my room.”

“Are you ready?” Triss asked quietly, watching as their friends stumbled down the stairs- well except Zoltan who was already down there with them- spread eagle across a nearby table, a half full tankard tucked under his arm.

She nodded and forced her tears back as Dandelion pulled her into a quick hug then passed her to Priscilla.

“Zoltan!” Geralt called gruffly, kicking the leg of the table the dwarf slept on.

“Bugger off.” He groused and turned onto his side, spilling the ale down his chest. The cold liquid roused him to enough awareness that he finally say him and smacked his lips. Finally noticing everyone watching him he rolled from the table and held a hand out to shake hers vigorously. “Safe travels little river.”

“You as well.” Wendy whispered, fearing anything higher would send her rightly controlled emotions spiraling. Iorveth entered a moment later, Azlin bouncing around Wendy’s feet until she whispered her goodbyes to the little puppy.

While Triss began the portal spell, Iorveth dropped Azlin into Geralt’s lap with nary a word, causing Wendy to smile at the sight of the battle hardened man holding the puppy out awkwardly.

“Aevon.” Iorveth said quietly, drawing her attention. He nodded toward Triss and she found the
portal waiting. She took a deep breath and sent each of her friend’s one last smile before following after the sorceress. Once Iorveth joined them, Triss released the spell, and in the light of morning Wendy realized they stood just below a two tiered waterfall.

The misty spray covered them as Iorveth led them behind the bottom level of the falls into a cave. Just as she’d found in the ruins, there was a pool of water only this one flowed out to join the waterfall… but something was wrong.

“Where’s the portal?” Wendy said, her voice unnaturally high. “Before, the pool had been glowing, I could practically hear this world from there. Shouldn’t it be the same way for this side?”

“Triss, did you bring us to the wrong spot?” Iorveth said tightly.

“No, I checked everything several times and then checked them again. This is where Avallac’h said the portal would be.” Triss said firmly.

“Bloede sage…” He growled and stalked several paces away before turning to face them once more.

Wendy shoved her glasses up to rest in her hair while she scrubbed her hands over her face in an attempt to bring clarity to her fogged mind. “What does this mean?” When neither Triss nor Iorveth replied she repositioned her glasses and blinked at them. “I’m seconds away from having the biggest breakdown of my life and would very much like to hear something- anything.”

Triss wrapped an arm around her shoulders. “It means we’re sailing for Skellige. Where we will have a word with our favorite Aen Elle and hopefully a lead on finding Ciri at the same time. Even if this portal isn’t active, Ciri could send you home.”

Wendy didn’t know what to do other than stare at Iorveth, feeling as if she were about to break apart. She had been working towards this moment, preparing herself mentally and bracing herself for heartbreak, and now that it was all for nothing…

“I’m going to be sick.” She whispered as her mind finally acknowledged the aching twist in her stomach, the acidic taste in her mouth and she rushed past Iorveth. When she’d emptied her stomach outside the cave and her body was left a trembling mess she turned to find him waiting and allowed herself to be pulled into his arms. “I’m- I’m relieved. How much of a worthless granddaughter I must be but I’m relieved.” Wendy drew in a breath that was more sob than anything. “I’m so sorry Pop…”

Chapter End Notes

A/N: *Sigh* I loved writing this chapter so much. Sorry it's such a long chapter but I mean...I loved it.
Destiny Dreams

Chapter Notes

*A/N: There was a -guest- review (on ff.net but decided to talk about it on AO3 as well) bringing up the quick transition between Wendy not knowing the language to suddenly knowing it and decided to address it on the most recent chapter just in case they make it this far I can clear it up for them. Normally I just respond to reviewers directly but as they were a guest I couldn't in this situation. It's just a case of lazy writing. I felt beginning each time Wendy wanted to say something "Wendy quickly turned the pages of her handwritten dictionary" was boring and cumbersome. In my head it was just implied that she might do all that haha. Once this story is finished and I do reedits, I'll fix this and hopefully make that transition more appealing and understandable. I've already noticed several other things that need to be fixed and have a list going. Please continue to comment and accept my mistakes in stride haha.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

When faced with the unexpected, Wendy always thought she’d be steadfast in its wake. After all she’d been adrift before in tragedy, mourning, guilt and the sense of loosing oneself. Part of her defense system which she’d built in response, in hope of never feeling such pain again, brick by brick around herself and Pop had been that she would be the strong one when it came time for change, as change was inevitable though not welcomed.

But time and time again she’d come to realize that she wasn’t the strong one. At least when it came to herself… when it came to others be it the Patterson’s missing donkey and trudging for hours in the early morning fields in search of it, or say a little elven village on the brink of collapse, certainly Wendy could ignore the apprehension clawing at her chest, and do what needed to be done.

The strength she’d needed to leave the house after moving in with Pop for the first day since her doctor deemed her recovered enough to go, had come from him. When she’d sat on the edge of her bed, before only ever slept in when she’d stay over- which wasn’t often since she and her parents had lived nearby- all he’d done was silently walk up to her and held out his hand. She’d stared at that hand, rough and calloused, for a good twenty minutes, knew she’d miss the first bell of school, but he’d never wavered and never spoke.

Many times over the years he’d been that missing mechanism that would somehow keep her going when she began to fall behind… but this time he wasn’t there and as Wendy stepped through Triss Merigold’s portal and back into Dandelion’s tavern, she was faced with a choice.

Stop and answer the questions that would no doubt follow her unexpected arrival and demand her own as well… or disappear into the room she’d never thought to see again and think, or more specifically to think on her guilt.

Upon arrival, Wendy swallowed tightly at finding everyone except Geralt looking at her with wide eyes, following her movements when she stepped aside to allow room for Iorveth to come through. Triss offered a small smile but ultimately, along with Wendy, her attention was caught by the curious
sight of Geralt and Azlin.

“Sit.” The witcher said gruffly and then moved his hand in a way that resembled sign language. The little puppy, watching him with a happy face that only a puppy could have, sat.

“Are you using witcher signs on my dog?” Iorveth asked.

“She tried to chew on my crossbow.” Geralt replied looking over his shoulder. His golden eyes widened at the sight of Wendy and he turned toward them while Triss released her spell. “What happened?”

Immediately, Wendy had her answer for just what she was going to do and she turned a glance on first Triss and then Iorveth. “I-I need to go… think.” She whispered, not recognizing her voice. Her throat still burned from loosing control, and she had to keep her fists clenched to disguise their trembles. Neither of them answered, but then again she didn’t wait for them to. Dandelion and Zoltan stepped aside to allow her passage and she silently made her way up to the room.

Feeling as if her body wasn’t hers she sat on the edge of the still unmade bed and allowed her backpack to slide from her arm. It wasn’t difficult for her to pinpoint why she was upset, though there were several. Primarily however… how does one move past acknowledging that if it weren’t for the one person who she cares about the most- she would have happily abandoned her life on Earth for one here on the Continent?

How is she supposed to look at the man she’d readily abandon Earth for and not feel as if she’d also readily abandon Pop as well? Wendy felt her stomach turn at just the thought. It was easy to come to the conclusion that she was the worst sort and underserving of anyone’s love and affection but it was a stubborn voice in the back of her head that sounded a lot like her mother telling her that she had been prepared to leave what was very well the love of a lifetime behind in order to get back to Pop…

What was wrong with feeling a bit of relief at having a bit more time… a few more memories to carry with her for the rest of her life… Wendy sighed and brushed a tear from her cheek and laid back on the bed.

A little more time. A heart’s desire.

Exhaustion crept up on her, whether from the long day and night of excess and elusive sleep, her current emotional turmoil, or some other more unworldly force, Wendy didn’t know and had little will to fight as her eyes slipped closed.

When she opened them again it was to look over her shoulder as a warm fur lined cloak was settled over her shoulders, but all she saw were stormy waves. They were wild and beautiful, but what truly took her breath away were the mountains. She stood there mesmerized by them, taking in the peaks disappearing into low clouds, the snow turning rocky cliffs smooth.

Wendy licked her cold cracked lips, tasting the salty air and immediately froze, her gaze locked on the mountains. She was dreaming… not the sort of pleasant- being invited out to brunch with your favorite man crush Monday dream, but the kind that left her terrified. She’d had this dream only this time she could see and she darted her gaze around looking for details but the mountains began to scream.

They were angry, ravenous screams that shook the ground beneath her and she clutched her hands around her ears in a feeble attempt to keep them out. With her eyes now squeezed shut she never saw the earth crack open around her but she felt something wrap around her ankle and pull.
Her eyes snapped open, she felt the weightlessness, suffocating and turning her stomach, saw the cliffs surrounding her begin to close in and turning the world black.

“A day before he died, I went to see him. I was grown and he was almost gone, so we just closed our eyes and dreamed us up a kitchen, and sang another verse to that old song. ‘Come on, Jack, that son of a guns are comin’ like desperados waitin’ for a train.’

Wendy blinked slowly. She was still dreaming only she found herself in the dream world like before, on the porch with Pop as well as her parents. “Hi Pop…” She whispered and laid her head against his shoulder. “Mom, Dad.”

“Good to see you my sweet, how are you feeling?” Her dad asked with a tilt of his head.

Wendy dragged in a ragged breath. “Terrible. I tried to make it back to Pop but my way back wasn’t there… either I was lied to or something is wrong, and now I’m not certain I’ll be able to come back at all and…” She couldn’t finish. She snapped her mouth closed and glanced at Pop, who paused his humming to look at her.

“It’s alright Wendy… When you’re ready, I’ll be here.”

Wendy wanted to believe that and instead of feeling better with his forgiveness she felt all the worse. “I know that you are just my consciousness telling me what I want to hear.”

“You don’t know… but it’s alright. I’m not a spring chicken anymore but I’m not going anywhere for some time yet. I’ll wait for you.”

“So. What’s the plan?” Her mom asked with a clap of her hands.

And therein lay another of Wendy’s many, many problems... Her newest quest and the link between it and her dream. “They say there is someone that can send me back.”

“Well spectacular! Take all the time you need!”

Wendy sighed. “It’s not that simple.”

“Will it be fun? Simple is boring, so this must be pretty exciting.”

“It will be dangerous.”

“How so?”

“My dreams… what if the-“

“Stop right there.” Her mom held up a hand. “You have spent the best years of your life avoiding it because of what ifs!”

A sudden piercing bark sounded from the darkness surrounding them, jolting Wendy into sitting up straight, her gaze sweeping the darkness.

“Ah, the time has come to send you on your way.” Her dad said with a grin.

“You should do something to help that fella of yours. You have the time, and he has quite the conundrum, hasn’t he?” Her mom added in.

“How could I help?” There was a tremble in Wendy’s voice.
“You’ll think of something. Just remember what you’re good at and it’ll come to you.” Her dad said with a shrug.

The bark sounded again, and following the urge, Wendy stood from the porch swing and moved down the steps before casting one last glance at her family. It was easier to walk away this time, perhaps because somehow she knew she could see them again if only in her dreams.

Taking a deep breath she stepped into the unknown and immediately a cold, wet nose sniffed at her bare feet, causing a shiver to race up her spine, but astonishingly, Wendy could make out Azlin. With a sigh she knelt down to run her fingers through a fully grown Azlin’s fur.

“Hey girl… here to lead the way?” She said, smiling a bit when the dog licked at her chin before trotting ahead. Wendy assumed she was being led in the direction of the campfire and felt her heartbeat skip at the thought. Feeling calm and ready, her pace increased, catching her up to Azlin and her bushy wagging tail.

A light in the distance told her she was near, and excitement began to race through her blood, increasing with every step. Certainly she could wake up and find her love in the waking world but here in her dreams, there wouldn’t be all the weight of their lives crowding her thoughts and less than desirable feelings. Just herself and her conscious with his voice and face telling her everything she wanted to hear. That she looked good in purple… her ideas were brilliant… her singing wonderful… but namely that everything was going to be alright. She was going to have more time with him, and hopefully when next the time came for her to leave, it would be enough.

At last she began to make out the shape of the light, and it was indeed firelight flickering around darkened shapes, but curiously enough it wasn’t a campfire as she’d expected. It was a lantern, swinging from a lamp hook on a wagon. Wendy slowed cautiously and whispered for Azlin to come back to her side but the dog only yipped and pranced on ahead.

Curiosity taking over, Wendy jogged up to the wagon and found several Aen Seidhe faces watching her with pinched, hungry expressions. Dirt smudged their cheeks and at first they looked at her with fear but quickly relief took over.

Wendy continued to walk beside them silently before noticing the appearance of more lanterns and even a few torches. Turning in a slow circle as she walked, she saw people of the three elder races and even a few humans trudging on through the darkness, the unknown. A small hand slipped into hers, startling her but she relaxed at the sight of Lacie.

“Hello sweet little sorceress.” Wendy whispered, coming to a stop and smiling down at the little girl. “Where is everyone going?”

“The future… or maybe it was the past. No, definitely the future.”

Wendy bit her lip and looked around uncertainly. “Is it a good future?”

“You don’t know that yet. But we should hurry, come on!” Lacie began to tug on Wendy’s hand, drawing her forward a few steps and out of the way of a wagon being pulled by a weary looking donkey ambled by.

“What do I know?” Wendy asked with a sigh.

“You know lots of things! But you’re not ready to know you know them… does that make sense?”

“One hundred percent. Do you know anything?”
“I know what you know… and somewhere in you, you know that you should be careful. Those Destiny picks to be special are often sought after… and never for the right reasons.” The little girl began to swing their hands between them, adding a little skip to her step.

“I’m not special.” Wendy insisted. “I’m just a clumsy farm girl who should have stayed in bed and missed her plane.”

“Well… sometimes Destiny gets it wrong… so it’s possible. There was once a boy who was thought to be special… but he was just… wrong.”

Wendy nodded firmly. “Well there you go... Wait. How could I possibly know that?”

“Destiny has a long memory… and something tells me that Destiny isn’t wrong about you.” Lacie turned on Wendy abruptly and stared deep into her eyes for a long moment. “Destiny has a message for you… whispering in the memory of your blood… The sun is setting, the flowers dying, the northern mountain burns, but the eagle soars, just out of reach of the arrow aimed for its heart.”

As Lacie said each word, the images flashed through Wendy. “What does that mean? What is causing so much chaos?”

“Destiny dreams.” Lacie tilted her head back, her eyes tracing the endless empty sky. “The burning star falls, spreading her light, her hearts desires.”

Once Aevon disappeared up the stairs, every eye swung toward first Triss and then Iorveth who bit back a sigh before leaning forward to place his hands flat on the table before him. Turning his head slightly he set his piercing gaze on Dandelion.

“Send your staff home and bar the doors.” Iorveth said quietly before turning his gaze on each of his companions, lingering on Priscilla. “If you’ve no wish to involve yourself in what I’m about to discuss, now is your chance to distance yourself. If you stay, you take on the burden of my trust and betrayal will not be tolerated.” He leveled his stare on Geralt. “Gwynbleidd-“

“I lost the right to call myself neutral long ago in Vizima… no sense in trying to go back now.” Geralt shrugged, nudging Azlin away from the heel of his boot.

“If this in anyway involves Wendy…” Triss began, crossing her arms.

“To a degree- it does.” Iorveth said.

“Then I’m staying.” She said with a firm nod.

“Wait- does this have to do with why she’s still here?” Dandelion asked with wide eyes.

“No, which is another matter to be discussed first- after you’ve sent the maids away.”

“Fine- but not a word until I’m back. Priscilla will you see to the kitchen staff? I’ll track down Cora.” Dandelion said, spinning away before Priscilla could do more than nod eagerly.

Why Iorveth was about to drag three more dh’oines into his problems, he could only guess at. Perhaps it was the long standing history Dandelion and Triss had with Geralt, a proven ally of the Scoia’tael cause… after all Zoltan was Scoia’tael and the foursome were tightly knit together through the trials they’d encountered over the years. Priscilla was more of an unknown but the scars on her
neck led him to believe that if she was not loyal to him, then she would at least be loyal to Geralt, and himself by extension.

While he waited for Dandelion to send everyone away and bar the doors, Iorveth leveled a glare at Geralt. “Axii is not an effective way to train an animal Gwynbleidd. Azlin is not a boy drunk on sour ale and spoiling to prove himself.”

“I had no idea you were so well versed in the art.” Geralt said dryly.

Iorveth straightened and crossed his arms. “What you know about me wouldn’t fill Zoltan’s tiny dwarven fist.”

“Your mother didn’t have any complaints about the size of my fist you rabid, flea bitten fox.” Zoltan groused, making a rude gesture with said fist.

“Zoltan! I believe fleas would have better taste than to infest such a one as Iorveth.” Triss pipped in with a saucy grin.

Zoltan grinned through his beard. “Yer right. With an arse that skinny, they’d starve.”

“Exactly. They’d be more likely to make their home in Gwynbleidd’s beard.” Iorveth jabbed a finger in the air toward Geralt as he paused mid scratch in said beard.

Triss wrinkled her nose. “He’s right. Too much time on the road- you need a shave.”

Geralt tossed a hand out toward Iorveth. “Blame the race, not the mutant.”

“Zoltan has a beard, and he doesn’t have any lice.”

Zoltan crossed his arms over his chest and nodded proudly. “It’s all about the proper ingredients in the beard oil.”

“Oh please. More like they’ve simply infested the hair on your ass instead.” Geralt said with a roll of his eyes.

Zoltan tugged on the bottom of his beard thoughtfully. “You know… my arse has been itchy…”

“Why are we talking about Zoltan’s itchy posterior?” Dandelion asked as he and Priscilla joined them at last.

“Because we got tired of talking about your perfumed posterior.” Geralt said with an arched brow.

Iorveth bit back a smile as the bard twisted to try and peer at his arse.

“Aww you guys are the best.” Dandelion said with a wink at Priscilla. “Now then, every one except for Wendy and ourselves has left, and every door and window is locked as tightly as Henrietta’s chastity before-“ The bard stumbled over his words, realizing the direction in which they were going. “Well just before- so what’s this about?”

Iorveth rolled his eye. “First off, the portal Avallac’h said would take Aevon back to her home, was not there.”

Geralt muttered a curse, shifting restlessly in his chair. “Just when I begin to let my guard down around him…”

“Calm down Geralt.” Triss spoke up. “There are thousands of possibilities and not all of them
involve Avallac’h being the one at fault. Ciri trusts him, that’s enough for me.”

Geralt clenched his hands into fists and narrowed his golden gaze at the sorceress. “And that does nothing to ease my mind.” He then directed his gaze at Iorveth. “So, Avallac’h. Seems we have two reasons to pay him a visit. About Wendy’s missing portal, and Ciri’s possible whereabouts.”

Iorveth nodded once. “Yes. If anything, after finding Zireael, she will be able to send Aevon home.”

“Avallac’h will as well be able to answer questions about Wendy’s dreams and miraculous recovery. If anyone knows anything about what is happening to her, it’s him.” Triss added, a breath of excitement in her voice.

“How is the lass taking this unexpected turn of events? She seemed shaken indeed.” Zoltan said quietly, sharing a nod with Dandelion.

“White as snow.” The bard added.

Iorveth felt that strange mixture of worry and aching fondness called love cover him like a blanket… at the time he’d had to force his own shock and relief to the side as Aevon began to feel the effects of guilt ripping away at her body. All morning long, he hadn’t been able to draw a solid deep breath so affected he’d been while trying to prepare to say goodbye.

To awaken to a silent morning, watch as Aevon dressed with a haunted look in her blue eyes and a tremble in her hands, it had weighed on him. He hadn’t wanted her to leave, just as he knew she didn’t want to, but to have heard the pain and guilt in her voice as she whispered to him her relief at finding her way back no longer there… his heart had soared even if he couldn’t speak of it. He would not add to her agony if he could avoid it. Her honor demands that she rejoin her family, no matter their own wants. It would be a testimony of his love for her that he would see that her honor remains untarnished...

He would not urge her to remain, though he wondered if he could. Would she stay if he asked it of her? If he willingly tossed away his honor for the selfish wish of having her with him… would she stay? He would never know.

“Aevon is suffering… the sage and Zireael are her last hope in returning to the land of her birth.” He said at last.

“So, Skellige then.” Geralt said with finality.

“Skellige. Again.” Iorveth agreed.

“Once a ship comes to port, we’ll secure passage.”

“So why the locked doors and secrecy just to discuss your travel plans?” Dandelion asked.

“Because he has more than just Wendy’s missing portal to talk about.” Geralt said with that piercing stare of his, directing it at Iorveth.

“I was invited to Dijkstra’s bathhouse yesterday. He had a great deal to say as all dh’oines do when they want something.”

“I hope you told him to go plough himself.” Zoltan said, shaking his head.

Iorveth tugged on the top of his leather glove.
“By the love of my mother’s butter ale... you didn’t tell him to fuck off!” Zoltan raised his voice with each word. “Iorveth, what have you agreed to?”

Iorveth glared at Zoltan. “Nothing- yet.”

“I think you better tell us everything that you discussed.” Geralt said with a cautious tone. “Dijkstra and Phillipa might have plotted and freed the north of a paranoid madman, but...”

Iorveth held up a hand. “Before that, we may need to leave Novigrad while we wait for a ship to come into port. At least those of us that were in Aedirn. Dijkstra let it slip that Aedirn knows of Aevon, at least her existence, and allegiance. Meaning someone survived the manor and after Dandelion’s little party last night...”

Triss sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose. “Every spy in the north and south now knows where we are.”

“And now they know you have a woman.” Zoltan dragged a hand down his beard and muttered a colorful curse. “There’s a safe house in the forest south of Novigrad. More a pile of cursed elven stone but it’s near enough I can quickly get to you when the ship comes in... might have to empty out the monsters though.” Zoltan said with a sniff.

“Then I suppose Gwynbleidd will be of some use after all. We’ll leave at dark. Did you bring horses witcher?”

“I have Roach. For the two of you and Wendy, we’ll have to... borrow. Unless Triss wants to portal...”

Triss waved a hand and shook her head. “I’ll ride. Could use the exercise.”

“No matter. Moving on-” Iorveth began.

“Why was Dijkstra talking about Wendy with you?” Triss demanded.

“As I was saying-” Iorveth said pointedly toward the sorceress. “Dijkstra has grandiose plans. He wishes to unite the north, and in return for mine and the Scoia’tael aid, toss what’s left of Temeria’s charred and ravaged remains on me, insisting a dh’oine woman’s aid would be invaluable in bringing the dh’oine under my control.”

There was a long, drawn out stretch of silence before everyone, even the otherwise quietly listening Priscilla, began to speak. Loudly. Iorveth took a moment to watch each of his companions, argue, ask questions, and otherwise give their counsel. It was chaos... beautiful chaos as Zoltan really only laughed until he was red in the face and gasping, Geralt going on and on about how everyone was mad, Triss wanted to know detail’s down to what Dijkstra was wearing and just how he thought to pull off such a grand scheme. Priscilla was shouting at Zoltan to be serious while Dandelion began to mutter about romantic lyrics that would describe it all in perfect rhyme.

“You said you haven’t accepted... why not?” Geralt finally asked a reasonable question that shut the others up.

Iorveth dragged a gloved hand down his face and sighed. “Little more than a century ago, when I first took up the blade, eventually making my way through the ranks of the Scoia’tael, this was never how I envisioned gaining freedom- true freedom for the Aen Seidhe. I was out to rid the land of the dh’oine plague. Simple.” He paused to shake his head with a sardonic laugh. “Eventually I realized that the only ones that hate dh’oine more than the elder races, are more dh’oine. Their hatred of each other is their undoing and leads to men like Dijkstra coming to men like me, dangling pretty pieces of
fairytales on a string, in hopes that I’ll be another puppet... And you already know very well that I am no puppet.”

“You plan to take Temeria without him?” Geralt asked, his voice borderline pleased.

“Last night, Aevon gave intelligent counsel on the matter. Dijkstra can have the north, but the Aen Seidhe will have Temeria, the dwarves Mahakam… perhaps even reconcile with Francesca though she will answer for her crimes against her own in her greed. We will have it without being beholden to anyone, including Dijkstra.” Iorveth set his hands on his hips and leveled a look on Zoltan and Geralt. “He needs my help extinguishing the flame, and I shall give it to him. I will deliver him a free Novigrad, and then we shall part ways as the allies we claim to be. Emryr will be next.”

“Which will not be easy.” Geralt muttered.

“No. It will not, but as we have all learned recently, a crown cannot save a king from a blade.”

“No but a sorceress can. Yennefer is in debt to Emryr for his amnesty and aid against the wild hunt.”

“Do not fear for the woman of war… or perhaps it is myself you worry for?”

Geralt gave a heaving sigh and shared a look with Triss. “And Wendy? How does she fit into your plans?”

Iorveth clenched his right hand before forcing it to relax. “Dijkstra is mistaken in his belief that she will be involved. We will find Zireael and she will ensure Aevon’s safe return to her own realm. Before any of this is to take place.”

Triss sent him a look that was bordering on pity and it churned like sour ale in his stomach. “Iorveth, I heard what she said at the waterfall. How are you so certain that she will leave once Ciri is found?”

“Her honor will not allow her to stay.” He said stiffly and immediately.

“I know how you can stop the flame.” Priscilla spoke up suddenly, rubbing a hand on her throat, her gaze burning into Iorveth’s. “When you return from Skellige, I want to help.”

“Priscilla…” Dandelion said quietly, his voice concerned but she shook him away.

“It’s the right thing to do… they bring so much suffering while claiming to be just in their evil… but they are just as corrupt as any king or crime lord, and they are worshipped for it.”

“Work with Zoltan, if you need-“ Iorveth paused as a strange feeling slipped through him, leaving him short of breath and cold. The others watched him with curiosity shining from their gazes while he shook the feeling away and began again. “If you need resources, he will see to them and once I return we will move forward.” Iorveth tilted his chin up, pleased as the newest member of his inner circle of dh’oine allies was proving herself already. “If everyone is exhausted of questions and opinions, we should see to gathering provisions for our disappearance from polite company.”

“In this grand scheme of yours… what is your plan for Nilfgaard once you’ve assassinated its Emperor?” Geralt asked quietly, more than likely already knowing the answer.

Iorveth knew there were few things that would sway Geralt’s loyalty, but his daughter Cirilla would sway him every time. “When I know, you will know Gwynbleidd.” He said simply, choosing to save that battle for a later day.

Geralt gave a small, grunting growl, and turned his gaze away nearly causing Iorveth to smile. The
wolf was choosing to save that battle for later as well. “Have Wendy change into her dress. She needs to blend in now more than ever.”

Iorveth curled his lip at the witcher’s tone as the thought that he’d already planned such a thing, but pushed the need to snap at Geralt to the side. “I suggest we part. I’ll find horses.”

“I will find horses.” Triss said with a roll of her eyes. “You are the most unblendable man I know of Iorveth, just barely more so than Geralt… Of anyone here, I blend in the most and with a simple illusion, the stable will never know the horses are missing until we’ve long gone. Geralt will gather food with that gold he was paid for the griffin and you will see to our Wendy.” She paused and poked at her chin with a finger thoughtfully. “If I may suggest… flowers.”

Iorveth stared at the sorceress while Priscilla and Zoltan nodded in agreement. “Flowers.”

“Aye, a lass like little river, heart on her sleeve , and threatens men twice her size with that tiny nail file of hers, flowers-“ Zoltan was cut off suddenly by an excitedly clapping blonde bard.

“Roses.” Priss added on.

“Red roses.” Triss added on.

“I was under the impression that I was too unblendable to leave and now you suggest I waltz about Novigrad picking red roses.” Iorveth said, irritation coloring his voice and narrowing his green gaze.

“You’re too unblendable to be doing something illegal… such as horse thievery. Toss on a hood and you’ll just be another shady romantic admiring life’s beauty. But be quick about it, she shouldn’t be alone like this for so long.”

“Fine. Feed Azlin while I’m gone Zoltan, and if you see Geralt using signs on her…”

Zoltan was already sweeping the wiggling puppy into his arms, chuckling as she chewed on his beard. “Not to worry, I’ll not allow the brute anywhere near her.”

Geralt opened his mouth to defend himself but quickly abandoned whatever he’d planned to say and began for the door, Triss following after with a quiet laugh.

Before taking his own leave, Iorveth’s gaze was drawn to the stairs, worry settling like a heavy rock in his stomach. “Will you see that she eats? She grew sick at the waterfall.” He said to the remaining two.

“I’ll do one better and whip up my famous honeysuckle, nostrix, and cherry tea. Proven to cure anything from heartbreak to the hiccups.” Dandelion said with a proud tilt to his chin.

A slight smile whispered across Iorveth’s lips as he rolled his eye and strode for the door, plucking a hooded cape from a peg on the wall. The tavern door closed behind him as Dandelion stage whispered to Prissilla, asking if he’d just been graced with his very own Iorveth smile.

Wendy dragged in a ragged breath as she came fully awake, the words of Lacey still whispering through her mind. Her eyes wild and panicked, she quickly scrambled from the bed and dropped to her knees by her back pack and began to empty it of its contents. Her clothes were tossed aside, toiletries strewn across the floor and books tumbled free. She didn’t notice the shaking of her hands or the clammy feel of cold sweat covering her body, she only had one thought-
“The burning star falls, spreading her light, her hearts desires.” She whispered to herself once- and then again and again as she pulled free an empty journal and clicked open a pen. Quickly, messily, she began to write down every detail of her dreams. Her breathing was short and her eyesight blurry, her glasses having slid down to the tip of her nose but she could not tear her mind away from her task long enough to push them back.

She described the unknown, the flickering porch light, and her mother’s hair, down to the ice cold grass. The words spoken and the feelings that came with them. How the red dress felt against her thighs and the firelight warmed her skin… and when it came to the premonitions, her empty stomach turned in revolt. Reflexively she pressed the back of a trembling hand to her mouth and tried to breathe through her nose.

With control barely tied together with a frayed rope, Wendy continued with her writing. The fire at Ryre, the mountains of Skellige, the fur cloak brushing against her cheek and the suffocating weight of falling.

A knock sounded on the door but it didn’t register as Wendy tried to put into words the horrible screams of the mountains.

“Wendy?” A voice came from the door.

“The ground trembled and cracked-“ Wendy whispered then yelped when a hand settled on her shoulder. Her concentration broken, she blinked up at the concerned face of Priscilla.

“I’ve brought food and some of Dandelion’s remedy tea.” Priscilla said in a gentle voice and nodding toward the table.

Wendy’s stomach turned once more and her mouth went dry and just barely she held back words of refusal. “Thank you Priscilla.” She whispered instead in a cracked voice.

Priscilla likely suspected that Wendy wasn’t going to touch the food as she reached out and ran a hand over Wendy’s hair before pushing her glasses to a more secure perch. “Iorveth tasked me with seeing that you ate, and surely you wouldn’t wish his ire on me.”

There was a wince on Wendy’s part, seeing that Priscilla had expertly backed her into a corner. “I will… thank you.”

With a final, understanding smile, Priscilla left Wendy alone once more, closing the door quietly behind her. Quickly, Wendy reached up and pulled the plate of cold roasted chicken, cheese, bread, and an assortment of vegetables, as well as the teacup of red tea.

Wendy nibbled on a carrot cautiously before pouring herself back into her work. She didn’t know what held significance or what didn’t. All she knew for certain was that her dreams were telling her something and she’d tried to out run them… but that hadn’t worked.

She whispered her mother’s words about Iorveth and how to help him… she wanted to, she just didn’t know how or even if she had the time. Everything weighed on how portals between worlds even worked. Before long, she’d moved on from finishing the carrot and found her appetite returning. Greedily she gulped down the surprisingly delicious tea and tore into the chicken and cheese, all the while scribbling through the journal.

“The burning star falls, spreading her light, her hearts desires.” She whispered as she reached the end, her eyes lost focus, writing the words over and over until she ran out of room on the page. The next page, she began to list just what those desires were. Everything. From the perfect cup of coffee...
to a long life loving others and being loved in return. Each more painful to write as they became more and more impossible. Many were at conflict with another, the best example, being torn between two worlds.

A ragged sob escaped her as she wrote the words with a shaking hand. ‘To stay… to leave…’ The pen pressed deeply into the paper, leaving indents and seeping ink while she fought for control of her emotions. She felt as if she were going mad in her need to understand and a restlessness quickly began to take over.

She needed more… more information, more time. Needed to scream, to talk, to be quiet… her mind was loud and erratic with panic and a hunger to find out what it all meant.

In a rush she stumbled to her feet taking her journal and pen with her and swung open the door and promptly ran into a solid wall of armored chest, knocking her back a step until hands wrapped around her arms, holding her steady.

“Iorveth…” Wendy whispered breathlessly as she blinked up at him, her heart skipping a beat as he swept his gaze over her.

A moment later he dropped his hands and knelt to pick something up from the floor, something he must have dropped in order to catch her arms. A rose, deeply red, held gingerly in a leather gloved hand. Her breath caught in her chest, Wendy’s gaze flicked from the small bloom up to Iorveth to a fascinating sight.

His gaze was locked on the rose and he dragged a hand restlessly across the back of his neck… if anyone had told her that Iorveth had a slightly bashful side, falling just short of blushing, Wendy would have laughed lightly with a shake of her head. Iorveth… bashful indeed. Yet here he was, endearingly holding a red rose- her favorite- and obviously avoiding her gaze.

Every thought and reason fled and her mind quieted outside of excitedly waiting for him to offer her the rose, biting her lip to try and control her smile. But the silence began to stretch until Wendy had to lace her hands together at her waist in order to keep herself from taking the bloom by force. He seemed lost in thought, or perhaps just unsure of his next move… Wendy’s wide eyed gaze softened.

She had little doubt he was worldly in the ways of intimacy, long before she came into his life, but she couldn’t help wondering if he’d ever been… romantic. Somehow she couldn’t see where he would have chosen to stroll along a shoreline with his lady’s hand held comfortably within his own as the sun set, over turning a wooden dummy to splinters. And yet here he stood, painfully romantically holding a rose. A voice in the back of her head wondered who’d made the suggestion and her grin won out for a brief moment before she managed to tamp it back down.

“That’s a very pretty rose you have… may I?” She said in a barely controlled voice and held a hand out.

Her words prompted him into shoving the stem into her hand so suddenly a thorn pricked the palm of her hand. She bit back a yelp, hiding the short stab of pain.

“I had to go to three brothels before I found one that had roses.” He said shortly, at last meeting her gaze.

Wendy hid her grin under the ruse of taking a customary sniff. “Was it a very nice brothel?”

She suspected her humor could be heard in her voice for he narrowed his eye and all trace of awkwardness disappeared as quickly as it arrived. “I suppose you’ve never been to one or you
would know that such a thing does not exist.” He said drily and stepped around her.

Her original intent momentarily forgotten, Wendy closed the door and leaned back against it, watching as he swept up the plate from the floor and set it back on the table before finding his seat and began stacking meat and cheese on a slice of bread.

“While the sex industry continues to thrive on Earth, we no longer have open advertisement of brothels and saloons. More or less it’s come down to committed relationships, ‘hook ups’, or knowing the right place to look with the right amount of money.” Her lips tilted into a crooked grin. “Which as you very well know, I never got around to any of these options.”

“Very well indeed.” He dragged a long look over her, a warmth spreading through her blood, causing her to mentally roll her eyes at herself. She had days before she was going to be up to doing anything about that look he was giving her, but then again it was her own fault for bringing it up in the first place.

“What time is it?” She asked, sending a look out the window to find evening shadows beginning to fall. “It took you all day to bring me a rose?” Wendy held the rose up to her chest and leveled on him a wide smile. “Awww Iorveth, no one’s ever scoured a city for a brothel with a supply of roses for me before.”

He rolled his eye and took a bite of his sandwich. As he chewed he studied her until he swallowed. “Why is that?”

Wendy knew what he was asking, but she couldn’t pass an opportunity to tease him. After all she’d had a trying day that was slowly making its way back to the forefront of her thoughts. Stepping around the mess she’d made, she sat in the chair across from him and set the rose on top of her journal. “I just told you that we don’t have brothels on every corner where I’m from.” She took a bite, watching to see if he found her as funny as she found herself. Probably not, but the corner of his mouth tilted up enough to make her heart skip a beat. Of course he could see straight through her, just as she could see through him most of the time.

“This is where you say something along the lines of-“ She covered an eye with her hand and dropped her voice a notch and attempted to copy his accept in a different language. “Aevon, you’re a beautiful, intelligent, hilarious woman… why have you not found some lucky young lad… that is before myself of course… minus the young.” Dropping her hand and her voice going back to normal, Wendy straightened her shoulders with a shrug. “No lonely, tragic reason. I wasn’t some damsel that was looking for love in all the wrong places or in love from afar… I just wasn’t. There wasn’t time or room for it… Something I suspect we have in common.” She added as more of an afterthought.

“Are you ready to talk about this morning?” He asked, quietly changing the subject.

Perhaps her humor and openness was more than he’d been expecting, and it wasn’t without her notice that he had that affect on her. Her gaze swept across the messy room before coming back to focus on the rose and journal. Less than five minutes ago she’d been a mad mess… a mess that was returning as she clenched her fists against the tremble of her hands and the dreams began to echo through her mind.

“I’m not certain there’s much to discuss… you were there and you know what’s going to happen next.” She sighed and slumped in her chair and pushed a hand wearily through her hair. “If you mean this…” She jerked a nod toward her scattered possessions. “Unless you’ve talent to dream interpretation or know how to stop them permanently, again there’s not much to discuss.”
“You dreamed again. After our return?” He leaned forward slightly, catching her eye.

“I don’t remember falling asleep. I don’t think I could count it as sleeping at least. I felt dragged into it… Something is going to happen on the way to Skellige…” Wendy frowned down at her journal. “I’m pulled down… suffocating. Drowning without feeling the water?” She sighed in frustration. “It doesn’t make sense… how do I keep it from happening if I can’t understand it.”

“You were leaving when I arrived.”

“I was going to ask everyone what they knew about Avallac’h. Triss seems to believe he will know, and I realized that I know very little of him… he spoke an ancient version of an already ancient language from Earth. How? Why haven’t I been asking questions and just accepting so much?” Wendy pushed herself from her chair and began to pace. “That’s what I do. I have so many questions and instead of finding the answers like I normally do, I just wanted to escape. To outrun them. And now that it’s no longer an option, I- I can’t-“

Her voice became panicked and the cold sweat from before returned. “I came out of that dream a- a train wreck. Words whispering and screaming through my mind, visions of setting suns and burning mountains.” She stopped her pacing to stare out the window. “The Aen Seidhe were walking… fleeing… resettling? I don’t know. I thought since it was my conscious, I would, but I know less now than I did before.”

“I know very little of Avallac’h other than he is a sage… a mage that is beyond mere sorcery. Gwynbleidd has no particular fondness for him but I believe that is more out of concern for his daughter. The sage has a complicated history involving Zireael and the wolf. His counsel would be better than mine.” He leaned over in his chair and swept her new dress from the floor and held it out to her. “The sage will have the answers, answers I would like to know as well… but we have a more immediate threat.”

Wendy slowly accepted her clothing, apprehension sinking into her chest. “What is it?”

“Novigrad is no longer safe. Dijkstra mentioned Aedim’s awareness of your existence, the only way they could know of is if someone survived that manor. And we were very much in the public eye last night.”

Her mind tripped into over drive as his words registered. “We have to get you out of Novigrad! But then how will- is there a ship already here? Is Novigrad even a port city? How could I have been so careless!” Wendy tossed a hand into the air before kneeling to begin repacking her possessions. “I’ve read enough books and watched enough television to know that spies are everywhere! I should have never encouraged Dandeli-“ She was cut off by a hand grasping hers and pulling her back to standing.

Iorveth held her hand close to his chest and tilted his head slightly to meet her gaze. “I’m not leaving Novigrad because of myself Aevon. A ship will arrive to carry us to Skellige but until then we must get you out of the city. The preparations are already taken care of, you need only change your clothing, say your farewells, and we will depart along with Gwynbleidd and Triss… They need to disappear until something comes along to capture Atkin’s attention.”

Wendy’s brows twisted into a small frown of confusion. “Why is it important to get me out of the city? I’m not the one with a bounty on my head.”

“Because too many know of my affection for you. Men like Dijkstra or Emryr would use you to try and control me.” He said in a low, almost sneering voice.
“Well that’s ridiculous. Everyone knows you would choose what was best for the Aen Seidhe, no matter what.” Wendy rolled her eyes and pulled away from him with a huff and returned to stuffing her books into her backpack. “Use me to control you. I’ve known you all of a month and even I know that wouldn’t work.” Out of the corner of her eye she watched as he picked up the rose from atop her journal, her movements slowing as she turned her attention on him fully.

“It is as you say.” He said quietly, placing the rose back on the journal and facing the window, leaving her with a profile of his scar. “But the importance of finding Zireael, and your return to your world for your own safety has become paramount.”

Wendy felt sick to her stomach, remembering how relieved she’d felt having no choice but to remain in his world for a short while later. She bit her lip, against the heavy feeling and forced her mind to find the humor. “In the dream world, my mother told me I had time. Seems that was wishful thinking on my part.” It wasn’t exactly funny to her, but it was better than the alternative which was break down into tears.

Once everything had been packed away, Wendy pulled off her t-shirt and slipped into her dress, lacing it tightly and pressing out wrinkles as best she could. Ponce the tailor would no doubt faint to see what had already become of his lovely creation, but there was nothing to be done for it now. After switching out her hiking boots for the high calf boots that did wonders for her temperament she took a moment to admire how trim they made her ankles seem. She wasn’t above admitting that she was a shoe girl, and perfectly secure in her vanity to admit that wearing a pair of boots that looked like the someone wearing them knew how to bring men to their knees with cleverness and wit made her feel as if she were just that sort of woman.

“If you’re done?” Iorveth said dryly, bringing her gaze to his slightly amused expression.

“Oh please, as if you’ve never noticed just how wide that chest pieced makes your shoulders seem and thought, ‘bloody hell, I look hot.’” Wendy said with a grin.

“I can honestly say that I have never looked at myself in the mirror and thought I look like a temperature.”

Wendy wagged a finger at him before buckling her sabre around her waist, noticing how it was becoming a habit. Before, she’d had it and her new dagger buckled to the outside of her backpack, anticipating never having to wear them again. “Do not be cheeky. You know what I mean.”

Before she could hook her modified backpack strap over her shoulder he halted her by slipping a hand around her waist, stepping close until his chest brushed hers and she had to tilt her head back to meet his gaze. He had that look in his eye, the one from last night that said there was more unspoken and unknown than she could fathom.

“I never know what you mean.” His voice grew husky and his gaze dropped to her lips, causing her to lick them in anticipation. Maybe it was the fact that thoroughly satisfying her needs was still new to her, or otherwise known as the ‘honeymoon phase’ but she felt the heady effects of wanting him twisting through her veins. But she had the lovely reminder of an aching back already pushing any thought of delaying their departure firmly away and she pulled away with a sigh.

“Hopefully this is one of those mythical three dayers rather than the typical six dayer.” She muttered to herself and heaved the backpack onto her shoulder, picked up her journal, pen, and rose from the table and practically stomped from the room without another word.

It was only when three pairs of male eyes took one look at her down in the main room of the tavern before turning into glares focused on Iorveth that Wendy realized she had a heavy glower on her
“Ach, lass what did the cockup do to put such a look on you?” Zoltan growled. “Did he bungle up the rose?”

A touch of her irritation left her expression, enough for her to smile slightly and shake her head. “Not at all, the rose was just what I needed to cheer me up. See?” She held it up for the dwarf to see. “He had to wander around to three brothels to find it… Unfortunately, a rose cannot chase away a truckload- uh wagonload of problems away for long.” Wendy said more for his benefit, as he’d revealed with his gruffly concerned words that he was the one behind the bloom.

“We need to make our farewells brief Wendy.” Geralts said. “I take it Iorveth spoke of the current situation.”

Wendy drew in a deep breath, searching for strength but only feeling exhausted instead, before nodding once. “He did.” She noticed that the tavern was eerily quiet this evening, empty save for their small group and she wondered if it had to anything to do with their current situation. She wasn’t given more than a second to ponder it before she was pulled into a round of hugs from Dandelion, Priscilla, and Zoltan, dropping her heavy backpack to the floor in order to give each one her proper attention. Each said words of comfort and wishes of safety, promising to see her off when she sails for Skellige, since it had the potential to be the last she would see of them.

The second round of goodbyes coming so soon after the first weighed on her but she was coming to accept that life here seemed to constantly be on the move, at least for those with lives such as her friends. She stood to the side as Triss straightened Dandelions hat and Iorveth shared a quiet word with Zoltan, and then as quickly as their goodbyes began, they were finished. This was natural to them, this coming together for brief moments of companionship before parting ways once more.

How odd the concept was for someone like her, who spent months without leaving the small city limits of her little town. The nearest city had been hours away and unless there was a great need for a visit, she’d just as soon stay put. But it hadn’t always how she’d envisioned her life… a traveler… exploring and discovering. Almost as she was now only without the swords, monsters, and now political intrigue.

“Aevon.” Iorveth’s voice at her side, drawing her attention from her inner thoughts to find him holding her cloak out to her. She blinked, realizing she’d left it hanging on a peg near the door after their return from shopping. She accepted the deep grey cloak and tied it over her shoulders as Iorveth lifted Azlin to tuck under his arm. She smiled at the happily panting puppy and scratched behind her soft ears.

“Ready for your first adventure little one?” She whispered before heaving her backpack up over her shoulder and following Iorveth into the back alley, Triss and Geralt trailing behind her. Four horses waited, saddled and packed with sacks and bedrolls. “I miss Xalvador.” She said as she stepped up to a roan and offered her hand cautiously for the horse to investigate.

“What will you name this one?” Iorveth asked, taking her pack from her and securing it to the side of the saddle. Wendy took a moment to carefully secure the rose and journal inside the pack.

“Eda… for the goddess of time and wealth. What about yours?” She eyed his red and white paint.

“Jeralt.” He said, shifting Azlin in his arm in order to offer a hand of assistance to Wendy as she tried to mount.

“Wh-what?” She stuttered out around a laugh, her foot missing the stirrup.
“Yea… what?” Geralt said, already mounted.

“Is there something wrong with the name Jeralt?” Iorveth asked, nodding for Wendy to try and mount her horse once more.

She was successful this time and grinned down at him. “It’s a fine name. Right Triss?”

“Can’t think of a better name in all existence.” The sorceress said with a wink.

“Flea bittin’ rabid fox fits.” Geralt said with an arched brow before turning his horse away and urging her into a canter, Triss following after.

Swiftly Iorveth mounted Jeralt with all the grace she’d come to expect from him, even as he did so with one hand and held little Azlin close until he settled her on the saddle before him. Wendy whispered the instructions and procedures that went with horse riding, remembering everything Iorveth had taught her. Fortunately it had only been a couple of days since she’d ridden by herself and she found it much easier as she followed Iorveth from the alley and before long, she crossed Glory Gate, the sun long gone. Iorveth rode close to her side with Geralt and Triss mere shadows several lengths ahead of them, following the dirt road that would take them somewhere safe.

The cold night air swept across her cheeks and through her hair, her love was at her side under the silver of moonlight, and her mind was quiet.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Sorry this chapter isn’t as exciting as the last haha but I hope you enjoyed it all the same
Of the Sea; Of the Stars

Chapter Summary

I did it! I got this chapter done before the week was done! Enjoy, and onward to the next ;)
occasional copse of trees.” She paused for a moment before tilting her head back slightly, the movement drawing his gaze to meet hers. “Would you like to know what I miss about Earth? Not just Pop… but besides him?”

The selfish, angry part of him that wanted her to stay snapped at him to say no… that he didn’t want to know anything about the world that would soon claim her once more. But the rational part that just wanted to hear her speak whether it be complete nonsense or something important to herself sighed and nodded its head at him sadly.

“What do you miss?” He asked at last paying heed to that rational part of himself.

“Being able to quickly find the answers to anything I wanted or needed to know.” She dropped her gaze from his, back to rest on the meditating witcher, Triss now sitting on the other side of the fire with some untitled tome in her hands.

“I’d expected the legendary world peace you spoke of or perhaps even the sunset in comparison… but this doesn’t surprise me either.” He said with a touch of humor to his voice.

“There isn’t world peace, just more peace there than here. And sunsets can be appreciated anywhere so long as there is one to watch set.” She gave a short laugh before sighing wistfully. “If I wanted to know everything there was to know about this ruin- what it was named, the quarry the stone came from, who founded it- so long as someone had researched and records were kept safe over the millennia, all I would have to do is do a quick search on my phone and there it would be.”

He didn’t know what a phone was or how a search on it would reveal thousand year old secrets on Aen Seidhe ruins and he assumed it had to do with the advanced technology she’d mentioned once.

“But instead of waiting for a ship to sail in, unload and prepare for its next journey in order to find out more about these dreams plaguing me and hoping to find Geralt’s daughter, we could be there in an hour by plane, and have our answers.” She fell silent for a long pause but he sensed she had more she wished to say.

The pause turned into minuets before she spoke once more. “Now that I’ve finally admitted that I’m not as eager to return, I am however impatient for answers. I’m to the point where I’m exhausted but don’t want to sleep. No matter how much we have undertaken since my arrival with very little time for rest, it is not fast enough.”

The moon was now high and Geralt began to move, unsheathing his silver sword and coating the needed oil across the blade.

“Why?” He needed to know… why is she in more of a rush now than ever. Before, it had been a mad dash to her portal, then to Adhart and the search for answers, then to Ryre for revenge and a twist of betrayal that eventually caused them to now take shelter in the crumbling ruins of his ancestors. There had always been a constant underlying current of reluctant impatience to return to her realm. Now that her return had been unexpectedly delayed she seemed more rushed than ever.

After they watched Geralt make his final preparations, possibly drink the potion that would sharpen his eyesight in the darkness and whatever else he would need, before stalking into the dark stone archway, bending a great deal at the waist in order to fit through the collapsed entry, her eyes dropped to the puppy sleeping in her arms.

“At first it was this drive to return to Pop before something terrible happened to him or to me… not knowing the fate of someone you love is a terrible weight to carry.” She slipped a hand from the depths of Azlin’s fur and brushed a knuckle across the leather of his gloved hand where it rested on
his thigh, drawing his gaze. “In my most recent dream, Pop told me that I had time. That he would wait for me… Whether that is just my mind attempting to justify my next words, or- or something even more bizarre…”

She drifted off as the sound of wraith howls and screams echoed from the dark ruin. After a moment, though the sounds continued, she drew a deep breath and continued with her thoughts, her gaze now locked on the doorway. “I want to believe that. It allows me the fantasy that if we can just get past this next hurdle, track down Avallac’h and Ciri, find my answers and Geralt’s daughter, then maybe I-I-” She shivered and huddled deeper into her cloak, whether from the late autumn chill, the sounds of Geralt’s battle, or some unknown reason, he could only guess at. “Maybe I could help you with your own quest then. Once my return home is assured with Ciri and her still astonishingly impossible ability then perhaps I can have that time Pop said.” Her gaze lifted to his, stilling his impulsive response of ‘absolutely not’ before he could give it breath.

The reasons why that was wishful thinking- terrible wishful thinking- rushed through his mind one after another. Her life had value to him, more than any he’d known for his entire life with the Scoia’tael, and that put her in danger. She was more than likely wanted, Aedirn was just the beginning in that aspect he was certain. She was a reluctant warrior, at war with her nature versus her need to protect and survive, and life here demanded much more than she would ever wish to give… and he would not want that for her.

Then there was the longer she stayed, the more he would want.

The want of impossible things that he’d never wanted, at least not for a very long time past. Things he shouldn’t want for they were precious and reserved for another, worthier lifetime. Beyond these reasons for her immediate return there were countless others but most importantly, as she said, not knowing the fate of someone loved, was a terrible burden. The longer she was here, the more she would suffer because of it.

But her eyes were wide behind her lenses, bottomless pools of swirling blues and greys, her hand slipped around his, holding tightly and he could feel her need to stay, if just a touch longer. And though instinct told him that the moment they found Ciri, he should send her through directly but, there was a need within him as well. He didn’t particularly want her involved in the machinations of the fight for true freedom and liberation, but he did want her. He wanted her to discover and learn, to see that light in her eye as she told a story to a room full of Aen Seidhe.

He needed.

When the path forward seemed locked in the thickest of mists, Aevon brought clarity and perspective. An ability to make him see the world around him and see all its flaws and monstrousness and yet find it worth fighting for. Not just so their people may walk into whatever tavern they wish without risk of hanging, but so they may someday recover some of what they lost.

As much as he thought their ancestors were foolish in how willingly they succumbed to the dh’oine invasion, it was because of her that he at least understood the why. And subsequently planted a small seed that perhaps it might be possible to rebuild some of what was once Aen Seidhe. Their own cities and culture, celebrated and respected. Never again would they be compliant in their destruction, he would not allow it, but he did long for peace… However brief it may be, perhaps it would be long enough for them to finally build a stable future.

She helped return that missing piece of himself, something he’d lost sight of long ago. First it was a young, wet behind the pointed ears boy, answering the call of revolution and vengeance. Certainly there was a good amount of hatred for dh’oines spurring him onward but back then he had been nothing more than a tool to be used and abandoned by Nilfgaard, working with them until the
betrayal of Emryr and Francesca. Then that call had twisted into outright rage, an insatiable need to burn every last monstrous dh’oine, fueled by every Aen Seidhe man, woman, and child unjustly slain and left to the carrion.

That need was still there but now it knew reason. The world was too far gone with the festering infection, short of a catastrophic event, there was no escaping it. A new way forward had to be considered, and though he’d come to realize it some time ago, had even tried to act on it to a disastrous end, Aevon believed in him. In his ability to lead, had been offering goading and sometimes infuriating guidance on his ability, but she had seen it in him even in the early days of their journey.

He still wanted to scoff at the idea as he could efficiently lead and train in matters of combat and strategy, but politics was another arena that he had no wish to dally in. But perhaps he could start something.

Iorveth’s hand tightened around hers against his will as his mind brushed against a thought and immediately retreated. Another one of those impossible wants that were beginning to plague him and were liable to get the both of them killed if he entertained it and he began to wish he’d followed Geralt in his hunt of the wraiths. His swords may be steel and it may take him twice as long because of it, but he would have held his own against the abominations, and his mind would not have been allowed to wander across things like needs and wants versus what had to be done.

“The wails have stopped.” Aevon said quietly, her voice tinged with exhaustion.

Certainly enough, Geralt squeezed his frame through the opening before arching his back and then sheathing his silver blade. “Eight wraiths and two barghest, half the place is collapsed but it’s dry and a few supplies to supplement what we brought. You won’t be surprised to know that the majority of its vodka, as it was Zoltan’s safe house.” He said as Iorveth, Aevon with a still sleeping Azlin, and Triss all mad their approaches to him.

“Tomorrow we should build a makeshift cover for the horses, as is, they will be fine in the shadows.” Iorveth said and began to fashion a torch for himself to carry. Once inside he dropped his bag in the center of the first room and surveyed as the others filed in carrying their own, Aevon using the light of his torch to join his side and drop her bag beside his.

A large circular room, with shelves built into the crumbling stone walls, a tree limb from the great tree outside hung through a section of the ceiling. Mentally Iorveth reminded himself to keep the torches from that area. The walls were covered in vines, the floor with roots, and he held little doubt that the room would become an inescapable inferno if they were lax with such details. He eyed the dark stairwells on the opposite side from the entry, felt the cold draft and knew he’d be getting little rest.

“This is beautiful…” Aevon whispered, turning in a small circle as she surveyed the room before pausing to watch as Triss scooped a glowing dust into a small leather pouch. “I always envisioned discovering places just as this… like the ruin I found on Earth with the portal. Only with fewer ghosts.”

Triss sent her a smile over her shoulder then finished her task before gesturing toward a stack of crates. “Vodka I’m guessing.”

Geralt grunted with a nod, already rolling his bedroll out. “Zoltan calls this a safe house but more likely just his secret hiding place for his favorite past time. Wraiths to keep out the curious, unless you know how to distract them with the right bomb. First watch King Iorveth the First?”
Iorveth narrowed his gaze at the witcher, feeling properly goaded. “Are you so certain I won’t simply step aside and allow the nefarious to have you?”

Geralt set his swords within easy reach and stretched out on his back, Triss perching on a vodka crate next to him. “Kings like me. Somehow I always end up breaking their curses, fighting in their wars, dragging them out of all around tight spots, and taking plenty of their coin because of it.” He closed his golden eyes but still pointed a finger in Iorveth’s direction. “And you get into so many tight spots already, I have the feeling I’ll be taking plenty of Temeria’s coin again soon. You’ll need me. Alive.” He dropped his hand to lace behind his head.

“Ah but there was that one time you allowed an assassin to slit a king’s throat right in front of you.”

Geralt sent Iorveth an arch look. “An assassin you were working with.”

“Often we must make unlikely alliances- however temporary they may be, in order to bring around change. And I’m not going to be a king. And I’m not going to need a witcher at my beck and call as Foltest did. When the witch hunters come, they’re welcome to you.” Iorveth said lowly and stalked to the wall with fewest vines and roots, wedging the torch in a crack and leaning on the wall beside it. Geralt’s lips only quirked up in a half grin at his response and Triss rolled her eyes at the both of them before rolling out her own bedding near the witcher.

He kept his glare on them while Aevon sighed and set Azlin down. The puppy, now fully awake, immediately hopped over to Geralt and began to sniff at his ear, resulting in her being swatted away gently but with a glare.

“Not fond of titles I assume?” Aevon said quietly, joining his side.

“No. Nor the ceremony that goes with them. I have no-“ He cut himself off and crossed his arms, suddenly painfully aware of his insecurity on the topic. “Get rest my heart.” He said with a weary sigh instead, dropping his gaze to hers as she stilled. It was then that he realized what he’d said. An endearment.

One he hadn’t meant to say. He didn’t want her to know… her return was complicated as it was, a twisting storm of regret and pain. Revealing the nature of his feelings toward her, putting them to words, would offer more torment than he was willing to force her to carry. He wasn’t a complete fool when it came to these things, knew the look in her eyes was meant to convey her own wordless feelings.

And Aevon felt everything with a ferocious strength whether in anger or love. He told himself, though she hadn’t said the words, he could still manage to let her go when the time came. It wasn’t simple or easy but it was something he had to do. Had already done so once. But he knew her. She would fill her head with dreams, delaying her return until it would be impossible. And she had to leave… for both their sakes.

But perhaps the slip of a single endearment would be quickly forgotten and he could carry on, soaking up whatever part of her he could before parting forever as painlessly as possible. The look in her eyes, shining widely up at him, told him differently and he gave a silent curse. “Rest.” He said again, nodding to her belongings. “Tomorrow we hunt.”

Her lips parted and she searched his face, a thousand thoughts crossing her expression but finally she settled on a sigh and shake of her head. “I’m beginning to fear sleeping. I don’t want to dream, don’t want to walk the dream world and wake with more questions burning through my mind. I just want a regular night dreaming of British actors telling me the poetry they wrote for me, or once I dreamed I
was a stowaway on a space pirate ship...” She paused and huffed a small laugh, followed by a deep yawn. “At this point I would even take something mundane like working endlessly on taxes, or nothing at all.”

Iorveth had questions… why specifically was she afraid? He scanned her face, picking up the dark circles that had haunted her since their return to Novigrad, the grim contrast between the red of her scar and paleness of her pallor, her lips chapped. Whatever sleep she might have gotten over the past weeks had clearly not been restful.

“I’ll watch for signs of unpleasant dreams and wake you.” He offered at last, feeling slightly disappointed when she dropped her gaze and nodded. He’d nearly hoped she would have stubbornly stayed awake, distracting him from the boredom that came with first watch, but he had only to see her shadowed eyes and watch as she yawned once more, to be reminded that she was weary.

Again, that ever present need aching within his chest reared its head, urging him to fight back the shadows in her gaze, to see those lips cracked from worrying bites turn up at the corners, and possibly hear his name no louder than a sigh in his ear. One of the few needs he allows himself to give into.

Quickly, as Aevon turns away he slips a hand around her closest hand, drawing her attention back to him. Her gaze was searching, her pause brief, and her approach willing. He lifted her hand to his chest, her eyes closing as she leaned into him, pressing herself upwards to meet him halfway in a kiss that spoke of longing and so many things left unsaid.

He told himself to keep it brief and chaste, a simple taste of her lips and then he would release her…and for all intents that’s how it began. But the moment her lips parted against his and the pained whisper of his name escaped, he lost all sense of that promise. He slipped a hand around her waist and held her hips tightly against his, humming low in his chest in approval when her free hand slid over his neck and brushed into the hair at the base of his neck.

When she pulled back slightly he followed her greedily, his hands tightening their hold on her, not prepared to release her so soon. He knew he won out when her fingers twisted in his hair tightly and it quickly turned from him holding her to her holding him and taking possession of his mouth with a roll of her tongue against his. A silent ‘fuck’ whispered through his mind, wondering if he’d ever felt like this just from a kiss. Knowing that he wouldn’t be satisfied without more but willing at take it anyways, fighting the need to rub his erection against the curve of her hip.

He managed control over that need but he couldn’t control hers… He quickly had to draw her away when she rolled her hips against him, sending a bolt of painful need through every vein. The moment couldn’t have been more than minute and it wasn’t enough, he wasn’t finished, but knew there could be no more between them. Her body was in a state of cycle and they were hardly free of an audience.

She must have had similar thoughts for she rocked back to her heels with a lingering sigh and dropped her forehead to rest on his chest. With a tenderness he didn’t know he could have possibly possessed he pressed his lips against the top of her hair, taking the moment to breathe in her scent before slowly releasing his hold on her.

Her hand untangled from his hair and she raised her head from his chest, her gaze searching. “I have seen the king with a face of glory, he who is the eye and the sun of heaven, he who is the companion and healer of all beings, he who is the soul and the universe that births souls.” She whispered with a brush of a finger along his jaw. “Rumi was speaking of his god but I feel it holds truth in what a leader should aspire.”
“Kings or gods, they no longer have a place in the north.”

Her lips lifted in a small smile. “No but rarely are true kings or true gods given a choice in their place in the world. They know what must be done and so it must be done. The true ones that is.”

He answered with a nudge of his nose against her ear. “Sleep.”

“Fine. But I’m only doing as you say because you’re charming and handsome. Not because you told me to.”

He rolled his eye and with both hands on her shoulders turned her away from him and pushed her lightly toward their belongings. He watched as she spread out a blanket, using his as well, before unbuckling her sword and laying it on the floor beside her. When she curled in the blankets facing him he tapped a finger to the corner of his eye, silently reminding her of her glasses. Once she set them aside, he’d expected her to put up a fight when it actually came to drifting to sleep but it seemed mere seconds before her eyes were closed and her breath slowing.

Somehow he managed to draw his gaze from her fire lit form taking study of their surroundings. The witcher and sorceress were turned away and Azlin tugged on a root. With a sigh he quietly called for the puppy to come to him and he spent the remains of the night and early morning training the fluffy ball of fur to sit while keeping watch.

The first two days passed without incident for Wendy, her lover, and their companions. They worked efficiently, as if they had been in this same situation countless of times previously, to build a temporary shelter for the four horses. Triss and Geralt found a source of clean water, which judging by their damp hair, had been immediately christened with bathing and whatever else, Wendy had no care to inquire about.

As for herself, Azlin, and Iorveth, they’d had success with hunting, or rather he had success while she just followed and tried to stay quiet. She did pay attention as he offered instruction on tracking and stalking their prey. At one point she’d asked to try and draw back on his bow but to no surprise found she could only pull back on it a small amount.

While Wendy may not have been much use when it came to actually killing the deer or whatever else they came across, she did plenty in helping to prepare and cook. She learned which plants in the forest could be safely consumed and which would kill her painfully before she could ever get help.

On the third day it was with surprise she learned that Iorveth was more than passable as a fisherman. An early morning walk to the nearby pond for the day’s water had turned into several hours of watching him fish with a hook and line, which he kept stored in a pouch tied to his sword belt, tied to a long stick. When she’d asked about it he merely shrugged and said that life in the forest or life as a soldier meant being prepared for everything and anything.

While she believed that to be true enough she also believed that he simply enjoyed it. She knew she’d spent more time silently watching him from the corner of her gaze than watching the water for signs of fishy prey, but it was difficult not to when he had the look of worry free contentment on his expression.

Wendy knew Iorveth was bothered, deeply, of what he saw as his duty to his people. She wished to bring him reassurance and encouragement but after that first night of their arrival, seeing the insecurity in one she was so used to seeing nothing but aloof confidence, she knew he needed time
and had kept her thoughts and words on the subject to herself.

Each day after the more needful chores were handled Wendy often found herself in the middle of Geralt imparting his bountiful knowledge of everything sword fighting, something that Iorveth often argued with him about. Usually about how Geralt’s techniques were for his two handed swords and broader frame while she was using a smaller sword with a smaller body and therefore should be using a different technique. To be honest Wendy didn’t particularly see any difference, especially as Geralt could wield his two handed sword easily with one, but she wasn’t in love with Geralt and that in the end was the deciding factor for her.

Iorveth was a demanding teacher while Geralt was quietly patient, simply repeating the moves versus Iorveth going into great, painful detail what would happen if she made the mistake in a true battle, but she would choose him every time. Instead Geralt let her try out his crossbow, something that was still difficult but manageable.

Triss spent a good deal of her time in the forest searching for herbs before working on potions, some of which she said were in the experimental phase of development, interestingly enough. Sometimes Geralt would disappear for hours and return with some foul looking substances in vials which Triss would happily take and begin mashing it in a mortar bowl.

Nights were spent around the campfire as the days meal roasted, listening to Triss speak of their exploits over the years. She learned that Geralt was neigh on a century old himself, his life at Kaer Morhen and how he met Dandelion. Wendy told about the invention of combustion and the impact of if on the entire world, the infancy of their interplanetary exploration and how they theorized that they had some three billion years left before their sun destroyed their planet.

She’d said the statement matter-o-factly as she popped a mushroom into her mouth before noticing the silent stares of her companions. A moment later she’d been bombarded with questions, mainly from Triss, and she’d answered as well as she could. Naming burning chemicals and how the reactions cause the star to burn hotter and expansion and over all life cycles of stars, something she only knew the rudimentary facts of. Yes it could happen to any star… she thought so at least. Wendy did however refrain going into other ways the world could end, and instead switched to safe topics such as how they explored oceans with submarines and sonar technology.

After the first two nights, when it was once again Iorveth’s turn to keep vigil, Wendy managed to stay awake with him, spending the time studying her Dream Journal as she thought of it, adding any new details that came to her and wondering what triggered the dreams as since their departure of Novigrad, she hadn’t had any at all. Not even a typical half dream, just nothing.

When she had nothing else to add and new answers didn’t just pop out at her after studying her sometimes erratic writings, she sketched. Usually of Iorveth with his pipe or as he flipped through one of her books, but sometimes of Azlin, or the both of them together. She drew her rose, saddened as its petals had begun to darken and curl, Geralt’s medallion and Triss brewing over the campfire, their ancient and temporary home, and what she bet it would have looked like as a freshly built structure.

On the nights when it was Triss and Geralt’s responsibility to keep watch, Wendy would fall asleep tucked against Iorveth’s chest with Azlin at her back, bundled in her cloak and their blankets, promptly as soon as he set aside her glasses.

With the routine the four had worked out almost wordlessly, it became easy for Wendy to forget that there was a world beyond their pile of stone and vines. That at any moment Zoltan would come bearing the message that it was time for them to sail where the glimpses of her dream could come to pass. She enjoyed the peace that came with being surrounded by trees, without anything more to
worry about other than Iorveth and Geralt quarreling over combat techniques. Her life had been noisy, whether from those around her or just in her mind, since her arrival and she missed the days of quiet.

The dawn of their sixth day in the forest, Wendy woke to an empty ruin. The torches had long since ceased to burn and gentle sunlight filtered through every hole in the ceiling and the entryway, laying a warmth across her skin that had her smiling as she stretched. The moment she realized that she was alone, her smile dropped, and she shoved her glasses on in a rush, looking around in a near panic.

It took a moment for rational to kick in and ease the beat of her heart and it was then that her eyes were drawn to the darkened staircase that led down deeper into the ruin. She had been looking for a moment to explore the unknown depths of those stairs. Geralt had said that he’d taken care of all the specters and hadn’t found anything interesting. And while she believed he wouldn’t find something interesting, she disagreed and had been waiting for a time when she could slip away.

Wendy cast another gaze around the room while she rolled from her bedding. Now was her moment. Any morning bush visits and hunting down the days meal could wait. She was going to see what lay beyond that dark unknown.

She dug out a journal she’d once used to record the two prominent languages of the land and pen, belted her sword and dagger around her waist as was now her morning habit, as natural as slipping on her boots. Quickly, with a slight tremble in her hands, she lit a fresh torch from the stack Geralt at carefully prepared early in their stay and slipped down the stars, her breath tight in her chest.

She glanced at the stairs that led in the opposite direction, promising them that she would see to them next before focusing on her current destination.

The already cool air quickly dropped to a familiar deep winter brisk along with her descent, sending a shiver down her spine and making her wish she’d brought along her cloak… or more practically her rain jacket. But she wasn’t going back now, not until she’d discovered all this place had to offer.

The stairs led to a hallway with rooms adjoined every ten or so feet, each either caved in with roots and rock or bare of anything save the occasional pile of what was once a specter. When she reached the largest room at the end of the hallway she found more of the same.

Rocks, roots, ruin.

Shadows flickering in torchlight

Wendy heaved a dejected sigh and turned away, her gaze catching on the torch held high in her hand and noticed something odd. The flame danced, pulling in one direction before being pushed in another. As if-

“A breeze.” Wendy whispered then fell silent, straining her senses for further evidence. It was there—a whisper of wind. With excitement thrumming in her blood with renewed vigor she twisted back to study the room with a critical gaze.

After peering through rubble and pulling aside thickly knotted roots she found it. A doorway, heavily guarded with the debris to the point where only a bottom corner could be seen, large enough for a cat to slip through.

But it was enough to give her encouragement.

She wedged the torch into a secure spot among the rocks and began to pull back rock after rock, carefully calculating which could be moved without sending the entire wall tumbling atop of her. She
worked steadily, the cool air quickly doing nothing to hold back the heat and sweat of manual labor. Her hands were quickly covered in dirt and grime, and at one point a shaken root dropped a curtain of clumped dirt on top of her head and shoulders.

Wendy coughed and did her best to shake the dirt from her eyes and quickly forgot all discomfort when she saw that at last she’d removed enough from the doorway to squeeze through. She dusted her hands with a grin before pushing the torch and her journal through first, crawling after them.

When she finally stood in the hidden room she gasped.

It wasn’t a breeze she’d heard but some sort of portal. The room was empty yet dominated completely by it. It didn’t glow an eerie blue as the one in the pool on Earth had, but it seemed to be more doorway than portal. The magic pulled at the torch, much as a breeze would. It pulled at her as well.

There was something on the other side just waiting for her to discover.

Wendy’s hand tightened around her torch and she’d nearly reached it before coming to an abrupt stop. What if this led to another world? She looked over her shoulder, noticing for the first-time, scorch marks on the ancient stone.

“The collapse wasn’t natural…” She whispered. This little clue sealed her next action and with straight shoulders she faced the portal once more. Something had happened here, something dark, and the answer lay through the portal. The thought whispered through her mind that it wasn’t an interplanetary portal, just as Triss’ wasn’t. This was structured, mage made. And she was going to discover its secrets.

The cautious side of her whispered that she should return to the main room, find Iorveth and have him join her but she stubbornly shook her head. This was her adventure. She’d learned a great deal since her arrival, could defend herself if it came to it, and its what Pop would expect of her. To answer that call deep in her heart, that this is what she was meant to be doing, whether in the wilds of the Germany or deep in an Aen Seidhe ruin.

Dragging the back of the hand clutching her journal across her forehead, Wendy finished her approach of the portal then carefully stepped through.

Her heart twisted painfully at the beauty surrounding her. As well as her relief at the sight of familiar Temerian plants letting her know she hadn’t traveled to some alien planet.

Everywhere she looked was green, a wild garden within a once domed ruin of Aen Seidhe architecture. Sunlight shined brightly through the long-gone ceiling, a bird, startled by her arrival, shot into the air and out into the sky.

“Massive.” Is all Wendy could think to say as she took in how high the ceiling must have once been. It was easy to piece together that the place had not been intended to be a garden, instead something more like a ballroom or concert hall. But now nature had almost completely taken over and there was a magical stillness about it.

Something that said nary a soul outside of the occasional bird or other wildlife had stepped foot in there in several millennia.

Wendy’s breath caught at the thought and carefully watching her step so as to not disturb the ethereal place, she began to explore. Her torch now lay forgotten on the ground next to the portal and her journal was clutched to her chest.
Her first impression was that the room was empty, devoid of a story to tell beyond once being a place of great magic. But then she saw them.

The skeletal remains of two long dead people.

They lay on a raised stone dais covered in vines, blending the ancient bones in with the surroundings. Any clothing they might have worn had long ago turned to dust until all that remained were their silver cuffs encircling their left wrists and silver circlets cradling their skulls. It was easy to imagine that they must have loved each other, either as lovers or family, for they lay side by side, their hands joined between them and their empty skulls touching at the forehead.

Wendy’s chest ached for them, these unknown ancient beings. A silver cup lay near the dais, covered in moss but its implication was clear.

She chose not to disturb them, despite her curiosity of the marks- runes?- etched into their wrist cuffs. Instead she allowed her attention to be caught on the stone shelves mostly hidden by vines and moss. She found various treasures, sculptures of tarnished wolves and ravens. What looked to be a rock collection, a small telescope, an octant and countless fragile scrolls likely to turn to dust the moment she so much as breathed on them. Searching more of the wall revealed more shelves with weather ruined books and Wendy began to picture the room had once been a library.

A flash of color caught her attention.

Behind a thick curtain of vines, she found an intact mural, faded and in many parts the paint had fallen away much like the hieroglyphics in Egypt, but there was enough for her to put the pieces together.

A beautiful Aen Seidhe couple stood facing each other their silver cuffed arms lifted and clasped together and engulfed in a blue glow. Behind them an ocean rolled with white capped waves and stars spread across the black sky. Wind tugged at long robes and capes, his blond hair swept against his neck while her dark hair fell nearly to her waist.

There was such an intensity in their locked gazes that Wendy felt as if she were intruding upon something sacred and profound. She saw their story sweep through her mind, the captain of a mighty ship setting his first step in this land far from his home, ready to make a name for himself as the best captain of the best caravel in all the ocean.

Then there was her, a well-respected lady of the stars, mapping the sky, though her feet were firmly on the ground.

All it took was his first letting him know that they needed updated star charts before their next voyage and he found himself in a tidy little observatory at the highest point of the city, staring into the greenest eyes he’d ever seen, struggling to follow along as she smiled and explained why her star charts were the latest in discovery.

He used the coin he’d meant to use for a new telescope and bought every chart she’d proudly said she drew herself. He’d thought she looked ever more beautiful as she blushed in pleased shyness and had been moments from asking if she would join him for a walk about the city.

But another man had walked in, giving her dark hair a tug that spoke of a deep familiar bond before disappearing further into the observatory. Embarrassed and feeling foolish for so easily allowing himself to be swept away in the tide of love, hastily bid her farewell, failing to notice just how similar the other mans green eyes had been to her own.
It was many years later before he returned, every day he’d hoped to forget but never had. Upon his return to the city he’d known he must see her, even if it was just to buy more of her work.

His heart had leapt when he stepped through the door and her gaze had lit up with recognition and delight, followed by a painful twist when she shooed a little boy with green eyes and dark hair into a room beyond.

Then she’d said the words ragamuffin nephews with a cheery roll of her eyes.

Not willing to go on without knowing, he finally mustered up the strength to ask her.

Ask her if she was promised to any other in all the land.

She’d smiled shyly and said not in all the land but there was one that was of the sea that she’d held out hope to see again. His heart had soared as she spoke of nights studying the stars where her gaze would fall to the sea, searching for the colors of his flag illuminated by moonlight.

That was the day their lives began together. But it would be years yet before he gave up the sea for her and they left the city for a quiet life in the country. She had her smaller observatory atop their home and he was still near enough to the North Sea that he could sail about in smaller voyages.

And then…

A hand settled on Wendy’s shoulder, shocking her from her vision and she twisted away, backing blindly until her back hit the mural. She drew in a ragged breath, blinking her eyes back into focus.

“Iorveth…” Wendy whispered between gasps.

He looked torn between cold fury and relief, his hand falling to his side, glare never leaving her face.

Her heart skipped a beat.

Slowly, ignoring his obvious displeasure at what she knew would be a long lecture on disappearing through strange portals, she stepped to his side and faced the mural, her gaze locking on the star gazer.

“This was their home. They’d planned to start their family. Children she would teach to read the stars and he to read the seas. But then…” Her already quiet voice drifted off until she found the words to describe what she’d seen. “The world changed. Monsters and humans came. They hadn’t wanted to fight, after all they were explorers not warriors. When the men came for what they’d assumed would be a manor full of riches, the two of them had sealed themselves away to be undisturbed in their…” Her gaze dropped to the lovers. “Their last moments together. This was their home, full of love, magic, and promise, and this was where they would die– on their terms.”

The burn of tears had her closing her eyes and drawing in a deep breath, comprehension dawned. “I-I felt a connection with them. A drawing to be here, and the story of them- of their home- played just as if I was living it. I was the both of them simultaneously, feeling their emotions and hearing their thoughts as if they were my own. It-It was overwhelming.” She opened her eyes and finally met his gaze.

There was still an anger emanating off of him, but he didn’t voice the words of the obvious. What she’d done had been reckless, she acknowledge that silently. But she would do it again. She knew that the star gazer lived on through him, something she suspected he would not find as fascinating as she did, but it made her heart ache all the same.
Silently she wished she’d had more time alone with the lovers, to see their story to the end though she knew how it ended with each taking a single sip from the same cup. To see the love, they had for the other just a little longer and whisper that the star gazers line continued, and she began to believe in the memory of Destiny just a bit more.

It was a romantic thought, and just as possible that she was wrong. But she held onto the belief that Iorveth’s ancestors had been star gazers, a family with a deep bond of love that carried on through their blood.

“It’s time to go Aevon.” Iorveth said at last, his anger thinly veiled in his tone.

She brushed a hand down the mural. “Just a little longer. There’s time yet to hunt.” She whispered listlessly. She could stay there forever, waiting for the story to play again through her mind.

“I don’t mean to leave to hunt. Zoltan has arrived. It’s time to depart for Skellige.”

Wendy’s dreamlike state shattered, and she dropped a trembling hand from the mural. “I see.” Was all she could manage to say. Avoiding his gaze, she slipped past him and toward the portal the emanating love she’d felt of the doomed lovers slipping away to be replaced with their fear and anguish. She felt sick to her stomach as she remembered the moment they realized they weren’t coming out of this library alive.

She paused a breath from the portal, closing her eyes as their emotions washed over her, so similar to her own. Their love, devotion… fear and panic. Their sorrow for the life they had dreamed of. A touch drawn down a cheek, a kiss to a brow, and a promise, all clouded with fear, but they were together.

In the end that is all that mattered.

Wendy’s breath shuddered from her chest as she took one last glance around the room, an irrational anger settling in her stomach when her gaze settled on Iorveth as he watched her cautiously. An anger at the humans who did this to them… forced them to make the decision to choose death over rape and torture. Anger at Iorveth for intruding on her time with them- She cut her thoughts off abruptly.

They were unfair thoughts… and she was just shaken. Something strange and unusual had happened to her, feeding into her emotions and she realized it was indeed time for her to leave. The magic continued to pull at her, whispering that there was more to show her, but she shook her head and stepped through the portal.

Triss had taken one look at her upon her return to the upper floor and asked her what had happened, but Wendy had only shaken her head and packed her belongings. Zoltan greeted her, slightly taken aback when she didn’t even look at him.

It was unfair of her, he was only the messenger after all, but he was the symbol of doomed possibility to her. Here to take her to a ship that could very well mean disaster.

The horses were already saddled, and it took every shred of strength for her to not look back as she tied her pack to the saddle and mounted. The return to Novigrad was swift and silent for Wendy. She felt as if she were outrunning the past as well as the future and when she felt the whispers of tragedy and the unknown brushing against her mind she would urge Eda to gallop faster.

The wind tugged her hair and her heart beat with erratic panic. She didn’t understand, even now that
the forest was far behind her, what had happened. All she knew was that she’d never felt so much in
the span of a heartbeat and that magic had been involved.

The lover’s fear still mingled with her own, twisting in her stomach with every hoofbeat.

When they arrived at the gate, the guards were busy arguing with a dwarven merchant and paid the
dfive riders less than a glance. Wendy didn’t want to slow down, she wanted to continue to gallop at a
reckless pace, but knew she no longer had the choice.

As soon as the they halted in front of the Rosemary and Thyme Iorveth swung from his horse and
promptly set his hands around her waist and lifted her from the saddle.

She yelped and immediately pulled herself away from his grasp the moment her feet hit the ground.
“Unhand me.” She whispered harshly, that irrational anger flashing through her before she got ahold
of it and scrubbed her hands at her eyes. “I’m sorry- just- I need a moment.” Her heart felt heavy
when she saw the blank look in his face, an expression she hadn’t seen directed toward her in weeks.

Triss set a soothing hand on her upper arm. “How about you boys see to supplies. Iorveth, Wendy
will need fur.” She looked at Wendy with a soothing expression. “Come, we will be at sea for
several days and will be unable to enjoy a proper bath.”

“You’re not taking her there.” Iorveth said in a firm voice but Wendy was already nodding eagerly.

“Let’s go.”

“Mount up.” Triss said quietly.

“Aevon-” Iorveth wrapped a hand around Eda’s reigns.

“I need- I just-“ Wendy stopped realizing that she didn’t know what she needed or wanted. She just
knew she couldn’t be there… everything was loud and chaotic. She wanted to tell him what she felt
but… would he understand? He was angry, she knew that. Could feel it brushing against her own,
but where was his fear? His agony? Her mind scattered again- she was feeling his emotions as surely
as she was feeling the tragic lovers.

Why wasn’t he as afraid as she was? She stared up into his green gaze. There was something else,
something she hadn’t realized was coming from him and it had her breath catching in her chest. He
wasn’t afraid, but he was uncertain. Worried. A lingering anger. Confusion. Need. And he cared.
Deeply. A familiar depth that brought the sting of tears.

Not caring if they had an audience she lifted a hand to the back of his neck and pulled herself up to
him, kissing him deeply. He responded a moment later, dropping Eda’s reigns and pulling her tight
against him. She wanted to tell him that everything was going to be alright. That her mind was a
mess and her emotions were in shreds, but she would figure it out.

She felt that part of him that- that- she wouldn’t name it. He hadn’t said the words, therefor she
wouldn’t say them for him. But she felt it surround her like a warm blanket, brushing against the
edges of her own and a moan slipped from her throat. His hands twisted in her hair and her dress in
response. She wondered if he could feel her as she could him. It was quickly becoming the most
intense she’d ever felt, her feelings melding with his, settling into her chest and driving her onward.

His teeth pulled at her bottom lip with barely restrained passion and resulted in the clearing of several
throats that finally registered the messy haze of her mind. She pulled back, blinking up at him and her
breath caught at the answering astonishment in his face.
Wordlessly she stepped back, his hands falling from her as hers fell from him, before swiftly mounting Eda. With a final, lingering glance, she followed Triss from the tavern and deeper into the city. She couldn’t yet put to words just what was going on with her—she couldn’t feel Triss or her emotions, nor that of any they passed by. It was as equally frightening and amazing as her dreams, something set loose by that library.

She wondered if it would continue or a spell that would eventually ebb away and she couldn’t say to which she would rather have. It was overwhelming and frightening to feel Iorveth’s emotions, in a way that it hadn’t been when she’d felt that of the lovers. Perhaps because he was still there, breathing and changing in every moment, while theirs was a story ancient and finished.

“We’re here.” Triss said after the silent ride. A boy ran up to them and led the horses away once they had dismounted and Wendy followed the sorceress into the dimly lit building.

“Ah Triss Merigold, Fourteenth of the Hill, The Fearless… what brings you to my humble establishment… and who is this?” A man of imposing stature and narrow features said from a nearby doorway.

“Dijkstra, no need to feign ignorance. You know who this is and we’re here for the obvious… a bath.” Triss said, crossing her arms over her chest.

“Right you are, but it’s polite to give one the opportunity to be introduced.”

Triss rolled her eyes. “Wendy, this is Dijkstra.”

“Nice to meet you.” Wendy said quietly and with a cautious eye on the man. He was dangerous, she could feel it rolling off of him in waves, but he seemed more calculating at the moment than anything. His gaze swept over her before flicking to Triss. There was something about the look, an understanding, that tightened around Wendy’s spine. For the first time since meeting her, Wendy wasn’t certain of Triss.

“Dijkstra, if you’re finished sizing up Wendy for your schemes, we could use a bath. We’ve mere hours before we leave.”

Wendy’s gaze jerked from Triss back to Dijkstra and found him smirking with a roll of his eyes. “But she’s just perfect for so many roles.” His gaze dropped back to Wendy, his smile growing. “I could make-”

“No—come on Wendy, we’ll see to ourselves.” Triss said and grabbed Wendy by the hand, pulling her into the nearest dressing room. “Ignore Dijkstra. He believes you could aid Iorveth in the fight for Temeria.” She said as she began to undress.

Wendy felt a sweep of relief that Triss hadn’t been silently plotting or something along those lines. She considered her friends words however, slipping her clothing off and dropping them into a basket along with Triss’. When they were wrapped in towels and leaving the room a maid slipped in and carried off the basket to see to their soiled garments.

Triss led her into a large room with partitioned baths, some were obviously occupied, and Wendy couldn’t help the blush that warmed her skin at the number of naked bodies strutting around, and the tell-tale sounds coming from some of the partitions.

With a sigh she slipped into the bath, her towel and glasses left behind on a bench beside Triss’, the hot water soothing and melting away her tense worries. Triss gestured for her to dunk her head and turn around, a sigh slipping from Wendy’s lips as she breathed in the sweet scent of honeysuckle
scrubbed into her hair. When her hair was squeaky clean, she did the same for Triss before they both settled against the edge of the bath.

“Are you ready to talk about it?” Triss asked.

Wendy heaved a long sigh and tilted her head back against the cushioned edge. “I- I’m worried. This voyage to Skellige… I dreamed of it and something terrible is going to happen. Just like Ryre.” She closed her eyes. “And now… I can feel Iorveth’s emotions. Almost to the point where I know what he’s thinking.”

“Even from this distance?”

Wendy frowned and realized that the part of her chest where she’d felt him was empty. “No. It dissipated as we rode away.”

Triss hummed a moment before splashing water down her arms several times. “And your foray into the ruin had something to do with this development?”

“It did- but if you don’t mind, I don’t wish to speak of it. It’s difficult to explain and my mind hasn’t fully come to terms with it either.”

“Of course…. How about we talk of your world instead… do you still plan to seal the portal?”

“Once I understand it, yes. If I must travel back to Germany, I’ll do so.”

“But you still plan to stay there.”

It wasn’t a question, just a reaffirming of Wendy’s pervious plans. “Yes. Your world is dangerous but mine would destroy it. There is nowhere that is free of greed and corruption…” Wendy said sadly. The words hurt to say but it was also needed. She needed to remind herself that there was more to her return than just reuniting with Pop. She would be keeping Iorveth and his world safe.

“We should go… Zoltan said the ship would sail today, having already arrived a few days before.” Triss said quietly.

Wendy’s stomach lurched as their departure became ever more real. “Alright.”

Back in the dressing room, their clothing had been cleaned, dried, and now waited in neat stacks. It occurred to Wendy to take her time, to find some reason to delay their voyage. But then what if the next ship was the true danger… and despite it all she wanted her answers.

Biting back a tormented sigh, she dressed as quickly as Triss did before following her back out to find their horses waiting for them… as well as Dijkstra.

“Safe journey my ladies.” He said with a slight bow. “I expect we’ll see each other soon, Lady Wendy. Tell Iorveth I stand ready to do my part.”

Her breath caught at the mention of his plans for Iorveth, reminding her that she wouldn’t want this man as an enemy. But then she remembered that he didn’t know everything, that she wasn’t a permanent fixture in this world, and while she hoped to do what she could to help Iorveth in his fight for true freedom, she wasn’t certain that her plans aligned with his. But she answered him with a firm nod and mounted Eda.

They didn’t return to the tavern, instead veering down toward the docks. The early afternoon air smelt of sea salt and laboring bodies. More than one sailor leered at the two women and made
twisted offers which naturally they both ignored. When Wendy caught sight of the ship, its sails raised, and anchor lowered, that lingering fear was actually turning into breathless excitement. Crew and travelers lingered about or moved along the boarding plank and Wendy searched the crowd for a familiar red patch hat.

A cheer rose from a nearby crowd and with her high vantage point from her perch on Eda, Wendy caught glimpse of what the commotion was. “Oh my…” she breathed out, pulling the horse to an abrupt halt.

“What is it?” Triss asked before following her gaze. “Oh my indeed.” She said as well. “Come on, we’re going to want to get a more pleasant view of this. Leave the horses, someone will recognize them and return them to their owner.”

Quickly, Wendy dismounted and whispered a farewell to the horse before practically sprinting after Triss. They made their way up a stack of crates and onto a platform, leaning against the railing to watch the scene below them.

The crowd was spread in a tight circle, cheering and waving leather pouches of coin. The familiar form of the colorful Dandelion yelled back at various people, writing in his book. Zoltan at his side shouting right along with the crowd, a laughing Priscilla with Azlin wrapped in her arms sat on a crate…. They were all very fascinating, but it was the two in the center of the crowd and was the real snack.

Fists raised, feet nimbly moving in the dance of a spar, were Iorveth and Geralt, undressed down to their breeches and boots. They were all tightly corded muscles, and graceful power. Geralt with his countless scars, Iorveth with his along with his tattoo trailing from his neck down to where it disappeared beneath the low waist of his breeches. She knew where it ended. Had brushed her fingers against the bottom most leaf where it rested just atop his thigh.

She swallowed thickly, her hands tightening around the rail. He dodged a hook from Geralt and spun away, aiming a jab for the witcher’s ribs. They were nearly evenly matched but Geralt was just a hint faster, could hit just a touch harder. But Iorveth had sheer stubbornness on his side.

“I don’t think I have ever been in more awe in my life.” Wendy said with wide eyes.

“I share the same sentimentalizes.” Triss said in agreement.

Wendy wanted to close her eyes, to quiet her mind and see if she could feel Iorveth’s emotions. But she couldn’t bring herself to look away. Her worry and fear were pushed back, replaced with images of every naughty thing she wanted to do him, one of which was sneaking into the birds’ nest of the ship and-

She almost laughed at herself. Whoever said that sex couldn’t solve one’s problems- or at least help forget them- had never seen men like the two of them spar. She could readily admit that it wouldn’t give her answers or suddenly make everything right in the world, but it was a damn good start.

“You’re going to tear him apart once we set sail, aren’t you?” Triss said with a barely contained laugh.

Wendy cut her gaze to the other woman. “As if you don’t have similar thoughts running through that mind of yours. Besides it’s been since the night of the party for us.”

“Oh, I absolutely do have similar plans.”

Wendy watched Iorveth land a powerful blow to Geralt’s chin. “I’m going to bring him to his
knees.”
With shouted commands and shouted ‘Aye Capins’ *The Portia* raised anchor and dropped sail, leaving Novigrad slowly shrinking against the horizon. Iorveth watched with crossed arms as Aevon waved with vigor to their friends watching from the docks until they could no longer be seen and then she stilled, her hands resting on the wooden rail. She had autumn wind reddened cheeks and the sun shone brightly against the reds and golds of her hair. Her eyes glimmered with a spark of excitement that he realized had been absent for the past several weeks and it warmed his chest pleasantly to see it returned.

Aevon was nearly back to her normal self, at least he could almost believe that. Something had happened in that ruin, something that had shaken her to the point of wild eyed panic mixed with reverence. He remembered his anger and need to rage at her for disappearing, wandering through something as dangerous as another mages portal.

Iorveth hadn’t allowed himself to feel fear at her disappearance. Deep inside he knew she was alright just incredibly reckless with her own safety and it hadn’t been difficult to deduce where she’d gone. And when he’d found her path led to an active portal, his mild exasperation at her delving deeper into the ruin alone had blown into heart stopping anger. Of course, she was going to go through, her nature demanded it. And so, he’d followed.

He may not be able to use magic, but he’d certainly felt it in that place. And there she’d been, covered in dirt, and unresponsive to his call of her name. So, he’d touched her arm… she hadn’t been the same since then. He didn’t know if it was just the magic emanating from their surroundings, but he’d felt her panic and anguish… and her anger.

Her silence afterward had been expected. He knew she preferred it, had claimed once that her mind was becoming too noisy and surrounded by silence helped her sort through the mess. And so, he’d allowed her to her thoughts. Then there had been that brief moment when she’d pulled away, physically and emotionally. It was difficult to explain but he’d felt her close herself off and he wondered then if he was losing her to the noisy mess.

But the moment had passed and with a familiar shine to her eyes she was in his arms. It might have been the relief that he hadn’t lost her yet, not to her chaos and not to her world, but his chest had ached with love and need. She had been all around him, overwhelming his senses.

He hadn’t wanted to part from her, from that feeling, especially if it meant her being in the presence
of Dijkstra. But in the end, he’d trusted Triss to keep her safe. And had distracted himself with procuring warmer clothing for them and ultimately joining in the sparring ring at the docks.

A corner of Iorveth’s lips tilted into a grin as he watched her. His jaw might be sore, but it had been worth it when he’d at last sent Geralt falling backwards into the dirt. After helping the witcher to his feet and in the middle of collecting his winnings from Dandelion, the bard had been pushed hazardly to the side with a yelp.

He’d barely blinked and realized Aevon’s intentions before her weight had hit him from a full lunge, sending him back a step before he’d managed to brace himself and wrap his arms around her waist. Immediately her legs had wrapped around his hips and her mouth crashed against his.

He huffed a laugh and shook his head at the memory of whistles and shouts. He’d long ago decided that keeping a low profile was just not going to work for the both of them. Their lives might be in a constant state of danger from those loyal to his enemies or just out to make coin, mainly because they couldn’t keep their hands to their selves when in the midst of a crowd.

His quiet laugh drew her attention and she brushed her wind whipped hair from her face and pushed her glasses up her nose. “What?”

Iorveth leaned back against the rail and crossed his arms. “We’re terrible at blending in.”

Her answering grin said that she picked up on his meaning. “For the record… I would have done that even if you’d ended up in the dirt instead.” Her grin slipped as she began to worry her bottom lip, her gaze drawn back out to the spanning North Sea as it turned into the Great Sea. “Will there be icebergs?”

“What?” He asked, a bit thrown by the sudden topic change. He’d been having a rather enjoyable time reliving the moment her legs had locked around his hips and his hands had slid down her waist to cup the backs of her thighs.

“A ship can sink just because of strong winds- oh no-“ Her panicked voice ended on a whisper and she turned wide eyes on him. “Iorveth-“

Realization hit him in the chest and he swiftly turned her back toward the railing, pulling her hair back as she had her first bout of sea sickness. When she seemingly finished he eased her up, but she stumbled back a step. “Let’s get you to the cabin landlubber.” He said cheerfully.

“I- I’m fine. I can handle a bit of seasickness.” She mumbled but stumbled along with him anyways. Azlin lay curled under the bed, restricted to the cabin under captain’s orders, which meant three days of cleaning up after her, something Iorveth wasn’t pleased about as he’d made great strides in the training in that area, but he voiced his hellos to her anyways when she bounded up to him.

“I- I’m fine. I can handle a bit of seasickness.” She mumbled but stumbled along with him anyways. Azlin lay curled under the bed, restricted to the cabin under captain’s orders, which meant three days of cleaning up after her, something Iorveth wasn’t pleased about as he’d made great strides in the training in that area, but he voiced his hellos to her anyways when she bounded up to him.

“It makes me so happy that-”

Aevon cut off abruptly and pressed a hand over her mouth before releasing it again as she crashed to her knees over the bucket placed perfectly beside the bed. Azlin yipped playfully and tugged on the tips of Aevon’s hair while again he found himself helping her hold the strands from her face.

Eventually, after many breaks and cups of water, he had her stripped and dressed in what she called
a tee shirt and curled on her side in the bed. He couldn’t help but smile at her pale pallor while he wiped away a thin sheen from her forehead. “For an explorer, this is not how I expected you’d spend a voyage across the Great Sea.”

She swatted at his chin with a roll of her eyes. “Be kind, I’ve never been on so much as a canoe before. I can swim with the best of them, but this perceived movement is not agreeing with my vestibular system.”

“As you say.” He said and slipped her glasses from her nose and set them on top of her belongings. Aevon answered with a deep sigh and her eyes slipped closed. “After that little show you put on at the docks, I was going to make you beg while I had my way with you from one end of the ship to the other.”

He barely bit back a bark of laughter as he drew the cloth down the side of her neck. “Of course, you were. There will be time enough for that still once you gain your sea legs.”

She pressed her cheek deep into the pillow. “Just you wait… you’ll see.” She mumbled, sleep already taking her, hopefully to another dreamless night.

To her frustration, Wendy didn’t begin to feel better until late into the second day of their travels. The only good thing that she could think of that came out of aching abdominals, sore throat, and a persistent headache, was that she never even thought about everything else that could being doom upon The Portia. Her premonitions and dreams were the furthest thoughts in her mind, as all her energy went into making certain the bucket was within arms reach at all times or sleeping dreamlessly.

Triss and Geralt visited her, with Triss apologizing for not having all the ingredients needed to draw up a potion that could help ease her symptoms. Wendy had waved her apologies away before sending them on their way. There was no need to force them to watch her dry heave every hour.

Iorveth however had been an absolute blessing, a perfect study in attentiveness that made her believe he might have been a wonderful healer in another life. He’d stayed by her side until she’d finally shooed him away as well, stating that if she couldn’t have fresh air, he should at least enjoy it enough for the both of them.

She hadn’t tried to seek out his emotions since that moment after their arrival in Novigrad… it felt intrusive and dangerous, and honestly, she wasn’t certain she could even if she wished to. For once, she felt content with the unknown, and settled for forgetting it all together. At least for the now.

The one thing she did have energy for, as well as plenty of time, was allow her imagination to sweep her away with just how she was going to christen their cabin once she felt better. The possibilities were endless and when Wendy went four hours straight without her stomach churning and her headache eased, she turned her thoughts from imaginative to concocting.

She sat with her back against the wall, her knees drawn up to rest her journal against them as she sketched Iorveth while he sharpened her sabre by the light of a carefully placed lantern as it was now darkening outside the port window. His armor and sword belt had been shed for the day, leaving him in a loosely laced green shirt with sleeves rolled up his forearms, dark blue breeches, and boots. She’d decided she would make her move once he finished, enjoying the rhythmic sound of steel on stone and occasionally adding a detail to her drawing.
When he began to rub down the steel with an oiled cloth, her heartbeat kicked up a few paces in anticipation and she quietly scolded herself for acting like a teenager. But then he set aside the sabre after sheathing it, and Wendy prepared to make her approach… Only to hold up at the last moment as he picked up her dagger and began the process on the smaller blade.

Wendy rolled her eyes and nearly threw her pillow at him, told herself that if it wasn’t for Azlin snoozing away on it, she would have to. As it was she glared over the top of her glasses instead and added a silly mustache to her sketch of him, making herself grin.

Surely a smaller blade meant it would take very little time to finish, but then he held the blade up high, narrowing his gaze at it in critical inspection before sighing dejectedly and getting to work.

It was in that moment that she decided she’d had enough. She was finally feeling wonderful, rested, and hadn’t been touched by the man she loved in nearly a week and a half. And who knew what lied in wait for them in Skellige or even on the voyage there… at the very least, probably less time alone than ever and she aimed to make up for lost time. Her mind brushing against the whispers that she would be striving to make memories that were to last her a lifetime as well, but she carefully sidestepped such thoughts. They had no place in her mind… at least not yet.

Wendy closed her sketch book with a snap, her gaze never leaving him as he carefully moved the blade across the stone. He only looked up when she crossed the small space between the bed and the single chair in the cabin, reaching for the dagger and stone, tossing them carelessly on top of her back pack.

He looked up at her with a knowing glint in his eye that made her slightly weak in the knees. “I’d wondered when your well of patience would finally run dry.”

Her mind immediately thought of a few cheesy retorts, along the lines that she was definitely not dry, or something similar, but she bit them back and instead set her hands on his shoulders and slowly straddled his lap. A low hum of approval escaped her throat as he ran his hands along the sides of her bare thighs until he cupped her ass.

“Were you prepared to sharpen every blade in this cabin in your quest to test my patience?” She asked in a chiding voice, her gaze dropping to his lips and wanting nothing more than to run her tongue along them.

“Every blade, every arrow.” He replied and brushed the tip of his nose against hers.

Desire flamed low in her stomach as she kept her lips just a breath from his. “Such a wretch.”

He drew his nose across her cheek and snapped his teeth together a breath from her neck, sending a shiver down her spine. “I’m supposed to be begging.” He said, pulling the neckline of her t-shirt to the side, allowing him access to her shoulder.

She dropped her head to the opposite side, moaning lightly as his lips skimmed her skin. “Later… I’m much to impatience for games.” She whispered at last, every plan flying through the port window. The only remaining idea was whatever it took to have him deep inside her as soon as possible.

“Always so impatient… Someday I’m going to take my time.” He said lowly and tightened his grip on her ass, pulling her tight against him so she could feel the hard evidence of his arousal. Instinctively she closed her eyes and rolled her hips against him, the smallest whimper escaping as that much sought-after friction shot raw need through every vein in her body, spurred on even more by his answering groan.
“We have all night for taking time.” She said against the high ridge of his cheek.

Iorveth shifted her back before releasing his hold on her, eliciting a pouting protest from her until she noticed him reaching for his laces. She bit her lip in anticipation while she watched him free his cock from its confines, feeling every muscle in her body tense in arousal as he pumped his hand along the length.

She’d never been so twisted in conflict, torn between taking over the movement herself, moving to her knees and taking him as far in her mouth as she could, or riding him until she couldn’t walk. Each had appeal but thankfully she knew what he wanted more readily than she did and with a free hand he urged her to raise above him.

It was only when she felt him hook a finger around her panties and draw them aside that she even remembered that she’d been wearing any at all, and she quite agreed silently that yes, taking them off completely would take too long.

He slipped his hips to the edge of the seat, his gaze locked on his task of lining his cock with her entrance, watching as she eased down, taking him in her fully. His breath hissed out and he dropped his head to rest on the back of the hair, watching her with a hooded gaze.

Wendy tentatively rocked her hips against him, adjusting to the feel of him filling her. The movement had her moaning and dropping her forehead to his shoulder but the need for more was quickly turning into an insatiable frenzy, sending her hands knotting in the hair at his neck, her knuckles pressing against the chair. His own hands found their place once again pressing deeply against the curves of her ass, rolling the mounds in movement with her rolling hips.

With renewed strength she lifted her head until her mouth found his, their moans mingling along with the twist of his tongue against hers. Needing more than the short, quick rolls of her hips against his, she bent her knees, hooking her feet over his thighs for leverage and began to rise above him before lowering herself.

Her new movements were rewarded deliciously with a guttural curse against her lips, encouraging her to rise further and lower faster. “Just like that Aevon, just keep-“ He whispered against her throat. Iorveth offered his own strength, though it quickly became about control as he became the one lifting her before sliding her back down over his cock with a slap of skin on skin. Wendy bit at his bottom lip before biting her way to his ear and dragging her tongue along its edge.

It was then that he changed the pace with a moan against her shoulder, grinding her against him every time he brought her hips back down his length. The added friction had Wendy nearly to the brink of release and she could only think of one way to reach it.

“Harder.” She whispered against the edge of his ear which turned into a whimper of desperation when he immediately shortened the movements and instead added strength in plunging her down. “F-fuck- Iorveth-“ She tried not to shout in his ear, so she again pressed her mouth against his shoulder. Her fists tightened in his hair as she felt release beginning to throb through her.

He allowed her desperate and erratic rocking against him as she rode him throughout her orgasm before he moved her fully up and down his length a few more times. His groans were muffled against her neck and becoming short and guttural. When she felt his muscles begin to lock she took his mouth with hers, loving how he wrapped an arm around her waist and tangled a hand in the hair at the back of her head, holding her mouth firmly against his and rocking her hips against him while he came inside her.

She would never tire of hearing him moan like that, was the first coherent thought she could manage.
as he slowly ceased moving her against him. None of that had been the official plan, certainly not while she wore a t-shirt with a cartoon cat on it, but it had been amazing. He was amazing.

“That’s my line.” He said against her lips, bringing realization to her that she’d said the last part out loud.

She hummed her approval of his response all the same and drew him back in for a languid kiss, stoking the renewed need to move her hips against him. He had similar thoughts as he tightened the arm around her waist and moved her in a small circle, drawing a small moan. A new coil of desire tightened in her stomach with what the movement revealed.

He was still hard inside of her.

Wendy straightened, immediately intrigued to see how far they could go and reached for the hem of her t-shirt, swiftly pulling it over her head and dropping it to the floor before his quickly joined it. Immediately he cupped a breast and dipped his head to capture the rosy peak deep in his mouth.

The pleasure of his tongue swirling wetly against her nipple had her crying out with a jerk of her hips. “Please tell me you can go again- like right fucking now.” She followed this with a moan, that single jerk turning into a repeated rock. His groaning hiss told her that he was as sensitive as she was but in a state of desperate need, just like her.

In wordless reply he slipped his hands to the backs of her thighs, holding her tight against him before beginning to stand. “Stay in me.” She whispered, not wishing to be parted from him if it could be avoided, for as long as she could.

“As you demand.” He said, stepping toward the bed. Before lowering them down he slid in and out of her a few times, the depth leaving her breathless. They’d yet to remove their remaining garments but it was with unspoken agreement that the clothing could wait just a while longer.

Iorveth did however, once they were spread across the small bed, quickly slip away her glasses and toss them onto the now abandoned chair. Azlin had long ago moved to the floor to investigate her plate of food.

Once comfortably braced above her on his elbows, Iorveth rested his brow against hers, shuddering when she eased patch hat away and brushed a finger along his scar. He lifted his head from hers when the tip of her finger reached his lip and promptly bit her finger playfully, bringing a grin to her lips.

Wendy’s grin quickly turned into a gasp when he flexed his hips, driving himself further within her. Her eyelids were heavy, but she wanted to watch his every expression. Where before they had been desperate for touch, answering the need for immediate release with instinctive, lust driven movements, now was all about watching the other come slowly undone in the throes of making love.

When he raised to his knees, his hands holding her hips tightly as he arched deeply into her, her heart had flipped painfully. His gaze raked down her body before watching himself fill her over and over, the sight spurring him to snap his hips faster. She loved the intense, almost painfilled concentration etched across his expression as he sought his pleasure with her.

She knew he hadn’t forgotten her pleasure, but in that moment, he was driven in his need to take, something she would happily offer herself for. After all it wasn’t as if she didn’t find it highly erotic to see his gaze dark with desire, a flush across his skin. To hear his breathless moans as his head dropped back.
He slowed his thrust to long languid strokes, opening his eye enough to watch her untangle her fists from the sheet and mold them around her breast, lightly rolling her nipples. Slowly he leaned forward, his weight caught on an elbow braced next her, bowing his back to drag his tongue across her fingers while she continued to gently tug on her nipple.

Wendy moved a hand into his hair, holding him in place while she arched back, moaning deeply. He continued to thrust slowly as he switched to her other breast until her need demanded that he use that tongue elsewhere. She urged his mouth to hers, wanting to feel him moaning against her lips, feeling herself nearing her crest.

Iorveth dragged in a deep breath before answering her unsaid demand, kissing her deeply. It was all she needed for her to go over the edge for the second time, her cries against his mouth, and her hips rolling against his in short movements. Her body was tight with how sensitive, bordering on the line of pain, she now was, but she continued to make love to his mouth, letting him know it was only the beginning for them.

His own release was brought about by hers, however where hers was paired with shallow rocking as she rode the aching pleasure rolling through her body, his was with long, deep thrusts. Her only real sign that he’d found release were the familiar sounds of his guttural groans rumbling against her tongue, spurring her to pull back enough to watch his expression. His eye closed with his brows drawn together, lips parted, his pained gasps sending her lips to taste the slight saltiness of his throat, hoping to soothe him.

Seemingly spent at last, he settled his weight against her chest, laying his face against her neck and running a hand through the slight dampness of her hair. She ran the tips of her fingers up and down his spine, sighing in satiated contentment. She felt the roll of the ship and the sounds of his slowing breath lulling her to sleep, and she very well knew she would have happily fallen into it deeply, despite the mess they’d made of themselves and the feel of him still filling her completely.

Her heart began to ache at the thought that there was no doubt in her mind… he was it. She’d never feel this way about another being. She loved him without end and loosing him was going to break something within her that would never be repaired.

Wendy wrapped her arms around him, threading a hand into the damp hair at the back of his head, blinking back tears when he nuzzled the spot below her ear and sighed deeply. She was going to lose him, she’d accepted that, but not yet.

There was still time for them.

“Aevon…” Iorveth groaned as the feel of her hot mouth took his cock deeply, dragged him from his slumber. Hazily he remembered barely managing to clean the evidence of their passion from their bodies before curling around her in the small bed and promptly falling asleep, her arse tucked against his hips and a hand cupping a warm breast.

Waking to find himself fully aroused was nothing unexpected but waking to the feel of her sucking his cock as deeply as she could had him already groaning in need. Turning fully onto his back he slowly blinked open his eye and rested an arm under his head, so he could watch his cock slide in and out of her mouth, her tight fist working him in time with the movements. Sunlight filtered in through the port window but he’d no idea just how late it was in the day. Nor did he particularly care.
She looked at him through her lashes and strands of her hair, a certain gleam in her eye told him that she had something going on through that mind of hers. A gleam that had him fighting back the need to tangle his hands in her hair, holding her still while he thrust himself between those lips of hers as far as he could go.

Instead he waited, interested to see what she had planned.

He quickly found that it involved her popping his cock from her mouth and crawling up his body until she straddled his face, lifting one of his hands to her mouth and sucking on his fingers before moving them down her body. He eagerly took the hint, using his now slick fingers to spread her folds and drag his tongue along her center. Alternating between sucking lightly on her clit and lips and delving his tongue between the folds all while massaging with his fingers, wildly encouraged by her panting moans and her hands fisting in his hair.

His cock missed the warmth of her mouth, her hand, her body, and his hips thrust in time with her rocking hips against his mouth. When he tried to reach for his cock, giving in to the need to feel friction on his sensitive arousal, she intercepted his hand when he’d just barely begun to wrap his hand around himself, and instead brought the hand up to cup her arse. He groaned in frustration but was mildly surprised when she pulled his hand back before slapping her arse with it.

His cock jerked in response to her moan, especially when he repeated the motion without more encouragement, slapping hard enough that her hips ground against mouth and her cry was loud enough to echo.

“Again.” She panted.

He could hardly refuse, not when the sounds she was making had him throbbing painfully. She rewarded him with an answering cry. He was torn between taking his time as he licked her center, giving her what she wanted, or finishing her off as quickly as he could so he could at last slide his cock as deeply as he could into her slick warmth.

Aevon shuddered against him, surprising him with her sudden release and his rolled his hips in greedy anticipation. He dragged his tongue against her one last time as her hips ceased rocking against him. He nearly hissed in triumph when she slowly began to move back down his body.

Leaning forward she sucked on his neck, running her teeth against the skin while she wiggled her hips down to his. He reached for his cock, ready to ease himself into her, but again, she intercepted his hands, bringing them up above his head.

“You don’t get to do that.” She whispered against his neck.

He released another frustrated groan and thrust his hips erratically, needing to be touched. She showed a shred of mercy by arching her hips in response, allowing his cock to nestle between the curves of her arse. His control was beginning to shatter, aided in its destruction when she rolled her hips, dragging her slick center fully along his length but never taking him in. When he jerked his hips against her, the head of his cock brushed her folds, but she pulled back before he could slide between them.

His need to grasp her hips and thoroughly fuck her senseless was growing, pushing him near that edge where he would indeed beg if she didn’t give him more. He turned his face toward hers, taking her mouth with his, hoping to convince her without words to give him what he wanted, what he needed.

While she did indeed moan against his tongue and continued to rub her heat against the length of his
cock, she refused him his silent demands. Just a little longer, his mind whispered, let her have her fun for just a little longer… she moved her hips up until his cocked lined up with her and lowered slightly.

He began to groan in relieved anticipation, wrapping his arms around her waist and rolling his hips up, ready to meet her half way. But she did the unthinkable and lifted herself away, the head of his cock throbbing painfully enough to have him whimper desperately.

“Aevon-“ He managed to whisper, his body clenching as she repeated the teasing movement of only allowing the head of his cock to enter her before pulling away completely. He couldn’t wait any longer.

Swiftly he wrapped his hands around her hips and lifted her away from him, eliciting a startled gasp from her, rolled to his knees behind her and entered her. He felt driven by a desperate need to take, to have his chance to dominate after her prolonged torture.

He wrapped an arm around her waist and braced a hand on the wall, sucking on her neck while her cries encouraged the powerful snap of his hips against hers. He drove his cock into her in a desperate fury. Before, they’d satiated a lustful need and made passionate love. Now was about taking, fucking, and laying claim to dominance.

His muscles strained tightly as her own began to weaken. He briefly wondered if he was causing her real pain, unable to tell the difference in her cries and he began to slow but she shook her head before turning her face to meet his, her tongue licking at his lips. “Keep going. Harder.” She whispered against them.

His stomach tightened painfully in desire, moaning as he surged against her. She arched her back, snapping her hips back against him in time with his thrusts. He hungrily took her mouth with his just as he took her body, her cries of pleasure all he could hear. The hot coils of need began to snap as her walls pulsated around him. No longer able to do more than hold his hungry mouth against hers as his release was finally taking over, her center milking his cock, his breath locked in his chest as his hips ground against hers in small jerks.

His overly sensitive and softening cock slowly slipped out of her when his shudders finally eased, and he rolled to his back with a groan, resting an arm across his eye. His mind was blank, simply remembering to breath all he could manage though he remembered to move his unoccupied arm enough for Aevon to settled against his side, her head resting on his chest with a sigh.

“I officially can no longer walk.” She said with a slightly dazed tone.

Iorveth huffed a laugh, taking in the current state of his body, equal parts relaxed and pained. Having zero motivation to move. “Would you think less of me if I admitted the same?”

Her laughed caused his finally calming heart to skip a beat, and again when she pressed a kiss to his jawline. “I could never think less of you. But…” He lifted his arm enough to peek down at her upturned face when she drifted off. “I totally had you silently begging.” Her knowing grin had him rolling his eye and settling his arm back against it.

“There’s time yet to turn the tables.”

She gave a dramatic sigh. “Promises, promises.” She said before yelping when he pinched her arse. “I’m going to test out these new sea legs of mine.” She said with an energy he hadn’t expected. “Maybe even find Triss and Geralt milling about.”
His body felt cold when she slipped away from his side, drawing him to drop his arm and watch her as she cleaned herself up and dressed. With a sigh he sat up and leaned back against the wall, knowing he couldn’t let her out there by herself. The sailors were a crude lot to any female, but Aevon was especially beautiful, certain to draw their attention.

He’d been hoping, especially with her sea sickness, that the two of them could have stayed in their cabin, undisturbed until their arrival in Skellige, but he’d momentarily forgotten that insatiable curiosity of hers. Of course, his Aevon would wish to venture above deck.

She was just beginning to buckle her boots when he eased himself from the bed, silently pleased when she paused to run her gaze down his body, but it quickly turned to impatience as he took his time in dressing. When he knelt to give Azlin instructions in behaving in their absence she whirled for the door and bounded out.

He smiled in amusement, then shook his head as he realized she’d forgotten her fur lined cloak. “So impatient she is…” He whispered to Azlin before remembering the extreme level of her patience when it came to torturing him. “At least in most aspects.” With a final pat to Azlin’s back he stood and pulled his own heavy fur around his shoulders before scooping hers up and following her path from the cabin.

Wendy stumbled to a stop once she reached the main deck of The Portia, her eyes blinking into the sight of the late setting sun. In the far distance, across dark blue waves, was the first sign of mountain peaks. The cold wind, more biting than when they had left Novigrad, brushed her skin, sending shivers down her limbs. But she was entranced by the sight—whether in fear or excitement, she couldn’t tell the difference in that moment.

She didn’t notice the crew going about their duties, or even remember to seek out her friends, all she could think about was what Skellige meant to her. She slowly approached the forward bow, her balance steady and zero signs of returning sea sickness.

The clap of wind and sail mixing with the sounds of waves was exhilarating and she could see how easily those who lived their lives at sea could love it with such passion. She inhaled the salty air, feeling herself falling in love as well.

The sudden weight and warmth of a fur cloak settling around her shoulders startled a gasp from her, sending her glancing over her shoulder to find Iorveth watching her with careful intensity. The action had her heart beating erratically and she turned to face him fully until she could slip her arms under his own furs, wrapping around her waist so she could press her brow against his chest. “Iorveth.” She whispered, fisting her hands in the back of his shirt when his arms wrapped around her in response. “You did just that- in my dream. What comes next, I don’t think I can face.”

“What comes next, you will not face alone.” His deep voice soothed her enough for her to turn in his arms and lean back against his chest.

His simple words had a powerful impact on her, reminding her that she wasn’t alone. The ship could crack open below them, but they would be together. But at the moment, they were standing at the bow of a ship, the cold wind tugging at their cloaks, watching as the edge of the world came ever closer while his warm arms held her close.

“It’s beautiful.” She finally admitted when as the last rays of light began to disappear and stars began to take its place.
“By morning we will have arrived.”

She took in a deep breath and turned her gaze to the stars, her memory of the star gazer sweeping through her mind, before the sight of a bright blue star caught her eye. She remembers the star gazer watching it, calling it a winter star.

“I’m naming that star- the bright one straight ahead, Iorveth.” She said with a smile in her voice.

“Is this another tradition where you come from? Naming stars after people?”

“Indeed, it is. They even send a little certificate in the mail, making it official.”

He huffed a laugh against the top of her head when he’d buried his nose in her hair before lifting back away. “Then the one beside it should be called Aevon.”

Wendy wrinkled her nose and laughed. “But it’s so small! Puny even. Here I am naming this big beautiful star after you and-“ She was cut off when he tipped her chin around until he could settle his lips against hers in a brief kiss.

“Puny or no, at least they are together.” He said quietly, his moonlit face a conflict of amusement and sorrow.

She sighed and turned back to watch the two stars glimmering above them. “Such a sweet talker… but alright. I accept my puny star.”

They stayed that way, watching the stars in relative silence until the first mate shooed them back to their cabin where they ate some of their food stores, cleaned up after Azlin and prepared for their arrival in Skellige in mere hours.

Wendy thought she might have been too tired, too anxious, too sore to do anything more than fall asleep without more than a few lingering kisses. She even would have been content with that, but it didn’t take much more than him taking her hand and rubbing her palm along the length of his stiffening cock still tucked in his breeches, hearing his resulting moan slip across her lips, to quickly change her direction.

It was a long time, time filled with long languid kissing and over the clothes rubbing, before they finally shed their clothing and longer still before he slid deep inside her. She held him close, running her hands up and down his back and wrapping her legs high around his waist, rocking her hips in rhythm with his.

She kissed his ear while he whispered words against her neck, words that she couldn’t make out. This time, perhaps because of the vulnerability of the first part of the premonition coming to pass, she couldn’t help allowing his emotions to melt into hers, desperately surprised when she realized she was doing it again. It was overwhelming, the amount of it that she felt, desperate and aching yet so full of joy and contentment.

A tear slipped free as the words threatened to fall from her lips. Their looming approach to Skellige signaled so many things, things she wasn’t ready for yet.

He gasped against her neck.

She began to feel his pleasure, the desire and need driving him to rock his hips deeply into her. It was becoming too much. She could hardly keep it together with her own arousal, but to feel his as well, was stealing her breath. Desperately she tried to push back the connection and swiftly failed, gasping as the ache within them both burned intensely.
“Aevon- I feel- I- ah bloody fuck-“ He groaned, sounding pained and in need. His chest was heavy against hers as he was no longer supporting himself and instead running his hands down her sides to grasp tightly around her hips. Frantically he ground his hips against her, sending them both into a mindless state where all she could do was tangle her hands in his hair, holding him as they both came undone.

It was painfully intense, a level she couldn’t put words to, stealing her breath.

Hazily she realized that though they’d found a level of release, he hadn’t stopped, and she didn’t want him to. He continued to rock against her, his cock still hard and deep, his muscles tense and his lips sucking at her neck. She was exhausted and already sore from their previous activities, but she needed him.

The unknown loomed over the horizon.

“One more time my love.” She whispered in his ear. She welcomed the pour of his pleasure into her own, stealing her breath and making her heart beat erratically. “Please my love, one more time.”

Her desperation fueled his.

One more time wasn’t enough.

There was a lingering sorrow as Wendy and Iorveth, awoken by the call of the ships crew that they were preparing to make port, remaining in their bed. She watched her finger as she traced his features, studying the shadow the morning light cast his long lashes against his skin. He studied her as well, occasionally running a hand over the splay of her hair.

She’d yet to fight back the connection between their emotions, taking in what neither of them would say aloud. It was just as profound and heart wrenching, but something told her that neither of them would survive putting the feelings to words, so she allowed the mix of her emotions with his to continue. She didn’t think she would be bringing this new change in her up to Avallac’h. It was raw and just barely understood, and she didn’t want to know more about it.

The crew shouted again, and Wendy knew their time was up. With a sigh she set about dressing, wincing at the soreness but having no regrets. If they’d more time, she see about going again. She sent a look over her shoulder when she heard him follow her from the bed, her gaze tracing his tattoo down to where it ended. Arousal pooled in her stomach, finding that he was half erect. If only they’d more time indeed.

He paused beside her, dropping a brief kiss on her lips before proceeding to dress himself, allowing her hands to take over some of the buckles on his armor.

Her gaze intense on her task she finally decided to broach the subject of this change in her. “Can you feel them?” She asked, pulling her gaze up to his when he didn’t answer right away. “My emotions.”

He met her gaze, knowing what his answer would reveal if he did. He didn’t say the words, but the softening of his gaze said enough. The realization had her closing her eyes, trying to hold back tears and nodding. She thought she’d been prepared… how wrong she was she now that she knew for certain and she fought for strength.

It came in the sound of a firm knock on the door let her know that there wasn’t time to fall apart. That time would come when she finally said her goodbyes and left him and her heart behind. She
dragged in a deep breath and stepped away from him, opening her eyes to meet his gaze. She felt his emotions, his *it* and pain, allowing them to swirl through her just a moment longer before forcing herself to block them, for good this time.

He blinked in surprise before hiding it behind a mask of determination.

The knock sounded again and finally got them moving to pick up their belongings, weapons yet to be strapped on, and Azlin scooped into Wendy’s arms. Before reaching for the door she raised herself up to take his mouth with hers, a kiss in which she poured her emotions into, brief but lingering.

His gaze spoke of understanding but the moment had come to an end and he opened the door. Geralt leaned back against the opposite wall with crossed arms and an arched look dropping to the passionate bruises on their necks. “The ferry departs in ten minutes. If we hurry, we might make it in time.”

Wendy couldn’t stop the blush from heating her cheeks and she pulled her fur lined hood up to hide the signs that they had been up to exactly what he thought they’d been doing. The touch of Iorveth’s hand at the small of her back guided her out and up the stairs to the deck, thoroughly ignoring anything Geralt had said.

“Finally! Hurry, the ferry-” Triss began but cut off when Geralt said he’d already told them. In a rush, the four of them weaved their way from the ship and along the dock, not giving Wendy time to adjust to the feeling of walking on something that didn’t move, with only Iorveth’s steady touch keeping her going.

She wildly twisted her head around, trying to take in the cold mountain peaks. The voices around her spoke in a mix of common and another unknown dialect but she didn’t have time to try and piece it together for Geralt was standing in a smaller boat and reaching for her. Holding Azlin close with one arm, she steadied herself with his aid before gratefully taking the first seat she could find.

Triss and Iorveth sat on either side of her but she leaned around them alternatively, looking for the mountains. The fact that nothing catastrophic had happened as of yet bothered her. She felt anxious and began to twist her hands in the fabric of her dress and worry her bottom lip. There was still time yet for things to go terribly wrong since they had yet to reach their final destination.

The captain of the ferry called out and the much smaller ship was untied from the dock and they set out to finish the journey to the only location Geralt knew to investigate first. Avallac’h’s laboratory.

Wendy’s body was coiled tightly as she surveyed the passing islands and snowy mountains. Every movement on a barely visible shore had her heart stopping and nothing could save her from the wild-eyed panic she was sinking in.

Iorveth silently placed a hand at the small of her back, reminding her that she wasn’t alone, but in the moment, it held little comfort. The dream, the scream, and ultimately the suffocating pull, played through her mind on an endless loop.

Even when they’d docked at some little seaside village whose name she couldn’t yet say, her stomach remained twisted and she had to knot her hands together tightly to hide their trembling. She focused on watching Azlin dart around Geralt’s feet as he led them to the hidden location, the sight making her a bit happier as the tiny puppy annoyed the imposing man endlessly. Something that she suspected was encouraged by her master if his small grin were anything to judge by.

Triss would send her concerned looks followed by encouraging smiles which she tried to return and
truly, the further they walked, the better she began to feel. The sounds of the ocean, something she
desperately wanted to love and if it hadn’t been for her dreams she would happily have sailed all
over the planet, faded until only the sounds of the wintery forests surrounded them.

And then they were there, Geralt commenting on the surprising lack of security in comparison to last
time they were there, as he led them inside.

And there was Avallac’h. A man she’d only met once, yet vitally important to her, in her quest for
answers and her quest to return home. He didn’t react at their intrusion other than to lower his hand
and scratch the wiggling Azlin behind her ears. Wendy took a quick survey of his dwelling,
somehow not surprised to find it filled with countless sheets of parchments and scrolls, books stacked
on every surface, and a self portrait that had clearly been doodled on.

“Where’s Ciri?” Geralt asked firmly, crossing his arms, completely forgoing any greetings.

Avallac’h straightened from his attentions to Azlin and set his quill aside, giving his full attention to
his guests. “She is resting, only just returned three days past.” He said with a gently understanding
voice.

The relief in Triss and Geralt was obvious, reminding her that Geralt saw Ciri as his daughter. Such
relief was short lived as the witcher then narrowed his golden gaze at the other man. “Why would
she come here?”

Avallac’h’s lips twitched but he managed to fight back his amusement into an arch look. “Come now
Gwynbleidd, do you truly wish for me to speak the words when you already know?”

“Geralt.” Triss said quietly when he took a step toward the other man. Wendy shared a wide-eyed
glance with Iorveth who merely rolled his in annoyance.

“Avallac’h, who are you- Geralt!” A new voice spoke from further in the cave and Wendy blinked
as it’s owner sped across the distance and threw herself into the witcher’s arms. “I wondered where
you were! Tell me everything!” She said when she pulled back from her adoptive father’s embrace.

Wendy twisted her hands nervously as she recalled her brief meeting with the beautiful and just as
equally dangerous woman, her mind drifting away from their conversation. Now that she knew the
extent of just how special Ciri was, she was in awe.

This woman was her way back to Pop.

Wendy dropped her gaze before lifting it again to Iorveth’s. She didn’t have to allow their emotions
to mix in order to know what he was feeling as she knew she was already feeling it as well.

“I remember you- the world traveler.”

Wendy blinked her gaze away from Iorveth’s to find Ciri watching her with a curious tilt of her head.
“I am, and I remember you as well, another traveler of realms. Call me Wendy… or Aevon. I answer
to both.”

“How do you come to be with this lot still? Thought you would have found your way back by now.”
She said, leaning a hip against Avallac’h’s desk, clearly comfortable in the Aen Elle’s space much to
Geralt’s irritation if his hardening jaw were anything to go by.

“An excellent question.” Iorveth spoke up with a sarcastic tone to his voice, his gaze leveled on
Avallac’h.
“The portal… Avallac’h, it wasn’t where you said it would be.” Wendy added, fighting the sudden tremble in her hands.

Avallac’h stood and walked toward a large diagram displayed on an easel. “The portals linking worlds are like doorways, that much is obvious.” He pointed to two separate circles, following the dotted lines until the merged into one circle. “Doorways that only open when the two paths are aligned.”

Wendy blinked as understanding dawned on her. “How long until the path to Earth aligns? Why did-” She swallowed angrily as tears began to threaten to fall. “Why did you send me there knowing this? Why allow me to believe that I could return just like that?” She finished with a snap of her fingers.

“This path will not open for weeks yet.” He answered in a calm voice. “As to why I led you to believe you could return whenever you wanted… I thought a quest to keep you’re mind occupied while we awaited Zireael’s return, better than the alternative. Sitting and waiting instead of living, seemed much crueler.”

Wendy opened her mouth to tell him that he was wrong but then she realized that she might not have had the time with Iorveth… with Lacei and Dain and Iohn. Iorveth would have gone to Adhart without her and might not have been able to save the village and would have ridden into Ryer to burn it down himself. Might have ended up dead well before he was captured.

She wouldn’t thank Avallac’h for sending her on a wild goose chase that had nearly broken her with its resulting guilt, but she wouldn’t despise him for it either. “So, it’s true. Ciri can send me back? Whenever she wants?”

“Well sure I can!” Ciri said with a comforting smile, watching from her perch on the desk as Avallac’h joined her side.

“That- That’s good. Very good.” Wendy managed to whisper, relieved and anguished all the same as she shared a look with Iorveth.

“I suspect you have more questions… do you not?” Avallac’h asked with more patience than Wendy had expected. The look he was giving her was tinged with… sadness? Either that or the complete opposite which was a warm happiness, either way it unnerved her, but she took the seat he gestured toward, facing him and Ciri while Iorveth, Geralt, and Triss listened silently several steps away.

“I have many questions. Some I suspect you know before I even ask them.” She said with a conflicting annoyed and humored voice.

“Ask them anyway.” He said.

Wendy swallowed, suddenly nervous. Finding answers to questions is what she did, constantly. No questions more than the ones currently burning through her mind, but now that she was at last faced with the voice of the answers, she was afraid.

“Since my arrival I’ve noticed… changes.” She shifted her seat, meeting his gaze directly. “Dreams. Visions, not only in the dream world, but premonitions and views of the past. And you- how is it you know a language barely remembered by those of my world?” Wendy frowned at Avallac’h, tilting her head to the side. “You couldn’t have possibly visited some two thousand year ago…”

“Time works differently in each realm we visit.” His gaze dropped from hers before rising to lock with Ciri’s. “One realm there is a day, another a century has passed.”
Wendy’s heart beat painfully when his gaze met her again. There was definitely pain in him, she felt enough to wonder if she’d lost control of her empathic ability, and if so why was there a connection with his? Even when her newborn ability had been spinning out of control, she had only ever felt Iorveth outside of the ancient lovers that had unlocked it within her.

“And the dreams?” She whispered, leaning her elbows onto her knees.

“How much do you know about your family Aevon?”

Wendy straightened abruptly in confusion at the change in subject. “Do you know how many Jones there are on planet Earth? I know that my father is from the east with exactly zero surviving immediate family.”

“And on your mother’s?”

“Her maiden name was Paine.”

Ciri straightened from the desk, her gaze bouncing between Avallac’h and Wendy.

“What? It’s another common last name… shortened from Payens when Pop’s great great great etcetera grandfather immigrated from…” Wendy’s eyes widened in surprise. “Germany and France.”

“That, my friend is not the most shocking part of this.” Ciri said with a glare at Avallac’h. “Tell her your full name.”

Avallac’h looked from the clearly irritated Ciri back to Wendy with a hint of exasperated amusement. “Officially I am named Crevan Espane aep Caomhan Macha.”

At first Wendy didn’t see what was so important about his long-drawn name until she noticed the similarities in the final name to another name. “Espane…” She said the name carefully once more. “It’s close to Paine… What does this mean?” She said a bit frantically, confused as to what this had to do with her dreams.

Instead of answering right away he moved to a nearby shelf and pulled free a single parchment, a drawing she saw as he held it out to her. A lovely young woman with strangely familiar features, her long hair an intricate weave of braids with the loose strands framing her face held back by an equally intricate circlet.

“Vaeri Espane aep Caomhan Macha… My little sister. Caomhan Macha is not a last name but where we were born and raised.” Avallac’h said with a faraway look in his gaze. “But we didn’t stay there. The Aen Elle had established posts across many worlds, one of which you discovered and ultimately brought you to this one. It was difficult then, traveling from our home world to this one and then on to yours just for the sake of acquiring a few slaves, without the constant aid of a navigator… We were children then, still learning the art ourselves.” Avallac’h smiled as some far-off memory played through his mind.

Wendy sat still, enthralled with his story, though the bit about their purpose for being on Earth had been to acquire slaves had not escaped her notice, she eagerly waited for him to continue.

“Our father was not pleased with what your planet had to offer, our magic was weak there, we were far from our mother and friends, and where we only had to wait a few months for this portal to align with yours, the wait on the other side was much longer and Auberon would not allow us a navigator.” His gaze met Wendy’s with a sad smile. “We did not walk long among your people, but in a tale I’m painfully familiar with, it was long enough for Vaeri to fall in love.”
Wendy’s gaze settled on the portrait held gently in her hands. Smooth out the point of her ears and soften the edges of her high cheekbones and…

“The post was abandoned, with Vaeri choosing to stay behind. Our father was unforgiving in what he claimed was her betrayal, swearing that he would not allow her back if she attempted to return to our people. I remember clearly the sorrow of her gaze as our father broke her heart. She did not fault my wish to return home, she knew of my own love for another, and I did not fault her the wish to stay behind… She must have adopted Payens as a surname, assimilating into the culture of her loves, and it eventually evolved into Paine.”

Wendy took in his words silently, forming thoughts around what he was leaving unsaid, wondering if it could be true but not having any evidence as to why he would lie. “I’m sorry.” She said at last. “You lost a sister… most times love is something wonderful and can bring so many together. But… sometimes it can pull apart.”

His smile was grateful and… unsurprised. “She was infallibly kind as well. It seems you have many of her traits.”

“The dreams?”

Avallac’h nodded, his gaze turning faraway once more. “And so much more to be certain. She was just coming into her own as a mage, and I hold no doubt that her power would have eventually matched my own. But where I excelled early in elemancy, she excelled oneiromancy.” He laughed quietly and shook his head. “She didn’t even have to try. She could enter the dream world on a whim and divine what the mystery had to whisper.”

“Why- Why now? Why are these dreams haunting me? How can I make them stop?” Wendy whispered desperately.

“I’m certain you have already linked these budding abilities to your arrival in this realm. Earth has chaos, but not enough to be of any true use unless you know what you’re doing. The dreams are the mystery, they connect you to possibilities, some are locked points, and some can be changed. The power isn’t in being able to dream, but in the ability to discern between the two. Destiny and the mystery, working together even as they quarrel over who is right and wrong.”

Wendy closed her eyes and rubbed her palms into them, sending her glasses up her forehead until she cleared her mind enough to think. “Ryer burning was a fixed point, but Iorveth’s execution was not.” She said more to herself than to him or anyone else. “The fur… fixed point but the rest?” Wendy shifted, her brows twisting into a frown. “How am I supposed to tell the difference?” She paused and waved her hands. “You know what- it doesn’t matter. How do I get them to stop? What triggers them? I don’t enjoy knowing the future. And there- there’s my jaunts through the dream world. Conversations with my dead parents. My Pop saying things that can’t possibly be my own consciousness speaking to me.”

“It will take training. I’m not the natural my sister was, but I can teach you if you wish, but there is more than just viewing the dreams of your future, of watching memories locked in chaos.” He paused to lean close, his gaze burning into hers. “You can control wherever you wish to go, who you see, learn why you see it. See the past and learn from it. And that is only the beginning. Aen Saevherne runs through your blood as surely as it does mine and Zireael’s. I will teach you to cut yourself off… But Aevon… Destiny speaks to you through the dream world while Mystery does the same through the visions. Both returned you here for a reason.”

Wendy swallowed, her hands clenching in the folds of her cloak. She almost wished she’d never asked. Acknowledging that magic was real was one thing but thinking of Destiny and Mystery and
Chaos as anything with sentience and power was beginning to make Wendy believe that she was truly in a coma this entire time. Even believing that her ancestor was a being from another planet, making her Avallac’h’s many greats niece was threatening her sanity.

“I don’t want this- them. I’m a normal girl, trying to help someone I care about before I return to another person that I care about. The magic trinity- they took me away from Pop. They’re cruel for leaving him alone and the guilt it has brought me. The pain that-“ She cut herself off, anger chasing back the sadness. “Chaos, Mystery, Destiny, they can all fuck off.”

“Well said my newest friend.” Ciri said firmly, clasping a hand on her shoulder.

Wendy’s lips lifted into a small smile before looking back at Avallac’h. His gaze was clear, and a light within him that told her that he was already twelve steps ahead of her. But she needed him, and though she had no reason to trust nor distrust, she knew he would never bring her harm. “When can we begin?”

“Aevon.” Iorveth spoke from his place against the wall. “A word.” He said once her gaze met his.

Wendy nodded before handing Avallac’h the sketch of Vaeri and leaving the small group to hear what insightful words he had to offer. He drew her to a far corner, but his gaze remained on Avallac’h.

“Why are you allowing this training? You can return to your home this very moment and the dreams will no longer bother you. Just as you wanted.”

Wendy studied the coats of arms he’d acquired in victory, her mind stumbling over her answer. “Why do you think?” She whispered, lifting her gaze to his face. “If Ciri can open a portal whenever she wants, why can I not stay… can just a little longer.”

“There are thousands of reasons for you to leave- immediately.” He said firmly, his gaze angry as he finally looked at her, an anger that she wished to understand more of.

“There are just as many for me to stay.”

Iorveth shook his head, grasping her shoulders firmly. “Think clearly Aevon. Do not allow your feelings to get in the way. Return to your home, to your family.”

Feeling dazed, confused, and utterly lost, Wendy shook her head. “Is it my home? I thought Pop was all I had and I was all he had. But Vaeri is Pop’s ancestor as well.” She blinked back tears. “I’m not abandoning him, I’m never even going to speak of Vaeri and magic or where I’ve been. I just need-“ She paused, resting her hands high on his chest, her gaze pleading for his understanding. “Just a little longer.”

His sigh wasn’t one of defeat or resignation, but of relief, as he pulled her fully against him, his arms wrapping around her. She pressed her brow against his chest, her hands holding tight around the leather straps of his armor. Her mind was a dizzy kaleidoscope, full of new and impossible bits and pieces of a much grander picture, but there was still him, steady and warm as ever.
“Wendy! Get in the car or we’ll be at the end of the line for hours!”

Wendy watched as her teenage-self wrapped a scarf around her neck, checked her reflection before shaking her head and removing the garment and untangled the next from the pile on her bed. It was faded blue wool with massive yellow and red paisleys patterned in. Once she wrapped this next scarf around her, artfully laying the tails just so, she then began to see to her pigtailed French braids.

“Wendy! I don’t give a damn if it’s your birthday, ma’am, get your butt moving!”

The young Wendy rolled her eyes, defiantly taking a moment to adjust her glasses, before finally leaving the room, the door to her bedroom snapping closed.

“I choose that scarf because it was so hideous. I was just beginning my ironic phase.” Wendy said quietly, moving to the window to watch as the younger version of herself and her parents slipped into the car and sped away.

“You are correct, it was hideous. But I believe that phase exists among the young as a matter of instinct, no matter the realm they are from. As a young sorcerer I was obsessed with feathers. No garment was safe… as you can see I have yet to release that particular phase, though I have managed to curb it into a more tasteful number of feathers.” Avallac’h said from behind her, drawing her to look over her shoulder at him.

“Naive and brave are the young while the old are left looking to them for wisdom to ease their fear.” She said with a sad smile.

“You are not so very old yourself Feainnwedd.”

Wendy snorted and rolled her eyes. “I feel as if I’ve already aged two decades since I arrived… Why did you call me Feainnwedd?”

His gaze looked past her, the way they did when he was living in the past. “I believe it is what Vaeri would have named you. Child of the Sun, Sun Child, they are the same. She was close to the woman who inspired the name.”

Wendy frowned. “The burning star falls, spreading her light, her hearts desires. Stars- Suns…”

Avallac’h crossed his arms with a thoughtful expression. “Interesting. Have you considered-“
“No.” She said with a shake of her head before sighing. “I mean- yes I have. No I’m not going to consider it anymore, it just struck me that you would name me something so similar. How many names am I to be given?”

“As many as you inspire. The ‘Holy Trinity’ as you have named them are using any means they can to whisper their tales to you. Through your dreams, through me. Even through Iorveth.”

Wendy straightened her shoulders. “Please… show me how to stop them. I’m no good to him or any of the Aen Seidhe if I’m a mess from constantly fearing the future.” She shook her head in exasperation. “I was nearly to the point of sabotaging Geralt’s search for Ciri, just because of the dreams involving Skellige.”

He stared at her for a long moment. “You would indeed make a great Aen Saevherne, so great is your desire to not become one.”

“With great power comes great responsibility.” Wendy quoted the familiar line. “Short of sounding like a cliché from a young adult novel where the heroine comes into great power, however reluctantly, I most fervently- Do. Not. Want. It.” She said firmly. “What I do want is to help Iorveth in his dream of achieving true freedom and peace for his people, and then I will return to Earth to live out my days as the shepherd I was always meant to be, long after Pop is no longer with me. I can’t do any of that if I’m twisted up inside my noisy mind.”

“I understand your frustration and will teach you to dream free of Chaos… This was merely to allow you to grow comfortable with my presence… Close your eyes… and wake.”

Wendy took a moment to still her mind and follow his instructions. She closed her eyes…

“Well done for your first lesson. Vaeri would have been beyond proud.” Avallac’h’s voice had Wendy blinking against the cold wind and sunlight.

They were seated facing each other near the edge of a cliff above his dwelling where only the sounds of rustling trees could be heard and only the cold could touch them. It took a moment for the lingering dizziness to leave her, allowing her to finally meet Avallac’h’s gaze.

“I’ve never dreamed while awake… I don’t think so at least.”

“There is more control if you do so but when you are asleep, they are more vibrant.”

Wendy nodded, remembering how faded her walk through her memories had felt in comparison to her dream of the campfire. “And more exhausting.” She said, fighting back a yawn. She didn’t mention the headache that throbbed behind her eyes.

“We should return, allow you to rest.” He said, standing.

“I had plenty of rest from last night, though it is a little cramped in your home.” She said dismissively yet accepted his hand when he offered it to help her stand, pulling her cloak tightly around herself.

“I expected Gwynbleidd to make his way here, but I did not expect him to arrive with so many.”

Wendy waited while he navigated the rocks and ledges before following his path. “Not even myself?” She asked once she used his shoulder for leverage and hopped down the final ledge, grunting slightly at the jarring sensation of landing from a three foot or so dip.
“You were expected, but not as soon.”

Wendy pushed her glasses up her nose and tilted her head at him. “What were you expecting?”

Avallac’h paused outside the doorway, giving her a look of fondness. “I expected to find you. That Gwynbleidd and Iorveth would have tucked you safely away in that tavern once you learned the truth of your path to your home was missing.” He shook his head and opened the door. “I did not expect you to have such impatience and seek out the answers for yourself, but I am not surprised.”

He followed her in and directed her toward the food stores. “I see our companions have yet to return with their prey and herbs. Do you enjoy tea?”

“Yes, with as much sugar as you’ve got.” Wendy swept a wiggly Azlin into her arms and cuddled her close before she browsed through Avallac’h’s countless stacks of books, watching as he went about putting together a tea brew from the corner of her eye. It unnerved her how easily he accepted her and she him. How certain he was that she was a descendant of his sister and how she felt he was right. She sighed when she realized that he might actually be seeing Vaeri instead of Wendy. “What is a navigator?” She asked she came across a book titled *Selective Navigating*, recalling his comments about needing them to travel between worlds.

“There are many ways to travel among worlds. The portals that are scattered about, relying upon perfectly timed alignments, were the most common and required very little capability to use.” He said, carrying two cups and offering one of them to her. “A navigator was trained to be able to sense these portals, to find routes linking worlds much as one would navigate a ship through a twisting channel.”

Avallac’h picked up a stack of books in one hand and settled in the couch across from his fireplace, Wendy joining him silently, watching as he locked his gaze on the small fire. “That was not enough for our people- the Aen Elle. We had to have more slaves to build our cities. We had lost the ability- or rather control over beings that had the ability to summon these portals at will long before. I…”

He trailed off, his gaze becoming lost for a moment before shaking his head and directing it at her. “Zireael is currently the only known child of the elder blood, there are others no doubt, but their lines were not as heavily watched. Her genetic history grants her the power to summon these paths, and the battle to control her has been… bloody. My involvement- less than honorable.”

Wendy suspected there was a great deal more that he was leaving out, details that would explain Geralt’s distrust of him as well as the fond yet hesitant way Ciri would look at him. Facets of his past that would identify why his gaze went faraway and why he readily smiled at her no matter how her questions or similar appearance to his long-gone sister affected him.

Details which she would not delve into.

“What are these?” She asked with a nod toward the stack of books between them on the couch. “The tea is delicious by the way thank you.” She added, setting her cup aside and allowing Azlin to climb her way up her chest and shoulder to curl up against her neck. Soon the puppy would be too large to sleep in such a place but Wendy found comfort in the warmth pressed against her.

“Good, it will help with your headache.” Wendy flicked her gaze up to his over the top of her glasses, catching his knowing smile. “These books contain a vast collection of knowledge regarding oneirromancy, divination, premonition… controlling not only your dreams but those of others. If you wish to prevent them then you must know everything about which you are preventing.”

Wendy felt the smile spread across her lips, genuine and toothy, as excitement urged her to pick up
the first thick tome and settling it across her lap. She looked at Avallac’h in surprise when he picked up the next one on the stack and settled deeply into the cushions, catching her curious glance. “I tend to avoid this area of magic… it was Vaeri’s expertise and to practice it would bring too much—well just too much.” His gaze widened and he sat up straight for a moment. “Not that I do not know what I’m about and will guide you wrongly in this… I just merely wish to refresh myself.”

“Of course Avallac’h, I trust you.” She replied with a small smile at his blink of surprise. What a life he must live that an innocent offer of trust would take him aback. It had her nearly rethink this whole allow a practical stranger that sets others so on edge ramble around in her head… but then he settled back into the cushions and took a sip of his tea, beginning his reading and looking entirely at ease and far from the dangerous man she suspected he was. Trusting him came easy, just as it had with Iorveth and the others… she couldn’t explain it other than a possible flaw in her personality. And truly she hadn’t had much choice but to accept the people destiny had dropped her on.

Swallowing a sigh as she pushed thoughts of her possible reckless susceptibility and Avallac’h’s role in her life, mentor, ally… family… and concentrated on her studies. It was all so incomprehensible and strange… every day she seemed to gain someone new. Smiling slightly, she realized her headache had faded.

The wind ceased to roll for a pause, allowing Iorveth a moment of silence in order to listen for signs of his prey, a well fed buck with a penchant of marking its territory. He’d caught a glimpse of the spiked beast near an hour past when he’d spied him at a pond taking his drink, just as the wind turned, carrying the scent of an intruder. Since then, the buck had been leading him further into the forest, consistently just out of aim it felt like.

Iorveth tilted his chin, scanning the tangle of trees and ignoring the soft snowflakes drifting down slowly. The forest seemed to hold its breath for a moment, long enough for the sound of a fallen leaf crumbling under a footstep to reach him.

His gaze narrowed in on the direction the sound came from, he tightened his grip on his bow and carefully made his approach, certain not to step on the leaves as his prey had. Using a tree for cover he paused a moment before turning, bringing his bow up in careful aim only to immediately relax his pull and sigh.

“Ah, seems we hunt the same buck, Fox.” Ciri said with a small smile, approaching from the direction of his aim.

“So it would seem Swallow. It also seems the Wolf was lax in training you in tracking.” Iorveth looked away from her in search of his next clue as to the buck’s direction.

“What do you mean? I’ve tracked it just as well as you have.” She snapped and set a hand to her hip, holding her small hunting bow loosely with the other.

“Was that not your step on a leaf that led me to you? My mistake.”

Ciri answered with a roll of her eyes before nodding to a patch of freshly fallen snow with deep print impressions. “If my lax training is correct, he’s gone that way.” She grinned over her shoulder in pleased triumph. “Shall we?”

Iorveth replied with a nod, realizing that he’d needed a moment alone with her anyways. After walking a few minutes in silence with him considering the correct tact to use when broaching the
subject of wishing to create an alliance to overthrow one's father, she came to a stop and faced him fully.

“Alright go on, what is it?”

Curious as to what gave him away he feigned ignorance with a tilt of his head. “What is what?”

She rolled her eyes with a huff. “You’ve spent more time glancing at me, opening your mouth before snapping it closed again, than actual tracking. You claim me to be loud while you stomp about with clacking teeth… so what is it you wish to discuss? Is it my ability to send Wendy home? Because I assure you I can.”

Iorveth relaxed his shoulders and shook his head, certain he’d done no such thing, but let it go. He took a moment to gather his thoughts before meeting her gaze. “I wish to discuss your plans for Nilfgaard.”

Ciri blinked in wide eyed surprise. “That… is not what I expected to hear you say.” She turned away and paced a few steps before turning to face him once more. “Why? What are your plans for Nilfgaard?”

“My plans are for Temeria and the Aen Seidhe. Currently Nilfgaard- specifically Emhyr- are in the way of them.” Iorveth said quietly, watching as she drew in a deep breath and dragged her gaze to watch the snow fall, her breath visible in the quickly dropping temperature.

“Only the Aen Seidhe?”

“They are my priority but anyone seeking a life free of tyranny would be safe. I do not seek to be the next king of Temeria. But I would protect it as someone more fitting brought it stability and growth.” He paused, looking past her and into the woods. “You know what your father’s plans where for you. And you must know what my plans are for him as well. I will carry through with mine despite your answer but keep this in mind before you answer… from one reluctant for the mantle of power to another…. One answer will breed utter chaos while the other will encourage change.”

Her gaze snapped to his. “And if that change is chaos?”

Iorveth waved a hand through the air sharply. “It can be no worse than Emhyr executing peasants and nobles alike for the slightest rumor of his demise. For the razing of villages in their failure to provide bountiful crops for his thinning armies. For the gleeful use and slaughter of those he once claimed to welcome.” He shook his head. “Do not claim daughterly indignance on his behalf, we both know what sort he is. We both know what sort I am as well. I’d burn every Nilfgaardian if it meant freedom, where he would burn the world if it meant he could rule it.”

Ciri closed her eyes and pinched the bridge of her nose for several breaths before looking at him once more, a light in her eyes. “I never make life changing events unless a wager can be made.”

“A wager?” Iorveth asked, feeling impatient annoyance at her evasiveness.

“Yes a wager. If you bring down the buck- specifically the one we’ve both been tracking, then I will consider what you’ve said- seriously. My hesitation has nothing to do with loyalty to my father, but everything to do with what I want out of life.”

“And if you win this wager? What is it you want?” Iorveth asked, shifting cautiously.

Her smile returned, a touch wistful. “I wish to hear how you, notorious in your legendary hatred for humans, come to be in love with one.”
Iorveth narrowed his gaze at her. “If you’ve wish to hear the story, ask Aevon. She is far better at telling tales.”

Ciri leaned forward, pointing a finger at him with a triumphant laugh. “I knew you did!” She straightened, her grin still wide. “I’m certain her side is very lovely but she did not have the same aversion to elves as you do to humans, therefore your side is much more complicated and makes the better tale… So have we a wager?”

Iorveth knew the trade was uneven in the gains versus the losses, a clue that he had her support, even if she wanted to delay voicing it. Let her have her wager, it benefited him in the long run anyway. “This is a wager of skill. Elder blood prowess is prohibited.”

She arched a brow at him but nodded elegantly. “But of course. Now let’s make this quick… I was already hungry, but now I’m freezing.”

“After you…” He nodded toward the most recently discovered sign, following a short distance when she set a quick pace. He continued to search for the markings and when the temperature continued to plummet as well as the sun, he began to search for where the creature would seek warmth, all while waiting for his moment to take control of the hunt.

He admired Ciri’s ability to track, showing quite the talent, and even fixing her mistake of reckless steps. But she at last made a mistake when she took the bark stripping of a squirrel for that of their buck. He grinned to himself, allowing her to follow what she believed to be the path, while he continued down a hill, watching the thicket at the bottom for signs of movement.

Iorveth stopped, his breath held, as he finally distinguished antler from bramble. Swiftly, before the winds could change, before a leaf could be stepped on, and before the buck could blink, he had an arrow nocked and let loose. From his slightly higher vantage, the arrow found its mark, followed closely by a second, preventing the buck from fleeing in pain and panic. Quickly, before the suffering could continue, Iorveth drew his knife and finished the grisly job.

“Looks like you’ve earned my consideration.” Ciri called from atop the hill, her bow now slung over her shoulder.

“Help carry this heavy bastard back to the sage’s hideout, and I’ll tell the tale of how a fool like me goes and does something foolish, even when he knows it will end badly.” He called back before securing his bow in its scabbard while looking for a sturdy branch to break off a tree.

“Deal!” She said excitedly and quickly joined him in his task of binding the hooves together around the long branch.

“You were following a squirrel’s markings.” He said once they had lifted the kill to hang between them, Iorveth in the front.

“How fitting.”

“It’s close proximity to the limb gave it away. You were looking for a trail while you should have been looking for somewhere warm, where the snow could be deflected.”

“Good to know.” She said with a touch of annoyance.

Iorveth sighed, knowing he was simply delaying his impulsive agreement to tell her… anything at all. The only way he could rationale it was his desire to show how he valued her as an ally. He could not do that with commands alternating with closed silences. He had to show vulnerability and trust…
“She saw a hint of the worst of me, was told even more, and yet chose to stay. Even going against her nature for- for the Aen Seidhe.”

There was a drawn silence, long enough that they were nearly back to the point where they came upon each other before she spoke. “It’s alright to say she chose you Fox. Chose not only your people but you as well.”

“It’s easier if I don’t.”

“I take it that means you haven’t told her either. How you feel… It’s easier if you don’t.”

Iorveth sent a look over his shoulder. “So much smarter than your father.” He looked back to the darkening forest and picked up the pace, pleased that she could keep up. “It was a surprise to find myself wanting a future that I’d never desired before and immediately knowing it would not happen. Thus the fool allowing something foolish to happen. Now I aim to pour every emotion brought into existence because of it into freedom and security, but only after convincing her to leave.” He paused his sudden rush of speech to shake his head. “She has it in her head that she wants to help. But I very well intend to either be alive and successful, or fail and be dead. The later more likely and I would not bring her death as well.”

“And what has prevented you from asking me to open a portal beneath her while she sleeps? As you seem to favor, it would be easier.”

Her words brought him up short a step before he caught himself. “As much as I would indeed find that to be easier, I often hear the words ‘just a little longer’ whispering through my mind, and I greedily accept. And when I finally convince myself that her life has more value than any shoddy attempt to assassinate Emhyr, I will come to you.”

“It need not be permanent Fox… I could open the portal at any time.”

“And what sort of life would that be, for you or her? I cannot leave here, you cannot always be at my whim- that is exactly the life you have been fighting against from your father and from the Aen Elle-, and I cannot expect her to live wondering if and when I would ask you to do such a thing. It is easier to send her home and then forget you have this ability.”

“Let’s clean the deer here.” Ciri said and they worked together to wedge either end of the branch between two trees, allowing them the freedom to get to work. “Thank you.” She said quietly, drawing his gaze from his knife to see her frowning at her own. “You could have taken me up on my offer and taken advantage easily. And instead you would give up any chance of happiness-”

“It was never a consideration to ask you to do anything other than help her to return home with that being the end. If anyone understands the battle you’ve had to fight for your freedom, it is me. Though I was never threatened with carrying the spawn of glory hungry monarchs- do you see why I have an aversion to the title?” He sneered as he drew his blade along the flesh that would be their dinner. “You deserve to take the control they sought to have over you and send them to their knees, begging for the mercy of a swift execution.”

“Yes well… two of those glory hungry monarchs are already dead with you plotting the death of the next… I say we’re right on track.” Iorveth glanced up from his task, finding her watching him. He didn’t have to voice his question, for she answered it with a small nod. “We’re going to want allies.”

“Cerys. I don’t believe she would send Skellige into outright war with Nilfgaard but I think she would support us openly.”
Iorveth nodded, continuing to process their kill. “Dijkstra plans to unite north of the Pontar. He claims he would allow Temeria to be claimed by myself in return for helping him rid the North of the Flame and of Nilfgaard. I will do my part but I will not accept his claim of power over me.”

Ciri cleaned her hands with a handful of snow before picking up a leather bag of freshly cut meat. “Wise. Have him beholden to you.”

Iorveth picked up his own bag, leading the path back to the hideout. “That is the idea.”

“How do you suppose Wendy’s training is going?” Ciri asked as they made their final approach.

“I imagine the sage is being piled on with question after question. Already she has an insatiable need to learn, but these dreams terrify her. She comes from a world where magic is a myth and the ability to dream the future is impossible. I hope your sage can bring her peace before she leaves… something I expect will keep them busy and her out of danger for some time while I arrange to meet with Cerys.”

Ciri led the way inside, coming up short at the sight they walked in on. Both Avallac’h and Wendy were spread across the couch, her head resting in his lap with Azlin stretched from Aevon’s shoulder to hang off the other side of the sage’s lap… each were utterly and obviously deeply asleep.

Tea cups were perched precariously on stacks of books and even more books were scattered about the floor. Aevon with an open book spread across her chest, another fallen to the floor with her fingers brushing the page, her glasses crooked and hooked around one ear. Avallac’h’s own tome lay across the back of the couch where his hand still rested on top of it. At some point Aevon had removed her boots and her bare feet dangled over the arm of the couch where the fire was near enough to keep them warm.

“Well I see they’ve been hard at work.” Ciri mumbled.

“Do you suppose this could be a lesson?” Iorveth suggested just as quietly.

The sound of Aevon’s quiet snore was barely distinguishable from the crackle of the fireplace. “It would seem not.” Ciri said, looking around the room. With a sly grin over her shoulder she walked over to a table and casually knocked the brass water pitcher and basin to the stone floor, the clatter waking Aevon with a gasp and Avallac’h with a slow blink.

“Rise and shine beauties! Dinner is on the two of you, now that you’re both well rested.” Ciri said, dropping her bag on the table.

The sounds of laughter drew Wendy’s attention from her task of lightly battering and frying up the deer meat Ciri and Iorveth had brought in, watching as Azlin tugged on a strap on Geralt’s boot. Ciri encouraged the puppy when she began to growl ferociously.

“Dammit Iorveth, call her off.” Geralt mumbled, shaking his foot lightly.

“This is part of her training. You threatened me, and this is how she should react.”

“You told me to threaten you. Mentioning that it was for her training true, but you failed to mention that you would sic her on me.”

Iorveth made a clicking sound, rewarding the puppy with a bite of meat when she caught on and
bounded back to where he stood.

“Why clicking? Traditionally people train with whistles or voiced commands.” Wendy spoke up, forking the final steak onto a platter.

Iorveth glanced in her direction. “I will train her to follow those as well as silent hand signals. It will depend on the situation and the command. Just then she followed a command of a specific sound, first gaining her attention and then a hand gesture to signal her to heel. It will take time but eventually she will know which sound means to look at me for commands and which mean to follow immediately.”

“I remember bringing a stray to Kaer Moren after finding it alone in the forest.” Ciri said, sharing a grin with Geralt. “I’d never seen Uncle Vesemir turn so red in the face before.”

“To be fair, not only did you bring in a mangy cur into the keep, you weren’t supposed to be out there alone in the first place and had been missing for hours.” Geralt said, propping his feet up on the table in front of the couch.

Ciri merely shrugged and used her foot to move his aside enough to make room for her own to prop up. “I told Lambert where I was going.”

Geralt rolled his eyes. “Lambert only grunted when Vesemir asked him of your whereabouts. Ass.”

“Here Wendy.” Triss said, holding out a stack of plate wear which Wendy accepted and set next to the steaks.

“Avallac’h, how are the potatoes coming?” Wendy asked, looking around his shoulder.

“Soft. I must say, I’ve never had deer meat prepared this way.” He looked down at her with a smile.

“Where I’m from, we fry everything. I mean we have whole festivals dedicated to frying the weirdest possible foods… its completely unhealthy, especially in large quantities. You don’t exactly have a lot of cooking oil to fry them in but the bear fat works well enough. Will certainly taste interesting.”

“Do you enjoy cooking? The rice mixed with vegetables is another interesting combination.”

Wendy shrugged, beginning to pile food onto her plate. “It’s ready everyone, come grab some. I like making deserts more than anything. Cooking meals was just necessary, something I traded off with Pop.”

Ciri swopped by with a full plate and dropped back into her seat. “Avallac’h is a decent cook, better than the rest of this lot. Triss is a close second.” She took a large bite of the steak and nodded toward Wendy. “Well done. This is quite tasty.”

Wendy grinned down from her perch on the arm of the couch where she ate with the plate balanced on her thigh. “Thank you.”

“How did the lesson go Wendy?” Triss asked.

Wendy grinned at Avallac’h before answering Triss. “Very well. I’ve already learned so much.”

A piece of carrot with bits of rice from the salad hit Wendy in the temple. “Liar. The two of you were napping by the fire toasty as two hibernating bears!”

Wendy tried to hide her laugh but shook her head. “No seriously! We sat in the freezing cold tested
some waters then spent the rest of the afternoon reading on the subject and discussing theory. Tomorrow we’ll work on practical.”

“I had success with clearing out that abandoned village, Nekkers. One of the locals said there were hot springs on the other side of the forest.” Geralt said, dropping a scrap down to Azlin, earning a scowl from Iorveth.

There was a moment of chatter as Ciri exclaimed that she was determined to find them and was calling on volunteers to join her, Wendy excitedly agreeing immediately. “Other than a hot tub at the local athletic club and Dijkstra’s bath house aside, I’ve never been in a natural hot spring.”

As the group began to finish their meals and set aside empty plates, Wendy gathered up the books, and put them on a nearby desk, keeping a couple for herself.

“Speaking of Dijkstra- Ciri do you have dice? Speaking of Dijkstra, how do you plan to deal with him? And it’s not just him you’d have to deal with.” Geralt said, clearing teacups from the center table.

Avallac’h poured wine, ignoring Geralt’s lowered brows at the sight. Ciri dug out a small wooden box and joined Geralt at the table. Triss accepted her wine, smiling when Wendy took a deep drink of her own.

“You’re speaking of Roche.” Iorveth said with a look as if he’d just whiffed something foul smelling.

“He may despise Emhyr as much as anyone else, but I doubt he will be happy to learn of yours and Dijkstra’s plans for Temeria.” Geralt took his turn rolling the dice.

“I’ll deal with Roche just as I always have, reminding him of his place.”

“Who is Roche?” Wendy asked with a nervous glance at Iorveth. She didn’t like the hatred in his voice, a hatred that sent a shiver down her spine.

“Vernon Roche. Commander of Temeria’s Blue Stripes. A murder-“

“He’s Iorveth but human.” Geralt interrupted with a level gaze. “You killed just as many of his stripes if not more, as he did of your Scoia’tael.”

“And he was defeated, and if he turns out to be a problem, he will be dealt with again.” Iorveth glared at Geralt.

Wendy frowned, dropping her gaze from the crowd at the table to the books in her lap. It had been sometime since he’d spoken with such hatred in his voice and it reminded her that as much as some things change, some stay the same. She wondered—briefly- at just what this Vernon Roche had done to Iorveth… and what Iorveth had done back. And would do again, making her hope that the two never crossed paths again.

“Ciri, you don’t have the gold for that bet.” Geralt admonished. “Tomorrow we’re heading to Kaer Trolde to visit Cerys while we wait for the next passage back to Novigrad before wintering in Kaer Moren.”

“Come spring, I’m to Kovir to advise Tankred. Something he’s going to want if Dijkstra’s eye wanders beyond Redania and Kaedwen.” Triss added.

“I’ll not be wintering in Kaer Moren.” Ciri said quietly.
“What?” Geralt asked, straightening in his chair.

Ciri sighed and stood, walking to stand beside Iorveth as every eye followed her, none more intently than Geralt’s and Avallac’h’s. “I’m to Vizima and likely the Golden Towers after that.”

“Ciri.” Geralt said quietly, his gaze never leaving her. “You don’t have to do this- if this isn’t what you want-“

“It is what’s right. Something I had thought on long before any of you arrived here. Tomorrow, Iorveth and I will request to meet with Cerys formally. You will go on to Kaer Moren and do what you do best.”

Wendy smiled slightly when Ciri’s gaze swept over the room, hoping to let her know that it was going to be alright. She looked determined and solid, but the signs of a breaking heart were there in the brightness of her gaze and the small tremble of her bottom lip. She didn’t want to hurt her adoptive father, but knew that there was no other way. Not if there was to be peace.

Geralt sighed and took a long drink of his wine. “Someone place a bet and reset the board. Not you.” He said as Avallac’h took the seat Ciri had vacated. “I’m not playing a game you could use magic to take advantage.”

“I have some shred of honor Gwynbleidd. Gwent instead?” Avallac’h suggested. “I’ve never played, giving you the advantage.”

“Fine… and sorry. I’m still not sure where you stand in all of this.”

“Currently my only stance is assisting Aevon with her power. Where I stand after that is dependent on if Zireael is open to advisement.”

Geralt cursed quietly as he dug out his deck of cards and Ciri dug out hers for Avallac’h to use. “I’ll teach you how to relieve him of his coin in four moves or less.” She whispered rather loudly. “I hadn’t considered advisement. That seems a long way off.”

“Yea well all of this game you and Iorveth ae playing at is going to be long and hard. Hope you’re ready for it Avallac’h.” Geralt muttered, followed by Triss whispering his name.

Wendy blinked around the room when she’d mentally translated his words before releasing a choking laugh, drawing every gaze. “I’m- I’m sorry he just said long and hard- followed by hope your ready for it.” Wendy broke off in laughter when the words replayed in her head.

Ciri joined in, holding her stomach with one arm and pointing at Geralt with the other. “You did! Triss did you know about this development?”

“He was quite fond of Uma…” Triss added with a grin.

“Can we please not bring up my time as Uma, particularly my time as Uma and with Gwynbleidd?” Avallac’h said looking torn between finding the conversation humorous and revolting.

“Agreed. Your round.” Geralt cleared his throat and nodded to the cards next to Avallac’h. While the two began their game with Ciri pulling up a chair next to Avallac’h and advising him on how to play the game, Wendy turned her attention to Iorveth who seemed to be passively enjoying his wine and petting Azlin.

It occurred to her that as of today, he was one step closer to achieving his dream. He had a true ally in Ciri, future Empress of Nilfgaard. She didn’t know the whole story, she was aware of that glaring
fact. Didn’t know how Geralt came to raise a princess in the ways of a witcher. Didn’t know how Avallac’h came to be involved in the quest to control her power. Nor did she know why Ciri was willing to be party to a plot to overthrow her father.

But she did know that Iorveth would soon be meeting another potential ally, one already in power, and his hair was in dire need of a trim. Her mind made up, she set her forgotten books aside and poked around Avallac’h’s laboratory until she found a pair of scissors and returned to her seat. “Iorveth, come sit.” She said, pointing to the floor between her knees with the scissors.

“My hair is fine.” He said with a roll of his eye.

“Iorveth, your meeting not only the Queen of Skellige, but a potential ally.” She grinned. “Now I adore your shaggy, unkempt hair. It’s very rock star. A small trim won’t change anything other than smoothing out a few rough edges… and if it’s my skill that has you nervous, I did my share of trimming Pop’s hair. If he could trust a thirteen year old me, then I imagine you can trust me with a pair of scissors almost eight years later.”

“She’s right Iorveth. Cerys isn’t like her numskull brother. She won’t care how you look really, but she’ll be more willing to take you serious if you haven’t looked like you’ve been rolling in a pig pen.” Geralt added.

“Not that card, this one.” Ciri played the card before Avallac’h could follow her instructions.

Iorveth glared at Wendy but in the end sat on the floor between her legs, allowing her access to his hair, which she immediately got to work on. She removed patch hat and lightly ran her fingers through his hair, styling the strands in various waves and getting a feel for just how much she should cut off.

He sat still as stone when she began to carefully snip at the back of his neck, evening out the line before moving on to the hair around his ears. When she finished she set the scissors aside and ran her fingers slowly through his dark hair, smiling slightly as he sighed.

“Tomorrow, after you’ve sent your request to Cerys, you should tag along with Ciri and me to the hot springs. I’ll shine you up bright for your visit to this Kaer Trolde.” Wendy said quietly.

He tilted his head back, gazing up at her. “Perhaps we can distract her with a treasure hunt or some such nonsense and have the springs to ourselves.”

Wendy tilted her head. “Treasure hunt you say… tell me more.” Laughing lightly when he rolled his eye and turned his gaze on the fire, relaxing back against the couch. “Some other time then.” She leaned forward to wrap her arms loosely around his neck, pressing a kiss into his hair. The game of Gwent continued with varying comments ranging from Geralt boasting that he never loses to Avallac’h calling him out on his exaggeration to Ciri thoroughly reprimanding each move the both of them chose and why her choice was obviously better. Triss repeatedly had to tell Geralt to put down the knife, he wasn’t playing against Lambert every time Geralt suspected Avallac’h of using magic in a game that had nothing to do with chance as dice did.

They were wild and chaotic, these people she’d found lightyears away from Earth. As messy and unkempt as her mind had been since her arrival, dangerous and constantly walking the line just this side of good, sometimes with a healthy view of the bad. But then there were the moments where the weight of their decisions and pasts were nonexistent, leaving them with a good amount of love and affection for those along for the journey.

Wendy tightened her hold around Iorveth for a moment, smiling into his hair when he wrapped a
hand around one of her forearms.

There was no one else in all of existence that she would rather be stranded on a foreign planet with.

Snow. She could feel it drifting against her skin, catching in her eyelashes and making them heavy. She had to fight the need to brush them away, to fix her glasses. To adjust the ties of her cloak as they were tightly pressing against her throat, tugging on her skin.

Wendy sighed, forcing her eyes to remain closed. She knew she shouldn’t be thinking about all these inane details. Her mind was supposed to be empty. Quiet. And yet it was louder than ever.

Thoughts of Iorveth inside writing to the Queen of Skellige Isles and her wish that she were actually with him as he wrote, of Ciri as she tried relentlessly to prove to Geralt that she was alright with her decision, and Geralt’s own sadness as he felt he was loosing his daughter all over again.

Wendy had woken that morning after a night reliving the same dream of Skellige over and over, only to feel the hazy feelings of Iorveth, Ciri, and Geralt seeping into her mind. Iorveth’s determination, Ciri’s guilt, and Geralt’s sadness.

Immediately Wendy had turned to her opposite side, pressing her face into Iorveth’s chest and fisting her hands in his chest as she struggled to push the emotions away. It was difficult with her own in such a disarray of confusion and panic. So many thoughts running through her mind… why did the dream return and why had it haunted her relentlessly, never changing. Before, Iorveth had been the only emotions she could feel and briefly Avallac’h before he’d gained control of himself.

But now a mere two days later and she wakes after a terrible night to the heavy weight of their fears and ambitions mixing with her own. Only when she’d slowed her breathing and recited the entire first chapter of North and South silently was she able to close everyone out, leaving her exhausted and fighting a headache.

Now, hours later after listening to Avallac’h tell her about the importance of keeping calm, and her mind quiet, she was once again finding nothing but noise. With a sigh she opened her eyes, taking a moment to brush them free of snow to find Avallac’h still seated across from her.

“What changed from yesterday Feainnwedd?”

Wendy dropped her gaze to the snow collecting on her lap and brushed it away slowly. “That dream I had of Skellige… I had it over and over. Every time I come into awareness, its with Iorveth placing my cloak over my shoulders while I watch the mountains come closer. And every time there’s the shattering screams, something wrapping around my ankle and pulling. And then I’m suffocating.”

She closed her eyes against the memory. “And then it begins again.”

“May I see it?” He asked gently.

“If I could focus, to calm myself, I would.” She said quietly before wincing as her headache continued to throb.

“Come, we’ll take a break for tea and see if we can find a way to if not clear your mind, at least distract it with something less consuming.”

Wendy nodded slightly, trying not to feel discouraged, joining him in the path to return back to his laboratory. “There’s another change in me that I haven’t spoken of. I… heal. Unnaturally fast.”
“The strengthening bond between Chaos and yourself. Accelerated healing is not unheard of, and yours could be attributed your heritage or interference of Chaos itself. I would not test how far it will go to protect you however.”

Wendy drew a deep breath and nodded once. “I have desire to test it. Thank you for the insight Avallac’h.”

He sent her a slight smile in reply, opening the door for her. Once inside she shook the snow away, smiling at Ciri and Iorveth from their spot at the table with parchments, quills, and inkpots spread about them.

“How goes it?” Ciri asked as Wendy poured water into a kettle.

“Fine. Just a headache to see to before we continue.” She said over her shoulder.

“Headache?” Iorveth asked, setting his quill aside.

“It’s not from anything I just did… I woke with it.” The sound of a chair scraping back had Wendy looking up to find Ciri standing and pulling on her fur lined coat.

“There’s no time then for tea. Iorveth is putting the final touches on his letter and has no need for me. Let’s go find that hot spring!”

Wendy hesitated a moment. She didn’t wish to skive her studies, after a night like last night, she wanted control over them more than ever. But… she also wanted to explore and the thought of a soak in a natural hot spring was incredibly enticing. With an apologetic look toward Avallac’h she abandoned her task of helping him make tea.

“Aevon-“ Iorveth began, only to be cut off by Wendy capturing his lips in a kiss.

She broke the kiss with a sigh, taking one last moment to kiss the bridge of his nose before stepping back to meet his gaze. “Finish your letter and come find us. I’m sure Ciri will have finished and disappeared on her treasure hunt by then.” She said quietly with a quick wink. “Avallac’h?” She asked in a louder voice.

“I’m to remain here. I think I know of a book that might hold a few answers and will share with you upon your return.” He said before looking past her shoulder to Ciri. “Be cautious, be aware, and hold steady.”

Wendy looked between the both of them while Ciri buckled her sword across her back, a sight that reminded her to pick up her own, as well as her back pack. It was heavy and a bit cumbersome but she wanted to wash some of her clothes while they were at the springs. Ciri seemed to be of like mind for she slipped a leather satchel over her head as well.

“We’ll be fine Avallac’h. The forest is small, the bears hibernating, and bandits holed up from the snow. And look, Wendy has a sword. We can handle a short hike to some springs.”

Avallac’h sighed. “I know. I’m still not past watching you disappear.”

That hesitant fondness Wendy had seen spread across Ciri’s face was painfully clear and it had her suspecting that Geralt might be wrong about how far their relationship had gone. She didn’t have much of a moment to ponder it though for Ciri managed to mask the brief flash of emotion as she placed her hand on Avallac’h’s arm.

“I’m not disappearing. We have plans to concoct, an empire to take in hand and steer to a brighter
future. A witcher to pester into gambling all his money away. But I’m not doing that without showing our favorite dreamer how to properly relax.”

Avallac’h quickly brushed a thumb across the curve of her cheek before nodding. “To your spring then.”

Ciri stepped back with a small smile, dragging her gaze from his to meet Wendy, tilting her head toward the door. “Ready?”

“Ready.” Wendy said and moved to join her before being stopped by a hand on her wrist and being pulled back to face a still seated Iorveth. When she stood between his knees and he gazed up at her, his grip on her wrist tightened slightly. “I’ll be there soon.”

Wendy smiled down at him, reaching up to adjust patch hat a touch.

“Ugh enough already, I cannot stand how sweet the air tastes now.” Ciri called from the doorway causing Wendy to scrunch her nose and wink at Iorveth before turning away and following after the other woman.

Ciri set a brutal pace through the light snow, her stride long and determined where Wendy’s was shuffling and clumsy as she had difficulty discerning limbs and rocks. In the end she just tried to step where Ciri did.

“I’m somewhat an expert in all things romantic.” Wendy began, eager to push away thoughts of dreams and meddlesome powers. “And I know a love story when I see one. So- you and Avallac’h. What’s that about because it bothers Geralt a whole lot, even if nothing has really happened yet.”

“You know, I asked Iorveth a similar question in regards to you while we were out hunting.” Ciri sent a small smile over her shoulder.

The sound of a wolf howling in the distance set Wendy on edge and a shiver spiraled up her spine. “So there is a story!” Her voice was lacking in her usual excitement as her gaze searched among the trees.

“I suppose there could be. I thought that- well have you ever thought something was going to happen, and so many times you were just there at the edge, and then something shoves you back at the last moment and your left starting over? That is my story. The details aren’t important, but in the end, something always comes between us.”

Wendy watched the stiff shoulders of Ciri’s as she led them in the direction of the abandoned village Geralt had spoken of, the snow growing more difficult to tread through as it grew deeper. She felt sad for Ciri and Avallac’h, a love that had potential but it was never given the proper time to blossom.

“True love doesn’t happen right away; it’s an ever-growing process. It develops after you’ve gone through many ups and downs, when you’ve suffered together, cried together, laughed together… Said by Ricardo Montalban back on Earth.” Wendy said quietly.

“Or maybe two people can just go through too much, always just a breath away but in the end crossing without ever meeting.” Ciri replied.

“Then you keep going through these things together, and someday that distance will close.”

Ciri sighed but her reply never came as she stopped suddenly mid step, startling Wendy into nearly stumbling into her. She bit back her questions and held as deathly still as Ciri, the beating of her heart
the only sound she could make out. Until the sound of Ciri’s steel blade hissing as she pulled her sword free, echoed through the forest.

Fear locked its self around her lungs, the dream playing through her mind. Her gaze searched the thick, snowy forest for any hint or detail of the danger Ciri sensed.

Was it the wolf?

The sudden flight of a crow from the tree below caused a yelp to slip free from Wendy as the movement startled her. Her gaze was drawn to the trees above and the sight of the black birds perched on every surface had her swallowing nervously.

“Ciri… there’s an unusual amount of crows in the trees.” Wendy whispered.

“I see them. Draw your sword Wendy.”

Following the instruction, she pulled the sabre free and held it in a low grip, turning in a slow circle to check behind them.

At first, all she could see were more trees, but when she tilted her head at a strange… almost human shaped tree… she could almost see more. “Ciri, was that deer skull there when we passed by?” She whispered with a slight tremble to her voice.

She heard Ciri spin around and step even with her. “Wendy we need to run. We run for that village and hope it’s far enough from the forest- Run!” Ciri shouted and pulled Wendy back by her backpack.

Wendy was still trying to process what she’d just seen. The- the- creature- tree like and with the head of a buck had lifted its arm high into the air before slamming them down into the snowy ground and a heartbeat later a twisting mass of roots had exploded from the ground just where she’d been standing a moment before, snow and dirt showering over them.

If Ciri hadn’t pulled her back, Wendy acknowledge that she wouldn’t be now be standing and turning into a stumbling run. The mixture of fear and adrenaline kept her going as she struggled after Ciri but it did nothing to keep her stomach from twisting at the hissing screech that sounded through the air.

Her sabre felt heavy in her hand as she held it above her head to deflect the crows diving at her and Ciri in a dark, swirling cloud. She couldn’t prevent the cry of pain as sharp beaks and claws went for her face and neck.

“Keep running Wendy- fuck-“ Ciri slid to a stop, bringing Wendy up with her.

Wendy tried to shake away the crows to look under her arm to the sight of wolves weaving toward them through the trees, their teeth bared and fur raised. Swallowing thickly she took a step back then remembering the tree creature, spun around.

It was gone.

Or so she’d thought. Mixed in the hurricane of crows, a black mist spiraled down mere feet from where they stood and took form from the ground up. Wendy drew in ragged breath after ragged breath as the air vibrated with the scream coming from behind the deer skull. It made her want to drop to her knees and cover her ears. It was pure instinct that had her lifting her sword to try and block the swing of its twisted arm of roots and branches.
It had little effect as the arm split into many and wrapped tightly around her body, pinning her arms to her sides. With a panicked toss of her head she managed to catch a glimpse of Ciri darting to one wolf with a flurry of slashes before darting to the next. Ciri was an exceptional fighter but there was little she could do against the countless wolves and forest monster.

She tried to breath, tried to pull herself free, but she was no match for the beast’s strength and it began to tighten its grip around her, making it impossible to draw breath. She felt as if her bones were about to begin snapping and the silent gasp of pain her only means of expressing it.

Wendy began to accept that it was too late for her. She was surrounded by the horrible screams from her dream, the caws of the crows and the vibrating cry from the monster, her body being crushed as her lungs screamed in agony for her to draw breath. It was too much, the pain and fear was too much.

Her sight darkened and she didn’t even have the strength or piece of mind to lament that she wish she’d had more time, hoped that Ciri managed to get away and warn Iorveth before he stumbled upon them. Her mind was reaching for that darkness, urging it to take away the pain and fear.

She didn’t know what happened to cause the beast to release her. All she remembered was the snapping of a rib, her head becoming too heavy to hold up and then suddenly she was crumbling to the ground in a loose heap.

A moment later she remembered to breath and drew in a gasping breath, the pain radiating through her bringing tears to her eyes and she tried to bite back her choking sob. It wouldn’t help in the end but there was little she could do to stop it.

Next came the realization that she was facedown in the snow and mud, and with sluggish movements she twisted her head and caught sight of Iorveth, flashing swords and precise movements attempting to drive the monster back. Ciri continued her dance with the wolves, but for every one she slew, three more bound from the forest in an endless wave.

When one leapt for Ciri from behind, its sharp fangs sinking into her upper arm, Wendy knew she had to get up. Grasping for whatever strength left to her she wrapped her hand around her sword and stumbled to her feet. She lunged for Ciri and the wolf, her momentum as she drove the sabre into the side of the beast sending them both to the ground while without even missing a beat Ciri dove for her next prey.

Wendy was left gasping as she rolled from the dying wolf, pulling her sword free and wishing she hadn’t had to do that. She wanted nothing more than to awkwardly lay there on her backpack, but she knew she had to keep getting up. Iorveth had lost one of his swords and was no longer on the offensive, the creature driving him back step by step as the steel sword was practically useless.

She had to give him a chance to gain the upper hand once more. Before she could talk herself out of the ill conceived plan she sheathed her sabre and leapt onto the back of the monster, chest burning as if her lungs where full of lava and tasting blood in the back of her mouth, her arms wrapping around its rough neck and she tried to use her weight to shift its balance enough to give Iorveth time to duck beyond its reach.

It wasn’t a good plan.

Plans made by clumsy farm girls who know more about sheep breeding than fighting should never been put in situations where they might have to come up with them in the first place.

But it almost worked.
Iorveth did indeed escape the immediate threat, that was where the plan ended for Wendy. She knew nothing about what she was dealing with, so it came as a bit of a surprise when roots snaked up from the snow and dirt and wrapped around her ankle, ripping her from the monsters back with enough force she left as if her ankle and knee might shatter.

If she was a bright as she’d always thought she was, perhaps she might have anticipated such a thing, after all she’d seen for herself that the creature was made of roots itself. But she hadn’t. She hadn’t expected the roots to slam her into the icy ground, but that’s just what they did. The only detail outside of the pain holding her prisoner was that her glasses her broken.

“Ciri! Get her out of here!”

She loved that voice. Iorveth’s voice. She remembered hazily that he was in trouble… and she pushed herself to her knees, blinking against the dizziness and through the cracks in her lenses. He was running to her. Then sliding on his knees when he’d neared her, his hands wrapping around her arms and pulling her to standing.

Wendy frowned at the blood on his cheek and reach up to wipe it away, but he was pulling her somewhere, and she tried to follow but she could barely lift her feet.

Something glowed just behind him, bright and green. The air hummed with… magic? But the sky screamed with the sounds of monsters, snarls of wolves, and cries of a storm of crows so she couldn’t be certain…

A dawning realization slipped through the cracks in her mind and she began to shake her head in dread and panic. “No- Iorveth-”

“This is the only way you live.” He said harshly, his grip on her tightening. A twisting rope of roots and dirt dived for them, wrapping around the arm he lifted to block her with.

The next heart beat froze around them as everything happened at once. Iorveth’s gaze met hers, that piercing green that made her think of a mid-spring forest. The hand still wrapped around her arm tightened as he spun her around before letting her go. The beast pulling him into the air just as it had her.

And then she fell backwards through the wall of Ciri’s conjured portal, the magic crackling loudly as it surrounded her, pulling her through space and time. She tried to breath. To cry out that this wasn’t how it was supposed to end. She was supposed to do what she’d been sent there to do and then return to Pop peacefully. But existing was impossible, much less trying to fight such magic.

She hit solid ground with enough force to tumble her feet over her head until she landed on her chest. Loose dirt filled her mouth and nose, stung her eyes but she had adrenaline fueling her, pushing herself to her knees as she looked around frantically.

“Iorveth?” Wendy whispered hoarsely before being forced to spit the dust from her mouth. Her mind refused to register the sight before her. She pressed her eyes closed with her fingers in an attempt to chase the images away. But when she opened them, they were still there.

The very telling sights of eighteen wheeled trucks surrounded by every manner of automobile sped along a highway in the distance.

“No- no, no.” She moaned as fresh tears stung her eyes. He sent her back, left her here while he and Ciri stayed there to die.

Wendy wrapped her arms around her waist and folded in on herself in agony.
AN/HAY! Sorry this one is so short, you know how fillers can be but hopefully you still enjoy these moments following chapter 19.

Returning to Earth had been something Wendy had imagined countless times. Hours spent riding Xalvador or as she waited for sleep to claim her in the elvan ruins were spent planning each move she would make once she at last made that final journey. Before learning the true nature of the portal directly to Earth, she’d resigned herself to swimming up through the pool and into the ruins of Germany. Of finding her way out of there and into the wilds. All while using her terrible sense of direction.

Near on impossible, but that was what it was going to take, so Wendy was determined to try.

Then it was wondering if Ciri could drop her right on her doorstep, after an impossible goodbye where she said how she felt with her eyes even if she could never bear for the words to pass her lips. Pop would come outside, hold her as she cried. She’d grieve, never truly over her life in another world. Safe for the rest of her days, but again frozen in time just as before.

But that was not her reality.

Wendy’s mind was quiet, as quiet as a broken body could allow a mind to be, but she welcomed the bruises, the fractured rib, sprained ankle, and countless cuts. They kept her mind from brushing on the fact that she did not know if the man she loved and his last sincere hope in real freedom lay dead in the snow. Would never know his fate.

She allowed the physical pain to chase away everything else as she sat in the dry dirt, her legs sprawled ungainly around her. Once a lovely dress and cloak, now torn, streaked with blood and dirt tangled around her boots. Her heavy and equally tattered backpack had eventually been allowed to slip to the ground beside her.

Wendy existed in a state of unseeing eyes hidden behind broken lenses, just breathing ragged breath after ragged breath, all while the hot sun beat down on her for hours. The traffic continued to pass endlessly, none taking any notice of the human like creature in the nearby field. Far enough away she could be mistaken for a bush, but near enough the rush of tires on asphalt stretched across the distance.

At some point, when the sun seemed to have reached its peak, her body began to move, instinct taking over. A shaking hand had reached into the pocket of her backpack where her phone had been since the earliest days of her journey and pulled it free.

Someone of right mind might have been relieved that it hadn’t been damaged in the struggle, but such a thought and the pleasant feeling that came with relief eluded Wendy. Instead she tried to push the power button, but the painful shaking of her hands kept missing their mark.
The first true thoughts in hours began to whisper through her mind. She had to get the phone on. Had to find her location and send it to Pop.

Otherwise she was never going to move.

Biting her lip against the frustrated cry that scraped against her dry throat, she clamped her hands around the phone tightly, and pressed it against her brow shutting her eyes tightly. She gave into the urge to rock back and forth hoping the fresh wave of pain in her chest would bring enough clarity to do what needed to be done. After releasing a quiet moan, she cracked open her eyes and lowered the phone.

She thought she would have felt relief as the phone came to life when she managed to press the correct button at last. Instead it was all she could do to guide her shaking finger through the process of turning on her location.

South Dakota.

Another stake of reality driven deep into her chest.

Her sight blurred with tears but she locked her jaw and fought them back.

She couldn’t… not yet.

Just a little longer.

In her state she didn’t trust her voice to say what needed to be said so instead, she painstakingly composed a message with her gps location and hit send, releasing a shuddering breath once done and turning it off once more and dropping it into the dirt by her knee… and she waited.

The hours of the day passed her by as she waited, never allowing her mind to stray near the events of before. Instead she watched the sun fall from the sky, settling over the continuously moving traffic in deep shades of gold and pink. Exposure should have been high in her concerns, but it just wasn’t. She remained in the heat, allowing her body to sway listlessly in the light breeze.

And then came the stars. Painfully familiar to the point she couldn’t bear to see them. And she didn’t have to for long. For soon after their appearance a pair of headlights fell on her.

Wendy didn’t have it in her to be wary of the approaching vehicle. If it was Pop, then everything was as expected. If it were a stranger finally taking notice, then anything they had planned would be dealt with. But as the headlights quickly approached, Wendy realized vaguely that she knew the shape and shade of the lights, and the smallest of whimpers escaped through the closing of her throat.

With shaking hands she pushed her hair back from her face and tried to stand as the truck slid to a rough stop near her but her legs were weak and ached, collapsing under her unsteady weight. But a pair of strong arms caught her around her waist, holding her close.

Pop’s familiar scent overwhelmed Wendy, making her dizzy and so full of… painful relief. He was real… over and over that thought rushed through her mind. He was real, she was back. He whispered her name in a broken voice, a voice that turned the remaining shards of her heart into dust. She’d hurt him, her Pop. The last person in the universe she’d ever wanted to hurt, and she had.

And she couldn’t even tell him why. There was no explanation she could possibly give that would make sense of what she’d truly gone through, if she’d ever been able to find the strength to voice them in the first place.
But she did have the strength to pull away slightly and make the attempt to stand once more. She needed to be… somewhere- anywhere other than this first sight of reality, the constant reminder that far away her love had died a horrible death in the attempt to save her own.

Wendy closed her eyes in panic, trying to shut out the thought before it could fully form, and leaned heavily against Pop as he helped her into the truck. She’d yet to meet his eyes, to even gaze at his face, but she felt his rough palm caress her cheek before quickly closing the door. A moment after tossing her backpack and phone into the bed of the pickup, he slipped into his side of vehicle and sat with his hands on the wheel for a long moment before at last reaching and shifting the truck into drive.

He’d not even paused long enough to turn the truck off, she realized vaguely and closed her eyes as she leaned her head against the window. She didn’t want to sleep, but the exhaustion mixed with pain, hunger, and heartbreak was becoming too much. She was safe. For the moment that had to be enough.

The last thought running through her mind as the wave of darkness drifted through her consciousness was that she hadn’t magically healed.

The porch swing swayed Wendy gently as she lay across the seat with one leg bent over the arm rest and the other one stretched down till her foot touched the cold wood of the porch. She stared at the faded yellow paint of the porch roof silently willing herself to fall asleep. It was difficult as her mind continuously listed the facts of her life, practically shouting within.

Days and weeks passed, turning into months, and still Wendy had yet to come to terms with the life she now lived. One moment stood out from all the others though… the moment Pop had knelt at her side while she lay curled in her bed. He’d waited days, far longer than she’d expected, but finally he’d asked the question. The first words spoken since whispering her name out in the field.

“Where did you go Wendy? Where were you for almost five years?”

The silence in her mind, in her chest, her soul had been excruciating. But eventually the words of Avallac’h managed to find hold in her mind… time worked differently.

And his question had gone unanswered for how could she possibly tell him that for her it had merely been weeks while for him she’d been dead to him and the world for years. She should be twenty-five rather than just nearing twenty-one.

But he’d accepted her silence, and allowed her to heal, and for so long she thought she might. Her bruises had faded, bones mended with time, and she’d hidden everything brought with her from the continent deep in her closet. She’d even managed to cry, soul wracking sobs, in the hope they would help her grieve.

But eventually she could no longer outrun her memories and once she allowed them to rush through her mind, she found they weren’t enough. She’d begun to long obsessively for those memories, of days of learning to ride Xalvador and sneaking glances at the hard edge soldier who’d taken on the task of saving the world while trying to return her back to her rightful place. Of first touches and soul searing fear…

And just as before when she’d admitted that she wasn’t ready to leave, the guilt ate away at her, feeding on her consciousness every time she looked at Pop. Despite the fear and panic, she wished
she were still there. Pop couldn’t possibly understand her sudden collapse to the center of the living
room floor under the weight of her paralyzing guilt, but he’d continued to offer his silent strength just
the same as he always had.

That was when she’d finally reached for the dreams. If she were to live with this guilt, she might as
well drown in her dreams, to allow them to take her away as far as she could go. Since her return
she’d only allowed sleep to consume her when she could no longer hold it back. Staying awake for
days, surrounding herself with the work of the farm as much as she could. Vaguely she noticed that
autumn was approaching, could feel it in the cold breezes as she worked to feed the goats and mend
fences. But eventually she’d have to sleep, crying until she gave in.

Always afraid the dreams would come bearing some terrible message, but they never did.

And when the day came where she was desperate for the dreams, to see his face as clearly as she’d
seen Pop’s and her parents, they still left her abandoned. All the ‘hearts desires’ she’d gazed around
at with so full a heart… the friends, laughter, her love and… children.

All were blocked from her now, as surely as her ability to heal. Avallac’h had been right, the chaos
of Earth was nonexistent. If she’d had more time with the sage, learned all he’d had to teach her
about the power, she might have been able to at least summon something. But no… she was left with
nothing. She had the journals, the sketches and the rose and everything she had left of that life… but
it was safer to keep them hidden.

And now that she wanted nothing more than to sleep, it eluded her. She was certain that this time if
she really tried, she could control the ability. To drag up a dream or even a replay of a memory…

Wendy sighed and closed her eyes. She needed to get up, to finally begin to pick up the pieces of her
and Pop’s life… beginning with finding a job. It had been months since her return and she’d yet to
turn on a tv, computer, or her phone… avoiding the world and all that had changed in it since she’d
left. She was reluctant to give up the silence, to relearn to be a part of humanity… it was terrifying
really.

So deep in her thoughts, Wendy failed to hear the porch door close and nearly fell out of the swing
when Pop spoke from above her.

“Mind if I join you Wendy?” He asked quietly in a voice that had her popping her eyes open to look
up at him. He looked older than when she’d left him, lines now beginning to etch themselves deeply
into the skin around his eyes. But otherwise he was still tall and solid, tan from his hours and days in
the sun, and he looked at her with nothing but patience. But at the moment, there was a hint of
more.

“Sure…” She whispered but only after she reminded herself of the correct language. She hadn’t been
there long but long enough where it had become instinct for her to answer in elder. Slowly she pulled
herself up to sitting, placing both of her bare feet on the floor while he took his usual place beside
her. There was a bit of apprehension twisting in her stomach, causing her to place her hands over her
stomach to try and calm her nerves.

“How much of our family history do you know Wendy?” He asked after a long silent pause.

Wendy blinked unseeingly for a moment, the words feeling familiar. It was with a twist of her heart
that she remembered Avallac’h asking a similar question…

“I know… we immigrated from Germany.” She answered carefully, turning her gaze to look at him.

“Have you ever seen anything like this before?”
Wendy frowned in confusion, having just noticed the photo in his hands. Her fingers trembled slightly as she reached for it. There was no way for her to hold back her gasp as she began to comprehend the object in the photo. A circlet very similar to the one in the drawing of Vaeri.

“There were stories passed down through the generations of our family. Stories that we had blood in our veins from another world… only stories of course but passed down even after we left our homeland.” He pointed to the photo. “That was the closet shred of proof that we had. Passed along with the stories until in the twenties it was sold to make ends meet.”

Wendy traced her finger over the intricate curves of the circlet that had once held Vaeri’s hair back from her eyes.

“My question to you Wendy… are the stories true?”

Her vision blurred with tears at his words and she could no longer hold the words back. “They are. Her- her name was Vaerie… I met her brother.”

He didn’t say anything for a moment, just released his breath and nodded.

“I was only gone a few weeks Pop… time works differently in each realm, a thought that makes my head spin. And I tried to return, I did. The-the portals are only aligned in rare occurrences.”

“If I ask you what it was like… will you tell me?”

She looked at him to find him watching her. She’d never seen his eyes lit up in curiosity before and honestly, how could she refuse him now… not when the only thing that had held her back before had been her fear that he wouldn’t believe her.

“It was beautiful and insane. Magic and creatures of which we only imagined… the people… the languages. It was incredibly dangerous and if not for-“ She paused, her excitement in telling her Pop about this wonderland that was a part of them in a distant way, dimmed as she struggled with her thoughts of Iorveth. “For the friends I made, I would have died without doubt, or never found my way back.”

“Will you tell me about that day Wendy? How did you get back if the portal was closed?”

She dropped her gaze to the photo still in her hands. It looked as if it were an inventory photo, as if the buyer had it displayed privately, and she wondered how Pop came to have the photo. “I was with my friends, one of which has the ability to make these portals at will. I-I was going to finish something I’d undertaken willingly before she brought me back but- but-“

“But that’s not what happened is it?” He asked gently.

Wendy brushed at the tears on her cheeks. “No. We were attacked by something- something I still can’t explain, and we were losing. I… I… Iorveth shouted for Ciri to ge-get me out of there. At the time I had no idea what he intended. But she did. He flung me through the portal and I’ve no idea if he’s alive. If either of them are.”

“Do you think she would come to you with this ability of hers? This Ciri?”

“I doubt it… her ability is coveted by powerful people and she has been through a lot because of it… the extent of which I can only guess at, for I didn’t know her long. Besides if she lives… she has more important things to do.”

“Would you go if she did?”
Wendy summoned a wobbly smile to turn on him and held the picture back over to him. “Of course not Pop. This is where I belong… with you and our lovely ladies. In fact, I was just considering going into town sometime in the week to look for a job.”

“Wendy you haven’t been to town since you arrived… are you okay with such a big step so soon?”

With a strength she didn’t truly feel she gave him a confident nod. “Of course.” Her go to response to anything she wasn’t truly feeling it seemed.

“Wendy… it’s okay to want to go back. I know you never really connected with a life here.”

Her smile trembled before she found the strength to continue on. “I could never leave you again Pop. I will always have my memories.”

He sighed slowly as he reached out a finger to trace along her thin scar. “And this?”

“Scars are all the rage there. Ciri had one like this-“ Wendy drew a finger in a long curve below her eye. “And Geralt- he had them all over his face but not like Iorveth. His scar came from a mangled eye down his cheek and ending at his lip… wore a funny little hat in place of an eye patch. I called it patch hat.” She smiled sadly at the memory… she knew she might be revealing too much about… things, but it kept her from having to explain just exactly how she came about the scar.

“And were one of these scarred friends… Vaeri’s brother?”

She’d never had such a long conversation with Pop, and even with all that had brought them to this conversation, his never ending questions were a surprise. But she would answer them for as long as he asked. “No, that was Avallac’h. Like Iorveth he is an elf.”

That revelation had Pop blinking in stunned silence while he mulled the information over. “Elf? Like a Santa kind of elf?”

For the first time in month’s Wendy laughed.

“Almost Pop. Think Lord of the Rings type of elf. Tall, beautiful, but yes with the pointed ears.”

“And our ancestor… was one of these elves?”

“She was. Avallac’h said they were here to establish a slave trade on humans and because of Earth’s lack of magic, they abandoned it. But Vaeri had fallen in love and stayed behind.” Wendy frowned at the subtle similarities between them. But where Vaeri had chosen love over her family, Wendy was choosing family over love.

“Did you?”

Wendy blinked back to awareness at his question and frowned at him. “Did I what?”

“Fall in love.”

“I did.” She answered immediately in a soft voice. “With many people and many places…”

“This Iorveth though was different.”

Her shoulders sagged and leaned back against the swing with a sigh. “What gave it away?”

“Wendy, I have seen you in pain, in your eyes and in your voice. You have it when you speak of this place of magic, and you have it when you speak of your friends. But when you speak of him?
There was little she could do but nod in acceptance and understanding… it was different to her.

“He saved me, and I even saved him. He wasn’t a kind or gentle person… life is very hard there but earn his trust and there wasn’t anything he wouldn’t do. He was going to lead his people to freedom… Pop, do you mind if we stop for now? I- I’m sure you have more questions and I thought I’d be able to answer them but this… this is getting too much for me.” Wendy said, feeling weak and exhausted. She missed Iorveth and all she wanted now was to learn to dream again so that she could see him, to say aloud the words she never gotten out while she was there.

“Sure Wendy, you go rest… when you wake, I’ll tell you something that you would find even more unbelievable than your journey to another world.” Pop said with a small smile and a pat on her knee.

His words gave her pause, as well as the smile but she pushed her glasses up her nose and made her way back into the house to collapse on her bed, her gaze eventually falling on the door to her closet. A whole life was hidden in there, a life she was beginning to feel the pull to return to. Stubbornly she turned her head away.

“I'll walk.” Iorveth bit out as he watched the leshen burn, its deer skull blackening as the tree like body turned to ash. All around them lay the bodies of slaughtered wolves and even a few crows that had managed to find themselves before the swing of a blade.

“Don’t be stubborn Fox, you’re wounded, severely at that.” Ciri said from his side, her hand holding a scrap of cloth to the bleeding wound on her arm. “I can have us back to Avallac’h within the snap of a finger… if you don’t I’ll just bring Avallac’h here, he’ll use a fancy knock out spell that he used on me once when I was being stubborn, and that will be that… though I doubt he will catch you.” When he still did not acquiesce, she sighed. “We have to go… she’s gone-“

“Fine. Open another of your portals.” He didn’t want to speak of her… what he wanted was to rip the world apart, to kill the leshen again, with his bare hands that time… but Ciri was right. They had to go. Both of them were wounded and they had work to do.

He glared at the portal magic she’d summoned, hatred simmering in his blood. So much so that the pain in his shoulder from where a ragged root had shot through it during his attempt to keep the monster distracted while Ciri prepared an incinerating bomb, felt like nothing. He’d been caught in the blast, his armor caught most of it and the initial assessment of his body before reality caught up to him told him that he had a few minor burns to his face, but like the shoulder, he no longer felt them.

“Zireael are you alright?” Avallac’h’s worried voice welcomed them the moment they stepped through but Iorveth didn’t stay to listen. He had no wish to hear the words spoken out loud, for they were already shouting through his mind.

She was gone.

He methodically began to remove his armor, tuning out the retelling and instead living in the memory… the sickening dread in his chest when he came upon Ciri fighting off waves of wolves while the leshen crushed the life from Aevon… the brief flashes he had of her in the remaining moments.

She hadn’t wanted to go.
He’d seen it in her eyes, had wanted to struggle against him… she would have rather stayed and died in that moment. But he couldn’t allow that and had sent her through.

“Iorveth.” Ciri said from behind him. “Drink this… it will help.”

Iorveth held out a hand for the drink, not caring what it was and tossed it back. A stiff whisky. It didn’t help.

She was still gone, battered, broken, and betrayed.

He lashed out, sweeping up a small table from next the fireplace, the assorted contents resting on top crashing to the floor as he swung it against the wall. He was only mildly satisfied with the pain in his shoulder and the sight of the wood splintering on the stone.

It was the only time he would allow himself the moment to grieve, to acknowledge the pain of loosing Aevon. It had been an inevitability… but they both thought they’d had more time.

Drawing in deep breaths he turned to meet first Ciri and then Avallac’h’s gazes, both were saddened for their own individual reasons. “Let’s get this over with… I’m going to Kaer Trolde tonight. This business with Nilfgaard needs to end and I’m done waiting.” He didn’t bother to try and keep the cold rage out of his voice. For too long he’d wasted his time… If he labeled Aevon a distraction, it became less complicated and easier to push thoughts of her aside.

She was gone, and Iorveth had developed a nasty habit of taking the uncomplicated way.
The sound of a truck door slamming shut woke Wendy from her restless sleep, causing her to groan and flail out an arm for her glasses- an older pair that would have made her cringe slightly at their design, but she was mostly just relieved to still have her backup pair. Slowly she came into awareness of herself and the late hour of the morning, sighing in frustration at her dreamless night. For days she’d been desperate for them to leave her… Wendy enjoyed obsessing over history and romance. Not dreams that left her terrified and twisted up inside.

And yet here she was, obsessing still. Longing just for a moment to walk among memories, to hear his voice and see the life they could have had. A moment would not have been enough however. She recognized that raw ache in her chest as she lay there staring at the wall of her room. She would happily fall into those moments and never leave… that is where he was alive and had been happy.

But Pop needed her to be here, in the present with him. He’d been through so much. More than any decent person should ever go through, experiencing loss after loss.

Slowly Wendy turned her head and gazed around her room, left perfectly as it had been when she’d left for Germany. Even now, months after her return, she hadn’t hardly touched anything. There had been dust and cobwebs which Pop had immediately swept away as she slept.

Ultimately her eyes fell on her closet door where within lay all the evidence of her travels. Journals and items she hadn’t touched since hiding them away out of fear of losing control… but she was coming to realize that maybe they could help. A poor replacement for the real thing or even the perfect land of the dream world… but they were accessible.

Before she could talk herself out of it, she slipped from her bed, opened the door and dropped to her knees, accepting the jarring pain that only lasted a moment. Her worn and battered backpack lay just as it had since the last she’d seen it, her sabre, still covered in dried wolf’s blood lay on top. Her once beautiful dress and cloak lay in a crumpled heap still torn and stained.

Ignoring the tremble in her hand, she reached for her sabre and laid it across her lap, recalling the memories of learning to wield it, first by Iohn and his kind encouragement. Then by Iorveth and his ruthless drills, watching her every movement before correcting her mistakes, every bit the commander despite their relationship. Unwittingly she remembered the lives taken, whether with her aid or by her final blow and finally had to set it aside, this time pulling the backpack toward her.

Slowly she pulled out item after item and gently set them aside. Her map of the northern countries, her gear and crumpled clothing. What was left of her dried food and toiletries. The small stack of books she’d acquired as well as the journals once intended to document her exploration of the cave but instead captured her time in another world.

Within one of them was the rose Iorveth had searched Novigrad’s brothels far and wide for, bringing a teary smile to her face as she recalled the moment he’d picked it up from the floor. Slowly she opened each journal, tracing a finger over some of the sketches and whimpering at the painful twist in her chest. It wasn’t helping, looking at all these images she’d sketched in her rudimentary art skill.
There were details missing like the pattern of lines in the feather on patch hat, and no matter how hard she’d tried, she never caught the intelligent and calculating gleam in Iorveth’s eye. The evidence of a hard man was there of course, seen in the tightness around his lips.

Wendy turned to the page which held her attempt at catching his smile… she’d failed miserably. It wasn’t difficult to realize that it was an unnatural expression for him, much unlike herself who could easily smile, so when it came to her trying to draw the lines… it wasn’t the same. His true smile was heart stopping and made her feel as if she were catching a rare glimpse at some mythical creature.

A knock on her door pulled her attention away abruptly and send her hands flying to her cheeks in attempt to clean away the tears she hadn’t even realized were falling.

“Wendy?” Came Pop’s voice through the door.

Quickly she set the journals from her lap and went to open her bedroom door. “Hi Pop.” She said quietly once she was looking up at him.

“Breakfast. I went and got us some donuts.” He was studying her with thinly veiled concern, prompting her to summon a wide smile.

“Alright. You can tell me about this shockingly unbelievable thing you have to tell me of.”

He nodded and left her to pull on a fluffy robe with matching slippers before joining him at the dining table. After she sat and picked out a chocolate covered donut he stood and began to pour them cups of coffee, making more racket than was typical of her ever steady Pop. The glass of the coffee pot rattled against the ceramic coffee cups and the metal spoon was jarring as he stirred in creamer for hers.

“Pop… are you alright?” Wendy asked hesitantly after finishing her bite.

With his back to her he settled his hands flat on the counter on either side of the cups and hunched his shoulders with a deep sigh.

“I’ll be alright Wendy girl. I thought I knew how to bring up this talk, but I’m realizing that it’s pretty damn hard. Must be how you feel whenever I ask you to talk to me about what you went through.”

Wendy’s lips lifted into a small smile. “You can start by giving me my coffee and just go with the beginning. That’s usually an alright place to start.”

Pop dropped his iron gray head in a nod before scooping up the cups and setting them both on the table, finally taking his seat once more. After a few sips in which he avoided her gaze he finally looked at her.

“I wasn’t always a small-town shepherd. I mean, yes this place was passed down to me from my parents and this is the life I grew up in… but there was a time when I was out seeing the world Wendy.”

Wendy’s eyes widened, and she tilted her head slightly. “Is this how you met Snope?”

Much like another man she loved with rare smiles, Pop managed one for her as well, his eyes shining with bemusement. “Yea it is. We met in Mexico City, on our way to see what could be discovered in South America. We’d get lost and have to rely on our wits and the kindness of strangers more than is recommended, but it was the adventure of a lifetime.”

“You’re right. That is definitely more unbelievable than me tripping into another world. I would love
to hear more about yours and Snope’s adventures through South America but… why did you stop?”

Pop dropped his blue eyes, so much like her own, down to his coffee cup. “You know how it is. Return home to recoup some finances, meet a pretty girl, suddenly settling down to the family business becomes damn good looking. Especially when a little one comes along the way.” He met her gaze again. “Your momma was just as adventurous but never made it out of town. And then you showed up with that same drive, a need to see the world. I was pretty proud to see you inherited my passion.”

Wendy swallowed against the tightness in her throat. “It must have been difficult to see me loose that part of myself. You saw that part of you in me and then I locked it away. No wonder you wanted me to go with your old friend.”

His smile was wide and genuine. “I hopped you’d find it again, never woulda imagined you’d go so far above and beyond though.”

She answered her smile with one of her own. “When I go all out, I go as far as humanly possible. Who knew that meant discovering interconnected worlds.” They fell into silence, their smiles lingering while they finished a few donuts and refilled their cups. For the first time since her arrival back, the silence didn’t feel heavy and full of pain. She could almost think this is what it would have been like if her parents were still alive and she’d just stopped by to share some breakfast with Pop.

But it wasn’t going to last, she knew. She still had a life to try and figure out. A society to assimilate back into and a future to plan out methodically. A family of her own was immediately off the table. She couldn’t have a family while loving the one she could have had in another life, it wasn’t fair to them, so she wouldn’t even try.

Deciding that any more thoughts of a future could wait, there were baby goats to feed and play with after all. “Thank you for telling me all this Pop. Tonight, you can tell me about getting lost, because that seems to be another thing I inherited from you.” She said with a teasing smile before turning to head to her room to change.

“Wendy… wait.” Pop said in a rushed voice that had her immediately turning to look at him in concern. “I- I want you to go back.”

Wendy stared at him a moment before huffing a laugh and shaking her head. “Go back?” If it were anyone else she would have accused them of joking, but as it was Pop, she knew differently, but that question was the only one her brain could form in that moment.

“Yea. You go back and live a life of adventure.” He shoved a hand through his hair and dropped back into a dining chair.

“Pop, I’m not leaving you.” Wendy said before taking a deep breath as she sought for strength for her next words. “Honestly, I don’t know if there’s even anything left there for me.”

“I want to go with you.” He said quietly as if she hadn’t spoken at all, dragging his gaze to hers. Stunned, she stumbled back to her own chair and shook her head vigorously. “Absolutely not. No. It’s dangerous there Pop. War is constantly being waged and- monsters are very real.” Her voice was frightened, her blood turned to ice at the thought of Pop being torn apart by griffins or whatever else that land was home to.

“Wendy. There’s nothing left for us here. I’ve felt it for a long time now… and so have you.”

Wendy rubbed her hands over her eyes, giving her a moment to put her mind back in sorts before
straitening her glasses and giving him a wide-eyed stare. “Pop this is where our family is buried. How can you say that there’s nothing left here?”

“They’re gone Wendy girl. Your grandmother always urged me to go out and answer the call to explore but I always kept it locked away out of duty. Your mother did the same thing when she fell in love and had you.” He dropped a hand on the table and shook his head. “I’m not watching you do the same thing. Again. They would want us to follow this need inside us Wendy. This is not our home… you know where our true home is and I’m asking you to take me there.”

Tears began to trace paths down her cheeks as she felt herself being torn in half. The desire to give in, to pack up what they could carry on their backs and leave Earth behind versus her need to keep him and herself safe. She knew he was right… this didn’t feel like home.

But it was safe.

And there was more.

“I don’t think I could go back there Pop only to learn that- that- what if Iorveth and Ciri didn’t survive? Right now, I don’t know for sure, which believe me, is damn difficult to live with. But to learn that they- he died that day? How do I live with that?”

“Oh Wendy, there’s no easy answer for that. I could say you live knowing he loved you enough to sacrifice himself… or not knowing really is worse than knowing. At least then, you could make peace. But Wendy girl… what if he’s alive?”

“I don’t want to do this just to return to possibly have him back or making peace with his fate Pop… this is too big.” She wiped away a tear and leaned forward against the table. “We’re talking about making a life on another planet, one that is incredibly dangerous and yes its beautiful and full of adventure. But we know very little about it and would have few allies.”

“Life is a daring adventure or nothing. Wonderful words by Miss Keller, and very true.” Pop said quietly. “You know the language, you know so much more than you think you do. And it doesn’t have to be right away… we still need to settle our affairs here and… I’d like us to get Vaeri’s circlet and take it back with us.”

Wendy widened her eyes and sat up straight. “The one in the photo? How would we even go about getting it? Do you know who has it?”

“I know where it is. We buy it back with the money we’d get from selling the property.”

Wendy was silent a moment as she did everything she could to tamp back the tendrils of hope caressing her. “Is this real?” She said at last.

“We owe it to ourselves Wendy girl to do everything in our power to be happy. For so long I kept that part of me hidden deep. And then I allowed you to do the same. And then I lost you… for almost five years I was alone. That’s a long time to think and for some reason through a miracle, you returned from this exciting and heartbreaking adventure. And I found myself so full of envy. Call me selfish but I want this not only for you my Wendy girl… but for me too.”

Wendy felt her hesitations crumbling as the desperate light in his eyes urged her to say yes. And really… how could she continue to say no. “We-“ She drew in a deep, steadyng breath. “We better get started. Avallac’h said the alignments are few and far in between but if I remember he said the next time for that portal was weeks away where as here it must have been years…” She thought back to the date, the anniversary of when she’d fallen through. “The five-year mark is in three months.”
“Then we have three months.” Pop said with a smile full of excitement and relief… it warmed her icy blood to know she’d brought a spark of life to his eyes.

“I have a way to close the portal… to keep others from accidentally crossing as well. Can you imagine the chaos our modern technology and weapons could wreak on them? But that means this is going to be permanent Pop. I need you to know that. Even if Ciri somehow survived, I won’t ask her to use her power to send us back to Earth.”

“I accept that Wendy.”

She met his soft smile with one of her own. “Then how could I say no to a bit of adventure?”

Life quickly became a whirlwind for Wendy and Pop. Each day was spent preparing to make the move of a lifetime. The very next day, everything they owned was put up for sale and the owner of Vaeri’s circlet contacted in regard to a possible price.

As they waited for a reply, Wendy tried to teach Pop a few words of common and elder speech’. She showed him everything of their future home that she’d been holding back for so long… the map, the books, her drawings and journals. She told him of the empires falling and rising, the conflict her friends were in the center of, a conflict she’d felt she needed to help with.

They made plans… the moment they arrived, they would make their way to Novigrad. If anyone could welcome them and break the news of all that had transpired in the time since that terrible day in Skellige, it would be Dandelion. What happened after that, they didn’t know. They agreed to take it one day at a time after that, to go where life took them.

It was a romantic thought; one Wendy had once imagined life would be like. She hadn’t imagined her Pop at her side, but now that she knew they were of the same spirit, she couldn’t imagine not going on this adventure with him. She grew excited at the thought of eventually showing him all the places she loved. Of Adhart, Ryre, and Novigrad and maybe someday Skellige when she’d found the strength to return. Of introducing to those she’d come to care about and then discovering what was there to discover and hopefully survive through the next day.

The return of her dreams did occur to her and she even wondered if chaos would have a similar effect of Pop. It became a priority to get into contact with Avallac’h as not only was he of their blood, but the only one who could help prepare them both for a life surrounded by magic.

So yes, plans were made but everything still hung in the balance. They’d yet to sell the farm and yet to get a price on their heirloom and time was beginning to run out. The sheep were easy enough to sell and any valuables they had were taken for a fair price. Carefully they selected what they would bring with them, including a small album with photos of their family back when they were whole, a book on earth’s wonders for when they would inevitable grow to miss the world they left behind, and their favorite coffee cups.

Several sets of their most medieval looking clothing were packed away though Pop’s still ended up being anything that wasn’t a plaid patterned shirt and black jeans. Wendy repaired her dress and cloak and packed plenty of tights and long button down shirts in which looked rather fashionable with her sword belt to cinch in the waist.

Pop was amazed and impressed with her sabre to which she waved off bashfully, letting him know that she was rudimentary in skill at best, but she had managed. His smile had faded when she’d
finally revealed some of the dangers she’d faced and had held her tightly on the porch swing. He’d whispered that he was proud of her ability to take care of herself, to face such a terrible thing and still be the beautiful and caring person she’d always been as before.

At last, mere weeks out from the day the portals were to align, the pieces began to fall into place for them. An offer was made for the farm, which they knew would happen, they were selling far under market after all but they both felt a huge relief to at last have the funds needed to make this journey.

With what they could carry in their backpacks, they said goodbye to the farm, went to visit the graves of their family to tell them where they were going and to look for them among the stars instead of Earth. Afterward they drove east to where Vaeri’s circlet was kept. All that was left was to acquire the last thing that was linking them to Earth. They never heard a reply from the owner so throwing caution and propriety to the wind, they made their way to a lavish countryside manor outside of Washington.

There was a nervous knot of worry in the pit of Wendy’s stomach as they pulled to a stop outside the elegant manor in their rusty old pick up. She fully expected to have the door slammed in their faces, but she knew this was something they had to do.

“How do you know this is where the circlet is?” She asked Pop as they stepped from the truck and closed their doors.

“When my dad told me about it I had this young foolish vision of going on an adventure and stealing it back. Of course, by the time I grew up, I also grew some sense and instead it would be a much wiser and legal to do this simply by earning the money and just buying it back. Perhaps on my adventures I’d find some artifact worth something and could use that.” He chuckled lightly and shook his head. “Didn’t happen of course but I did get far enough in my research to learn of its location.”

“Do you think they still have it?”

Pop rang the door bell and drew a deep breath. “Guess we’ll see.”

It was only after they drove away hours later, an elegant wooden box seated in the seat between them while they shared wide smiles, that Wendy realized something.

Destiny was at work here, she could feel it. Everything was coming together perfectly, perfect in the way the owner had happened to be home, a home that happened to still keep their heirloom safe. An owner who had been willing to listen to them explain that the circlet had once belonged to their family for generations until times became hard and it had to be sold for survival. And again, had been willing to return it to them for the hefty sum of every cent they had save for the airplane tickets and money for food.

Yes, destiny had wanted Wendy there before, and it wanted her there again.

The next day, a week away from the day she theorized the portal would open, they sold the truck for the price of a kind smile to a stranger who was holding a sign asking for help near the airport then spent the hours before their international plane arrived sleeping at their terminal gate.

It was becoming all to real for Wendy… she was really going to do this impossible thing, dragging her elderly Pop along with her but really… it was him dragging her along. A turn of events she never would have expected. She was terrified and excited, and again it took pure exhaustion, an exhaustion that was common when one spent hours upon hours driving cross country, to finally fall asleep.
She didn’t dream, but she did feel rested when Pop shook her awake with words that their plane had arrived.

An energy vibrated through her as they at last landed in the country in which their ancestors had hailed from. An energy that she could feel coming from Pop as well and whenever she grew hesitant about what they were hours away from doing, she only had to look over at him to see his silent strength and excitement, a glimpse of who he must have been as a young man exploring the world.

Taking a day to rest from their nonstop travels over the past few days they finally left out on the same path Wendy had taken with Snope and his students. Of course, they couldn’t rely on her sense of direction and apparently not his as well, but instead a carefully examined map was put together.

Allowing destiny to guide her, Wendy led Pop to where she’d made that last phone call to him before loosing track of her travel mates. Following an invisible path that felt familiar and beckoning. Chilly rain drizzled around them as they disappeared into the trees.

“Did anyone look for me... out here?” Wendy asked quietly. Wondering why no one found where she’d fallen through.

“We searched the forests for eighteen days.” Pop replied after a moment. “I wanted to keep searching but it was ultimately determined that you’d either ran away, were taken, or killed by a bear.”

Wendy shivered at the thought of those fates. “I’m sorry you had to go through that Pop... that was the main force driving me to return... despite the distractions and my wish to stay a little longer.”

“I was devastated, true. But I’m glad to have you returned, and with you came my old self.” She glanced at him as they stepped over fallen trees. “I can’t thank you enough for that Wendy girl.”

With her heart high in her throat and filled with nervous dread and excitement she summoned a smile for him but did not reply for the sight of a familiar fuzzy red squirrel caught her eye bringing her to an abrupt halt.

“How long do squirrels live for?”

Pop sent her a look and a shrug. “I don’t know... somewhere near ten years in an optimal habitat?”

Wendy sighed with a smile and nodded to the creature watching them from afar. “We go this way.”

Yes... destiny was definitely at work here. Just as before she offered part of a granola bar to the squirrel, Pop watching without question, and then again followed the path weaved before them. The hike to this point had been long and cold, night quickly setting in, but now that they were so close neither wanted to stop. Instead of pausing for much needed rest they followed the squirrel to the small hole Wendy had fallen through a lifetime ago.

She stood aside and watched as Pop pulled out a rope and tied it around a tree, dropping the loose end down the hole. Before climbing down, he stood before her and tucked a loose chunk of hair behind her ear. “We can do this Wendy girl. We’re going to return to where we came from, you’ll find your love is alive, and we’ll spend our days exploring from one end of the universe to the other as we reconnect with our kin.”

Wendy blinked back a sheen of tears and nodded quickly. “Let’s do this.”

The ancient ruin that had once been a fleeting home for Avallac’h and Vaerie looked nearly the same as it had when she’d first stumbled across it. The elvan statue still dominated this first room only for now there was a thick layer of leaves and dirt surrounding it, having fallen through the hole she’d
created years ago.

Pop, with the light of his flashlight stared up at in awe and Wendy waited patiently as their past and future became all the more real for him. Eventually though he looked to her for guidance and carefully she retraced her path through the ruin. As they stepped into the room with the pool, Wendy couldn’t help the breathless gasp that escaped.

There it was… glowing blue and magical. A powerful tug wrapping around her, urged her to take the final steps. Destiny had ensured that they reached this place at this point in time and there could be no hesitation from either of them now.

“This is it Pop… it’s time.”

“It’s beautiful and feels…”

“Magical?”

“Yea…” He said in wonder.

Smiling softly, Wendy removed her glasses and tucked them safely away. They both ensured that everything was strapped down, her sabre included before they shared one last look and took deep breaths. Vaeri’s circlet was tucked safely away in the bottom of Pop’s backpack, locked in a safe case with her holding the key. They had enough food to last them the several days walk to Novigrad and nothing holding them back.

“On the other side is a waterfall so pull yourself out immediately. Then I’ll light the bombs Geralt said would disrupt the magic, sealing the portal.”

Pop nodded, pride shining from his blue eyes turned to magical orbs by the light of the pool.

“Alright… Let’s do this Wendy girl.”

Deep in the night a lone candle burned in a particular room of the Rosemary and Thyme. From the foot of the bed a dog in her last stages of puppyhood lifted her head and began to howl, much to her disgruntled master’s irritation.

Chapter End Notes

AN/ Apologies for another short chapter. I’m so ready to get back to the adventure! Also, in this obviously fiction world of make believe airlines don’t care about swords or dimeritium bombs…. And selling a house can be done in weeks, and people carry around hundreds of thousands of dollars through several states in a back pack…. So obviously I took some liberties and called it destiny!!!!
Torn between fears and hopes, Wendy couldn’t help her content smile as she led Pop down the small path tracing close to the river. It felt… relieving to be back. Despite having never made it to this point in her original journey to the portal, there was a familiarity with her surroundings. The trees, the river… even the clouds seemed to whisper their welcome back to where she’d always belonged.

The colors where bright, the sounds singing through the crisp winter breeze, swirling around her and leaving her breathless. Each step over the past two days, taking her closer and closer to Novigrad. She was excited to be reunited with people she’d thought to never see again, and just as equally terrified of what news they would have for.

Wendy glanced over her shoulder to peek at Pop as he followed a few steps behind her, his hands wrapped around his shoulder straps and his gaze constantly taking in their surroundings. At least she would have him with her no matter what they found. And if it turned out that her worst fears were true… well then she silently made the promise to somehow carry on the dreams of another, seeing them to fruition.

“So far our journey has been quiet. You made it sound as if monsters and bandits were lurking around every tree.” Pop said.

Wendy squinted at the sun lowering slowly through the sky before skimming her gaze along the banks of the river. “It has been pretty quiet… but if I followed the map right, we should be nearing the place where I was last on this path, and just beyond that is the camp where not only were I- lorrve and I jumped by bandits, there were drowners too.” She broke slightly while saying his name, just as she did every time she forced her self to mention him… but he had been central to her experience here before and she couldn’t avoid speaking of him. And truthfully he deserved to have his name spoken despite the heaviness of doing so.

“Drowners… the blue, what did you describe them as again? Zombie lookin things?”

“That’s them. I never had a chance to research more about them as I would have liked but a well shot arrow took care of them last time.”

“Too bad all we have is your fancy sword.”

Wendy rolled her eyes to herself. “Yea, yea well if we come across a bow of some sort, you’re welcome to it. I can barely shoot a crossbow.” She couldn’t say anything around her held the look of one of the old camps but the river was increasingly making her nervous the more they talked about the monsters. Her sword hand slipped from the hold she’d had on her back pack strap and wrapped around the sabre hilt.

“I knew I should have sent you off to that summer camp the next county over. Think I saw a flyer once sayin they had archery classes.”

Wendy huffed a laugh with a shake of her head. “You would have had to hog tie me, toss me in the bed of the pick up, and left me lyin in the dirt in order to get me there.”
“Yea well… in the end I couldn’t stand to be parted from you. Not so soon after losin your mom and dad.” His voice was quiet and sad, but it was also filled with relief, a feeling she knew all too well as she realized he was openly talking about her parents.

“I had dreams of you and them… while I was here. Lucid dreaming I guess you could call it but Avallac’h said it’s much more than that. You were always singing your favorite song and Mom was getting onto you for singing something so sad.”

“Sounds like her.”

Encouraged, Wendy slowed down until he was up at her side and she could look up at him with a small smile. “Do you remember the time Dad kicked Mom out for eating his leftover enchiladas he’d been thinking about all day?”

“I do.” Pop dropped a smile down at her. “She of course repaid the favor when she spilled coffee on that signed first edition of that fancy city author of his.”

“You mean his copy of The Raven? Pop, Dad liked to claim it was a signed first edition but we all know it wasn’t. He found it at a yard sale, saw what he wanted to see and paid twenty bucks for it. Mom was doing us all a favor.”

“Maybe so, but I still aint never heard a being scream like that since.”

Wendy’s answering laughter as swept away by the winter breeze.

By the time the sun sank to a thin golden line between the horizon and the stars, Wendy and Pop at last reached their destination for the night. Wendy took a cautious peek through the trees to the clearing to see the gruesome sight of the bodies left behind after the attack of the bandits. Though months had passed and all manner of beasts took what they wanted of the corpses, there were still remains out in the open, sending a wave of revulsion through her stomach.

“Let’s backtrack some and make camp.” She whispered, refusing to meet Pop’s gaze. To her relief, he didn’t push for an explanation on her sudden change in plan nor the sickly tinge to her expression that she had no control over.

Pop made the campfire while Wendy stood nervously watching the trees, her hand still at her sabre hilt. Since their arrival, she’d taken first watch, not at all confident in her ability to protect them but she was damn well going to try. Always, she was nervous when it came time to rest for the evening but tonight felt different. She felt eyes watching them from every direction, heard the sounds of swords being drawn and the creak of bow strings, and no amount of holding her breath and listening could make her believe that it was just the wind in the trees.

“You alright Wendy girl?” Pop asked quietly coming to stand beside her.

“I don’t like this particular area.” She said just as quietly. “Go ahead and eat something and get some rest. I think we should make it as early of a morning as we can.”

“You’re the leader of this expedition-“ He paused to set a hand on her shoulder, drawing her to finally meet his gaze. “But I’m here if you need me.”

With her free hand she gave his a quick squeeze paired with a fleeting smile. “Course Pop.” It was odd to be in her current role… the most knowledgeable and most equipped for the duty of protector.
She couldn’t say she was enjoying the constant worry and longed for the days when she pestered Iorveth for information on every new plant, animal, and landmark they came across, completely at ease. Thankfully Pop wasn’t quite as verbal with his curiosity as she was, picking up on her constant unease, and offering his comforting silence instead.

Later while he slept, Wendy wondered if he’d soon show signs of inheriting anything special from their ancestors. Her dreams had yet to return to her, but then again she hadn’t had her first one until weeks after her arrival.

She hopped he didn’t… the dreams themselves were fine but the premonitions were unpleasant. Of course she’d welcome them back with open arms if it meant she got to see, hear, and touch Iorveth again. Even if he were just the form of her consciousness.

Wendy sighed and turned her gaze to the stars peeking through the winter bared trees, familiar if only in the fact that they were still so new to her… that is until she found the ones she and Iorveth named. A bitter smile crossed her face as she thought about all the stars she would travel to if it meant she could have him back…

So far only one, but if Avallac’h or her dreams told her that she could travel portal by portal, star by star, to find a universe in which he still lived, she would.

After huddling by the small fire in her light weight jacket into the early morning hours, Wendy at last woke Pop to take her place but only after he agreed to wake her as soon as the sun began to rise. He hadn’t looked pleased at the thought of her getting so little rest, but she swore she would be fine. She was lying of course, she would be miserable and he knew it, but neither were up to arguing and they let the situation be.

There would be time to catch up on sleep once they were safe within the noisy walls of the Rosemary and Thyme.

After several hours of just grazing the edges of sleep, Pop said her name quietly, bringing her into full alertness immediately with her swinging her gaze around wildly. She couldn’t shake the feel that danger lurked just out of her sight and without word, they made their departure within moments, Wendy leading them in a quick detour around the rotting bandits. After a good start to the day they paused to see to their needs, allowing their backs and feet to recover for a moment before continuing.

They were close… perhaps a day more than they would have been if they’d had horses, but she could practically see Novigrad in the distance. Which was all in her head of course, but it did light a fire within her to keep up the rigorous pace. Luckily Pop had been active his entire life and was in terrific shape, much better than herself at that- easily keeping pace and without question.

However her pace slowed to a cautious walk as in the short distance a small group of men lingered around a tree shadowing the dirt road. Equipped in shiny black armor with horses equipped for war, Wendy briefly considered attempting to avoid them. All choice was taken from her as every black winged helmet of the small force turned in their direction… any attempt to avoid them would make them persons of interest, and by the look of them, they looked bored.

“Pop, stay quiet.” She said without looking at him.

Swallowing down her fear and forcing a pleasant expression onto her face she continued to follow the road same as before. A moment later she pried her hand from around her sabre hilt, hoping to seem friendly and unassuming. Pop stepped up beside her when the soldiers formed a line meant to blockade them. Her throat constricted as she studied the colors of the soldiers, with the gold sun displayed proudly over the chest. From what little she knew… these were Nilfguardians. Black
As Wendy and Pop came to stand before them, she caught a few quiet words in a language that sounded similar to Elder, but just different enough that she could be certain. Choosing her words carefully, she spoke in Common.

“Hello… may we pass?” She tried to meet the eyes of the closest soldier through the opening of his helmet.

“Certainly… but you both look weary. Why not keep us company for the mid-day meal?” The soldier waved toward a small basket resting near his feet with various items of food scattered inside. His voice was heavily accented, confirming ever more their nationality.

“You are kind, but we’ve a long journey still, and should be on our way to keep making ideal time.” Wendy attempted to deny him politely, and for a moment it looked as if he would accept her reasoning. However he was paused before he could say anything by another soldier stepping up to his side and leaning close to speak.

Whatever was said by the second, the first soldier never released her from his gaze. “One moment.” He said and finally released her from his scrutinizing, dropping his gaze to a piece of paper being held by the second.

From her angle she couldn’t make out what was on it, but it nonetheless made her hand itch to wrap around her sabre hilt.

“I must ask, as it is my duty to keep these roads safe, where is your destination?” He said, once again trapping her in a stare she couldn’t read.

“As I am a woman traveling with an elderly man, for my own protection, I would ask who you are.”

“Ah, I have failed in my manners… my mother would be horrified. I am Captain Elias of Nilfgaard.” He followed his introduction with a snappy salute then leveled an expectant look at her.

“Pleasure. My name is Wendy, this is Richard… he’s from somewhere north of the Blue’s. I came across him a few days ago and from what I’ve been able to piece together, traveling to Novigrad. As I am going there as well, we decided to become traveling companions.” She felt her heart beating erratically as she rattled out half-truths with more information than she was comfortable releasing.

“And the reasoning for these long travels you have both undertaken?”

“I can only guess at Richard’s, but as for myself, I hope to find gainful employment.”

Captain Elias cast a long glance over Pop before nodding. “He may continue forward. As for yourself, you are being placed under arrest to be delivered to the emperor himself.”

The breath was sucked from Wendy’s lungs as shock slammed through her. “What?” She whispered, her eyes painfully wide as she searched for some sign that the soldier was joking.

Smoothly Elias plucked the paper from his comrade and held it up for her to see and a new wave of shock rushed through her. A drawing of her, with the glasses there was no doubt that it was her, with the words that could only mean she was wanted. The Nilfgaardian’s sun marked it as their wanted poster, not Aedirn or Kaedwen… She was wanted by Nilfgaard, and it wasn’t difficult to put together why.

It was a brief flash through her mind that she could tell them the one they truly feared was already
dead so there was little they could gain from having her as a prisoner, but then it occurred to her that they might not even know yet. She couldn’t be certain on how much time had passed, and if they didn’t know a threat had been eliminated… then what was to keep them from just outright killing her and Pop in order to tie up loose ends?

If Iorveth was already dead, then there was no one they could use her to control.

Wendy was faced with several options in the seconds following him revealing her face drawn on the paper, one of possibly hundreds in circulation. She could draw her sword, putting Pop in danger as well as herself. She could signal for Pop to run for the forest, taking their chance in outrunning trained soldiers and their horses.

Or she could face this for what it was. This wasn’t an accident, this running into the Black Ones just a day or so away from Novigrad. She refused to give this credit to Destiny… Chaos wanted her in Vizima. That was where the chokehold on Temeria and its people were. Where Iorveth had hoped to build a safe place for his people.

Wendy slowly turned to look at Pop, torn by being unable to tell him what was happening, not without putting him in danger. She tried to send him a brave smile as she slipped off her pack… she had a feeling that she wouldn’t need anything in there and Pop would need her possessions to convince Dandelion and the others of his identity. He had been able to pick up a few words by the time they made their travels but for the most part there had been very little time in which to teach him enough to get by. She didn’t know how far Vizima was but her current clothing would have to do she decided. Silently he accepted her bag, his gaze carefully blank, reminding her that her Pop was intelligent and was reading the situation easily.

Next, she unbuckled the sword belt and passed that over to him as well, it wouldn’t fit him but at least he had something to flash around should he come under attack. She felt sick to her stomach, the thought of leaving him again twisting through her insides without control… but now that he had her possessions, he had the map. Knew the big red circle around the city was their destination and that they were going to a tavern near the city gate.

Dandelion and Zoltan would know what to do once they put the pieces together.

Summoning up a smile meant to show kind farewell to a stranger she nodded him along. Pop hesitated a moment, his gaze searching hers a moment longer before returning the nod and weaving through the soldiers. Wendy swallowed her sigh of relief as they allowed him to depart peacefully, turning all their attention fully on herself instead.

Chaos wanted her with Emyr, well then, she would go peacefully. Properly terrified and wondering if she’d made a mistake- if coming back had been a mistake, if not fighting to stay free, had been a mistake… As Elias eyed her, no doubt suspicious of her easy surrender into their custody.

All she could hope from this point is that they held off on that famous Nilfgaard brutality, so long as she gave them no reason to doubt her willingness. She didn’t trust them, not a bit. And they didn’t trust her either and knowing why gave her an idea.

Clawing together some strength, she firmed her shoulders and stared at Elias dead in the eye through the narrow gap of his winged helmet. “You know who I am, you know why I’m wanted?” At his curious nod she took a step toward him before continuing. “Then you know who I learned everything I know from. If anyone crosses a boundary, and I arrive to your emperor in any other way other than how I am as I stand before you in this moment, you can count on me putting every skill he taught me to make those guilty pay for it.”
She expected him to call her on her bluff, but instead he just looked offended. “We have orders to deliver you to Vizima should you be found. So long as there is not reason to restrain you, you will not be so. Flee, proper measurements will be taken. Obey, your limited freedoms will continue.” He gestured to the basket of food. “Understood?”

Wendy leaned down to pick up an apple and took a bite, lightly disgusted at her choice but it was that or bruised peaches and rough looking bread. “What happens now?” She asked, evading agreement.

“No, we take you to command where you will be given a mount and escorted to Vizima. The journey will no doubt be rigorous as Emperor Emyr has been awaiting you for a while now.” Elias said and gestured for her to begin walking back from the direction she and Pop had come from.

Fighting back an overwhelming weight of fear and panic, Wendy took one last glance down the road to Pop’s slowly retreating form. It pained her to be separating from him… they were never meant to be parted ever again if she could have had her way. But chaos - she despised thinking of it as some all-powerful deity, never having been someone of faith anyways, but honestly her unimaginative mind could not come up with another explanation - seemed to be control of her fate at the moment.

She didn’t have an option of coming out of this alive without taking note of the signs and allowing control to slip away from her.

As much as she hated not having control over her life, whether as Nilfgaard’s prisoner, or a pawn of chaos, she would tread the next challenge with utmost care.

Snarls alerted Iorveth to a presence hiding nearby, and he dropped a quick glance to Azlin and followed her gaze to a bookcase. Quietly he stooped to give the quickly growing dog a rub behind her ears, signaling that he was pleased with her aid. Since Skellige, he’d intensified her training, knowing that with the path he was taking her down, she would need it to survive… and she was proving to be more than useful, current situation as a prime example.

Taking precise steps, Iorveth approached the book case, stepping over a slain witch hunter and examining the bookcase. He paid no mind to the titles themselves, and instead focused on the decorative statue placed in the center of the shelves. Stone painted in gold, a bowl of flames, held aloft on a pedestal. He rolled his eye and sheathed one of his swords.

Almost as if it were a waste of his time to have to do something so pathetic, Iorveth used the statue as its purpose intended and opened the hidden safe room to reveal the stoic old man seated inside.

“Excellency.” Iorveth said, his voice sarcastic while lifting the blade of the sword he’d kept in hand up to the man hastily wrapped in a rich dressing robe, the point just a breath from his throat. “Do this lowly elf the honor of joining me, your flock is waiting for your holy presence.”

Cyrus Hemmelfart, Hierarch of the Eternal Fire kept his expression impassive as he slowly stood from the velvet and gilded chair he’d been occupying, the blade moving along with him. A lone bead of sweat slid from the man’s bald temple, the only evidence of his fear. A predatory grin slipped over Iorveth’s slips at the sight.

“I will not negotiate with a diseased rat.” Cyrus said between bared teeth, eyes dark with hatred.

Iorveth guided Cyrus from the Hierarch’s personal chambers, curling his lip at the shackles and chains hanging from the bedpost, blood pooled on the floor. The young woman, half Aen Seidhe
and human from the look of her, they had been unable to save, but Daine had already picked the shackles from around her limp wrists and already removed her. Unfortunately, she was not the only such victim they— the Scoia’tael— had come across since invading the Grand Picket, but she was the only one to not survive the ordeal.

“How fortunate it is that I am not here to negotiate. I suggest silence before I remove your tongue, we have a long way down.” Iorveth said coldly, nodding for a few of his warriors to lead the way down, moving to stand behind Cyrus and pressing the point of his blade between the man’s shoulder blades with enough pressure to get him to stumble forward. Cyrus slipped in the blood drenching the floor and would have fell if not for Iorveth catching him by the robe and keeping him steady.

Iorveth whistled for Azlin to follow, leaving the remaining Scoia’tael to set about dousing the room with kerosene, poised ready to set it alight as he hauled the Hierarch down the stairs of the tower. All through the journey down to the bottom floor and out into the dark, more of the Fire’s enforcers were dragged into the stairs and led along with Iorveth and Cyrus.

“Was it necessary to burn it?” Dijkstra asked with an annoyed glare as the ever-growing flames began to engulf the center piece of the cult’s power. The light cast dancing shadows over the faces of the captives and those drawn near by the commotion.

Iorveth kicked the back of Cyrus’s knee, sending the man sprawling down to the stone before turning to look up at his work. “You want to send a message to his followers, this is how you do it.” He said, sheathing his second sword and crossing his arms. “You lay out his sins, you take away their power, and you make them afraid.”

He felt Dijkstra study him, his curiosity apparent. “Rule through fear? Is that your philosophy?”

“Humans are ruled by fear. Be it fear of magic, elves, or death. Take the fire they look to with such reverence and use it to destroy their faith, to show that it is no shining beacon of hope, but chaotic and consuming. None of them are safe in this life, least of all monsters such as their Hierarch.” Iorveth said in a cold voice, his gaze dropping to the still kneeling Cyrus. “Break him before his sheep, then give them a new ‘beacon of hope’ and they will fall to their knees in their desperation to be led anew. It is the way of dh’oine after all.”

“Is this what you plan for Emyr? Where is that filly of yours? Without her, the humans will not accept you no matter how desperate for safety you make them.”

Iorveth swept his gaze over the small crowd of debauched priests, witch hunters, and temple guards, each with a blade to their throat just as he ordered. Their eyes glittering with fear and firelight, some pleading for their lives, some smelling of piss and blood. Silently Iorveth lifted a hand, and knowing he had the attention of every man, woman, and child in the crowd that had gathered, as well as his soldiers and their prisoners, he lowered his hand in a slow sweep. Blades immediately drew deep against every throat.

There were horrified screams mingling with dying gasps and bodies slumping to the cobbled stones. Their duty done, his warriors stepped over the dead and dispersed into the darkness, prepared to follow their next orders. Those of the Fire scattered through Novigrad were already being eliminated, and beyond the city were to be slain without quarter.

“Desperation is a powerful noose to have tightening around one’s neck Dijkstra. If I must burn Vizima to incite enough of it, I will.” Iorveth turned from the sight of the dead and the burning tower. “Long may you reign crime boss.”

“I’ve seen the wanted posters. Agents of Nilfgaard have been posting them.” Dijkstra said quietly, an
unusual tinge of respect in his voice that made Iorveth distrust him even more.

“Do as you wish, for their search is fruitless.”

“Are you so certain? I have my own searching.”

Iorveth turned back to glare at the other man, his hand settling on the hilt of one of his swords. “Why?”

Dijkstra ignored the clear threat shining out of Iorveth’s angry gaze. “I know a great many things, primarily that she could be a powerful ally, but as a sign of goodwill.”

“As I said, yours and their search will not come to anything as she is dead. I witnessed it.” It made him sick to his stomach to say the words for even if they were not technically not true, they might as well be. She was lost to him forever.

“Seeing you now… I believe it. I’ll call off the search. In the morning come by and we will discuss the next course of action.”

“In the morning I will be gone. I leave you to build your kingdom and to liberate my own.”

“Iorveth, I’m a man of my word. You upheld you—“

“I will not wait for you to solidify your hold on the North. By the time you have chosen your colors, Nilfgaard will be pulling away from your borders.”

Dijkstra shook his head with a glare full of pity. “Do not let anger and grief blind you, elf.”

“Do not let self-importance blind you dh’oine.” Iorveth sneered. “Everything is already in motion and you would be nothing more than a hinderance. Send a raven when you need my help with Aedirn.” With the final insult given, he moved through the crowd with Azlin at his heel, taking no pleasure in the way the pitiful and crying rushed to part the way for him.

At the tunnel leading from the island, Zoltan joined him, and they mounted their waiting horses.

“Emyr will know about this by morning.” Zoltan said quietly after they reached the mainland, guided by the light of the burning tower.

“And?”

“He will be on guard because of it.”

Iorveth gave a humorless laugh. “He is paranoid and on guard as it is. The fact that I burned an island of cultist will be light reading with his morning fast.”

“He will have questions for Ciri.” Zoltan insisted with a touch of worry in his voice.

“Ciri will have reached the Golden Towers by now.”

A long suffering dwarven sigh broke the following silence that lasted till their destination was in sight. “I don’t like this Iorveth. You’ve always been a bloody bastard, but since—“

“Since nothing Zoltan.” Iorveth said with a clenched jaw. “This has been a long time coming and if Emyr, Dijkstra, or anyone else believes me to be acting recklessly, then that is to my advantage.” He reigned the horse to a stop and swung down, Azlin already waiting at the tavern door. Before stepping through the door, he leveled a hard look at the dwarf. “If you cannot tolerate my methods
tonight Zoltan, then I suggest you remain here because what comes next will not be any more pleasant.”

Zoltan heaved another sigh, his shoulders dropping slightly. “I’m with you Iorveth, have been since Flotsam. That doesn’t mean I can’t mourn the happy lad you were for the one breath you were.”

Deciding not to reply, Iorveth shoved open the door to the still noisy tavern, its occupants drunkenly unaware of the terror holding the north of the city. He was a common enough sight now that no one lifted a brow, but instead a pint was shoved into his hand by a concerned Dandelion.

“ Took you two long enough, I have been pacing behind stage for what feels like hours now.” The bard said quietly before turning to lead them to a table in the far corner where Priscilla waited with an anxious expression. It was thanks to her knowledge of the tower, having undergone her own experience at the hands of the Fire’s priests before being rescued by Geralt.

“It is done?” She whispered as everyone settled into chairs, Azlin settling under Iorveth’s chair after a quick pat on her head.

“Aye. Dijkstra will no doubt make a demonstration out of Cyrus, just as the Fire had been doing to mages, non-humans, and anyone who looks at em wrong, for years now.” Zoltan said then took a long drink of his ale. “Pig’s piss Dandelion, this is the welcome we get after the night we had?” He groused roughly with a frown before taking another drink.

At the dwarf’s reaction Iorveth pushed his tankard away slightly and relaxed down in his chair. He allowed weariness to carry his mind lazily while Zoltan filled in the other two of the events of their mission. He should have moved onto his room for a few hours of rest as he planned to depart in the early morning. Not to mention his swords needed to be seen to though the rest of his belongings were already packed and waiting.

Vizima however was not his immediate destination. First, he had called for a long overdue meeting of the scattered Scoia’tael command. They were to gather in Adhart and discuss the chain of command once Emyr was disposed of and allowing him to disappear from the front of afraid dh’oine minds for a time.

Fighting back the urge to curl his lip in disdain he swept his gaze over then taverns occupants, taking in the loud drunkards and pitiful waste of life. Any one of them would no doubt spit on any Aen Seidhe for no other reason other than they feared no retaliation, assuming his people were broken. He burned to prove them wrong, and soon, once they woke with pounding heads and sick guts, they would hear what his people are truly capable of.

With a sigh, Iorveth let go of the sudden rush of anger and dropped his gaze back to the scared wooden table. It would be a relief to be back with his own. He was growing weary of the constant presence of dh’oine… alleged ally or not. He did not want to think of it… but Zoltan was right about him. Since Skellige, his tolerance had turned lethal. He knew how she would look at him, seeing the path he was taking of outright brutality. But rather than shy away from the guilt, he welcomed it. Strapped it on like armor and relished in the fuel it gave him to continue on. He was close… so close to being done. Afterwards he would allow him to think of her, to grieve the way she would look at him. To hear the words, she would have said in trying to urge him to consider diplomacy. But he could not allow such thoughts. She would hate what he had done this night and he would welcome that hatred.

Azlin nudged her nose against the back of his boot and he closed his eye for a moment. All he had left…
The dog suddenly shot from under his chair and toward the door of the tavern, eliciting a tired sigh from the warrior.

“Looks like your mutt needs to be let out Fox.” Zoltan said with the barest of humor lighting his equally tired expression.

“What are you waiting for Iorveth? Go let her out before she pisses on the floor!” Dandelion cried out when Iorveth didn’t immediately stand.

“It’s not as if your illustrious clientele hasn’t already.” Iorveth muttered but heaved himself up and weaved his way after the dog. The moment he opened the door, Azlin shot out into the dark of the late night- or early morning… he couldn’t say, but he leaned against the outside wall and crossed his arms. Time passed, an inordinate amount of it and he frowned in concern.

He stepped out into the street, looking in the direction he’d last seen the dog and let out a sharp whistle, one meant to convey the command that she had better return, immediately.

But return, she did not.

Muttering a curse, he opened the door and leaned in to locate Zoltan and the others. “Zoltan!” He called out sharply, gaining the dwarves attention over the noisy distance. “The damned dog-“ He was cut off by Azlin running back in the door from between his legs. The relief he felt left him dizzy and he sighed, closing the door behind him. As he dropped back into his chair, ignoring the dog as she danced around him excitedly, he couldn’t believe he’d been about to demand help from his companions just to look for the pain in his arse.

“You needed something Fox?” Dandelion asked with amused eyes.

“I need you to put dog on the menu.” He replied darkly, glaring at Azlin. She ignored his hand signal to calm down, as well as the voice command he followed it with.

“What has her so excited?” Priscilla added.

“I cannot say. I’m retiring however. Zoltan, we leave at first light.” Iorveth leveled a long look at the other man.

“Aye, I’m calling it as well. Dandelion send a report on what Dijkstra does.” Zoltan said and eased himself from his chair.

“Hey! Since when am I under your command?” Dandelion protested with a horrified expression.

Zoltan tugged on his beard and Iorveth turned away but still heard his answer. “Since I promoted you to General of reporting what the fuck Dijkstra does next.”

“That doesn’t sound like a real rank- who is that?”

Iorveth ignored them and continued toward the stairs, only to be given pause by Azlin nipping at his soft leather boots as he reached the first step. “Azlin.” He snapped quietly down at the dog, but she wouldn’t relent.

“Uh Iorveth…”

Beyond tired and pissed off, Iorveth turned on Dandelion with bared teeth and a dangerously flashing green gaze. “Fuck off bard.”
“I plan to, quite blissfully too. But first I think we need to take a healthy interest in the strangely dressed fellow standing in the doorway.”

Sighing in annoyance, Iorveth followed his gaze, just as Azlin released him and ran to the elderly man in question. He narrowed his eye as the man with thick hair the color of iron bent slightly to pat his still excitedly bouncing dog on top of her head.

Indeed, he was dressed strangely but Iorveth was beyond caring and was prepared to dismiss him and Dandelion altogether, that is until he caught sight of a familiar black bag on his back with a familiar sword held in his hand.

Anger and confusion immediately coursed through him and with his knife already in his hand he strode across the tavern.

“Iorveth I think-” Dandelion began but was too late as Iorveth pressed the blade to the man’s throat and met his nervous blue eyes.

“Where did you get that sabre and bag?” He snapped in a dangerous tone.

The stranger swallowed and slowly lifted his hands, one empty, one holding what he knew to be Aevon’s sabre. “Wendy.” He said quietly.

Iorveth tightened his grip on the knife and leaned close. “I know whose it is. What I want to know is how.”

The man no longer looked nervous but seemed frustrated. “Iorveth?”

It was a question that did nothing to lesson his anger.

“Iorveth, let him go, and we will figure this out.” Dandelion said quietly, slowly edging between them and pushing the knife wielding hand back away from the stranger’s neck. Fortunately, occurrences like this were common in the Rosemary and Thyme so none paid them any mind, not that it would have stopped Iorveth regardless.

A bit of distance, allowed some of his anger to finally slip away and he stared into the familiar blue eyes, shock refusing to acknowledge what hope was trying to whisper through him. Aevon’s pack and sabre, Aevon’s eyes, all in the procession of a somewhat oddly dressed man.

Without further word, Iorveth turned toward the stairs. “Bring him.” He said in a voice he couldn’t recognize and took the wooden stairs two at a time, quickly shoving his way into this room. He struggled to calm his panicked breathing and leaned down to brace his hands on the table while all three of his companions filed in after the stranger, Azlin happily leaping onto the bed.

“Empty the bags.”

“You know- I’m not doing this because you told me too, because I’m not your bloody servant, but because I want to know just as much as you do.” Zoltan snapped then nodded toward Dandelion to help him relieve the man of the bags. He let them go without fuzz, his gaze never leaving Iorveth.

“No Zoltan, you do not want to know as much as I… The sabre.” Iorveth directed this last order to the man and held out his hand. He hesitated a brief moment before handing over the weapon with sad reluctance.

Carefully Iorveth laid it down on the table, both hands again braced on the wood as his gaze traced over the achingly familiar weapon. “It’s hers.” He whispered, finally dragging his gaze to the items
being pulled from the bag.

Books, journals, clothing, cups, food, each item causing a stab of pain in his chest. He couldn’t believe it… didn’t want to allow himself to…

Iorveth dropped his head a moment, allowing a moment of weakness before looking back at the stranger. “Where is she?” He asked with a calmness in direct opposite of the chaos he currently felt.

“How about we ask him his name?” Priscilla offered when he was answered with a helpless frustration on the man’s face.

Weary, Iorveth waved a hand for her to continue. It was taking every bit of his strength to keep his emotions in what little control remained within him.

With a calm voice, Priscilla walked to each person and said their name, before holding out a hand toward him, signaling it was his turn.

“Richard.” He said, a bit of confidence straightening his shoulders. He was a tall, lanky man with sun tanned skin and a tired expression. His clothes were travel worn and Iorveth realized he must have walked from- from the portal.

“Richard.” Priscilla smiled kindly, holding her hand out to which he accepted in a short shake.

“Why is he here? He cannot be here-“

“Wendy…” Priscilla held her hands up in an inquisitive gesture. “Where is she?”

Richard sighed and dragged a hand down his face. “Black-“ Was the only word they were able to understand, informing them that Aevon had made some attempt to share the more common language with her grandfather, for that was no doubt who now stood before them.

When everyone save Iorveth tilted their heads at him in confusion he repeated the words but added hand motions to it, holding them up to either side of his head like antlers. A dawning light seem to come over him as he suddenly lurched toward the pile of processions and picked up a pencil and one of Aevon’s journals.

A moment after moving the pencil across paper, he held the journal out to Iorveth who took it slowly. He knew immediately what the symbol meant, and he uttered a curse and dropped the journal on the table by the sabre. His memory flashed back to the first time he saw her face sketched onto a wanted poster.

Because of him she’d returned. Because of him she was hunted.

“Nilfgaard.” He focused on Richard. “Emyr has her.”
AN/ Changed Priscilla’s story slightly to fit along as I saw fit. Thank you for reading!!!
After a night of zero sleep, a night spent for the most part thinking in silence on every possible course of action he should take next, Iorveth finally began to write a change in orders. After the initial revelation of Aevon’s whereabouts, not to mention the shock of her return period, Priscilla had coaxed Richard into eating and laying down to rest. Dandelion and Zoltan made their own departure shortly after with promises to help him get her back.

With a sigh Iorveth dropped the quill and rubbed a hand roughly over his face, his gaze then falling on the sleeping form of Richard, Azlin curled up against his back. Aevon’s grandfather. Here, in a world not his own.

Iorveth shook his head with exhausted frustration. He had countless questions for the man. How could he have allowed her to come back, joining her no less. How did he come to be in Novigrad completely unscathed? Why did Nilfgaard have Aevon, while he walked free? Did he not even attempt to stop them?

The question poked at the anger simmering beneath the surface and he had to remind himself that Richard, just like Aevon when she first arrived, would likely be unable to do anything should they have come against a pack of wolves much less a command of Black Ones.

He felt sick at the thought of her being a prisoner of Nilfgaard. Powerless to stop the shudder through his body as he pictured her face… the brave one she tried to keep in place even as she was twisted up with fear. Powerless to do nothing more than to change orders and ready a horse.

With clenched jaw he finished writing the last of his messages and rolled them up. On his way out of the room he swept up his pack and whistled for Azlin to follow. He ignored the others already seated around a table in the now otherwise empty tavern and strode for the door.

“Iorveth, you need to eat.” Priscilla spoke up gently, in contrast to her rush to cut him off at the door. He glared down at the petite woman, but she refused to be bowed. “You will be useless to her if you weaken yourself in your haste.”

“Aye, Emyr will not harm her.” Zoltan added, drawing Iorveth’s daggerlike glare toward him instead.

“Until he wishes to use her to send a message. How do you think he will do it? A lock of hair? What about a finger or even an ear?”

Dandelion paled a touch but shook his head. “That is assuming that you are the reason he wants her to begin with.”

“Och what do you mean by that Dandelion?” Zoltan asked, pushing a plate of food toward Iorveth as he at last approached the table.
“Look, I’ve been involved in all kinds of intrigue through out my life, comes with the territory of being friends with witches and trouble makers like you two.” Dandelion grinned ruefully a moment before becoming serious once more when Richard appeared on the stairs, both his and Aevon’s packs in hand as well as her sabre. Priscilla waved him over to a chair while Dandelion continued. “What Dijkstra said about searching for her struck me as odd. Why would he care about her? Because he thinks she can keep you in line or somehow the humans will see you as one of them merely because of the love you share?”

Iorveth paused in his chewing as he considered the bards words. “He was aware of her before meeting her…” He sighed and closed his eye. “And while she and Triss were at the bathhouse, just what do you think they were discussing?”

“Your pretty boy charm?” Zoltan said, chuckling at his own worthless joke.

Rolling his eye, Iorveth held a sausage down for Azlin before pushing his half empty plate away. “Upon our return to Novigrad Aevon was distressed and frightened of her changing powers. I could feel the fear and torment within her. If she made any mention of them anywhere near one of Dijkstra- or maybe even Emyr’s spies…”

Zoltan muttered a curse, all humor evaporated as he slammed a clenched fist on the table. “Dreamers are powerful weapons. Even untrained ones such as our lass.”

“Emyr has become paranoid to the point where even those closest to him are executed for whispers of his madness.” Dandelion said quietly. “If he can use Wendy to efficiently root out every conspiracy against him-“

“Nothing changes, regardless of his reasoning for capturing Aevon.” Iorveth bit out and stood. “Whether he wishes to hang more dh’oine, I care not. But he will not do so with her in his power.”

“Then what are our orders oh fearless leader?” Zoltan asked with a sarcastic lift of his brows and crossed his arms over his chest.

“The base beneath Vizima will be informed of my impending arrival and I want eyes on her-“ Iorveth cut his gaze to the silently watching Richard before bending to pull out more paper and this time a graphite stylus. Quickly he drew I diagram of the days cycle and pushed it over to the other man before standing straight once more. “How many days?” He asked despite knowing Richard likely couldn’t understand him.

Richard dropped his gaze to the diagram before meeting his once more with understanding. He lifted two fingers into the air and Iorveth felt his heart sink ever more. There had been some small part of him that had clung to the hope that maybe he’d be able to track her before disappearing into Vizima. “Two days. There is little doubt that they have already reached the palace.” After pacing away a few steps he turned back to look at Zoltan. “Do we know any allies of Dijkstra’s? Who he might have given order to no doubt watch the Nilfgaardians.”

Zoltan shifted nervously but looked him dead in the eye. “Aye. But you’re not going to like it.”

Iorveth instinctively wrapped a hand around one of his sword hilts. Zoltan was right… he didn’t like it and he silently cursed his own recklessness and stupidity.

“Stop it right now Iorveth.” Priscilla scolded. Once she had his attention she continued. “This is not your fault. She made the decision to return, and its likely she made the decision to go with the soldiers willingly- especially if it meant her grandfather could make it to us. The only thing out of your control is the part where you fell in love.” She gave him a sad smile. “There’s no controlling
that and it is not your— nor her fault— that there are people like Dijkstra and Emyr willing to use that against you.”

“Are you suggesting that Dijkstra—” Zoltan before cutting himself off and rolling his eyes. “Of course he would use this opportunity to try and get one up on everyone else in the game. Unless you truly convinced him that she was indeed dead.”

“Unless his spies in the Nilfgaard encampments have already reported Aevon as their prisoner, he is the only one to be uncertain.” Iorveth said quietly. “Zoltan, send these messages and put out scouts for Dijkstra’s man. I need to be in Vizima. Now.” Without waiting for reply nor goodbye, he left the tavern. He walked six steps before picking up the additional sound behind him, and they weren’t the familiar pattern of Azlin.

Biting back a sigh he stopped and turned to find Richard following him, a determined glint in his eye that was painfully familiar. “No.” He said shaking his head.

Richard’s face clouded with restrained anger and frustration. A few of his words Iorveth had heard Aevon say but the more complex were lost on him… their intent however was not. This was a man whose only remaining family was in danger and it was clear that he did not find the idea of being left behind to do nothing at all negotiable. Iorveth had to admit that he felt that frustration himself… there was nothing that was going to keep him from prying Aevon away from Emyr.

He pointed toward the horses tied to the stable, already prepared by Dandelion’s employees for the original planned journey of himself and Zoltan. “Can you ride?”

Intelligent eyes moved between him and the horses before giving him a firm nod. Without speaking further Iorveth turned to tie his bags and bow to the saddle, waiting as Richard did the same to the other horse. A flash of regret spread through him… he was meant to have been reunited with Salvador in Adhart. Instead he was to remain with a random stable horse for a while longer.

But as he and Richard shot through Glory Gate in the early morning light to the angry shouts of the guards, he couldn’t help the breathless excitement taking over him. She was back…

His Aevon was back.

The woman standing before Wendy was beautiful, breathtakingly so, practically to the point of too beautiful if there were such a thing. Yennefer, or Yen as she’d occasionally heard her as being referred to, was standing watch over the maids tasked with bathing her in preparation to meet Emperor Emyr.

Wendy had to admit, a hot bath was more than appreciated but she could have done without the assistance— and the audience. More than once she was given a hard stare until she relinquished her hold over her chest and allowed the maids to do their work.

All while they worked, Yennefer went on about the respect Emyr expected from her despite any possible hostilities between them.

“Why would he expect hostilities from me?” Wendy inquired more out of curiosity than bravery. “What exactly does Emyr know of me?”

Yennefer crossed her arms and nodded a silent command to the maids who in turn urged Wendy to stand, allowing them to dry her thoroughly before wrapping her in a dressing gown. “This way for
your clothing.”

Her question remaining frustratingly yet unsurprisingly unanswered, Wendy followed behind. She felt no need to thank the maids for their handy work, not having wanted them to do the task of scrubbing multiple days of hard cross country travel from her body, but she did manage to give them a tight lipped smile that felt more like a grimace than anything pleasant.

Laid out across a dressing table were under clothes, a richly elaborate tunic and vest in the colors of black and gold paired with black breeches and high heeled boots. Considering the startling similarity to Yennefer’s own clothing, the main difference being the colors and embroidery designs, Wendy suspected she had chosen the outfit herself.

With this in mind, Wendy managed to hold back her quip about how gaudy it seemed. She was in a world where her nearest known ally Pop, was a hard two day ride away. She was terrifyingly- to the point of pain and panic- alone and though she didn’t know much about Yennefer, she was a friend of Geralt at the very least. Yes, best not to offend the closest thing she would find to a friend in Vizima.

“May I know where my own clothing is?” She asked conversationally while she set about dressing.

“I gave orders to have them cleaned and returned in due time. Sit.” Yennefer issued the order with a blank tone once Wendy secured the buckles of the boots to which she sat down gratefully.

As Yennefer pulled a boar hair brush through her damp curls, Wendy covered her deep yawn then rubbed at her tired eyes, vaguely wondering where her glasses were. “How long is this meeting going to take? I’m guessing yawing in his Imperialistic presence is going to be frowned upon.” She watched Yennefer in the gilded framed mirror as the other woman pursed her lips, whether out of humor or distaste, it was difficult to tell.

“Indeed. I know you’ve had a long journey. Emyr is not fond of unnecessarily long meetings, though he will require both our presence for the evening meal before you can retire.”

Yennefer’s striking eyes met Wendy’s in the reflection for a brief moment before Wendy dropped hers to her fingers twisting wrinkles into the bottom of her gold trimmed tunic. “Tell me this at least… Is this about Ciri?”

The brush dragging through her hair paused for a moment before being set aside and nimble fingers began to artfully twist her strawberry gold hair into an elegant knot. “What do you know of Ciri? Have you seen her?” Yennefer asked in a quiet voice.

Wendy was unsure of how much to reveal of her time with the daughter of Emyr, therefore she hesitated.

A hand settled on her shoulder, drawing her gaze back to the one in the mirror. “Ciri is as close to my heart as a daughter Wendy. If Emyr has had word of her since she left to face the White Frost, he has not saw fit to inform me.”

Tears stung Wendy at the vulnerability in the strong woman’s voice, and at the pain of her own ignorance in the fate of Ciri. “I have seen her since her return… but that was a long time now, and when I last saw her… it wasn’t good.”

Yennefer drew in a deep breath of strength and gave her a single nod. “Very well… You are as presentable as can be.”

After several blurry blinks Wendy tilted her head. “Where are my glasses?”
“Such an imperfection would be an offense… you may have them back once you have retired, and anytime you are in his presence afterwards, they are to be removed.” Yennefer said dispassionately. “Or, if you like, I could fix your eyesight to where you would never have need of them again.”

Wendy winced visibly at the thought. She knew her glasses wouldn’t last forever, as for one, eyesight deteriorates over time and would leave her in need of a new prescription. And she’d seen the style of spectacles worn around in this world… but her glasses were… intrinsic to her. “How about I come back to you on that in a few years or if my current pair become broken?”

The smallest of grins curled the corner of Yennefer’s lips. “I understand… though… you do know you have the ability within you to learn how to do so yourself.”

Scrunching up her nose, Wendy tried to hold back a shudder. “I figured as much… but I just want to be able to control my dreams, to not be afraid of them. The rest… equally terrifying and I’ve not had time to really consider if I want to pursue magic.” She shrugged deeply before standing and facing Yennefer. “I suppose it will depend on what exactly Emyr wants with me.”

“Come.” Yennefer said and turned to lead Wendy from the richly furnished washroom.

While Ryre had been lovely and quaint, it was still only a lord’s castle… and nothing compared to the extravagance of Vizima’s royal palace. She hadn’t had a terrific view of the city as she rode in under a setting sun, but she had seen parts of Lake Vizima and an old city that had obviously seen some difficult times. Especially recently if the blackened stone and destroyed homes left to crumble in on themselves were anything to go by.

But there was no evidence of a town torn apart by events she could only guess at, here within these palace walls. Nilfgaard color and banner were splashed about every surface whether outright or in more subtle ways… leaving no room for Temeria’s own history to remain. “History is told by the victors…” Wendy whispered to herself in her own language, earning a look of reproach from Yennefer.

“At all cost, you are not to speak in a language Emyr cannot understand.” Yennefer said with such seriousness that Wendy froze.

For all she’d heard of this invading emperor, she hadn’t really feared him. Appalled and disgusted by the invasion of vulnerable countries and subsequent treatment of those citizens- destabilization he was likely involved in causing- the ruthless use and abandonment of a people he’d claimed to sympathize with- and the abhorrent plan involving Ciri.

And if Yennefer’s warning were anything to judge with- this clearly unstable man’s temper could be offended by glasses and paranoia driven to the brink by an accidental use of one’s native language… reality and fear were well and truly beginning to cloud her mind. It took great effort to steel her spine and follow Yennefer into the grand office in which Emyr sat behind a richly polished desk. She did her best to ignore the dangerously armed guards watching her every move, a reminder to just how helpless she was.

While introductions were being issued, Wendy took in the man’s hard face. Emotionless unless one could count a permanent look of distaste as an emotion. As she studied the hard lines of his face, he did the same to her, giving nothing away of his true thoughts.

A light jab from Yennefer’s elbow to her ribs, reminded Wendy to do her hastily learned bow. It left a bitter taste in her mouth but as the saying went… when in Rome…

“Reports. On your activities since you were first seen in Novigrad.” Emyr said with a gesture toward
a stack of papers in the center of his desk. A surprisingly tall stack at that... and it wasn’t the only one. There was another thick stack and she desperately wished to know just what information was held within the paper and ink.

The ill-advised words of - 'I’m quite honored to have been of such interest’ nearly escaped but she remembered Yennefer’s sharp elbow, the armed guards, and Emyr’s hard expression, and instead swallowed them back. She stayed silent, wondering just how much he knew about her.

“Where is he?” Emyr asked in a dangerous tone, lifting a finger to brace along his jaw in a pose that spoke of a casual air that failed to put her at ease.

The question took her off what little guard she’d scraped together and left her chest aching. She thought she would have been prepared for Emyr’s interrogation into her relationship and she thought she’d have gotten used to the words she knew she’d have to say. But on both accounts, she was not.

Blinking back tears and clutching her hands tightly together at her stomach, she forced herself to hold his gaze. “He is dead. On Skellige.”

He held silent for a moment, calculating the worthiness of her reply before dropping his hand from his chin to tap on his desk. “My daughter said the same.”

Along with Yennefer’s gasp of surprise, Wendy felt a small spark of relief before the absolute crushing reality that her fears were just confirmed of Iorveth’s fate. “Ciri- l-lives. I am happy to hear that.” Wendy said with some difficulty- though she meant the words, they were no less painful, dropping her gaze to his stack of reports on her as soon as the words were out.

“Indeed.” Emyr kept his stare pinned to her until she composed her sinking emotions enough to meet his once more. “You have limited access to the palace grounds with an escort at all times. You will accompany me at the evening meal where we will discuss your... adventure. Once you have adjusted further, I will inform you of your purpose.” His orders given, he waved a hand in dismissal.

Feeling entirely numb to the point she was having difficulty breathing, Wendy followed Yennefer out of the room.

“We have a few moments before the call for dinner. I'll show you a few areas of the palace which might interest you.” Yennefer said quietly with a small hint of compassion in her voice, and Wendy hazily wondered if the other woman even truly knew what happened just then. She hadn’t been privy to information on Ciri, a woman who Yennefer considered a daughter, how could she know anything about an enemy of Nilfgaard?

One thing Wendy knew for certain, she could not talk about her heartache and its cause, not with this seeming ally with compassion in her voice, not with anyone... Wendy felt more alone than ever.

Life in her corner of the palace was... dull for the most part. After Yennefer introduced the palace to Wendy, the library, garden, both of their rooms which were surprisingly close together, and where she could find ready access to a servant to bring her whatever she needed, they were summoned to the dining room.

Emyr demanded the details of her exploits, showing little interest in the world she came from, but instead focusing on her time with Avallac’h. She hadn’t voluntarily revealed her dreams, he had already known and it was after a long moment of staring at her barely touched food that she finally put together where he got that particular report.
She’d had to clench her teeth against her sigh of annoyance at herself and the fact that everyone was a damn spy.

After being dismissed once again, Yennefer parted from her with the advice to become acquainted with the library… apparently there was an entire wall of shelves she would find most interesting if the other woman’s cryptic words had been interpreted correctly.

After the long day, weeks, months that she’d had mixed together with an emptiness she hadn’t been prepared for, Wendy had fallen asleep without disrobing and paying the guard standing inside her room barely a glance.

More than ever however, she was desperate for her dreams. But she was left with another night with nothing but the unknown.

The days were long, quiet, and save for the everlasting presence of her guard who she couldn’t help but wonder when they ever changed shifts, she was left alone. She’d followed Yennefer’s advice and explored the library and it hadn’t been difficult to puzzle together just what Yennefer had wanted her to read. And the knowledge did make her feel a little less alone…

Books upon books about oneiromancy and Wendy had heaved several armfuls of the tomes to a pretty little corner of the garden and delved deep into them. And thus her pattern for the following weeks continued. Waking in the morning and dressing in the warmest clothing she could find, and disappearing into the garden with one arm wrapped around books and the second balancing a plate of food a servant would leave out on the table in her room, left there before she could awaken.

Some days Emyr would call for her to join him for the evening meal with Yennefer there as well—someone who she rarely saw now that she knew her way about the palace. Several times she’d found herself standing before Yennefer’s door, hand lifted to knock… but in the end she always turned away, her eyes grazing past her guard in her haste.

While she’d learned a number of things about her power of dreams, and had even began to experiment with them, her guard- or guards for surely there must be at least two watching her in shifts- remained a mystery. Slight of frame with almost feminine walks, their faces were always hidden by their helms and never spoke. Not that Wendy wished them too… she sometimes whispered conversations to them, replying for them and slowly assuring herself that she was going mad.

Other than the surprising progress with her dreams, the trick it seemed, was in allowing fear and desperation to slip away and instead allowing respect and curiosity to take its place, life was at a standstill. She missed Pop and was worried sick about him. She missed Iorveth and welcomed him into her dreams. Dreams that left her heartsick and broken when she awoke… but the relief that had filled her when she at last regained that particular power… it left her in anticipation of falling asleep once more.

She replayed memories of their short time together, watching as an outside spectator and catching glimpses she’d missed before. Smiling sadly when she watched as her memory revealed stolen glances when no one was watching, or rolled eyes of annoyance and small, hidden smiles. Each filled her with remembered emotions and Wendy could feel herself sinking into contentment… wishing to never wake up.

But always- no matter where at in her memories she watched- she would snap awake, tears soaking her pillow, an aching headache, and a never ending exhaustion. And thus her day would start.

More than once Wendy entertained the idea of escaping, had mapped out her route after standing at
the window in her room for hours. It would be so easy… But then she would remember her ridiculous reason for even succumbing to becoming a glorified prisoner.

Chaos.

Wendy was growing impatient with her purpose to being in Emyr’s grasp… what was her point? All she’d accomplished was to finally control which memories she saw or even a visit to the campfire in the unknown where she would tell her consciousness version of Iorveth all that she’d wished to say to him so long ago now. Often she would even visit with Pop, watching as the two most important people to her interacted.

She’d learned so much more of course, if she wanted to, she could enter other people’s dreams and control them… but she’d yet to experiment with such a terrifying part of her ability. She’d considered the pull to see if she could search out Pop in the world of dreams, but as unguided as she was, she feared harming him…

There were countless warnings against misuse of such power and as fear made her control erratic and unstable, she continued to shy away from the attempts.

Instead she continued to learn and wait. To sit through silent dinners and cry in her sleep.

Until one evening Emyr revealed his plans for her. Use her oneiromancy to divine where the Scoia’tael were hidden within Vizima. He hadn’t named them outright, instead using evasive words such as radical movements that would cost many lives to be forfeit if they continued to roam free of Vizima.

He hadn’t mentioned that it was Nilfgaard forces which would be losing their lives, and he hadn’t mentioned that it was their freedom for hers… but that had been the message hidden within his expertly chosen words.

At a loss as to how she could possibly respond to his demand she instead remained silent with her blurry gaze locked on her plate and gratefully fleeing the moment he dismissed her from the meal, pulling her glasses from the small pocket on the belt she wore and slipped them back on as she went. She’d already known she could never do as he wished, so now, pacing her room and filled with panic, Wendy tried to scrape together a plan. She didn’t get far in her ideas before a scream pierced through the still darkness of a late winter evening. Drawn to her tall window, she couldn’t make out anything from the street below. Not at first at least. With her heart beating wildly, she remained focused on looking for any movement and when the screams came again, she was able to follow the sound to the dark street beyond the stone wall several feet high.

Two soldiers tugged on a chain, pulling a line of shackled people into the dim moonlight. A girl, possibly just entering her teens fell to her knees with a cry, screaming when a third soldier appeared behind her and pulled her up by an armored hand twisting in her hair.

Swallowing against the quick unraveling of her stomach, Wendy pulled the drapes across the window with a snap of fabric, standing with her hands twisted in the folds before finding her voice.

"Please leave so I may dress for bed."

With so long of showing complete obedience to Emyr, he allowed the guards to stand outside her room now, but she only found this out recently when at a particularly low moment full of an aching head and the all-encompassing loneliness, she’d whispered for the guard to leave her. To her surprise, she’d had her first night truly alone since her arrival.

Not wishing to push her luck, she rarely made the request but tonight…. Tonight the chaos called to
her and call her a fool for believing in it or even for wanting to do anything in the first place but she had to answer. To do what she could.

The moment the door closed behind the guard, Wendy quietly opened the drape and pushed the tall window out enough for her to drop down to the stone path below. It was far enough to jar her bones and alter her balance, and vaguely she wondered how she was going to climb back inside, but there was no time to show true concern.

The soldiers and their captives had already disappeared somewhere beyond the wall, urging her to quickly hoist herself over the wall that bordered the palace. It was difficult with her stylish yet slick boots and she could feel the rough stone pulling at the fibers of her clothing but was successful in making it over and running in the direction where the horrific scene had taken place.

A voice whispered in her mind that she could just keep running… the cold winter air drawing her to make her escape into the darkness… but she pushed the whispering away as best she could. She had a purpose here and perhaps… maybe this was it.

The sounds of chains, whimpers, and gruff- heavily accented words alerted her that she’d come upon them, bringing her stooped run to a slow walk, pressing against the stone wall. Her hands trembled out of fear and her gaze swept the street in frantic need of a weapon. The only thing other than a wheelbarrow of hay was a pitchfork and she could pick up the powerful scent of manure. They must have entered the palace stables… and wherever the captives were being taken to, Wendy had a feeling it wasn’t to a nice spa in Vizima.

Swallowing back the lump of fear lodged in her throat she took up the pitchfork and stuck to the shadows. She had to shake her hair from her face as the rough wind pulled the loose strands about her making her wish she’d thought to braid them before going on this suicide mission.

Too late to do anything about it now, she blinked until her sight adjusted to the sudden light of lanterns coming to life within the wooden building, sending her to the shadows just beyond the door, the heavy pitchfork held tightly in her hands.

Holding her breath she peeked through the small opening left by the soldier on guard and could make out the sounds and sights of people in bondage being shoved into a large cage in the bed of a wagon. Whether they were prisoners or something else altogether, Wendy felt her stomach twisting at what she was witnessing and strengthened her resolve.

As quietly as she could, Wendy eased through the door and approached the rear soldier. No solid plan beyond disabling one soldier and running away from the other two, hoping to draw them from the prisoners who she hoped would be wise enough to take the opportunity, Wendy mentally sighed. This was a terrible idea and she was going to die… her foolish following of what she’d taken as signs from destiny and chaos was going to get her killed and leave Pop all alone in an unknown world, again without ever knowing what happened.

But she couldn’t stand by, especially not now. If it meant running for her life with the very real possibility of being tossed to Emyr’s feet only for him to demand her execution, well at least she saved these ten or so people from what was sure to be a fate much worse than hers no matter how hers ended.

Tightening her grip around the rough wooden handle of her weapon she twisted it back around her and swung it back around with as much strength as she could claw together, a shout escaping from her chest as the strong iron prongs connected with the steel helmet, the contact reverberating painfully past her wrists and she dropped it just as the soldier did, out cold.
There was a long moment of quiet shock as the two remaining soldiers stared at her, and she at them. Slowly, almost comically if Wendy had watched the scene unfold in a movie rather than her very real life, she bent her knees and never taking her gaze from the soldiers, felt around blindly for the pitchfork.

The moment her fingers grazed the rough wood, both soldiers drew their swords and lunged for her. The thought that she’d completely forgotten to run flashed through her mind as instinct had her swinging the pitchfork up like some mad villager out of a gothic novel.

But the soldiers were not frightened of her or her pitiful excuse of a weapon and never hesitated in their rushed approach of her. Never even thinking of using her importance as Emyr’s prisoner to try and weasel her way out of their deathblows she clenched her teeth and squeezed her eyes shut, preparing for the worst.

But the worst never came to pass… at least not for her.

The sound of gurgling cries and steel hitting the ground pried open her gaze to the sight of two dying soldiers while a tall elven man who could only be of the Scoia’tael stalked toward her and the still knocked out Nilfgaardian.

A mixture of relief, apprehension, and no small amount of despair at the death surrounding her spread throughout her body. The man had silky black hair laying across his shoulders, a stony expression, and two deadly blades dripping with fresh blood. Dark eyes swept past her and down to the soldier and knowing his intent, Wendy looked away with a wince as he finished what she’d started.

Without a word he shoved a bloody set of keys into her hands, forcing her to drop the pitchfork, but she paid it no mind as she rushed around the now dead soldiers and to the chained people. With trembling hands as adrenaline continued to rush through her body, she managed to unlock the shackles, one after the other, human and non-human alike, not watching as the people fled.

But when the last lock sprang free, the young woman from before, remained with a dirty tear stained face staring up at her. “Th-there’s more of us. We we-were being h-held in a-a-a-” The girl struggled to get her words free but calmed slightly when Wendy lifted a hand to gently run down her arm.

“It’s alright. I want to help and any information you have will save lives.” Wendy said gently, capturing the girl’s hand in her own despite the blood still smeared across her skin.

She took a deep breath and nodded. “A storage room… under the armory.”

“That’s very helpful… what were they going to do with you and the others? Where were they taking you?” Wendy didn’t believe the people were criminals, outside of perhaps petty theft in order to survive. The other possibility left a sour feeling in her stomach.

“I didn’t do anything!” The girl cried out and wrapped her arms tightly around herself. “But th-they look for the smallest things to take us… mine was tripping and falling into one of them.”

“And what were they to do with you?” Wendy asked in a voice just above a whisper.

“Drag her and the others south and into slavery.” The Scoia’tael said spoke from behind her in a cold voice, drawing her gaze for a moment before looking back at the miserable girl once more.

“Do you have somewhere safe to go?” Wendy asked.

“Back home I suppose. We were packing up and fixing to leave the city… I don’t know if my family
left without me or not.”

“See if they are and if not…” Wendy paused to think of a solution.

“Little Mahakam. The old alchemists place.” The Scoia’tael spoke up, and the girl jerked a hesitant nod toward him and after whispering a quick thank you, fled from the stable.

Exhausted now that the immediate threat to her life had been staved off, Wendy sighed and turned toward the stranger. “Thank you… for stepping in.” He didn’t offer any reply, but having been around Aen Seidhe and Scoia’tael enough, she didn’t really expect any. Instead she stepped up to a soldier and keeping her gaze carefully away from his empty gaze, worked his sword belt off and buckled it around her hips as tightly as she could.

“What are you doing?” He- the stranger, spoke up at last as Wendy picked up the sword and after getting the feel of the slightly longer and heavier sword than what she was used to, she gave a couple of practice swings before sheathing it.

“I’m going to find the armory before more people are forced into slavery.” She said plainly in elder speech, a language she hadn’t been permitted to say aloud for a very long time now. “I’ve already come to the conclusion that Emyr is going to kill me for this… might as well make it more than worth the price and save as many as I can before I’m caught.” She spared him a glance as she made her way past him. He was nearly handsome, but he bore the visage and bearing of a man who’d lived a long time with difficulties beyond her imagining, his expression one of anger and yet… he’d taken the time to help her free a handful of slaves and even told the girl where she could find safety should hers be compromised. Much like she wore her recklessness as her armor, counting on fumbling her way through situations to get her to the other side, perhaps this stranger wore his anger as his armor.

Either way, it was time for them to part.

Only he stopped her with a hand on her arm. “You cannot be serious… if not for me happening by, you would be dead. You cannot expect to take on an unknown number of other soldiers.” He said before dropping his touch from her.

Wendy rolled her eyes with a disbelieving snort. “Happened by… You’re just another spy, come to see just what Emyr has planned for his latest acquisition. Wendy by the way.” She held out her hand with a smile that failed to reach her eyes.

He lowered his brows and after a moment, accepted her hand for a firm handshake. “I am Yaevinn… and your name is Aevon.”

Wendy’s lips parted in surprise and she tightened her hand around his before remembering herself and pulling it free. “I’m sorry… I just haven’t been called that in a long time.” She dropped her gaze and turned away to hide her tears. “You’ve heard of me?”

“I have.”

Afraid to ask for specifics, Wendy decided to leave it at that and sent him a quick nod before turning away. “Again, thank you Yaevinn.”

As she reached the doorway she heard him heave a sigh. “You still mean to go.”

It was not a question, but it did stop her, and she gave a look over her shoulder. “Of course, you’ve given me no reason as to why I shouldn’t nor offered up a better idea. You may not have seen me at my best with that pitchfork, but now that I have a sword, I’ll at least be able to save a few more.”
With a shake of his head he came to stand before her, his expression having softened slightly, smoothing the lines into a more handsome face. “What does Emyr want with you?”

With a sad smile she looked out at the eerily quiet night. “He wants me to use my growing skills in oneiromancy to tell him where you are based at within Vizima. After that… well he has a lovely reputation to live up to does he not?”

“You want me to offer an alternative plan to your suicide mission… I offer this.” Yaevinn said and when she looked over at him, he crossed his arms. “Return to your room, clean yourself and go on as if you never left.”

Anger flashed through Wendy and her expression twisted into a heated glare. “No. My reason for being here is not to serve up the Scoia’tael on a silver platter. I’m going to help those people, humans and nonhumans alike and find a way to get them out of the city.”

Yaevinn’s smile was pleased and with more than a glint of slyness to his dark eyes. “I will clean up this mess and will meet you beneath your window tomorrow night. We will rescue your would be slaves.” His expression hardened. “With force.”

She caught the meaning of his words and bit back a sigh of impatient annoyance. He was right, she was certain of it as much as he was as well. Infiltrating a compound was going to already be risky with a small command of warriors, and to go alone… or even with just him, she was likely to get more killed than she saved.

Rather than give in gracefully, Wendy pulled her shoulders back, continuing with her glare. “Fine. But if I learn you did this without me, Emyr will be the least of your concerns.”

“If the rumors about you are to be believed, then I know that very well. Shall we?” He swung out a hand with a surprisingly amused expression.

Wendy eyed him curiously before walking out ahead of him. “There’s no need to escort me, after all it’s just down this street.”

“Humor me.”

“Fine… so what rumors?”

“Remember your shadows.” He said and pulled her against the stone wall.

“I knew that.” She hissed, feeling annoyed with herself for getting caught up in the closest thing to a companionable conversation that she’d had since her first night in the palace.

“We Aen Seidhe enjoy our gossip and story telling just as much as any other people. After your travels among our kind, it should be no surprise that word of Iorveth’s woman reached Vizima.”

His words were meant with good humor she was certain, but they lanced through her all the same. “As much as I mourn him… I will never be fond of being known as woman in place of the many things I am. I loved him, but I was more than his woman.”

“Mmm I forgot how independent dh’oine women have become over the years. Forgive me.”

Wendy rolled her eyes to herself and told herself one mind at a time… it was going to take changing one mind at a time to get these lug head men to consider her gender equal no matter what world she was on.
“Loved? Past tense?” Yaevinn asked curiously bringing her to an abrupt stop and turning to stare at him with a horrified expression.

“I’m sorry… I thought word would have reached here by now. Iorveth-“ Closing her eyes as she was once again forced to say the words she hated more than any other in any language. “He was killed on Skellige. A monster attacked him, Ciri, and I. He tossed me through Ciri’s portal and I only just learned she survived though I’m not certain how. She confirmed to Emyr that he was dead.” She turned her gaze up to find their two twinkling stars. “Loved in the past tense as in he is no longer here, but I will always love him.”

Fresh pain burning beneath her skin, she turned away and quickly finished her approach of where she had climbed over the wall of before.

“I see.”

No condolences or offering of a happy story from a memory Yaevinn had of Iorveth… just an ‘I see.’ And really, Wendy had no idea what she would have done with these things if he had offered them. Instead she locked up the feelings ripping her heart to shreds for the thousandth time, and hoisted herself up onto the wall, Yaevinn doing the same.

When she stood below her window she chastised herself for dropping so far. “So… I think I’m going to need some assistance.”

“Somehow, I suspected as much.” Yaevinn said in a dry voice but knelt and weaved his hands together.

With his added height, Wendy had an easier time of slipping in through her window with only a marginal loss of grace. ‘Don’t forget, you save those people without me, you die.’” Wendy whispered down to him with a stern frown to which he ignored and disappeared the way they had come. With a tired sigh, she closed her window and turned toward her bed only to come to a startled stop, slamming a hand over her mouth to muffle her scream.

Her guard watched her, leaning back against the wall, her helmet tucked up under her arm. With a smirk, the blond hair soldier slipped a finger up to her lips, the universes sign for ‘shut the fuck up’ before straightening and sauntering from the room.

It was a long time before the fear began to thaw from her frozen limbs, freeing her to stumble to her bed and collapse atop of it, the sword pressing painfully into her hip.

“Fucking spies.” Were the only coherent words she could put together aloud or silently before falling asleep. Whether the spy was an ally or not, Wendy supposed she would know come morning.

“Ah Iorveth, would you like me to give you a report on tonight’s activities now… or after you’ve finished the game?”

Iorveth didn’t look away from the cards placed before him as Yaevinn spoke with a brazen tone. “Now will be fine. Idris is improving his skill in the life or death game that is Gwent.” He said with a small smile to the other man seated across from him.

“Perhaps it would interest him to know as well, seeing as I had to kill three Black Ones tonight in order to keep his granddaughter from being slain.”
Cards were forgotten and Iorveth stood and turned to pin a steady glare at Yaevinn, Idris coming to stand at his side. “What happened?” He demanded.

Yaevinn crossed his arms with a small, all knowing smirk. “She is indeed trouble, though I am surprised it took this long for her to find some. She decided she was going to play the role of vigilante and rescue a wagon full of Vizima’s finest bound for Nilfgaard as slaves.”

Iorveth lost a small amount of composure as he swiped a hand down his face, a thousand questions running through his mind but failing to focus on just one long enough to put it to word.

“Reckless and impulsive, she had nothing but a bloody pitchfork. Knocked one out and braced for death against the other two until I stepped in. She freed the slaves, thanked me, and tomorrow we’ve arranged to meet and rescue even more miserable slaves.”

Iorveth dropped his hand from his face as he stared at the other man in complete shock, a feat Yaevinn smiled at in complete glee. “You are what?” He whispered harshly and took a threatening step toward the smirking man, pausing when Idris settled a hand on his shoulder.

“The woman threatened my life if I did all of this without her. Besides… I think it’s time to act on Emyr.”

“Explain.”

Yaevinn shrugged and walked to a chair, waving its current occupant out and taking over. “Emyr wants to use her to find us, and I have the feeling her recklessness is just beginning my friend. She does not expect to escape Emyr alive as she has no intention of betraying us- you, and with her believing that you yourself are already dead… she hardly cares.”

Iorveth felt his stomach sink with dread as he listened. “She believes me to be dead?”

“Yes. She had already thought so but Ciri- the little minx- told a little falsehood to her father, thus confirming Aevon’s suspicions.”

Retaking his own seat, he frowned at Yaevinn. “I have no doubt that Emyr knows differently. Not after Novigrad.”

“I believe he has allowed her a certain amount of time for her feelings to… lessen. Soon he will surely begin to make her stay within the palace less and less unpleasant, putting pressure on her to give him what she wants.”

“Then it seems the time has come. Bring her here tomorrow. Before setting out on a rescue for slaves.”

Yaevinn lifted a brow. “And put my life in mortal peril? I think not. Besides… I think she could use the adventure, keep the color in her cheeks. She is currently unattached after all…”

Iorveth narrowed his gaze at the other man with a curl of his lip but before he could begin to issue death threats of his own, Yaevinn rolled his eyes. “A joke Iorveth. And they say I’m the serious one…” He muttered this last part to Idris, who had come along quickly with his ever-growing understanding of their language, returned with a small smile.

“Well then, that is my report. You better clean up Commander, you reek of moldy Aen Seidhe ruins and you want to make a good impression as you come back from the dead. Ah yes and stop naming the dh’oine you seem to be collecting. You’re terrible at it.” Yaevinn gave one last parting jab and then disappeared into the noise and bustle of his base below Vizima.
“Does she truly think I’m dead?” Iorveth asked, his gaze meeting Idris.

Idris took a moment to translate the words and formed his reply, a look of sorrow etched into the lines of his face. “Yes. She mourns you.”

Iorveth sat back in his chair, his hands laid loose in his lap as he struggled to organize his thoughts and feelings. He couldn’t imagine what Aevon was going through, had been going through for a long time, now knowing of the extreme time difference between their worlds. When he’d sent her back to her own world, yes, it had torn him apart… but at least he’d known she was alive.

“How… upset do you think she will be to learn we have been within reach of her for weeks now?” He asked Idris with a great amount of apprehension. Somehow, once he’d learned she was unharmed and walked freely about the palace, Iorveth had talked himself into patience. After all, he had an entire people to save… that small part of him that still couldn’t choose Aevon over all of the Aen Seidhe had won that conflict within. To play the game Emyr wished to play until the time was right. It was a move that was at complete conflict with his need to pull her free from Emyr’s grasp the moment he arrived in Vizima. But with his disappearance after Novigrad, and subsequent failure to spring the trap Emyr had no doubt set for him, the emperor had grown comfortable enough with his lack of action to move forward with his next move. Use Aevon to find the Scoia’tael.

“My granddaughter will be fury embodied. Before or after her happiness at knowing you live… I can’t say. But yes. Prepare your arguments now my boy.” Idris said with an amused twinkle to his eye.

It was slightly odd to be called boy by a man who was half his age though he looked double it, but over the past weeks, much like he had with Aevon, her grandfather had quickly grown on him and even made himself useful around the base. Not the best cook, but he worked tirelessly in the kitchen to keep everyone fed, including the slaves they were continually rescuing about the city and funneling through the ruins and out to the much safer swamps outside the city.

The irony that she should somehow find herself in the freedom of others just as he was while he waited for Emyr to grow bored and lax, was not lost on Iorveth, and he missed her more than ever. He shouldn’t have waited… he knew that now.

With a long sigh, Iorveth stood and began to prepare for her arrival. He had a great deal to apologize for, and very little time to find the words.

He should have chosen her.

Chapter End Notes

AN/ Ok so??? I was super nervous about introducing new characters and hopefully I did them some justice. I hope all yall enjoyed it!
With difficulty, Wendy pried open her eyes to stare at the black and gold canopy of her bed through crooked glasses. She’d clung to her dream for as long as she could… the lingering warmth of the fire on her skin, the sound of uncontrollably happy laughter echoed through her mind. She could still feel the wide smile that had been spread across her lips, but it was all fading now.

Covering her face with her hands, she wondered why she did this to herself… Either she tortured herself with purposefully searching out these dreams or she tortured herself by pushing them away. There was no peaceful medium for her and neither eased the agony locked around her chest. Her happiness only lasted until she awoke and it was then that reality stripped it all away, leaving her weak.

“It would be too easy…” Wendy whispered into her palms before letting her hands fall to rest on the bed. As easy as it might be, she knew it wouldn’t be right. She would take her pain and wrap it around her shoulders as a reminder that she still lived, and she had work to do.

If she made it through this day, if Emryr let her be for just one more day, and if she survived her little rescue mission tonight, she would put together a plan with Yaevinn or whoever his commander was to break Emryr’s hold on Temeria.

She had ideas, all terrible, but now that she had a contact within the Scoia’tael, the time had come.

With a groan, Wendy slid from her bed and began to ready for the day. With a look of disgust she realized she had flecks of dried blood on her hands and instead of washing in the basin, decided to visit the washing room, barely remembering to remove the sword and hide it between the mattresses. She was incredibly lucky that she had waken before the maid came across the perfectly incriminating scene she made. As far as she knew at least…

The guard from before- well she assumed it was the same guard as it was again difficult to tell with the helmet back in place, silently stepped into place behind her. Already on edge, Wendy hastened her pace and shut the washroom’s door in the guards face before dropping her bundle of clothing onto the dressing table and waiting for the maids to ready a bath.

The entire day, Wendy felt like she was just barely keeping it together, it being her sanity. Between her anticipation for the night ahead, saying goodbye to a room she hoped to never see again, and the anxiety of whether Emyr knew of her after dark activities or not, Wendy found very little focus. Focus she desperately needed.

This was her last day to soak in any information about her fledgling power, and once she’d scrubbed herself clean of the previous night and dressed in the most serviceable clothes Yennefer had delivered to her, she closed herself in her room and poured over the books. Anything that could
possibly be used against Emyr.

Much like her time in Adhart, she sat for hours, only ever moving to turn pages and switch out books. Without her journals to keep notes in, she was forced to memorize the flood of information. She wished for Avallac’h in those hours, needing his assurance that while each of these complicated spells could indeed kill her or drive her insane if done incorrectly, she was well within her power to survive them.

But he wasn’t there to offer such comfort. No one was. Instead, she was going to have to prove to Yaevinn that she could and would do them without question, regardless of her fate. She was Scoia’tael, and that meant finishing what so many had already died for.

The more she read about one particular facet of this dangerous branch of chaos, divining the future, the more she became curious. Different from premonitions which were pieces of a malleable puzzle of foretelling while the future was meant to be an endless sea of possibilities. Late into the afternoon Wendy laid out on her bed, books spread about her and closed her eyes with the spells chant whispering across her lips.

The instructions said to summon visions of the future as if one were watching a play on stage, actors speaking their remembered lines and going through the theatrics of the endless possibilities of the future, focusing on how far one wanted to see the ripples spread out. There was caution added to these instructions, words of wisdom as the future was constantly changing and it was only possibilities that could be seen, and the only real benefit in the knowing of such chaos was preparation. To spread one particular future over another in hopes of that particular ripple becoming set in stone was not recommended as it then made the diviner look like a fool and a fraud.

Rather than a play, Wendy envisioned herself in a movie theater, seated perfectly in the middle with a plush chair and not having to share either of the armrests. Fascinated she watched as several scenes played across the screen, amazed at this ability of hers.

She saw blood, Emryr laid out beneath his throne with a knife in his heart, her hand wrapped around the handle, but she lay with her head twisted at an unnatural angle. Like mist, the scene shifted and changed until again she appeared, this time seated beside him with a cold expression to match his own, her glasses and scar gone. That particular vision left her feeling sick but a warmth replaced it when the scene shifted to a mixture of people, laughing and throwing flowers at her feet as Pop took her by the hand and spun her into a dance. Another, the people instead threw banners of black and gold into the street, herself lighting them on fire as the people cheered. She tossed a crown into the inferno with a feral smile.

She felt herself growing tired but she wanted to push herself further.

A lovely misty morning, she sat atop a cliff in a white dress and eyes locked on something far below, something she couldn’t see but it made the future her smile. The vision morphed into one in which she stood on a balcony of some unknown castle, an elaborately designed dress holding her shoulders stiff as she watched a city burn.

Feeling as if her mind were being dunked into a boiling pot of water, Wendy stretched for just one more vision, one last possibility. It came in the form of a small portrait of herself, scar, glasses and all, hanging on a wall and being straightened by Ciri who had a sad smile before she turned away and lifted a tankard of ale and clacked it against Zoltan’s who in turn broke out into a drunken song. “Dig my grave both wide and deep with tombstones at my head and feet. And above my head you can carve a turtle dove to signify I died of love.” His offkey singing echoed away as she finally allowed the vision to fade away.
She hadn’t wanted to know her own future, not at first, she’d been more interested in Emryr himself and while it had started out that way, disturbingly, she had lost control. Listlessly she reached for the book she’d been using to guide her through the divination, blinking through the ache behind her eyes until she could focus on the words, searching for why she had only seen her own future rather than the one she had wanted.

All that she could put together was that his future would shape any of hers. It didn’t satiate her curiosity or bring her peace of mind, after all her future was more likely to be grim, having only had a few possibilities that would leave her with a smile. It did however confirm that whatever was to come of her time in Vizima, no matter the outcome, it happened now. Her life was at a standstill until she followed through with it.

That last one though… it had been difficult to tell how far in the future it had been. Did it mean she was to die this night? Or was it a continuation of her broken neck future?

Feeling sick to her stomach she dropped the book back to the bed and laid there, forgetting all of her plans to read every word she’d hoped would hold the secret to using her abilities against Emryr.

The guard entered the room with Yennefer who came to a stand over her, sweeping her gaze over Wendy and her chaotic hurricane of open books spread around her.

“A bit of light reading?” She said, crossing her arms.

“Yes.” Wendy replied, too weary and sick to offer anything voluntarily.

“Emryr wants to know if you have found the movements.” Yennefer said quietly.

“Why are you helping him Yennefer?” Wendy asked suddenly, her mental filter switched off.

There was a moment of drawn silence where Yennefer stared at her with a hard glint in her violet eyes. “I made a deal. Serve as his sorceress advisor in return for his army to fight the wild hunt.”

Pushing herself to sitting up Wendy shook her head slightly. “So why can you not scry for the Scoia’tael? You are a sorceress… with skills that far surpass my own.”

Yennefer brushed her long black hair behind her shoulder with a roll of her eyes. “I am indeed a skilled sorceress. But oneiroromancy is not a skill set one can just learn from a book.” She gestured toward the storm of books with a wave of her hand. “Unlike most forms of magic, the ability to divine and walk through your mind as well as others, is something one must be born with. Sages, those with ancient elven blood, well you catch my meaning now I’m sure. I am not fully human, but my elven blood is… weakened by my human ancestry.”

Wendy lifted her brows skeptically. “And mine is not?”

“I am certain anyone descended from Avallac’h need not worry about a few generations of human genetics to wane their magical potency… Now then, I see you have been hard at work. Have you anything to report to Emryr?”

“No. I experimented with visions of the future, but all I could discern were random images of my own, none of which would lead him to the Scoia’tael.”

Yennefer looked through the books scattered about before picking one up and handing it to Wendy. A thick tome on the useful art of scrying. “He will not be patient.”

“Why… after all he’s done, why would you remain in servitude to him?”
Yennefer bent down close, tucking a loose lock behind Wendy’s ear as she stared deeply into her eyes. “Before it was because he helped my daughter. And now it is because he holds my daughter in the heartland of his country… You, Ciri, and the no longer here to bear the consequences Iorveth, may have thought you could outmaneuver Emryr… but he is not a fool and he will not be played. My continued protection of him and utmost obedience keeps Ciri safe and out of his bed.”

“Oh Yen…” Wendy whispered, her heart breaking for a mother doing whatever it took to protect her daughter. She never thought to question the odd dynamic between Yennefer, Geralt, Ciri and Emryr. If she managed to find a way to get them all out of this mess- except for Emryr that is- she would love to corner Dandelion and have him dish out all the details for her.

Resolving that she would use Yennefer’s strength as example, she decided more than ever she would free Yennefer and Ciri. She never thought she was born for such things. A life of learning and exploring, that had been her hope. But destiny had other plans for her. A life of fighting for others… yes, with every passing second she felt more and more at ease calling herself Scoia’tael.

“I’ll start reading right away.” Wendy said firmly, wishing she could do something to offer the other woman comfort, but had the feeling it would not be appreciated. And really, Yennefer did not allow her a chance to anyways as she straightened and left without another word, the guard closing the door with a firm snap.

She immediately dropped the book onto the bed with a long, tired sigh. The sun was well on its way to setting and the hunger clawing at her reminded her that she’d yet to take the time to eat anything. With an equally long night ahead of her, Wendy forced down a meal of cold ham, vegetables, and cider. The meal, in the end did help to ease her headache.

It with a growing sense of excitement rather than dread that she tightly wound her hair into a long braid, cleaned her glasses, and strapped on her borrowed sword. Tonight she was joining her people for good. No longer able to remain sitting with her nose buried in books, she passed the remaining time before Yaevinn’s arrival practicing her footwork and getting used to the added weight of the Nilfgaardian sword.

The guard could have come in at any moment, but with the lack of reaction from Emryr and Yennefer, Wendy found she didn’t care. The guard was not Emryr’s and she doubted the human woman was the Scoia’tael’s. That left of course countless others watching her every move, but for the moment they were not making a move with the knowledge of her nights capade.

With darkness at last shrouding her room and the city outside, Wendy took one last glance about the mess she was leaving behind. She would have happily carried all the books along with her, but as that was impossible, she left with nothing but the clothes on her back and sword at her hip.

“Again with the boots?” Yaevinn tutted as he stood to the side, watching as she dropped into a wild limbed mess at his feet.

“It’s not as if I’m given a stipend allowing me to choose my own footwear.” Wendy snapped up at him with a glare as she dusted her knees off. “Or should I have gone to Emryr and informed him that I needed boots more suitable for dropping from windows?”

“If you do, I should like to be there.” He replied dryly.

“No doubt you would… do you know where the armory is? Where are the others?” She asked over her shoulder, striding for the stone wall.

“Impatient are you?”
“Yes. I’ve just spent the day a complete mess wondering if Emryr knew of our little adventure… What did you do with the bodies?”

“What I had to do, as well as stealing the wagon and horses to keep up the pretense that the soldiers and slaves had departed Vizima. The armory is a short walk beyond the stable. They need to keep where they store the slaves—”

“Captives.” She inserted as she pulled herself up and over the wall.

“Captives close to their source of transportation. As for my regiment, they stand ready nearby. To bring them all here, would have been unwise.”

Wendy frowned to herself. “I knew that… I’m sorry Yaevinn, it’s been… a day.”

“A day? Yes it has.” He cut a glance toward her, leading her through an alley.

“Meaning a long, tiring day.”

He stopped her with a hand on her arm, a hard dark stare leveled on her. “If you are not of right mind, then you need to stay out of this.”

She shrugged her arm free and kept walking. “I have many more possible futures where I survive long enough to see Emryr dead, very few where I die tonight. I’ll be fine.”

“And it is just that ideology which will assure you’re death.” Yaevinn growled, his long stride catching him back up to her.

“I’m not a complete idiot Yaevinn. I will stay to the back and pick off those that I can… I won’t enjoy the act and will likely become sick afterward, but I will do my part, do not worry. I’ll keep any sneaky bastards off you’re flank.”

“The only sneaky bastard I’m worried about is—”

“Aevon?” A voice whispered from the shadows, bringing them both to a halt as a surprised gasp sounded from Wendy.

“Daine!” She managed to cry out as quietly as possible before launching herself into the arms of the man stepping into a beam of moonlight. It felt wonderful to at last see a familiar and beloved face for the first time since she left.

“The commander made no mention that the dh’oine woman joining us tonight would be you!” He said and set her back from him at arm’s length, his hands resting on her shoulders as he examined her with concern. “You’ve lost weight.”

Wendy shrugged sheepishly though her grin never faltered. “Would you eat Nilfgaardian food if you had a choice?”

Wrapping an arm around her neck he pulled her into another hug with a chuckle. “Fuck no. Course that excuse won’t fly with the commander.”

She tilted her head back, straightening her glasses since being smushed against his chest had knocked them askew. “Why would Yaevinn care?”

Daine opened his mouth, confusion twisting a frown between his eyes but Yaevinn interrupted. “I care because we need you functional. Oneiromancers are rare and if you’re to be of any use, you
“Right… why didn’t I think of that.” Daine’s slowly spreading smile was wicked and left her confused as to what was obviously an inside joke between the two men. If there was a joke somewhere in Yaevinn’s reasoning, it went sailing over her head.

“Enough about my weight lads. Is it just the three of us?”

“With you fighting once more at my side, who else could we possibly need?” Daine said in his usual charming way that never failed to bring a smile to her face.

“The armory is at the end of the street. Archers are already in position to take out the patrols as they come with Daine’s infantry there.”

Wendy followed his nod to the shadows, but found no one. “They’re good.” She whispered.

“Of course they are! Trained by the best.” Daine said cheerfully.

“You?” Wendy assumed, smiling up at him.

“And who do you think trained me?”

It wasn’t difficult for Wendy to think of who, and her smile slipped. “Did Yaevinn not tell you?”

Daine’s gaze danced between them. “Tell me what?”

Wendy sighed and shook her head. “I can’t keep telling people. Yaevinn, tell him please? I’m going on ahead.” Not waiting to hear the words spoken, she moved into the alley, melting into the shadows and just making out the warriors watching her pass.

By the time she reached the next street, the armory before her with two heavily armored guards standing on either side of the door, Daine caught up to her and squeezed her shoulder. “It will turn out my love.”

An odd choice of comforting words but she ascribed it to his endless good humor and optimism. She failed to see how anything could ‘turn out’ after the loss of Iorveth. But she knew Daine cared, and that was enough for her so she gave him the smile he was waiting for and looked to Yaevinn.

“Waiting for anything special?” She asked.

“For you to give the signal.”

“Me?” She whispered in surprise, her eyes wide.

“This is your mission, as of now, you are the captain of our little merry band of vigilantes.”

She swung her gaze to Daine, swallowing nervously when he sent her an encouraging wink. “Right then… just what? Wave my arm?”

“That’s how Iorveth would have done it. I myself like to whistle. Yaevinn is fond of taking a surprise kill shot first to startle and distract. You do what feels natural and your command will be followed.” Daine said.

Wendy bit her lip as a surprising wave of excitement surged within her. She was bothered by ordering the deaths of men just doing their job, something they may have undertaken out of necessity though she had reconciled the logic that it was down to an us versus them situation. But she was
exhilarated by the trust and acceptance she’d been given… something she never would have expected if she lived to be as old as her Aen Elle ancestors.

In the moment that she turned to watch the soldiers from her place among the shadows, she lifted a fist into the air and lowered it in a gentle forward sweep, she let go of her identity as Wendy from Earth. As arrows rained from the night, finding their marks in the weak areas of the soldier’s armor, Wendy was left behind and she accepted herself fully as Aevon.

She would always think of her life as Wendy with a sad fondness, and she knew Pop would understand, but Wendy had been an outsider, more a reflection of what could have been if she’d chosen another path. But this was Aevon’s path… she had a place in this wild world, where Wendy did not.

With the outside guards slain without more than the smallest of cries as they clawed at the arrows lodged in their throats, Aevon pulled her sword free and followed her warriors into the armory.

True to her promise to Yaevinn, she kept her back to the wall and chose her fights carefully. She only faced one soldier head on, coming out with a bloody lip and bruised shoulder but she had a grin that only slipped when she pulled a dagger free from a dead soldier and used it to slit the throat of another from behind as he stalked Yaevinn. The third and final life she took of the night was a soldier that was already felled but would take hours to die yet.

A Scoia’tael warrior had lifted a blade, prepared to finish him off when Yaevinn had stopped him with a hand and gave her a leading stare.

Aevon swallowed thickly and stepped up without breaking her gaze from his. Wendy would have hesitated, but as she was no longer really there anymore, and Aevon knew this was necessary, she pierced the suffering man’s heart through his already mangled armor. Her arms shook painfully from the exertion just as her mind felt hollow from the violence.

She couldn’t wait until she was alone so that she could grieve the lives she’d taken, wish for a peace that could never be achieved… but she’d done what needed to be done to save those being preyed upon for their weakness, and that was something to be proud of.

“Let’s go free your captives.” Yaevinn said with a pleasant expression, handing her a ring of keys.

A short while later, after freeing the dozens of people of all races being held in the dungeons beneath the armory, a part of the palace that she suspected had been an Aen Seidhe castle long ago, she watched as they were led through a portal and into the Scoia’tael base where they would be fed and rested before being led to a safe place hidden within the swamps.

Each face she studied, dirtied, haggard, but relieved, was more than worth the guilt. If she had to choose between them and soldiers who may or may not have been coerced into enslaving others, she would choose the enslaved.

Those soldiers had still had a choice. They could have rebelled, joined those they were to hurt instead of allowing such suffering… it was little comfort, but Aevon took what she could. After seeing so many innocents in such poor condition… any sympathy she might have had for the soldiers she’d ordered to be killed, vanished.

“Aevon, your turn.” Daine said quietly, bringing her from her thoughts to a now empty room save for herself and him.

“Right.” She said, suddenly feeling nervous. She didn’t know what she should expect but she was
suddenly assaulted with the reality that she was about to be among strangers and while Yaevinn and Daine respected her enough, she was well aware that each Aen Seidhe would judge her themselves. Too late to go back now, Aevon stepped through the portal, taking in the wonderful ruins lit by torches and candles everywhere she looked.

Daine bumped into her as he followed her and removed a crystal from the wall and effectively closing the portal. Everywhere she looked, people buzzed around. Food was being divided up, medics were examining bruises and broken bones. An Aen Seidhe was giving out blankets to humans, and humans were accepting them with tears and thanks.

It was enough to make her heart skip painfully to see two races who hated each other find a moment in which they had a common enemy and put aside their differences… at least for the moment. Aevon might be naive about a great many things but she knew that it would take careful nurturing to keep any amount of truce growing beyond their immediate troubles.

Whether this friendship of the humans and non-humans was fleeting or not, Aevon relished in the moment for as long as she could.

“Come on, get that lip looked at.” Daine said and nodded toward a woman with fresh linen squares and a bowl of water.

“How are my teeth? Stained with blood?” Aevon asked before baring her teeth and tilting her head back. The cut on her bottom lip ached from the movement, but she needed a moment of silliness to keep her from floating off.

“Look as if you’ve gone full high vampire.” He chucked her under the chin before nudging her toward the medic. “Go on, I’ll scrounge ya up some food.”

“Have someone bring in my bed from the palace…” She said around a yawn before walking away.

“Sure thing princess.”

Aevon ignored the teasing sarcasm and shyly allowed the medic to clean up the blood from her lip and chin, allowing her gaze to sweep over the faces crowded within the base of operations. It was touching to know that Yaevinn had been seemingly helping those terrorized by Emryr long before she’d stumbled upon them. Perhaps this world wasn’t as broken as she’d thought. She winced slightly as the medic dabbed on some bitter smelling salve on the cut. There were several familiar faces from her time at Adhart and more than one sent her an acknowledging nod which she answered with a small wave.

The medic had just finished when Aevon’s gaze landed on a familiar head of iron gray hair. “Pop!” She cried out over the constant noise, not caring about the lull of it as she caught the attention of dozens of eyes. There was only one pair she cared about in that moment, and the moment they landed on her, she was rushing through the sea of people, hurtling herself headlong onto his chest, his arms wrapping around her just as tightly as hers did to him.

She squeezed her eyes shut not only out of happiness to have found him, but in relief that he was alive and well. The faint feeling of his own relief mingled with hers and she sighed at the wondrous feeling. “What are you doing here? I mean- don’t get me wrong, I’m beyond happy that you’re here but-” She leaned back to look up at him. “How? Tell me everything.” Realizing that everything she’d just said had been in elder, she quickly repeated them in English.

“I found your friends and after many conversations using hand gestures and drawings, I was able to tell them who I was and where you were. And so, here I am, waiting until your friends could get you
out of there.” Pop said before tucking her head back against his chest. “Never again… I’m too old to keep losing you Wendy.”

“Oh Pop… I agree. Never again. And do you think you could call me Aevon? That’s who I am here.”

“I will if you tell me everything you’ve been through since we parted. Including that split lip.”

Aevon smiled in quiet contentment. “Of course I will.”

“Aevon, don’t mean to interrupt, but here.” Daine said from behind her and she pulled free from Pop and turned to find him holding out a deep bowl of steamy soup.

“Thank you Daine… have you met my Pop?” She accepted the food and began to blow lightly before doing her best to avoid touching her wound with the hot liquid.

“Sure, he’s been with us almost three whole weeks now and so far, has almost kicked my ass in cards. Quick learner he is.” Daine said with a wink before sauntering off.

Shaking her head, Aevon looked back to Pop. “You said you found my friends. Are any still here? For three weeks at that.”

Pop’s expression softened except for a mysterious twinkle in his blue eyes. “Only one.”

Aevon’s heart lightened at the thought of seeing another familiar face and she looked around with wide eyes. “Who?”

“She usually comes if you whistle.”

“Do- do you mean Azlin?” Her smile did not dim at the thought of seeing the dog once more. “You know I can never manage a decent whistle.”

“Good thing that she’s coming this way already, saving you the trouble.”

Aevon followed his gaze and though she’d been expecting her, Aevon still gasped at seeing how much the puppy had grown and after shoving her bowl into Pop’s hands she knelt and cooed for the wiggling doggo to come to her. Azlin seemed to remember her perfectly well and eagerly nudged her nose into her Aevon’s neck, all wagging tail and wet tongue.

“Oh Azlin, I’ve missed you so much- you’re so big now, my big wiggly baby…” Aevon ran her fingers through the soft black and white fur, sighing happily as she held the familiar warmth close. “How did you come to be taking care of Pop hmmm?” She whispered before easing back to standing.

Pop handed back her bowl, waiting as she dragged her gaze from the happily panting dog away long enough to swallow down another spoon full of soup before speaking up. “She found me. Came right up to me and herded me toward that fancy fellow’s pub like I was a lost lil sheep.”

Chuckling, Aevon told Azlin she was the best girl ever and thanked her. After a yip, Azlin disappeared back into the sea of people though as time continued they were beginning to settle down for the night now that injuries had been tended and bellies filled.

“Did Geralt bring you here?” Aevon asked, watching as a human gave his blanket to a dwarven woman.
“Mmmm no. Never met your witcher friend.”

Aevon arched a brow at him. “You’re being awfully mysterious. Tell me everything! Who did you meet? If you’re with the Scoia’tael then Zoltan?”

Pop sighed, and after tucking a loose strand of hair behind her ear he settled the hand on her shoulder, his gaze looking at some point beyond her. “I wasn’t entirely honest when I spoke early. There are actually two familiar faces still here, one other than Azlin.” His gaze met hers. “I need to get back to my duties. A lot of mouths to feed.”

Aevon was hesitant to leave his side so soon and smiled brightly. “I’ll come help!”

Pop dropped his hand from her shoulder and again looked over her shoulder. “Nah, you’ve got other business to do.”

She turned her head with a frown, trying to find what kept taking her Pop’s attention away from her. “There’s nothing more impor-“ She broke off abruptly as her breath froze in her chest, her half empty bowl of soup clattering to the floor, completely forgotten.

Across the ever buzzing sea of people was a memory, the perfect image of the last time she saw him… without the blood that is. It was as if every cell in her body forgot their primary function as she stood trapped by the gaze of a ghost. Sounds faded, and her mouth went dry. It took the sting of tears to get her to blink and they fell freely down her cheeks.

And just when her lungs began to burn, she drew in a ragged breath, wanting to look away but too terrified that he would disappear if she did. And then he moved, people moving out of his way with every step. Someone nudged her between her shoulder blades, firmly pushing her forward a step, reminding her that she had the ability to move.

The second step was easier though it was becoming difficult to see beyond the blur of tears. When he was within steps of her, she lifted a shaking hand but in the next heartbeat of a moment, reality set in and instead of reaching out to touch his face she covered her mouth to muffle her sob and closed her eyes.

She was hallucinating, her mind exhausted by her experiments and subsequent fight… rest. She needed to find the nearest free blanket and sleep.

But then… a warm hand caressed her cheek, a familiar rasp of calluses from decades of wielding weapons, held against her skin and she blindly moved her hands out, clutching the linen shirt as soon as she felt the fabric.

Aevon bit her lip but a whimper escaped all the same when the hand at her cheek was joined by another on the back of her neck, pulling her forward one last step, her brow pressing into his chest and fist twisting tightly in his shirt. The sound of her name, whispering in her ear with his voice, the scent that always reminded her of campfire deep in a forest, and a steadily beating heart against her fist told her that this was real… he was real.

Alive.

As her mind began to accept that fact, questions raced through her, searching for her voice, but all she could manage was his name. Her voice muffled and sounding rough, over and over she whispered his name.

“Aevon, look at me.”
She shook her head against his chest.

“Why not?”

“Th-there’s a chance that I’m still in the palace, lost in my dreams and this isn’t real.”

“How do I convince you otherwise?”

“You could try kissing her until she forgets her own name.” Daine’s voice came from some place nearby but Aevon was too shaken to register his humor.

But it was enough to get her to open her eyes and tilt her head back, her chest twisting with a renewed ache as she traced her gaze over a scar that scrawled upward from his top lip before disappearing behind the crimson patchhat, a scar that could only belong to him. She continued over his aristocratic nose until she finally met his vivid green eye.

There was so much held within that gaze but what took her by surprise almost more than seeing him alive and well, was the hesitation. And it only increased when he dipped his chin down but she shook her head frantically in panic. “No don’t! I- I need to think clearly, to figure this out and if you kiss me-”

Iorveth’s lips taking hers cut Aevon off, and the moan that escaped as his familiar taste overwhelmed her would have brought a blush to an of sound mind Aevon. But as she was not of sound mind and the feelings of love, elation, and relief rushing through her every cell, left little room for emotions such as embarrassment. Not even the sting of pain from her split lip find purchase through everything else welling up within her.

A moment after her eyes fell closed, she parted her lips and lost herself in him and accepting what she’d been slowly accepting more and more since she felt his heart beating against her fist. She could feel it still, and loath to stop such a wondrous sensation, she tilted her chin back falling deeper into their kiss and slid her other hand up his chest to the back of his head, his hair brushing her knuckles. When her tongue brushed against his lips, eliciting a groan low from his throat nearly forgot her name.

Several coughs sounded from behind her, increasing in volume as she continued to loose herself in the kiss and the contentment spreading through her, until finally it registered that it was Pop making the noise. Embarrassed at last, she broke the kiss but couldn’t manage to pull her hands away. Instead she stroked his hair and held his gaze searchingly.

“Iorveth… you’re alive.” She at last spoke the words with full acceptance and wonderment.

“Told you that would work.” Daine said as he moved to lean close to Iorveth’s ear and winked at her while Iorveth rolled his eye but the corner of his mouth lifted in a small smile regardless of feigned annoyance.

“Alive. How? What happened? Emryr said… Ciri said…” Aevon’s mind began to turn, bringing clarity. “Ciri lied to Emryr? But why?” Before he could answer, she stepped back, her hands falling to her hips and glared at Daine. “And you knew. Yaevinn isn’t in command here.” Anger and disbelief began to well up within her and she glanced around the ruins, ignoring the curious onlookers. “Where is he? Daine I’m going to kill you!” She went to step around Iorveth while Daine danced away a few steps, holding his hands up and shaking his red hair from his face.

“Think about this Aevon… just how long has he been in Vizima? Who should you really be upset with?” Daine said with a wicked smirk toward Iorveth who muttered a curse.
Daine’s words did give her pause and she slowly turned wide, horrified eyes to Iorveth. “Three weeks. You and Pop have been here… for three weeks.”

“Let’s go somewhere private to talk.” Iorveth said quietly, a glare never leaving Daine.

Aevon stubbornly wanted to refuse. To demand answers before she moved another step, but she could hear the whispers and feel the stares… including that of Pop’s. Beyond him she could pick out Yaevinn leaning against a wall in the distance, a smug smile twisting his usually stony expression gleefully. It occurred to her that the two warriors were looking for a show, had purposefully withheld the information and a flash of hurt mixed with the anger.

“I’ve waited this long, what’s five more minutes?” She said, deliberately holding her hand out to Iorveth. Daine and Yaevinn had wanted a show, well she wasn’t going to give them one… and as he took her hand in his and led her away, the walk allowed her time to think, or at least attempt to rational the situation. He always had a reason for everything he did… she just couldn’t wait to hear what it was.

And the moment he closed the door to what looked like a storage room, Aevon pulled her hand from his and crossed her arms over her stomach, hoping to calm her swirling emotions. From the corner of her eye she saw him drag a hand down his face with a sigh.

“I had reasons for not making contact with you the moment I arrived in Vizima, though I’m having difficulty remembering them now.”

“Try.” Aevon said, turning to look at him fully. “Tell me why it was fine to leave me in that insufferable place with that tyrant, allowing me to go on believing you were dead for a second longer than necessary!” Her voice had risen with each word, in the end loosing her breath as she shouted the last, tears frustratingly coming back to her. She was tired of crying but this… she felt she was no longer in control of anything, much less her ability to fight off the tears.

“Once Yaevinn assured me that you were safe and free to roam the palace shackle free, I realized that we had an opportunity. Learn exactly what Emryr wanted with you. He does not believe me to be dead by the way, not after what I did to the cultists in Novigrad… While we waited, we began playing the hero with humans. Now, after having rescued hundreds from slavery in Nilfgaard, word is spreading among them. They will be more pliable to Aen Seidhe governance.”

Iorveth spoke as if he were addressing a meeting of coworkers, reviewing their latest quarter of achievements and future plans… but every word cut her deeply, and she could hardly blame him his reasoning. Selfishly she wanted to rage at him… what about her? Why had he chosen his people over her?

But she knew better, somewhere in her aching heart, she knew. After all, she’d told him long ago that he was a leader, and that meant doing what he had to do to see to their safety. But some part of her could no longer hold her own need to voice just how hurt she was. “Half a year of mourning. Three weeks of living in fear… how long were you going to wait Iorveth? What if I’d never met Yaevinn, telling him what Emryr wanted me to do, who in turn told you? How. Long.”

“As long as it took.”

At his words, her anger melted away as her shoulder sagged and she was left with a new headache and never ending exhaustion. “Well, at least you’re honest.”

“Aevon…” He took a step closer to her, holding her gaze with a surprisingly soft expression. “I did not tell Yaevinn or Daine to withhold any information from you, but I should have found another
way. For one, I didn’t know you believed me to be dead, nor for so long. Not for a moment did it occur to me that you would have thought so, and looking back on that day, I see it now.”

Aevon closed her eyes a moment as the memory flashed through her mind reminding her that she may not have lost him but she very well could have, and the thought left her shaking and light headed. It was awful… this cut through her heart where on one side she wanted to rage against him for all the enduring anguish she’d been through. For him taking away her choice to leave willingly, for not coming to her side the moment he rode into Vizima.

And there was the other side of her heart… the side that just wanted to hold him and tell him he did the right thing. That she understood his reasoning, even if it hurt. For far longer than she’d ever wish on anyone, she had believed that the other piece of her heart, her soul, was beyond her reach for the rest of her days… but he wasn’t beyond her.

Before her stood not the reason for her happiness but the reason for its enrichment. She’d still been able to smile and make plans without him, it had hurt, but she’d managed. But now… he stood before her, alive, and she knew her life would be brighter for it. His gaze still bore the hard edge of a violent life, but there was a spark within the depth of vibrant green.

Something that had been missing during their travels, even well after their feelings had become apparent.

Yes… she could give him an earful for every second she’d had to endure his supposed death, completely ignoring that fact that she’d been the one assuming up until three weeks before when Ciri had told the falsehood to throw off Emryr.

But she’d much rather bask in the hope she saw in him.

“Doing what you must for our people, I can never be truly upset about that… particularly if it means we’re actually working together with the humans.” “I don’t know what the right answer is.” She paused and looked at him once more, finally taking her own step toward him. “But it would have been nice to know.” She lifted a hand to lay flat over his heart.

His emotions nudged against hers and wish a sigh she welcomed the connection, having missed him, missed this feeling desperately. Everything he felt, apprehension, relief, that spark of hope… all mixing together into love. They brushed against her own and Aevon relished in the warmth they filled her with. And with them a certainty she hadn’t felt ever before.

Iorveth settled a hand over hers, his gaze never leaving hers. “You were lost to me, as certainly as I was to you, but at least I knew you lived. I am sorry for—”

She lifted up on her toes to cut him off with a brief kiss. “You have a long time to make it up to me.” She whispered against his lips before lowering herself back down with a sigh. “I think I have to go back to the palace… I would love for nothing more than to never leave you again, I want to hear of everything that has happened since I left… how you and Ciri survived the—”

“Leshen.”

“-leshen, what happened with Dijkstra and how Pop has adjusted. But… I think I know how to stop Emryr.”

“I know that you do.” His voice was firm and she knew that she was now doing just as he had done… well close to it. She was choosing their people over him for the moment. To willingly put herself back in Emryr’s grasp where everything could easily fall apart, all in the hope that it
wouldn’t. To do what she had sworn she must, just as he had done. It would hurt, but unlike Skellige, it wasn’t meant to be forever.

Nothing save certain death was going to keep them apart this time.

Silence stretched between them as they simply stood there, touching only with her hand over his heart, taking in the others presence and basking in the reality that they were together again… for the moment. Words were begging to be said, and for once, Aevon realized there was nothing holding her back. That certainty within her grew.

She wasn’t going to leave him as she was no longer forced to choose between him and Pop. All she had to do now, was say the words, assuring him that she was his for all eternity. She may have to leave him for a little while, after all she was his way to Emryr… but she would do so knowing that finally she’d been honest with not only him but herself.

“I love you.” Aevon said quietly in English, gazing up at him. She wondered why she hadn’t used that small little trick long ago when she’d begun to feel that need to tell him how she felt… why hadn’t she just spoken the words so he couldn’t understand them…

But as she still rested her hand on his chest, she could feel the steady beat of his heart, her sign that he was truly alive, there was a very telling increase in its speed. Very little had changed in his expression and she doubted he had heard those words in English before, but he knew.

“I love you.” This time she said the words, rolling beautifully past her lips in their ancient language… His heart still beat strongly against her palm but this time there was the smallest parting of his lips and settling of a tight hold on her hips. A smile lifted to her lips, more than pleased with the effect her words had on him as well as the relief in having finally spoken those three words. After all he was a romantic, in his own way. “I’ve wanted to tell you that for so long… I can’t bear to part from you without finally saying them to you.”

Iorveth gazed back at her intently a moment before sweeping her into his arms and kissing her deeply. She hadn’t expected him to say them back, she knew he had his own way of doing things and expressing feelings, such as a kiss that was quickly leaving her breathless and weak kneed. And she would gladly take any form his expression of his love for her took, whether it be soul shattering kisses, words of adoration, or the simple act of brushing her hair… she would take them all.
Under the pale glow of a full moon, Iorveth glanced down to the hand held tightly within his own. He was continually having to reassure himself that this moment was real, that Aevon had accepted his reasoning for delaying their reunion and had even expressed her love for him. He was left in wonderment on what he’d ever done with his miserable and death filled life to have deserved her or the love she offered. Especially when not long ago, he’d not even believed such a thing truly existed.

He now held no doubts that it did and somehow, he swore he would find a way to tell her how he felt in return. There were few things that left him shaken and uncertain, but his fear that she would be insulted or discouraged by his own failure to immediately repeat her words back to her had done just that. Left him shaken. There was a wild, primal part of him that held fast to the thought that this was a cruel trickery.

No one was meant to be able to care for him beyond what they could manipulate him into doing for their own gain. Streets ran red with blood he has spilt for over a century, skies darkened with smoke of villages and cities he has burned, and the air was filled with the vile stench of decay when he was done.

Even now, if these next hours do not go as they should, he was willing to do the same to Vizima… thousands of lives would be lost, some innocent, most not. But it would be on his order. Who could ever love someone like that?

But Aevon had said her words, her lotus blue eyes shining with so much endless happiness and acceptance, that all his misgivings had faded and he basked in the emotions only she could well up within him.

Now, after donning his armor and weapons, after leaving orders for Yaevinn and a tearful parting between grandfather and granddaughter, Iorveth was escorting her back to the palace with the moon high in the sky signifying that they’d moved onto the next day. She was at his side, perhaps a little sad around her eyes, but her smile was lingering, and often she turned it up toward him with a squeeze of her hand in his.

When the time came, he helped her over the stone wall, rolling his eye as she told him how Yaevinn was no where near the gentleman he was, as the other man had never even offered to help her over the wall, but he did have the redeeming moment in aiding her through her window.

Not willing to risk detection, he quickly lowered his hands and braced for her weight as he took his own redeeming moment in helping her back into her room. He’d thought he could easily walk away but as she leaned out of the window, hands braced on wit sill with moonlight shining down on her from a cloudless sky, Iorveth made a change of plans.

He stepped back a few paces, watching Aevon as he took a running start and climbed to her window with precise movements, and sending her back a few steps with a gasp.

“What are you doing?” She hissed quietly but a delighted smile slipped free as he stepped through and closed the window.
Before he could voice his reasoning for his sudden change in plans, he caught movement beyond her in the darkened room. Swiftly he pulled her behind him as he drew his sword, and ignoring her yelp of surprise, rushed the intruder. He stopped with the blade held to their throat when they removed their Nilfgaardian helm but he was no less prepared to kill the woman staring at the sword prepared to take their life.

“You.” Iorveth snarled, hatred vibrating from deep within his chest.

“I’m not the enemy here squirrel.” Ves said, eyes still on the blade.

“You will always be the enemy. Where is Roche?”

“Watching and waiting… we’re here to help take Temeria back.”

Iorveth leaned close, pressing the blade to her skin just enough for her to feel it but not to draw blood. “Tell Roche that if he interferes, the stripes will not be given deference to the black ones. Tell him to send my regards to Dijkstra, however.” Slowly he stepped back and lowered his sword. When he nodded toward the door with a jerk of his head, Ves replaced her helmet and darted from the room.

“I knew she was a spy.” Aevon spoke up from behind him and he turned to find her stacking books into piles on the floor. “I just didn’t know for who.”

“Blue Stripes… she was Roche’s leftenant, still is I suppose though they fight for whoever suits theirs and Temeria’s interest. Which seems to be the Scoia’tael for the moment.” Iorveth huffed and shook his head. “Geralt is going to pout for missing this.”

“He is isn’t he?” Aevon agreed with a quick smile over her shoulder before resuming her task. He took the moment to study her and their surroundings, taking in the concerning slightness of her form. It reminded him of the emotional turmoil she’d been suffering for months now, and he was still at a loss as to how to ever repair what he’d done. But when she looked at him from the shadows, her arms wrapped around books, it was with love and understanding that continued to take him by surprise.

Silently he sheathed his sword and took the books from her arms. “You changed your glasses and your hair is longer.” He stated, dropping the stack to the floor.

“My others broke… someday I’m going to have to use magic to heal my eyesight but I couldn’t say goodbye to them just yet. I suppose I could have a pair made but have you seen the style? I would look like a big eyed bug. And yes Iorveth, hair tends to do that.” Her lips lifted into a teasing grin. “All that hard work I put into making you presentable for Cereys and already you’ve allowed your hair to grow shaggy once more.”

There were a great many things he wanted to do in that moment. Say something charming to keep her smiling, to ask her endless questions, primarily about her foolish reasoning to return to a life so filled with danger. But rising above every other want, was the need to touch her, to see her… he only hoped she wanted the same.

Her gaze studied him as he slipped them from their perch and dropped them on top of a pile of books. “I-“ He hesitated a moment, putting his words in a different order while he slipped the length of her braid over her shoulder and began to unravel the thick plait. “I never grow weary of hearing you go on about such nonsense. Your humor even as the world balances on the cusps of triumph or failure.”
Her smile was pleased while she reached up and removed the cap covering his hair and disfiguring scar, it joined her glasses on top of the books. “Since we’re giving off handed compliments, I never grow weary of you using your scary voice on others. Even if they claim to allegedly be allies.”

He arched his unscarred brow and unbuckled the sword belt from around her hips, desire spreading quickly through his body as she allowed him to continue, feeding the flame that was linked to the possibility that she wanted him. “I thought you had an aversion to violence.” He dropped the sword to the floor.

“I do. But when you use that ‘I’m going to kill you’ voice, something peculiar happens.” Her hands tugged on his own belt, bringing him forward a step.

Her hair was splayed over her shoulders until he brushed the long strands to her back, uncovering the ties of her boned doublet. “And what is that?”

She closed her eyes with a small smile and began to unwrap the sash from around his waist as soon as his sword belt joined hers. “I imagine you saying my name in that voice… which should be insane.” She opened her eyes to stare up at him. “But instead of bloody violence I think of something else along with it. Do you want to hear?”

The breathless sound of her rising arousal in her voice was already driving him to the edge of his limits but he lived dangerously, why not add to it. He slowly untied the top lace of her doublet. “Go on.”

A fevered pleasure shined from her eyes and she pulled the buckles of his chest armor free, soon leaving him in his under shirt, breeches, gloves, and boots before continuing. “I imagine my back against the wall.” She tugged off his gloves before allowing him to continue his way down her laces. “My legs wrapped around you, your hands holding my hips, and my name in your voice.”

He nearly moaned at the vision she created in his mind, and he shifted his stance to ease the press of his growing hardness against his tight and unforgiving breeches. Her words must have had a similar effect on herself as even in the dim light of the moon he could make out the flush spreading across her skin and even without the aid of sight he could hear it in her increasingly erratic breathing.

At last he was pushing the doublet down her arms and with her undershirt undone, he pulled the fabric down one shoulder, allowing him freedom to taste her. She gasped quietly when he ducked down and dragged his mouth along the curve where her shoulder and neck met. “Th–this probably isn’t w-wise.” Aevon whispered, in complete conflict with her actions as she tugged his shirt from his breeches.

When he reached her ear she whimpered lightly, encouraging him to bite the lobe lightly until he pulled back and took his turn lifting the shirt over her head and allowing her to do the same to him. “This is the definition of unwise decisions.”

“Is this why you stayed?” She asked breathlessly when he began to work on her camisole.

“It was not the original intention when I made the impulsive decision.” With her now bare from the waist up he calmed himself enough to reacquaint himself with her curves, taking time with lingering touches and a hungry gaze. “The path to the throne room will be of shorter distance from here. This is pure strategy.” He relished in the catch of her breath when he rolled a nipple with a thumb.

In turn he shivered lightly as her own touch traced the lines of his markings. “Mmm wrong answer. You most definitely should have said you made the decision long ago to lure me to a soft bed with
every intention of ravishing me just down the hall from our mortal enemy who could enter at any
time he wished.”

With a low growl he wrapped an arm low around her waist and backed her up to the bed, following
her down when she laid back. Legs tangled and hands roamed over exposed skin. “Let’s go with that
then.” He said in a rough voice.

When he freed his hand from beneath her hips and reached for her boots, she stopped him. “First…
say my name. In your scary voice.”

Iorveth laughed, the sound coming from deep in his chest as his lips pulled into a wide smile. He
delighted in her, finally allowing himself to appreciate her in everyway and accepting how she felt
about him. She found his voice enticing, enough so that it could rise desire for him, well he would
happily give her what she wanted.

“Aevon.” He said in this most threatening voice, but unable to smother his smile, especially when
she narrowed her eyes and bit her lip.

“Again.” She purred.

“Not until I’ve claimed my prize.”

She rolled her eyes with a smile. “Fine. One boot.”

With a thump, the boot hit the floor.

“Aevon.” He said again, immediately reaching for the next boot.

“Iorveth.” She whispered in a voice that made his cock jerk within his breeches.

In response he kicked off a boot hastily while she ran her hands up his arms, along his shoulders
where they met behind his neck.

“Iorveth.”

He didn’t know how she knew that voice was the one to use on him, the tone enough to have him
fighting a thousand battles and crossing endless oceans just to hear his name whispered, just like that.
He reconciled himself as the hopeless romantic fool that he knew himself to be.

The last boot of four, joined the previous three.

Without hesitation her legs wrapped high around his waist and she tangled her hands tightly in his
hair as he took her mouth with his, deeply and with a need that could never be eased. Moans were
consumed by the other as hips rolled and rocked together for a brief moment before the intensity
became overwhelming, causing Iorveth to pull away and raise to his knees.

Her hands fell to her chest, palming her breasts while she watched him pull her breeches down her
hips before quickly doing the same with his. It had only taken him a handful of heartbeats to finish
divesting them of the remainder of their clothing but it was far too long.

Someday, when he had more control over himself than some wet behind the ear lad, he was going to
relish in having all the time in the world to listen to her moan his name… but he had no control in
that moment. She was wet and ready, hands pleasuring herself as she waited for him to finally take
her, her gaze watching him hungrily. With a groan he bowed forward and drew lightly at a nipple
peeking from between her fingers with his teeth.
Time faded away from him when her other hand slid down his ribs and hips before wrapping around his cock, moving along the length while he rushed up against her. Moving his mouth to his favorite spot on her neck he wrapped an arm beneath her waist and the other held his weight as he slid deep inside her.

Moans and sighs mixed together in the early morning darkness, hips rocked together tightly in sync. Nails pressed deep into the skin high on his shoulders, the gentle pain nothing compared the aching need to hear her come undone, knowing it would send him into his own release.

Their movements were a steady, unrelenting pace that was quickly beginning to spiral as she pleadingly told him to don’t stop. That is until she did.

She dragged her hands down his back and clutched his hips. “Don’t m-move.” She gasped against his shoulder. Every nerve in his body was shouting for him to continue, to drive himself into her over and over, but he’d learned some time ago that when she made a request, she had something in mind, something delightful. So despite his body trembling from him resisting, he held still.

She pressed her heels into the mattress and holding his hips against her, tightly ground along his cock, stealing his breath. He lifted his head from her neck and watched her expression as she used him in the most wondrous way, needing to lick her slightly parted lips but resisting, in awe of the pleasure across her face. She came with a long whimper, the roll of her hips dragging friction along his cock and the last shreds of his control snapped.

Wrapping her in his arms, he thrust himself into her, closing his eye and pressing his brow to her shoulder. He followed her quickly, his release brought on by the lingering effects of hers. He groaned deeply as she ran her fingers through his hair, pleasure leaving him feeling weak as he finished his release within her.

For a long moment they simply laid there, wrapped up and tangled together, learning to breath and allowing complex thoughts to wander away. He vaguely realized that he must be heavy but she didn’t seem to mind as she languidly twirled her fingers through his hair while he breathed deeply against her neck.

Eventually she turned her head and pressed her lips against the spot between his brow, and sighing deeply he found the willpower to slip away from her and lay on his side.

“Mmm never going so long without that particular activity again.” She murmured sleepily as she tucked herself against his chest which he gladly pulled her closer with an arm around her waist.

“There hasn’t been anyone since-“ He paused when she tilted her head back and frowned up at him and he rushed to explain his impulsive and ill thought of question. “It’s just… months passed for you in the span of just a week for me… I went a week thinking you were gone from me forever. But you had months.” He knew he was rambling like a school boy, wishing he’d never elaborated on her comment.

Aevon rolled her eyes before closing them with a small smile on her lips. “Rest assured my love, you have thoroughly ruined all other men for me. But… I didn’t even try so who could say for sure.”

Happily ignoring the trial quickly approaching them as the morning marched onward, Iorveth continued to lay in contentment with Aevon held possessively in his arms. He hadn’t intended to need reassurance that she hadn’t sought out another during their separation- after all she believed him to be dead, and really he wouldn’t have blamed her if she had, but it did nothing but fill him with pleasure that she hadn’t.
“I am well and truly ruined for any other as well.” He added off handedly, chuckling as her hand swatted his chest.

“You only went a week before learning I was back. If I hadn’t just vowed to never go half a year without having my way with you, I’d declare right now that you suffer as I have.” She said teasingly. A moment later their quiet laughter faded, leaving them with a stretch of silence.

When Aevon shivered, Iorveth eased himself up and pulled a blanket folded decoratively over the foot of the bed, up over them both, holding her close once more.

“I keep having to tell myself that this is real… that you’re alive.” She whispered.

His chest ached at the pain in her voice, himself amazed that someone could ever feel such things for him. “I never expected anyone to mourn me when I died… more likely feasts held in my slayers honor. But knowing now that I caused such an experience for you… I could never make that up to you Aevon. I had to save you, and that was the most assured way that I could.”

“I know my love. You have nothing to apologize for, not even for doing what was best for our people. I myself always encouraged you to step up and do what was in their best interest… waiting for Emryr’s next move while establishing support for our cause was exactly what needed to be done.”

His thoughts suddenly rushing through his mind as her words tugged at the part of his heart he’d held guarded against her, and with a feeling of peace spreading through him, he let them in. “Our people… our cause. That is why I love you Aevon. Even after learning of our weakness which led to our downfall, and the ruthless measures we’ve had to succumb to since as we claw ourselves out of the miserable pit our ancestors and dh’oine have attempted to bury us in… you accept them as your own. Knowing they might not accept you as willingly, many will never look beyond the shape of your ear, but… I know you would care for them regardless.”

“Peace and love have to start somewhere. Why not with a ruthless hater of dh’oine and an ‘other worlder’ with naive ideals.”

“How we will manage to straighten Temeria out with my impatience with mindless dh’oine and your endless wish to talk diplomacy, I cannot fathom.”

“First, we eliminate the common enemy and then we put them to work, working alongside them to rebuild the city and country. Give them borders to protect, crops and livestock to grow and nurture, forges to create and schools to learn in, human and non-human side by side, and it will happen. Slowly and over time.”

It was a lot to consider and a rather large part of him wished for his original plan of just killing all the humans as they had done to the Aen Seidhe for centuries. It was the easier way. But as he’d learned recently, taking the path that was easiest did not make it the right path. He had learned from her, a relatively short time for him when he thought about it and for the first time in his long, violent life, he was looking forward to what came next.

All that lay between him and the future he was looking forward to building with the woman in his arms, were the next two hours that could only end with Emryr’s death or his own. The thought of Aevon having to live through his death a second time, had him tightening his arms around her impulsively.

“Why did you return? You were safe and believed me to be dead… what was there to return to?” He asked quietly, nudging his nose into her hair and inhaling her scent.
“It was Pop. I wasn’t content or happy but was finally beginning to find the strength to try and build something out of what I had left after loosing you. But Pop… he’s always known we didn’t belong there. We had our simple lives, lost our loved ones, and nothing was holding us there. So after some convincing on his part, we sold everything we owned, bought back Vaeri’s circlet, the only clue Pop had that we were more than just earthlings. And when the time was right, we made the journey, using a dimeritium bomb that Geralt had given me to close the portal for good.

I had no plans other than living the life of a vagabond with Pop, showing him all the places I fell in love with while discovering more as we went. As much as that life would have, in its own way, been fulfilling, I find I’d much rather be here with you and limiting my days of exploration to fun little vacations. Everything that has led to this moment, destiny has been at the center of it all. I was always meant to find you and help find a way to bring our people out of that endless pit you described.”

“You had taken away your most assured way of returning… you were coming back for good. Remind me to tell you of my own brush with destiny, when this is all over.”

Aevon tried to stifle a yawn but failed spectacularly. “Tell me now.”

“It’s a long story and we need to first clean and then ready ourselves. The sun begins to rise soon.”

“So… tell me as we do all that.”

It was a decent enough compromise so Iorveth reluctantly left the bed, offering a hand out to her as she followed. The part of him that was constantly in need of her, lingering along the edges of his mind and waiting within the deepest recesses of his blood, urged him to reach for her and play out her fantasy with her back against the wall.

But he forced himself to be content with an all too brief kiss and a lingering caress down her body before separating and taking care of their individual needs. The silence he filled with the tale of his days with Vrihedd Brigade, riding with Yaevinn and doing the dirty work of Emryr. Up until the Peace of Cintra where the Scoia’tael were deemed common criminals and made an example of.

Of thirty two planned executions, he told of how only he and one other commander escaped the death sentence. Aevon’s gaze never left him as they dressed and he spoke of Isengrim and their escape from the Ravine of the Hydra, all made possible by the right foot placed in the right spot on a crumbling ledge. The fall should have killed them both, as well as the boulders that followed.

But destiny was on his side that day and though the underground river had been painful upon contact, it swiftly carried him and Isengrim from the falling rocks that would have otherwise crushed them immediately at the best, trapped them underwater at the worst.

Their survival hadn’t been guaranteed after that fateful escape of their execution. With hands bound behind their backs and the rush of a ruthless current giving them no chance to free themselves, they’d had to purposefully move themselves into the path of great slabs of rock, using them to halt their travels long enough to take turns in unraveling the water swollen ropes.

It was a long journey before they found a path from the cave system, bloodied and bruised. They’d parted ways, Isengrim went east and he went south where he began his work in uniting the Scoia’tael against anyone who wore a crown and any man or woman who stood between them.

“It was not my first escape from an assured death. But it was the most memorable.” He finished his tale, holding his hand out to accept the sword Aevon held toward him.
“Where is Isengrim now?”

“In Dol Blathanna, awaiting word from me to confront Francesca for her betrayal.”

“What will happen to her?” Aevon sat on the edge of the bed, bracing her hands on her knees.

“She is not a strong, queen, duchess, whatever she calls herself these days. She will give in to the demands if it means she keeps whatever title we allow her.” He bent down and picked up his cap and her glasses. “Isengrim will control Dol Blathanna’s army. Give it the general it needs.”

“What are our demands?” She slid her glasses on, blinking at him as her eyes focused.

“The usual drivel. Fealty to Temeria, recall the branding of Scoia’tael as war criminals and terrorists, and so on.”

Easing her arms around his waist, she laid her head on his chest. “I can’t imagine how my life would have turned out had you not escaped execution.” When she shivered, he slid his hands down her back, “The thought terrifies me.” She whispered, and he could feel it.

A blood freezing fear slipped around him… he would do anything to chase it away but the sounds of a city slowly awakening came from beyond the window, drew both their gazes. The first light of dawn, signaling the time had come.

“Iorveth… what if I can’t do this? I’ve barely experimented with the basics of oneiromancy.” Aevon looked back at him, fear shining brightly from her gaze.

He didn’t have a true answer so instead he eased her from his arms until she again sat on the edge of the bed and knelt before her putting them at eye level as he wove a hand into the hair at the back of her head. “You will because you must. These moments are all that stand between us and a life… together.”

“You truly wish for that? A life with me?” She whispered the question, reaching out to touch his jaw.

“Don’t tell Dandelion that you’ve convinced me of such romantic notions but yes. Where we go from here, whether it’s setting Temeria to rights, wandering through random portals and into lost ruins, or herding sheep until the end of time… it’s going to be me and you.”

She smiled softly and tilted her head slightly. “Not even going to ask me if that’s what I want? A life with you?”

His smile was as genuine as hers. “Call it intuition. After all you said I’d ruined all other men for you.”

“But did I say women?”

He chuckled lightly and leaned forward, taking her mouth with a deep kiss that quickly stoked the embers within him. “I’ll keep working on ruining you for them too.” He whispered against her lips.

With a sigh she pulled away slightly. “But after this.”

“Yes. After this.”

“Please be careful… when I saw my future, it was me who killed him, but with his dying breath he took me with him. I don’t know exactly how it works but I didn’t look for instances in which it was
someone else who faced him… I thought I was going to be the one.”

“You get me there, and I’ll do the rest. Emryr has nothing to live for outside of greed and cruelty.” He said fiercely.

Her gaze went far away for a moment, a dreamy smile spreading across her lips before she focused on him once more.

“What?” He asked but her smile only turned secretive but no less happy.

“Us, my love, we have everything to live for… I’m counting on you returning to me.”

“I will be the first you see when you wake.” He swore fiercely before standing, her head tilting back to follow him.

“Say my name.” She said in a husky voice.

Fighting a grin he obliged her, knowing perfectly well what she expected from him. “Aevon.”

She gave an exaggerated shiver with a matching smirk before settling back on the bed and closing her eyes. When her lips began to move soundlessly, a spell weaving together, he firmly turned away.

Moving to stand in front of Iorveth, Aevon wondered if he knew she were there. The dimension she was in was nearly identical to his, the only difference being the hazy film that seemed to turn the once vibrant world to a cool vignette. Colors were blue hued and bled together without defining lines and sounds were hollow.

Iorveth seemed somehow sharper than the rest of the setting but perhaps that was because he was alive as opposed to the inanimate objects scattered about the room. She wanted to touch him but feared if she did, she might pull him in with her, so she held off and stepped through the door.

The guard, another of Roche’s spies likely, stood just outside but when Aevon set a hand on her shoulder and whispered the spell, she crumbled to the ground. Her physical form that is. Her intangible form however appeared behind her, now trapped in the same dreamlike dimension as herself.

Not waiting for the downpour of shouts of confusion, Aevon continued on from her room, touching guards and soldiers as she went. Each time she repeated the spell, the same that she’d cast on the spy, brought them to her side.

Some, once they caught on to what she was doing tried to stop her, including the spy in her angry confusion, but as they were intangible now, their hands simple went through her. Left with nothing more than their shouts and threats, Aevon did her best to ignore them.

With each she touched and cast her spell on, the more difficult it became to continue forward. She was holding too many souls prisoner and knew not how many still lay between Iorveth and Emryr, but at least she knew where to go.

Emryr was a creature of habit, and a known early riser. He would be in the throne room as he had been in her visions, doing what, she couldn’t be certain of. But he would be there.

As she approached the tall throne room doors, her vision darkened. The shouting grew louder until
she could feel the hazy air vibrating with their cries of anger and fear. She’d lost count ages ago, of how many she’d taken prisoner, but from what she could see, she had at least two more before she attempted to take hold of Emryr.

Desperate, she stepped between the last two guards, their lances crossed in front of the doors. Reaching out with shaking hands she took hold of both their shoulders and closing her eyes she pulled them over.

Pain burned heavily through her mind and she pressed her palms to her eyes, her illusion glasses falling to the ground. The pain wasn’t receding as she’d hoped, counting on a brief break in casting the spell to push it back to a manageable point, but she wasn’t that lucky it seemed.

She began to consider the very real possibility that she was going to die if she continued further away from her body, carrying the weight of so many tormented souls in her pocket of reality, with a spell she’d never practiced before.

But she couldn’t stop either.

Iorveth was making his approach, stepping over soulless bodies, his swords drawn and gaze watchful. Her part in all this was not done, not yet. As desperate as her mind was to return to her body, she couldn’t.

Forcing herself forward, Aevon stepped through the doors and nearly wept with panic.

Yennefer stood near Emryr and his throne, watching no doubt as Yaevinn began his assault on the Nilfgaardians from the hidden Aen Seidhe ruins deep beneath the palace. A poetic justice in a way.

But Aevon told herself not to worry about Yennefer. She didn’t know if she could make it to the emperor but she had to try to at least distract him enough for Iorveth to have the upper hand. With heavy steps and pain coming to her in sharp waves, she reached the steps. Emryr was staring past her, gaze locked on the still shut doors.

“You do not look well Wendy.” He said quietly, but somehow his voice resonated beyond that of those tormented by her and she noticed he was no longer looking beyond her but directly into her eyes. “What is wrong with her sorceress?”

Yennefer turned to look at her, lips parting slightly. “She’s not corporeal.”

“Yes I gathered that when I saw her walk through solid wood doors.” Emryr snapped coldly.

Aevon wanted to know how it was she could be seen but she was too tired and beginning to suffocate from the pain wracking her mind and intangible body. With a desperate cry she lunged up the last of the stairs and set her hands to either side of Emryr’s face and looking deeply into his dark gaze she began the spell. It gave her a small ounce of satisfaction that while he could see her somehow, he could not touch her as she could him.

With the spell nearly complete he began to slump in the throne... but Aevon made a mistake. In her relief and haste, victory assured, she released the spell too soon and her hold on the emperor slipped. Anguished and desperate she tried to start over but it was too late. She was loosing all sensation of both their realities.

She didn’t want to let go, terrified of what was going to happen because of her failure... but she no longer had control and silently she slipped away into the unknown.
Iorveth waited a few moments after the last two guards fell before opening them and striding through. A wave of panic filled him to see Emryr still awake, wondering what had happened to Aevon. Emryr was slumped in his throne, holding his head as he stared down at his approach, Yennefer coming to stand next to the throne.

“She failed and no doubt such a powerful spell on one so untrained at the cost of her own life. If the bleeding from her ears were evidence enough.” Emryr said evenly, straightening his back.

“Shut up.” Iorveth snapped in a dangerous voice. Whether the emperor said such things out of truth, merely to shaken him, or both, Iorveth forced himself to remain impassive after that small outburst. It did feel good however to see the emperor clench his jaw, rage sparking from his gaze. Good. “Aevon did just as was needed. She saw to it that I reached you, anything beyond that was unnecessary as I have always demanded the pleasure of killing you myself.”

“Yennefer.” Emryr commanded with just her name.

“She needs you Horsewoman of War.” Iorveth added, his gaze intent on his prey. Without further word or glance, the sorceresses left the room, presumably to see to Aevon. Hopefully.

Now alone, Emryr stood, his already impressive figure towering above from his vantage point as he drew his sword. Iorveth calculated his moves, of where to keep Emryr on the defensive until he weakened. Iorveth knew him to be very skilled with a sword, and his grip on his own swords tightened in anticipation of not only finally reaching this long awaited moment, but of the challenge as well.

Pushing away his worry of Aevon and how the sacking of the palace went elsewhere, Iorveth slowly made his way of the stairs, Emryr following his every movement. The moment his ascent was completed, he began his offence against the emperor.

Whether two shorter swords versus one broader sword or any variation and combination of weapons, the two men were evenly matching of skill, strength, and speed. They traded blows, taking turns in their deadly dance between advance and retreat. Both were determined and relishing in the strenuous dodging of blades.

Iorveth drew first blood with high downward spinning slash, he caught Emryr on the shoulder of his sword arm, but he quickly paid for it with a powerful blow caught near the sword hilt, loosening his grip on the sword and it clattered to the marble floor.

With a feral grin he tucked his now weaponless arm behind his back and changed his style to take advantage of an opponent with a wound. Relentlessly he used heavy, bone jarring downward swings, forcing the emperor to raise his heavier sword high to catch the blow before having to lower again to stop an upward slash.

He quickly grew tired of Iorveth’s tactic and with a whistle, summoned soldiers from a servant’s entry. Iorveth wasn’t surprised and paid them little attention. So long as he stayed close to Emyr, his soldiers would not risk accidently striking him instead.

Something the other man quickly realized as he tried to turn Iorveth’s back. Knowing he only had to hold out until his own soldiers reached the throne room, Iorveth made a desperate and reckless move by ducking beneath Emryr’s blade and rushing him, tackling him to the floor with a shoulder low into the man’s waist.
The sound of his warrior’s battle cries filled the throne room, and without looking knew they were waging war on Emryr’s soldiers. When he moved draw his sword across Emryr’s throat, he was caught by surprise when he’d allowed the other man to remain in control of his sword and he paid for the mistake as the swords steel pommel caught him on the side of the head in a powerful blow, sending him sprawling to his back beside Emryr.

Blinking back the throbbing pain behind his eye and feeling around for his sword, he felt a heavy weight settle on his waist and hands wrap around his throat. Furious with himself and no where near finished fighting, Iorveth bared his teeth and pulled at the hands closing off his ability to breath.

“That’s it, fight with your very last breath.” Emryr whispered harshly. “How many Scoia’tael live to see old age? None. You will be picked off one by one, a dying breed for a dying cause. You and your ilk failed me and now-.” Emryr broke off with a cry as a black and white blur with sharp snapping teeth tore into the soft pliable skin of his ear.

As Azlin growled and twisted her head in her attempt to sever the ear, Iorveth was released. A yelp told him that the release granted him had been paid for by Emryr flinging the dog away with heave, but it was enough for him to pull his hunting knife free of its sheath and before Emryr could react, shoved the blade deep into the man’s heart.

Emryr grunted and clutched his hands around the Iorveth’s grip on the knife, but he quickly lost the strength to fight back and slumped to his side. A heartbeat later, Iorveth was up back to his feet, and after a few stumbling steps in which he checked on Azlin who though shaken seemed otherwise unharmed, ran from the room.

He ignored Yaevinn and Roche as they continued to finish of the Nilfgaard soldiers, he would deal with Roche later. He retraced the path back to where Aevon lay, realization that the soldiers along the way were dead, and doing nothing to calm his on setting fear. There was no moment to triumph in their victory over Emryr, not until he knew Aevon would be there to partake in it as well.

He pushed his way into the room and didn’t stop until he reached the bed, dread flooding his every vein. Yennefer sat at her side, cleaning blood streaming from Aevon’s ears.

“She’s alive Iorveth… but just.” Yennefer said quietly.

“Why does she bleed? Why has she not awaken? The others… they’re dead.” Feeling sick to his stomach he pulled a chair to the side of the bed and sat down heavily, reaching for her hand.

“Best somewhat educated guess? She held onto the spell for too long. Magic of any kind takes a great deal of mental strength, but just as you grow tried the longer you wield a sword, the same happens with magic. The bleeding is trauma from over exertion.”

“Best somewhat educated guess on how to help her?” Iorveth bit out coldly, glaring at the sorceress who merely rolled her eyes at him.

“No need to be dramatic Iorveth. Rest- a great deal of it- will heal her just fine. She has ancient Aen Elle blood, and they have this little trick of accelerated healing. So long as the wound begins to heal before it turns fatal- such as a knife to the heart or severing of an artery.”

He felt it was too soon to grow lax in his fear, but he did lessen his glare and even managed a nod of appreciation. “Thank you.” He muttered and dropped his gaze back to Aevon who besides an unnaturally pale pallor and bloodied ears, looked to be sleeping peacefully.

“You’re welcome. Now then, if you will excuse me, I have a daughter to inform that she is now an
Empress and can begin calling her troops back to where they belong.”

“Give Zireael and the sage our regards… they will want to know of Aevon’s return.” Iorveth said as Yennefer handed him a clean linen cloth and stood from the bed.

“Avallac’h is with her? I’m going to flay him if he’s touched her.” She said fiercely before summoning a portal.

“I doubt any touch would have been allowed if it wasn’t welcomed.” He spoke up impulsively, earning him a violet eyed glare.

“When you have a child who has the annoying habit of only ever seeing the good in people, then you might have an opinion.”

“If I hadn’t pulled the woman fighting for her life right now from a river, you would be dead as well. She rarely sees anything other than the good, just like Ciri. It is because they see that within others that we learn to be better… for them.”

“Fine. If he’s hurt her then… And see to that wound before you bleed all over her.” Yennefer snapped at him before stepping through the portal, leaving him alone with a softly breathing Aevon.

There was an awareness in the space surrounding her. She felt she was sitting on something hard and she lowered her hands from her lap to run her fingers along with wood. Mostly rough in places but smooth in areas where touch was common.

Slowly a hazy yellow glow from a point slightly above her began to brighten and she realized she was on the porch swing of the old sheep farm. The rocking chairs were empty, and Pops place beside her was just as equally vacant.

She didn’t have time to feel sad about the loneliness however as she heard her mothers voice calling from beyond the porch steps.

“C’mon Wendy- or is it Aevon now?”

“Aevon… well she has lots of names now, but that’s the one that’s truly her.” Dad added.

Curiously Aevon stood and made her way down the steps.

“There ya are! We gotta get goin Aevon girl.” Mom held out a hand which she immediately took.

“Where are we going? Did I-“ She paused, her mind beginning to race as she began to remember details. The pocket dimensions spell, the imprisoning of countless soldiers, her failure to take Emryr. The pain, suffocating, falling into the unknown. “Am I dead?” She whispered.

This time it was her dad who answered. “Oh honey, you have such a long time before that. How long do those elvish people live again? Well with every day that you spend in a world full of magic, you become more and more entwined with your ancestry.”

“Well… that’s good right?”

Her parents shared a look before looking back at her again. “Sure is wonderful. Now then- Come. On.” Mom spoke.
“Where to?”

“Well you didn’t think we were going sit on that porch while you and the old man go out and have an adventure did ya? That little piece of us that will always be with you is tagging along.” Mom said, tugging on her hand.

“We have a campfire to go and find.” Dad added.

A breathless excitement speared through her chest. “I know how to get us there quickly.” Aevon said and closed her eyes. “Around the fire, my heart’s desire.” When she felt the warmth of the afore mentioned fire, she opened her eyes and smiled.

“Well that’s handy. But now that we’re here, you better get going. We’ll keep everyone occupied with stories and laughter. And honey… feel your guilt and learn from it, but do not let it control you. You did a wonderful thing for a terrible price but you won’t have to pay for it alone. Remember that.”

As much as Aevon wished for longer, she knew it was time to let go of them for a time. They were right after all. They would always be with her, and if ever she needed to, she now knew where she was sure to find them.

Blinking back tears of love and farewells, Aevon allowed the dream world to fade and slowly came awake. There was blinding pain behind her eyes and she felt every nerve of her body light on fire without even moving. But it was all worth it, for she only had to blink once more to find her focus.

True to his word, Iorveth’s beloved face, relaxed and at peace in a way it only ever was when he slept, was there waiting for her.

Chapter End Notes

AN// I love you guys <3 Hope yall enjoyed and only one more chapter to go! ; ;
Blithely it occurred to Aevon that she’d seen this moment before. The white dress, the crumbling ruins, all set against the back drop of a misty morning that was the epitome of late autumn. As of yet, she could not see what had made her smile in that far away memory of a future moment that might come to be. But as she looked down at her white dress, pretty and new with flouncy skirts swaying around her calves, she knew it must be soon. A true moment in time, one she’d wondered about for many silent starry eyed moments, swiftly approaching.

It was enough to leave her breathless.

Of all the future moments she could have had, this is one that came true. Or would. She’d known it would the moment she’d seen the dress in Vizima, just a few days before she was to leave for Adhart. Excitement had stirred in her blood as she’d stood there, staring at the dress displayed in the dressmakers window. It had cost a pretty penny, but she’d had to have it.

Now, as she made her way up the steep path to the ruins overlooking Adhart, she thought of all the turns she’d taken to get to this point. To this future moment.

Of waking to find Nilfgaard’s suffocating grasp on Temeria crumbling. Being reunited with friends and family, the promising herself to not judge Roche too harshly, and pride… such deep joyous pride as Iorveth set aside his hatred enough in order to work with the equally ruthless human. It was not a popular decision with the Scoia’tael, but Roche loved Temeria and gladly- well perhaps not gladly as he had to acknowledge that he answered to Iorveth- accepted the role of protecting its interest. After all, Dijkstra was continually stirring the turmoil that would always ravage the North.

Now standing near the ruins, Aevon huffed a laugh at a particular memory, of countless familiar faces surrounding a long table in the Narakort tavern, a knife held to Iorveth’s throat while he simultaneously held one to Roche’s. The table between them cluttered with food, drink, and evidence of excessive gambling. Pop had rolled his eyes while Zoltan shouted for the two hot bloods to settle whether the squirrels got the pleasure of putting Nilfgaard heads on pikes or the stripes with a good arm wrestling match.

As for herself, she had been left more than a bit breathless to see that familiar glint in Iorveth’s eye, one that spoke of feral violence. That wild gleam paired with bared teeth as he exerted authority over his ‘arch nemesis’, she had quickly stepped in and pushed the Blue Stipe commanders hand down firmly with the word that he could take the northern border for now while Dijkstra kept Aedirn busy.

Without breaking Iorveth’s gaze, she’d firmly wrapped her hand around his knife wielding fist and had pulled him away in the direction of the stairs. He’d gone willingly of course, the awakened violence that constantly simmered just beneath the surface within him gentling just enough to make her toes curl and neither had paid any attention to the hoots and whistles that followed them.

Aevon set a hand on the damp stone wall towering above her, her grin slipping free from her attempts at holding it back with a bite to her lip.

That night had turned out to be rather special.
Sighing happily she tilted her head back and took in the ancient ruin. Years had not been kind to the once imposing guard tower. Likely a line of defense to protect Ryer before it was Ryer, when humans were conquering the elves.

Closing her eyes she could imagine the walls still holding strong, hear the sounds of soldiers sharpening their blades, the scent of mud and hay mixed with burning torches. Magic could still be found, clinging to the leaves of the green ivy and swirling through the morning mist. She remembered standing in the small village below, wondering if time would ever allow her a moment to stand within the crumbling stone. If between her research, poor sleep schedule, and fighting her growing feelings for a specific hater of everything she represented, she would find a moments peace to explore. She hadn’t then, life’s twists and turns quickly pulling her away from the small village that had been so deeply hurt.

But now… though life was not any less chaotic, with her return to celebrate an ever strengthening alliance with Ryer despite the continuing struggles with Aedirn, she impulsively slipped away from the low burning campfire she’d slept beside. Welcomed the brief privacy of the wheelhouse while she changed into fresh clothing- the simple white dress-, slung a small leather bag holding her journals of pencils over her shoulder and explored until she found the path that would lead her to that towering ruin.

She had walked with bare feet turning chilled with the early autumn cold, the need to feel unrestricted and whimsical playing a large part in her reasoning to forego her boots. It reminded her that she lived in a world where she could make her own rules, dance barefoot through the grass or pull her love away from a from testosterone fueled stubbornness and have her way with him. Though no one had ever told her on Earth that she must wear shoes at all times, she had abided by the unspoken rule that she would.

It had become a rather freeing habit of hers. A long day with close minded humans and elves was usually much better spent without pinched toes or heavy heels. While in the beginning the more nobler of those she had to deal with gave her more than a few raised brows, they’d quickly learned to look past it. She was there to see to the rebuilding efforts and successful integration of two angry peoples, not there to suffer their bickering while equally suffering from footwear. Of course Iorveth was adamant that if she left the palace, for the safety of her digits and health, that her boots were a must. She wasn’t an imbicile she’d heartily reminded him.

So with her feet bare and more than cold, she’d followed the river, past the place where under the tree scattered moonlight she’d first had her breath stolen away. Just after that, the waterfall along with the fields of blue lotus. The sight of them had made her smile in remembrance of the young sorceress currently away in Dol Blathanna to continue her training.

Eventually she’d found her way up the cliff, sighing in relief as the cold breeze had chilled her exercise warmed skin. Anticipation had left her breathless but now magic and curiosity had taken over. With very little effort, her hand still pressed into the stone, she slipped into the memory with a sigh.

She could feel the fear in the air, taste the iron of blood, hear the shouts.

Opening her eyes, she watched as a man- a human one at that- stood just out of her reach. His blond hair lay limp down his back, darkened with sweat and dirt. He was well armored but it showed signs of seeing many battles, and currently he held his helm tucked under an arm, blood gleaming on the sword held loose in the same hand.

Walking around him slowly, her heart beating wildly, she took in the blood splattered across his chest, his dark eyes looking out across in the direction of where Adhart would one day be. A glance
at their surroundings showed the tower standing tall and proud. An unfamiliar banner snapped in the
wind, the sun shining brightly through the bright red fabric. Human bodies lay freshly slew all
around them, a cart burned hot, the horse strapped to it, dead. Whether he had been a survivor or
slayer, Aevon had yet been able to determine.

Everywhere she looked, there was death.

Everywhere save the man’s dark eyes.

They were alive with fear and hope. She felt his emotions with every breath they both took, growing
stronger as she finished her circle around him. As if he’d been waiting for her to join his side once
more, he turned from the cliff and made his way toward the tower. With a rough shout he kicked the
iron reinforced door until the frame splintered.

Slayer then.

Though she knew she was in no danger, Aevon felt her muscles tense as she followed him into the
shadowed tower.

With the quick ease of a well-seasoned warrior, he slipped his helmet back on and leapt into battle
with the few soldiers left to defend the tower.

As she watched the battle play out, flinching at the sound of steel sinking into flesh before scraping
on bone, she searched for what drove the lone warrior. Why did he throw himself into the battle as if
his only option left were to take every last life within its stone walls?

Closing her eyes within the memory, she sifted through his emotions. Stepped around his bloodlust,
fear, hope… and found desperation. She followed it, sinking deeper into what drove him to such
vicious lengths.

Love.

It took the shape of a rising sun, light spreading across a sea of grass waving gently in a soft breeze, a
doe and a fawn walking with calm serenity in the distance.

Aevon opened her eyes to find the last soldier slip from the sword, his armor clattering on the stone
floor. Without waiting for the last breath, the lone warrior lunged for the stairs, taking them upward
as quickly as he could. She however did pause, taking a moment to glance in the opposite direction.
Down the stairs that led into the darkness, sinking into the depths of the cliff.

Something called for her, like a finger beckoning for her to slip into the darkness. With a wry grin
she winked to the darkness, promising to explore its secrets later.

Smoothing her hands down her dress in anticipation, she hurried up after the warrior.

All playfulness and exhilaration left her in one stomach twisting gasp when she reached to top of the
tower, mere steps behind the warrior.

His shouts of horror and panic were echoes of her own.

They stood shoulder to shoulder, gazes torn between a woman- willowy with her pointed ears
poking through her chestnut hair, and a child… ears slightly tipped giving evidence to a mixed
heritage, the sight of which almost had her whimper in their familiarity. Both with tears streaming
down their dirtied faces, and both with blades to their throats. The woman met his gaze, her
shoulders were held straight and though she looked terrified, she gave a small nod.
Aevon almost pulled herself from the memory, knowing there would not be a happy ending for this family. But she held herself firm. She would watch, knowing there was nothing to be done to change the past and instead use the pain that this tragedy would bring her to influence the future. Tell their tale in full detail with hopes that it would never happen again.

Fighting back her horror, she forced bravery into her spine, her stance matching that of the woman’s and she prepared herself to carry on their story into the present.

The warrior had made a decision, she could tell by the clench of his jaw and the flex of his grip on his sword. However, he did not make the choice she had thought he would. She had expected him to make a fathers choice. Of saving his child’s life with the sacrifice of his mates life. It was a terribly difficult decision, but it was one she would have made too… as much as it pained her, there was not a universe in existence where she could choose any life over that of her child.

But there was a third option. And it spoke of her lack of a true warrior’s heart for even if she had thought of it, she would not have had the courage to take it.

And just like that it was over in the blink of an eye when with a spin, the warrior tossed his sword to the woman and loosed a second smaller blade. As she caught the handle and deftly spun the blade, driving it into the soldier’s stomach, the dagger flew into the throat of the second soldier.

Aevon had clapped her hands over her mouth, eyes wide and burning in their need to blink.

It was reckless and could have cost both the mother and child their lives, but the swords at their throats slid harmlessly away as their captors slumped to the floor.

She learned a lesson as she watched the memory continue, watched hands trembling with fear and relief, arms tossed around loved ones, tears wiped away. She welcomed the feelings of the reunited family, unable to fully imagine the horror they felt, and praying to whatever deity happened to be watching over this beautifully broken world, that she never would.

Their gentle whispers and cries were over taken by cheers, and Aevon allowed the magic surrounding her to dissipate. The tense alertness left her body with a sigh and she blinked back into the present. She still felt the lingering emotions of the family but they did little to ease her sadness.

This time, the story had ended somewhat happily. It hadn’t been easy, and she couldn’t say if they had lived out a long life together, but for so many other families, their endings had not been joyous.

Brushing away a tear she turned toward the cheering, and the sound of Azlin barking in excitement, chiding herself for being so emotional. She knew it came with the territory, but this was meant to be a time of happiness, and looking for sadness would not help anyone.

With a sigh she stepped away from the ruin, her hand falling to rest against the soft material of her dress and she approached the cliff edge.

As she settled, her bare feet dangling freely and without fear of the breathtaking height, she felt excitement thrum through her blood.

This was her moment.

A future memory that had been several years in the making, and she would at last see what had made her smile as if she were watching fireworks light up the sky for the first time on a hot July night back on Earth.

She curled her hands around the cool rocky ledge and peered down to the small yet steadily growing
village below.

But she was most definitely not smiling.

Through the cheering, she could make out the thunder of hoof beats. She’d known there was to be a horserace, but it was meant to be on a course between Adhart and Ryer, not around the village. Of course it all made sense when only two riders appeared to be racing past cheering villagers.

Dain and of course Iorveth… possibly putting their horses- namely the still breathtaking Xalvador-through some pre-race exercises. That was all well and expected but was not what had Aevon gritting her teeth and narrowing her gaze in anger.

It was the little body of her three year old son held in the saddle.

“I’m going to kill him.” Aevon growled to herself as she watched the race. “I’m going to kill all of them.” She added once she noticed the equally small body of Dain’s own son in his own saddle. And there was Pop, she easily picked out his snowy white hair, cheering them on. “Am I the only one with any sense in this family?” She muttered, just barely holding the words back from a shout.

But her smile did come at last, and she didn’t even realize it as she lived in the moment. As a lover and a mother, watching the center of her universe- of every universe she could possibly exist in, she in turn existed in the moment.

She watched as the men pulled their beastly horses to a stop in the center of the village, and her anger receded into irritation as she promised to shout at the lot of them for putting the children in such danger. But even that faded from the front of her thoughts as her son- her little boy with dark hair and green eyes clapped his hands in joy. His father picked him up and with practiced ease placed him on his shoulders before urging Xalvador to trot gently through the crowd.

They were putting on a show for their people, not as the current Lord Protector of Temeria and heir but as one of them. It was odd to see someone like Iorveth welcoming the praise… but when the joy of your own child was involved, how could one not.

So there she sat, watching her love of this life and every life she should ever be granted thereafter with their son held high on his shoulders as the village they had saved together heaped praise and adoration at them. Even from her perch from above she could feel their happiness, of Iorveth’s pride and Tareq’s joy. It bloomed within her chest with more warmth than the stars, her finger tips tingled, and chaotic magic settled around her shoulders.

A memory that would last forever, just as the memory of the tower would last forever.

She could not fault Iorveth and Tareq their moment together. While she would have preferred a safer moment, she could accept that Iorveth was always going to have that wildness within him. He might have the patience to suffer through politics while enclosed within pristine palace walls for days and weeks at a time, there would always be the predominate side of them that belonged among the forest, the mountains, anywhere the wild called to them.

And that wildness was never more apparent in Tareq than it was in that moment as well.

That is what brought on her smile. The similarity between father and son…

Closing her eyes she brought forth the memory of Tareq making his way into the world, after months of Iorveth’s apprehension over his suitability as a father, and though she was exhausted from the seemingly endless labor, she’d watched as Triss placed a newly cleaned and bundled Tareq in his father’s arms.
Months of apprehension had melted instantly away from Iorveth’s body.

Something within herself had clicked into place as she watched, exhausted and fascinated, as a war hardened soldier instantly fell head over heels in love. The look of awe for Tareq, followed with a lingering kiss pressed against her damp brow had nearly overwhelmed her, but it was with peace that she had fallen into a much needed sleep.

And it was only Iorveth and their closest friends that were surprised as over the following years that he took to fatherhood as easily as he did to everything he did. She had never seen anyone so excited about showing the world to another being. And truthfully, that is why she promised to go easy on him when she confronted him about racing about at break neck speeds with their three year old Tareq.

When she opened her eyes, the cheering had dissipated and her family was no longer able to be seen. The true race was not meant to take place until after the noon feast and after taking notice of the waning morning, Aevon decided that she had plenty of time yet before it was time to eat.

However, her ever increasing appetite reminded her that she’d yet to eat and demanded satisfaction, so she pulled a small blackberry pie wrapped in linen cloth from her bag. Not exactly appropriate for the first meal of the day but her mouth had watered when she’d smelled them being baked the day before, and as was her habit when it came to delicious food, she’d stashed some away for situations exactly like this.

Moaning happily as she bit into the flaky crust, she pushed away from the ledge and wandered around the tower remains. Her gaze slipped over the now grass covered floor, smiling triumphantly around a mouthful of pie when she was able to make out the entrance to the stairs leading downward. They were well hidden by centuries of growth but looked to be stably cut into the stone.

And just as it had while she’d been within the memory, the darkness whispered words of welcome and intrigue.

After licking the last trace of pie away from her fingers, and realizing with a wicked grin that Iorveth had his dangerous tendencies, she just might have her own as well… she brushed aside the vines and stepped down into the darkness.

She held a hand out, palm facing upward and summoned a bright ball of light. Avallac’h had given it some official magic name, but she continued to call them these balls of light magic faery lights, a bit of homage to her own legends, and followed the shadows down.

It was of course reckless to explore such a place without weapons and armor, or even shoes and she would have to be quick about it if she wished to keep herself free of Iorveth’s own lecture before she could even have the chance to voice her.

Luckily there was only one floor down, and it house very little furnishings save a chest covered in vines and shelves built into the stone. It wasn’t a chest of treasure or even some legendary weapon, but the contents made her smile all the more.

Books.

Old and covered in dust that had managed to slip through the cracks in the wood and iron. After carefully opening one, she found they were journals in an unfamiliar language, crude maps drawn inside of unfamiliar lands…

With a grin she put the journals back and closed the lid. Heavy, but small enough for her to manage
without a great deal of effort, Aevon lugged it up the stairs. Her faery light fading away as she no
longer had need of it, she prepared to make her way down to Adhart with her treasure in hand and in
her mind already putting together the letter she would send to Avallac’h. He would absolutely want
to see what she’d discovered.

But all thought was brought to a comical halt as she caught sight of Iorveth leaning against the ruin
across from her, arms crossed and a single foot braced on the wall behind him. He was dressed in a
deep green shirt of linen, deep wine colored tights with his blue sash belted around his waist. His
brow was low as he watched her and the sight sent her immediately into defensive mode.

Unfreezing her muscles, Aevon tilted her chin back and strode past him. “Good morning Iorveth.”
She said crisply.

“Aevon.” Whether it was in greeting or warning, she couldn’t tell, he was that damn good at
masking himself when he wished to. Of course the hand that shot out and wrapped around her wrist
and brought her to a stop ought to have been answer enough but it sent equally conflicting emotions
swirling through her.

On one hand, she wanted to latch onto her anger and give him a good set down for the stunt with
Tareq. And then there was the other hand, the part of her that thrilled any time he touched her. She
 glanced from his hand up until she met his gaze and her lips quirked up into a grin at what she found
here. He wanted to be angry with her for leaving alone and without weapons… but his answering
smile spoke of everything she needed to know.

Neither of them wanted to argue. They both knew he would not promise to raise their children to be
just as wild and free as himself, as the true free Aen Seidhe they were. Just as they knew she
wouldn’t promise to be more careful when she left the safety of camp and explored… her own
version of wild.

Besides… she had news to share.

But not before she took advantage of their first moment alone since they left Vizima.

Slowly she set her newly found treasure in the grass, shivering as the movement cause Iorveth’s hand
to drop away from her wrist.

“The moment I woke to find you gone, I knew you had come here.” Iorveth said as she straightened
and turned to rest her palms high on his chest, his own raising to cup her elbows, thumbs grazing the
backs of her arms and sending a new shiver down her spine. “You should have woken me, I would
have come with you.”

A soft sigh escaped her as she settled her weight against him, drawing in his warmth and tilting her
head up to brush her nose under his chin. Desire was already sweeping through her body, tensing in
anticipation just as her emotions relaxed. How typical of him to not entirely allow the matter to rest…
he always had to have a word in.

“Waking you would have meant waking Tareq. Besides, Azlin knew I’d left. Now hush and have
your way with me against these stone walls while we have this moment… we’re expected soon, so
you’d better act quickly Lord Protector.”

He curled his lip at her use of his title. The only one he would accept and bestowed upon him by
reluctant nobles. He didn’t like it, but he’d long since stopped snarling whenever he was announced
with his name attached to it. Of course, she found it incredibly thrilling to call him so. His demeanor
immediately became anything but lordly and this instance was no different.
A growl rumbled from his chest as she slid her hands up his chest until she could twist her fingers in
the perpetually shaggy length of hair at the back of his neck. Head dipping low till his lips hovered
just a breath above her own, she waited in impatient anticipation, her lids falling low.

When she could not wait further for his lips to settle against hers, she flicked out the tip of her tongue
to taste him.

Just a moment of a heartbeat, one of many that she would always carry with her, but it was enough
to turn the tides. The next moments were spent with hard hands holding her hips, twisting their
positions until her back was pressed against the ancient stones. Soft lips taking, tongues meeting,
moans dragged from deep within.

This need for him and the thrill of knowing that he had that same need for her, never ceased to amaze
her. All her life, such feelings had been far off and reserved for novels and television. Resigning
herself so early in life to spending it on the safe side until one day finding it did exist. Somewhere in
the expanse, there was one perfect addition to her life. And then it had been stripped away. And
she’d once again resigned herself to continuing that life from before, only then she’d been torn
asunder.

Had felt the barest edges of love, had held visions of what could have been deep in her heart.

And if not for the courage of the only other person who might have known what she’d gone through,
would still be locked within the four walls of her childhood bedroom, on the other side of the
universe.

As Iorveth’s hot breath dragged across her throat, Aevon promised herself not for the first time, to
continually treasure every moment she had of her life. When Iorveth was being especially stubborn
or Tareq more interested in playing before the sun rose rather than sleeping in, or any number of
people and the chaos they brought with them, she would remember the pain of leaving this world.

All thought was quickly chased from her mind once she realized that Iorveth had freed himself from
his laces and pulled the skirts of her dress high around her waist. His groan at finding she’d foregone
any undergarments sent hot stabs of lust straight through her center. She gave him a wicked grin as
the cold air caressed her exposed skin just as warm, callused hands smoothed around to cup her
cheeks.

“What are you waiting for Lord Protector?” She whispered, leaning up to nip his bottom lip.

Iorveth bared his teeth and lifted her until she could wrap her legs around his hips. The cold stones
bit into her back, but that small pain was the furthest from her mind as it could possibly be. Instead
her eyes where rolling closed, and her head tilted back to rest on those offending stones as he slid his
length deep within her.

Aevon tightened her fists in his hair, gasping as he held her hips tightly and moved within her. Her
body cried out for release, but her heart wanted him to never stop, and if his groans against her neck
were any indication, he was having similar thoughts.

But the wicked part of her was moaning for him to go faster, harder. And he obliged. His hips
snapped against hers, his thrusts becoming shallow and her moans became whispers. Alternating
between his name and telling of how much she loved him.

He found his release, speaking of his own love as he pressed tightly against her, the added friction
dragging her over the edge with him. As their released echoed through her body she dropped her
brow to his shoulder and tried to ease her breathing.
She pressed a kiss against the lightly damp skin of his neck and sighed happily. “I could stay like this forever.”

He huffed a breath against her ear and echoed her sigh. “Think anyone would notice?” He flexed his hips against her enough to remind her that he’d yet to pull away and the friction on her sensitive flesh elicited a small whimper that had the domino effect of him tightening his hold around the backs of her thighs.

“I can think of a few who might. A few we need to return to.”

Aevon answered with a disappointed sigh as he finally pulled away and eased her to standing though she continued to lean against him. He dragged a hand down the length of her hair until she found the willpower to step away.

“It’s just as well… I’ve news.” Aevon glanced over her shoulder as she walked away from the ruins and back to the cliffs edge.

“What news?” Iorveth spoke from behind her, having followed once he’d righted his clothing, reminding her to smooth a hand down her dress. There wasn’t anything she could do about the current mess he’d made of her, but she would not be faulted for taking a moment of privacy upon their return to the village.

Her gaze swept over the village, searching for the familiar snowy hair of Pop and never far from him, the black hair of Tareq. Her emotions swelled within her, searching out those of Iorveth’s and she found him awhirl with curiosity, and hope. It was enough to turn her lips up softly as she reached behind her for his hand.

Silently she settled his palm low on her waist where the beginnings of a swell could be felt.

With the sound of his breath catching for a heartbeat she felt his hope mingle with anticipation, but these were accompanied with fear. A fear she understood and had felt herself.

“No matter how she’d rationalized that it was a very common matter of nature, many times women did not even realize they’d been carrying, it hurt. Would always hurt, and it was something she shared with only Iorveth as they’d not even shared their newest secret with their closest.

But this time was different. She’d known for much longer, having held this secret deep within her heart in the chance where the worst happened again. She would of course have told Iorveth if it happened, but she would spare him as much pain as she could. He might have been frustrated that she’d taken on such a burden herself, but that was a weight she would have carried out of love. She would always spare him pain if she could.

To set his fear at ease, she slowly moved his palm in small circles over the gentle swell. “Truly.”

Iorveth’s smile, just as rare and breath taking as the first time she’d seen it, took her breath away. “We’ll have that house full of shouting and laughter that we’d dreamed about. Tareq little Lai here and the countless children that will come.”

“Lai? Countless?” He paused a breath, his green gaze narrowing at her in suspicion. “You already
know how many children our future holds, don’t you?”

She rolled her eyes playfully. “Of course, I do. Would you like me to tell you? Hint-“

“Don’t tell me! The number does not matter, for even if it were to just be Tareq and now Lai, they would be enough. Any children we have, they will be enough.”

Aevon felt the sting of tears as her love for him grew, continuously without end. “You, him, them… you’re right, you all are enough.”

Iorveth tucked a chunk of hair behind her ear, his gaze flicking between her and the village below. “Shall we go share the news with the world? Just in time for the feast?”

She shook her head slightly. “Not today. Perhaps just Tareq and Pop. And maybe Dain if he behav… of course that means telling Eloen. And Avallac’h likely already knows but I should write to him. Ciri as well. And of course, Zoltan needs to be informed that he technically lost the bet since he had me written down as being with child before our return, and I was already so before we even left. But that’s it. Except… Geralt and Triss. I mean they were with us in Vizima all through my pregnancy with Tareq.”

She was cut off with a deep kiss that had her toes curling in the grass and leaving her breathless by the time he pulled away. “You are impossible, a human from a far-off world with grand idea’s and an answer for everything. And I love you.” Iorveth said in his quietly dangerous voice, but it brought about the bright smile she could ever summon.

“And I love you, an impossibly stubborn elf from an equally impossible world.”

For the second time in just as many minuets, his smile stole her breath before he scooped up her chest of found treasure, tucked her against his side, and as one they turned away from the cliff. Future plans were spoken as they walked, for their growing family, their slowly recovering home, and their newfound dreams.

Of Iorveth wishing for another puppy to train with Azlin and her own desires to face Skellige for the first time since that painful day when they’d been ripped apart. Of wondering if her gifts for dreaming and magic would carry over to their children.

Their dreams were endless, as were their hopes… and their love.

Chapter End Notes

AN/ As I type this, I’m crying for so many reasons, but mainly because I loved writing this story. I know it isn’t perfect, at times cheesy I’m sure, and I am absolutely terrible at endings which probably says something about why I have so many WIPs but I sincerely hope those of you who have read this story in it’s entirety have enjoyed it. I loved getting to know some of you who commented and allowed my ramblings in return. For any new readers, please let me know what you thought, what you enjoyed and what you didn’t, I will always try to engage in the discussion, even now that the story is over. I like to think that I might continue on in the Aevon/Iorveth verse, and if the inspiration
comes to me, then I certainly shall. For now, I’m going to sit in wonder that I finished something!!! Over 200k words in 5ish months!!!
I love all of you <3 please keep in touch.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!