Where Sleeping Wolves Lie

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Where Sleeping Wolves Lie

by Quarra, xantissa

Summary

Someone sent a small army to kill Geralt. What’s worse is that they very nearly succeed in their task. In a desperate move to save Geralt’s life, Alucard whisks him away to another world where Alucard has both power and connections in hopes that modern medicine can heal where the vampire’s magic cannot.

While Alucard and his doctors fight for Geralt’s life, Dracula unleashes his ire upon...
Geralt’s world. Ciri, Eskel, and the rest of the Wolf witcher family must find a way to contain the damage and discover who’s responsible for the assassination attempt on Geralt, before Dracula burns down the world in his rage.

Notes

Notes from Quarra:
Alright folks, we’ve already finished writing this fic, but it is 450k words long and most of that still needs to be edited and proof read. So. I think I have all the tags that are really needed, but I may end up adding some as we edit. We’re going to try to aim for updates around once every two weeks, as real life permits. I’m busy as hell, but I’ll be working on it as I can, so please, be patient with me. Each chapter will be between 14k words and 24k words, 30 chapters in total, so each one will almost be like a mini fic anyways, lol.

For this fic to make sense, you should probably have read at least No Wolves Allowed and Fun is a Matter of Perspective. The rest will help and add context, but those two are gonna be key for understanding what the hell is going on here.

Also, fair warning, we have played fast and loose with Witcher canon. It’s mostly the same, but we’ve altered some stuff about Ciri’s childhood, her witcher family, and how all the witchers grew up.

A huge thanks to Dira Sudis for beta reading for us. Huge. HUGE. Seriously, I cannot stress it enough. And thanks to Xantissa for being patient with me while I smooth out all the kinks in the fic. I appreciate it.
Chapter 1

The first time he felt the portal opening, Dracula didn’t make much of it. When neither Geralt nor Alucard showed up, he chalked it up to change of mind or circumstances. He remembered his own experience using the wolf portal, and how sometimes the Wolf guide could appear at the most unfortunate of places.

After the second, he started paying closer attention to the portal room. After the third time the portal opened but nobody came through, Dracula summoned Alucard.

The small, winged demon he sent to Castlevania City was ugly and not too smart, but it had the ability to cloud people’s perception and reliably travel in sunlight. Summoning Alucard from his chosen duties in their home world wasn’t something he had done before so he hoped his son would understand the importance.

While he waited, Dracula reached out with his other senses, straining through his connection to Geralt. It was difficult to get a true sense of the situation while they were on different worlds. The best Dracula could sense was that Geralt was alive and worried. It nettled him that he couldn’t get a better idea of what was going on. If they’d been in the same realm, Dracula would have been able to tell Geralt’s physical condition and emotions, and if he focused, far more than that. But as it was, all he could sense was enough to further add to his unease.

By the time Alucard came through his own portal, dressed in a dark business suit that was very reminiscent of what Zobek used to wear, the wolf portal had opened again and closed with no one coming through two more times. Dracula was there in the portal room waiting for him.

“Father.” Alucard’s eyes flickered around, likely sensing Dracula’s agitation. His normally black and yellow eyes were covered by some type of colored contact, giving him a more human looking brown iris on white background. As much as Dracula didn’t care for the look—he preferred his son looking more natural—he understood why Alucard did it. After the death of Zobek and the rampant demonic infection in Castlevania City, Alucard had stepped in with a human persona to help the remaining humans rebuild. Dracula himself didn’t particularly care one way or the other, not really, but Alucard had taken up his old duties as champion of humanity. Helping to clean up the wreckage from Dracula’s destruction of Zobek, Satan, and his acolytes was part of that.

“Alucard. Look through your bird’s eyes and find Geralt.”

“What’s happening?” Alucard asked, just as the wolf portal whooshed open again. Dracula stared at it for long moments, waiting for Geralt to come through. But he didn’t.

“I don’t know,” Dracula said quietly. “The portal has opened and closed many times. I’m not yet sure if I should go through myself and find him.”

The situation in Geralt’s world was an interesting one, energetically speaking. There was darkness in that world, and a great deal of it, but the Powers of Light and the Ancient Gods still roamed freely. The course of their world’s fate wasn’t one he’d intended to interfere with. Every time he used his powers in that realm, it sent ripples through the world. Small visits and minor uses of power had almost no effect, but the more power he used there, the more it would shift the balance of energies. Where that chain of events would lead, he wasn’t eager to discover.

In his own homeworld, Dracula had killed the god Pan and then his brother Agreus, forever changing the natural balance of the world. Pan’s death had driven the previously neutral Agreus
mad and made him nothing but a vengeful spirit. It wasn’t something Dracula was eager to repeat. There was a reason, a purpose to the Old Gods, and disregarding them wasn’t something he was willing to do again.

So Dracula tempered his growing worry with caution, and hoped that Alucard would be able to shed light on Geralt’s situation.

Without another word, Alucard closed his eyes and settled into his stance, showing the relaxed focus of a spellcaster at work. A chill swept through the room as his power manifested, and the scent of frost and fur teased at Dracula’s nose.

Alucard’s brow furrowed, a wrinkle deeping on his forehead. The relaxed focus bled into something darker and strained. Dracula could feel Alucard pour more power into the spell, could see the tension ratchet up in his body. Then Alucard’s eyes flashed open suddenly and the sense of his power dissipating abruptly.

“I can’t track him,” Alucard said tightly. “Something, somebody is blocking him from my sight.”

An instinctive bout of smoldering anger built inside of Dracula. How dare someone else meddle with what was his. Close on the heels of that anger was worry. There were already what, five? Maybe six portals that opened without Geralt coming through.

The wolf portal opened again. It was happening more frequently now, and Dracula suspected further meddling. If there was a spellcaster powerful enough to block Alucard’s sight, then they might be affecting the portals as well. With one hand outreached, Dracula fed power into the portal, strengthening it, making it a stable, clear passage between realms.

The wolf portal was for mortals; it was easier on their constitution, and the Wolf that led them through was as much a protector as it was a guide. The darkness was a hungry beast, and like any predator it became all the more ferocious when sensing blood or vulnerability of any kind. The Wolf was the sentient spirit that protected the travellers from the corruptive and dangerous power that filled the void between worlds. Dracula ached to just rip a hole between their dimensions, to go wherever the latest portal came from and drag Geralt back here where it was safe. The knowledge that he couldn’t stung. If Geralt was wounded or seriously hurt in any way such a trip could kill him. It was better to let the Wolf lead him through. It required waiting, though, and Dracula was so very much not one to wait.

Finally, Dracula could sense the Wolf coming through the portal. Slowly, and with a mortal in tow. The wait was agony, and both Dracula and Alucard stood like stone statues.

A single hand reached through and into the portal room, gloved and bloody, leaving a wet smear on the stone floor. In an instant Dracula was there. He held on and pulled Geralt through. As soon as his body was completely in the room, the portal collapsed.

Geralt lay gasping on the floor. His breath was a painful, gurgling wheeze and his brilliant yellow cats-eyes flickered around the room, unfocused and too wide.

There was so much blood. It was everywhere. How could a mortal even hold this much blood? Dracula ran careful hands down Geralt’s body, seeing, feeling, more wounds than any human should have been able to withstand. Arrows stuck out of him in several places. Some had been broken off and completely healed around, others were still unbroken and fresh. All of them stank of poison. Bruises and cuts lined Geralt’s arms and legs; his thick leather and chain armor did its job, keeping most of the wounds away from his heart, but even that protection was limited.
His hair was messy, full of leaves and mud. Bits of twigs that had scraped skin were still stuck under the scrapes. On the left side of his face Dracula could see gravel biting deep into the scraped raw skin. One of his eyes was nearly swollen shut, and there was a series of cuts running from his temple to his eyebrow. The wound smelled bad, unclean, possibly infected already. Everything he could see was at different stages of healing, obviously received across a long stretch of time.

He carried no gear aside from his swords, and several of his extra belts had been wrapped around limbs as makeshift tourniquets.

“Dracula.” Geralt’s voice was a pained whisper, and he reached up with one shaking hand.

Dracula leaned into it, heedless of the blood and dirt; all that mattered was Geralt’s hand on his face. He wanted to pull Geralt into his arms, but the wounds were too great. He couldn’t bear to do more damage to his lover. He wanted to breath power into Geralt’s body, but it was too much, too harsh. The strain of it would kill him as surely as the arrows would. Helplessness and anger boiled up inside of Dracula and threatened to choke him.

A great, widening horror and pain filled him up as he knelt there, unable to do anything useful. Not even with all the power he possessed.

“What happened?” Dracula held Geralt’s hand to his cheek, feeling the strength go out of it. “Who did this?”

Geralt blinked and tried to focus on Dracula’s face. His breath came out labored and harsh, and fresh blood trickled down from his nose and lips.

“Not the...” Geralt coughed and blood black as tar escaped his lips. “Not the townsfolk. Leave them. Only---” He coughed again, this time it was a full body shudder, and Dracula could feel his heart labor to keep up. Alucard pressed down on two different wounds, trying to stop the bleeding. But there were too many.

Fire burned inside of Dracula as his pain mounted. His eyes stung and he could feel the castle around them groan under the maelstrom that was being birthed within him.

“Keep your rage to those who deserve it,” Geralt choked out. He begged with his eyes, and his fingers spasmed against Dracula’s cheek. “Please.”

His other gloved, bloodied hand rested on top of Alucard’s rapidly staining ones. It twitched and Dracula realized Geralt was trying and failing to squeeze Alucard’s hand.

“Wa...ned to...see you,” another spasm that sent dark blood spilling down Geralt’s chin and neck. “B’fore...”

“No,” Dracula said quietly. Geralt could not be dying. This could not happen to him again. Not again.

“S’rry. Tr’d to...c’me home...” Geralt’s eyes fluttered closed.

“If you think,” Alucard said, his voice wretched, “that I will let you go so easily.” Alucard was all but glowing with power and the floor around him frosted over as an enormous seal bloomed around him and Geralt. Dracula felt the power raise up as a stylized clock pattern formed up above Geralt. The two clock hands started to move slowly backwards just above his chest. Dracula moved back, leaving the sphere of the spell and watched. His heart pounded like mad as everything came to a stop. The blood drops travelling down Geralt’s pale skin slowed and then froze. Dracula couldn’t see him moving, breathing, or even really showing any signs of life.
“What are you doing?”

“Our power would kill him, but the doctors in Castlevania City can save him if I can get him there in time.” Alucard lifted Geralt’s body, sitting him up and then reaching under him. “This spell is designed to turn time back and forward on inanimate objects.” There was sweat starting to bead up on Alucard’s forehead and a tightness to his voice that Dracula wasn’t used to. “I can’t turn back time on living beings, but my spell is fighting against the natural order of things and in result is slowing the time he is experiencing.”

Dracula made to help but Alucard warned him away with an abrupt gesture.

“No,” he said sharply. “You are too powerful, you might break the spell. Don’t touch either of us.”

Helplessness and rage churned inside of him, and Dracula took a step back. For a moment all the darkness and hate within him paused in face of the love he felt for Alucard. His brave, kind, powerful son. Alucard was fighting death once more, and Dracula practically swelled with pride and respect. It trembled on the edge of his anger, and Dracula felt so full of his emotions that he nearly burst with it. He could feel it leaking off of him, his will made manifest as powerful tendrils of shadow wafted off of him like flames. “Save him. Do whatever you can.”

“Taking over Zobek and Bioquimek’s fortunes has to be good for something at least,” Alucard said fiercely, standing with Geralt cradled in his arms. His charcoal grey suit was already filthy with the dirt and blood that soaked Geralt’s wrecked body.

The portal to Castlevania City opened abruptly, its energy so powerful that Dracula could feel the sting of it from where he stood. The Wolf was there too, standing in the middle of the passageway, surrounded by blue light and looking up at Geralt’s unmoving form in Alucard’s arms with its ears folded back in distress.

Making friends wherever he goes, Dracula thought distantly, his rational mind quickly getting lost to mindless, burning rage. Even the Wolf guide was worried.

It hurt to watch Alucard disappear into the portal, taking Geralt with him. The castle was quiet and still around him after they left, echoing with emptiness. Only his rage remained, seething and boiling just under the skin. Even the stone floor in front of him was empty; the castle had swallowed up every drop of Geralt’s blood. Like he had never been.

Then the stones themselves seemed to shiver uneasily, and Dracula could feel a storm brewing in Geralt’s garden. A heavy, drenching rain that would flood and cripple if left unchecked. The skies above the castle howled with a frozen wind that screamed in from the mountains, and the molten rivers under the foundations swelled.

This place was of his own creation, though much of it wasn’t a conscious choice. It formed from his energy and blood, his power and emotion. It was his servant and an extension of himself at the same time. It felt his pain.

But there were others who should feel his pain more.

Dracula turned to look at the space that held the portal Geralt had come through. It was child’s play to reconstruct that passage, build it back up, viciously ripping open the way between worlds. He didn’t care for comfort or for protection. The darkness between the worlds would not dare touch him, and if he brought some of it with himself to Geralt’s world? Well, it wasn’t anything those on the other side didn’t already deserve.
Whoever was responsible for this would pay so very dearly. That, at least, was something Dracula could do. He couldn't heal his beloved. Couldn’t stop time as Alucard had. Couldn’t even touch them and hold them as they left. He was too dark, too powerfully corrupt. So he set his mind to what he could do.

The ones responsible for this couldn’t have done so casually. This was no accidental attack. Geralt was too strong, too resilient for just a chance encounter to kill him. His wounds were too many, and so obviously spread out over a length of time. Poisoned arrows. A mage blocking Alucard’s tracking spells and bringing down the portals. Whoever had come at Geralt with murder in their hearts had done so with a plan. Had systematically attempted to hunt him down and kill him.

It took just a step. One step to take him from his castle to a forest thick with scent of night and Geralt’s blood, and the baying of hounds loud in the air.

Dogs. They dared try to hunt Geralt down with dogs. As if his lover was nothing more than an animal. Prey.

The night was Dracula’s ally, and every shadow his friend. He stretched out his power, feeling the trees around him, their roots burrowing deep into the cold, wet ground, and every little creature under their winter bare branches. A frigid wind swept through the darkness, the physical side effect of his attentions.

There was a small army in these woods. He could feel them crawling through it, could smell their hate and blood. Could taste the paltry power of a little mage on the air. They’d spread out, but were rapidly closing in on the area. The pathetic excuse for a caster that they had must have sensed the Wolf portal that took Geralt away from this place, and no doubt sensed the rip in realities as Dracula came through himself.

A vicious, unholy grin stretched across Dracula’s face, and he waited. Power welled up within him, and it actually became difficult to keep his physical form. He wanted to rage, to become fire incarnate. But first he wanted them in front of him, so sure of their victory that they would walk themselves to their own deaths.

The dogs found him first. They perished in an instant, burned to nothingness in a wave of fire so fast and hot that they didn’t even have time to yelp. The chaos power ate them down to the last remnant of bone.

Next were the foot soldiers, and behind them were men on horses. They stood with torches and crossbows, swords and shields, milling uselessly just out of what they probably thought was attacking distance. Obviously they were alarmed and confused. Dark power all but poured off of Dracula, and even those who weren’t attuned to the energies of the world would sense it. His eyes must have been glowing in the dark.

Dracula’s smile twisted into something hungrier, a vicious baring of teeth. He waited just another moment for them to gather closer.

“Witcher! Come out, foul demonspawn and face your holy judgement!”

And there was the priest. Or mage. Whatever. They would all die the same.

With the claws on his right hand, he pierced his own palm, letting the blood drip down. It was no effort at all to let that blood coil out, to fill it with his will and turn it into a burning, bright red essence of his rage. His blood whip. Favored of all his weapons, and the most natural one in his hand.
The first lash sent a dozen men flying into the air, and the second cut them in half. The third dug a
knee deep furrow into the earth quarter of a mile long. Screams filled the air and the earth burned
under his fury.

This night would not have a dawn, only darkness for any soul present here. They chose their path
when they decided to hunt down Geralt.

Dracula would be their just reward.

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“Is there anything I could bring you?” Alucard’s aide asked from the entrance to the viewing
mezzanine, his voice a little higher than normal.

John was a good aide. He had been incredibly efficient and practical in the face of the destruction
his city had gone through, but Alucard calling him in to organise a trauma unit for one patient
within the time it took Alucard to get a helicopter from Bioquimek’s helipad to Castlevania
General Hospital was a little beyond his ability to swallow.

“Change of clothes,” Alucard said absently, eyes fixed on the surgery taking place just below
where he was sitting. His clothes were soaked with Geralt’s blood. The suit and coat were stiff with
it, filling the room with the scent of Geralt’s pain and life slipping away.

Somewhere along the line, his hair had come out of the tight braid he usually sported here. The
severe hairstyle served a duel purpose; it made him look more intimidating and it could be easily
styled to hide the pointed tips of his ears. Now it was a wild mess. His hands were also dirty; dried
blood flaked off of his skin and stuck under his nails. There just wasn’t any time to wash them. Not
during the frantic organization of transport and through all the effort it took to get people to do
what he wanted without asking too many questions. Even now, Alucard’s attention was on his spell
and Geralt’s tenuous hold on life.

“Yes, Mr. Belmont,” John answered before withdrawing from the room. Alucard knew he would
be back soon enough with clothes and other necessities in hand.

John was a big help, fielding calls and people while Alucard concentrated on keeping Geralt alive
those few minutes more, keeping the spell steady and true no matter what was happening.

It was still in effect. He couldn’t stop Geralt’s time but he still slowed it significantly. Both to make
sure Geralt didn’t bleed out on the table and to make sure he didn’t start healing right around the
Doctor’s fingers.

Despite the many protests, Alucard had managed to get everything from sound to images from
cameras in the surgery room to be routed to his station. He could see what they were doing through
the window, as well as watch close ups of the procedures on the multiple laptops set up on hastily
brought in tables around him. He could see every arrowhead the doctors cut out from Geralt, every
splinter of wood, every artery and muscle they had to sew back.

There was so much damage they actually had to bring in three surgeons. Each one was working on
a different area. They had already finished most of Geralt’s limbs, cutting out infected flesh and
stitching his lover up like a Frankenstein’s monster. Two of the surgeons were working on Geralt’s
insides.

They had to cut him open almost from neck to hip. Alucard watched them spread Geralt’s ribs and
dig in deep, to his heart, his lungs. One worked on the picking out splinters and shafts of the arrows
that had worked their way into the ribs while the other one removed Geralt’s intestines and washed them off in a basin beside the gurney, stitching up tears as he went.

There was so much that had to be done, so much damage that even a witcher would not survive without help. Not only the still bleeding wounds, but the things his body already healed around. Little bits of debris that were poisoning his blood along with the toxins the lab was already working on identifying from the removed arrows. Added on to that was the toxicity of his potions and the effects they had on him. Potions may have saved him in the heat of the battle, but they were making Geralt all the harder to treat.

A gentle knock at the door made Alucard’s ears perk up. He didn’t bother turning his attention away from the doctor’s work. “Come.”

Footsteps behind him, and then the hospital director was standing next to him. Alucard had known that he’d get the attention of the director; he’d pulled too many strings to make this happen for it to go unnoticed. Not that he cared. Geralt was more important than any inconvenience to his human persona here.

“Mr. Belmont. I’m so sorry to hear that you’re, er, in such a terrible situation.”

It took Alucard a moment to remember the man’s name; so much of his attention was kept on the spellwork keeping Geralt suspended in time, not to mention how he watched every little cut the surgeons made. He spared a second to be grateful that he’d left his contacts in. His eyes must surely be glowing from the power he was using to control the spell. Some of that would no doubt shine through the colored lens of the contacts, but not enough to be terribly noticeable.

“Dr. Bryce,” Alucard said eventually. “I appreciate how quickly you and your staff were able to respond.”

An extremely slow paced beep filled the quiet room, a soft marker of Geralt’s heartbeat. Alucard stood as still as the floor under him, listening to it. Each of his breaths was timed to that infrequent sound.

“I have to admit your request was highly unorthodox.” He shifted, his boots scuffing the tile. “We have no medical history on the patient, he doesn’t seem to figure in any of our databases. He seems to be a universal recipient, no antigens in his system to reject whatever blood we are giving him, but our lab is having problems determining his actual blood type.”

It would probably be useless for Alucard to admit that Geralt’s blood type wasn’t one they would recognize. After all the mutations and enhancements, much of his biology would only have a passing resemblance to that of a regular human’s. Since there was no actual question in the director’s statement, only an implied one, Alucard stayed silent.

There was some additional awkward shifting next to him. Alucard ignored it.

“There is some additional awkward shifting next to him. Alucard ignored it.

“Any information that you can give us about the patient would be appreciated,” Dr. Bryce finally said.

That was a tricky matter. Knowing about Geralt’s enhancements wouldn’t actually help the doctors much. How would he even explain them without causing more problems? Alucard tapped one finger on his arm, a small sign of his frustrations made manifest. He didn’t want to tell these humans anything about his lover. All they would do is ask more needless questions.

Several more slow beeps passed. Several agonizingly slow breaths.
Dr. Bryce sighed very, very quietly.

“With all due respect, Mr. Belmont, we need---”

“Think very, very carefully on what you will say next.” Alucard’s voice dropped low and sharpened. He had to take a moment, to draw back his anger and his upset. It would serve no one in this situation. Cold stillness filled him up once more, and he reminded himself that he was a protector for humankind. He offered rewards, not threats. “Think about what you want. Ask your surgeons and nurses in that room what they want. Because if he survives this, I will get it for you, and them.”

It took a few moments for that last statement to sink in.

“Mr. Belmont. As generous and appreciated as your offer is, our doctors are working blind here. Help us get him the care he deserves.”

_The care he deserves._

Alucard thought briefly of the ones who did this to him, and held back a snarl. Something of his anger must have leaked out, because Dr. Bryce shifted back the tiniest bit.

“There is nothing I can tell you that would change how you are treating him,” Alucard said, sighing a little. “You are all doing well. As well as I could hope for.”

“...Thank you.” There was a bit more shuffling in place from Dr. Bryce. Then he took a deep breath. “What can you tell me about his family? Any preexisting conditions with his parents?”

Silence.

After a minute, Dr. Bryce tried again. “Can you tell me anything about any past trauma? The x-rays have shown an alarming number of healed breaks.” Paper shifted around. “Every major bone in his body has been broken more than once and healed at some point in time in his past. Along with all the, uh, arrowheads and associated current debris, the doctors have picked out several smaller embedded shrapnel. Likely from previous…incidents. We’ve found what appears to be splinters of metal, wood, bone, and, uh, claws.”

Damn Geralt and his inability to ask for help. He’d gotten better about it in the past few months, ever since the echinops incident. But there were still times where Alucard wondered if Geralt even knew how to let others take care of him.

Dr. Bryce seemed to be waiting on an answer, so Alucard said, “I am grateful to your team for discovering and removing these inclusions.”

It was almost time for Alucard to let up the spell a tiny bit. He’d been doing that periodically, just enough for Geralt’s native healing to kick in and help ease the surgeon’s way. Keep him from dying on the table from all the cutting they were doing. It couldn’t last for long, though. Geralt was too resistant to foreign toxins. The moment the spell eased up, his body would begin to fight off the sedation. They’d already been through this three times, and it caused the doctors no end of panic.

Alucard wasn’t fond of the process either. Not even a little. But it was necessary.

Slowly, he flexed the power of the spell, letting time reassert itself on Geralt’s body, little by little. The ponderous beat of the heart monitor sped up, and Geralt twitched on the table.

The voices of the medical team in the theater below them took on a more frantic note.
“He waking up again.”

“Jesus, how is this guy doing that.”

“Get the crash cart ready.”

“Up that sedation.”

“I already did. Anymore might kill him.”

“He’s gonna try to crawl off the damn table again!”

“Then up the paralytic.”

“He’s burning through it just as fast as he is the sedative.”

“Hold him!”

The flurry of activity continued on for the long, agonizing minutes that followed. Alucard’s supernaturally keen eyesight made it easy to pick up the minute changes in Geralt’s wounds as his body began to heal. Blood flowed, augmenting the additional fluid being pumped into him, and many of the smaller incisions sealed themselves immediately. The larger ones began to knit, too, but slowly. Given how splayed apart his muscles were and how weak in general he must have been, Geralt could only continue to twitch feebly. His throat worked around the respirator tube and his eyes fluttered.

Just as he was really opening his eyes was the point where Alucard’s nerve failed. It was possible that Geralt might benefit from another minute or two of his body healing, but the price in pain was too high. A weak, agonized groan vibrated around the intubation tube. It was too much. Alucard couldn’t bear it.

Another flex of power set the spell back into place, slowing the passage of time for Geralt’s body, keeping him still and unfeeling. The low beep of his heart monitor slowed back down to its glacial pulse, and the staff in the theater calmed a bit.

It took Alucard another minute after that to remember to blink.

“He is resistant to both painkillers and sedatives,” Alucard said, his tone as dry as a desert.

“So I see.” Dr. Bryce was clearly struggling to stay polite. Alucard couldn’t care less. All that mattered was that his staff did their jobs and kept Geralt alive.

“I’ll need to be there when he’s done with surgery.”

“Given the extent of his injuries, his doctors will likely want to keep him isolated for a while post-surgery. The sheer potential for germ contamination---”

“You do not understand.” Alucard fought to keep his voice even. To keep the bitter anger, frustration, and all encompassing, terrible worry locked away inside where it belonged. “As soon as your surgery is done, he will wake up. I must be there to keep him calm.”

“Mr. Belmont…”

“This is non-optional. There is no force in the city that can keep me out of that room. Nor should you interfere. To do so would only cause more difficulties for everyone involved.”
The silence that followed Alucard’s demand was telling. Clearly, Dr. Bryce was doing a quick mental calculation, weighing the odds that Geralt would die anyways against the potential risks of an additional untrained person in the room.

Little did he know that Geralt would be unable to catch sickness from him, not to mention that the only thing keeping Geralt unconscious was Alucard’s spell. The strain of keeping that magic going was enough that Alucard could feel it trembling in his bones. He’d never held a time spell for so long.

It didn’t matter. He would not fail here.

There was another deep, frustrated sigh from Dr. Bryce. Alucard sympathized.

“Alright, Mr. Belmont. We’ll set up some scrubs for you. You’ll need to clean up first.”

As if Alucard wasn’t aware that he was coated in blood. As if it wasn’t grating against every single nerve. The scent, the feel of it on his skin. Soaking in, tasting of poison and pain. But not fear. There wasn’t a speck of fear in the smell of Geralt’s lifeblood.

Alucard reminded himself to breathe. At least one breath per beat of Geralt’s heart.

“...Mr. Belmont.” Now Dr. Bryce sounded even more hesitant, if that was possible. “Your family has, ah, a reputation. I’m sure you’ve heard the rumors…” When Alucard did nothing but continue to watch the surgery below, Dr. Bryce audibly swallowed. “In light of last year’s infection and your...somewhat sudden return to the area and philanthropy in rebuilding the city, there are questions about whether or not you’re following the, ah, family business?”

Alucard blinked.

Was this man really asking him if he was a vampire hunter? Now? Of all times?

The details of what all the Belmont family had been involved in over the centuries were not well known, not by any stretch of the imagination. But the Belmont line had always been cast as protectors of humanity, hunters of all things evil, and knights in the fight against Dracula. Since becoming a public persona, many people had tried to pry the same answer from Alucard, but few had tried quite so bluntly. And at such a tasteless time.

“I mean,” Dr. Bryce continued gamely on, “given the nature of your, ah, companion’s injuries and unusual physiology, it does invite certain questions.”

Now Alucard turned to look at Bryce for the first time. The older man had short, grey hair to go with his dark skin, and while his suit was in good taste and quality, it wasn’t as fine or elaborate as Alucard’s own. He looked tired. Deep rings lay under each eye and his eyes held just a hint of redness.

The moment Alucard met the man’s gaze, his face turned a touch ashen, and Alucard could hear his heart speed up.

“Is that so,” Alucard said. The words were barely a whisper in the room, just a touch louder than the steady, slow beep of the monitor. It was a struggle to keep his power from crackling around him. If anything, the look that Alucard leveled on Bryce made the man turn even more grey in the face and he swallowed again hard.

“Dr. Bryce,” Alucard continued on, “I value my privacy greatly, and I would be most distraught to discover anything about this incident becoming public knowledge.”
“No, no no! Of course not! Patient confidentiality is of critical importance here at Castlevania General---”

As he babbled his assurances, Alucard turned back to watch Geralt. Even missing those precious few seconds rankled him, and he drummed his fingers against his bicep in annoyance.

There was another gentle knock at the door.

“Mr. Belmont?” John’s familiar voice floated in from behind the door.

“Come in, John,” Alucard called out to him. The soft crinkle of plastic and cheap paper accompanied John’s familiar footsteps, as well as the scent of some kind of food and drink.

Alucard needed to change. Had to get out of these foul clothes and scrub the blood off of himself. Wash away the awful scent of it from his skin. But the idea of tearing himself away from Geralt’s side was anathema to him.

“I’ve got you a change of clothes here, sir. I also got you something to eat. If you want. I know it’s been a few hours already. Here’s some hot tea, too. Something light and floral. Warm your hands at least.”

John always remembered that Alucard liked something warm to hold on to, but didn’t care for the bitter scent of coffee. It was that level of attention to detail that had served him well as Alucard’s aide.

“Thank you, John,” Alucard said, more from habit than anything else. “Find me a basin of water and a washcloth. I’ll change in here. Dr. Bryce, if there’s nothing else?”

There was a long pause, and Alucard could tell that John and Bryce were exchanging a look. Alucard ignored it. They could exchange whatever loaded glances they wanted to, as long as they got their jobs done.

“No, of course,” Dr. Bryce said with a sigh. “The latest update looks like surgery will only take a few more hours. Your, uh, the patient is extremely resilient, and we’re all glad for it. Even with the unusual complications, the doctors are making far better time than we had any hope to expect.”

It suddenly occurred to Alucard that he’d never even told them Geralt’s name.

“Geralt,” he said suddenly. As much as he was loath to share information, he couldn’t stand the idea of his lover laying there nameless under those knives, benevolent though they were. “His name is Geralt.”

“...Geralt. Geralt, no last name?” Dr. Bryce sounded hopeful for a moment, but Alucard wasn’t in a sharing mood. Silence stretched for a few more seconds, and then Dr. Bryce sighed again. “Right. Thank you, I’ll let the doctors and nurses know.”

Alucard didn’t bother to answer, all of his focus was drawn back to Geralt’s slowly beating heart and the spell that held him so still.

--

John Smith sort of loved his job.

It was hard, sure. Belmont was an insanely busy man. He could be demanding at times, too, as well as bizarrely eccentric. The hours were long and the pressure was high.
But through all of it, Belmont was an unfailingly polite and quietly kind man. John saw it over and over, every time he spent time with his boss. When John’s duties had become too demanding, Belmont had given him leave to hire a team of assistants to help him. When his hours got too long, Belmont made sure that he was eating regularly and had access to a bed to sleep in. His overtime bonuses were nothing to sneeze at either.

Beyond their personal interactions, John saw just how much Belmont cared about the city and the people in it. Not only had he poured millions upon millions of dollars of his own fortune into the rebuilding of Castlevania City, Belmont had taken it upon himself to make sure that emergency systems were organized and funded. He had new staff hired and brought into the city, both for hospitals and security forces. He had paid for food and clean water to be distributed until the state of emergency following the infection breakout had passed, and still kept up several soup kitchens even now that the city was well on its way to recovery.

John really considered himself lucky to have his job, and to work for someone who was making a difference for so many people.

But today was the first time that John had ever seen Belmont so stressed. Hell, today was the first day that John had ever seen Belmont dirty. Throughout the last year of citywide emergencies and clean ups, the refugee crises and corporate backstabbing, every single hair on Belmont’s head had been in perfect order. His suits were always pristine, and his nails perfectly manicured.

But there they were, hours into this whole hospital debacle and Belmont was still was covered in the strange man’s blood. For the first time in John’s memory, Belmont had been snappish. Rude, even. Considering there was a man bleeding out in his arms, John figured it could be forgiven.

It still worried him.

More than that, it was a touch frightening, too. John was always aware of just how wealthy and powerful Belmont was. It was apparent in everything he did, from how he shopped, how he spoke, and how he expected things to change to suit his own needs. It all screamed, here was a man of power.

To see that sort of power and influence used so quickly and ruthlessly was a bit astonishing, even as John was the instigator for some of those strings being pulled. Get a private operating theater with a viewing room ready in fifteen minutes? Sure, but, whew, the things John had had to promise to get it done. If it weren’t for the fact that Belmont was practically a board member on the hospital based on how much he donated, it wouldn’t have been possible.

It wasn’t just that, though. It was the way Belmont stood. The way his voice cut through every other sound in the room. There was this presence around him that sent a shiver up John’s back.

And his eyes…

Belmont’s eyes were normally a warm brown, but tonight they looked almost gold. John would never in a million years admit it to anyone, but he would have been willing to swear that if put in a dark room, Belmont’s eyes would be glowing. It was kind of freaking him out, to be honest.

But John worked to keep in mind what a good person Belmont was, and that these were clearly extenuating circumstances.

When he headed out of the observation room to rustle up a wash basin and a cloth, the hospital director was outside waiting for him.
“Mr. Smith, could I have a word?”

Part of John’s job was to deal with stuff like this, and after what little he’d just overheard, it seemed like there would be a lot to manage.

“How can I help you, Dr. Bryce?” John asked with as pleasant a smile as he could muster.

It had been a damn long day already, and it was rapidly turning into a long night. John was tired. He longed for a cup of coffee, but Belmont had a nose like a hunting hound. Not that Belmont would ever tell him not to drink it, but John could see the offended twitch of his nose every time John had a particularly strong cup. On days where he was personally assisting his boss, John kept himself to sweet caffeinated drinks like Coke or strong tea.

“Is there any way you could talk some sense into your boss?”

That wasn’t an unusual request, either. John had discovered that Belmont had a knack for flabbergasting people.

“I’m afraid that’s not really in my job description,” John replied with a rueful smile.

From the pained groan that Bryce gave him, this wasn’t really an unexpected response. Then his gaze turned speculative. “...Do you know anything else about the guy we’re working on in there?”

“Even if I did, which I don’t, it’s not my place to say.” John gave him a look.

He completely understood how frustrated the man was. Belmont could be implacable with his wants, organizing things just so, and sometimes in a manner that was completely baffling to everyone else involved.

“I know, I know. I just.” Bryce closed his eyes and took a breath. “It’ll be worth it. Belmont has more money than god, and he’ll make this worth it to us.”

Since that was nothing but the truth, John kept his mouth shut on that subject. “If you’ll excuse me, Dr. Bryce, I have things I need to attend to.”

“Yeah, I know. Let the nurse’s station there know if you two need anything,” Bryce waved a hand over to a counter down the hall. “For god’s sake, try to get that man cleaned up a bit. He looks like a serial killer.”

With that, Bryce wandered off and John went about his way gathering up various things.

By the time he’d returned to the room, pushing a cart with all the necessities, only another twenty minutes had passed. In all that time, Belmont didn’t appeared to have moved at all. He was still staring into the operating theater with all the focus of a lion stalking its prey. His normally neatly braided hair was a wild mess, and there was blood dried up under his long, neatly pointed fingernails.

Worry gnawed at John’s gut. He liked his boss, and it pained him to see such a good man in such dire straits.

“I’ve got all the things for a sponge bath there,” John said into the quiet of the room. “Hot water, cloths. I even found some cleaning picks for your nails and some dry shampoo if you want.”

Belmont didn’t even answer properly, he just made a soft noise of acknowledgement and kept staring.
Unsurprisingly, the bag of takeout that John had had someone deliver to him was still sitting untouched. He’d ordered from Belmont’s favorite spot for dinner meetings. Something light and easy on the stomach. A bowl of hot noodle soup, some freshly baked bread with herbed butter, and a fruit tart in case he wanted something sweet. Belmont normally barely ate anything at all, and John couldn’t image that he’d be feeling any hungrier given what he was staring at.

Still, it was worth a shot.

“Mr. Belmont, if you can, you should try to eat something. Or at least get some liquids in you.”

That actually made Belmont huff out a laugh, though it sounded both bitter and incredibly unamused. At least it was a reaction, though.

“You sound like my Father.” Mr Belmont shook his head. “He’s always on me to eat more.” Mr. Belmont turned to cast a quick look at the bag of takeout. “Not now. Maybe later. Geralt might be hungry when he wakes.”

John blinked, and kept his mouth nailed shut. No way the guy down there was gonna be awake any time in the next week, no matter how certain Belmont was that the guy was gonna wake up the moment the scalpels were put away.

Also, who the hell was this guy? He showed up with honest to god arrows shoved in him, enough to nearly make him look like porcupine. Castlevania City had seen some fairly strange things, but as far as John knew, there weren’t any longbow gangs running around the mean streets.

His gaze was drawn to the twin swords on one of the tables. This guy, Geralt, was wearing armor. He had swords.

Again, Castlevania was a strange place, and about a year ago John knew a number of people who would have been thrilled to have a sword on hand. But still. It was just weird.

Since John hadn’t been asked to leave, he found a chair in the corner and waited, quietly reading on his phone.

It took another fifteen minutes of Mr. Belmont staring at the ongoing surgery before the man moved. The sudden activity after the eerie stillness was startling enough John raised his head from the latest update messages his team sent him. Mr. Belmont was standing, eyes still fixed on the surgery below, but he had his jacket already off and was working on the cufflinks at his wrists.

John got up to help. He took away the discarded suit jacket and folded it, stuffing it into the plastic bag he prepared earlier. He would take it to the cleaners. They were usually capable of miracles, but he doubted even they could help with this level of staining.

His boss discarded the cufflinks, throwing them carelessly onto the table. One of them skidded sideways and then off onto the floor; the blue gem inserted into the white gold winked briefly in the harsh light as it fell. John lunged for it before it got lost. He was all too aware that those were worth a small fortune, considering the gems were the highest quality sapphires.

He remembered the shopping trip where they’d bought them. Belmont had looked over the expensive cufflinks and scoffed, commenting that the gems inset into them were such low quality he had no intention of paying such high prices for them. Shortly after that, he produced a small pouch of different precious stones---each one so clear and pure that John had no doubt they were beyond anything even a high quality shop had to offer---and demanded John order some cufflinks, tie clips, and watches made with the stones. John had left the office and promptly called a full team
of security because this was a small fortune he had in his hands. He had to admit, he was pleased with what he eventually ordered.

It drove home the difference between them, how his boss just didn’t seem to care about losing one of those cufflinks.

To preempt any more throwing, John stuck his hand out for the tie pin. That got him a sideways look and a tiny huff of amusement from Belmont. The pin, also inset with a brilliant blue sapphire, got deposited into his palm with care that was just a tiny bit exaggerated.

The tie itself John didn’t even try to save. He just carried it over to the bin and threw it away.

After that, Belmont started unbuttoning the shirt. While it was good quality and a designer label, John felt it wasn’t worth it to try to save the silk and cotton blend. The stains would never come out of the snow white material without serious chemicals being involved. He knew enough about his boss’ over sensitive sense of smell to know he would never wear it again anyway. Into the waste bin it went.

He put the cufflinks and tie pin away in his briefcase, to be put into the work safe later. He had a feeling Belmont wasn’t in the right state of mind to think of such details right now.

When he turned back to his boss, he was frozen stupid at the sight in front of him. He was facing Belmont’s back, now mostly bare as he was almost finished shucking off his soiled shirt. John expected the paleness. His boss’ face was a clear indication that color was something hard to come by on his complexion, and the white hair only exacerbating that expectation.

What he did not expect was how incredibly fit Belmont was. It was astonishing to see the smooth shift of undeniably powerful muscles and the way they were delineated under the pale skin as Belmont reached for the bag of takeout. Dumbstruck, John watched as his boss pulled out the chopsticks for the noodle soup, broke them apart, and then put them between his lips. He reached up to quickly tie his hair into a messy twist which he then speared with the chopsticks. The cheap wood all but disappeared into the thick mass of messy hair.

It still looked wild, but at least it was off his shoulders. Small locks fell down the sides of his face, covering his ears and tickling his neck. It made his boss look so much younger, barely John’s age really, and so…pretty. He looked softer, too. The line of his jaw was clean and the curve of his lips almost gentle.

Then John looked down, mostly because his boss was too tall to look up at him for too long without getting a crick in the neck, and he froze for a completely different reason.

Belmont turned to reach for the washcloth and started lathering it up with one of those tiny hotel room soap bars John had scrounged up. That put him with his front to John. The powerful musculature, so unexpected of a businessman, wasn’t surprising given what he’d already seen. But the wide, ragged scar bisecting Belmont’s torso from shoulder to hip, faded white from age, was definitely not something he ever thought he would see on his reserved employer.

It was ugly too. It had healed jagged and uneven, as if it hadn’t even been given any medical attention after it happened. Belmont didn’t even seem to remember it existed. His movements were sure, unhindered by the scar tissue, and his eyes kept darting back down towards the operating theater. All of his focus stayed on the surgery as he absently swiped the washcloth over his stomach. Some distant part of John’s mind expected washboard abs like that only existed on TV and gym ads, not on actual, real people.
Reflexively, John sucked his own stomach in, suddenly feeling inadequate with his soft belly and lack of any real muscles to show. It wasn’t that he was fat. He was just…slender. It’s not like he had a lot of time to work out. Before this very instant, he would have assumed Belmont was in the same boat.

The scar was hard to reconcile, mute proof of previous violence done to such a kind man. He was used to Belmont wielding power in a boardroom or from behind a desk, with his sharp mind and seemingly endless knowledge. John did not expect him to be physically powerful, obviously extensively trained, and he even less expected the massive scar. Something about its placement and the way it cut across his middle had a certain deliberateness to it. As if somebody tried to eviscerate him.

John swallowed, reeling not from any single thing, but from the total of them. Up until now, John always thought his boss was an aloof, yet intrinsically gentle man. To witness this physical proof of violence on his body, to see that under his suit he was physically fit to a level John had never seen on a real human before, as well as the circumstances that brought them here, put cracks in the image of who John thought Belmont was.

The man Belmont had brought to the hospital, broken and bleeding, was intimidating as well. Between the swords and the obvious armor, the scars on his face, and the multitude of injuries, old and new, and all the damage the doctors were struggling to fix now…all of that was painting a completely different, much more disturbing image of his boss than John ever expected.

Just what did Belmont get up to when he wasn’t at the office?

Belmont was quick in his ablutions. He finished cleaning his chest with brisk efficiency. Then he made sure his hands were clean, carefully ran a pick under his nails, and put on a new shirt. After that the change of pants was a quick thing. Just a few sweeps of the washcloth were enough to clean his knees and thighs of the blood that soaked through the expensive wool blend. In a few minutes he was put together and immaculate as always; the new dark grey, subtly-pinstriped suit hid away the powerful physique and softened the edges again.

Belmont carefully unpinned his hair and spritzed some of the dry shampoo onto it. After a quick rub down, he shook his head, letting his crazy mane fall where it would. Then he went to stand next to the window again, watching.

The blood was all gone, cleaned away, and the new suit did wonders to make him look sane again. But his hair was still wild, if cleaner.

And still Belmont stared.

“They’ll be finishing up soon,” Belmont said softly. “This next part will be tricky.”

It almost seemed like Belmont was talking to himself. But it wouldn’t be the first time that John played sounding board, so he asked, “How so?”

“Geralt is going to panic when he wakes up. And then it’ll be a chore convincing him to stay in bed.”

Again, John just blinked. What the fuck.

But Belmont kept going. “I’m going to need your help keeping him occupied.”

Wait what now.
If massive, several-hours-long, full-body surgery wasn’t enough to keep this guy down in bed, John wasn’t really sure what the fuck he was supposed to do about the situation. But John just licked his lips and nodded, at least trying to pretend to be confident in his abilities. “Alright.”

The time ticked down, and John could practically feel Belmont’s anxiety. He was as tense as a damn tight rope.

There was a small sigh, and Belmont ran a hand through his hair. “It’s time. It’ll be annoying enough forcing my way in there alone. Stay here until we move out, then follow us to whatever room has been set up.”

“Yes, sir.”

Belmont was already moving out the door, not even waiting for the answer.

John walked over to the window and took a look down. He hadn’t wanted to earlier, both because it seemed like a very private thing and because he wasn’t sure he could actually stomach watching surgery in action.

Now he was glad for his discretion, because the man on the table down there had more stitches then a quilt. His arms and legs were already wrapped up and covered in blankets, but his torso was just finishing being stitched off.

Jesus, it looked like they’d cracked this guys’ ribs open. How was he even alive?

They’d barely managed to wrap bandages around the man’s chest and Mr. Belmont was waltzing into the surgery theater. No scrubs. No face mask. Just walked in dressed in his suit like it was a goddamn boardroom. John wanted to facepalm, but all he could really do was just stare, jaw dropped in horror. Or maybe awe. It was hard to tell.

The nurses rushed over to stop him, but Belmont just pressed them aside like they were nothing. Sure enough, just as Belmont had said, Geralt’s heartbeat picked up. Its slow, rhythmic beep that filled the room became more and more rapid. His eyes began to flutter, and his fingers twitched.

That was when John remembered he had mics here attached to all the monitors. Belmont had kept them at a nearly non existent volume, but there wasn’t any reason to leave it so low now. John turned it up, curiosity eating him alive.

“Geralt, don’t move.” Mr. Belmont’s voice was firm, deeper than John was used to. He had his hand on the man’s forehead and was leaning in low, his hair falling forward to brush the man’s face. The doctors and nurses squawked, trying to get Mr. Belmont to move. Then they squawked again when the patient’s arm twisted and flailed, knocking aside some of the equipment placed on both sides of him.

Geralt’s eyes fluttered again, and then opened to focus on Belmont. There was a deep gurgling sound; he was trying to talk around the intubation tube in his throat.

“You’re safe,” Mr. Belmont said with that deep voice and caught the flailing arm, pressing it down onto the bed. “Don’t move. You are in my home city. The doctors just finished putting you back together. If you move around you will break the stitches and we will have to do this all over again.” Mr. Belmont was pressing down still, keeping Geralt as still as possible.

Geralt blinked again, glancing around quickly, but then his gaze settled back onto Belmont’s face. The heartbeat monitor slowed down just a little, and he seemed to stop struggling.
When one of the surgeons moved forward to check the bandages, Geralt flinched back so hard that
he nearly knocked over something again. But Belmont just held him down, as effortlessly as he’d
pushed aside the nurses and doctors earlier.

“It’s fine. You’re safe. I won’t let anyone harm you. They’re going to check your bandages, and
then take this tube out of your throat.”

“Excuse me! We are not---” But the doctor in question didn’t get a chance to finish that statement.

“You will take it out, or he will,” Belmont said. His voice dropped registers again, barely coming
out as a low growl. He motioned down to where Geralt’s hand was already locked onto his wrist.
No man fresh out of surgery should have this much control over his muscles.

“This is malpractice. You’re going to kill him,” one of the other surgeons muttered. But he wasn’t
stepping forward to stop anyone. Eventually one of the nurses walked up, and with a nod to both
Belmont and Geralt, started working on untaping the tube.

“I’m going to touch your throat, sir,” she said quietly. Geralt’s eyes focused on her for a moment.
The cameras were high enough quality to show his cat slit eyes. He blinked, once, and his pupils
refocused down to thin lines.

Holy shit. He had cat eyes. Yellow, vertical slit pupil cat eyes.

Carefully and calmly, she stripped off the tape, turned off the machine, and then placed a hand on
the tube. “This is going to be uncomfortable, but it will be quick.”

Then it was out, and Geralt was coughing weakly.

“Thank fuck,” he wheezed, voice raspy and cracked. A pained groan escaped him, but when he
looked up to Belmont’s face again, a tiny smile stretched across his face. “Sight for sore eyes.”

John couldn’t see whatever expression Belmont made in return, which was a damn pity.

“Don’t talk yet,” Mr. Belmont said in a gentle voice that was direct contrast to his previous low
threat. His hand on Geralt’s forehead twitched, as if he was going to a stroke and aborted the
movement on the last second. “Let them finish moving you to your room. We can talk after.”

Geralt nodded weakly, and then closed his eyes. But he never took his hand off of Belmont’s wrist.

“Holy god,” one of the nurses whispered. The surgeons just stood and stared. The nurse who’d
helped with the tube kept moving along, disconnecting Geralt from most of the machines and
getting the gurney ready for transport.

“If you’ll just hang tight for a little while longer, sirs, we’re going to head you out now. Try to keep
your eyes closed, the lights above you in the hall are a little disorienting. We’ll tell you when we’re
at your room.”

“A little,” Geralt croaked with something that obviously tried to be a laugh. Mr. Belmont shushed
him immediately.

Then they were wheeling their way out, leaving a group of completely stunned hospital staff in
their wake.

John stared for a moment longer, just as stunned as the surgeons. Then he shook his head, pulling
his mind back into the moment. Mr. Belmont expected him to meet them.
Quickly as he could, he gathered up all of the miscellaneous personal effects from the room and piled them on the cart he’d taken. Including the swords, and holy shit were they heavy. And a little worn, too. The handles looked like they’d seen use.

John resolved not to think too deeply on it. Maybe Geralt was an actor.

He thought about those bright yellow cat eyes, and just how many arrows Geralt had in him. While John gathered things up, he realized that the mics were still on in the operating theater below.

“I’m telling you, it’s not possible.”

“Clearly it is, because we just saw it.”

“He just...woke up! After a---how many hours have we been here? Ten? Twelve?”

“Fifteen,” a third voice added.

“Fifteen hour long major surgery! And you damn well know that went faster than it should have.”

“He’s right, David. We should have been in here for two days straight with the number of injuries he had.”

“Well there were three of us working. That mitigates it.” The first voice still sounded uncertain, though.

“Why are we pretending that the person we just worked on was even human,” the second voice said.

“Well he sure had an awful lot in common with a human,” the third voice responded dryly. “Same bone structure, same organs and placement, same internal systems…”

“Vertical slit pupils and reflective membrane in the back of the eye…”

“...I’m not saying there weren’t anomalies---”

There was a snort.

“---But honestly, you all know damn well we’ve seen stranger things.”

“...That’s true.”

“So rather than get upset over it, we should try talking to our patient. I don’t know about you, but I’d love it if all my surgeries had such a success rate.”

At that point, John couldn’t justify dawdling any longer to listen. He had a job to do, and it sounded like at least two out of the three surgeons were taking the whole situation with relative ease. That would help him out later, John was sure.

Right before he left the room, he paused and looked back to the wastebin that held Belmont’s soiled tie and shirt. Things covered in blood from that extremely unusual man. John didn’t know what someone could do with that, but he’d seen enough crime shows to know to wonder.

He beelined back and grabbed the whole waste bag, then he tossed in anything that might have had a bit of blood on it. He could burn it later. Everything that couldn’t be tossed got wiped down with a cloth dipped in Purell.
It wasn’t that John was paranoid. It was just that Mr. Belmont paid him to pay attention to the little details. If Belmont wanted the hospital to have some of his guest’s blood, he could supervise a draw.

Since John had already scoped out the room they would be in, he headed directly there.

He arrived just as the nurses finished sliding Geralt onto the permanent bed in that room. John waited off to the side as they got settled.

The first nurse, the one from the surgery room, went on to explain some of what Geralt was hooked up to. It didn’t seem like either Geralt or Belmont were paying attention, so John made sure to take notes. Throughout it all, Belmont kept one hand on Geralt’s chest, and the other gently rested on his forehead. For his part, Geralt kept his loose grip on Belmont’s wrist, holding that hand still over his heart.

“Thank you, nurse,” Belmont said quietly, once she was finished.

“Please, call me Victoria,” she said with a warm smile. “The doctors will be in to talk with you about the surgery just as soon as they’re cleaned up. Please don’t hesitate to let us know if you need anything. Here’s the call button, that will ring us up immediately. We’ll also stop by to check up on you periodically, just to see how things are going.”

With that, she and the other nurse took themselves out.

John stood off to the side, waiting. Ostensibly, he was looking through his phone, checking up on progress for the twenty or so tasks he was in the middle of juggling. Mostly, though, he was watching Belmont and Geralt out of the corner of his eye.

He’d never seen Belmont be so tactile with anyone. Sure, Belmont would shake hands with people when introduced. That was kind of part of business. But he wasn’t a warm person to be around. He didn’t invite personal closeness, not in any way, shape, or form.

But here he was, touching Geralt on the chest and head, and having his wrist held in return. There was an intimacy to the touch that John couldn’t put his finger on. Where they particularly close family? They didn’t really look alike, though they both had that pure white hair. Were they cousins? Or step-siblings? Lovers, maybe? Belmont almost never talked about his personal life. The rare few times it did come up, it was only in passing, like the comment earlier about how his old man nagged him about eating.

“Al’c’rd,” Geralt slurred softly, his voice still a cracked, awful wreck. He pried his eyes open to look up at Belmont, but even John could see it was a monumental effort. Whatever he was trying to say, Belmont seemed to understand, though, because it made Belmont’s lips quirk up for a moment.

“Shush. Save your energy for healing,” Belmont said softly.

With the way they looked at each other, John couldn’t help but wonder if they’d forgotten he was in the room. Something was definitely going on there, and the explanation of ‘brothers’ was looking more and more unlikely.

With the hand that wasn’t wrapped around Belmont’s wrist, Geralt waved a finger at Belmont’s suit. There was a questioning quirk to his eyebrows, and a hint of a smile at his mouth. Given the light bandages across one temple and the bruises that still decorated one side of his face, the expression was strained, but he got the message across.
“I’m expected to dress like this while I’m here.” Belmont’s expression was a mix of worry and amusement, and was more expressive than John saw the vast majority of the time. The curious tilt to Geralt’s head seemed to encouraging him to speak, because Belmont continued.

“Castlevania City was built on the ruins of Dracula’s castle, its original incarnation.” John had to raise his eyebrows at that. The wording there implied that there were multiple versions of Dracula’s castle. Now, John wasn’t a theologian or a history major, but he’d really only heard of one version of the dreaded lord’s palace. Not to mention the fact that this was all well known, ancient history. Why in the hell would whatever Belmont needed to explain start with that? “Humans have come a long way since the castle crumbled, centuries ago. Some of the structures are the same, but many are not. Humans built up towards the sky with Dracula’s indestructible stonework at its roots. It has never been an easy place to live, too much of Dracula’s rage-fueled darkness had soaked into the earth, but it was workable. Humans thrived. I would have stayed out of the public affairs here, but recent events forced my hand. The people here needed more help than what I could offer from a discreet distance.”

Belmont fell silent after that, his eyes cast down to study the bandaged chest under his hand.

John had never heard why Belmont had arrived to be a white knight for the city. Not beyond the official reasons at least, that Trevor Belmont had seen the terribly plight of the people here and couldn’t bear to let them suffer. In all the time John had been working for Belmont, he’d never seen anything that contradicted that story. He’d often thought there was something more to it, though. A person doesn’t usually dump so much time and sustained effort into any endeavor without a compelling personal reason.

“Y’r helpin’,” Geralt whispered, a tiny smile tugging at his lips.

“It is my duty. So it is for all Belmonts. Even my Father...in his own way. In times past, he was too filled with rage. It consumed him. But now...”

Belmont stiffened in place, and then looked down to Geralt in alarm.

“Father,” he said in a strained whisper, and looked at all the bandages. “I left so quickly. I didn’t think about what I said. He probably---” Belmont closed his eyes slowly, slumping his shoulders and hanging his head low. He took his hand off of Geralt’s forehead and covered his own face. “Fuck.”

John almost dropped his phone in shock. He’d never, not once ever, heard Belmont swear. Not even a little swear, let alone the F-bomb.

From the look on Geralt’s face, this wasn’t particularly unusual though. He actually looked a little sympathetic, and weakly patted the hand still on his chest.

The silence stretched for a little bit, while Belmont clearly was trying to think through whatever family drama he’d left behind. It was actually a little reassuring. No matter how rich or powerful, even folks like Belmont had issues with their parents.

“You need to go?” Geralt asked very slowly and very quietly, as if he was trying very hard to be clear. Each word was barely audible over the ambient sounds of the heat vent blowing into the room and the steady beep of the heart monitor.

Now Belmont looked truly torn. His hands clenched up into fists and his face had twisted into a pained grimace.
“Not yet,” Belmont said, finally. “I need to make sure you’re okay first.”

Geralt breathed out a little sigh of relief and nodded, eyes closing again.

Before either one of them could say anything else, there was a quiet knock at the door.

“Come,” Belmont said, composing himself. His expression smoothed into the pleasant neutrality that John knew so well, though he kept one hand on Geralt’s chest.

In walked the three surgeons from the operating theater. To John’s complete lack of surprise, they all looked tired. It seemed to be a general mood for everyone. On top of that, though, they also had varying expressions of concern and interest.

“Mr. Belmont. Geralt,” the first man said, stepping forward. He was tall and thin, his skin was ghost pale and he had a salt and pepper colored buzz cut. Over a fresh set of scrubs he had on his doctor’s coat, and was carrying what must have been Geralt’s chart. He almost took a step forward, raising his hand to Belmont for a hand shake. Then he aborted the movement, seeming to notice how Belmont was still holding onto Geralt. “My name is Doctor David Miller. I was the head surgeon during the operation today. These are my associates, and the other surgeons who were with me in the theater, Doctor Jane Manly, and Doctor Robert Whitney.”

He waved at the other two doctors with him. Jane Manly was a short woman with dark hair and a face that seemed to want to smile, though her current expression was set in something similar to a dry smirk. She held a couple of dark colored plastic bags, though it wasn’t clear what was inside them. Robert Whitney brought up the rear, standing slightly behind Dr. Manly. He had his arms crossed over his chest and a sour twist to his mouth. His shoulder length brown hair was tied back under a bandana, and he slouched a little in place.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” Dr. Manly said with a smile. “And may I congratulate you on surviving your surgery.” She smiled a little wider at Geralt. He smirked in return and winked at her. Once she spoke, John recognized her as the third voice from the theater, the one that had been urging the others to calm down.

Dr. Whitney just nodded at the rest of the room and hung back.

Dr. Miller cast a look over to John, and then looked back to Belmont. “We’d like to have a chat with you about the results…”

“Yes, John can stay,” Belmont said dismissively. “He’ll be here a great deal anyways, helping me as I need it.”

Yeah, John knew that was inevitable. More overtime pay for him, he supposed. It was kind of nice not to be left out of the loop, though.

“Alright. Well.” Dr. Miller shifted in place for a moment, and flipped through Geralt’s chart. “I feel like maybe this doesn’t need to be said, but I’m gonna say it anyways. You---” he looked at Geralt sharply “---should not have survived this. I have never, ever seen a single person take this much damage and live. This is by far the most elaborate full body surgery I have ever taken part in.”

“I’m kind of surprised, too,” Geralt chimed in shakily, clearly exhausted and fighting sleep.

“Which brings up the second thing,” Dr. Miller continued. “None of us have any idea why you are awake and talking. You should be unconscious, just from the shock alone.” He floundered for a moment, his jaw working but no sound coming out.
Induced mutations at an early age, specifically designed for this purpose. Increased healing and resistance to shock or pain, as well as high efficiency in processing toxic substances,” Belmont said with a sigh, his thumb rubbing gentle circles over Geralt’s chest.

Stunned silence reigned in the room for a moment.

“Huh. Well. That does explain it,” Dr. Whitney grumbled.

“Just in case you want them, we pulled these out of you.” Dr. Manly raised up the bags. “This one is arrows. I’d honestly suggest we just burn them, considering they’re coated with an as of yet unidentified toxin. This one has other items. Which, again, we are all most impressed at your resilience. And perhaps suggest you consider requesting that Mr. Belmont keep a surgeon on staff?” She raised an eyebrow at Belmont.

Geralt gave Belmont a side eye and raised eyebrow. “Mr. Belmont?”

A smirk tugged at Belmont’s lips, and he said, “Don’t worry, you can still call me Trevor.”

Geralt looked at Belmont with a strange expression, half amused, half something else before he blinked and answered, very obviously trying to enunciate clearly.

“I will, then.”

The whole exchange was incredibly bizarre, though the strangest part for John was the fact that it looked like his boss had just flirted.

That...

That had never happened before.

It was through sheer willpower that John managed to keep his jaw from hanging open.

“Riiight…” Dr. Miller said, glancing back and forth between the two.

“Are there any data from the…medical experimentation...available?” Dr. Whitney asked.

“Anything you can tell us would give us a better idea of what we’ll be looking at for your recovery,” Dr. Manly added. “Because right now, we’re all still shocked you lived. If you were a regular…well, unenhanced human, I’d say your recovery timeline would be extensive. If all went well, maybe out of ICU in a month. Regular bed here for several more weeks after that. Outpatient care for the next six months, followed by couple years of physical therapy. But…” She shrugged.

“If I’m not bleeding out, I’m good,” Geralt slurred the last word a little before blinking and clearly focusing again.

Belmont actually rolled his eyes and stared at the ceiling for a moment. “You are not good. Not fine or any permutation of such. You would have been better if you came to me for help before you were at death’s door.” Belmont all but growled. Then he closed his eyes, took a deep breath and continued more calmly. “You are resting if I have to tie you down to the bed.”

“You know why I couldn’t come sooner,” Geralt said quietly. “I had to drag them away from the towns. I couldn’t let there be any more collateral damage.”

“If you died, it’s not the towns we would have to worry about.”

“I tried to get back to you once I thought I could. The way wouldn’t stay open though. It didn’t get
bad until I started that. I would have been a little hurt, but fine if I’d gotten through the first try. They---” his face twisted in frustration for a moment, and he winced, his hand spasming around Belmont’s wrist. “They kept blocking the way, and every time I tried to call the Wolf, they got closer to me. Like they could sense it.”

“You have been unconscious for close to seventeen hours,” Belmont said. “Whatever retribution my Father planned for you, it’s done already.”

That earned Belmont a flat look. “You really think he’d be done in under a day?”

“If we are lucky,” Belmont said gravely. “He holds enough affection for you, he might have listened to your plea.”

Belmont sounded so serious, almost grim. John could tell there was something they were talking around, but couldn’t figure out what. Still, there was something a little ominous in the way Belmont talked about his dad. Maybe that was how people in power thought of their parents. John couldn’t say. His own father was a retired accountant and while they always had financial security, they were never among the rich and the powerful.

The doctors looked like they were completely fucking lost in this conversation, too. But John knew from experience that the kind of money that Belmont could throw at things allowed him a huge amount of leeway in how people treated him.

“As for his medical records, there are none,” Belmont said, abruptly turning towards the doctors. “We will have to take it step by step.”

“Tell me the damage, and I’ll tell you how long it will take me to be back on my feet,” Geralt said weakly.

“Alright.” Dr. Miller moved over to the light board on the wall, flipped it on, and started putting up images. “These are some images we took during surgery. Some of them are pretty shaky, but we were doing it while trying to operate on you at the same time. You have fourteen broken bones.”

He started pointing to various parts of the body. “Here in the arm, fingers, ribs, clavicle, ankle, and foot. You’ve got several dozen fractures in various spots. Then there’s all the soft tissue damage. The arrows ruptured several of your internal organs, which have now been stitched together. Amazingly, nothing hit your heart, and your lungs got off light compared to the rest of you. There were so many toxins in your blood we couldn’t actually distinguish between them. Several compounds are so far completely unidentifiable. On top of that there was the massive blood loss, general trauma, some infection, and all the shrapnel.”

Now John’s jaw really did drop. How, again, was this guy still alive?

“Fingers should be usable tomorrow, healed fully in three days,” Geralt said slowly. “Bigger bones...” He hesitated, or just fought off sleep again. “I will be able to move in two, three days. Less than two weeks for them to fully mend.”

Again, he hesitated.

“Not sure about the internal organs. As long as I’m not bleeding out they will heal up, probably a little over a week? Maybe? Depends on how much I get to eat.”

Geralt yawned widely, wincing hard at the tail end of the movement.

“Some of the toxins were mine, it’s what kept me from bleeding out on the run. Infection will clear out by itself now that there’s nothing stuck inside me to reawaken it.”
It briefly looked like someone had run around the room and slapped everyone in the back of the head with a board, because the doctors all had identical looks of shock. John was right there with them, too.

The only person who didn’t seem concerned was Belmont. He just scowled and said, “You’ll be in bed for longer than two days. You are staying put for at least a week. After that we’ll talk about slow walks around the room.”

“I need to go back,” Geralt insisted.

Belmont raised himself, straightened, and suddenly lost all traces of the soft, flirting man he’d been just a few minutes earlier.

“Good luck doing that without my permission or help.”

And that, John could tell, was a threat. Very calmly delivered, and very final.

There was a brief pause as Geralt pursed his lips and looked steadily at Belmont. Then he sighed. “So be it, pretty wolf. I’ll stay. I’m just worried.”

That seemed to soften up Belmont, but only a tiny bit. “As are we. This was too close, Geralt.”

“I know.” Geralt closed his eyes, drifting a little. It only lasted a moment, though. Then he shook his head very minutely, as if to rouse himself, and looked back up to the doctors. “I won’t need much attention. You’ll hardly notice me.”

The look that Dr. Miller and Dr. Whitney exchanged told John just how much they believed that big, fat lie.

Meanwhile, Dr. Manly just asked, “We’d like to run some tests…”

“No.” Belmont looked at her. “You did amazing job putting him back together, but there will be no record of him ever being in this hospital, nor will there be any tests performed beyond what was done already.” Then he looked to John. “My aide will send people to your labs to remove the information from the system.”

John was already typing out messages to their lawyers and security group. They’d be well armed with both gag orders and bribes, as needed.

“But the potential to save lives here would be---”

“I would not only die, but kill to make sure the experiments that created me will never be repeated. The success rate was less than ten percent anyway, and they carried out the procedure for generations.” Geralt exhaled. “This dies with me.”

To that, Dr. Manly had nothing to say. She was clearly taken aback by his grim response, and cast worried looks at both her colleagues.

“Children, doctor,” Belmont said. “When I said ‘a young age’ I meant children. And less than one in ten patients survived the procedure.” He looked each of the doctors in the eye. “I will not approve human experimentation, much less repeating the process that Geralt was subjected to as a child.”

“Is that your call to make?” Dr. Manly asked.
“Since I was the one to clean up Bioquimek’s mess, yes, it is my call to make.”

“I’m good to leave here if you want,” Geralt said dryly. “Just roll out a blanket on your floor and I’m set.”

Belmont glared down at Geralt.

“Don’t push your luck.”

Geralt snorted softly in amusement, and then winced. “Ow.”

“We can try painkillers,” Belmont said. “Let’s hope with a high enough dose they’ll work.”

That actually made Geralt pause and think for a moment. “You know, I don’t think I’ve ever bothered with a painkiller. I mean, aside from just getting falling down drunk, and that takes so damn long and so much booze it’s hardly even worth it. I can’t even think of a single other witcher that’s bothered to come up with a potion for it either. It might work.”

“What do you mean, it might work?” Dr. Whitney straightened out suddenly from his slouch. “We are giving him the standard dose for his weight already.”

“Oh?” Geralt looked surprised. “Kinda still feels like you cracked open my ribs and rearranged things. That’s actually happened before, so I’m being literal.”

The doctors looked at each other with eyes wide in horror.

“Jesus, he’s feeling it.”

Dr. Manly lurched to Geralt’s bedside and started frantically looking at readouts and screens. “We should have known. We had to up the sedation by factor of seven for it to hold him down, no wonder a standard dose is not registering.”

“Call up the anesthesiologist. We need a specialist here,” Dr. Miller said quickly.

“Not sure why you’d even bother,” Geralt said, his voice dull with exhaustion. “It’ll just heal in a couple days.”

For a brief moment, Belmont actually looked like he wanted to strangle Geralt.

“Just because you can stand the pain doesn’t mean it’s not putting stress on your body. You will heal faster and rest better if you are pain free,” Belmont said tightly.

John felt queasy thinking of the agony that Geralt must be in right now after such an extensive surgery. The fact that he was so coherent and able to talk was nothing short of mindblowing.

“How are you not just screaming from the pain?” Dr. Whitney whispered in horror.

“Practice,” Geralt said.

And that was the most terrifying answer yet. Good lord, no wonder Belmont said he’d need help keeping this guy in a bed. More and more, John was feeling inadequate to the job.

The anesthesiologist must have been waiting nearby, because she was there only minutes after Dr. Whitney had stepped out to request assistance. It actually took longer for the combined people there to convince her to give what she was certain were lethal doses of narcotics to an extremely wounded patient, than it did for the drugs to take effect.
“Oh,” Geralt said, his eyes fluttering closed as the dosage hit. He was deep asleep as soon as the last sound left his mouth, his chest raising and falling slowly and evenly as the heart monitor continued to beep steadily in the background.

Belmont closed his eyes, too, and sighed with relief. “Thank you, doctor. You have no idea how frustrating it is to try and get him to rest.”

“...I think we’ve got an idea,” Dr. Miller said dryly. Dr. Manly snorted.

Over the course of the next few minutes, the various doctors filed their way out of the room. John took notes on who would be on call first, and made sure to get the names of everyone involved in this whole event. He was sure once it was all done, Belmont would want to compensate everyone for their hard work. Not only that, but he’d probably want additional nondisclosure agreements ready and waiting for each of them by morning.

“John,” Belmont said quietly, startling him out of his frenzied work. “It’s been a long day, and you’ve worked very hard. Go get a few hours sleep.”

Despite the craziness of the day, that made John smile a little. Even after everything that had happened, his boss was still making sure he had time to rest.

From the look of things, Belmont himself was about ready to drop too. There weren’t really any physical signs. No dark circles or red eyes. He was looking exceptionally pale, and there was a weight to how he stood, a droop to his shoulders that spoke of bone deep exhaustion.

John was tempted to go find an extra bed somewhere, but he was also a little worried about not being on hand if something came up. Something set uneasily with him about leaving Belmont and Geralt unattended. He thought for a moment longer, and then resolved to find a pillow and a blanket, and just crash in the hall outside.

“Thank you, Mr. Belmont,” he said. “I’ll be right outside if you need me.”

“In a bed, John,” Belmont said. “Sleep in a bed,” he repeated, casting him a wry look. “I’ll be here when you get back.”

“I’ll bring breakfast,” John said with a pointed look. He knew damn well Belmont hadn’t eaten a single bite the whole day.

“Get enough for five people,” Belmont looked down at Geralt. “He’ll be hungry when he wakes up.”

“Any requests for something you’d like?”

“Fresh bread and herb butter if you can find it,” Belmont said after a beat.

“Will do, boss,” John said with a tired grin, and showed himself out.

He hurried to finish setting up his appointed tasks. Tomorrow would come too quickly.

--

“It’s Dracula,” Yennefer said, her voice oddly echoing through the spelled mirror.

Triss nodded. “His energy signature is unmistakable.”

“So you’ve actually seen whatever is going on?”
Triss shifted on her feet uneasily. Hours ago she’d felt something strange, a tension far in the distance that rippled through the local energy matrices. What she’d found wasn’t encouraging in the least bit.

“No.” Triss shook her head and shivered, thinking of the miasma of darkness that covered the whole area. It was so thick that none of her scrying spells let her see anything beyond the boiling dark clouds.

“He said he wasn’t going to meddle.” Yennefer’s image frowned.

“It’s been over a year,” Triss said. “He hasn’t…so far.”

“The rest of the lodge is worried. This is a new power. Accusations are flying like birds every which way.” Yennefer shook her head. “They suspect Nilfgaard, but Nilfgaard worships the sun. Ostensibly, anyways.”

“He didn’t strike me as a man who would start something just for fun. He has a reason, I am sure.”

Silence stretched between them for a moment.

“Do you think Geralt is alright?” Yennefer asked quietly.

“It might not be him,” Triss said tightly. “Maybe something happened with Alucard. Or maybe on a different world, and we’re just the punching bag.”

“Or maybe it’s just random, because he is a damn god of chaos,” Yennefer spat out. “How does Geralt always do this?”

“Get in trouble?” Triss asked, humor curling her lips.

Yennefer sighed, pressing her palm to her forehead. “Right. Stupid question.”

As far as Triss could tell, the area of darkness was slowly spreading towards the nearest city. If the locals were smart, they’d be heading for the hills.

“I have no idea what is happening under the darkness, but I know we can’t let it reach the city. If it does, the Temerian Royal Council will have to react. Especially after what happened in Novigrad with the dragon, everybody is already on the verge of starting up a witch hunt for whatever dark power they can find. Another incident, now in Temeria, could shift the balance of power throughout the northern kingdoms. If somebody gets the bright idea that the source of the black dragon and the cursed land it left is in Temeria, Redania will be sure to blame them for the mess in Novigrad. Even though Novigrad is a free city, they still have deals set up with the Redanian Regency Council.”

“And Geralt would be right in the middle of that mess,” Yennefer sighed.

“Not to mention the fact that if Redania starts squabbling with Temeria, Nilfgaard is sure to take advantage.” Triss thought through the latest information she had on troop movements on the border there. “As far as my spells can see, they haven’t made a move yet.”

“But it’s only a matter of time,” Yennefer said grimly. “And they might be hiding, too.”

Damn this whole situation.

“Sometimes,” Yennefer said with a strange expression, “I’m kind of curious what would happen if
a Nilfgaardian army did come for Dracula.”

“You always were the wild one,” Triss said. “It would be a massacre. There’s something…barely restrained about that man. I think he would have loved the chance to bring chaos and destruction. Question is, would he stop at just the Nilfgaardian army or continue unchecked?”

Yennefer snorted. “Once he starts, I’m not sure anything will stop him. Maybe Alucard. Or Geralt.” She pursed her lips.

“Or…maybe Ciri,” Triss mused.

“What.” Yennefer’s voice was flat with alarm.

“Hear me out.” Triss waved a hand at her. “Dracula likes her…as much that he seems to like any human. Of all of us she has the best chance of talking to him. More importantly, we know where she is. Alucard spends almost no time on this world, and who knows where Geralt is.”

“Ciri might know. You know she keeps track of him. Somewhat.”

“All the more reason to bring her in.”

Triss could see Yennefer struggle with the idea. They all cared for Ciri, helped raise her, taught and guided her. But Yennefer had had more of a hand in that than Triss did. Yennefer had even risked everything when she stood against the Lodge of Sorceresses to protect her adopted daughter. She was bound to feel more concerned about sending Ciri into such an unstable situation.

“Do you have a better idea?” Triss asked pointedly.

“...No.” Yennefer sighed.

“And if it really is Dracula, he is still too interested in getting into Geralt’s pants to ever act against Ciri.”

That made Yennefer snort in amusement. “True. I swear, I never thought I’d meet someone more insatiable than Geralt.”

“I’m still trying to wrap my head around the fact Geralt hasn’t slept with anyone but Alucard or Dracula in over a year.”

“It’s unreal,” Yennefer nodded in agreement, eyes wide. She brushed her dark hair back for a moment and just blinked, clearly as astonished as Triss was a the whole situation. “He blushes. Geralt blushes near them. Like a…a…”

“Like he’s in love.” Triss kept her tone as neutral as she could, but there was a complicated brew of emotions welling inside of her. Sadness. Maybe a touch of jealousy. Pleasure, too, that Geralt was so happy. Despite everything that had happened between them, she was still his friend.

Yennefer looked down, rubbed at her eyes and then back up again.

“I never doubted he loved me,” Yennefer said. “Just like he loved you,” she added after a moment. “But this…it’s like he met the other half of his soul.”

“Two thirds,” Triss commented with a grin, hoping to make Yennefer smile.

A smirk pulled at Yennefer’s lips, and she raised an eyebrow. “Usually when people say they met their soulmate, they don’t actually exchange bits of their soul.”
“Geralt.” Triss shook her head, because really, that one word said it all. Yennefer huffed out a rueful laugh, and nodded along.

“You’ll talk to Ciri?”

Triss nodded. “Yeah. Maybe if we’re all lucky, this will blow over quickly.”

Before anything worse happened.

---

Eskel nearly fell off his chair when the portal opened all but on top of him. The man eating his supper to the left of him did fall, spilling the contents of his plate and choking as Ciri stepped from the blindingly blue light.

“Eskel!” She greeted him with a wide smile.

*Shit*, Eskel thought, every hair on his body standing up straight. “What’s wrong,” he asked flatly.

Ciri sat down in the now-empty spot to Eskel’s left, the startled man having just fled. Various other patrons of the dive he was in were also moving away, though some with more alacrity than others.

“Ha, ha, ha it’s so funny that you should think something is wrong---”

“Ciri…” Eskel rubbed his face and sighed.

But then Ciri dropped the fake happiness and said quietly, “Dracuла is doing…something in southwestern Temeria. What exactly, Triss, Yennefer, and I don’t know. We can’t See in. But whatever it is, it can’t be good.”

“Oh, Gods.” Eskel thought of how Dracula had turned into a dragon at the end of that whole kidnapping fiasco, and how Steingard’s lab had been burned down so thoroughly that it had melted down to the bedrock.

“Yeah. Exactly. We haven’t gone to look in person yet. I’m good at portals, but even I wouldn’t be able to leave if Dracula didn’t want me to. I thought it better to grab you first.”

Eskel frowned sharply at her. “The hell do you think i’m gonna be able to do?”

“Talk to him.” The look on Ciri’s face clearly said, obviously. “His mark is literally carved into you. Besides Geralt, you’re the best shot we have of getting him to stop whatever he’s doing. Even if he’s not doing any damage---” they both paused and exchanged a look that spoke of how unlikely that was “---the southern border with Nilfgaard is extremely unstable. None of the northern kingdoms can afford to have Temeria locked into some kind of internal battle while Nilfgaard’s armies are just waiting for an excuse to attack.”

“Or a witch hunt,” Eskel said with a grimace. He looked longingly at his dinner and sighed. “Where’s Geralt?”

There was a long pause.

Eskel turned to look at Ciri, brows drawn in with worry. “Ciri, where is Geralt?”

“I don’t know,” she finally admitted. “I can’t find him.”
A pool of utter dread filled Eskel’s gut, and suddenly food was the last thing on his mind.

“Ciri,” Eskel said, quickly overcome with an ugly suspicion. “What if Dracula can’t find Geralt either?”

She looked at him with wide, worried eyes, and shrugged helplessly. “Please come with me. We need to talk to Dracula to find out what’s going on.”

“I would come with you just because you asked,” Eskel huffed. “But what you think I can do there is beyond me.”

When all she did was give him a hug, Eskel got even more worried.

“At worst he can snack on me while you get away, I suppose.” Eskel patted her back, feeling only a tiny bit awkward.

Ciri let out a weak laugh, and drew back to look at him. “I appreciate it.” She stood up and looked around at the patrons squished around the tables against the walls, well away from them both.

“You ready?”

“Lemme grab my bag and pay for a couple fortnights worth of stabling for the horse.” Anything longer than that and Eskel knew he’d have bigger concerns than just whether or not his beast was being taken care of.

In just a few minutes, he had everything squared away.

“I’m gonna portal us to the front of the leading edge of the darkness,” Ciri said when he walked over. “That’s my best guess for where he’s at.”

“Makes sense.” Eskel nodded, and adjusted his pack on his shoulder.

“Just remember, try to get within touching distance of him!” And then she reached for his shoulders.

“Wait, why-aaaah!” Eskel’s question was cut off as he was dragged through a wall of glowing blue light.

The place they landed was so strange, so alien, that Eskel wasn’t even sure it was their world. It was hot. Hot enough that it stung his throat when he breathed the heated air in. The ground was dry and crumbling, crunching oddly under their feet as they walked. It was black, not the black of a rich soil, but the dark grey of old ashes from a fire long since burned out.

It was dusk there, maybe. From the dark clouds it was hard to tell, and a red haze colored the remaining light. It was also quiet. So very quiet that Eskel could hear Ciri’s breathing like bellows next to him.

There was nothing but empty, burned out, flat landscape as far as the eye could see.

Eskel turned slowly, his hand automatically going for the swords at his back. He froze before he even got to pull them out.

Now he could see Dracula walking slowly towards the dim shapes of buildings far in the distance. His red coat flared behind him, moving softly with each slow step. Flecks of darkness seemed to float off of it, trailing smudges of power and darkness behind him. Overhead, the boiling black clouds followed his footsteps, twisting and rolling forward with his every step. They looked
menacing and bigger than life. Unstoppable. His dark hair floated in nonexistent currents of air and his hands were empty, not a trace of any weapon on him.

He looked like a god in that moment, like a terrible creature of vengeance and destruction. Distant, unapproachable, and above all inhuman, for all that his shape was that of a man.

Eskle could hear Ciri’s sharp intake of air, but he couldn’t take his eyes off of Dracula.

Maybe it was because of whatever mark Dracula had on him. Maybe it was because Eskel had been healed by Dracula’s power, over and over. Or maybe it was the fact that Eskel had spent countless hours at this point wrapped up in Dracula’s arms and power, sometimes alone, sometimes along with Alucard and Geralt. Whatever the reason, Eskel could taste Dracula’s rage in the air. He could feel the pain and anguish that rode just under that, too.

In the face of that suffering, Eskel couldn’t help but step forward. Slowly, cautiously, but forward nonetheless.

No sooner had he taken his first step then Dracula stopped. He hadn’t turned, though. His back was to them; his wide shoulders were covered by his usual red and gold coat, and flecks of power continued to sluice off of him like water.

“What are you doing here?” Dracula’s voice echoed as if a thousand mouths said the words at the same time.

“I’m here to see you,” Eskel said as calmly as he could, still stepping slowly closer. If Dracula were human, they’d be at shouting range, but Eskel knew Dracula would hear every quiet word. Just as Eskel could hear Dracula’s harsh breath and strangely echoed voice. “What happened?”

“Humans happened,” Dracula said in that cold, angry voice. “Stupid, cruel, and vicious.” The heat around them spiked, becoming even more sweltering and making Eskel break out in immediate sweat. He could taste the salt of it dripping onto his lips. “They hunted him for miles, using dogs and mages, shooting him full of arrows as if he was some kind of hunting game.”

Fuck.

It was everyone’s worst fear. Someone decided to go piss off a greater power of darkness by fucking with that god’s chosen love. It was kind of a toss up if the victim was Alucard or Geralt. Either way, Eskel ached with pain and worry.

“Since they loved hunting so much...” Dracula said, and his voice grew louder as emotion boiled over. “I showed them what true hunting looks like,” he added with vicious satisfaction.

Eskel pressed on, moving slowly closer. It was a good sign that Dracula hadn’t just struck him down, though deep down Eskel didn’t think Dracula would. Not even in a blind rage. But there was still a fair distance between them; they were barely in normal talking range, now. A long way to go and a lot of space for something to go wrong.

“Alucard and Geralt. Are they alive?” Worry threaded every word. Eskel had a hard time feeling bad for the deaths of whichever assholes started this shitstorm, but he was deathly afraid for his friends.

“Alucard took Geralt away to his world under a time spell, a last ditch effort to save him.” Dracula turned to look at them over his shoulder. His eyes were just a pool of red light seeping slowly into the dark halo of his hair around them. “He thought I didn’t know why his spell worked on Geralt when it doesn't work on any living being.”
“Why did it work?” Eskel asked dutifully, inching a little closer, not quite paying attention to Dracula’s words. He focus was more on just being as non-threatening as possible, and gaining as much ground as he could.

“Because Geralt was so close to being dead the spell all but confused him for a piece of inanimate meat.”

Each word carried a wealth of pain, a suffering so deep that Eskel could barely wrap his head around it. His heart ached to soothe that suffering, and still he stepped closer. Almost in arm’s reach now.

“You can feel him, though, can’t you? Geralt. You’d know if he died.” Eskel was just as desperate for an answer as he thought Dracula might be.

The heat spiked again, stinging against his skin. He could hear Ciri pant where she stood back.

“I can’t feel him at all. He’s either still under Alucard’s spell or already gone beyond my reach.”

Eskel was close enough now that he could feel the raging heat radiating from Dracula’s body, as hot as any furnace or fire he’d ever been near. He looked up into those fathomless eyes and saw all that pain.

“You’re not alone,” he said quietly, and leaned in to rest his forehead on Dracula’s shoulder. A terrible shudder raced through Dracula’s body, and Eskel moved even closer. He stepped in and around, pressing himself up against Dracula’s front and burying his face into the crook of Dracula’s neck.

Dracula said nothing, did nothing, but the heat lessened, no longer burning Eskel’s skin and lungs.

Time slipped by for a bit, and Eskel wrapped an arm around Dracula’s side, letting his hand slide under that heavy red coat to hold on to Dracula’s stone still body.

“Why won’t you go to him? To Alucard?” Eskel asked when the body under his hands felt more like flesh than a source of power barely keeping human shape.

“I can’t.” Dracula’s voice sounded horrible, but it had lost the strange echoing quality. This sounded more like a man in pain than a god gone mad. “My power can damage Alucard’s spell and it is the only thing giving us any hope of saving Geralt at all.”

Eskel winced. Damn whoever started this.

“Send me,” Ciri said from behind Eskel. She must have moved in after the heat dropped. Eskel turned a bit to look at her, but kept the bulk of his weight pressed into Dracula’s immovable body and his cheek still rested on the thick gold embroidery on the coat collar. “I can travel between worlds. Give me a target, something to aim for, and I’ll go and return with news.”

Dracula looked to her then. His eyes slowly lost their eerie glow and went back to a more normal look for him; banked fire red irises on a regular white background.

“You could,” he said looking down at her. “You wouldn’t affect Alucard’s magic.” He reached under his coat and withdrew a fist sized orb glowing with blue and purple lights that twisted violently inside. Eskel stared at it. He could feel his hair raising up from just staring at it. The energy emanating off of it was chaotic and unstable. “This is a relic from that world. Be careful not to break it, else the demon inside will perish and your body will be flooded with a power I am not sure you would survive.”
Ciri stepped forward and took the glowing orb from him. “Thank you. I’ll find out what’s happened.”

“We could wait for you at Kaer Morhen,” Eskel said. He felt more than saw Dracula’s attention turn to him, sharp and heavy.

“Are you trying to distract me from my vengeance?” Dracula asked, his voice sinister and low.

“No,” Eskel said simply, tilting his head to more easily look up into those burning eyes. “I’m trying to comfort you, which would be better done in a familiar place. If there was anyone left alive who may have hurt him, I’d be all for you burning them to ashes. But whoever was hunting Geralt is long dead.”

Ciri shifted uneasily. It was enough movement that Dracula shifted his gaze to her again. “You know something.”

“I have suspicions. I don’t know anything,” Ciri corrected.

“This attack was far too organized, far too well planned to be a spur of the moment witch hunt. Those who carried it out are nothing but dust now, but those who ordered it must surely still be alive.” Dracula’s words were cold as ice and Eskel could feel the burning rage build up around them again.

“It goes deeper than just that. There’s some hidden hand at work here. Triss and Yennefer are certain of it, and given what I know of the local politics, I agree with them.” Ciri sighed in frustration. “Someone is trying to stir up trouble for this kingdom, and right now there are at least three good candidates for who it might be.”

“Tell me.” Dracula all but growled out the order.

“After we find out who is responsible, I’d be thrilled to. Until then, all we have are vague ideas. I don’t even have a name to give you.” The field was so quiet that Eskel could hear the rapid beat of Ciri’s heart. She stood firm, though, eyes locked with Dracula’s and her chin up. When the silence stretched out a little too long, she added, “I promise you, when we find who is to blame for this, I’ll happily give you whatever information I have on them. But until then, rampant destruction will only give them a better chance to get away.”

Dissatisfaction and ugly, boiling anger burned across Eskel’s senses. But after a minute, Dracula nodded.

“I will hold you to your word.” There was the sensation of something locking into place, and Eskel could see how Ciri turned pale in the dim light. “Go. Find Alucard in Castlevania City, and bring me back news of Geralt’s fate. We will await you in Kaer Morhen.”

Ciri nodded, and took a few steps back. After one last look at Eskel and Dracula, she turned her attention towards the purple orb. A faint cool breeze floated towards them as she summoned her power. Blue light trailed down her arms to wrap around the object in her hand, and motes of pure light energy drifted from her now glowing eyes. The power slowly built up, like an ever increasing pressure against his senses.

Then in a flash, she was gone.

Dracula and Eskel stood together for a silent moment, both staring at the empty earth in front of them.
“She’ll find them,” Eskel said finally, briefly squeezing Dracula tight. “Ciri’s a good girl. Smart and strong. She’ll be back soon. Triss and Yennefer will help out here, too. I’m sure of it.”

But all Dracula did was hum unhappily.

After another moment, Dracula raised his hand, palm outward. He crooked his claws and twisted his hand around. As he moved, black energy grew within his palm, caged by his fingers. Little tendrils leaked out, floating down to the ground and sparking with red embers. The dark mass sputtered and swelled until it all but overflowed from around his wickedly long claws. Eskel could feel the heat radiating off of it, warm on his cheeks. With a flick of his wrist, the energy dissipated completely, leaving Dracula’s hand empty.

Eskel looked up at Dracula and raised an eyebrow.

But before he could say anything, a spot of red energy burned into existence not more than a few feet away. It was jagged like a lightning bolt held in place, cutting through the air and opening wide.

Out of that portal came a massive black horse, or horse-like creature, anyways. Its coat was thick and rough, and it had heavy feathering covered its hooves. A long, shaggy mane fell down, partially covering its smoldering red eyes. Inside its mouth were sharp teeth, each one half a finger length long and shining like polished pewter. As it stepped closer to them, Eskel noticed the feathering covered up heavy, sharpened claws. As if someone had filed each hoof into three wicked points. The beast was easily the size of any draft horse Eskel had ever seen, and for all its menacing features was darkly beautiful.

It nuzzled up to Dracula’s hand, friendly as could be and smelling of sulfur. The moment Dracula touched it, brilliant red lines of energy coiled across its dark hide. If it was some kind of script, it was a language that Eskel had never seen before.

“It is dangerous for me to take mortals through the paths I travel between worlds,” Dracula said bitterly, absently rubbing the beast’s forehead. “The void is a hungry thing, and it is eager to feast on any who would travel unguarded. Or any who bear wounds. It would not dare touch me, but you would be another story.”

Since so far Eskel was as of yet uninjured, he just frowned in confusion.

“You made us a portal to get out of Novigrad,” he said, thinking back to their escape from the burnt remnants of Steingard’s lab.

“It was necessary then, and you had Alucard to guard you. For all my power, even I have limits.” The words were almost spiteful, and Eskel could feel Dracula’s anger seethe around him.

Eskel nodded, still sort of confused but willing to let Dracula take the lead on this anyways. He’d learned by now that sometimes it was just easier to go with whatever the vampire had planned.

Dracula grabbed hold of the demon’s mane and hauled himself up on its back.

“This is my horse, Night. She’ll take us to Kaer Morhen.”

Eskel paused to look at Dracula, and then give the monster he was seated on a good once over. “Horse? That’s not a horse. I’ve seen houses smaller than that beast.” He squinted. “Also, did you name a mare, Night? So it’s Night the Mare?”

There was no change to the flat, unhappy expression on Dracula’s face, but Eskel thought he might
have felt a flicker of amusement in the air. Something about how the energy that saturated the burnt earth under him felt.

“Are you coming?” Dracula’s voice was cold and distant, and Night pawed at the ground, snorting.

It was a good thing that Eskel was an extremely competent rider, because he was certain that this particular trip would be a taxing one. For lack of anything better, he grabbed ahold of Dracula’s arm and hauled himself up, setting himself behind Dracula on the horse’s bare back.

Fuck, but it stank of demonic energy. The moment he was seated, the beast took off running, making Eskel scramble to hold on to Dracula’s coat.

Faster and faster, Night ran, until scenery moved by at a dizzying pace. Woods, buildings, and fields all blurred together. They moved at such a pace that after a short time Eskel didn’t even bother to look up. He couldn’t. His eyes kept trying to focus on the things that were flying by, but there was never enough time to get more than the impression that for a brief instant something was there. Instead he buried his face into the back of Dracula’s coat and held on for dear life. Each jump felt like it might jar him from the seat, and even though the gait was smooth enough, he knew that losing his balance would be a death sentence.

As unsettling as the ride was, Eskel wasn’t completely surprised by it. Kaer Morhen was weeks journey away from southwest Temeria. Dracula would never waste so much time in travel, not when he had other means available.

It was still a shock when Night gave one large leap, and then came to a stop. Her hooves, or claws rather, rung dully against the ground, and she pawed around a bit, tossing her head.

Eskel risked a look up.

They were in the courtyard at Kaer Morhen. From the look of the moon, they’d only been riding for a matter of a few hours. He was viciously glad for how smooth Night’s gait was as he didn’t even want to imagine what could happen to him if he had fallen off her while she ran.

A cold winter wind cut into Eskel’s armor, and he remembered that it was significantly fucking warmer where he had started this journey. He shivered, and flexed his fingers, grateful to let go of his deathgrip on Dracula’s coat. After a moment, he slid off of the beast’s back, taking a step away to leave Dracula room to dismount.

Months of watching how Geralt interacted with Dracula’s servants had rubbed off on Eskel, because the first thing he did was give a shallow bow to the horse and say, “Thank you for the smooth ride, Night.”

She tossed her head, but then turned to sniff around at the partially snowy path. What she was looking for, Eskel wasn’t sure, because with teeth like that she sure as fuck wasn’t eating grass. Mice, maybe? It was hard to say.

Dracula dismounted, but he left a hand on Night’s flank. Slowly, he stroked over the smoldering red marks on her hide. “You did well,” he said softly.

Then he dissolved into swirling shadows and disappeared into the stonework of the keep.

Eskel watched him go, then turned to look at Night. The beast looked back at him and snorted.

“...Do you want in the stable?” he asked, feeling mildly stupid. It was hard to tell how intelligent the beast was. Normal horses were fairly smart, but not that smart.
But she shook her head at him, her long mane falling all around her in shiny waves. Then she wandered over to investigate another part of the courtyard.

She really was an exceptionally pretty horse, if not for the teeth. And claws.

Eskel didn’t make it five steps away towards the keep when he heard a thump and a squeal followed by suspicious crunching. For a moment he just stood there, weighing in his mind if he really wanted to see what happened. Curiosity won, and he turned back to look.

Back where the courtyard was mostly high grass and old shrubs covered with snow, Night was standing with her leg pressed firmly into the unmoving body of what looked like a rabbit. Her sharp claws punctured the white hide, spilling blood onto the fresh snow. She bent down, biting a big chunk of the rabbit and tearing it off by tossing her head up to gobble up her kill. Her ears swivelled back at him and she lifted her head to look at Eskel. Part of a rabbit leg was still hanging from her jaws.

After a long moment of staring, she slowly bent down again, eyes still very firmly on Eskel, grabbed what was left of her kill, and trotted away with her head and tail high. She disappeared behind the nearest bit of wall high enough to hide her.

Eskel pinched the bridge of his nose and briefly wondered how this became his life. Then he shifted his pack on his back and headed in towards the kitchen.

It was late winter, so he was sure Vesemir was still here somewhere. Eskel had left Kaer Morhen early this season, trying to get a start on some contracts in the south. Lambert had only spent half the winter with them, and Geralt had been in and out all year. So the only one Eskel really expected to be in the keep was Vesemir and a few of Dracula’s servants that seemed to have moved in.

Sure enough, the kitchen fire was lit and the pantry stocked. It was late, though, and Vesemir was probably already in bed.

Since no one was there, Eskel headed up to his room and dropped off his bag. After a moment of thought, he stripped out of his armor and swords too, and then dug around in one of his chests there for some sleeping pants.

The longer Dracula was out of his sight, the more anxious Eskel got. He decided to skip building a fire. Chances were good he wouldn’t be spending much time in this room tonight anyways. He hesitated another moment, and then just grabbed the sleeping pants and headed to Geralt’s room.

Once he was at the door, he paused to knock. No response. Somehow he got the feeling he should have expected that. He shrugged it off and entered anyways. It wasn’t like Dracula didn’t know he was there.

Sure enough, Dracula stood in the center of the room staring at the bed, silent and unmoving. Eskel wasn’t even sure he was breathing.

On the ride over, Eskel had considered his options for this encounter. Dracula was beyond upset. Unstable, even. So filled with pain and anger that he’d nearly burned a hole in another country. With that in mind, Eskel had come up with something like a plan.

It was probably a stupid idea.

He was going to do it anyways.

Quickly and quietly, he divested himself of his clothes and changed into the sleeping pants. There
was a basin of water and a stack of clean towels laying on one of the tables there. Eskel knew the succubi tended to keep Geralt’s room ready for habitation at any given time. There was even a nice fire roaring in the fireplace, and the covers of the massive bed along the far wall had been turned down.

Eskel took a moment to clean himself up a bit, if only to get the smell of sulfur out of his nose. He could take a proper bath later if Dracula was feeling better. Unlikely, but possible. Maybe Ciri’s trip would be a fast one and they’d have good news by morning.

He could hope, anyways.

As soon as he was moderately clean, Eskel silently padded over to the bed and slipped in, scooting back a bit to make room for Dracula. There was a vacant stare on Dracula’s face, but Eskel could still feel the barely contained upset and pain.

“You coming?” Eskel asked, holding the blanket open.

It was safe to say that Eskel had a fairly odd relationship with Dracula, Alucard, and Geralt. After the kidnapping and subsequent torture the previous summer, Eskel had become sort of a fixture in their lives. He found that he craved the close and easy affection that Dracula and Alucard were swift to give, and where those two went, Geralt was sure to follow. They’d shared a bed and cuddled together more times than Eskel could count.

Sex wasn’t something he was interested in with them, not really, but the closeness that they offered was another thing entirely. He still felt embarrassed about it at times, but not so much that he ever wanted to stop. Not that he had much choice in some instances. If Eskel was feeling bad enough, Dracula somehow knew and always managed to appear, ready to offer comfort whether Eskel wanted it or not. Alucard was almost as bad, wandering around stoned out of his mind and seeking a warm body to wrap around.

So it shouldn’t have been a surprise to Dracula that Eskel was inviting him to come to bed. But all Eskel got was a cold stare.

After a moment, Eskel frowned. Then he sat up and thought for a moment. He closed his eyes and sighed.

This was going to be awkward.

He slid out of bed and went to stand right in Dracula’s space, his bare chest flush with Dracula’s. Then Eskel reached under the heavy, red coat and hugged him tight, shifting himself so that his neck was open to Dracula’s face. Partially because he thought that the show of vulnerability would set Dracula at ease, but also because he wanted his personal scent a little closer to Dracula’s nose. This whole room was infused with Alucard and Geralt’s scents, and while that might help Dracula in a little while, it wasn’t doing a damn thing for him now.

“Come to bed, please?” Eskel asked quietly.

It took a few minutes longer, but eventually some of the tension left Dracula’s body. Slowly, Eskel ran his hands up Dracula’s chest and pushed the coat off of his shoulders. Then he reached down to try and find where to unlatch that ridiculously elaborate belt.

“What are you doing?” Dracula’s voice was rough and low.

“I’m getting you out of this armor so that we can cuddle,” Eskel replied evenly, finally getting the belt off. As soon as it hit the floor, it disappeared into a puff of shadow. A quick look around
proved that the coat was gone too.

Huh. So Dracula was willing to unsummon his armor, but not actually take it off himself. That was fine. Eskel knelt down and set to work unbuckling his greaves. As soon as the clasps came undone, the heavy metal vanished along with his boots, leaving Dracula standing in just his leather pants. He’d finally turned his attention to Eskel though, even if it was still on the cold side.

“I’m not stripping you out of your pants,” Eskel said sourly. Again, there was the barest flicker of amusement in the air, before the crushing unhappiness settled in. He stood up and wrapped an arm around Dracula’s torso again, gently pulling him towards the bed. “Come on. It’s cold. Get under the covers with me.”

Dracula moved like his bones were made of steel and he had to unbend each and every one of them just to walk. It was progress, though, so Eskel would take it.

Step by step, they made it to the bed, and then into it.

“How do you want me?” Eskel asked. When he was feeling bad, he often liked Dracula or Alucard over him, so he could settle his head into their neck and fill his nose up with the scent of their power. But he wasn’t sure what Dracula wanted right now.

It was a sure sign that Dracula was still massively upset, because he didn’t even rise to the bait of potential innuendo. He simply pulled Eskel close and rolled them so he was laying on top of Eskel, nearly covering him completely. That suited Eskel just fine, and worked into the other half of his absolutely stupid plan.

First, though, he just held Dracula close. He ran one hand up and down Dracula’s back, and with the other he tangled his fingers in Dracula’s hair, rubbing gently along the scalp there.

It seemed to take ages for Dracula to loosen up, for his weight to really settle into Eskel’s body. Slowly, muscle by muscle, Dracula became a person made of warm flesh instead of what felt like hard stone. Eskel kept up the soothing motions, and let himself breathe in the scent of embers, blood, and skin. Odd as it was, this meant safety to Eskel, and he relaxed into it, too.

When Dracula turned his face into Eskel’s hair, he knew it was just about time for the next offer.

“Do you want to feed from me?” Eskel asked quietly. It hadn’t happened often, but there had been a few times over the past months where Dracula had wanted Eskel’s blood. Those incidents were… interesting to say the least, but Eskel knew the desire was there.

Dracula pulled back a little to look at Eskel in the eye. A frown tugged at his lips. “What?”

“What?”

“Do you want to feed from me?” Eskel asked again. “I could go drink a couple of potions. Make the blood taste better.” It wouldn’t just taste better, though. It also acted like heavy alcohol, or a depressive mood enhancing drug. Basically, it would get Dracula stoned out of his mind.

But all Dracula did was glare at him suspiciously. “Why would you offer that? You don’t normally care for the side effects of my bite.”

Which was true. Eskel just shrugged though.

“You’re my friend. If you were human, I’d offer to get you falling down drunk. But since you’re not, this is what I can offer.”

Eskel could have mentioned all the times the Dracula held him after nightmares. Or the way he’d
comforted Eskel during the whole Steingard incident. Or how Dracula had shown he cared in a thousand tiny ways that were as infuriating as they were considerate. But that made this whole thing seem like an exchange, and it wasn’t. The simple truth was that Dracula was a friend now, and Eskel was willing to help him however he could.

He could see how Dracula thought the offer over, turned it around in his mind and looked for any sign of ulterior motives. There weren’t any, so Eskel stayed loose and calm. Ready for whatever Dracula decided to do.

“No potions,” Dracula said eventually.

“Alright.” Eskel tilted his head to the side and waited. One of the things that Geralt had mentioned was that Dracula could taste emotion when he drank. It was with that in mind that Eskel focused on the fact that he wanted to bring comfort to his hurt friend. That he was worried, too, and that it was alright to be afraid and upset. They could be upset together.

Dracula stared at him for another moment, then leaned down and bit.

It wasn’t the deep, gouging marks that Eskel knew Alucard sometimes got, but this bite wasn’t as gentle as Dracula had been with him in the past. It was sharp, quick, and deep, though the pain was still tempered by the full body pleasure that came with drinking.

He couldn’t help but arch up into it, holding Dracula tight to him. Eskel hoped the feeding would help, he really, really did. It wasn’t even really about all the collateral damage that came from Dracula’s rage, though he was sure that was why Ciri had come to him. It was because he could feel how much pain Dracula was in, and he wanted to do anything he could to ease it.

A tiny moan escaped from Eskel’s mouth as bliss rolled over him in waves, timed to each suck against his neck. After only a few draws he felt Dracula shudder hard over him, and bite down harder, deeper. Pain mixed in with the pleasure again, and he could feel a little bit of blood trickle out of Dracula’s mouth.

When a strangled little gasp of pain and pleasure worked its way out of him, Dracula drew back.

“No,” Eskel said, his normally rough voice sounding that much more wrecked. “Take what you need. I can take it.”

This time, Dracula didn’t hesitate. He leaned down and bit again, just harshly as the first time, drinking deeply of what Eskel offered. It was glorious and a little painful. But, fuck, Eskel was so hard. His cock strained against his pants, trapped between their bodies. It was a side effect of all the pleasure, and as much as his body screamed for some friction and attention, both Eskel and Dracula knew that wasn’t what Eskel wanted. So the lust was ignored, which was both frustration incarnate and an utter relief.

Throughout it all, Eskel urged Dracula on, and tried to give Dracula the mental equivalent of a hug.

Dracula let out a frustrated growl and bit Eskel a third time, marking him down the bend of his neck.

_That’s right, Eskel thought to himself. Let it out. Give it to me. Give me your rage and your pain. You’re not alone._

He felt more than saw Dracula dig one hand into the bed next to him, and rake with his claws. Great, awful ripping sounds snuck in around the pounding of Eskel’s own heart in his ears, and
something wet and hot trailed onto his cheek. The other hand stayed on Eskel’s neck, keeping him held tight to Dracula’s fangs.

The fourth bite hurt more, but Dracula was trembling above him, and gripping him so tightly that Eskel knew there would be bruises. Even the pleasure from the feeding was a savage thing, driving out all thought aside from wanting more. He knew he had to be making little noises, but for the life of him he couldn’t pay any attention to it. All he knew was that Dracula was getting what he needed, and that was good.

When those wickedly sharp fangs finally pulled out of Eskel’s body, the two of them sat heaving together, both breathing as if they’d run there from Temeria rather than ridden. Dracula was furnace-hot on top of him, and his face stayed buried into Eskel’s neck. More slick, wet heat trickled down onto Eskel’s neck, and he suddenly realized that Dracula was crying. By this point, the hand that wasn’t on Eskel’s body had clawed several inches into the bulk of the bed. Fluff and fiber floated around them in the air and tickled at Eskel’s nose.

Eskel’s whole body was on fire with the sensual pleasure he’d been flooded with, but he kept himself still as best he could. It would pass. He would not rut up into Dracula’s hip, no matter how good an idea it sounded. Instead, he just held Dracula tightly through whatever he was feeling and tried to be there for him.

They stayed that way for a long time. Slowly, the coiling heat in Eskel’s groin faded away, and the ache in his neck turned into a dull throb. After a time, Dracula’s shivers slowed down as well, and he all but crushed Eskel under the weight of his body.

Eskel slowly ran his fingers back and forth across Dracula’s neck. Small, soothing little movements. Enough to remind Dracula that Eskel was there, present in their embrace. That he wasn’t just enduring it; he wanted to be there.

The heat that radiated off of Dracula’s body was wonderful, and Eskel didn’t even mind that the scent of his own blood had mixed into the smell of Dracula’s power. It might have just been the blood loss or the warmth, but Eskel felt sleepy and relaxed. Content, even. Even his ever present worry over Geralt was a distant thing under the weight of Dracula on top of him.

“I don’t want him to die,” Dracula whispered softly, face still buried in the marks on Eskel’s neck.

Eskel rubbed his cheek against Dracula’s head and squeezed him tight. “Geralt is a stubborn bastard, and Alucard is brilliant. If there’s any chance at all, they’ll find a way to exploit it.”

The pressure around him grew for a moment as Dracula held him crushingly close. It was enough that Eskel struggled to breathe for a moment. Before it could turn into a problem, Dracula’s grip eased, though it didn’t release entirely.

With careful little licks, Dracula started cleaning the wounds on Eskel’s throat. This was something that had happened previous times when Dracula fed from him. He was usually a little neater with his bites, though. The marks on Eskel’s neck must have been impressive as hell. From how Dracula licked over the length of his neck, blood had probably smeared all over. The slow, wet drag across his skin was as relaxing as the hands wrapped around him, and Eskel melted into it.

When Dracula’s tongue finally worked up to lave over one of the raw wounds, stinging and sharp, Eskel couldn’t stop the little noise that escaped him. Dracula started to move away, but Eskel just held him down, held him close. He knew damn well that he couldn’t hold Dracula if the vampire really decided to get away. But Dracula still paused, he still let Eskel keep him close.
“S’fine,” Eskel grumbled. “Stings a little, but it’s fine. Kinda feels good. Go ahead.”

“I don’t want to drain you,” Dracula sighed. “If I keep it up I will want to drink from you again.” He sounded calmer, a lot more reasonable than before, the edge of rage now banked in his voice.

Eskel shrugged with his unwounded shoulder. “If you feel the need, just let me drink a Swallow. I’ll heal fast.”

He ran his fingers through Dracula’s hair and closed his eyes.

“I could feel Geralt, just for a heartbeat,” Dracula whispered.

“Mmmm. They’re working on it. Alucard and whatever he’s got going on there. Geralt won’t go easy,” Eskel said quietly. “This wouldn’t even be the first time he’s cheated death. There’s still hope.”

“I know,” he sighed, but didn’t sound convinced. “Geralt is a bright soul, though. People like him often…go outside of my reach…when they die. For all my power, some souls are forever out of my reach.”

That made Eskel blink in surprise. Dracula was talking about some kind of heaven. He was the King of Hell, after all; the opposite of that would be what was out of reach.

“You realize that Geralt would fight to get to you,” Eskel said finally. “No power could keep him away. He’d wreck them just to get back to you.”

“Souls…are not given a choice,” Dracula said, shifting away from Eskel and turning to lay on his back.

Unwilling to let the intimacy of their embrace go, Eskel followed him over and sprawled across his chest. His neck ached, but the sensation wasn’t really enough to bother him. It did make him settle so he leaned a little heavier on his unhurt side, leaving the bite marks a little more visible. Maybe it would bring Dracula a little extra comfort, too, to see the marks. He certainly was a possessive bastard.

“It hasn’t happened yet. No need to borrow trouble.”

“You witchers are unusual enough, you might as well be right anyways,” Dracula said softly.

Eskel snorted in amusement. “We bend and break rules everywhere we go. Not sure why death would be any different.”

He settled farther down, scooching so that his nose was buried in Dracula’s neck, right where the scent of dark power and burning could fill up his nose and head. His eyes drifted closed again, and he couldn’t help but breathe out a little pleased sigh.

Then Dracula put a hand on his head and slowly began trailing his fingers through Eskel’s hair. That was bliss as far as Eskel was concerned, and he sighed again happily. His brain still felt a little fuzzy from the bites, but as long as Dracula kept up the gentle petting, he didn’t care in the slightest.

It didn’t take long for him drift off to sleep after that, a warm body under him, the scent of embers and blood in his nose, and a careful hand in his hair.
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Note from Quarra: I am a bit ahead on editing, so this chapter came a little early.

The great nothingness, the void in between worlds, encompassed Ciri for a moment. It felt like falling. Or maybe like being pulled apart and then put back together. Sometimes it was as easy as walking through a door to another room.

This time, it was like racing through a wraith-filled hallway. The darkness around her was hungry, sometimes angry, and it felt like a small eternity between her own world and this new one.

When she finally stumbled onto hard ground again, she was in a strange circular room. The walls were grey stone, and enraptured figures were carved into the panels. Behind the carvings, through gaps in the stone, she could see large wheels and gears, though they were still and silent. The room itself was empty, but for a single lectern that stood in front of a wooden circle on the floor. It reeked of darkness, of Dracula’s magic. The whole room did to a certain extent but the device in the center most of all.

It reminded Ciri of his castle, actually. Both because of the decoration style and the feel of demonic energy.

She debated for a moment about investigating the lectern. A single step towards it was enough to convince her not to. The black energy around it was oppressive, and as she moved towards it, she could sense the hostility.

This world was already turning out to be a hell of a place.

Ciri sighed, and turned towards the doors.

As she approached, the great wheels behind the statues turned and ground against each other, pushing the massive doors slowly open. Bizarrely, this emptied into a strangely austere hallway; almost as if someone had built a brand new building on top of an older one. The walls looked to be made of some kind of grey brick, and there were lights set into the ceiling. The lights weren’t fire, or lanterns, or even magic, but they glowed with an even white light.

A sinking suspicion came over her.

Ciri had known for quite a while that she was able to travel between worlds. While she still had a great deal to learn about magic in general, she was exceptionally powerful with portals in particular. Her mentor, Avallac’h, had trained her to travel between realms; in those travels she’d seen many strange worlds.

Some were very much like her own. But she’d been to one where humanity roamed unchecked by the mystical world, and as a result had advanced to unimaginable levels of technological advancement. They hadn’t stayed in that world for very long; both she and Avallac’h were ill suited to blending in there. That brief visit was long enough that she recognized a similar type of craftsmanship in the lights here in this world.
If her hunch was right, then she’d soon be spending most of her time attempting to blend in. Who knew what the locals might think of magic. She couldn’t risk the possibility of starting a panic or witch hunt if she cast magic anywhere near people, but she had to find Alucard and Geralt as quickly as possible.

It seemed no one was around in the hallway.

Since she was alone, a quick locator spell was the first order of business. She raised her hands and focused her energy.

Ciri was hesitant to draw any from the natural world around her. The hallway didn’t crawl with Dracula’s unique brand of darkness like the strange circular room did, but it was still a dark place energetically speaking. Far darker than she normally worked with. Not only that, but if this city did have spellcasters, they might be watching for disturbances in their energy matrices. Better to use her own reserves, and cast carefully.

Luckily, locator spells were both cheap and easy in terms of power consumption and skill.

She spread the spell’s energy out, reaching, seeking Alucard. Ciri hated to think that her father might already be dead, but if he was it would be no use to try and locate him. The spark that defined his essence would already be gone. Alucard, though, she knew would be alive.

But the spell rebounded. The power snapped back on her like a taut bowstring, vibrating with thwarted intent. There were wards around the city, there had to be. Possibly built into the very walls.

Then she remembered Dracula’s castle, and how the whole place had spawned hundreds upon hundreds of wards, layer after layer as it grew. If this city was anything like that, she should be happy that all her locator spell did was rebound harmlessly. A good ward might have sent a nasty attack along with it.

She sighed.

Alright. If that option was out, perhaps a general scrying. Or maybe something more like dowsing. She wouldn’t actually be sending any energy out, just increasing her own reception to it. It helped that at this point she was fairly familiar with Alucard and his power. They’d discussed their differing schools of spellcasting at length a time or two, complete with demonstrations. She knew the taste, the scent of his power. Now all she had to do was focus her magic to sense it, even at a very great distance.

Happily, this spell was also quite a simple one; a temporary internal modification. Like boosting her natural sight or sense of smell, almost.

When that spell actually worked with no rebounds, Ciri pumped her fist into the air in triumph and a fierce grin spread across her face. Already she could feel a tugging, like a magnetic alignment almost, leading her in the right direction. All she had to do was get to open ground and follow it. And if she happened to find a city map or a few signs along the way to help her navigate the roads, all to the better.

She pulled her heavy grey cloak around her shoulders, covering up the hilt of her sword, and pulled the hood down over her face. Might as well at least try to be subtle.

Now to get out of the hallway.

A simple spell took care of the lock on the door.
She emerged into a wall of noise and light. It was evening, or maybe even nighttime judging by the color of the small patches of sky she could see through the achingly high buildings around her. The moon was huge up in the sky but there was so much ambient light and activity her instincts were confused. Not a single star could be seen, though perhaps that was just due to her limited view.

There were lights everywhere.

There were lights perched on high lanterns set at even intervals along the circular plaza she’s walked into. The posts stretched out near the walkway she stood at and down the street.

There were people walking alongside the streets dressed in clothes she’d never seen before. Styles ranged from sleek and form fitting to colorful and garish. Some people were covered from head to foot, while others exposed an indecent amount of flesh. Nobody wore any kind of armor and for that reason alone she was glad she had her cloak up. There were also strange, metal carriages without horses that carried people to and fro, as well as colorful, blinking lights set into buildings around her. Some of the lights were clearly used for the building itself and those inside, while others framed banners with names that meant nothing to her.

She had emerged from an unlit alley, remaining largely unseen and ignored as she watched people walk by. The metal carriages that passed by made a great deal of noise, and people everywhere were talking. Some to each other, and some to little boxes held to their ears; perhaps something like a spelled mirror. It was hard for her to tell.

The street here seemed to be a large circle with more roads branching out like spokes on a wheel. Tall buildings ran up along the outside of the ring, each one cold and grey and as high as the barely visible sky. In the center of the street-circle was a massive statue of a woman holding a sword pointed out in front of her. The lines were simple and clean, showing little emotion. Even though it had to have been at least two stories tall, the buildings on the outer circle of the street still dwarfed it.

The smell hit her next, or rather the lack of it. Granted, she could smell the strange, nose tingling chemicals and a million foreign scents, but the ever present scent of sewers was absent. In her homeworld, more often than not, waste was just thrown out onto the street to slowly make its way out of the city. That was why stepping stones were such an important thing. Here there was no scent and no stepping stones. As she watched the oddly smooth cobblestones of the sidewalks and the smooth black surface of the roads, she could see the moisture of a recent rain still there, but nothing that would indicate where the waste produced by such a big city would go.

Not far from where Ciri stood, away from the bustle of people, she noticed something that looked like a small shrine built into the wall of the building she’d just exited from. It was surrounded by lit candles, and looked to be made of beautifully carved wood. The whole thing barely reached as high as her waist. Whoever built it made it to look like a tiny house-like structure. It had little steps leading up to it, all of which were covered by candles, side walls, and a tiny peaked roof built on top. The front of the shrine was open to the street.

Inside there were more candles burning, casting flickering golden light on the scroll hung above them. It looked to be suspended there by magic, but as far as Ciri could see it was really just a trick of the candle light. The little wooden pegs that held it up were stained black, but the scroll itself looked nearly golden in the glow of the candles. Even more curious was that there wasn’t any sense of the divine around the little shrine at all.

Curious and hoping for some information, she stepped closer and pulled the scroll out. A couple of quick glances around her proved that no one was really watching. After a moment or two, when there were no cries of outrage, she carefully unfurled the scroll.
The language it was written in was one she recognized, very similar to the common speech in the Northern Kingdoms. The words were formed a bit oddly, but she was relieved to see that she could still understand it. The scroll described how this place, Victory Plaza, was founded by the Brotherhood of Light to celebrate their victory over Dracula, the wretched Lord of Darkness. It was meant to commemorate the half a million men who lost their lives in that final battle.

Ciri blinked.

Well, fuck.

That did not bode well for the rest of her trip here. Granted, the Dracula she knew very much was the Prince of Darkness, King of Hell, God of Chaos. But in the time that she knew him, he didn’t seem to be actively malevolent. Jaded, yes, and cynical as could be. But he seemed to hold no interest in doing anything but tending to what was directly in his keeping.

She thought of the barren wasteland that was once the southwestern border of Temeria, and shuddered. Eskel had managed to calm Dracula down enough to halt his slowly grinding rampage before it hit any real human settlement, but what if he hadn’t? What if her father really was dead, and the true perpetrators of his murder still extant?

Cautious of drawing attention to herself, she replaced the scroll, setting it back down gently into its holder in the shrine. No one seemed to notice or care that she’d picked it up to read it, so that was a bonus.

She wrapped her cloak a little more tightly around her body, and found a crowd of people to walk with, slowly moving toward that internal tug.

As she walked, she marveled at the buildings. Some were tall and sleek, with massive bronze statues adorning platforms in front of them. Others had the same sweeping, morbid-looking architecture that Dracula’s castle did, all spikes, lurid sculpture, and haunted-looking windows.

Hanging off buildings all around were more of the lights. All colors, shapes, and sizes. Most seemed to be just advertisement. Buy now! Only 29.95! Hot Food Here!

The crowd she was walking with were headed towards one such adorned building, with its massive glowing lights above ancient-looking glass and iron doors.

When she read the sign, she stumbled to a stop.

*Now Playing:*
Call Me By Your Name
Won’t You Be My Neighbor
Chain Massacre no.12

*Midnight Showing:*
*Alucard the Vampire (1982)*

*The iconic movie that ruled the charts for years!*

She stood there, jaw dropped. It couldn’t have been this easy to find him, could it have been? This didn’t look like a place for a wounded man.
Alucard told them he was a merchant, not an actor, and she could recognize a theater when she looked at one, no matter how strange the world. She moved closer to the building to get a better look and was rewarded by finding a poster in a frame up on the outer wall.

In atrociously large, red font the poster screamed *Alucard the Vampire*. Right below the title was a picture of a broody, dark haired man with his hair tossed around by an invisible wind. He was staring forward with a furrowed brow and there was a huge cross in his hand that trailed a metal chain. What, exactly, that was supposed to be, Ciri had no idea. Between his red, pouty lips she could see a pair of blindingly white and definitely impractical fangs poking out.

Smaller pictures were lined under him. One was of an oddly shaped box; like a very elongated hexagon, large enough to fit a grown man. It was barely cracked open and a well manicured hand was slipping out of it. Given that, it was probably a coffin. Why it wasn’t a plain rectangle, she wasn’t sure, but perhaps there was some cultural significance.

The small image next to that was of a fainting woman, barely clad in a thin, white, gauzy shift. Her throat was bared to the viewer, and two obvious puncture marks lay there, slowly dripping blood.

By the time she looked at the third picture, Ciri was already hard pressed not to giggle. This was obviously some kind of romantic vampire love story. That last picture cinched it in her mind. It showed the actor playing Alucard bending over another buxom, mostly naked woman and biting her neck while she clung to him in rapture.

That was when she lost it. She laughed so hard that she had to lean on the wall next to the advertisement, clutching her pained side.

*Alucard the Vampire.*

Holy gods, she was never going to let Alucard live this one down.

“*You shouldn’t laugh like that missy.*” A passing man had paused to scold her. He looked to be on the young side of middle aged, and was dressed in more conservative, layered clothes. “*Sure, the movie is a bit cheesy but that was how they made the movies in the eighties. It doesn’t change the fact that it incorporates so much of our city’s history! It’s a good modern representation of Alucard’s legend, even if it is a little on the romantic side. And still a very popular erotic thriller, if you like that kind of thing.*” He gave her a stern look. “*You should see it first before you laugh.*”

Ciri sobered, and straightened up.

“I’m terribly sorry for…for laughing.” She was not sorry. Not even a little. The words *erotic thriller* still bounced around her head, but learning from sorceresses had taught her how to lie as well as how to cast spells. More importantly in this situation, they taught her how to be diplomatic. “I’m not from around here. What’s the legend you’re talking about?”

He gave her a strange look.

“You must really be from far away. The story of Alucard is huge in Castlevania City. He was supposedly a vampire knight who fought against Dracula’s monstrous creatures. He always showed up in times of terrible need, fighting off demons no human could withstand, and then disappeared. Who knows if it’s really true, but there are still devoted followings, and not just the folks who like this kind of thing.” He waved at the poster on the wall. “There are shrines to his memory, many built by the people he saved over the years. The Church doesn’t really condone the shrines, but they don’t really forbid them either.” The man shrugged. “If you head over to the arts district, you’ll find the library. They’ll be able to get you a good accounting. You might run into
one of the shrines, too. Castlevania City has shrines everywhere. We have to, in such a dark place.”

Now that sounded more like the Alucard she knew. Ciri nodded along with the man as he explained.

“Thank you so much,” she said. “I really am quite new here, and I appreciate the recommendation.” Before the man could walk off, she asked, “Since you’ve been kind enough to explain, I was wondering if you’d be able to point me in the direction of a hospital? I’m in town trying to reach a sick friend, but I’m afraid I’ve gotten quite lost.”

She gave the man a winning smile, with just a touch of hesitance and hopefulness.

“That’s unfortunate luck,” the man said. He scratched his nose and thought for a moment. “Well, there are a couple major ones. You don’t happen to know the name?”

“I’m sorry, I don’t remember it. I’m well and truly useless with this kind of thing.” She slumped, trying to look a little dejected.

“I guess you could try the nearest one, and they can direct you to other hospitals if you won’t find your friend there.”

“That seems like a really good idea.” Ciri nodded eagerly.

“There’s Castlevania General on Wygol street. It’s one of the newer buildings, so it’s got the modern look. None of the statues on the outside, you know. That’s the one with the busiest ER, too, I think. Mr. Belmont funded the remodel after the Outbreak destroyed it, so it’s got top of the line facilities.” He looked around, and then pointed up the street. “Over there is the local metro station. You see the sign with a big M on it? That’s it. It’s got stops all around the city, and maps. Castlevania General should be listed on it. Actually, if you need to you can ask the folks who work there for better directions. The hospital has its own stop I think, but I don’t remember what line it’s on.”

“Thank you so much!” Ciri gushed, smiling with sincere and profound relief.

“Good luck,” the man said with a wave, and headed back down the street.

For a moment, Ciri had to smile. Even though the man had caught her laughing at what was apparently a treasured cultural icon, he’d still offered her directions to the hospital. It was a kindness unlooked for, and unusual in such a dark place. Perhaps that’s why humans thrived here with so much demonic energy around. They’d banded together as a community.

The station that the man pointed her towards was away from that inner tug that she was following, but the chance to look at a map was too good to pass up. She made her way up the block to the sign the man indicated.

All around her, crowds of people swirled, on their way to work or play or wherever. The sheer noise of it was impressive. Between the din of hundreds of people walking and talking, and the strange rumbles and honks from the metal carriages, this was the loudest city Ciri had ever been in. The crush of people was impressive as well, especially the closer she got to this ‘Metro’ thing the man spoke of.

The first thing she saw when she started down the sunken stairs was a large green sign blinking at her from the surrounding walls “Free transport from 8 pm - 5 am.” Beside that, there was a little glowing sign displaying the numbers 8:12 pm. Obviously, it was a measure of time, and again her luck held out. Ciri was confident that she could con her way into a free ride, but it was a relief to
know that she wouldn’t have to.

She could hear people talking as they passed, and their steps grew faster and more confident as they headed inside. The crowd was funneled into a series of waist high gates; they were all held open right now, but chances were good that they would come down once fees were being charged again. A clever way to make sure people pay to get in. There was a guard post off to the side of the gates, but the man there was relaxed, just watching the crowd with casual boredom.

“Thank god for the free metro,” a dark complected woman passing Ciri said, clearly talking to the blond to her side. They’d all been shoved up together by the crowd attempting to get inside. “I would have never managed to get back home from work before the babysitter leaves if I had to walk. And a daily train fee just to get back and forth to work, ug. Can you imagine how much that would cost?”

“I hear you,” the blond said with a shake of her head. “Just the idea of needing to walk after dark around here would make me start looking for work elsewhere, and just leave the city. Over a year since the Outbreak, and still there are reports of Infected being spotted.”

By now, they’d passed through the little gates, but Ciri was curious about what they were talking about. She ducked her head a bit farther down and kept close enough to hear the rest of the conversation. With the crowd, it wasn’t even that hard.

“Yeah,” the first woman said with a bit of a sigh. “I guess it’s going to take years to completely clean out the city anyway. The security is better nowadays, so that’s something. Most of the main buildings are rebuilt, but I don’t know if they’ll ever clean up all the rubble off of the side streets.”

“Right? You know how I told you my uncle has a bookstore?” The blond leaned in as she spoke, like she had some juicy gossip, and her companion responded by walking closer. Ciri couldn’t help but lean in a bit, too.

“Yeah?”

“Well, apparently sometime during the Outbreak a wall or five got torn down and he said that there’s a passage leading straight to the mental hospital right in the back of his shop now. Apparently it got missed during the renovation.”

Now the first woman recoiled in horror. “Oh my god! No?! That’s terrifying!”

“I know, right? Can you imagine? They say that’s where Dracula buried all the dead children he ate.”

Both women visibly shivered.

“I cannot believe he hasn’t cemented that right up. Or made his landlord do it. I would have.” The first woman shook her head and waved a finger, emphasising the no.

“Ugg, he says it costs money.”

Ciri could practically hear the blond roll her eyes. Quite frankly, she was in agreement. The last thing she would want in her shop was a direct line to a mass grave. That was just asking for ghouls to invade.

“Yeah. People lost so much during the Outbreak, can see him not having anything to spare. Still. The old mental hospital? Isn’t that place cursed? Besides, who even came up with the idea to build the hospital on the graveyard of all those children anyway? They should have made a statue or a
place of remembrance there instead."

“God, this city is weird,” the blond muttered, and both women shook their heads.

They turned right and walked out of sight while Ciri stopped in place, surprised and queasy with how certain the women were of Dracula eating children. They spoke as if it was a fact, and one supported by undeniable evidence. She tried to connect the threatening, angry, but still polite and largely neutral man to the monster they were describing and found that she couldn’t. Even knowing that Dracula had utterly laid waste to that patch of forest, that was still just an act of abrupt rage, a short lapse of control in the face of overwhelming upset and stress.

The crowd was starting to bump into her, so while she was thinking, she turned the corner and got her first look at what this ‘Metro’ thing really was.

Large metal carriages, settled on rails, rocketed in and out of the station. There were several lines of rails, too, with platforms in between them, each connected by arching walkways. The noise of it was overwhelming, and the air smelled of electricity and burning oil. Once the carriages stopped, people swelled on and off, and then the doors would close and the contraption would continue on its way.

If it hadn’t been for the fact that Ciri was trying very hard to blend in, she would have stopped dead in her tracks just to stare. As it was, she still had to drift off to the side wall to have some time to take it all in. The scope of the place was mind boggling. How many people even lived in this city? Tens of thousands? Hundreds of thousands?

For a moment she was overcome with worry. Through all this mess, all these people, she still had to find her father and Alucard.

Ciri closed her eyes and focused on the spell still working on her, leading her to where she needed to go. The alignment hadn’t moved at all; it was still dragging her along, like a compass needle.

Whatever was going on here, she could find them. More was at stake than just finding out the latest news. Dracula was waiting, and waiting impatiently at that, she was sure.

Thank the Gods for Eskel, she thought.

Her adopted uncle had been cagey as hell about whatever was going on between him, Dracula, Alucard, and Geralt. But something had happened during the whole Novigrad incident. Since then he’d gained Dracula’s mark on his chest, and the faint flavor of demonic energy about him. Not only that, but the few times she’d visited them all at Kaer Morhen, there was a certain lack of personal space between them all.

Of course she’d teased the hell out of him for it, but much like Geralt, Eskel didn’t seem unhappy with his situation. As far as she could tell, Dracula treated both Geralt and Eskel extremely well, though the vampire did have a tendency to infuriate. He seemed to take quiet amusement in watching people get flustered around him.

She’d gambled that Eskel would be able to calm Dracula down enough to be reasoned with, and it had paid off. But there was no telling how long that would last. Or if it would last at all if she found out that Geralt had passed on.

Ciri gritted her teeth and prayed her father wasn’t dead, for more than just his sake or her own.

A quick look around the platform showed that placed up and down the walkway at strategic points were maps. She beelined for one of them and stood there taking a good long look.
From what she could see, she was on the eastern side of the city. Victory Plaza. This Metro thing looked like it had pathways all throughout the city; they criss crossed in the center as well as circled around it in a large loop. The map even had a helpful *You Are Here* dot on it, thank the gods. Based on that, plus the magic tugging in her chest, she chose the line most likely to lead her towards wherever Alucard was. It ran right through the heart of the city and clear across to the west side, in the district marked Downtown.

That projection lined right up with the dot on the map that said Castlevania General.

Ciri blessed whatever kind spirit was looking out for her, and headed towards what she hoped was the right carriage.

As she walked along, she passed by any number of little shops dug into the walls. The stands sold anything from books to food to drinks. There was even a clothing shop far down at the end of the way.

What caught her eye, though, was what appeared to be an image projection. Several of them, actually.

One of the shops had a line of boxes, and each one had a glowing, moving image inside. Like an illusion, or maybe the projection from a megascope. Two of the three boxes showed what looked like some kind of sports game; large, well padded men sliding around on ice and bashing into each other. Possibly chasing something, though it was hard to see. Maybe it was a survival of the fittest kind of thing? Maybe only the ones who managed to leave the ring alive or undamaged were the winners?

One of the boxes held two people talking directly towards the viewers. This was the only box that had sound coming out of it, too. It was so amazing, so lifelike, that Ciri found herself mesmerized.

“...The latest in a string of Infected sightings near the downtown district. Local security forces were quick to contain the threat, and there were no additional outbreaks or deaths. Three people were critically injured in the attack, but were immediately taken to Castlevania General for quarantine and treatment.”

The image that followed that was of some kind of massive, chitinous monster twice the size of a man. Whatever it looked like before it was subdued was beyond recognition, because what was being shown was clearly a half destroyed corpse. Poisonous green ichor spread all around its body as men sprayed fire onto it, burning it to a crisp. What was more interesting was that the fire didn't seem to be a spell. It looked like it was being sprayed out of a hose, as if they'd somehow managed to find a way to hold fire in a box and then let it out as needed.

The image switched back to the two people talking. This time, the other one started to speak.

“Local elections are starting to heat up. The vote is still more than three months away, but several potential candidates are to appear in a debate later this week. Topics listed range from city wide budgeting, Outbreak control, Social Services, and Church involvement in government action. The debate is a public event and will be held at the City Amphitheater. Seating is first come, first serve, and the second half of the debate will be open to public questions. The deadline to register to vote is May 5th.”

The speakers switched again, and started talking about the weather for the rest of the week. Ciri had never seen weather divination like this before, but it was very impressive looking.

Ciri wasn’t certain what exactly the whole election thing was all about, but this had to be some
kind of news. Perhaps like a town crier. Or royal proclamations.

She watched on.

“...And in our last story today, Trevor Belmont, CEO of Bioquimek Corporation was reported heading into Castlevania General Hospital sometime yesterday.”

The image that popped up was Alucard. Sort of. He wasn’t wearing his armor or sword, and his eyes didn’t look right, but it was definitely him. It was clearly some kind of posed picture. The image of him was staring just off center, his face mildly neutral, and every strand of hair perfectly braided back into place. Whatever clothes he was wearing, Ciri had to assume were something standard for this world.

“Trevor Belmont is the man hailed as the modern-day savior of this City. A year and half ago, during the worst of the Outbreak, this reclusive billionaire and heir to the famous Belmont bloodline, came forward to help Castlevania City rebuild. He took control of Bioquimek from former CEO Raisa Volkova - suspected to be behind the start of the Outbreak. And in the weeks following, he staged an unprecedented series of buyouts, staging hostile takeovers of Bernhard Industries as well as Zobek Industries after the former President and CEO mysteriously disappeared during the Outbreak. Since then, Belmont has spent billions on city restoration. He also retooled Bernhard Industries manufacturing plants to produce weapons capable of destroying the infected and distributed them to city’s security forces. For all his involvement in city-wide restoration and damage control, he is very rarely seen outside of his HQ.

“Reports so far are sketchy about the reason for Belmont’s visit to Castlevania General. Unconfirmed sources claim Mr. Belmont called in an unplanned helicopter sometime after noon and travelled to Castlevania General with extreme haste. The hospital itself is keeping a lid on any information leaking out and a large number of Mr. Belmont’s security forces have been spotted on hospital grounds.

“No official statement has yet been made by his publicist. Our hopes and prayers are with Mr. Belmont during this time.”

Ciri watched the image be replaced by a series of moving images.

The first was of Alucard on some kind of podium, his hair again braided back tightly, and dressed in dark, austere clothes. His eyes looked human, brown irises and white sclera, and his clothes looked expensive and extremely well tailored in comparison to other people in the images.

The second moving image was of him walking down a plushly carpeted corridor surrounded by gaggle of darkly clothed people. Different clothes, the same tight braid, so obviously the image was from a different time.

A third moving image was of Alucard getting out of one of those metal carriages she’s seen on the streets. Only his seemed bigger, longer, than anything she’d seen so far and somehow more intimidating with its shiny black surfaces and black tinted windows.

Everywhere he went there were flashes of light and people looking at him the same way Ciri saw people looking at kings---with greed, terror and admiration in their eyes.

He did say he owned a trading company, but he didn’t say the people here treated him like some kind of royalty and an almost mystical savior. And the name. He clearly did not go by his vampire name, Alucard, but by Trevor Belmont instead. She wondered if the name Alucard was common in this world, or if it was his existence that started the whole Alucard legend in the first place. That
seemed the most reasonable, given what she knew of Alucard’s personality.

It was also a little strange to realize, none of those people knew Alucard was a vampire. They firmly believed that Trevol Belmont was as human as they were.

Ciri stared at the images in mild astonishment long after the people talking had moved on to other stories. She remembered what her father said, that Alucard and Dracula had a long, complicated history. That was never more apparent to her than it was right now. She wondered if Belmont was a name that Alucard had adopted, or if that was his old human name. Geralt had said he was more than a thousand years old; maybe Alucard simply always used the same family name when he had to interact with humans?

Whatever he had going on here, he was at the hospital. He had to be there with Geralt.

She started looking around the platform again for which metal carriage she was supposed to get on. The whole system seemed infernally complicated, with color-coded carriages and twisting routes. Finally, she thought she found the right one. A second long look at a map showed her that it would take her to a different part of the city, and then she’d have to switch carriages again.

Ciri gritted her teeth and took one last look around the platform before stepping into the carriage.

Almost there.

Seats lined the inside walls of the carriage, and bars hung down overhead within easy reach. Ciri followed along with the crowds as she saw people randomly sitting or holding on to the bars as needed. The reason why they were there was immediately made clear, because the carriage lurched forward with enough force to make her stagger on her feet.

Keeping an eye on the other travelers around her was completely disregarded as soon as the carriage left the platform. All she could do was stare out the window. She thought they were underground. After all, she’d gone down stairs to get to the platform. But it looked like Castlevania City was built in elaborate terraces, and in between walls of rock she could see deep caverns and ancient buildings. She found herself pressing against the window to see better.

It looked like Dracula’s castle---almost, anyways. There were statues everywhere. Some were twisted and broken while others were still bright and shining; they lined the walls of buildings and stood guardian over deep empty doorways that led back into who knows where. Dotted along the way were more of those tiny, candle lit shrines, each one with its own illuminated scroll set in its center.

Curiosity ate at her. What did they say? What bit of history did each shrine commemorate, and how much of the truth was really there?

Soon enough the carriage started to ramp up, slowly going above the main street level and twisting through the massive buildings above. It was breathtaking, how vast the city looked. Each building was lit up with a million tiny lights, and she could see other high-arching carriage rails far in the distance.

Even more breathtaking was the fact that wherever she looked, wherever the Metro took her, she saw the edges of Dracula’s castle in the shape of the buildings, in the arches of the bridges, and in the twisting lines of the streets. The city was huge, bigger than any she had ever been in before, but for all its size it didn’t manage to outgrow the castle at all.

She was so enthralled with watching the city fly by that she very nearly missed her first stop.
After several minutes of hustling around, checking the map, and noting her inner alignment with Alucard’s power, Ciri made her way onto the next carriage.

This one took her off in a different angle, farther west this time. The buildings looked older here, and she could see there were whole chunks of Dracula’s castle that were still intact.

As she rode, she could feel the residual energy of the place. Some of it was almost like Dracula’s fire and blood flavored power, but there were other threads here, too. There were so many pools of dark energy, though they were fractured, broken things. Melded throughout the city were powerful veins of lighter energy.

She wondered how much of that was due to Alucard’s influence. He often claimed he wasn’t much of a mage; his abilities were mostly combat based. But it was natural for someone’s home to take on their energy signature. It was part of how the various worlds, the very fabric of reality, worked. Despite his claims of having limited magical ability, Alucard’s reach was great. He held a great deal of power in general, and the lay of the land would reflect that.

Those living here were no doubt influenced by the corrupting power that had infested this area for so long, but people could change it back as well, through their actions and choices. Light wasn’t an inherently good power, nor was darkness inherently evil. She saw enough in her life to know, to believe with every fiber of her being, that it was what you did with the power that mattered. She’d seen light power used to murder hundreds of people and she’d seen dark power cradle a wounded person as gently as a mother would a child. Dark opened one up to possibilities, to the weaknesses of their own hearts. What people chose to do with that, that was a true measure of a person.

Alucard’s power may have stemmed from Dracula’s darkness, but she had no doubt that he wielded it in such a way that it brought only hope and safety.

The tugging against her senses grew stronger as they moved, and when the disembodied voice of the carriage called out ‘Castlevania General’, she was more than ready to get off.

This station was much busier than the one she’d originally started on. There were people waiting for the carriage, but also plenty of other people disembarking like her. They poured out in a living, pulsating mass that flowed up the stairs and out of the station.

Ciri followed the swirl of people, many of which were moving directly towards the building her magic told her Alucard was in. She kept with the loose group as they headed into some type of formal entranceway. A large desk stood in the middle of the vast room there, and the sign above it said ‘Information’.

Alucard was above her somewhere, she knew that for certain. A quick look at the desk showed that there were maps posted in various spots on it. Several of the people behind the desk were engaged in various activities; some answering questions while others seemed to be doing some kind of clerical work.

She tried to unobtrusively study a small map of what had to be the building she was in. It was quieter in here, quieter than the Metro platforms anyways, and the air was artificially cold. The tang of disinfectant filled the air, along with the unmistakable scent of sickness.

“Can I help you find something?” a woman behind the counter asked, turning to look up at Ciri from where she was seated.

“I know the room I’m supposed to go to, but I’m not sure where the stairs are.” Ciri shrugged a little apologetically, trying to come off as both innocent and lost.
The woman looked at her for a moment before pointing left.

“Go ‘til the end of the corridor, the stairs are behind metal doors. They are marked.”

Ciri thanked her and beat a hasty retreat. It wasn’t like she was being hunted here or anything, but she couldn’t help but feel exposed as an outsider.

Twenty minutes later and she was still walking up stairs. It was a damn good thing that she was in shape, because of course Alucard was on the Gods be damned top floor. She resolved to tease him about it later. Just because he could turn into bats didn’t mean that he needed to roost like them.

Finally she felt the tug inside her even out, indicating she had reached the floor she needed.

She pushed the heavy metal door open only to come face to face with a mountain of a man. His hair was cut so short he looked nearly bald, and there was a kind of white cord coming out of his ear. His neck was thick with muscle and he wore the same dark grey clothes and a white undershirt that she saw a lot of men favor in this city.

He was markedly different from the people she passed on the streets in some ways. Not only was he a damn sight bigger, but he was a warrior, too. She could tell he had serious training by the way he stood, his legs slightly spread and his center of gravity low enough that she knew he wouldn’t be easily bowled over.

What was more interesting was the second man, who stood outside of their reach. He was dressed in nearly identical clothes, had a very similar haircut, and was watching them with dark, careful eyes. One of his hands was raised, with one finger pressed against his ear. The same kind of white cord that the first man wore came out of his ear, under his finger, only to disappear under his collar.

She gave a purely internal sigh.

Because of course Alucard had guards. She’d see on the image projections how well regarded he was here, and since he was trying to blend in as a human, it would be expected that he would need them. The irony of it was sort of hilarious. A group of human fighters trying to protect an incredibly powerful, ancient vampire.

Deeper in the corridor, she could see even more guards stationed at even intervals. All of them were turning to pay attention to her, and all of them were obviously on high alert.

Fuck. Might as well try the easy way first. It might work.

She smiled and said, “Please excuse me, I’m here to see my father. He’s in one of the rooms here.”

“The whole floor is reserved, no access allowed.” The mountain sized man she was facing was the one who answered. He didn’t move a single inch from blocking her way. Actually, he even shifted to block even more of her view than he did before. “I will have to ask you to leave, miss.”

It was second nature for her to shift her own body weight to match, preparing for whatever attack would inevitably be coming towards her.

“I really need to see Trevor Belmont. He has my father here, and it is critical that I check in on him.” Ciri stayed polite, but firm.

She could see the man’s pale blue eyes narrow slightly. He’d caught her shift and understood it for what it was. Damn, she should have expected Alucard’s guards would be well trained.
“There are no scheduled guests, therefore I can not allow you access.” The man was still remarkably polite, which was not something she was used to from thugs.

“And yet, there is at least one here under Trevor Belmont’s care. A man named Geralt. I will see him.”

Worse come to worst, she would teleport by them. She didn’t want to, but more was at stake here than just the lives of a few guards. Or even just her own life. She didn’t see any blades on them, but she had no doubt they were armed.

Several more of them began to steadily walk down the hall towards her. Maybe if she gathered enough attention in this corner she could portal by them and run to wherever Alucard was, with no bloodshed at all.

“Please, just tell Trevor Belmont I am here to see my father. My name is Ciri. He’ll know who I am,” she insisted.

“Miss, if you show us some identification we can check with Mr. Belmont’s aide if you are who you claim to be.”

The second guard who was keeping his distance was now walking up. One of his hands was raised towards her in a standard peace gesture, but the other was hovering strangely close to the edge of his jacket. She hazarded a guess that was where his weapon was.

Ciri tilted her head at the mountain man she’d been talking to, mildly confused. Identification? “Like a passcode? Or an item of recognition?”

The guards looked at each other, clearly baffled by her answer. Something she’d said made them look as if she was either very stupid or lying, both options unfavorable. Chances were good that this identification was something standard for this world, and she’d just completely missed the implication of the word. Which was just great.

“Tell the aide that I know who is with Trevor Belmont, and I know what he wears around his neck, and I know the color of his eyes. Belmont will recognize me on sight.” Ciri tried to stay calm and firm, but she couldn’t help but keep herself ready for an attack. She might be able to Quen herself before they reached their weapons, but she couldn’t be sure. A short teleport away would be her best bet.

“Miss,” the first guard said, “you have to understand that Mr. Belmont is a very influential man. You are the tenth person in the last hour to try and get in to see him. If we called the aide of such a busy man every time somebody asked for him, he would do nothing but stand here all day.”

“His father is a very influential man, too, and significantly more wrathful,” she said testily, and then sighed in frustration.

She could see that remark sailing right over their heads. They were clearly loyal only to Alucard and were not going to pay attention to any other person, even his father. Also, something in their lack of reaction made her think they hadn’t met Dracula.

“Is that a threat?” The second guard asked, still very politely.

“No,” she said again, suddenly incredibly weary. “Just the sad truth. I need to see my father. He’s here and he’s hurt. Please. If Trevor Belmont doesn’t recognize me, I will leave without a word or act against anyone here.”
“What’s his name?” a new voice asked unexpectedly. She was so focussed on the guards and the immediate threat of them that she had completely missed anyone else approaching.

Ciri turned to look at the man, and said formally, “My father’s name is Geralt of Rivia. He’s known as the White Wolf, Witcher of the Wolf School, and Gwynbleidd. I am Ciri, his adopted daughter, and Child of Surprise. He is hurt very badly, and I must see him. Please.”

The young, thin man had an unflinchingly polite expression on his face. The wire rimmed glasses on his face reflected the light when he shifted, making it hard to read his eyes. His clothes were of a similar cut to the guards, but significantly finer in quality. The fabrics looked softer, and each item had obviously been tailored specifically to him. He dressed in lighter colors too; pale grey pants and coat with a light blue shirt under it, and some kind of decorative fabric hanging down his front.

“What does he wear around his neck?” the thin man asked, not letting her know if he recognized the name or not.

“A medallion shaped like a wolf’s head,” she answered, trying to remember that the word witcher probably wouldn’t mean anything to the people watching her. “He also has white hair, like me, and cat eyes.” She paused. “Gold with vertical pupils,” she added just in case. She hasn’t seen any cats on this world yet.

The thin man, definitely younger than any of the guards, turned to the first guard who was still blocking her way with his bulk.

“Matt, let her through.”

“Just as soon as she gives up her weapons,” the big man rumbled, never taking his eyes from her for even a second.

She raised an eyebrow at him. She’d spent a lot of damn money on her sword, and wasn’t keen to lose it. Especially not to a random set of humans.

“Weaponry in the presence of Mr. Belmont is non negotiable,” the thin man said. “If you truly want to speak to him, you will disarm yourself. Otherwise you will not be allowed a step closer.”

Ciri desperately wanted to tell this man how little her sword and daggers would do against a being like Alucard, but she understood where he was coming from.

Slow and steady, she threw back her cloak to show off the various belts lined with daggers and the heavy sword at her back.

“Where shall I put them?” she asked with a grin, baring her teeth a little.

“Keith,” the large man, Matt, called out and another guard popped up, this time coming from the direction of the staircase. “You’ll be responsible for the weaponry.”

“Yes, sir.” The man came closer and looked at her expectantly.

Ciri began unbuckling the belts that held them to her body, wrapping them carefully around the scabbards of the blades. When she handed them over, she paused to stare at the man she was giving them to. “I will have these back, or I will find you.”

“Of course.” He looked as unfazed as all the other ones. Where did Alucard even dig those guys up? They strangely reminded her of witchers, actually. “Do you want a receipt per blade or one for
the total?”

She sighed again and rubbed her eyes, muttering to herself, “Geralt, why…” How did he always get into these situations? Then she shook her head, and looked at him again. “No need. Please take me to Trevor Belmont and my father.”

She pulled out all the blades and bombs that she had on her and passed them one by one to the guard waiting patiently beside her.

“Am I done?” she asked, trying to conceal her irritation. It was possible that she hadn’t succeeded as well as she would have liked, but oh well. It had already been a damn long day.

“Almost, miss,” Matt said, as politely as ever. “I just need to pat you down for hidden weapons and then we’ll be done.”

Because of course.

“So be it.” She raised her arms and hoped they’d keep to polite areas. “Try to take advantage and I’ll break your fingers.”

By this point, Ciri was well and truly tired. She’d portaled several times that day, once through worlds, and to an unfamiliar world as well. And then hours of journey after that, too. She was so close that she could taste Alucard in the damn air. Regardless of how many weapons they took from her, those were replaceable, and she could still use her magic if need be.

At least he was quick, for all that he was very thorough, too. His hands patted both the outside and the inside of her sleeves and her sides. He looked under the back of her collar and ran his hands over her belt twice. He didn't try to cop a feel, which was a nice surprise; that only spoke of how well trained a guard he was. She did raise her eyebrows at him as she felt him stuff his fingers into the edge of her boot and run the circumference of her calf. Probably checking to see that she didn't have any hidden blades there.

“I would ask you to give up the wide belt. It’s heavy enough to serve as a weapon,” Matt said, getting up. “Other than that we are almost done.”

She unbuckled it and thanked whatever spirit had guided her to choose pants that fit. Then she handed her belt to Keith, already waiting with a nice armful of weaponry.

Ciri looked to Matt with raised eyebrows.

“Thank you for your cooperation.” Matt inclined his head. “I hope you enjoy your stay,” he added with the same even, polite tone that made her want to bare her teeth at him like an animal.

“The belt was a test,” she realized.

That pulled the first, honest reaction out of him. It was just a flicker, there and gone, but he inclined his head to her.

“I wanted to see your body language when faced with an unexpected and somewhat unreasonable demand,” he said.

“And what did you see?” she asked, curious.

“You are very irritated, but not unreasonably so. That excludes drugs and other mood altering substances as your control remained steady in face of a situation you couldn’t have foreseen. If you
were a paparazzi, you would have balked at the pat down, but you managed to stand still for that. The request to give up a clothing item usually makes the untrained ones break their role. Your micro expressions also fit the emotions you portrayed. If you had remained too calm, didn’t react to the request with impatience and frustration, or your micro expressions denied your outward expressions, I would have shot you.”

The explanation actually made her smile. “If my father lives, you should talk to him. You two will get along very well, I think. Never, ever play dice or cards with him.”

That pulled a tiny smirk from the big man’s face. It was a good face, she decided. Not too pretty, but attractive enough. Intelligence shone in his eyes, which was always a trait she liked.

“I like a challenge,” Matt said.

Ciri took a moment to look him up and down, admiring the warrior’s body he had, then she smiled wolfishly. “So do I.”

“Suddenly, I can see the resemblance,” the thin man sighed.

That brightened Ciri up significantly. “You’ve seen him.”

“Mr. Belmont’s guest, against all odds, is alive and on his way to recovery.”

That news alone made Ciri want to drop to her knees and weep with joy. She absolutely did sag in place and close her eyes. “Oh thank the Gods. You truly have no idea how relieved I am to hear that, and not just for his or my sake.”

“Follow me,” the thin man said, and motioned for her to join him.

Ciri took a step forward, but then hesitated. She turned back to Keith.

“If you value your fingers, you won’t meddle with the bombs.” She helpfully pointed towards the stack of rounded objects in his hands.

“You brought bombs to a hospital,” Matt said flatly.

“You didn’t?” she asked, one eyebrow raised. “It’s not like they’re incendiary bombs. They’re part of my standard kit.”

“I prefer the precise approach myself. But now I kind of want to know what kind of bombs they are.” Matt narrowed his eyes at her a little.

She smirked wickedly at him and winked. “If there’s time later we can share recipes.” Then she turned to the thin man. “Shall we?”

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Given what little John knew of Geralt, if he had to pick out a set of characteristics that would embody Geralt’s daughter, Ciri would match all of them.

Physically they didn’t look alike, aside from hair color. It was hard to say what Geralt might have looked like under all the damage he’d taken anyways, but Ciri moved like she was the most dangerous person in the room; all power and grace. The scar across her cheek and the small mountain of edged weapons Keith relieved her of was also a big hint.

John had just laid down to get the rest Belmont had sent him to when security started feeding them
updates on a potential situation in the hall. A single woman, possibly heavily armed, was asking for Trevor Belmont and his guest.

It was the guest part that had made John take notice. So far none of the obvious slew of reporters, investigators, and opportunists had mentioned a guest. That information was so far on lock down that John knew not even a whisper of it had gotten out.

But this woman, Ciri, from what she said it was obvious she knew who Geralt was. From her exasperation, it was also pretty clear that she was familiar with his general attitude or antics.

That really didn’t bode well for John in the future, especially if he was going to be tasked with keeping Geralt in bed.

As much as he hated to interrupt Mr. Belmont, this seemed like a situation he’d want to know about. A quick nod to Matt had him following along behind them towards the room. Just in case this wasn’t what it seemed.

“When we go in there, please try to be quiet. Geralt just got out of surgery and is resting,” John mentioned to her as they walked.

“Good Gods,” she muttered back, then shook her head. “Did you have to tie him to the bed?”

Yeah. She knew Geralt.

“Once the pain medication hit he was out of commission anyway. It’s a miracle he is alive. All his bluster won’t change the fact that he’s unable to do anything but sleep.” John watched Ciri out of the corner of his eye, gauging her reaction.

“I’m vaguely terrified by how much painkiller you would have had to use for it to work.” She didn’t look terrified. She looked worried as hell, though she was keeping her pace to match his.

“Considering the extent of his injuries, if he tried to get up from the bed he would rupture his wounds and probably bleed out on the spot. Doctors had to cut him open to fix him. It’s just bits of metal and some thread keeping him together. After the trouble Mr. Belmont went to, to keep this man alive, it would be best if you did not encourage any ill advised movement on his part,” John said testily.

The woman seemed made of attitude, just like her father, and people like that often risked their lives doing stupid things just to prove they could. John would have to make sure she understood the gravity of the situation or he would use one of the code words given to him by security. Thankfully, besides the standard plea for help there were some codewords that requested tranquilizers to be used instead of deadly force. Matt was known for his quiet and minimal-damage way of handling problems. He’d be able to handle anything Ciri could throw at him.

John was pretty sure, anyways.

“Gods. No. I wouldn’t.” She looked at him earnestly. “You have no idea how sick I am of seeing him halfway dead. I’m more concerned about him trying to get up on his own. Al—-- Trevor Belmont would stop him, I’m sure.”

John looked sideways at her. He’d already seen her try to charm the guards with wide eyes and guileless expression on the security feed the team had streamed to his phone. He wasn’t going to be taken in so easily, but she did sound honest and looked appropriately appalled.

“Mr. Belmont has been on his feet for many hours now, making sure your father is well taken care
To that, she simply smiled, small and smug. “He would move heaven and earth to keep my father alive.”

“He did. We are not sure what the fallout will be of this. I hope it will be something we will be able to contain without too much damage to Mr. Belmont’s reputation or his business.”

“You and me both, friend. I love my father dearly, but he is a Gods be damned reckless idiot at times. And this particular time is just…” She rolled her eyes in frustration, and then set her jaw in determination. “It is what it is. Trevor Belmont has done what he can. The rest of us will cope.”

Where did this woman even come from?

The way she spoke was bizarre. John already took note of the various aliases that she said Geralt went by, and resolved to look them up the moment he had time on his phone.

The fact that she swore to gods plural instead of one God was exceptionally odd. People in Castlevania City may or may not attend Church regularly, but all of them knew that it was servants of God that saved them all from the powers of darkness centuries ago.

He was sort of dying to ask her more questions, just to see how much she would spill, but they were at the door to Belmont’s room.

John knocked firmly on the closed door, half hoping that Belmont would be asleep in a chair and thus unavailable for company.

“Come in,” came Belmont’s voice from inside the room.

Damn.

He opened the door and led the way inside.

The moment Ciri caught sight of the hospital bed, she made an awful, strangled noise, and dashed towards the bedside. Matt moved to follow her, but stopped when it became obvious she wasn’t touching Geralt at all.

She simply stood over him, holding out her arms like she wanted to grab him, but didn’t quite dare to.

“Oh Gods. Oh Gods, Father.”

“Ciri?” Belmont stood next to the bed on the other side from where Ciri was standing, one hand still on Geralt’s chest.

“I had to find you,” she said, not taking her eyes away from the sleeping man. “Your father is…upset.”

Belmont just blinked at her. “Upset. Yes. I imagine he is. But how upset?”

There was a terrible long silence where Ciri clearly stood there trying to choose her words.

“It’s…not as bad as it could be. Will be if Geralt doesn’t---” She swallowed hard and looked down at the bed again. “If Father doesn’t make it.”

“He will, provided he’s not an idiot in the next few days.”
The absolute lack of formality, the familiarity that girl was displaying, shocked John. Belmont wasn’t a person that ever invited this kind of approach. It also rankled a little, for the same reason.

“That’s good.” She nodded in relief. “That’s good. I already dragged him back from death once. I don’t want to try again. Either way, I need to take word back to your father.” Now she looked back to Belmont and raised an eyebrow at him. “He’s in Kaer Morhen with Eskel, waiting.”

John saw the way Belmont’s lips opened in shock.

“You fed Eskel to him?”

She flailed a little in place. “I mean, it seemed like a good idea at the time? What else was I going to do? Your father was, is, furious. Out of anyone else there, Eskel was the only one who even had a chance of stopping the rampage. It worked, though. Amazingly.”

“I’m not sure what’s more shocking. That you were ruthless enough to use Eskel as distraction or that my Father actually stopped long enough to hear out his therapy witcher.”

“Pfft,” Ciri said, rolling her eyes and snickering. “Therapy witcher. I’m never going to let Eskel live that down.” She rubbed a hand over her eyes. “And it was less a distraction and more the only option. It’s not ruthlessness when you look at the possible results. Besides, all I had to do was get us there. The moment we saw your father, Eskel just walked up and hugged him. And it worked.” She shook her head, clearly baffled.

Throughout all of this, John couldn’t help but watch in stunned silence. He’d learned more about Belmont’s personal life in the last half hour than he had in the last year of working by his side. And from the sounds of it, Belmont’s family life was a mess. John started to have terrible flashbacks to reality TV and the ridiculous nonsense that other rich and powerful families got up to.

“Will you take a message to him?” Belmont asked, sounding unbelievably abashed.

“Of course. He’s kind of waiting on news from me anyways. And it took me a long time to get to you. This city is…” She looked around the room, gazing at nothing in particular, almost as if she were looking right through the walls. “It’s something else.”

“It’s nothing compared to the castle itself,” Belmont said, looking down at the sleeping man. “I still can’t believe people decided to live here, perceived victory or not.”

“So the shrines I saw. They had truth in them?” Her voice was a hushed whisper, half curious and half horror-filled.

“People here believe they defeated Dracula,” Belmont said in a tone of finality.

John couldn’t help the gasp he made when the realisation of what his boss was saying finally hit. Trevor Belmont was the last descendant of the Belmont family. If there was anybody who had a right to make statements like that, it was him. But the enormity of that statement still boggled the mind.

People believed they defeated Dracula.

Meaning that they actually didn’t. Somewhere out there, Dracula was still alive and well, his power unchecked.

Belmont suddenly seemed to remember that they weren’t alone in the room.
“I’m sorry, John,” he said, sounding honestly apologetic. He looked John right in the eye. “Dracula was never destroyed by the Brotherhood. He defeated them, killed them all to a man, and then decided to go for a long sleep right here, in the ruins of his castle.”

There were no words. John just stared, mouth open.

“He was awakened during the Outbreak,” Belmont continued in an even, calm tone. As if he was discussing the weather and not the fact the greatest evil to ever walk this Earth was alive and awake again, and had been for over a year now!

“You’re a Belmont,” John whispered. “Your family fought against him and his forces for forever. Is that why you’re here?”

“Dracula is immortal,” Belmont said. “It took the Belmonts a long time to understand that.”

“He’s not…”

John glanced around the room quickly, suddenly noting every shadow in the room and wondering what evil might be hidden there. From the stunned look on Matt’s face, John wasn’t the only one massively disturbed by this turn of events. Curiously, Ciri didn’t look surprised at all. Which, honestly, only furthered his suspicions about whatever it was that she and her father got up to in their free time.

“He wasn’t the cause of the Outbreak. He helped stop it, as well as much worse things that would have happened if not for his intervention. He doesn’t seem to have much interest in this world anymore.”

To that, John had absolutely no idea what to say. His whole world view had just been shaken up. Dracula had been destroyed. That was just history! But everything his boss was saying now flew in the face of that. Not only that Dracula was alive, somewhere, but that he helped contain the Outbreak, too?

But of anyone, a Belmont would know the truth.

“What happens if he decides to take an interest again?” Matt asked.

Ciri glanced to Belmont, and then, strangely, to Geralt’s sleeping form. “Honestly?” she said, “it seems unlikely.”

The delivery of that statement was so bland, so matter of fact, that John had to blink again. Whatever was going on here, whatever Belmont knew about Dracula, Ciri was in on it.

Holy shit, no wonder they all carried swords. This was like a clip out of a bad movie.

“Do not spend time worrying about things you can’t change,” Belmont said. “Dracula is not interested in causing trouble, his rage was banked by his long sleep. There’s no need to worry.”

John was still pretty fucking worried. The bomb that Belmont just dropped was incredibly disturbing. But now was absolutely not the time to have a panic attack over it. He had a job to do, and Belmont truly didn’t seem concerned about the situation himself.

Again, if anyone would know, a Belmont would.

So John resolved to press that issue into the back of his mind, beef up security, see if there was any truth to the whole legend of the combat cross, and then take a weekend after all this was over to get
falling down drunk. From the look on Matt’s face, he was thinking the same damn things.

John straightened his tie and blinked a few times, trying to compose himself. “I’ll take your word for it, Mr. Belmont.”

“What message should I deliver?” Ciri asked, turning to Belmont.

“That he can come here now.”

“Oh thank the Gods. I’ll go now. I just need my blades.” She side-eyed Matt for a moment, her lips quirking into a smile. “Although, I could just go right this second, leave from this room, and have a reason to come back.” Then she looked back to Belmont. “Should I leave from right here, or go somewhere private? I don’t want to disturb anything.”

That statement didn’t make a damn bit of sense at all. If she left the room, wouldn’t she be leaving anyways? John puzzled through the wording and was coming up with nothing. Maybe it was some kind of code.

“Get your blades. If Geralt knew I sent you out without your weapons, he’d throw a fit. Any of the other rooms on this floor are private, should you need a moment to compose yourself, but I would appreciate discretion with your departure. You are welcome to return any time you wish.” Belmont looked almost amused for a moment, and glanced to Matt. “All of my personnel will get appropriate amounts of time off, should you wish to share…trade secrets after their shifts are done.”

“How generous of you,” Ciri said with a smirk. Belmont just looked at her knowingly, his lips tugging into a smile. She held her hand out again over Geralt’s sleeping form, and her face twisted bitterly. “I can’t even touch him. He’s a mess.”

“He will heal,” Belmont said quietly. “The next few days will be stressful and difficult, but he’ll recover.”

“Should I ask for a Swallow from Eskel for him?”

And again, John was lost. Swallow? Like the bird? Or the action?

But Belmont just shook his head. “He’s too weak. The arrows he was hit with were poisoned, and he overdosed on his own potions to keep from bleeding out on the way to us. On top of that, we’re already feeding him impressive amounts of narcotics to keep him pain-free. It’ll be days before he’s able to process the toxicity. Days for his organs to even be whole again.” The worry in Belmont’s face eased for a moment and turned into something more akin to exasperation. “And after that, I think I will use every advantage I have to keep him to his rest.”

“Poison, huh.” Her gaze turned calculating. “Got any of those arrows left?”

“John?” Belmont asked.

“Ah, yes. Over here.” John went over to where he’d stashed the bags that the surgeon dropped off, and grabbed the correct bag. Despite the obvious familiarity that Ciri shared with Belmont, he was still hesitant to give them over to her until after she was out of the room. Even broken and bloody, they were still poison tipped arrows.

From the look on her face, Ciri noticed the hesitation and was amused by it.

“I have to compliment you on your staff, Trevor Belmont,” she said, her eyes twinkling.
“Thank you.” Belmont inclined his head. “I am very pleased with them. You may simply call me Trevor, though.”

The crinkles around her eyes deepened. “Trevor it is, then.”

She took a few steps around the bed, closer to where John was standing, yes, but also closer to where Belmont was. For the life of him, John just wasn’t used to people being so familiar with his normally aloof boss. Right here in this room were the only people in the world that John knew were given leave to call Belmont by his first name.

“I’ll give one to Vesemir,” Ciri said. “He knows more about poison than I do. He’ll be able to tell us if it’s a specialty thing.”

All humor and ease fled Belmont instantly, and the air almost grew colder for a moment. He straightened his spine and his eyes seemed to shine in the dim light of the room. John brushed it off, but god, Belmont looked scary as hell for a minute there.

“You think the ones who ordered this are still alive,” Belmont said quietly, his voice as cold as a winter night.

Ciri just looked at him with pursed lips. “It’s a longer story than I have time to tell here. I’ll come back to explain. But, in short…Maybe.”

“Does Father know?”

“Oh yeah. He knows.” She visibly shivered and went a touch pale.

That in and of itself was disturbing as hell. Here was a woman who didn’t even blink at the threat of Dracula being alive and well, someone who looked ready to bulldoze past Belmont’s hand picked, highly trained security team, but Trevor Belmont’s father made her blanch.

And this guy was going to be coming here.

Again, John wished for a cup of coffee. Instead, he messaged one of his support staff, ordering a variety of drinks and snacks. If Belmont was expected guests, might as well get started on the refreshments now. Something cold or room temperature to keep people satisfied until they wanted breakfast proper. He hoped there would be some time to sleep in between now and then though.

Belmont just shook his head. “I have more reason to be grateful to Eskel than I expected.” He sighed very, very softly. “Travel safely, Ciri. The paths here are dangerous ones.”

“I always do.” She looked at him for a moment, then dashed in, quick as a whip, and crushed him into a hug.

Matt had already taken three steps towards them by the time she made contact, but Belmont held his hand up at him, stopping Matt from interfering.

“Thank you for saving my father,” Ciri said softly. Her face was buried in Belmont’s suit, so John couldn’t tell what her expression was, but her voice was rough and thick. “Thank you so much.”

His expression softened. But before he could say anything she darted away, grabbed the bag of arrows from John, and fled the room.

“Keith, she’s headed out,” Matt muttered into his ear piece. “Give her back her gear, and put her on the list. She’s allowed back whenever.” He looked at Belmont and raised an eyebrow. “Should I
escort her out?”

But Belmont shook his head and waved at a couple of chairs on his side of the room. “Stay. I need to speak with you two. Briefly, though. I am very tired.”

He looked it, too. John had never seen his boss so visibly exhausted. He moved like every joint hurt. Slowly and cautiously, Belmont eased himself down into a chair next to Geralt’s bed, making sure to keep a hand on Geralt’s chest. When Geralt’s hand slid off of Belmont’s wrist during the readjustment, Belmont gave a tiny, unhappy sigh. With careful movements, he placed Geralt’s hand back where it was, resting it loosely there on his wrist.

Matt and John shared a brief look, but both of them moved to take the offered seats. Once they were settled, Belmont looked at them solemnly.

“I am always grateful that I somehow managed to find such competent and intelligent employees,” Belmont started. “Trust me when I say that I know this is redundant, but it needs to be said again, if only for my own peace of mind. Nothing either of you see or hear in this room can be even whispered of outside of it.”

He gave them both a long, serious look. For a moment it seemed like he was looking right through John’s eyes and staring into his soul. As intense as it was, this was the kind of gravitas that he’d come to expect from his boss. Seeing the slightly relaxed, slightly more human behavior around Geralt and Ciri was the real shock.

John was well aware that he, and everyone else who worked closely with Belmont, had gone through one of the most thorough vetting processes there was. That was expected, given Belmont’s power and wealth.

But it had suddenly become apparent to him that there was far more at stake than one man’s wealth, or even the companies he controlled or the city he was bent on saving. He thought of the widespread panic that would cover the city if it was known that a member of the Belmont family admitted that Dracula was alive. Even if Belmont had no idea what he was talking about, which was so damn unlikely that it was nearly unthinkable, just the rumor of it would be profoundly damaging.

The sheer amount of trust that Belmont had just shown both John and Matt was staggering.

John shared another look with Matt, and then said, “We wouldn’t. Not for anything.”

Matt just nodded.

“Thank you,” Belmont said gravely. “There is a lot you may see or overhear in the next few days. I’ll try to answer questions as I can, but I may be busy.” He closed his eyes and pressed a finger to his forehead, rubbing the space right between his eyes.

“My Father will be here soon. He travels extremely quickly when he wants or needs to. He is---” Belmont stopped to think for a moment, clearly digging for the right words. “He is a man of strong passions, and is both protective and possessive of what is his. There is very little he actually cares about, but once he gives his affection it is absolute. The kind of power I can wield is paltry in comparison to his.”

That was hard to swallow. As the hospital director had said earlier, Trevor Belmont had more money than God. He didn’t control specific countries as other world leaders did, but given his wealth, holdings, and name, he was as influential as the most powerful among them.
Belmont let his gaze fall to Geralt’s sleeping form, and a little tug of unhappiness pulled at his mouth.

“I’m sorry sir, but…I wasn’t aware of any other Belmonts owning significant industry in the country. Or out of it,” John said hesitantly, struggling to get all those contradictory facts in order in his head.

“You won’t find his name on any ledgers or company letterheads,” Belmont said with a sigh. “But when he decides to make things happen, they do and paltry things like borders don’t matter.”

Now that was truly terrifying. John swallowed. Suddenly he realized where Trevor Belmont had gotten his relentless nature.

“Will he have his own security?” Matt asked, ever the practical man.

Belmont shook his head, making the loose hair fly everywhere. It was naturally messy, sticking up every which way, and it gave him a much more wild look than John ever expected of him.

“To be honest, Father would probably welcome being attacked. Anything to take the edge off of his bad mood. I’d be worried about the collateral damage, though.” Belmont stared off into the distance, pensive. “But that’s rather unlikely. He’s generally able to discourage opposition by demeanor alone.”

Discourage opposition by demeanor alone.

John looked to Matt and was oddly comforted to see the experienced bodyguard, a former special ops soldier, giving him the same kind of shocked side eye John was sure was on his face.

“Do you have any pictures?” Matt asked. “I could distribute it to my people, make sure he doesn’t get stopped like Ciri did.”

“There are no pictures, nor do I think there ever will be. In the unlikely occurrence that you will see him enter here, you’ll know him as my Father. He has…presence.”

John looked at Matt again.

“No pictures? In this day and age?”

To that, Belmont just smirked. “Tell me, were there pictures of me prior to last year? Are there any yet to be found dating from before that time?”

The silence stretched for a moment as both John and Matt realized that neither one of them had ever seen such a thing. Not a single childhood photo. No pictures of high school or college gatherings. Not even a drivers license one.

“It is our way to remain the the shadows,” Belmont said. “Our bloodline is too well known, too intertwined with the historical events that everyone knows about. It is best to leave the Belmont heritage as dead as we can make it.”

Belmont looked to Matt.

“My Father is an extremely proficient fighter familiar with many weapons, and also very used to command. It is better to show respect and keep distance when dealing with him. His temper is easily sparked though, so be sure to have your men prepared for that.”
Temper, John thought and suddenly remembered the huge scar bisecting his boss’ chest. A cold chill shot down his back and he swallowed heavily.

He almost hesitated to ask, but in the end he felt he had to. No matter how scary Belmont’s father was being talked up as, ultimately John worked for Trevor. Not his father. There were enough things that were being talked around here that John was starting to feel worried. “Are you going to be alright here with him?”

“He does as he pleases.” Belmont shrugged. “But I’m not the enemy here.”

That was not the resounding, my father would never harm me! that John was hoping for. Which was…just…great.

What Matt was thinking, John couldn’t tell. His face was as blank as ever.

“Does he look like you?” Matt asked, looking pointedly to the white hair on Geralt’s head. “Coloring?”

For some strange reason that made Belmont chuckle.

“He has dark hair, though he is paler than I am, and his eyes are of very unusual color. Much as mine are, actually. I wear contacts. I very much doubt my Father would bother with them though. That is pretty much the only physical similarity between us.”

John blinked, looking at Belmont’s completely ordinary brown eyes. His face must have expressed his confusion clearly enough because Belmont sighed.

“Oh, I have been dying to take the contacts out for hours anyway.” He reached for his pocket and pulled out a tiny jar, unscrewed the lid, and placed it on the little table near the left wall. Then he reached for his eyes and pulled at his eyelids, carefully working to get something out. After a moment he lowered his hands; the two lenses perched on his fingers were much larger than a simple contact should be. He dropped them into the jar, and rubbed his eyes. For a moment there he looked tired, the rigid line of his spine softening and shoulders drooping into an exhausted slump.

Then he straightened, his posture military perfect again, and turned to look at them.

John sucked in a loud breath and Matt twitched where he sat.

Belmont’s eyes were black. Not like normal people had black eyes. Sclera---what on every human was the white surrounding the color of the eyes---was midnight black on him. Inside of that black field, his irises were brilliant gold, as inhuman as any Infected that John had seen in pictures or on TV.

“You see why I wear the contacts,” Belmont said dryly. “My father’s eyes are similarly striking, though he at least retains the white around his irises. It’s a, ha, bloodline specific trait.”

A million questions bubbled up inside of John, and not a single one of them were appropriate to ask. All he could do was stare for a few minutes longer. Eventually he found a way to shut his jaw and blink.

He rallied. None of this changed what John knew to be true about his boss. Belmont’s kindness, his generosity, and his actions during the past year all stayed the same. So maybe Belmont’s family was a bit stranger than John expected. Honestly, given the last name, maybe John should have anticipated something like this?
His mind drew a blank for a moment.

Nope, definitely not. There was no way he could have seen this coming. Every fantastic, highly uncredible story about the Belmont line that he’d ever heard came swarming back into his brain.

Then he thought of everything he’d seen in the past twenty four hours. Swords and men with cat eyes and black eyes and ridiculous power and inner knowledge of Dracula and his whereabouts…

This was stuff from a fairy tale.

But there was his boss in front of him, looking more and more exhausted as the time stretched. Belmont wasn’t even looking at them any more; he was just gazing sadly at Geralt.

Shit.

Now John actually felt a little bad for freaking out.

“Shall I add contact fluid to your regular accessories list?” John asked as smoothly as he could.

“I’m told it helps with the dryness.”

That earned him a tiny smile.

“That would help, yes. Thank you.”

“How soon should we expect your father?” Matt asked.

“Soon. Very soon.” Belmont frowned. “Hours at the most. When he arrives, he may be short with you. Dismissive. Please do not take offence. He doesn’t like people very much, and he’ll be worried for Geralt.” Belmont winced. “I said some harsh things when we parted, so he might be in a bad mood.”

“Noted. We appreciate the heads up,” Matt said evenly.

“Any specific needs? Food requirements or dress items?”

Belmont looked at John with something akin to naked terror for a brief moment, before he schooled his face.

It took another moment of thinking, but eventually Belmont said, “I am not entirely sure of his attire, but if you manage to get some discreet scans of him when he arrives you could order some official wardrobe choices for him. He likes blacks and reds, maybe a little green. Jewel tones and as intimidating as it can be made. If there is metal, make it gold.” Then he seemed to think of something else. “Better not mention food.”

John thought of how Belmont himself seemed to be on the border line of some kind of eating disorder, given how little the man consumed. Then John remembered how Belmont said his father nagged him about eating, and how bitter he sounded about that. That mixed uneasily in John’s mind with the instant of panic he’d just witnessed. What could Belmont’s father possibly have said, or done, to him to give him that reaction to eating?

Yeah, maybe food wouldn’t be the best subject to bring up.

“I think that’s the most important things. All else can be addressed after he arrives.” Belmont sighed. “Unless you have more questions?”

John had a million and one, most of them would probably get him fired. So he just shook his head
and saw Matt doing the same thing. Without another word, they both stood up and made their way out of the room. Belmont had already turned his attention to Geralt, and John really hoped the man would get some sleep. It sounded like he’d need it for the upcoming family reunion.

After both he and Matt were out of the room, John quietly closed the door behind them, careful not to make much sound.

Then he turned to look at Matt.

Normally, the two would never talk to each other outside of work related subjects. They were different enough that they might as well be from different worlds. But in the face of this particular night of strangeness, both of them shared the exact same expression.

*What the fuck.*

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Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Notes from Quarra: Editing continues to move on. Here is a chapter an itty bit early.

After Ciri left Alucard and Geralt in their room, it only took her a few more minutes to get her gear, get armed up, and be on her way. Keith had messed with her stuff a bit, but only to organize and pack it up nicely into a white cloth. She struggled hard not to be amused at his utter professionalism as he gave her the blades back and asked her to count the items. She felt like he would commit a ritual suicide if she claimed an item was missing.

Just for caution’s sake, she headed out of the hospital for her portal. Alucard didn’t seem to be very keen on his people knowing he wasn’t human. She wasn’t sure if that extended to them knowing she was a sorceress as well, but until she got more information on that she was willing to play it safe.

Once Dracula arrived, no doubt that particular cat would be out of the bag. The chances were slim to none that he’d be able to keep his otherworldliness in check. Afterwards, she’d see how Alucard and his people were handling the situation, then reevaluate.

On her way away from the hospital, she saw something that made her pause. It was a painted poster, clearly some kind of advertisement, showing yet another long haired man with ridiculously large fangs hilariously flailing around with a cross and chain.

Alucard!
Coming Soon!

She paused to look at it and realized there was another poster just up the street with the same man but in a completely different pose. The second poster showed him wearing white billowing shirt cut so deep in front she could see his belly button. He was bending a mostly naked, buxom brunette over his arm. She was covered only in strategically placed pieces of a bed sheet. Two neat puncture marks delicately bled from her neck as she stared doe eyed up at the man. Even more hilariously, in the background she could see a piece of bed visible and naked, shapely female legs sprawled there.

Ciri reached for that one, carefully prying it away from the wall by a corner that had already come loose. She couldn’t help a giggle at the sight of the pants so tight she could see which side the Alucard in the picture carried himself.

This would make a fantastic gift for her father. She might put it up in his room, right where Dracula and Alucard could enjoy it as well. Or rather, where Geralt and Dracula could enjoy it and Alucard could burn in torment. She almost wished there was a second one with this image on it, so she could keep it herself.

Maybe next time she was here she would look for one.

Ciri carefully rolled the fine paper up and looked for a nice dark alleyway to portal out of. It didn’t take more than another minute or two to find a good spot, and then she was off.
Knowing that it was going to be freezing cold outside back in her own world, she portaled right into the main hall of Kaer Morhen; Castlevania City was cold, but it was nothing like as frigid as Kaer Morhen in winter time.

From there, she peeked into the kitchen. It was still pretty early, though, and no one was there. Not that she was surprised. She figured Eskel and Dracula were holed up in Geralt’s room anyways, but it looked like Vesemir wasn’t up yet either.

She headed up the stairs to Geralt’s room. That was the most logical place for Dracula to be. Even before she reached the floor, she could smell how thick the darkness was there. The air tasted different with every step she made towards Geralt’s room. Raw, undiluted power crawled over the wood of the door so thickly that it stung her skin.

Right as she was about to knock, the door swung open.

Inside was lavishly different from the rest of the rooms in Kaer Morhen. The whole room was saturated with Dracula’s power, soaking the stonework until it was matte black. Luxurious furniture decorated the space and heavy dark curtains shrouded it in dim light, blocking the windows completely. A large candelabra in the corner and the fire in the fireplace kept the room from being truly dark.

The bed was a massive thing, all covered in plush quilts, furs, and pillows. Inside it, Dracula lay on his back with Eskel sprawled over him. The heavy covers were pulled up to Eskel’s obviously naked chest, and he lay limp with his head buried into the crook of Dracula’s shoulder. The position gave her a nice view of four vicious-looking bites trailing down his neck, healing but heavily bruised. His skin was red and tender-looking around the torn teeth marks, a mute proof of where Dracula’s appetites lay. She wondered if those bites were the only ones on him, or if the covers hid more.

Dracula was clearly wide awake. His eyes burned red in the dim light and one hand was carefully combing through Eskel’s hair. As far as she could tell, he was naked too.

Ciri felt her cheeks heat up a bit. She knew that Eskel was close to Dracula, but she really hadn’t thought they were on sharing bed terms. But here they were.

She closed her eyes for a moment and got her reactions under control. Whatever was going on here, Geralt surely knew about it, and was alright with it. That was what was important. Gods, but no wonder Eskel had gotten more physically friendly with them over the past few months. He was now part of a harem, after all.

Oh, she couldn’t wait to rib him about that.

“Tell me,” Dracula said quietly. Whatever he’d done to, or with, Eskel must have been exhausting, because Eskel didn’t so much as twitch.

“Geralt is alive,” she said in the same quiet tone, taking a few steps into the room. “He’s been very, very badly hurt, and Alucard looks like he’s about to fall over, but they’re both alive.”

Exhaustion overtook her finally too, which was about the time she remembered that she’d been traveling nonstop for many, many hours, without food or even drink. She fell down into a chair near the bed, trying to keep in close talking distance with Dracula. It felt easier to speak softly, and she didn’t really want to wake Eskel. He looked like he could use the rest.

“He was asleep when I got there,” she continued. “They had to cut him up. A lot. Barely any part
of him wasn’t covered in bandages and splints. Alucard said he’d be fine, but he’s got to stay still and recover.”

She shook her head and rubbed her face.

“Gods. He just---he looked---” Ciri shook her head, and tried to focus on the good news. “He’s alive, and he’ll recover. That’s the important parts.”

“He’ll survive?” Dracula’s hand stilled in Eskel’s hair.

Ciri nodded, smiling. “Yes. Alucard asked me to tell you that you could join them now. He’s got a lot of humans with him, and they don’t actually seem to know he’s a vampire. Pretty odd, seeing him trying to pass, but I guess it’s helping. He goes by the name Trevor Belmont. Although given what I saw in the city, maybe there’s good reason.”

With that she grinned like a lunatic and grabbed the poster, quickly unrolling it. This was the best thing she’d seen in ages, and she was going to show everyone she could.

“Take a look at what I found near the hospital,” she said, turning the massive poster around, showing off her ill gotten gains to Dracula. It was nearly impossible to keep herself from doubling over with laughter, but she made an effort to keep the snickers under control. “I’m thinking this is a great get well present for Geralt.”

“‘Alucard the Vampire,’” Dracula read aloud, studying the poster, no doubt noting the number of naked female limbs. “‘The most engaging erotic thriller of the century.’”

“Apparently he’s got quite the legend? Enough that people keep making stories about him.” She dissolved into snickers. “Oh Gods, father is going to laugh himself sick.”

Dracula looked thoughtful, his eyes narrowing in obvious speculation.

“Erotic, hmm?” he hummed. His voice had dropped low and it was inviting enough that even Ciri felt a tiny shiver of interest creep up her back.

She laughed quietly for a moment longer before she set the poster down, exhaustion and worry overcoming her again.

“Geralt will live,” she said again. It was just as much a reassurance for herself as it was for Dracula. “He’ll recover and be fine. Apparently, he spoke enough that Alucard’s aide noticed that he and I share a few similar personality traits. Alucard won’t let him go. Kept a hand on him at all times. I’m not sure if that was because Geralt looked so---” Her throat closed up for a moment, and she had to swallow hard. “He looks rough. I don’t know how he’ll even move yet, but knowing father, the moment he’s awake he’ll be itching to get out of there. They’ve got a large and well trained group of guards around them, too. Very cautious group, and very professional. Alucard is treated like royalty there.”

She carefully removed the purple orb from her belt pouch and placed it on the table next to her. Whatever it was, whatever use Dracula had for it, she was glad that she wouldn’t need it any more. Now that she’d visited Castlevania City, she’d be able to find her way back there without assistance.

Dracula extended his hand and the orb lifted up from the table, floating up to his open palm and then sinking into it soundlessly. Between one heartbeat and the next, the orb was gone. Disappeared. What was even more disturbing was that Ciri couldn’t even feel its chaotic, burning power any more. There was only Dracula.
“He looked…he looked dead when he was at the castle.” Dracula paused. “I heard his lungs stop when he breathed out. He didn’t take another breath, would have died right then and there if Alucard hadn’t stopped time for him.”

Each word hurt, like a stab to her chest. Ciri found herself snarling down at the floor, so overcome with pain and rage that she couldn’t keep it in, not for a second longer. She’d held everything in, held it all together to get what was needed to be done, done. But now that she was suddenly without an immediate task, and drained magically and physically, she couldn’t help but let her emotions leak out. A few hot tears ran down her face, and she covered her eyes with one hand, trying to breathe through it.

“He’s alive,” she reminded herself again.

“And he will stay that way. Alucard has his ways. He is very good at getting what he wants. And like me, he wants Geralt alive.”

She nodded, and resolved to try and find some way to thank Alucard.

Then she thought of the bag of broken, poison arrows tied to her belt. Maybe she had a way to thank them all, and get a little satisfaction for herself, too. Whatever, whoever had started this whole damn mess, she’d find out, and those responsible would have more than Dracula to deal with.

“These were taken out of my father’s body during the surgery.” She put the bag on the table, unwilling to look at the metal and death inside. It was enough that she could smell Geralt’s blood on it along with the sharp scent of hospital.

There was a soft noise as Eskel stirred, nudging his head a little up into Dracula’s unmoving hand.

“Mmmmph?” He turned his head, and blinked rapidly, finally noticing where Ciri sat next to them near the bed. Then he groaned, his face turned red, and he scrunched up his nose.

“It lives!” she crowed, catching Eskel’s sleep-fuzzy eyes.

“Ugggg, I am the worst witcher ever,” he groaned quietly, though made no move to get up. He just buried his face back into Dracula’s neck. “How long have you been sitting here?”

“Hours,” she said with a straight face. “I came back yesterday, but you hadn’t moved so we decided to play some truth and dare in the meantime. I just cleaned up the debris from the last game.”

“I hate you,” Eskel said grumpily, and turned his face a little farther into Dracula’s shoulder. His ears burned bright red, though, and the flush spread down his neck.

“You look comfy,” she said with a grin. “Looked even comfier when I saw you sleep while he petted your hair. I never knew that it was your weakness.”

The red was starting to creep down Eskel’s shoulders and he groaned again quietly, his whole body tensing up in acute embarrassment.

“Less than ten minutes,” Dracula said, unexpectedly taking pity on him. “Geralt is alive and recovering, though severely wounded.”

Ciri hid her surprise at the fact that Dracula seemed so eager to offer comfort, to ease Eskel even when the reason for his discomfort was nothing worse than some teasing.
The line of tension eased out of Eskel’s back and he sighed in relief. “Thank the Gods,” he said quietly.

Then Eskel moved, shifting off of Dracula and sitting up. The blankets fell down to pool around their waists, exposing the triangular mark over his heart. She’d seen it before; it was something he’d picked up after the Novigrad incident. Only it was no longer triangular. There were little tendrils curling out from the bottom end. Unrecognizable runes had spread outward into Eskel’s chest, making the mark look like it was a living, growing thing. Like it had set in roots.

He didn’t seem to take any notice of it. He just rubbed at his closed eyes, and groaned a little. His new position showed off the other side of his neck, though, which had an extremely impressive bruise on it in the shape of a hand print.

Holy fuck.

It took a fair amount of effort, but Ciri did her best to school her expression. Whatever went on here, it wasn’t for her to be judgemental about it. Eskel wouldn’t be so relaxed if he felt forced or uncomfortable in any way. Not only that, but it was obvious that whatever had happened in the last few hours had helped mellow Dracula out immensely.

Dracula eased up as well, so they were both sitting upright on the bed. His eyes followed the way Eskel moved, lingering on the bites and bruises, and the hand that was on Eskel’s head slid down to hold his neck. It must have been a gentle touch, though, because Eskel didn’t so much as wince as Dracula brushed over the marks there.

After a moment, Eskel dropped his hand and looked over to Dracula. The expression on his face was surprisingly concerned. The way his brow wrinkled, the way his eyes darted down Dracula’s body and up to his eyes. It was obvious that Eskel was worried for Dracula, not about him or his actions.

By now, the oppressive darkness around them had eased. Ciri didn’t feel like she needed to crawl out of her skin at the prickling sensation of so much chaotic, dark energy seeping up out of the stone. It had retreated back into something more manageable, and Dracula’s eyes had lost some of their burning glow as well.

For a moment, Eskel and Dracula only had eyes for each other. It felt private, intimate in a way that made Ciri want to blend into the wall.

Dracula leaned forward and pulled Eskel towards him at the same time, letting their foreheads rest together. They both closed their eyes. He ran his hand through Eskel’s hair again, bringing it to a slow stop over Eskel’s neck.

“Thank you,” Dracula said softly.

They breathed softly together for a moment as Dracula dragged his thumb back and forth across one of the bite marks. Then Dracula’s body dissolved into darkness, and melted away.

Eskel sagged forward for a moment, suddenly without the support he’d been leaning on. He looked up just long enough to watch the last bit of Dracula’s shadow fade from the bed.

Once it had completely vanished, he face planted right back into the mattress.

“Ugggggg,” he groaned quietly.

Ciri gave him a moment to gather himself, and then said, “I’ve got to admit, I’m a little surprised.
Alucard, sure. Anyone can see you two are friendly. But Dracula, too?”

“It’s not a sex thing,” Eskel said, voice muffled by the bed he refused to get up from.

“Uh huh.”

“I wore pants. He wore pants! We didn’t---” Eskel sighed. “Nevermind. You aren’t gonna believe me.”

The truth was, she almost did believe him. As far as she knew, Eskel wasn’t really interested in men. More than that, while there was some physical closeness in the last few months between the four of them, it wasn’t the same as how Geralt, Dracula, and Alucard were with each other.

Still, the evidence was pretty damning. Besides, this was perfect fodder for teasing.

“Hey, whatever you want to do.” She raised her hands, as if showing that she wasn’t going to touch the whole situation. “Besides, you kind of fell onto your sword for Temeria, there. Or fell onto his sword. Whatever.”

Eskel threw a pillow at her. She ducked it, grinning.

“I didn’t. Not in either respect.” Now Eskel looked up to give her the stink eye. “I mean, yes, it was good to stop him from burning everything to a cinder there. But even if he wasn’t, I would have gone to help.” His face grew sadder for a moment, more worried. “Geralt means a lot to him. And to me. We’re friends.”

For a moment, Ciri assumed he was saying that Geralt and he were friends. Which, obviously. But then as she thought about it, it occurred to her that he might be saying that he and Dracula were friends, too. That alone was kind of a stunning thought.

“Come on,” Eskel said, pushing himself up from the bed. Before she could complain about seeing him naked, the covers fell off of him showing that yes, indeed, he did have a pair of sleeping pants on. “I need to eat. And get something hot to drink.”

She watched as Eskel got out of the bed and went digging around through one of Geralt’s clothing chests. As he moved, she idly admired the build on him. He was a couple inches shorter than Geralt, and a little thicker with muscle. His brown hair hung loose down to his shoulders, and like all witchers, he was covered in scars. Most of the Wolf witchers were a little on the pale side, and Eskel was no exception to that, especially now in winter.

She’d been spoiled by growing up with witchers. Now all the men that she met looked soft and weak in comparison, never quite reaching the height of physical perfection she was used to. There were exceptions even among witchers, of course; some of them went way overboard with training and building up their muscles. But Geralt and her adopted uncles? Damn, a girl got used to good things.

If she died alone because all men looked less than attractive in comparison, and she was unable to think of any of the Wolf witchers as partners, she was going to haunt them just to share her misery around.

Women were an option for her, at least. Ciri had very fond memories of Mistle. They were young and the situation wasn’t ideal, but they’d cared about each other. After Mistle’s murder, she hadn’t had the heart to look for love with anyone for a while.

Maybe she was starting to reconsider that. At least on a physical level.
Just the mention of food was enough for Ciri’s stomach to protest its poor treatment. As exhausted as she was, food was a very good plan. Get something to eat, then fall over somewhere. After that maybe she would head back to see Geralt.

She looked over to where Eskel was still groggily digging through a chest of shirts. Maybe he might like to join her. Alucard and Dracula both might appreciate his presence there, too.

Eskel finally found what he was looking for and slipped a loose shirt on over his head. She wondered if he knew his scars were looking better than ever before. They were losing the redness and the puckering buildup characteristic of badly healed wounds; while potions were life saving, they didn’t always heal things smoothly or prettily and witcher regeneration could only do so much.

He left the collar of the shirt loose, probably because his neck was killing him. It was a mild surprise that he didn’t bother going for a Swallow to speed the healing along.

“Come on,” he said, nodding towards the door. He paused to grab some soft leather house boots, and then headed towards the door. “Fill me in on the details over some tea.”

He looked like a mess.

Ciri shook her head and snorted softly in amusement, then followed him out the door.

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“You think this red is good enough?” The voice was doubtful. The pitch was high and light. A woman, then. “The last was too orange. It clashed with my skin unpleasantly.”

“Go with something a little pinker. A little cooler,” a second female voice added, this one a little lower in pitch.

“And don’t wear silver jewelry,” a soft male voice added with a touch of exasperation. “I told you before silver looks bad on you.”

“The best pieces I have are silver!” cried the first voice.

“You need to get some better tribute. Maybe try trading some crude silver bits for really delicate copper work? Take craftsmanship over metal value?”

“Easy for you to say,” the first voice grumbled. “If only this one would decide to give in, we could come up with some kind of schedule. Now I can’t even take time away from the castle to get anything done!”

Vesemir groaned and shoved his head back under his pillow. More and more often, the succubi and sole incubus of Kaer Morhen found their way to his bedroom to gossip. He wouldn’t mind so much, except they kept doing it while he was trying to sleep.

“Don’t complain! I heard you got to serve our Lord himself in the baths the other day!” the second female voice said, obviously thrilled with this new piece of gossip.

“Mmmmm,” the first voice hummed with satisfaction. “He’s such a man.”

Iga. That was Iga, talking about whatever she was doing with Dracula. Which Vesemir really did not want to know. Iga was beautiful, very much so, and it wasn’t like Vesemir was dead. He had some interest. But she was a demon, and that’s where his interest totally fell off. Hearing her and
the other sex demons talk about the rest of the inhabitants of the castle was taxing on the best of
days.

The second female voice must be Eyra. Sometimes other succubi wandered in and out of Kaer
Morhen, but those two stuck around most of the time.

He tried to pile another pillow onto his head. Maybe that would help.

“At least you’re getting fed something,” the male voice grumbled. Vesemir recognized it as
belonging to the one lone incubus that frequented the keep.

“Maybe we could get Lambert drunk?” Iga mused. “Lord knows once he starts going it’s a
marathon. And he does like to change the holes he uses. Maybe if we got him drunk enough and
dressed you up prettily he wouldn’t notice the switch?”

“If that were the only criteria, we should add Eskel to that, too. Besides, have you ever seen him
wrapped up in the Master’s arms?”

There was a happy sigh.

“Eskel is out of bounds unless he either asks or we are specifically ordered to him,” Eyra warned.
“The mark on him is clear.”

“Yeah,” Iga sighed. “And he fucks so good! Always makes sure we come too.”

“Does he do men?” the incubus asked, already sounding defeated.

“Not that I’ve heard of,” Eyra said apologetically. “But sometimes his scent when he’s with Master
or Sir…I wonder, is all I’m saying.”

The male sighed again. At some point Vesemir was going to have to learn his name.

Vesemir finally unburied himself from his pile of blankets and pillows, and glared over at the
group of demons sitting in front of his fireplace. The women were wearing lacy peignoirs, and the
material was so thin that Vesemir could see the shapes of their perky breasts under the gauzy
fabric. Their long legs were bare and apparently unfeeling of the chill in the air.

Both succubi were blondes, though Iga was rosy skinned with walnut brown eyes and Eyra was
pale with eyes so pale brown that they were nearly gold. Both had horns growing out of the tops of
their heads, delicately curling close to their skulls and down near their ears. Eyra’s horns were light
brown and Iga’s were closer to a gold color.

The lone incubus was in a similar gauzy robe as the succubi, but with a very thin pair of sleeping
pants on as well. He looked to be a young man with golden skin and golden brown hair curling up
charmingly over his forehead. Small horns peeked out of his hair and curled close to his skull,
though they were about half the length of Iga and Eyra’s.

“There is a kitchen,” Vesemir said, annoyed. “It has a nice big table. You could spread out your---”
he looked at the small array of bottles around them, and sniffed the air “---nail paints and still have
plenty of room for drinks. There is even a fire. And you could do all this without waking me up.”

“But how would we ask then if you fancied a nice little morning blowjob?” Iga was already letting
one shoulder of her ridiculously thin robe fall down, revealing the curve of her naked breasts. The
material snagged on her hardened nipple and stopped its descent. Vesemir swallowed and turned
his eyes away.
“Besides, this is around when you normally wake up anyways. We kept quiet until then.” Eyra winked at him. “Though if you prefer, we could keep you warm under your furs. I’m sure we could find a more pleasant way to wake you up.”

He sighed, closed his eyes, and counted to five. “No, thank you, though I appreciate the offer.”

“Yet you keep refusing,” Eyra sighed.

“I can appreciate the sentiment behind the offer without partaking in it,” he said mildly, sitting up in bed. After months and months of being constantly propositioned by the succubi, Vesemir always made sure to have a dedicated set of sleeping clothes. Pants and a shirt. Sleeping nude was just asking for trouble.

“Nobody is partaking in this place,” the incubus murmured gloomily.

“Maybe one of the sorceresses will visit,” Vesemir said dryly.

“Ciri is here,” Iga said.

This only made the incubus’s shoulders fall a little farther down. “She’s not partaking either.” He slumped in his chair. “Says I’m not her type. Too skinny and too young. I think she only likes warrior types. Too used to you witchers.”

Both the succubi winced in sympathy.

“That’s a tough break,” Eyra said.

“Why is Ciri here?” Vesemir asked. That was sort of unusual, especially since Geralt wasn’t here and hadn’t been for a few weeks.

The demons just shrugged.

“She and Eskel are in the kitchen. Master was here, but he left. Not sure why.” Iga carefully dabbed a tiny brush into a vial of pinkish-red paint. “Master was upset. Very, very upset. We didn’t dare go near.”

Vesemir just rubbed his eyes.

“I saw the evidence on Eskel’s neck,” the incubus said with a breathy voice. “Damn.”


“Bites. Several of them. Bruised and deep, too.” He sounded unreasonably jealous.

They all sighed happily, and Vesemir could smell their interest and desire in the air.

Time to get dressed and go. At least as long as the demons insisted on invading his space, he got the latest news while they were there. He stood up and dug through his chests for a fresh set of day clothes, then grabbed his gear too. He’d go and dress in the baths. There was no point in trying to kick the demons out so he could have a little privacy. They’d only want to stay and watch. And make comments. Probably start losing clothes in strange and mysterious ways. Vesemir might be old, but he wasn’t dead yet.

Before he walked out, he paused to look at their color selections.

“Eyra is right,” he said to Iga. “The cooler red looks good on you. Try the purple-red, too. Save the
“gold-pear for him.” He waved at the incubus.

The demon in question cheered up. Damn, but he was a pretty boy, especially when he smiled hopefully up at Vesemir. “Really?”

Vesemir just nodded. “Maybe you should consider asking Dracula to allow you to visit elsewhere from time to time? No sense in letting you starve here.”

The incubus deflated a bit as he realized that Vesemir wasn’t actually flirting.

“I won’t starve,” the incubus said, sounding glum again. “We all have a blood oath to our Lord. It means his power feeds into ours if we go too low. But it’s like eating porridge, every day, for all of your meals, always. While a good romp in the sheets is like a well baked turkey, full of flavors and juices.”

Since *flavors and juices* were the absolute last thing Vesemir needed to think about right that second, he just shook his head. “Thank you for the heads up about Dracula, Eskel, and Ciri,” he said, and then headed out.

The trip to the bath was a quick one, if cold. Over the years he’d gotten used to the drafty halls, though they seemed less so today. It made him wonder just how much Dracula’s magic had seeped into the stone. Vesemir was still stunned at the way Dracula rebuilt whole parts of Kaer Morhen. Magic was one thing, but he didn’t expect the baths to be as pretty as they were. There was an artistry to their creation that he hadn’t expected of someone as destructive as Dracula.

The large sunken pool in the basement baths was continually fed by a stream that was directed to the ruined castle straight from the mountain that the fortress was hugging. Water from the stream first dropped into a shallow pool, in the middle of which a huge metal cauldron was placed. Inside the cauldron there was a burning, twisting ball of orange-yellow fire that never burned out. One of the succubi told him it was a fire elemental that had moved in, lured in by Dracula’s chaos power. It was so hot that the whole cauldron, big enough to house four grown men, was cherry red on the inside, making the water around the outside of it hiss and boil. That basin of water was allowed to overflow, raining hot water down into the main bathing pool like a tiny, captive waterfall.

It was a show not only of power but also of craftsmanship and knowledge. Whoever designed it knew that hot water would gather at the top of the heating basin, and cold water would fall to the bottom as it heated up. Somehow, the water that flowed into the main bathing pool was always just the right temperature. Hot enough to ease sore muscles, but still cool enough to be tolerable. There were smaller aqueducts feeding in cold water at various spots; Vesemir couldn’t tell if there was method to it or if this was done just to look pretty.

The main bathing pool had a permanent drain that flowed off back out of the basement. Where, exactly, it went, Vesemir wasn’t sure. He suspected that it ran through some kind of filtering system, and then was expelled down the side of the mountain. Or perhaps it went to watering the vegetation in the courtyard.

He *hoped* it ran through a filtering system.

The result was ever-steaming, hot bath that never ran out. It was well stocked with herbs and soaps, with clean towels always waiting on the edges. Dracula’s servants were amazing in their efficiency. As much as Vesemir didn’t like the idea of Dracula changing Kaer Morhen, he had to admit he loved the baths.

Vesemir washed up quickly, and then dressed himself for the day, putting on his regular clothes as
well as his armor and swords as a matter of habit. Whatever was going on had piqued his interest, and he was eager to see what news Ciri and Eskel had.

By the time he got to the kitchen, Ciri and Eskel were both finishing up plates of some kind of egg dish. Something with bits of sausage and potato mixed in, from the scent of things.

“Morning,” Ciri said tiredly, and waved at the large skillet on the hob. She looked like she hadn’t slept in days, very nearly nodding off in her chair. “We made extra for you.”

Eskel looked worse than she did. The demons were right, his neck looked mauled. There were bites all down one side and heavy bruising on the other. He had his head rested on his fist, propped up by the table, and he still looked like he was in sleeping clothes. The shirt he had on was mostly open in the front, too, and Vesemir could see Dracula’s mark peeking out from the opening.

Vesemir served himself up a plate of the egg dish and sat down, eyeing the bite marks. “Really, Eskel?”

All he got in return was a rude gesture.

“You look like I expect Geralt to look.” Vesemir shook his head.

That just made Eskel’s head sink a little lower, his shoulders coming up around his ears.

“Eskel had a hell of a night,” Ciri said with amusement.

“It certainly looks like it.” Vesemir took a delicate sniff, and frowned a bit. Eskel did look like it, but he didn't smell like it. There wasn’t a hint of sex or old arousal on him. Just his regular personal scent mixed in with Dracula’s and Geralt’s. He was wearing Geralt’s shirt from the looks of the loose fit, but Dracula’s burning scent clung to him, strong enough that it was overpowering even from all across the room.

“Yesterday was a rough day,” Eskel said finally. “Geralt’s hurt. Badly.”

Vesemir’s spine stiffened. “How badly?”

“Gods, Vesemir.” Ciri covered her face with her hands. “He nearly died. Would have, if not for Alucard. Dracula…” She winced.

“Dracula must have lost his damn mind,” Vesemir finished for her.

“Remember that huge forest that used to be on the south-east side of Temeria?” Ciri asked.

“Used to be?” Oh, that didn’t sound good.

“Well, there’s still some forest left, but it’s by no means huge now.” Eskel chimed in.

*For fucks sake, Geralt, this is why you don’t fuck chaos gods.* Vesemir rubbed his face in his hands for a moment. “But he stopped before getting to the deep forest.”

“Mmhmmm.” Eskel nodded, poking at his food. “The fires didn’t make it to Brokilon proper, I guess, but the Temeria side of the border is fucked.”

That was just as well. Brokilon was its own country, ruled by dryads and filled with elves, nymphs, and other sentient forest creatures. If that had been destroyed, it would have been like burning down a whole civilization. Just destroying human-inhabited forests was bad enough, but destroying Brokilon would have been a bloody genocide.
“Eskel managed to calm him down a bit, and I portaled out to go get news. Just got back a short while ago.” Ciri slouched further down in her chair.

“We came back by...horseback,” Eskel said. “Kinda.”

Vesemir frowned.

“When did all that happen then? Last I heard you weren't even close to Temeria. Besides it would take weeks to ride back from there!”

“Yesterday,” Ciri said.

“Dracula summoned a horse. I think.” Eskel said between mouthfuls of food. “It looks and acts like a horse. Mostly at least. We rode it, her, back.”

A frustrated groan escaped Vesemir, and he looked up at the ceiling, praying for strength. At this point, he was well familiar with how Dracula liked to skirt the rules in everything that he did. “What sort of creature do I have to worry about now,” he asked flatly.

“Night the mare. She’s out in the courtyard. Eating rabbits.”

As if the beast in question could hear them talking about her, a loud neigh could be heard out in the yard. While the kitchen was on the ground floor of the keep, that was still elevated from the courtyard level by several feet. Given the volume of the sound, Vesemir was certain that Night must have been right below the window. Waiting.

“Night, the mare,” Eskel repeated, a strange expression on his face. “The mare called Night,” he said again, an expression of a dawning understanding spreading on his face. Then he dropped his fork and rubbed his hands over his face. “No fucking wonder I was dreaming of a horse chasing me.”

Because of course Dracula’s chosen mount would actually be a literal nightmare. Witchers called those types of creatures the Mara, or just the Mare. The name ‘Night the Mare’ clearly had many meanings.

“Do you feel exhausted?” Vesemir asked, trying to ascertain the extent of the damage. If the beast was actually feeding on him, leaving him too drained to function, that couldn’t stand. Dracula would just have to find somewhere else to store his horse.

“Eh? I got sleep. It wasn’t fantastic, but it was sleep. I think most of what I’m feeling is blood loss related.” Eskel winced and put a hand over the bites on his neck. “He took a lot.”

There wasn’t really anything polite Vesemir could say to that, but he did briefly consider throwing his plate at Eskel’s head. Finally he said, “That does tend to happen when you sleep with vampires.”

“I didn’t sleep with him! I mean, we did sleep. Actual sleep happened. But that was---” Eskel stopped long enough to see that both Vesemir and Ciri were just looking at him, eyebrows raised in disbelief. “Nevermind.” He pushed aside his plate and laid his head down on the table.

It was tempting to keep the teasing going, but Vesemir could see how tired Eskel was still. And if what they said was true, Eskel had done them all a favor by distracting Dracula’s rampage. There was a small part of him that was somewhat pleased to see Eskel find someone to share his time with, too. Of all his remaining boys, Eskel seemed the most alone. It would be a shame to ruin that with teasing.
Although Vesemir wished that Eskel had had more sense on the matter than Geralt. Apparently not.

From the very first night Geralt had introduced them to his new lovers, Vesemir had feared what would happen if Geralt was ever seriously injured. Of the very few people and things that Dracula cared about, as far as Vesemir could tell anyways, Geralt was the more vulnerable. Not only because he was mortal, but because the very nature of his Path kept him in life threatening situations.

Clearly, Dracula and Alucard had found a way to cope with the aftermath of most of Geralt’s jobs. It had been more than a year since the three of them had been together, and Geralt had to have been seriously injured more than once in that time. Probably several times, actually. There hadn’t been any kind of fallout from any of those events. Not that Vesemir could see anyways.

This was different, though.

“What happened to Geralt?” he asked Ciri.

She sighed. “Triss and Yennefer pieced a lot of this together before they got in touch with me. That was sometime yesterday, so they no doubt have new information by now.”

Ciri waved her hand in a tired, somewhat dismissive gesture, and shoveled another fork full of egg in her mouth. Vesemir wanted to applaud her for that. Magic took a lot out of a person, and sometimes killed the appetite, too. It made him proud to see her taking care of herself.

“As far as they could tell,” she continued in between bites, “Geralt was somewhere in Temeria. Probably not Vizima, but maybe Dorian or Maribor. Somewhere in the southwest. Somehow, the Order of the Flaming Rose got tipped off that Geralt was in the area. They gathered up their brothers, and went on a little witch hunt.”

To that, both Eskel and Vesemir wrinkled their brows in confusion.

“But. Why?” Eskel asked. “They don’t like us witchers, but they don’t usually run us out of town. Or at least they probably shouldn’t based on their own damn religion. King Foltest doesn’t even like them that much. He took all their gold after that whole uprising nonsense.”

“Yes, and most of them moved north to Redania and Kaedwen. But there are still chapters in every major city in Temeria. Or, there were anyways.” Ciri shrugged. “Pretty sure everyone who went on that little witch hunt is now ash in the breeze, along with several leagues of forest. Anyways. This is where it gets…political.”

Eskel groaned and Vesemir rolled his eyes. Gods, this was why witchers stayed neutral. To try and avoid this nonsense.

“I know, I know.” Ciri paused to take a drink, wetting down her throat. “So, remember that whole thing back in Novigrad? The first time that Dracula showed off a little?”

Eskel stiffened in his seat. That incident may have been a fun romp for Dracula and Alucard, but it was nightmarish for Eskel. Vesemir had heard a little of what had happened from Geralt, drinking late one night. They’d almost lost Eskel there, either to death or madness. It was through the efforts of Geralt, Alucard, and Dracula together that they managed to get him out whole, if severely injured.

Come to think of it, that may have been where this newfound closeness to Dracula came from. Vesemir eyed the mark that peeked through Eskel’s shirt. Dracula, staking his claim.
“Well,” Ciri continued, “Dracula blasting that building to molten glass caused quite a stir.”

“That’s an understatement, I’m sure,” Vesemir said dryly.

Ciri nodded. “When his dragon form appeared in the sky, all of the lights in every temple and every altar to the Eternal Flame in Novigrad went out. The sky was dark for two solid days afterwards. Seers all across the nearest three countries started picking up visions of dark, living shadows. It’s been months and the crater is still considered cursed.”

“Demons galore, I bet,” Eskel said quietly, though he didn’t sound unhappy about it. If anything, there was a vicious sort of satisfaction to the words.

“Yup, though not as many as there could or maybe should have been, what with how attuned that little bit of land is now to Dracula’s power. He must have sealed the rift so nothing major could get through, but…” She waved her fork in the air and rolled her eyes.

“But little things get through. Or are simply attracted to it,” Vesemir said.

“Exactly. So, in the last few months various powers have been scrambling to try and figure out what happened.” She paused to take another bite, then held up a single finger.

“First, you have the Regency Council of Redania. Novigrad is a free city, and is Redanian in name only. They pay tribute to the council and get all the protections from the Royal Military and their various peace treaties, but they make and enforce their own laws. This little upset set the Council to considering if they should take a more active role in governing there. So they’ve sent in their spies to dig around.”

She held up a second finger. “Then you have the Order of the Flaming Rose. There are several groups of holy orders and monster hunters concerned with the demon outbreak, but the Order was particularly invested. They’ve been rallying power and gaining traction. People are afraid, and that means they’re starting to listen to anyone promising safety. No matter how damn stupid they sound.”

“Lambert was saying that Redania was difficult this year,” Vesemir mused. “He even left winter rest early to take on more jobs.”

“It’s not that there are more jobs.” Eskel shook his head, and poked at his food. “Maybe the bounties have been a little more on the demonic side, but the number of jobs is around the same. It’s just a lot of the damn bigotry has been worse. I haven’t seen it getting bad here in Kaedwen or even south of here, but the western side of Redania…I’ve had to skip more towns than expected. Not only because inexperienced dumbasses from the Order are taking all the jobs and not asking even a single clipped coin for them, but because people are just a bit more unfriendly.”

“That’s it in a nutshell. The Order is active, and they’re stirring up trouble.” Ciri paused. “Maybe.”

“What do you mean, maybe?” Vesemir frowned at her.

Ciri held up a third finger. “Here’s the extremely tricky part. Triss and Yennefer think, think mind you, that Nilfgaard has been sending out spies to stir up trouble. They’ve done it before, after all, and they are eager as hell to destabilize Temeria as much as possible. Losing the Second War hurt, and Emperor Emhyr has a bug up his ass to conquer the Northern Kingdoms. If Temeria falls, then the rest are likely soon to follow. So while it’s possible that the Order saw Geralt around town and decided he was the root of all ills and needed to be hunted down immediately—”

“It’s just as likely that someone put them up to it.” Eskel interrupted her, and groaned. “I find it
hard to believe that Geralt couldn’t take down a single chapter of those idiots.”

Vesemir tapped his fingers on the table, his frown growing deeper. None of this boded well, not for anyone.

“Right?” Ciri pointed at him. “And how did they know to call up all the chapters from the surrounding towns? It would have taken time to get them all in one place at one time. To get enough people to really press Geralt into running. Triss took a peek with her scrying. All the chapter houses in Southwestern Temeria are empty. The best we can figure is they gathered up into a larger group specifically to find him.”

“In which case, someone was watching for him and keeping them informed,” Vesemir said.

“Exactly. So. It could have just been the Order being righteous bigots and going on a grand old witch hunt. Or they could have been put up to it by either Nilfgaardian or Redanian spies.”

“Why would Redania give a shit about killing Geralt?” Eskel asked with a frown.

“Because if they were investigating around Novigrad, someone might have figured out that Geralt was in town the night before Dracula’s dragon showed up, looking into that specific property.” Ciri raised her eyebrows at him. “We both know how he investigates, and Alucard and Dracula weren’t helping him out at all. So he probably went to every single information source he could and just stabbed things until someone gave him the location he needed.”

Vesemir shook his head. “That’s a long shot, Ciri. Someone would have to find exactly who Geralt talked to, what he was looking for in the first place, and then added it all up to get a full story.”

“All of which can be done with time and effort,” she replied evenly. “Spies know their business, and they’re as persistent as the plague. Besides, Geralt is neither subtle nor unnoticeable. People remember the White Wolf, the Butcher of Blaviken. They wouldn’t have even needed to start asking about him. They would have just had to ask about the property, figured out who was living there, and then see who else was interested in that place before it got melted. Geralt’s name would have eventually come up.”

“Still doesn’t explain why they’d care to kill him,” Eskel said.

“Because if he can call down a giant demonic dragon, that’s a power worth either controlling or stopping,” Vesemir said, shaking his head. What a clusterfuck.

Ciri just shook her head at them. “It’s not just that. Redania might need him to seal the deal with Novigrad. Think of how much pull they’d get if they could offer the head of the man responsible for the current plague of terror they’re now facing. A guarantee that the dragon won’t ever show up again is a pretty sweet bonus to that deal. And if they can use their spies to convince the zealots of the Order to do it for them, well, all the better.”

“Shit.” Eskel dropped his fork and rubbed the bites on his neck.

“Yup,” Ciri said with a nod.

“As interesting as this speculation is, none of it actually gives us names,” Vesemir said.

“Yup,” Ciri said again, this time sounding more exhausted. “As soon as I got the information from Triss and Yennefer, I portaled off to grab Eskel, portaled us to Dracula, and then portaled myself to a whole new world. Alucard’s home world, it turns out. It’s where he took Geralt to recover. Then I wandered over that crazy city for several hours trying to find them. And then I portaled back here
“For fuck’s sake, girl.” Vesemir almost reached over to smack her in the back of the head. “How are you even still standing? Get some sleep!”

“Trust me, food was more important,” she said, scraping the last bite off of her plate. “Besides, I needed to fill you all in. And give you this.”

She pointed to a bag on the floor. What it was made of, Vesemir couldn’t tell, but when he leaned over and sniffed he could smell Geralt’s blood on it. And something else, too.

“In there are poisoned arrows. They were taken out of Geralt. You know more about poison than I do. Would you look at them and see what kind it is? It might give us a hint as to what happened.”

Eskel snorted. “Because it’s not like Dracula left bodies, let alone witnesses to question. Fuck.” He shook his head. “The border there is a damn wasteland now.”

“Dracula didn’t get to any towns? None at all?” Vesemir found that hard to believe.

“Apparently Geralt ran, and they had to hunt him down,” Ciri said with a visible shiver.

“I bet you he led them away on purpose,” Eskel said quietly. “Probably nearly killing himself to do it. He had to know that Dracula would lay waste to whoever was hunting him. So he led them away from the towns.”

Fuck. That sounded exactly like something Geralt would do.

“He’s alive, though? And he’ll recover?” As completely fucked as the rest of this situation was, Geralt was a good friend. Like a son in some ways. It brought a great, aching pain to his chest to think that Geralt may have been lost to them.

“Yes.” Ciri’s voice was filled with relief, and she slumped farther down in her chair. “Alucard was able to help him in time. Barely.”

Vesemir cast an appraising eye over her, taking in the heavy purple rings under her eyes and the paleness of her face. “Go rest, Ciri. We’ll take care of the dishes. I’ll look at the arrows after.”

She nodded. “Once I get a few hours sleep, I’ll contact Triss and Yennefer. See what else they’ve dug up.”

With that, she stood up and staggered off down the hall towards her room. Vesemir turned to look at Eskel, who was still barely upright in his chair.

“You too. Go sleep it off. You look like you need it.”

To his great shock, Eskel didn’t even argue. He just pushed himself up to standing and headed out of the room. As he passed by, he dropped his hand on Vesemir’s shoulder for a moment. “Thanks, old man.”

“Troublemaker,” Vesemir grumbled affectionately back. Half of his grey hairs had to come from Eskel and Geralt alone, pulling all the ridiculous stunts they did as children here in Kaer Morhen.

He looked around the kitchen for a moment, and then quickly finished up his breakfast. It took only a moment to wash the few dishes. While he worked, he listened to the quiet sounds of their latest demonic addition to the keep frolicking around the yard.
“Hmmmm. Night, the mare,” Vesemir said quietly to himself.

Once the few dishes were clean and put away, he put on his winter cloak and boots and headed outside. He’d get to the arrows in a moment. First, he had to talk to a horse.

The horse was pretty, Vesemir had to admit. Strong and tall, he watched the mare prance along the battlements until she noticed him. Then she turned, heedless and unafraid of the height, and trotted along the crumbling stone towards him, her head and tail high. Her long mane was as black as her midnight coat and it seemed to float in the air behind her as she moved.

When she reached the edge of what she could reasonably walk across, she looked down and strained her neck to look over the edge of the battlements, obviously doing some kind of mental calculation. Somehow, Vesemir wasn’t at all surprised at the fact her legs suddenly bent in ways no horse was actually capable of. She jumped down from the battlements to the courtyard proper in a leap more befitting a cat than a horse.

Once on the lower level she straightened out, again looking like a mostly regular horse, and resumed her trot. Her ears pricked forward and she would have looked cute if not for the fangs sticking out from between her lips or the claws hidden in her feathering. The red eyes were a bit of a put-off, too.

It wasn’t the first time that Vesemir noticed that Dracula’s things tended to be both beautiful and scary.

“Greetings, Night the mare,” Vesemir said as soon as she was in range. “I’m Vesemir. I watch over the keep.”

He held out a bit of bread with jelly on it, something he’d snagged before he left the kitchen, and hoped that she was like other horses in that she’d go for sweets.

She sniffed his face first. Those fangs came way too close for his liking before she turned to the offered treat. She obviously made an effort to lip the bread gently from his palm, making pleased little huffs as she ate what he brought.

It was impossible not to crack a smile at her obvious satisfaction in the treat. He wasn’t quite sure how smart she was, but he had a feeling she was smarter than a regular horse.

Ah well, might as well be polite. Better to assume more intelligence than less.

“Night, you’re welcome to stay here in Kaer Morhen.” She huffed at him, strong enough he could feel the breath fan his face. “But you need to be gentle with sleepers’ dreams. We are witchers, and being exhausted will kill us in battle.”

Her dark eyes were watching him carefully and her head lowered from her proud arch, enough he could pet her forehead if he wanted too. He got the impression she was listening to him.

“Eskel and Ciri are in a bad state today in particular. Let them rest for today, and I’ll share a fat chicken with you later tonight.”

She sighed, her sides expanding dramatically before sagging as if he had just told her that she would have to work without rest for days on end.

“Hmm.” Vesemir thought for a moment. “Do you like being brushed?”

One ear went down, he couldn’t tell if it was surprise or confusion, but it did make her look
hilarious. He didn’t laugh. She tilted her head at him.

“All our horses love being brushed. Not sure if you’d like it too, but come to the stables and I’ll brush you for a while. Get the dirt out of your hide and the tangles from your mane and tail.”

She neighed at him, short and loud, then turned towards the stables and started trotting, her tail high. Once she noticed he wasn’t beside her, she stopped. Looked at him, then at the stable, and back at him. Then she turned around, trotted back, and circled him so that she was once again beside him. This new position left her side open to him and her head pointing at the stable.

Apparently, she was pretty damn smart. He grinned ruefully. “Yes, now is fine. I have some work to do today, but I can stay for a little while.”

She looked at him, then back to her side, and back to him. The nod she gave him was something akin to ‘climb on’ sign.

That made him raise his eyebrow at her.

“You realize there are a hundred tales of demon horses that take men for a ride that they never return from, yes?”

The sound she made then was a chortling kind of neigh that sounded eerily close to a laugh. She repeated her ‘climb on’ gesture, and this time her head bumped into him a little.

Vesemir considered for a moment. He remembered Dracula’s promise. No dark thing in this keep would ever harm them. Dracula was not a being who could disregard his own solemn vows.

“Alright,” he said, and grabbed onto her mane, hoisting himself up onto her back.

Her body was solid and powerful under him and her hide was glossy black and soft. It was surprisingly pleasant to be seated on her, even bareback.

As soon as he settled, he felt something change. It started at her neck. Delicate curves of red light rose up on her hide, down along her neck, and then spreading lower. The intricate, oddly beautiful pattern flowed down over her sides and over her legs, glowing red against her black hide. Before he had the time to react, he felt her bunch up, muscles tensing under him.

Then she jumped.

“Shit!”

He barely managed to tighten his legs around her as they went airborne. A flash of red lightning split the air before them, blinding him.

When he blinked away the after burn on his vision, they were landing inside the stable. His lone horse neighed in distress as Night landed on the stone floor and danced a little in place, shaking her head like one shakes off hands after lifting a heavy weight.

Vesemir blinked and tried to unclench his fingers. That wasn’t what he was expecting. Shockingly fast. So very, very fast.

She moved again, tensing up, but this time it was only to stomp at a bit of old hay stored in a corner. There was a squeak and a squish. Night nosed through the hay until she uncovered a half-squashed rat that she then promptly ate, bones crunching in her decidedly not herbivore teeth.
Carefully, Vesemir slid off her back, keeping one hand on her neck.

“Amazing,” he said quietly. “It’s no wonder Dracula favors you.”

He huffed a little in astonishment again, and looked her up and down.

She lifted her head and pranced in place, very obviously proud of herself.

“I’ll go get the brushes and...” he paused to look at her feet. “Regular horses need their hooves picked out. Do you?”

She made a nodding gesture, picking up her front leg and obviously waiting for him to take it.

“I’ll get the picks, too then. Just a moment.” He headed over to the wall and grabbed his supplies. “You know, the garden has moles. And there are squirrels that keep breaking into the wood shed.”

That got him a short, excited neigh and some feet stomping. Obviously welcome news.

He had to pause for a moment, suddenly struck by the realization that he was going to be playing groom to a demon horse. Dracula’s demon horse, no less. And he’d walked right into that.

Vesemir shook his head. They were helping each other out, was all. She’d keep the pests under control, and he’d make sure everyone slept at least reasonably well.

As he grabbed the hoof pick and wandered back over to her, he couldn’t help but wonder a little bit about how life in Kaer Morhen had changed. Vampires in the keep. Succubi and incubi in his bedroom. Fire elemental in the baths. Demon horse in the stables.

Perhaps the most unsettling part about it all was how little it seemed to bother him. Objectively speaking, Vesemir was happier than he remembered being in a long while. Thanks to Dracula and his antics, Vesemir somehow got a lot more regular updates from the remaining wolf witches than he had in years.

The keep was no longer just a base of operations, a place to winter. It was starting to feel like a home again.

The succubi with their offers of sex might be strange, but they also helped out with cooking and filled the place with chatter and ordinary, everyday things that he never expected to hear in this place again. Just the other day he caught them arguing about hogging the baths and who took the longest. There were flimsy, colorful clothes scattered around different rooms, and a lot of maintenance problems he was used to dealing with in the keep were somehow...not happening any more?

He paused, suddenly realising he hadn’t had to patch up a leaking roof in months, nor did he have to fix a crumbling wall in any of the rooms.

And his witchers. Geralt was the one who always got into the kind of trouble a witcher should never be part of, like assassinations of kings and other political stuff. He did it long before Dracula, but with the demon lord, his chances of survival skyrocketed. As did the chances of Vesemir knowing what happened to each of his remaining charges.

That was the only thing he hated about being a witcher. That he would only know if any of the boys died if they stopped showing up for winter. Even then, he would spend years wondering if maybe they were still alive somewhere. Now he didn’t have to worry about that. Should something truly bad happen, he was sure most of the keep’s inhabitants would know about it near instantly.
and pass the news.

With a lighter heart he bent down to work at cleaning out the debris stuck between the three thick claws that made up Night’s front foot.

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Matt Snow walked quietly between the stairwell entrance and the elevator doors. He was a professional. He’d been through all the joys and pains of waiting for a mission to start. That endless, nervous silence before a sudden firefight.

So he knew how to keep his cool. When he paced back and forth between the checkpoints, it was calmly. His gait was slow and measured, and his expression was neutral. He firmly believed in leading by example. If he was in control, so would be his people.

All those years of past experience had never come in more handy, because Matt was extremely unsettled. Belmont had dropped several information bombs on him not more than an hour ago, and it took everything he had not to start buying out his weapons wishlist.

Dracula was alive. Somewhere else, sure, and with no plans to come back to Castlevania City. But alive.

Belmont was… well, whatever the hell he was, it wasn’t totally human. Those black and yellow eyes were something else. To be honest, Matt wasn’t really sure what to think about them. He’d seen a lot of shit in his career, both while in the military and after in the private sector. This night might take the cake, though.

He had to wonder how many of the rumors about the Belmont family were true. Were they all demon hunters? Was that what Belmont’s guest was? Matt hadn’t missed that Ciri said her father had eyes like a cat, yellow with a vertical slit pupil. He knew that Belmont occasionally would disappear for days on end. Originally, he’d thought it was just another case of a billionaire being eccentric. But now he just wasn’t sure. Was Belmont off doing other things with this group of sword-toting wackos?

Which brought him back around to Ciri. That woman looked like a fighter. The way she moved, the lithe muscle she had under that obvious leather armor. All the confidence. He’d seen it when she first came up the stairs; there was this moment where he just knew she was calculating how to take every single one of them out.

Matt was used to that sort of evaluation. What was interesting was that she never seemed to lose her confidence in her chances. There was no flicker of defeat as she realized she couldn’t fight so many guards. Not at all. She thought she could win, or at least accomplish her goal. And that was pretty damn interesting.

More concerning, and more immediate, was the looming threat of Belmont’s father. After everything Belmont said, not just to Matt and John but to Ciri as well, that was cause to be more than a little unsettled.

The guy sounded like a crime lord. Above any laws but his own, and powerful enough to enforce whatever desire he had.

Personally, Matt tried to keep on the right side of the law for his private sector gigs; being a mercenary who only cared for money was never his style. He had enough contacts in the business to know how working for crime bosses went. He’d heard of the ridiculous money people earned
and the even more ridiculous things they were expected to do. He much preferred his eccentric but pretty much vanilla billionaire boss.

Or that was what he thought so far. It turned out that just because he didn’t have to cover up the drunken shenanigans of a young playboy, he wouldn't get away scot free.

Belmont’s reactions to questions about his father were pretty worrisome too. He saw the way John flinched when Belmont didn’t reassure him about being safe with his father. John had seen something that the conversation reminded him of, and was worried about it. That practically screamed domestic violence.

What was worse was that there wasn’t a damn thing anyone could do about it. Even if Belmont’s father was an abusive bastard, Belmont had already established that his father was also powerful enough to do whatever he wanted. Hell, Belmont didn’t even seem bothered by the bald statement that he would let his father do anything he pleased. Seemingly up to and including violence.

In all the time that Matt had worked for Trevor Belmont, he’d never once see the man react in fear. Until tonight, when John mentioned the subject of food. That was an incredibly telling reaction. Whatever private family life Belmont had had growing up, it was starting to look like it was a hell of a lot more twisted than Matt expected.

It bothered him to know that there was nothing he could do. It sat uneasily on him because he respected Belmont. For the year he’d worked for the man, he'd seen nothing but a respectful, intelligent, genuinely good person. Belmont might have been ruthless in his buyouts, but he helped Castlevania City out of nothing but honest desire to help. He had influence in the city, yes, but Matt hadn’t seen him use that influence beyond securing hospital care for his severely wounded friend. Matt counted himself lucky, being hired to work for such a man. To see him unwilling to fight, to see him giving in, was heartbreaking. He hoped, against all odds, that things wouldn’t turn out as badly as he expected, all the while preparing for the worst.

Matt already briefed his people to be on their best behavior. They were to avoid any interaction with Belmont’s father other than absolutely necessary, and he put the fear of God into them, again, should any information make it out of the hospital.

His ear piece beeped.

“The south elevator is on the move,” Jeff, the man in charge of watching the cameras, said over the comms. “I… didn’t catch who entered it.”

Matt frowned.

“Replay?”

Jeff hesitated.

“Fuzzy. I can track whoever is in the elevator by the image going snowy, but I can’t see them.”

That unsettled feeling grew inside of Matt. There were no pictures of Belmont’s father. Not ever.

“On my way.”

He made sure to have his people in formation in case it wasn’t Belmont’s father. He went to stand in front of the elevator, taking the brunt of the first encounter. Unlike his special ops days, he couldn't just lie in wait in some dark corner. He had to be the welcome committee. He rolled his shoulders, settled the ultra light bullet proof vest better on his body, and made sure to assume as
relaxed a position as he could while still keeping his center of gravity low.

The elevator pinged and the door slid open soundlessly.

The man waiting in the middle of the carriage was nothing and everything he expected at once. While not quite as tall as Trevor Belmont, he cut a striking figure nonetheless. Matt’s first impression was big. He had wide shoulders and a wide chest that pulled at his suit just a tad too much. His black hair was shoulder length and was left to fly where it may. It made a striking contrast to his pale face and the dark red eyes.

He watched Matt with interest.

*Red eyes.*

At least they weren’t glowing, Matt consoled himself. But the red irises were only enhanced by the red and gold armored fucking coat spread over the man’s shoulders. He wore a black suit underneath. The material was a touch shiny, catching just enough light to reflect it back and give the impression of being rare and probably expensive as fuck.

His shirt was black too, some kind of black on black pattern that briefly caught Matt’s eye. He didn’t wear a tie, and the last two buttons of his shirt were open, showing off the strong line of his neck.

It was such a blatant contrast to what Trevor Belmont usually wore. Trevor tended towards the buttoned up look, and his suits, while elegant, were still mostly conservative in design. Lots of white, blue, and grey in his wardrobe.

Trevor’s father was flashy as hell. Between the deep black of his attire, the red and gold coat, and the massive multicolored rings sparkling at his fingers, he was obviously all about showing off his wealth and power.

Something in the way he stood, the way his balance was distributed so well between his feet, told Matt he was a fighter. A well trained one, too. Matt watched as those red eyes swept over him, noted his weapons, then swept over the guards hanging back. Trevor’s father then looked at Josh and Matthew, both of whom sported automatic weapons in plain sight, and very clearly dismissed them all as not a threat.

What the everloving *fuck.*

“Ciri told me that my Son had security waiting,” the man rumbled. His voice was low with a faint accent curling around his words. Nothing that Matt recognized at all. It was a nice voice, unexpectedly quiet and very confident. Like the man didn’t need to shout to be heard…or obeyed. There was also a strange emphasis on the word *son* that Matt didn’t like. Like there were a million other meanings stuffed into that one word, just out of Matt’s reach.

“How…prudent of him.” The man let a smirk curl his lips.

Oh, Matt didn’t like how he said that one bit. It implied a whole host of terrible things that could have happened if he was delayed, even by the smallest margins.

Regardless, Matt was a pro. He knew how to keep what he was thinking off his face. So all he did was take a step back and gesture towards the hallway.
“This way, sir.”

“How long have you been working for him?” the man asked, walking even with Matt instead of following him.

“I joined up with Mr. Belmont shortly after he went public in Castlevania City last year, while he was helping clean up the Outbreak.” Small talk wasn’t a complete surprise, but it was a little unexpected. Sometimes powerful men didn’t want to bother with it, viewing the hired help as little better than furniture. But sometimes they liked to probe.

“Hmm.” The sound rumbled low in the man’s throat. “It pleased me to no end to learn he picked apart Zobek’s empire. There’s a kind of poetic justice to that.”

Matt wasn’t sure what to say to that, so he kept silent. He could hear on his earpiece that someone had alerted John. The aide was no doubt already headed into Trevor Belmont and Geralt’s room, giving them the heads up that company was on the way.

Another thing that Matt found profoundly disquieting was how silently the man moved. His clothes didn’t rustle and his steps didn’t squeak or echo on the polished floors.

“While you are here, is there anything we can offer you, or any particular title or name you would prefer we address you as?” Matt asked, as politely as he could.

So far he hadn’t heard anything about a name. He assumed it was Belmont, but with a person like this Matt wasn’t taking anything for granted.

“My name is Gabriel Belmont,” the man answered. “Which puts you in the uncomfortable position of having two Belmonts to call at once.”

Matt cast a sideways look at Gabriel Belmont, noting how uniquely unhelpful that answer was.

“Any preference to how I should call you, sir?”

“Don’t use Gabriel, I don’t like that name.”

The sheer menace in those words made the hair on the back of Matt’s neck prickle. At the same time, he could tell it wasn’t completely directed at him. He swallowed.

“Duly noted, sir.”

It was awkward as hell to think of his boss’s father by anything as personal as a first name, but already it was getting confusing in his head to have two Mr. Belmont’s to answer to. He resolved to never call Gabriel anything but ‘sir’ when speaking to him, and think of him as Belmont Senior.

Prior to this whole event, Matt would have never considered calling his boss, ‘Trevor’, even in the privacy of his own mind. But now with his father around, it seemed like the easiest solution. Anything that saved him a bit of headache would be welcome.

He’d just have to remember to never say it out loud. Honestly, that wasn’t as difficult as it might seem. He’d been in the army after all. He had learned to keep a whole host of unflattering names about his superiors between his teeth. Thinking of a man by his first name, even his well respected boss, would hardly be a stretch.

Matt was relieved to see that they were at Trevor’s room. Just as he was about to knock on the door, John was already there opening it up from the inside.
As tempting as it was just to wave Belmont Sr. into the room, his earlier conversation with Trevor still sat uneasily with Matt. Belmont Sr. was a powerful man used to getting his way, it was clear. But even powerful men sometimes hesitated to act poorly in front of witnesses. Matt couldn’t do much to protect his boss in this situation, but he could stay in the room for as long as they would let him.

It was with that reasoning in mind that Matt led Belmont Sr. into the room, splitting off to stand by the wall as soon as they entered. Being present but invisible was half his job description. A second or two later, John joined him. The two of them shared a quick side-eyed look, and then settled in to watch.

Belmont Sr. walked straight towards Trevor, who was already standing to greet his father.

“Father,” Trevor said quietly, taking a step forward.

Belmont Sr. moved in close, his hands raising to take Trevor’s head in both hands. There was something strange in the way his fingers splayed over the sides of Trevor’s head. His thumbs rested on Trevor’s sharp cheekbones, just under those strange black and gold eyes. There was possessiveness in the gesture, a discomfiting sense of ownership that sat like a hard pebble in Matt’s shoe.

“You look horrible,” was what Belmont Sr. said in lieu of greeting.

Trevor’s lips quirked a bit. “I am very tired.”

Matt watched as the thumbs stroked over Trevor’s face, tracing the edge of the dark circles that accumulated there during this whole adventure. He shifted, uneasy again for a reason he couldn’t quite pin down. Maybe it was something about how physically close they were.

“Geralt?”

“Drugged and recovering. It was a very near thing.” Trevor closed his eyes for a moment, breathing out heavily. It almost looked like he was leaning into Belmont Sr.’s hands, just a little. “It took a very long time for them to sew him back together.”

There was silence between them for a long moment, filled with nothing but that touch that kept persisting.

“It’s good I stayed away then.”

“I’m sorry,” Trevor said, his forehead wrinkling with concern. “It was harsh of me to say. I should have clarified.”

The older man shrugged.

“I knew what you meant,” he said, letting his hands fall from Trevor’s face. “And Ciri threw Eskel at me as a distraction, the cunning thing.”

Trevor just shook his head. “I still cannot believe she did that. I absolutely believe Eskel went along with it, though. How is he?”

The way Trevor asked made Matt start to really wonder about the health and wellbeing of whoever this Eskel character was.

“Ciri took him to get something to eat, I think. He slept. I think Night likes him. She definitely
came to visit him."

The look that Trevor gave his father was one of completely unsurprised exasperation. “So now Night is at the keep, too?”

Belmont Sr. shrugged.

“Where else was I supposed to put her? Eskel and I needed some fast transport.”

Trevor rubbed his eyes and let his shoulders slump. “You do realize the amount of damage Night can do when unsupervised?”

“It’s fine. Vesemir is there.”

“That man does not deserve Night’s antics. You do know she only acts all sweet and obedient for you, right? Anybody else and she is a terror. Quite literally, too.”

At this point, Matt was thoroughly confused. Was Night their driver? A particularly spoiled one? Or an unstable one?

“Vesemir will deal.” Belmont Sr. waved his son’s concerns off and turned towards the bed with their sleeping patient.

Matt felt extremely bad for Vesemir, whoever he was.

“You invaded the man’s home, you could at least try to be more careful what you do.” Trevor's gently chiding tone of voice actually went a fair way to making Matt feel better about Belmont Sr. being there. There was an ease in how they talked that didn’t have any hint of fear in it.

“He’s welcome to try and stop me,” Belmont Sr. said. He stepped over to the bed and looked down at the sleeping man. That response was not reassuring at all.

Trevor just sighed at his father, clearly not willing to argue the point any longer.

“Just remember Geralt wouldn’t like it if something happened to his home.”

“Geralt hasn’t complained yet!” Belmont Sr. protested smugly.

“Geralt hasn’t caught on yet,” Trevor corrected.

Did all these people live together on some kind of compound? If they really were a group of monster hunters, per the traditional Belmont family stories, what would that place even look like? Was it just a house?

The more Matt heard, the more questions he had. Which actually sucked because he knew damn well it wasn’t really his place to ask any of them.

“How long will he be asleep?” Belmont Sr. laid a soft touch on Geralt’s forehead, pushing the hair away to get a better look at the ashen face beneath. His hands looked gentle.

“Hard to say.” Trevor looked pensively at Geralt’s sleeping form. “When the doctors listed off Geralt’s injuries to him, he estimated he’d be active in a couple of days, and recovered in under two weeks. Given that they had to actually unpack his organs, scrub them, and piece them back together, I’m inclined to believe that estimate was optimistic. Based on past injury, I expect him to wake up in half a day, ready to eat out the kitchen.”
“You saved him.” There was so much emotion packed into those three words, such intensity Matt felt uncomfortable just listening to it. The way Belmont Sr. leaned over Geralt, the way he was touching Geralt’s face spoke of close connection. Matt had already assumed that Geralt was at the very least a close friend of his boss, but now he was starting to think Geralt was somebody as important, if not more so, to Trevor’s father, too.

“I wasn’t sure I would be able to. There were... so precious few options left to save him.” The pain and worry in Trevor’s voice was a tangible thing.

“Where’s his pendant?” Belmont Sr. asked. He pulled the blankets covering Geralt away, exposing the heavily bandaged upper body. Lines of stitches were visible under the gauze in some of the less thickly bandaged areas. Damn, the man looked like Frankenstein’s monster with how riddled his body was with sutures.

John hastened over to a set of drawers, and dug around for a moment.

“Here it is, sir,” John said nervously, as he walked over and held up a small cloth bag. “Everything was removed from him prior to surgery. His, ah, other possessions are all here as well.”

Belmont Sr. reached for the bag. His rings sparkled in the artificial light as he quickly dug into it, pulling out a large metal medallion in the shape of a bristling wolf’s head. That was a serious piece of jewelry; the thing was large enough that it could have completely filled up the palm of Matt’s hand.

As soon as the bag was out of John’s hand, he retreated back to stand next to Matt. Honestly, Matt couldn’t blame him. Not one little bit.

“It’s strange, seeing him without it.” Belmont Sr. watched the pendent spin in the dim light of the room before leaning over to let it rest on Geralt’s neck.

“Like Eskel in Steingard’s dungeon,” Trevor said quietly, an unhappy frown tugging at his lips.

“People keep thinking they can take it away from them as a trophy,” Belmont Sr. growled, low and deep in his chest. “And I keep having to teach them the error of their ways.”

For a moment the room seemed a little darker, and Matt held back a shiver.

Matt knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that Belmont Sr. was talking about murder. Whoever caused the damage to Geralt, they were dead already. And judging by the way Belmont Sr. spoke, Matt had no doubt that the deaths were not pretty.

“Hold on to it for now,” Trevor said, motioning to the pendant. “It will only get in the way of all the equipment and dressing changes he will have to go through.”

“I will.” Belmont Sr.’s hands slid away from Geralt and he put the medallion into an inner pocket of his armored coat. Then he turned to look at Trevor.

“Have you eaten yet?”

Matt could feel John stiffen next to him.

Trevor licked his lips. His eyes skidded away from his father to lock first on Matt, and then John. Matt noted that there were several take out boxes and bags on one of the tables near the wall, likely brought in by John some time in the last couple hours. But Trevor didn’t even look at them.
“Leave. Nobody enters until called in. No exceptions.” Trevor’s voice was firm as he ordered them out.

Belmont Sr.’s eyes were fixed on his son’s face, seemingly forgetting about Matt or John entirely. Matt didn’t like it one bit. There was something supremely creepy about it, but he couldn’t put his finger on it at all.

Matt dragged his feet as long as he could, letting John leave first. He made sure to make eye contact with Trevor on his way out, hoping for some kind of message. A sign that there was something else that Matt should be doing to help other than leaving. There was nothing, though.

“Just keep everyone away until my Father or I call you in again,” Trevor repeated quietly.

The moment the door shut behind them, Matt and John just looked at each other. It was clear that John was just as worried as Matt was.

“It might be best if we stayed right here,” Matt said quietly. “Just in case they need anything.”

“Yes,” John said, seizing on the idea with eagerness. “Just in case.”

There was a moment of silence. A thousand questions weighed down on Matt’s tongue. But he remembered what his boss said. Not a whisper outside of that room about anything that happened in it.

John, it seemed, was thinking of the same thing, because he promptly whipped out his phone and started tapping away. Matt had just resigned himself to the silence, when John tapped on his arm and showed him the screen of his phone.

On it was a note program with a short message typed into it.

*Is it just me, or is creepy guy really, really creepy?*

Matt took the phone from him and typed out his own message.

*10/10 would not want to meet him in a dark alley. He knew we were armed and it didn’t make an impression on him at all.*

John took the phone back, read the message, and winced. Then he started typing again.

*Did you catch the part about dungeons? I get the feeling they weren’t talking about a club.*

Matt quickly typed back, *Yes I did and no they weren’t. I bet whoever did that number on Geralt, is no longer among the living. That creepy guy sounded way too satisfied when he spoke about teaching people the errors of their ways.*

At that, John just nodded, eyes wide. Then he thought for a moment, typed, and passed the phone back.

*So. I’ve got concerns about boss’s...health and wellbeing in there. Don’t know what we can do though. Ideas?*

The sad truth was, they couldn’t do anything until Trevor asked for help.

Matt frowned and slowly typed out his response.

*All we can do is try and keep the creepy guy happy. Let’s not add to boss’s troubles if we can.*
John looked crushed for a moment, but nodded. He shook it off quickly though. Matt had noticed that about the man; he was very quick to adapt. Smart, and good at handling several important projects at once.

After a moment of thought, John typed at his phone as passed it over.

*By chance, have you ever used a combat cross?*

Matt looked at John incredulously and didn’t even bother typing out his response.

John just flailed a little and added a bit more on the message.

*Look, you cannot tell me that this didn’t cross your mind at least once in the past 24 hours. You saw what Ciri had. You think they’re door to door salesmen in their free time, armed like that?*

He raised his eyebrows at Matt.

Matt took the phone away from John and typed in with quick fingers.

*Automatic weapons, incendiary rounds, flamethrowers all work great. Why use antiquated weaponry?*

John just raised an eyebrow at him as he typed a response.

*We should ask Ciri next time we see her. Or Geralt when he wakes, because he had two swords on him, both were so damn heavy that I could barely lift them. One was solid silver.*

Matt considered this, and also considered the scars on Geralt he saw during the few moments he’d had to watch him.

*Personal preference? Habit? Some kind of gang or sect thing?*

That made John pause for a moment. Then he looked up at Matt speculatively. He typed up something real quick and shoved the phone back to Matt.

*I’ll look into it.*

Matt wanted to tell him to be discreet about it, but held his tongue and simply nodded. John was good at his job; he didn’t need Matt telling him how to do it. He just nodded instead. This night was a long string of one revelation after another and whatever Matt thought he knew about his boss was turned on his head. He had no doubt it was similar for John.

John held up his phone again.

*Thanks for sticking in there with me. I didn’t want to leave them alone.*

*Me neither,* Matt typed back.

*Now for the worst part of the job. Waiting,* John responded.

It was so much worse than any shootout, just standing there, waiting to see what would happen next. Wondering who would come out of the room, if anyone did. Waiting and planning for all the possible ways to limit damage. God knew that Matt knew enough about the atrocities people committed that his imagination was painting one horrible scenario after another for him. The only bright side was that if he knew about a possibility, it was something he could make a contingency plan for. Even if he prayed that he wouldn’t need to use any of them.
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Notes from Quarra: There is a song in this chapter. They lyrics are listed, but if you want to listen to it. Here is the link! The song is from the Witcher 3, and it's called Lullaby of Woe.

I...may actually have all the words to this memorized now.

Also, here is where we start to see some divergence with traditional witcher canon. We modified things to suit us, and it comes up a bit in discussion. No major changes, though.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Dracula listened with amusement as Alucard’s servants stationed themselves outside the door.

“It seems you’ve chosen your underlings well,” he said quietly, careful not to let his voice carry. The mortals outside didn’t need to hear what they spoke of in here.

“Thank you,” Alucard said, matching his soft tone. “They’ve been an immeasurable help. Especially today.”

For all that his son was keeping the conversation light, Dracula could see how Alucard’s eyes followed the line of his neck. How he left his lips slightly parted.

The time spell he’d cast on Geralt must have been extremely taxing. Alucard was hungry in a way that Dracula had rarely ever seen him. His skin looked grey to Dracula’s keen sight. Only the dim, warm light of the room kept him looking mostly human. The eyes, though, those were a big tip off. They were nearly glowing in the soft lamplight.

Dracula stepped over into Alucard’s space and traced his thumb over Alucard’s jaw.

“They are afraid of me.”

Alucard just snorted. “Because they are sane.”

Beautiful, Dracula thought, and let his thumb rub over Alucard’s lower lip. It was so plush and wet. Alucard’s heart picked up, and his breath stuttered. Alucard’s reaction, that there was a reaction at all, never failed to bring a rush to Dracula.

“They are afraid for your sake more than their own. You never fail to inspire loyalty.” Pride welled up inside Dracula’s chest. Even when they were at odds, Alucard had always made him proud.

“It’s a strange thing, to have people. I’m not…used to that.”

That was a sentiment that Dracula felt especially sympathetic to right at this moment. The way Eskel had fearlessly walked through his fire, came to him, wrapped around him. Offered himself. It stirred things inside of Dracula that he’d thought long dead.
“It is very strange not to be alone,” Dracula said after a moment.

Alucard shifted towards him, his eyes bright with hunger. He was close enough now that Dracula could feel Alucard’s presence along his flank, the gentle pressure of his body not quite touching. It felt cold. What little warmth that used to be there had melted into the exhaustion that obviously was dragging at him.

“I want to drink from you,” Alucard murmured. His lips just barely moved under the thumb Dracula still had over them. The breath of those words fanned over Dracula’s skin and he couldn’t stop a shiver of appreciation. He loved that Alucard asked for it this time. Maybe more than he was willing to admit.

A slow smile tugged at Dracula’s mouth as satisfaction curled up inside of him, and he pulled Alucard’s body a little closer. “I would like that very much.”

With regret, Dracula took his hand away from Alucard’s face, reluctant to lose even that bit of contact. He shrugged his red coat off his shoulders and caught the heavy, armored fabric before it hit the ground.

“I can’t believe you wore this,” Alucard said quietly. “Poor John had no idea what to think of your choice of wardrobe. I think the coat was enough to terrify him.”

“I like my coat,” Dracula defended.

He turned to Geralt and spread it over the sleeping witcher. There were so many bandages and fresh stitches that Dracula didn’t dare touch him, but he could give Geralt something that held Dracula’s scent. With how sensitive the witcher's sense of smell was, he was sure Geralt would feel his presence that way.

There was a faint stirring as Geralt took a slightly deeper breath in. He turned his head just a little and made a sleepy nudge closer to the coat collar tucked in around his shoulders. Then he sighed softly and settled back down further into sleep.

“He recognized your scent and relaxed,” Alucard said, sounding touched.

“Yes.” Dracula didn’t even bother pretending it didn’t make him happy.

Dracula got rid of the suit jacket next. The black garment ended up draped over a small table nearby. He didn’t pay much attention to it; where his clothing ended up didn’t matter. Catching Alucard’s eyes as he started slowly unbuttoning his shirt was far more important.

“Aren’t you afraid of messing up your clothes?” Dracula asked, enjoying the way Alucard’s eyes followed his fingers’ progress, button by button.

It seemed to take Alucard a moment to process the question; he was too caught up in Dracula’s slow stripping. Finally he licked his lips again and said, “I suppose two suits covered in blood in one day is too much.”

“Pity,” Dracula said with a smirk. He wouldn’t be opposed at all to that particular scene. On the other hand, getting some bare skin to touch while Alucard fed on him would be *nice*.

Dracula pulled his shirt out of his pants and finished unbuttoning it, letting it fall open to show off

Alucard didn’t make him wait long. He discarded his suit jacket and tossed it to hang over some
piece of furniture or other. To Dracula’s intense pleasure, he noticed that Alucard wasn’t paying
any attention to where he threw the clothes either; his eyes were focused on Dracula.

“Open your shirt,” Dracula said as he headed over to the couch that sat opposite Geralt’s bed. “I
want to see your skin.”

It only took a moment for Alucard to work open the knot of his tie. That got tossed somewhere
behind him as well. Then he stalked forward, swiftly unbuttoning his fine shirt. Those lovely,
clever hands worked quickly and efficiently. Dracula was so caught up in watching them that he
nearly missed how close Alucard had gotten.

By the time he looked up, Alucard was pushing him down onto the couch and straddling him.

“So demanding today,” Dracula purred, pleased to be manhandled by his usually reticent son. “Do
you want me to open up a vein, or would you prefer to do it yourself today?”

He put his hands on those slim hips and reveled in the feeling of Alucard’s tall body shifting over
him. Alucard wasn’t shy about putting his weight on Dracula. That was all right, Dracula could
take it. He could take whatever Alucard dished out and more.

“I want to bite you,” Alucard said, his voice breathy. “I want to feel your flesh part beneath my
teeth.”

As he spoke, his eyes nearly glowed with hunger, as beautiful as shining gems. He ran his hands
down Dracula’s chest, slowly, scraping across the skin with his nails and leaving white trails in his
wake.

Dracula leaned back, resting his head on the back of the couch and let Alucard see all the flesh he
had available for biting.

“Do you want my neck or my chest?” With Dracula’s blood, it was never about the quantity of it.
Even one sip could be packed with enough power to burn lesser creatures to ashes. Alucard could
take his power though, could take it and subvert it, make it *his*.

He could see how Alucard’s fangs sharpened and grew, how he panted just a tiny bit through his
teeth.

“Both,” Alucard whispered. He clenched one hand into a fist, clearly trying to master himself.

Dracula laughed, sliding his hands higher, until they slipped under the open shirt and traced
Alucard’s muscular sides. He liked to feel the way the muscles flexed there, the way Alucard’s
ribs moved with every breath he took.

“Dinner is served,” Dracula murmured.

“I am so angry and…” Alucard shook his head a bit, and then went back to staring at Dracula’s
bared skin. “Afraid. And hungry. I am better controlled than this.”

“Afraid of what? Me?”

“Afraid that we would lose him. That I wouldn’t be enough.” Alucard dropped his gaze. “That his
death would mean I would lose you, too.”

“You won’t lose me,” Dracula promised. “I am immortal and I will be here for you always.”
“There are more ways to lose than just to Death’s grasp. You were lost to rage once. I would not, could not stand by to watch it happen again.” Now Alucard’s face twisted in pain, and each word came out like he was spitting knives, rough and low.

“I had nothing but rage then. Only eternal life and rage to carry me through it.” Dracula ached to comfort his son in some way, but comfort wasn’t something he was particularly good at. He struggled silently, trying to find the right words. “It’s different now.”

He grabbed ahold of Alucard’s hands and pressed them to his chest, over his heart. “Don’t think of could-have-beens and might-have-beens. Those are the terrors that haunt a foolish man, terrors that have not happened yet or did already. There’s no use torturing yourself over things you can not change or things that may never come to pass.”

Alucard nodded, dropping his eyes.

“Were you ever afraid of me?” Dracula asked, curious.

“No, but I was afraid of what being loved by you means.” Alucard pressed his hands right where Dracula’s heart beat strong and steady. Eternal. “You love without reason, without limits. It’s terrifying. It’s even more terrifying to bear responsibility for what that love may make you do.”

“You can not be held accountable for actions of other people,” Dracula rumbled. “Have I became so unpalatable, really?”

Alucard laughed, quiet and dry like autumn leaves.

“It’s not the demon part of you that loves like that. It’s the human.” Alucard shifted, meeting Dracula’s eyes. “It’s always been the human part of you, hasn’t it?” Alucard closed his eyes. His weight was heavy on Dracula’s legs. Solid. Real. “It took me a long time to realize this.”

“I don’t know any other way to love,” Dracula said. He lifted his hand high enough to tangle the fingers into Alucard’s messy hair.

“It is part of your charm. Your passion is as powerful and alluring as as it is terrifying.” Alucard leaned forward and slid his hands up to hold onto Dracula’s shoulders.

“Charm, you say.” An edge of a laugh still rumbled in Dracula’s throat as he pulled Alucard lower by the grip he had on his hair. “Drink from me.” Dracula stretched his neck again, offering it. “Take what you need from me.”

“Yes,” Alucard said, his voice low and rough. He didn’t hesitate like he usually did. Nor was he gentle. He laced one hand through Dracula’s hair and bit down on his neck, fierce and powerful.

Dracula hissed at the sensation of fangs going in, breaking through skin and muscle to reach a vein. The pain wasn’t an issue; he could deal with much more of it effortlessly. But the sensation of it…it was so much. There was the burn of satisfaction spreading through his body, welling up from the knowledge that it was his blood Alucard needed. That Dracula’s presence was both helpful and desired at the same time.

The moment Alucard’s fangs broke the skin, a rush of desire spread over Dracula’s body, fighting for dominion over the satisfaction. It burned like a wave of molten lava filling his veins, raising his lust and his hunger. He wanted. He wanted everything. Wanted Alucard to bite deeper, drink more. Wanted to turn them over and fuck Alucard while he drank. Wanted to bite him and drink from him too, to feel what Alucard felt in that moment and experience everything his son was.
He limited himself to urging Alucard on, pressing Alucard’s head harder to the bite. Dracula’s cock was hard already, tightly pinned inside the fabric of his slacks, and he pressed that against Alucard too, letting him feel how he affected Dracula.

Alucard made a hungry little whine, and bit again, harder and messier this time. He worried the wound into opening further and drank greedily, making Dracula hiss at the sensation. The pain-pleasure of it and the pull on his power. Dracula thrust up again and there was Alucard’s hand, pressing against his trapped cock, rubbing him harshly in time with his greedy swallows.

Feeling his normally careful and cautious son lose control was as heady as any drug.

“Yes,” Dracula urged. “Take it. Take as much as you want.”

He tilted his head back further, giving Alucard space to bite again and again. Hungry little growls escaped Alucard’s mouth as he all but savaged Dracula’s neck.

It felt so good.

The power exchange. The way he could feel Alucard drawing on him. The desire and unheeded want. The hand on his cock, and Alucard’s scent all around him. Dracula loved every moment of it.

It took everything he had to hold himself still, to let Alucard take it all. The rough hands and teeth on him drove him nearly out of his mind.

Alucard’s lips slid against his neck, over skin and blood, cool and smooth. It was just a soft rub, a quick little nuzzle before he bit in again, digging a ragged wound into the crook between Dracula’s neck and shoulder. The wound would bleed less there, but there was more meat to bite on, more flesh to really sink in those fangs into. He bit again, over and over, and a wild, untamed growl left him at each one.

In between bites, he sucked hard at the wounds, drinking in whatever blood he managed to spill. He pulled away from time to time just to lick the skin clean, before he sank his teeth somewhere else, penetrating as deep as he could.

Such attentions would be horrifically painful for a human, but Dracula reveled in the feeling of Alucard letting himself feed. The pull of blood and power was unbelievably pleasurable, and he was enjoying every second of it. Alucard’s hand rubbed harshly on Dracula’s cock in time with his drinking, bringing him pleasure and that much closer to orgasm.

The frenzy wasn’t sustainable, though, no matter how much Dracula delighted in Alucard’s heedless chase after what he wanted. Far, far sooner than Dracula wanted, Alucard’s drinking slowed and the hand on his cock gentled. The fangs drew out of Dracula’s neck, but rather than licking around the already healing wounds, Alucard just rested his forehead on Dracula’s shoulder and panted. Each breath was harsh and heavy, tickling against the wet skin there.

Dracula knew that Alucard must have been exhausted. Holding any spell for an extended period of time was impressive, but Alucard must have kept his spell on Geralt going for hours on end.

They’d have time later for a continuation, if Alucard wanted it. For the moment, Dracula ran his hands over Alucard’s body. Up and down his back, over his hip, offering him the touch he knew his son would crave. Despite the lack of release, Dracula couldn’t be more pleased. It was so rare that Alucard took what he needed, and Dracula was happy to provide.

He reached down, slipping his fingers into the front of Alucard’s pants. Dracula could feel how hard Alucard was, and noted the way he twitched his hips forward ever so slightly in time with his
Dracula turned his head to brush his lips against Alucard’s ear. “Shall I finish you off?” he whispered. “Take your hot, needy cock in my hand. You’re so close already. I could make you come all over my hand and stomach, get your scent on me, and then lick it off my fingers.”

The low, needy groan was answer enough, and the shudder that ran through Alucard’s body was an added bonus. It only took a moment to work open his belt and pants, and then Dracula was easing his slacks down. Not too far. Just enough that Alucard’s heavy cock sprung free from the well fitted clothing it had been trapped in.

It was heaven to wrap his hand around that pulsing length. To feel the smooth, soft skin under his hand. He knew it would be a bit of an abrasive slide. There was no slick to ease the way and Dracula’s hands were those of a fighter, callused and rough. But he also knew how much Alucard liked that little bit of pain mixed in.

Every time he stroked his thumb over the glans, the sword callus there caught right on the leaking slit, and Alucard jerked in place. He huddled over Dracula. One hand was still clutched tightly in Dracula’s hair, but the other dug into Dracula’s shoulder, kneading into the flesh with every stroke. His hair fell over them both, wild and full, shielding Alucard’s face from view. But Dracula could feel how those light breaths on his neck got stronger. He could hear each tiny, little wrecked moan, every soft whine, as Alucard’s cock twitched hard in his hand. The scent of his own blood mixed in with Alucard’s unique smell of frost and fur, and Dracula drank it in.

“That’s right,” Dracula said, coaxing the pleasure out of him. “Let go. Give it to me.”

He sped up his hand, and Alucard bit down again on Dracula’s shoulder. This time he didn’t break the skin, though. He just used the flesh there as a method to stifle his own moans as he trembled and jerked in place.

“Come for me.”

The bite on his shoulder deepened for a moment as Alucard’s body locked up, his cock spurting come all over Dracula’s stomach and chest. He let out a low, almost pained sigh as Dracula worked him through it, wringing every last drop out of his cock.

When he finally came to a shuddering stop, Dracula just held him. He loved how Alucard’s cock twitched in his hand. Loved the heat of it, the softness of the skin, the life of it. If he kept working him, relishing the softness of the skin, Dracula knew he could get Alucard hard again in almost no time at all. He could feel the potential in how shuddery Alucard’s breathing was, in how his hips twitched and flexed at every little touch. But that wasn’t what was needed here.

Alucard had needed to feed. More than that, he needed relief. A safe outlet for his frustrations. Now that this was done, Dracula could see the exhaustion starting to weigh on him again.

Before Alucard could slide right down into all the come that was now spread across Dracula’s chest, Dracula eased him over onto his side on the couch. Those lovely, blown golden eyes watched him beneath a veil of white hair. Alucard’s lips were stained red with blood and his cheeks held a healthy pink glow.

With loose, uncoordinated arms, Alucard held on to Dracula, trying to urge him closer so they could press their bodies together.

“I need to clean up first,” Dracula said, unable to stop himself from teasing just a little bit.
A pleased smile stretched across Dracula’s face as he brought his hand up to his mouth and licked Alucard’s release off of his palm and fingers. Savoring it. He loved the way Alucard tasted, his blood, his come, the sweat on his skin. Once his hand was clean, he wiped up the come off of his chest and licked that off, too. He swallowed it all down, pleased in the knowledge that Alucard’s scent would still be on him for a while, even after he’d licked the mess clean.

The whole while he kept his eyes locked with Alucard’s. The way the breath caught in Alucard’s lungs, the way his heart pounded in the quiet of the room, and the way his eyes followed Dracula’s tongue, it all served to light that vicious fire of satisfaction deep inside Dracula. Driving his son to weakness with pleasure was one of Dracula’s favorite activities.

By the time he was done wiping up every last drop of come and licking it clean, he knew the wounds on his neck were fully healed, too. There probably wasn’t much blood left on them; Alucard had been too thorough with his licking and sucking. It was almost a pity. He liked that Alucard had bitten so deeply into him, and drank so heavily. He would have loved to bear some marks to prove it.

“Almost done,” he rumbled quietly, and then leaned down to take Alucard’s soft cock into his mouth. Alucard arched up under him, and stifled a gasp as Dracula quickly sucked it clean. It was so warm and slick in his mouth, and there was a terrible rush of power from knowing that Alucard allowed Dracula to do this. To let Dracula use his mouth, which could so easily rend and tear, on his sensitive flesh.

One, then two full swallows up and down that vulnerable length were enough to get the last traces of come off of it. That brief action wasn’t nearly enough to get Alucard hard again, but it was enough to make him writhe in pleasure for a moment. His hands dug into Dracula’s shoulders, and his breath came out in wet little gasps.

Dracula pulled up and carefully tucked Alucard back into his slacks, zipped them up, and buckled the belt over it.

“Good as new.” Dracula hummed in satisfaction, and pulled Alucard close.

He arranged them so that Alucard was curled up in his lap. It was tempting to just lay them both down, but Dracula couldn’t escape the nagging need to keep Geralt in sight. That meant that Dracula at least had to be sitting upright.

Alucard burrowed into Dracula’s warmth, with his arms curled around Dracula’s body and mouth at Dracula’s neck. But instead of the happy little sounds he usually made post-feeding, Alucard trembled in place. A small, breathy whine escaped him, and Dracula held him tighter.

Feeding on Dracula’s powerful blood got Alucard higher than a kite. It made him sleepy and cuddly, seeking out more warmth and the comfort of close touch. But the events of the day clearly had left Alucard still distressed, despite those effects.

Dracula urged him closer, tucking Alucard’s head under his chin and trying to wrap his shirt around Alucard’s body as much as possible. His coat would have been better for the job, but he couldn’t deny Geralt the comfort of it.

As Alucard slowly quieted next to him and drifted off to sleep, Dracula brooded.

It was difficult to see Geralt so injured. Rage still roiled inside of Dracula, banked for the moment, but ever-present. He tried to remind himself that Geralt would live and that was what was important. But he couldn’t help but save up cold fury for whoever was truly responsible for this.
The immediate perpetrators had been punished, but soon enough he’d know who was giving the orders.

Soon enough there would be another round of death and burning.

Until then, Dracula could wait. It was easier now that he knew Geralt would live. That he would remain human and unchanged. For all Dracula’s promises to change Geralt into a vampire should he die, that wasn’t something he was eager to actually do. He didn’t want Geralt to change. Becoming a demon could kill the love and the goodness in Geralt and Dracula didn’t want that to happen, ever.

It was easier still to rest, to wait, when he could see Geralt in front of him, and with Alucard wrapped around him. Their scents mingled in the room; Dracula’s own fire and darkness mixed with Alucard’s frost and fur scent and Geralt’s herbal and silver taste. Layered over it was the scent of Geralt’s pain and all the medicines they’d used on his wounds. That pain made Dracula want to bare his teeth. It set something on edge inside of him. Still. It was enough that the three of them were together.

A few hours passed as Dracula watched over them. He could hear the occasional nurse try to get into the room, but Alucard’s servants sent them away.

They were good servants; Dracula would have to remember that.

Eventually, Geralt’s breathing picked up and his eyes fluttered a bit. He would wake soon. Alucard was still deeply asleep, though. He’d taxed himself a great deal already, so Dracula was loath to wake him up.

Slowly, he eased Alucard around to lay on the couch. Dracula spied his own suit jacket, and lay it over him, hoping that the scent of it would soothe him as the scent on his armored coat had soothed Geralt.

Whatever blood was left on his neck, he reabsorbed into his skin. After all the work Alucard had done securing his identity here, it would be a shame to ruin it with some casual bloodstains.

With those matters all settled, he headed over to the door. It was time to scare up a doctor. Perhaps get Geralt’s bandages changed. From the smell of them, it was time for them to be checked anyways.

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Matt stood guard outside Geralt’s room and was incredibly grateful that he’d had the forethought to take a sleep shift while Geralt was in surgery. He knew that, at least for his job, the more complicated stuff would happen once they were settled in a room. Doctors and nurses would be in and out at all hours. The longer they were in one place, the more reporters and other types of attention seekers would try to get in, too.

So personally keeping a close watch on Geralt’s door was something he still had energy for. It wasn’t that he didn’t trust his people to do it. It was that Belmont Sr. gave him the creepy crawlies, and he was particularly worried about his boss being alone with him.

He knew John felt the same way, although the younger man had long since given up the fight against sleep. Understandable, since he’d been running around non stop since this whole affair started. Rather than taking one of the extra beds on the floor, John had simply pulled up a chair next to where Matt stood outside the door, curled up with a pillow, and passed out.
While he waited, Matt couldn’t help but run through different scenarios in his head. What if’s. It paid to be prepared, after all. But now ideas he previously thought of as outlandish and impossible flooded his brain, and he suddenly found himself making contingency plans just to keep calm and occupied.

There wasn’t much he could do if any low-key abuse was happening. Belmont Sr. clearly had been getting away with whatever he was doing for a long, long time, and as long as Trevor put up with it, there was nothing to do. If there were visible wounds, or something happened in front of him, Matt could bring it up to his boss. Escape routes and safe house locations ran through his head. That would be a harder route to follow through with and he considered it pretty unlikely scenario in general, but it made him feel better to think about all of his options.

Then there was the stuff John had insinuated. What did Ciri and Geralt use their swords for? Infected? Other types of monsters? Did other types of monsters even exist? Legend said they did, but Matt had always looked at that with a certain amount of rational scepticism. Was that something that Matt would have to prepare for now?

The door opened behind him with enough violence to make him jump and spin around. As soon as he caught sight of who was in the doorway his heart skipped a beat. It was Belmont Sr., looking much different from when Matt had last seen him. His coat and suit jacket had been discarded and his black shirt was hanging open exposing a pale and very fit chest. A quick glance at the muscle definition told Matt it was a fighter’s body rather than the product of gym time. Belmont Sr.’s eyes seemed more red in the light, almost glowing as he locked his eyes on Matt.

“Get a doctor,” he ordered.

Matt’s heart slammed in his chest and he felt the blood drain out of his face. Suddenly all those wildly unrealistic worst case scenarios didn’t seem so far fetched.

“Nurse,” Matt called off to the side. The medical staff had been hovering around since the last check up he’d brushed off. Waiting to be let in with great displeasure. “Call up the doctor.”

The nurse hurried over to the nurse’s station and got on the phone. Two others came over immediately, clearly expecting to be let in.

Matt never took his eyes off of Belmont Senior. It was always a bad idea to take eyes off of the most dangerous person in the room, and right that moment, Matt had no illusions on who that was. “What’s wrong?”

Belmont Sr. raised his eyebrows slightly, clearly reading Matt with more ease than Matt was strictly comfortable with.

“Geralt is stirring. Looks like he’s going to wake up any moment.” The voice was low and a little raspy. The accent intrigued Matt again, mostly because he couldn’t for the life of him place it and he was good with languages.

A rush of relief went through Matt, though he tried very hard not to show it. He nudged John awake. No doubt the boss would want him to keep track of things.

The nurses hovered awkwardly at the door, both clearly itching to get to work. “May we come in?” one finally asked.

Belmont Sr. stepped back and away, heading into the room once again and leaving the door open behind him.
Matt noted how Belmont Sr. didn’t seem bothered by being bare chested in front of so many people, not did he seem react in any way to the few interested glances he got from the nurses passing him by. Maybe it was really warm where he normally lived, and so an open shirt was more common than here.

That didn’t seem likely.

By the time the nurses had filed in, John had shaken himself awake and was straightening up his tie. They shared a quick look, and then both headed in.

What Matt saw when he walked in made his eyes go wide with surprise. Bits of clothes were strewn all across the room and Belmont Sr.’s ostentatious armored red coat was draped across Geralt. Trevor’s suit jacket and tie were tossed across one of the tables.

Trevor himself lay down on the couch, cuddled up inside of Belmont Sr.’s suit jacket. He was curled on his side, and his shirt was obviously open under the black jacket spread over him. Matt could just barely see the edge of some kind of scarring on his chest. From the look of his position, it was clear that he hadn’t been sitting on that couch alone, either.

Matt almost disregarded the odd casualness of the scene. Okay, so it was sort of weird that both father and son somehow ended up with their shirts unbuttoned, but maybe there was some cultural thing that Matt was missing here. And it wasn’t that surprising that Trevor was asleep on the couch. He’d been up for probably more than twenty-four hours dealing with the whole mess.

Then Matt noticed that there was just a touch of red on Trevor’s lips.

Blood. It had to be. There was food in the room, but nothing that would have stained Trevor’s lips so red, or he didn’t think so, anyways. Trevor never carried candy sweets with him, nothing that would stain his lips. Besides, Matt had seen enough men cough up their own blood that he knew what it looked like when a bit stained the lips.

A myriad of possibilities raced through Matt’s head. Was his boss sick? Seemed possible, what with the lack of eating. He didn’t know enough about diseases to know what might cause such a thing.

What seemed more likely was that Belmont Sr. had a fit of temper and knocked his son around a bit. It was easy to split a lip on a tooth. If hit right, the bruising wouldn’t even really show. A knock to the head wouldn’t even show if the wound was under a mane of hair like Trevor had. Maybe that was why Trevor kept it so long. Habit.

Matt made an instinctive step towards his boss, driven by the need to make sure his charge was okay. He didn’t get farther than a step when a sharp command stopped him in his tracks.

"Don’t touch him," Belmont Sr. was looking at Matt again. The words cut through the quiet muttering of the nurses and they all froze to stare at him.

His attention was a heavy thing. The focus of it was sharp enough that Matt could feel the small hairs at the back of his neck raise up under the scrutiny.

Once the medical staff realized Belmont Sr. wasn’t even looking at them, they hesitantly resumed their actions. One nurse worked on replacing the fluid bags while another started checking vital signs.

Matt swallowed, and took a step back. He wanted to go look at Trevor to see if there was anything he could do. But something in the back of his brain was screaming at him to not take his eyes off
of Belmont Sr.. There was such controlled menace in that gaze, almost like a rattlesnake coiled and ready to strike, that it made him want to check his weapons.

He didn’t do anything of the sort. That would have been both massively unprofessional and an incredibly bad idea. It was never a good plan to let someone know that they’d gotten under the skin. Better to be as calm and collected as possible, and wait for his opportunity to act.

Movement over on the bed distracted him. One of the nurses had a hand on that armored coat, trying to pull it off, Matt assumed. But Geralt had made a grab for it, holding it tight to his chest.

“No,” Geralt mumbled, his eyes barely cracked open. Sure enough, they were brilliant yellow, though Matt couldn’t quite see enough of them to see if they really were vertical pupil like a cat’s. Given how weird Trevor’s eyes were, he had to assume they were, just as Ciri had said.

The doctors must have been having a field day with that little bit of biology. Then there was the fact that even half-conscious and three-quarters dead, even two nurses were unable to pry the coat away from him. He seemed stronger than both of them and Matt could see from where he was standing that Geralt wasn’t putting that much effort into holding on.

Belmont Sr. sighed and went to the bed.

“Geralt,” he said in that dark voice of his.

“Hmm?” Geralt blinked up at him.

“Give me back my coat.” Belmont Sr. reached to take the item. Matt wondered how heavy it was, with all the metal added to it.

A little bit more clarity came to Geralt’s eyes, and he let go of his hold. With that clarity came the obvious stubbornness, based on the look on his face. Geralt blinked again and deflated a little.

“Smells nice.” Then he paused, and took an obvious sniff. The look he gave Belmont Sr. was almost petulant, his eyes wide and betrayed. “You couldn’t even wait for me to be awake to watch?”

“ Mostly dead things don’t do it for me,” Belmont Sr. said flatly.

What the fuck he was talking about, Matt had no idea. But apparently that response made sense to Geralt, because he huffed out a short laugh, and then winced hard.

“Three-quarters dead at most,” Geralt said petulantly, but he was letting the nurses start cutting the gauze off of his wounds to expose the extensive stitching that seemed to cover most of his chest and belly, as well as arms. Basically everything that Matt could see was cut into, one way or the other. Damn, that man looked like a collection of badly matched patches on a quilt rather than a human, what with all the post surgery bruising showing up already.

Geralt didn’t even bother watching them work. He just looked up to Belmont Sr..

“I’m glad to see you,” he said quietly, his voice rough and low.

There was a hell of a lot packed into that phrase, and Matt caught himself sharing a sideways glance with John.

“I’m glad you are alive,” Belmont Sr. said, his voice going shockingly soft.

Geralt reached up for him, though his hand shook. He didn’t lift it far, though. Honestly, Matt was
damn surprised he could move at all. There were a hell of a lot of removable splints on him, including one on his arm. Before his hand could fall back to the bed, Belmont Sr. had taken hold of it, cradling it in his own.

“We need to call in a doctor,” one of the nurses said after examining the stitches. “I don’t know how it’s possible but the skin is already starting to grow in around some of the stitches. They need to be removed already.”

Now Geralt finally looked down at his arms and chest. He grimaced a little. “Ug. This is why I never use stitches. Pain in the ass to cut them all out again.”

“You never use bandages, either,” Belmont Sr. said with mild irritation. “You usually don’t need them. And then you end up with a completely new set of scars we have to get rid of.” He paused. “Again.”

“I don’t know what you have against my scars. They are like a badge of honor on my skin,” Geralt said with mock offense.

“Only you are running out of skin to mark.” This seemed like an old argument, with both of them repeating the lines like it was familiar and well rehearsed.

The hell did this guy get into in his spare time if this was normal?

Even that little bit of banter seemed to wear Geralt out. He closed his eyes and sank a little into his pillow with a sigh. “Pain killer is kind of great. I don’t like how it makes my head feel, though. It’s harder to think. Seems like a lot of work for very little reward.”

“What’s a lot of work?” Belmont Sr. asked.

“Taking pain killer. Gods, the potency I’d have to make just to get it to work. And then I wouldn’t even be able to fight afterwards. Easier just to deal with the pain and keep going.”

If Matt wasn’t concerned before, he really was now. All the injuries they were hinting at and still this guy would just keep going? Sure, there were times in a fight where adrenaline got a man through, and then only later he realized he was walking on broken legs. But this…this sounded a lot more long term than that. Like Geralt would regularly just shrug off massive injury and go about his day.

“I kind of like that it’s keeping you down for the count,” Belmont Sr. said ruthlessly. “I don’t have to rely on you staying in bed and behaving nicely. Knocking you out seems so much more efficient.”

Geralt’s lips quirked up into a smile.

Before he could answer, though, one of the doctors came in. Dr. Miller, the head surgeon in charge of Geralt’s case.

“Good morning, Geralt,” Dr. Miller said, and immediately went over to take a look at what the nurses were doing. “I’m both surprised and completely unsurprised that you’re awake already. How are you feeling?”

“Fuzzy in the head. I’m not sure I like the pain killers.” Geralt opened his eyes to look blearily at the doctor.

“We can cut them down a little bit, if you really want, but I’d advise you to keep on the most
effective dose. Mr. Belmont was correct in saying that you’ll heal better if you aren’t stressing out
your body with pain.” The doctor looked around the room, seeming to notice Belmont Sr., Matt,
and John. He frowned. “You,” he pointed to John, “I know are allowed to stay here while we
discuss matters with our patient. The rest of you I don’t know.” He looked to Geralt, eyebrow
raised. “You want them out or in?”

Geralt pressed his lips together, holding back a grin, and glanced up to Belmont Sr. “He can stay.
The other one…”

The look he leveled at Matt was far more intense than what a nearly dead guy should have been
able to dish out. Matt could see Geralt noticing his build, his relaxed but prepared stance, and every
place he was hiding a weapon. If Matt wasn’t convinced before that this guy was an experienced
fighter, he was now.

“Guard, huh,” Geralt said. “Trevor’s. You just a grunt, or are you in charge?”

“Mr. Snow is Mr. Belmont’s head of security,” John interjected. “He and I have similar levels of
information clearance.”

“I always hated bodyguarding gigs,” Geralt sighed. “Boring, and it’s always for some rich asshole
who probably deserves to get punched in the face.”

Matt held back a snort of amusement, because yeah, that was often the case. He did smirk though.
John was right, there really was a resemblance between Geralt and Ciri. The ballsy irreverence was
unmistakable. “I’m lucky to be in the employ of someone as sensible and even tempered as Mr.
Belmont.”

“Stay,” Geralt said with a tiny tilt of his head. “Just take a seat. The looming is annoying. I keep
wanting to go for my knives, and then remembering that I don’t have them. Which, speaking of…”
He looked up hopefully to Belmont Sr.

“But only one,” Belmont Sr. sighed and flicked his wrist, producing a dark, matte throwing blade
he passed to Geralt like it was as normal as passing a handkerchief. Where the fuck he even pulled
that out of, Matt had no damn idea. He would have been willing to swear that Belmont Sr. was
unarmed up to that point. “There’s so many tubes connected to you. I don’t want you cutting some
of them by accident.”

“Is that one of yours?” Geralt asked, looking the small blade over and turning it over. His fingers
were still shaky, but Matt could see he wanted to play with the blade. Suddenly, Matt thought of
Ciri, and the small mountain of daggers she had on her.

Also, that was sort of an odd question. Because if the blade wasn’t Belmont Sr.’s, what was he
doing with it anyways?

“Yes,” Belmont Sr. said. Then he frowned. “I don’t think I’ve ever given one to anyone before.”
Geralt looked honestly a little misty eyed over that statement, and he held the blade a little tighter.

“Not even…Trevor?”

“He has his own.” Belmont Sr. looked at where his son lay sleeping. “He never needed anything of
mine.”

In all the time Matt had been guarding Trevor, he’d never once seen him with a weapon. Then
again, he hadn’t noticed any weapons on Belmont Sr., either, so maybe that wasn’t a good metric.
He glanced over to John and noticed how hard the man was thinking. Matt could practically see the wheels turning. He wondered if he was going to be questioned about combat crosses and other ancient weapons again.

“...Right,” Dr. Miller said cautiously. “Normally we don’t allow weapons in the hospital---” Both Geralt and Belmont Sr. looked at him with a completely unimpressed glare. “---But you know what, as long as no one gets stabbed, sure. Don’t tell the hospital director.”

“We won’t,” Geralt promised solemnly. Belmont Sr. didn’t bother with any promises.

Suddenly Belmont Sr. turned his head away from Geralt, towards where his son lay sleeping and frowned. Matt turned to look too and saw his boss stir, his nose wrinkling.

“Sleep,” Belmont Sr. said in a voice that Matt could swear echoed.

A cold shiver ran down Matt’s back and he whipped around to stare at the older man. But Belmont Sr. wasn’t doing anything. He was just staring at where his son slept. After a beat, Matt turned to look that way again and noted that Trevor seemed to have fallen back asleep, ignoring the people around him completely.

There was a long pause as everyone watched the exchange with varying degrees of alarm. All except Geralt, who just seemed amused.

“Mr. Belmont had a very long day yesterday.” Dr. Miller said finally. It was clear he was just grasping at straws, because that was obviously fucking weird. “He probably needs the rest.”

“He does,” Belmont Sr. confirmed in a commanding voice, as if his son getting any rest or not was dependant on him in any way.

“Nurse, if you would help me with these stitches?” Dr. Miller grabbed a small pair of scissors from a tray and then turned back to Geralt. “Geralt, we’re going to snip off some of these smaller ones, then we’re going to give you a quick clean up. Your wounds all look amazingly good, given that you were bleeding out yesterday. Not even a hint of infection, though the bruising and some swelling is normal...if much farther advanced than expected. After that, I’d like to get you taken over for x-rays so we can get a look at how those breaks are healing.”

Geralt looked to Belmont Sr. at the last part. Strangely, Belmont Sr. just shrugged and shook his head.

“...Sure.” Geralt said eventually. “You can do everything Trevor approved,” he added after a moment of thought.

“I’ve got a list of things that Mr. Belmont had concerns about,” John said, stepping forward. “I can help coordinate that with you.”

For a wild second there, Matt thought that Geralt didn’t know what an x-ray was, but that was impossible so he pushed that thought out of his mind.

Matt settled in to a chair along the wall, mindful of Geralt’s request, and the nurses and the doctor spent the next half hour picking out stitches and washing out the wounds. It wasn’t Matt’s preferred place to stand watch; he didn’t have eyes on the door. Belmont Sr. had already shown a preference for the best position for that and there was no way in hell Matt was going to bring attention to himself by sitting there. At least where he sat now gave him a good view of the bed and both Belmonts.
The quiet sound of multitudes of small stitches being cut quickly filled the room. One of the nurses carefully snipped the stitches and the doctor followed behind her with a pair of pincers, tugging them out one by one. The second nurse followed after him with antibiotic gel. Matt winced, knowing from experience how unpleasant that was. Geralt kept twitching at every tug, his face twisting into strange expressions.

“This feels…” Geralt started but trailed off, seemingly unable to categorize the sensations. Matt sympathised so hard. It wasn’t exactly pain that was bad. Rather it was just the oddness of the tugging sensation that he himself hated about overdue stitches being removed.

“Hurts?” Belmont Sr. asked. Matt wondered if the man ever had any type of surgery before.

“No,” Geralt sighed. “I wish it hurt though, would be easier to deal with.”

Belmont Sr. just hummed at him, and rubbed a thumb across his knuckles.

Then Matt remembered what Ciri said. “Your daughter told me you play cards. Once you’re feeling a little better we could pass some time that way. I can arrange the watch details so I’m free.”

“Anything to take my mind off having to lay in this bed! Yes! Please,” Geralt said with a desperate kind of eagerness. “Though it’s not a proper card game without some liquor.”

“No,” Belmont Sr. and Dr. Miller said at the same time. They looked at each other for a moment in mild surprise.

“You are on an awful lot of painkiller, and we just sewed up your liver yesterday,” Dr. Miller continued. “I know you mentioned you wanted solid food, but even that is pushing it.”

“Liquor makes painkiller work better, from what I understand.” Geralt narrowed his eyes a bit, as if reconciling facts in his head.

“No,” the doctor said. “It affects your body and internal organs, as well as your brain. It is true that alcohol has some effect on experiencing pain, but the damage it does to your organs is not worth the slight increase in pain resistance. And you have to pay for it the next day. You know why? Because it’s poison. So what you people call a ‘hangover’ is nothing else than the result of your body being poisoned and fighting off the side effects long after the dubious positive effects have passed.”

To that, Geralt only grinned. “I poison myself professionally. I’m built to take it.”

“Alcohol also kills off your brain cells, making you lose your mental capability bit by bit.”

“…Have you been talking to my daughter? Maybe some former lovers?” Geralt narrowed his eyes at the doctor, but Matt could see just a hint of smile at his lips.

Good God, this guy was made to start trouble.

“I don’t drink on the job anyways,” Matt said, before either the doctor or Belmont Sr. started to contemplate strangling the man they’d tried so hard to save.

“Wise choice,” Geralt said evenly, settling his head back down. “Fighting drunk is a fun trick, but not one I generally like to repeat.”

It didn’t take very long for the doctor and nurses to finish with the stitches and rebandage Geralt
back up. They unhooked him from the surrounding machines and fastened the various IV bags to his bed.

“This floor has its own x-ray room,” Dr. Miller said. “We’ll take you down there for a few quick shots, and then bring you right back.”

Belmont Sr. frowned and looked at his sleeping son, and then back to Geralt.

“Matt,” he said unexpectedly. “You will accompany Geralt.”

Matt looked at his sleeping boss. He didn’t feel like leaving him alone in such a vulnerable state.

“I will stay with my son,” Belmont Sr. said. “You have to keep an eye on Geralt.”

“Hey!” Geralt protested mildly from the bed.

Belmont Sr. transferred his gaze to the wounded man.

“All you need to find trouble is to breathe,” he hissed. “I’m not letting you out of my sight without protection.” He looked at Matt again. His eyes almost burned with the weight of his gaze. “Matt here seems professional enough. And aware of what the possible consequences of failure might be.”

Yeah, Matt knew. Everything about Belmont Sr. screamed that he took care of his own problems. 

He nodded at Belmont Sr. and followed Geralt’s bed out of the room. Matt did notice that John stayed behind. Even though he knew that John would have a snowflake’s chance in hell of doing anything against the kind of trained fighter that Belmont Sr. obviously was, it still settled something in him to know they weren’t leaving Trevor totally alone.

The x-ray went remarkably quickly. Despite all the bluster and shit talking that Geralt did, he didn’t seem interested in actually making much of a fuss. He did side-eye the x-ray machines pretty hard, and also flat refused to set aside his knife. Dr. Miller tried to look at Matt for support in getting him to drop it, but Matt just shook his head. That was a lost cause.

Strangely enough, the knife didn’t block any part of the image during the x-ray itself. Matt had no idea what it was made of, but it didn’t show up at all. It wasn’t metal. Hell, regardless of that, its density should have shown on the images. But it didn’t. It was like Geralt was holding nothing. Matt had a moment of fierce professional jealousy. If Belmont Sr. was a more approachable man, he probably would have asked about the blade and what it was made of, but in light of his character, decided to keep quiet.

Just like the doctor promised, the x-ray room was just a few doors down from where Geralt and the Belmonts were located, so getting him there and back went quick. Matt took the opportunity to get a quick look at his people stationed along the corridor and mark who changed shifts. He preferred that his people change one by one, staggered through a shift, instead of the whole team being changed at once. While it did mean that people were constantly rotating in and out, he liked that there was always at least half the team that knew the current situation.

When they got back to the room, it was to the sight of his boss still asleep on the couch, now cuddled up against Belmont Sr.. Trevor shifted in his sleep. His head rested easily on his father’s shoulder and his hair fell over them both to spread over Belmont Sr.’s pale, muscular chest.

There was a sense of intimacy about the pose that made Matt uncomfortable. It wasn’t the normal
parent-child kind of intimacy; there was a vibe that set all the alarm bells ringing in his head. He looked over at John, who was sitting quietly in the chair farthest away from the couch. The aide gave him a wide eyed look in return.

One of the nurses fumbled when Geralt’s bed passed the door. Geralt himself was already dozing, his energy spent. The door squeaked and thumped hard as it closed with much more force than necessary. Geralt woke with a start at the noise of it slamming, and eyes snapped open in alarm. His hand closed around the throwing blade, hiding it in his palm.

The sound also made Trevor startle awake and he straightened up with a jerk. He ducked his head just a little, letting his hair hang forward and hiding most of his face and his eyes. John sprang up, probably remembering that Trevor took off his contacts and hadn’t yet put them on again.

Matt noted the movement, but his attention was focused on something else entirely. He was already aware that Belmont Sr. was a trained fighter. That man all but flaunted his physical power. What shocked him was Trevor.

When Trevor moved upright, the jacket covering him slipped, exposing his naked chest and the huge fucking scar bisecting him from nearly shoulder to hip. That and the musculature on him. The tight, rigid muscles of his abdomen and wide, hard chest were clear signs of a seriously trained fighter. His build was different than his father’s. While he seemed to be built for speed and reach, his father was thick like a brawler. Both were impressive in their own way.

Trevor did not curse, but the indrawn breath was enough to express his shock at noticing so many people on the room, most of them staring at his chest. Were they staring at the musculature or the scar from an obviously hideous wound, Matt had no idea.

His boss lowered his head, and his hair fell forward even more. It hid the last trace of his face as he started buttoning up his shirt with nimble fingers.

John was soon between Trevor and the rest of the room, standing so close their knees nearly touched. The aide flailed about for a bit, probably making sure he hid as much of his boss' body as he could.

“Welcome back, sir. We let you rest on your father’s insistence.” John managed to produce a pair of sunglasses and passed them to Belmont while still standing very close. “You have been on your feet for so long, you could use some more rest actually.”

Long, pale fingers took the sunglasses from John and Trevor slid them on before pushing his hair away from his face.

John reached into his pockets again and pulled out a fistful of scrunchies and hairpins, offering them to Trevor next.

That pulled a smirk from Trevor’s lips and he picked a thick, blue scrunchie from the selection offered. He reached back and quickly twisted his hair up into a messy bun with the hair tie to hold it in place.

“You could have woken me up earlier,” Trevor said quietly, clearly speaking to his father as he got up and went about straightening his clothes. The sunglasses looked good on him. Definitely more designer than the stuff John himself wore. They were clearly meant for Trevor from the get go. Matt had to wonder what else John had in his pockets.

“You minion is telling the truth. You needed the rest and I told them not to wake you,” Belmont Sr.
said.

Matt blinked.

**Minion?**

“Just because you are a barbarian, doesn’t mean you have to act like one towards my people.” Trevor sighed, going to get his discarded suit jacket back.

“I have been on my best behavior,” Belmont defended. Then he looked at Matt, his gaze heavy and terrifying. “Haven’t I?”

Geralt snorted softly, and then winced. The nurses around him busily hooked him back up to the various machines, checked the fluid bags, and made their way out of the room.

“Terrifying them into confirming your good behavior? Now I know why Eskel was so insistent on telling me you were being good that time you all got kidnapped.”

Matt straightened up. “Who got kidnapped?”

“Well, Eskel got kidnapped and this man here,” Geralt pointed a shaking finger at Belmont, “decided it was great jolly fun to be kidnapped too, so he went with the kidnappers as well.” Geralt sounded increasingly irritated. “For fun!”

“I made it worth your while, didn’t I?” Belmont asked with raised eyebrows.

Geralt was quiet for a little while.

“Yeah.” Geralt’s voice was a bit rougher, probably from the exhaustion and sleep. “Yeah, you did.”

Matt put his hands behind his back and spread his legs to make sure he was in parade rest position. He needed to make sure he wouldn’t rub his hands over his face and betray his thoughts.

Suddenly he was very, very glad he wasn’t Belmont Sr.’s head of security because he would have probably gone grey if his charge decided it was *fun* to get kidnapped.

“How are you feeling?” Trevor asked. He was beside Geralt’s bed now, bending over him.

“I’m fine,” Geralt said dismissively, trying to lift his arm again. Trevor didn’t let him though. He caught Geralt’s arm and pressed it down. “You look better.”

“Don’t try distracting me with compliments,” Trevor said. “You should be asleep. You will aggravate your wounds if you keep moving around so much.”

“I know.” Geralt sighed. With each blink his eyelids stayed closed longer and longer. “I’m tired.”

“Sleep then,” Trevor said, his voice quiet. “Let your body rest and heal.”

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“Sleep then,” Trevor said, his voice quiet. “Let your body rest and heal.”

“Can’t. This place stinks of sickness and suffering. Infection and chemicals.” Geralt wrinkled his nose. It looked like he was struggling to stay awake as it was; his eyelids hung low and he kept blinking the sleep away.

Matt couldn’t help but discreetly sniff the air. Sure, there was the obvious tang of filtered air, and hospitals always had a certain faint smell. He wouldn’t go so far as to say the place stank, though.
But Trevor just winced in sympathy, and Belmont Sr. stood up to go fetch his armored coat from
the chair he’d tossed it on earlier. Then he draped it over Geralt once more. As soon as the heavy
fabric lay over him, Geralt took a deep breath, and a soft smile touched his lips.

“Thank you,” he said quietly. Something about the way he said it made Matt think he was thankful
for more than just the coat. He tried to shift a bit, but Trevor stopped him, effortlessly holding him
down to the bed. “I just need it…yes, like that.” He sighed happily as Trevor tucked the heavy
armored collar up over Geralt’s shoulders.

Rather than falling right to sleep, Geralt cast an unreadable look at Trevor. Then he glanced over to
where Matt and John stood. Whatever he saw seemed to disappoint him. He sighed quietly, and
when he looked back to Belmont Sr., he said, “Would you bring your blue coat too, next time? It
smells different. I like scent of both around me.”

For some reason, Belmont Sr. didn’t seem like a blue kind of guy. Matt dismissed the thought.
Everyone had at least some variety in what they liked to wear.

“Of course,” Belmont Sr. rumbled back at him. “Rest now.”

Geralt nodded slightly, his eyes fluttering shut. Then he took a long, deep breath, and his heart rate
started to drop.

_Drastically._

Fucking hell, this guy was going to die right there.

A shrill ring sounded out from one of the machines next to him, and a nurse came rushing in. Matt
pulled John out of the way to let them through. Oddly, neither of the Belmonts seemed alarmed. In
fact, they both seemed mildly irritated at the machine and nurse.

Before the nurse could even get close to Geralt, Belmont Sr. stepped in front of her, blocking the
path.

“Silence your machine.” Each word was packed with menace and the nurse nearly stumbled over
herself to back away from him.

The nurse floundered for a moment. “Sir, please, you have to let me—”

At this point, Dr. Miller had rushed in as well, and ended up piling up behind the nurse.

“Geralt is fine,” Belmont Sr. said quietly, and with no little annoyance. “He has slowed his heart on
purpose to ease his rest. Silence the machine before it wakes him.”

The nurse just stood there and gaped at him, while Dr. Miller darted around to press a few buttons
on the heart monitor. The sound cut off, but it remained tracking the beat on the screen. Geralt’s
heart rate had slowed down to one beat every five seconds, and each one was punctuated by one
long, slow breath. In, beat, out, beat.

Silence reigned in the room as they all watched Geralt sleep.

“How?” Dr. Miller’s question was a soft whisper in the room.

“Training and skill.” Belmont Sr. sounded both approving and smug.

Dr. Miller just blinked at him, and then shook his head. “Sure. Why not. This is…normal, though,
right?”

“It is,” Trevor said.

“Right.” Dr. Miller sighed. “I have his x-ray results. It’s...basically exactly what we expected, given what you and he told us. He’s healing incredibly rapidly. His bones look like they were broken a week ago, not a day ago. The internal injuries, well. Those are trickier to diagnose, but if he was having issues I think we would have been seeing problems already. When he wakes, let a nurse know. We’d like to do some more checks.”

With that, he took himself out. As he left, he gave Matt a wide eyed exasperated look and then rubbed his face with his hands.

That feeling seemed to be happening a lot around here.

As soon as both the doctor and the nurse left, the Belmonts settled in as well. Belmont Sr. went back to rest on the couch. The only place in the room, Matt noticed, where he’d have sightlines to his son, Geralt, the door, and the windows.

Matt couldn’t help but wonder just what was it that Belmont Sr. did in his life that settled those habits so deeply. Was he a soldier before? A mercenary? The training seemed much more comprehensive than somebody without military experience could get.

Trevor pulled up a chair next to Geralt’s bed, and rested one hand on Geralt’s chest.

“John, Matt, report please,” Trevor said quietly, clearly trying to keep from disturbing Geralt.

John and Matt glanced at each other. At John’s nod, Matt spoke first. “Things are going smoothly here. Standard expected individuals trying to gain access. Hospital has been cooperative. No incidents.”

“That’s good to hear.” Trevor took off his sunglasses and rubbed his eyes. Then he looked over to John, and raised an eyebrow.

“I wish my news were as good.” John walked over to his briefcase and pulled out a tablet, quickly typing on it, and then handing it off to Trevor. “There’s been some leak of news about you entering the hospital, but nothing about why you’re here, and not a word about Geralt. There’s footage of the helicopter we took to get here, but nothing beyond that. The speculation has caused a drop in stock prices, but not a drastic one.”

“Hmmm. Unavoidable, but not totally unwelcome. Buy up additional shares. Keep an eye on the rest of the medical market. Find out who else is buying.” Trevor browsed through whatever figures that John had compiled.

“Are the Bernhards making any noises?” Trevor asked. It was a well known fact that the remaining members of that family did not take well to their corporation being bought out from under them.

“Publicly? All we’re getting from them is the standard trash talking on social media. Privately?” John pushed up the bridge of his glasses and frowned. “That’s harder to prove, but best we can tell they’re pushing. Rumor has it that backroom deals in three different manufacturing plants are in the works for this week, and they’ve suddenly decided to jump on a candidate for the mayoral race.”

“Tell whoever needs to hear it, that should a Bernhard win the office I will withdraw all funding from the city.”
John went a little pale, but nodded. Their boss’ dislike for the Bernhard family had long been apparent. Matt had been involved enough with various connections on the weapons scene that he knew what kind of warmongering they got involved in. For a long time, they made the best weapons there were. With the onset of the Outbreak, Bernhard Metals, LTD was one of the companies that Belmont managed to seize. The Bernhards, a family just as old and well known as the Belmonts, had not taken it well.

Given how ruthless that particular business could be, Matt was generally happy to just be in charge of Trevor’s personal security. Corporate espionage was a serious concern. There were rumors, too, of some rather nasty illegal weapons dealings. Weapons that didn’t go through official channels and products that no sane person would use. Matt tried to keep an eye on it, if only because he knew damn well that the Bernhards would use whatever they could to take out Trevor. Literally, probably.

“Bernhards are still giving you trouble?” Belmont Sr. asked from his seat on the couch. There was something of a surprise in his voice, but all of that was underlined by a vague thread of menace.

“Always,” his son answered, not bothering to look up from his tablet screen. “Though, not in the traditional sense. Most of their descendants keep to the black markets and money grubbing.”

“I thought Laura was the last of them.” Belmont Sr.’s voice softened at that name. Then he shook his head. “Nothing good ever came out of that family.”

“As far as I know, the main branch died out a long time ago. There were some cousins and such scattered around who took over what remained of their fortune after the Bernhards’ castle fell to Carmilla.”

John shot Matt a look. He wasn’t sure what Trevor was talking about, but the Bernhards hadn’t had a castle in hundreds of years. If the Belmonts had been watching the Bernhards since then, that was a really fucking long time to hold a family grudge.

“Hmm,” Belmont Sr. shifted, rubbing his hand over his chin. “Should I have made an effort to track them all down originally?”

Now that sounded incredibly fucking ominous.

At that, Trevor looked up to his father, speculatively. After a moment’s thought, he said, “No. There were other, more pressing matters. And no one can say what humans will do. The family could have easily gone another way.”

When it looked like neither Belmont was going to continue that side conversation, John picked up again with his report. “It would be best if you made a public statement, and soon. The longer you wait, the more confidence in your position will weaken, and the more trouble we’ll start to have with the sharks circling. You could do a recorded statement, but it won’t have the same impact as physically showing up. Videos can be faked. Showing up in person more thoroughly proves that you are still well.”

Trevor nodded reluctantly, though his eyes strayed to Geralt’s sleeping form. “I’ll need new clothes. Limited questions. Pre-screen the reporters, and write up a list of things I won’t be answering. Check with the hospital director. We’ll need a room here for it. Not on this floor.”

That was a bit of a relief for Matt. He could set up a separate group of his guys to run security on the press room, and keep this floor locked up like a drum.
“...What will you be saying?” John raised his eyebrows.

A smirk tugged at Trevor’s lips. “I’ll have to think on it.”

“The value of your company depends on your personal well being?” Belmont Sr. asked, sounding displeased.

“Somewhat,” Trevor said. “Think of it in terms of royalty. If a king is weak, his subjects may suffer from poor leadership. His nobles will seek to depose him. Other countries look to take advantage. It is similar now.”

“You can’t keep this up long term,” Belmont Sr. said. He leaned farther into the couch and rested one arm on the back of it. “In your…situation, that will cause more trouble than you can reasonably deal with.”

Matt remembered the blood on Trevor’s lips, and the worry inside of him grew. Suddenly the things that the Belmonts were talking around seemed like massive elephants in the room.

“I know.” Trevor sighed. “I don’t have to, though. I think it will only take another couple of years to get the city over most of the major crises. In the meantime, I will try to create a network of corporations to own all of my companies, muddling up the chain of ownership enough so that I will be able to fade into the background. I will need some figureheads though,” Trevor said, looking at John with a speculative tilt of his head.

“And if something…unexpected happens before then?” Belmont Sr. asked. The words didn’t sound concerned. If there was some kind of life threatening illness happening here, that made it sound like Belmont Sr. didn’t give a flying fuck about it. Which led Matt to believe that whatever ‘unexpected’ things that Belmont Sr. was addressing, they had nothing to do with his son’s health. Which was odd. He’d seemed more concerned for his son’s welfare for that kind of disregard.

Or maybe he knows that he’s in control of whatever unexpected event will happen, Matt thought with a cold shiver. Domestic abuse was still a viable theory here, after all.

But Trevor didn’t look concerned, so maybe there wasn’t a more sinister insinuation. “Billionaires are known to be eccentric.” He shrugged. “Sometimes I may need to disappear for a short while.”

Disappear. Like maybe if he were recovering from a serious injury. Matt’s eyes flickered over to Geral, and he wondered again just what the hell the Belmonts got up to in their free time.

“Do you want me to come back here?” Belmont Sr. asked, his voice heavy. Matt knew there was something dangerous implied, but for the life of him he didn’t know what. Did he mean to bring his crime syndicate to Castlevania? Make himself known publicly? None of those things seemed like a good thing for the city, much less his boss.

“There is no need.” Trevor’s voice was surprisingly gentle, as if he were sparing his father a great trial. “Matters here are well in hand, and even if I were to disappear tomorrow, the city is still better off now by far than it was a year ago.”

“I will never understand how you can have so much patience for people.” Belmont Sr. shook his head, bafflement clear on his face. “After so long, and after everything that happened, you still want to save them all.”

That brought a quiet laugh out of Trevor. “I would if I could. I know too well my own limits. But people are…” He looked distant for a moment, then he looked back into Belmont Sr.’s eyes. “There is so much worth saving, Father.”
Belmont Sr.’s lips twisted down at the corners. He looked conflicted. Like he wanted to vehemently deny his son’s words but something was stopping him. He looked over to where Geralt was sleeping and sighed.

“Very well then,” he agreed. To what, Matt had no idea. He knew half the conversation was flying over his head.

Trevor raised an eyebrow at him. “Did you want to come back here?”

“No,” Belmont Sr. said in that deep rumbling voice. “This place only serves to remind me of your mother’s death and Zobek’s hand in all of that. To know he thrived and prospered after what happened…No, I do not want to spend more time here than I absolutely have to.”

Matt swallowed hard. That sounded very much like Belmont Sr. was saying that his wife was murdered by Zobek, or at least that Zobek ordered it. None of this was public knowledge. Hell, none of it was even rumored or whispered about. No wonder the man was pleased to hear that his son had devoured Zobek’s empire.

Whatever had happened, Trevor must have been aware of it, because he simply nodded. “At the very least, you were able to get your revenge. I admit myself very satisfied in taking apart everything Zobek created and using it for my own ends.”

That last bit was said so coldly that both Matt and John stood up a bit straighter. Their boss wasn’t usually so vicious, at least not towards any single person. Certainly he was cunning and ruthless in his pursuit of helping Castlevania City, and in taking over several vulnerable local industries.

Maybe this was why. Death of a beloved parent was a very strong motivator.

Despite that, Matt couldn’t think any less of his boss. There was some personal tragedy there, and Trevor had taken whatever had happened and used it as an excuse to help hundreds of thousands of people. Maybe millions, if one thought about what he’d done to spread the antidote for the infection that caused the Outbreak.

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“Sir,” a voice in Matt’s earpiece piped in. “We’ve got a bit of an issue at the south stairs.”

Matt tapped his ear piece. “I’m here. What’s up?”

“Ciri is back, and she’s got someone with her. Big guy. Armed, we think. He’s refusing to take off his weapons, and they’re refusing to leave.”

“On my way,” he said. Then he looked at the rest of the room. “Please excuse me a moment.”

It only took a minute to get over to the stairwell, and sure enough there was Ciri. She was basically dressed in the same way as the night before, though she wore a different colored shirt this time. She’d already slung her cloak over her shoulder, showing off that incredibly impressive knife collection strapped to her waist and legs.

She was dwarfed by a man standing next to her. As big as Geralt, he was a veritable mountain of muscle. His brown hair pulled back in a low ponytail. He sported a jacket that was really not much more than leather and chainmail armor, belts and pouches across his chest, and what looked like a double sword harness on his back. His cloak was protruding in a way Matt already learned to recognize, suggesting two sword hilts over one shoulder. Hanging off his neck was a pendant identical to the one that Belmont Sr. was keeping for Geralt.

*Geralt has two swords, too. One solid silver,* Matt thought, remembering what John had said.
All of that paled in comparison to the extreme scarring on his face and throat. It looked like some creature tried to claw his face off, and the red, angry scars stretched from his temple to his lips, breaking the upper lip on the right side of his face. His neck looked like it had been split open by the same set of claws and just as haphazardly put back together.

“Matt!” Ciri said brightly. “Please tell your men that we’re not here to cause trouble. We just wanted to see my father.”

“Ciri,” Matt said with a nod. “If you’re not here to cause trouble, then you’ll be happy to put aside your weapons.”

“Piss off,” the man behind her growled. His voice sounded so damn rough that it belonged more to a feral dog than to a human being. “I’m not taking off my swords for Geralt’s lazy ass.” He rolled his eyes.

Shit, his eyes were just like Geralt’s, too. Yellow with vertical slit pupils, just like a cat.

Matt had to blink at the immediate rebuttal. “Weapons aren’t allowed near Mr. Belmont.”

The look that Matt got in return from this guy was something that could have been listed under the definition for *Bitch, please*. “He damn well doesn’t care about my swords.”

Ciri grinned, wide and slow at the man and raised her eyebrows.

“Argh, shut up!” The man bristled a bit and clenched his fists. “You know what I meant, good Gods, girl! It’s enough that Geralt’s mind is constantly in the gutter. Don’t follow his example so closely!”

“It’s alright, Eskel. I know what you meant. I’m sure that he doesn’t mind your swords at all,” Ciri said with a solemn nod that had to be completely fake.

The man growled again, this time wordlessly.

The fuck was even going on here?

Matt looked up at the ceiling for a moment and took a breath. “Ciri, if you would not antagonize the heavily armed man next to you, that would be much appreciated. Also, still no weapons allowed. Your gear will be safe with us, and we’d be happy to return it to you as soon as you leave.”

“Again, piss off. After all the shit I went through to get this stuff, I’m not going to give it away to a group of humans I could take on by myself without breaking a sweat.”

Matt was slightly offended at that assessment. His people were the best. Although, this guy did look like a pro, himself.

“Mmhmm,” Ciri hummed. “We all heard of how…Trevor’s father took you shopping.”

Matt looked over the big man, noting again his scars and his sheer size, and felt an inkling take root in his mind. Gabriel Belmont seemed to have a weakness for a certain…type it seemed. He remembered how careful and intimate Belmont Sr. seemed with Geralt, and now Ciri was suggesting that he treated this man as some kind of kept…the term boy didn’t fit the sheer menace this man was exuding, but maybe kept warrior? Assassin?

The man just glared at Ciri. “Payment for services rendered.”
She said nothing, but the shit eating grin on her face was eloquent enough.

“For fucks sake! Not like that!”

“I said nothing,” she demurred.

“This is how you treat me. Who was it who taught you how to cheat at cards? Who showed you how to make your first bomb? And---”

“Vesemir showed me how to make my first bomb.” She was still grinning.

He just glared at her more, and then turned to look at Matt.

“Children are so ungrateful today,” he complained. “Regardless, I’m keeping my weapons. Kindly move.”

“I am in charge of security for Mr. Belmont and his guests during their stay here. If you were in my place, would you let in an armed stranger?”

The man actually laughed at him. “Yes. What would they do? Tickles us all to death with them.”

Matt grit his teeth.

“Do you really believe, truly, that there is no way, absolutely no way, somebody could hurt you or my charges?”

“Ever? Or just here right now?” The man tilted his head curiously.

“Ever,” Matt clarified. All one needed was a chance, that one single moment where vigilance failed or circumstances aligned. There was always somebody more dangerous out there.

“I can be hurt.” He waved at the scars on his face. “Obviously. Your charges…” He glanced to Ciri, and frowned. “That’s not for me to say. But your charges cannot be hurt by me, not ever. And I have absolutely no worries about my safety from you lot. So for this moment in time, no. None of us are doing anything but getting into a dick waving contest. Just let me through.”

That was when the name clicked in his head. Eskel. This was the guy who saw Belmont Sr. in a full rage over what had happened to Geralt and walked up to hug it out. Having now met Belmont Sr., Matt had to admit that he was more than a little impressed. Still, if this man really was a kept…something, that was just part of his duties, right?

Hard on the heels of that was the realization that if an enraged Belmont Sr. didn’t scare the piss out of this guy, nothing Matt would do or say could be at all intimidating.

Matt sighed.

“This is pointless.” He pulled out his phone, clicked two quick pictures of the new man’s face, and sent the images through company chat to John. Let him verify with their boss if Matt was to let this man in without stripping him of all the weapons he was undoubtedly carrying.

Both Ciri and Eskel frowned at Matt’s phone, and then looked at each other.

Seconds after it sent, Matt got a response.

*Creepy guy incoming.*
Well that was just great.

Matt only noticed Belmont Sr. approach because he looked for it. For a man that big, he barely made a sound as he walked. He’d at least made an effort to look more presentable. His shirt was mostly buttoned up again and his suit jacket was back. All that black only made him look paler under the artificial lights. Those same lights made all the jewels on his fingers sparkle like mad.

He brushed right by where Matt stood and walked right up to Eskel, easily stepping into his space. Then he put a hand on the back of Eskel’s neck, resting his palm right under where the pony tail was tied.

The touch was strangely possessive, but somehow bizarrely in line with how Belmont Sr. seemed to interact with everyone he was close to. It still set off vague alarms in the back of Matt’s head.

“Eskel.” There was pleasure in Belmont Sr.’s voice, but something else, too. Matt could read just a touch of uncertainty there. “What are you doing here?”

While a hint of red touched Eskel’s cheeks and ears, he didn’t dispute the hand on him, which was extra interesting. A quick glance to Ciri showed that she’d settled into a neutral expression. For all her shit talking and teasing with Eskel, she wasn’t willing to weigh in while Belmont Sr. was standing right there. Wasn’t that interesting.

“Vesemir lost his shit when he saw that Night ripped up his garden while hunting moles. They’re in negotiations right now. I figured I should get out of there before getting hit in the crossfire.” Eskel side-eyed Matt and frowned. “These guys want me to give up my weapons.”

“They seem to be quite cautious.” The fact the words definitely had a note of approval in them was very gratifying. “My son chose his people well.”

Now Eskel turned his glare on Belmont Senior. “Geralt doesn’t take his weapons off for me. None of you have cared before. You damn well know I’d rather stab myself than hurt any of you three. Disarming Ciri and I now does no one any damn good. All it does is make us more vulnerable as a group.”

“What are you expecting trouble?” Matt asked, slightly frowning. Whatever history these people had together aside, it was telling that Eskel considered himself a part of their group and was weighing group tactical options.

Eskel turned to look at Matt. “The way this city feels? Wouldn’t shock me. For fuck’s sake, with the sheer amount of uncontrolled demonic energy here, I’m almost tempted to see if there are any bounties up.”

Demonic energy? Really? Matt could practically feel his people give each other disbelieving looks. If it weren’t for the fact that the last year in Castlevania City had been weird as fuck, Matt would have dismissed that as crazy talk, too. Given what he’d seen in the last day at the hospital, he grudgingly let it slide. John was gonna have a field day, though. Also, bounties?

“You’re a merc,” Matt stated flatly. Those guys were generally bad news. Morally flexible, and willing to take the truly terrible jobs. Things that were never very legal, even on the best of days. Worst of all, they never stuck around long enough to take any damn responsibility for their work.

“No.” Eskel narrowed his eyes and bared his teeth in something that wasn’t quite a sneer or a grin. “I’m a witcher.”

Maybe they were in some kind of cult. Or maybe that was the title Belmont Sr. used for his hitmen.
Maybe that was what Gabriel Belmont did as his day job; running some kind of cultish hitmen organization? That would explain a lot. Trademark weapons, scarring, maybe even the visible mutations.

If Matt considered the rumors of the Belmont family’s history, some mutations would explain a lot of the extreme feats they were known for. Maybe that was what Belmont Sr. did to, or looked for, in his people. The mutations, that edge above regular humans. Geralt’s eyes and extreme healing abilities. Eskel’s eyes and most probably healing too, considering the extent of his scarring and the fact he was still clearly functional. All of those painted a pretty clear picture.

“Hmmmm.” Belmont Sr. looked at them and rubbed a thumb over his neatly trimmed goatee.

“Nooooo.” Eskel turned to stare at Belmont Sr., eyes wide in alarm. “Whatever you’re thinking, no.”

But Belmont Sr. ignored him and took a step back, looking at both Ciri and Eskel up and down.

“Strip,” he ordered.

“What?!” Ciri and Eskel chorused. Matt blinked at them, jaw slightly dropped.

“If I need to change out of my armor for my son to feel more comfortable, you two can as well,” Belmont Sr. said mercilessly. Matt boggled at the idea of what he even would look like in full armor, then he thought about that red coat with all its gold armored plates. Then he boggled again, because armor? “Now strip. You can keep whatever weapons you can conceal in your new clothes. You.” He turned to Matt. “I’m sure you can find them something suitable to wear while they’re here.”

“Wait, why am I involved with this?” Ciri complained. “I was fine handing over my sword!”

But Belmont Sr. just ignored her, instead continuing to stare at their bodies, as if trying to imagine them in other outfits. Or, fuck, maybe he was color matching in his head. From the way he was dressed, obviously the guy had opinions on color themes.

Eskel muttered a few curses under his breath, but proceeded to take off his cloak. Sure enough, under it were two big ass swords, as well as another handful of daggers strapped to his sides, and a giant fucking metal hook hanging off his belt.

Matt couldn’t keep it in. He had to ask. “Okay. The swords, the knives, those I get. But the hook? Why?”

“For trophies,” Eskel said nonchalantly as he started working on the buckles of the sword harnesses. “Carrying a severed head around is annoying and more slippery than you’d think. Easier to put it on a hook.”

All Matt could do was stare in horror. This guy was probably a serial killer. That’s what was going on here. He’d just invited a serial killer up to hang out with his billionaire playboy boss.

As he was having an internal freakout about that answer, Belmont Sr. was next to him nodding.

“If you had clawed gauntlets, that would work as well.” Belmont Sr. held up his hand and crooked his fingers as if he were holding something by the tips of his fingers, like claws. “Good grip. Functional. Multipurpose. No need for actual blades.”

“Well, sure, but what if I wanted both hands free?” Eskel said logically.
“You shouldn’t limit yourself to just the one option. You could have both. Maybe we should do another shopping trip…”

The look of pure horror that crossed Eskel’s face was priceless, and he froze in place for a moment. “No. Absolutely not. I am extremely pleased with my gear, but I do not need clawed gauntlets. If someone is close enough that I need to brawl with them, I’ll just punch them in the face.”

Belmont Sr. hummed again, but sounded unconvincing.

“...If you’re going shopping again, can I go?” Ciri asked. “I could use some new armor.”

“And dresses. You have no fine clothes.” Belmont Sr. looked at her, one eyebrow raised.

She winced hard. “Shit.”

Eskel snorted.

The shock of whatever the fuck was going on here started to wear off, because Matt suddenly remembered that he needed to get clothes for them. Quickly.

He pulled out his phone again and sent a frantic message to John. Damn, but the man was a miracle worker, because in under a minute, Matt has a response saying that *some* kind of clothes would be delivered within fifteen minutes, and that they could get something better later.

Eskel had finally gotten his swords off, and he held them to his chest like they were his only children. He looked at Matt, who was still trying not to look like an idiot faced with this craziness and maybe failing. Then he looked to Belmont Senior.

“Here.” Eskel thrust the swords at Belmont Senior. “Hold on to these for me.”

Belmont Sr. blinked at him. “You trust me with your swords?”

“Yes,” he said, as if that were obvious. “Just give them back to me when I need them, or before I leave. Whichever comes first.”

Most of Ciri’s weapons were already handed over to Jacob, but then Matt noticed she’d started to unlace her shirt.

“Wait,” Matt said, holding up a hand. He honestly hadn’t thought that they would literally drop their clothes right there in the hall. Or, at least, that Ciri would. Eskel seemed to be dragging his feet on the whole affair. Much to Matt’s relief. “Not here. There’s a side room. I can’t let you go unattended, but we can at least get out of the hall.”

Given the fact that some of the nurses were now watching discreetly from the nurses’ station down the hall, that idea was probably overdue.

He, Ciri, Eskel, and Belmont Sr. headed into one of the vacant patient rooms near the stairs. Once inside, Eskel and Ciri both started piling more weapons onto the bed there.

Holy fuck. Matt had thought that Ciri had a fair amount of weapons on her. Clearly, he wasn’t thinking creatively enough, because Eskel was armed for bear. Several bears. And maybe a joust, too.

By the time Eskel had worked his way out of his heavy leather and chainmail armor, there was a knock on the door.
Matt wandered over to the door and picked up the clothing bags from one of his men, then he handed them over to Ciri and Eskel. Decency suggested that he turn away while they changed, but he was loath to actually do so. He wanted to know what weapons they were wearing and where. That was just sensible security.

The two of them puzzled over the clothing for a while. Ciri claimed what looked to be a plain, loose black skirt and a pale blue button up shirt from the gift store downstairs, and Eskel pulled out loose jeans and a darker blue button up. The garments were huge; probably since John had no idea what sizes he had to work with. Matt was just grateful that they had clothes at all.

Apparently being watched didn’t bother either Ciri or Eskel one bit. Ciri did turn around to strip off her shirt before she put on the button up, though.

Matt knew that Ciri was a fighter. It was clear in the way she moved, the way she filled out her clothes. But actually seeing all that hard muscle along her back and on her arms was another thing entirely.

She was beautiful.

Scars were littered here and there, more evidence of whatever crazy life she led, but Matt didn’t find them unappealing. Somehow they just emphasised her strength that much more. For all the sinewy muscle on her, she was delicately built. Her shoulders were thin and her frame tall, but she lacked the sheer bulk that her father held. Her white hair was wrapped in a messy bun low at the back of her head. Long ashen strands escaped it in all directions. He couldn’t stop thinking about how oddly ethereal her green eyes looked when combined with her white hair and dark black eyeliner.

Matt tried very, very hard not to keep looking. He couldn’t help but take another glance though.

The shirt was long enough that she could have worn it as a dress alone, if she put a belt on it. So once that was on, she stripped off her leather pants and slipped on the skirt. Her legs were just as fantastic as the rest of her, powerful and firm, and Matt caught himself wondering just how many knives she’d end up strapping to her thighs once that skirt was in place.

There was an itching sensation on the back of his neck. Matt then realized he was being stared at by both Belmont Sr. and Eskel.

*Shit. That was massively unprofessional,* he thought with an embarrassed wince, and his face heated up a bit.

To his vast relief, neither of them seemed to want to make a fuss out of it. Belmont Sr. looked faintly amused, though Eskel had a narrowed eyed look that made Matt worry a bit.

In the short time his attention had been divided, Eskel had slipped on his new jeans and was threading one of his belts through the loops. His chest was still bare, and there wasn’t a pennyweight’s worth of fat on him anywhere. Nothing but hard muscle.

Also, holy fuck did that man have a lot of scars.

Some were things that Matt recognized as stab wounds, cuts, or burns. But others looked like claw slashes and bites. In fact, there was a whole line of fresh bite marks down the man’s neck and shoulder. They looked mostly healed, but given how quickly Geralt was healing, that probably didn’t say much. The spread of the bite made it look like it came from a human mouth, but the punctures looked far to wide for that. A human’s front teeth were made for cutting; they
would have left a thin line as a scar. But these bites had thick, wide punctures, like whatever had bit Eskel had fangs. Or maybe the bites were particularly vicious. Or both.

Not only that, but spread across Eskel’s chest was a massive black tattoo, about the size of a large spread hand, positioned right over his heart. The center of it was a large triangle with strange lettering and glyphs filling the inside. Outside of that, the ink spread out and down, like roots almost, and more glyphs lined the border of the triangle.

Matt was staring. He knew he was, and he knew it was rude. It still took him a minute to look back up at Eskel’s eyes. Eyes that shone in the dim light of the room. Matt looked at the pile of weaponry on the bed, then looked back to Ciri and Eskel. Both were fighters, clearly seasoned ones. But what the fuck they’d been fighting, Matt had no idea.

It felt for a minute like he’d fallen into an adventure story.

What even was going on with these people?

Another strange thing he noticed was the way Eskel looked down at his chest, as if surprised by his own tattoo. Then he looked up at Belmont Sr. and...glowered. When Matt looked over at Belmont Sr., the man was carefully studying his nails, so falsely innocent that Matt’s teeth ached with it.

Matt cleared his throat a bit, and nodded towards Eskel’s chest, noting that the wolf medallion still hung around his neck. “That’s an interesting tattoo. What does it mean?”

“As far as I can tell, it means ‘mine’,” Eskel said with no little resignation, and then he slipped on the shirt provided.

For whatever reason, this made Belmont Sr. laugh.

While Matt tried to puzzle sense out of that answer, Ciri and Eskel proceeded to conceal an impressive number of knives all over their bodies. In Eskel’s case, he also managed to hide a few glass vials of some strange colored liquid.

Once they were finished, Matt called in Jacob to collect and organize the remaining weapons. Belmont Sr. kept ahold of Eskel’s swords, slinging the harness easily over one shoulder.

As they walked, Ciri asked, “How is Geralt?”

“Resting,” Belmont Sr. said. “Meditating.”

Both Ciri and Eskel seemed relieved by this, and they walked the rest of the way to the room in silence.

Meditation made it sound like some kind of holy ritual. It set Matt’s head spinning in some truly strange directions. Before he could get too wrapped up in those wild thoughts, they got to the room.

The moment Eskel and Ciri caught sight of Geralt, they moved to the bed. Trevor stood up from his seat at the bedside and waved Ciri into it. She smiled at him, but quickly seated herself, placing one hand onto Geralt’s chest.

Eskel walked over to the other side of the bed, eyeing Geralt’s body up and down and taking a quick sniff of the air.

“Fuck, he looks like shit. Smells like blood and poison, too,” Eskel said.
“There were poison arrows,” Trevor said quietly.

“No.” Eskel shook his head. “Well, yes, there’s that. But I can smell the potions he used. He took too many. Far, far too many.” He leaned in, closed his eyes and breathed in deeply, tilting his head a little as if to catch the scent in the air.

“What do you smell?” Ciri asked.

“Swallow. Lots of it. Kiss. Golden Oriole. He was bleeding and poisoned long before he stopped running. Swallow took care of the wounds and Golden Oriole would have taken care of the poison, temporarily anyways, but it wasn’t enough. He must have had to take Kiss too, to slow the bleeding down.” He sniffed, tilting his head again. “White Raffard’s Decoction. White Honey. The smell of White Honey is too strong. He overdosed himself several times over. Healing with Swallow and White Raffard’s, cleansing the poison with Golden Oriole, cleansing the toxicity with White Honey, and then starting over again. He didn’t even bother with anything to boost his attack. Just things to keep him running. Fuck.”

“I don’t think he had any other choice than to run,” Belmont Sr. said from his spot on the couch. His body positioning was relaxed, but the look in his eyes was anything but. “They had dogs hunting him, close, middle, and long range forces when I arrived there.”

“How many?” Eskel asked.

Belmont Sr. shrugged.

“I didn’t bother to count.” He sounded viciously satisfied about whatever he did to the people hunting Geralt, and Matt had no doubts what that whatever was. John must have caught on to that murderous undertone, too, because he was looking at Belmont Sr. with wide, alarmed eyes.

“I don’t think that place will be habitable for years to come,” Ciri said. “I’m not sure Geralt would like that level of destruction.” She sounded carefully reproachful, as if she really wanted to chastise Belmont Sr. but didn’t quite dare.

“Good,” Belmont Sr. said with a terrible twist to his lips. “When he is better, I will personally show him what I did. I will show him the place that’s nothing but ash now. So that he knows what happens if he doesn’t ask for fucking help!” he roared the last words out, all veneer of pleasantness and control stripped away as his anger surged to the surface. The tendons on his neck stood out and he leaned forward, exuding so much menace and rage that Matt took an instinctive step towards Ciri, his mind already half set on getting between her and the threat.

She leaned slightly away from him, but she didn’t look cowed, merely cautious.

“You can’t just throw your weight around like that,” Ciri said urgently. “You knew the Path was dangerous, you knew he could get hurt. You can’t just go on a rampage like that if things—-” Her voice broke down suddenly. “If he doesn’t make it one day,” she whispered. There was a shine to her green eyes, startlingly pale among her dark makeup. Matt realized she was holding back tears.

“Eskel, some help here.” She turned to her silent companion.

“This wasn’t the damn Path and you know it,” Eskel growled. “This is politics. Bullshit politics, which we shouldn’t be involved in anyways. Everybody knows witches die alone and forgotten in some ditch or another. There are no graves for us, there are no people bringing flowers to mourn our passing.” The big man was hunched forward, bringing an image of a charging bull to Matt’s mind. “Personally, I like the idea of somebody caring what happened, somebody scary enough
other people will think twice about whether it’s worth it to hunt a witcher a sport.”

“None of you will die nameless and forgotten, not anymore.” Trevor injected, voice firm and strong. He didn’t look shocked or surprised at the train of the conversation.

Eskel smiled bitterly at him.

“There’s just Geralt, me, and Lambert now. Vesemir is getting too old for the Path, preferring to stay at the keep more and more. The Wolf School is dead.”

Ciri lowered her head, and the white ends of her hair fell forward to trail over Geralt’s chest.

“We are the last ones,” Eskel said quietly.

Trevor looked down at his hands, then at John, and back to Eskel. His face was calm and composed, his eyes no longer betraying any emotion.

“How do you want the school to be revived?” Trevor asked suddenly. “With Bioquimek’s advancements into mutagenics and gene splicing, I could probably produce much more efficient mutagens for the Trials than any you had before.”

Eskel looked up sharply at him, and furrowed his brow. He thought for a moment, and then shook his head and went back to staring at the ground.

“We were made for a reason. Now humans don’t want us. So fuck ‘em. Geralt, Lambert, and I, we can’t stop hunting. It’s all that we are. But what was done to make us…” He shook his head. “None of us want to see it happen again. Maybe it’s better we all die. It still hurts, though. No more new students. No more brothers.”

Eskel let out a hard breath.

“I never expected you to be the one to offer, though,” Eskel said, looking to Trevor. “Out of the two of you”—he motioned between the two Belmonts—“I expected him to make the offer.”

Trevor was still unreadable as he looked at Eskel.

“You never ask for things. Not serious things anyway, just the paltry stuff anybody can give you.”

“What more do we need? Food, weapons, armor.” Eskel raised his eyebrows, looking mildly mystified. “We’re not meant to have anything else.”

Belmont Sr. laughed suddenly. “To hear you say that, son, is hilarious.” He tilted his head to give Trevor a sardonic look. “When was the last time you asked me for something?”

“You are a hard man to predict,” Trevor said, locking gazes with his father. “You sometimes choose to deliver in unexpected ways. Or the scope of what you choose to give is…not quite what was expected of you. It makes it hard to ask.”

Belmont Sr. smiled, still looking over his shoulder at his son.

“I love how you manage to hide truth among your lies.”

Matt tensed, unable to read Belmont Sr.’s mood from his voice alone. He seemed amused, but he also seemed like a man who was able to hide his emotions very deep if he wanted. Maybe he just didn’t feel the need to hide it most of the time.
Right now, Belmont Sr. chose to show amusement, but Matt felt the little hairs on the back of his neck raise up. He wasn’t the only one to feel unease. His boss, while still keeping eye contact with his father, tensed. Eskel was also watching the older Belmont with careful eyes.

“Father,” Trevor said carefully but no more words were forthcoming.

“You have been trying to handle me for a long while now,” Belmont Sr. said. The amusement leaked out of his voice, leaving it strangely blank. Almost thoughtful.

“I…” Trevor hesitated, but never took his eyes off of his father. “I don’t want to come back to how it used to be.”

“Do you think my anger to be so unreasonable?”

“I don’t think this is the place for this conversation,” Eskel said, crossing the room in just a few steps and insinuating himself directly between father and son, facing Belmont Sr..

Damn, that took balls. Matt himself wasn’t allowed to intervene until his boss indicated distress, so he was grateful for Eskel’s interruption. It didn’t take away from the fact Eskel was facing Belmont with his head held high and expression calm.

“Witchers,” Belmont Sr. said, his voice unbearably fond. “All of you have more balls than brains.” He rested his chin on his curled up fist, watching Eskel with bright eyes that Matt couldn’t read.

“I protest the accusations. I read a lot.” Eskel shrugged easily, still making sure to remain a meatshield between father and son.

“It’s true,” Ciri piped in, some tension in her voice. She was obviously trying to shift the mood. “His brain isn’t even always in the gutter, unlike my father’s.” She patted Geralt’s chest gently. “This one is a little bit of a lech.”

“There are literally songs about how much he’s fucked around,” Eskel said with amusement. “Hard to compete with that.”

“I have yet to hear any of those songs,” Belmont Sr. said, turning away from Eskel and looking to where Geralt lay sleeping. His pose seemed to suggest that he’d abandoned whatever line of argument was brewing there before, much to Matt’s relief.

“You kind of scare the piss out of Dandelion, so he’s not eager to share. I know ‘em, but my voice is shit. Get Lambert drunk instead. He’ll sing ‘em for you.”

“Oh gods, just let me know when you’re doing it so that I can make sure to be as far away as possible. I do not want to hear any of them,” Ciri said with a groan, hiding her face in her hand. “I already know way more about my father’s exploits than I ever wanted to.”

Eskel stepped back and rubbed his face with both hands.

“I, too, know far too much about what Geralt’s gotten up to.” Eskel sighed and went closer to Geralt’s bed again. Matt saw him take a breath and flinch from whatever he smelled.

There was a bit of a pause in the conversation. Enough that Matt couldn’t help but ask a question that had been simmering in the back of his head for a while now.

“You can smell what he was poisoned with just by leaning over him?” Matt asked, intensely curious.
It wasn’t really normal protocol to ask questions of his charges, but it felt like they’d breached that bit of politeness already. And Trevor had said he’d try to answer questions as he could.

“Mmhmmm,” Eskel said with a nod. “But only really because we use the same recipes, and lately we’ve had similar harvest spots. I know what those potions smell like. The fact that I can still smell them means that his body is still overworked with toxicity.”

“So no more potions for a while.” Ciri sighed. “We expected that.”

Eskel just nodded again. After another quiet moment, he looked up to Trevor. “Thank you for saving my brother. I don’t know what it cost you to do it, but thank you.”

A bit more of the family tree unfolded into Matt’s mind. So Geralt and Eskel were brothers. Maybe the cat-eyes were an inherited trait, like Belmont’s strange eye coloring. It begged the question of if they were related to the Belmonts in any way.

“I am relieved I was able to do so,” Trevor replied.

Quiet settled over the room after that. Maybe there just wasn’t anything else to say.

Matt found a wall to hold up, present but unobtrusive in the way a good guard was. Trevor took over a seat at the table John was sitting at, and the two of them looked over a couple of tablets together, occasionally quietly discussing future plans and requirements.

Belmont Sr. stayed at his spot on the couch with the excellent sight lines. Eskel alternated between staring at Geralt and pacing back and forth between the bed and the windows.

The curtains were drawn tightly, but no one made a move to open them and let some sunshine in. Probably so that Geralt might rest as long as possible. Ciri sat with her head bowed over his sleeping form, one hand on Geralt’s chest. Measuring his breaths with her hand.

Matt’s heart went out to her. She looked worried and tired. Hell, they all looked tired. Even Belmont Sr. had a certain distance to his gaze that suggested his mind was on other things.

Waiting quietly was part of the job for Matt, so he easily settled into it. He kept an ear on the minimal chatter from his earpiece, keeping him updated on what was going on with the current security detail, all while resting as much as he could while standing up.

After a while, Ciri began to hum. The tune was soft and sad sounding. Slow, like a lullaby. The sound of it made Eskel stop his pacing, and he stood with his back to the room, staring at the drawn curtains.

After a couple rounds of the melody, Ciri began to sing softly. Her voice was light and lilting, and it sounded almost haunted in the dim room. After the first couple of lines, Eskel joined in. His low growl of a voice adding an extra layer of spookiness to the strange lyrics.

Wolves asleping' 'midst the trees,
Bats all aswayin' in the breeze,
But one soul lies anxious, wide awake,
Fearin’ all manner of ghouls, hags and wraiths.

For your dolly Polly, sleep has flown,
Don’t dare let her tremble alone.

For the witcher, heartless cold,
Paid in coin of gold,
He comes, he’ll go,
Leave naught behind
But heartache and woe.
Deep, deep woe.

Ciri hummed the last bar an extra time, and Eskel turned to stare at Geralt, leaning back onto the window sill behind him. Almost as an afterthought, he flicked out a little throwing knife. Matt nearly jumped out of his skin, but he didn’t get more than a step forward before he realized that Eskel was just flipping it between his fingers. An absentminded habit with a lot of knife fighters, Matt knew. It took a hell of a lot of effort, but Matt settled back against the wall. It helped that neither of the Belmonts looked like this was unusual.

Eskel sighed heavily, his expression a little sad as he gazed at Geralt’s slow breathing. Despite the more modern clothes, Eskel looked positively demonic in the dim light. The knife flashed in his hand and his eyes shined, almost glowing yellow.

Then Ciri and Eskel started singing again, like the bars she hummed of the melody were just the standard break between verses.

Birds are silent for the night,
Cows turned in as daylight dies,
But one soul lies anxious wide awake,
Fearin’ all manner of ghouls, hags and wraiths.
My dear dolly, Polly, shut your eyes,
Lie still, lie silent, utter no cries.
As the witcher, brave and bold,
Paid in coin of gold.
He’ll chop and slice you,
Cut and dice you,
Eat you up whole.
Eat you whole.

As they sang, Ciri patted her father’s chest lightly, as if soothing him deeper into sleep. By the end of that second verse, Matt and John shared a wide eyed and deeply disturbed look. That song was freaky as shit. Spooky didn’t begin to cover it, and the things it implied were even worse.

Witcher. Eskel said he was a witcher, and hearing him sing about cutting up people while flipping a goddamn throwing knife was beyond fucked up. There was a melancholy about him, too, though why that was, Matt couldn’t hazard a guess.

It wasn’t that the song was graphic or violent that disturbed Matt so much. There were plenty of songs about violence these days. It was the slow, meditative feel to it. The sense of absolute truth to the words. Like the things it was about were as true and unavoidable as night coming after day. The pain and fear implied in every word, imbued into the very essence of what a witcher was, and the ultimate acceptance of that.

Belmont Sr. looked pleased and a bit curious, maybe finding something in that song he liked or at least understood. A little smile quirked at his lips and he watched Eskel with interest.

The most surprising reaction was Trevor, though. He looked both sad and subtly angry. Matt had never seen that particular expression on his boss’ face before. There was just the hint of a frown, both on his lips and in his eyes, and the cast of his shoulders made him look almost resigned.

Ciri and Eskel actually sang a second round of the song, while the rest of them sat dumb and watched. The silence that followed it was absolute.
Eventually, Belmont Sr. said, “That was a very unusual song.”

“Is it?” Ciri asked, seeming to shake off the somber mood. “It’s just a lullaby.”

“A lullaby,” Trevor said flatly.

“They teach it to all little witchers,” Eskel said, low and soft. He flipped the knife again, tossing it up into the air and not even bothering to look at the blade when he caught it. The sheer skill it took to do that trick alone was ridiculously impressive. “When we arrive as children, or infants as the case may be, long before the Trials. It’s our lullaby, sung in quiet, peaceful nights, tucked into our cribs and beds with practice knives and wooden swords. When we’re older, we learn enough songs to fit in at any tavern, in any country, but that is our song. It’s a lesson, but also a comfort.”

“That song is a comfort?” John asked. His eyes were as wide as dollar coins and his voice was hushed with horror.

It was a sentiment that Matt one hundred percent agreed with. This guy was a child soldier. Fuck. These two being in some kind of cult was looking more and more likely.

Although, the Belmorts seemed as surprised by the song as Matt and John. That implied that Trevor and Belmont Sr. had… acquired Geralt and Eskel after whatever fucked up group raised them. Matt was pretty relieved to know that his boss didn’t have anything to do with this deeply messed up little scenario.

Eskel looked both unhappy and a little offended at John’s insinuation. His face soured a little more and he flipped his knife in a more elaborate manner.

“Yes, a comfort. Any time one of us broke a bone or got a nasty stab wound, Vesemir would come by after practice and coddle us a little. Clean us up. Change the bandages, and sing us to sleep. It’s a reminder of childhood, you know?” His gaze went distant again. Remembering, probably, and still casually tossing the knife. “Geralt and I, we learned it together. Played knife games to the lyrics. Kid’s stuff. Passed down from generation to generation of students. When Ciri came to us, we sang it to her, too. Our lullaby.”

He and Ciri shared a small smile.

“We had little rhymes and songs too in the barracks where we were placed as kids,” Belmont Sr. said unexpectedly. “The older boys liked to teach them to the newcomers to scare the wits out of them.” He shifted on the couch, eyes going unfocused. “The caretakers only cared that we did well in school and on the training grounds.” He shrugged. “With more than fifty of us orphans to a barrack, I guess it was hard for them to keep track anyway.”

Matt was hard pressed not to gape at Belmont Sr.. If he understood those statements correctly, the older Belmont said he was raised as in some kind of military organization, too. Matt looked to his boss, to see how he reacted to that bit of news, but Trevor was looking at his father without surprise. There was curiosity, though, as if he knew the bare facts but didn’t know the details.

“I heard stories,” Trevor said. “That you were amazingly talented. Teachers kept comparing our achievements to yours every time we didn’t quite measure up.” He smiled wryly. “The only songs we were allowed to sing were psalms, though.”

Matt sucked his breath in, not quite believing what he was hearing. Belmont Sr. had to have been a child soldier, just like Eskel and Geralt, though the place he was raised seemed a different one from them. It explained him feeling so connected to the witcher warriors. The fact that Matt’s
highly polished and reticent boss was apparently raised in that same place, trained as a child soldier too, was mind boggling. Matt kept glancing back and forth between Trevor and his father, trying to make sense of what he was hearing.

Belmont Sr. shook his head, lips twisting in disgust. “Psalms? Really?”

“I guess they were looking for ways to make us more…loyal…to the brotherhood.”

“Loyal?” Belmont Sr. snarled. “I believed in them the hardest, there was nobody more devoted to the cause than me.” He got up to pace. Anger crackled off of him. “And look how that turned out.”

“The rhymes survived, you know, passed from generation to generation, no matter how hard the teachers tried to make us stop repeating them.”

“Even the horse one?”

Trevor smiled.

“Especially the horse one. We were boys after all.”

Belmont Sr. shook his head.

“It is so strange, to know you walked the same path I did.”

Matt stared, because that? That implied Belmont Sr. didn’t know what happened to his son as a child. What the hell had even happened with this family, and why did Matt have a sinking suspicion that it had heavily influenced the clearly fucked up interaction between them all?

“Sir,” John spoke up hesitantly, sounding unsure but also so completely confused he just couldn’t stand it anymore. “Is there something I should know? Anything I need to make sure is not mentioned during any interviews?”

Belmont Sr. made a sharp, dismissive noise. “Those few that might still know the truth, won’t dare make a sound in fear it might bring my attention to them.”

Trevor turned his head to watch his father pace.

“I was taken away from my mother on the day of my birth, before my father even knew of my existence,” Trevor said evenly. He turned to look at John then, eyes calm and steady. “If you are asking if I was a child soldier, the answer is yes. Just like my father was before me.”

“I’m sorry,” John whispered to Trevor, his eyes wide with horror.

“Don’t be. It wasn’t your fault and it was a long time ago.” He looked to his father again, who was still pacing the room. “And once one gets my Father’s attention, it’s impossible to lose it.”

The older Belmont stopped moving and inclined his head.

“You are mine now,” he said in that rough, low voice of his, full of menace and dark promises. “I will destroy anybody that tries to take you away from me.”

Matt had no doubt that Belmont Sr. was being literal with that threat. But Trevor only nodded, seemingly unsurprised and unmoved by the violent possessiveness.

Having Matt’s suspicions confirmed was much more than he’d ever expected. Maybe Trevor spoke up about it now because the truth was so outlandish nobody would believe it should Matt tell
anyone anyway. Trevor Belmont, the elegant, multi-billionaire philanthropist who all but single-handedly raised up Castlevania from ruin, a child soldier? Raised in barracks and taught to kill? Who would believe that?

It also made Matt aware of how differently he needed to plan security around his boss. Up until now, Matt treated Trevor as a civilian; somebody reasonable but ultimately useless in any dangerous situation. Now, it seemed it wasn’t the truth at all.

“Children in such places...” Trevor was speaking again, and turned to look at John. “We came up with strange rituals, ways to comfort ourselves because there was nobody else to do it or show us any better. We were there to be trained, not to be children, as far as the teachers were concerned.”

Eskel nodded. “That is it exactly. That’s why our lullaby is such a comfort. Most didn’t make it through the Trials. Everyone had to train their hardest. There’s no such thing as comfort on the Path. Coddling us would only kill us faster. But we could sing ourselves to sleep.” He smirked. “Vesemir was a bit of a softie.”

“It wasn’t that bad for me,” Ciri said.

“Nah. Girl child? What were we gonna do with you? Train you to be one of us, that’s what. No Trials, and things were different, but you got all the skills. We did our best, though.” Eskel looked at her fondly. “You do us all proud, girl.”

She gave him a wobbly smile in return.

“You were all great. Even Lambert.”

Eskel snorted. “For all his bitching, Lambert would be the first to draw his weapons for you. He’s ridiculously overprotective.”

As a career soldier, Matt knew what it was like to live by violence. But this, how the people here all seemed to share such grim past experiences...it shook him. Each of them had trained from birth to fight and die, with seemingly no regard for self. It was horrifying.

“Do you still fight?” Matt asked his boss. It was mostly morbid curiosity that drove the question, though tactically it would be good to know. Still, he found himself wanting to get a better feel for the kind of man Trevor was. The last day had been too different, driving everything he thought he knew on its head.

“He does.” It was Belmont Sr. that answered.

Matt decided asking Belmont Sr. if he still fought was just a stupid question; it was so very clear that he did, and with relish, too.

“Do you two ever spar?” Matt asked, looking them over with a professional eye. Now that he saw under the careful misdirection of the suit, he could see how the Belmonds could be a match for each other.

Belmont Sr. never looked at Matt. Instead he stilled completely and locked his gaze on his son, strange intensity coming out of him. Trevor stilled completely.

“No. We will never fight each other again,” Belmont Sr. said quietly.

Again?
“We practice sometimes. Trevor and I,” Eskel said, looking at Trevor. “Different styles, but fun to share. Drives Geralt crazy.” Eskel shifted his attention to Matt. “I’m curious to see what style you fight with.”

“Mostly Krav Maga,” Matt said. It was an efficient style after all, though Sistema was gaining traction the last few years.

“I’m unfamiliar. You’ll have to show me. Once Geralt wakes up. He’ll wanna see, too.” Eskel tilted his head. “We learned several styles, and we’re always looking for more.”

“I want to see too,” Ciri said, sounding offended. “Why are you excluding me from your dick measuring competition? Is it because I don’t have one?” She blinked huge, wounded eyes at Eskel. “I knew you always wanted a boy,” she finished that off with a loud sniff.

“Aww, I figured you’d want to measure his dick in private,” Eskel said with a shit eating grin. It only lasted for a moment though, then his smile gentled into something more normal. “You’re welcome to join us, though. You could use some more practice fighting a group of attackers.”

Ciri blushed, just a little, but she was so pale it was easy to see even in the dim light of the room. She glared at Eskel. “Should I mention that story I heard about your inseam being measured during that famous shopping trip and how well that went?”

Eskel raised his hands in surrender, but still smirked. “A witcher is the last person who would rain on your fun. There are far too many embarrassing tales to tell. Just be glad Geralt’s not listening in. He’ll start giving the poor man tips.”

Heat burned at Matt’s face, so much so that he ran a hand over his face. “I cannot believe this is up for discussion,” he grumbled.

Eskel shrugged.

“No secrets among people who can smell your interest,” he tapped his nose. “You’ll get used to this eventually.”

Ciri sighed.

“Keep your nose and your tongue to yourself,” she huffed.

“Awww, but women love my tongue.” He grinned at her.

“All the more reason you should be afraid of losing it,” Ciri said sweetly.

“Fine, fine” he raised his hands again. He looked to the Belmonts. “Either of you wanna join or watch? Nothing like a little blade work to pass the time.”

“I’m definitely interested in watching and joining,” Belmont Sr. said.

“Vetoed,” Eskel and Ciri chorused together.

“You can’t break Trevor’s people, he needs them,” Ciri explained.

Belmont Sr. raised himself like an offended cat.

“It’s like you don’t trust me to limit myself.”

Ciri and Eskel looked at each other incredulously and then back at the older Belmont, with
identical expressions of disbelief on their faces.

“Fine,” Belmont Sr. grumbled. “I will watch only.”

Matt wasn’t ashamed to know that he was just a tiny bit relieved.

“You might need to sit on Geralt to keep him from joining anyways,” Eskel added. “How about you?” He looked to Trevor.

Trevor glanced at Geralt, asleep in his bed, then at Matt, and then at Eskel. Matt knew he was going to refuse when he opened his mouth, but he also could see that Trevor was tempted to agree.

“I won’t join in.”

But Eskel just nodded, like he expected that response as well. “Maybe later, then. And you can always watch. Or send your servant to us.” Eskel nodded at John, who squeaked in alarm. “He could use a little basic skill.”

“Only if he wants,” Trevor said with a smirk. “Not everyone need be as rigorously inculcated with fighting as we are.”

There was a pause where John clearly realized he was the only person in the room who wasn’t trained to fight and kill. Even his gentle boss, a man that two days ago Matt would have sworn had never held a weapon in his life.

“Keep the fighting to this room,” Trevor said after a moment. “It’s spacious enough you could move things around a bit and have enough room for a controlled match. And put someone at the door to make sure no one walks in on you. The last thing we need is some of the hospital staff panicking.”

Matt almost couldn’t believe that his boss was on board with this idea. Then again, if the craziness was at least contained and distracted here, that was one less thing for him to worry about in general.

The alarm on his watch buzzed. Matt’s shift was up. He was sorely tempted to ignore it and stay, but he had already worked incredibly long hours. This hospital stay wasn’t going to be a short one either. He had to plan for stamina.

Earlier he was worried about leaving Trevor alone with his father, but now Matt wasn’t so sure he needed to be concerned. Well, he was still certain that there was the terrible possibility for something violent and bad to happen. Everything Belmont Sr. had said only lent itself to the idea that he was a possessive and temperamental man. One prone to violent outbursts.

But the way Eskel had fearlessly walked in between father and son earlier was extremely reassuring. Matt couldn’t help the nagging suspicion that if it was down to a one on one fight between himself and Belmont Sr., he would lose and lose badly. Eskel at least had the benefit of being someone that Belmont Sr. seemed to actually listen to.

Maybe that was because of whatever other relationship they had going on? Or maybe that was the relationship; with Eskel acting as an advisor.

...A very physically close one.

Yeah, right.
Regardless, Matt found himself less worried about leaving them all alone in a room together.

“Mr. Belmont,” he said, turning to Trevor. “I’m afraid my shift is up. Would you like me to send in someone else to replace me here?”

That made Trevor smile a little. “There is no need. Thank you, though. Please, get some rest. Take John out with you.” John protested immediately, but Trevor held up a hand, cutting off the interruption. “I know how little sleep you’ve gotten. The press briefing isn’t until tonight. Go eat something. Get some sleep. In a bed. We can finish this up once you wake.”

John hunched his shoulders a little, but then he nodded and started to gather his papers.

Before Matt could take more than a single step away, Belmont Sr. said, “Matt. You should arrange your security detail so that your shifts are spent here.” Those red eyes of his seemed to burn for a second, and it was creepy as fuck. “I want to see you fight my witcher. And Ciri enjoys watching you.” That last bit was said with a smirk.

Ciri just buried her face in the bed next to Geralt. “Oh Gods, you are just as bad as my father. Whyyy,” she groaned.

“Because it amuses me,” Belmont Sr. answered easily.

Heat flooded Matt’s face and he licked his lips, buying himself a moment of time. He glanced over to Trevor, who just nodded at him. “Alright,” Matt said. “I’ll see you all after I get some sleep, then.”

If he hurried out of the room after that, no one needed to know that it was because he was afraid of what else might come up.

John was hot on his heels. As the door shut behind them, they both shared another terrified, horrified, shocked look.

“If we didn’t have to work in just a few hours, I’d say we should go get drunk,” Matt said quietly.

John dragged one hand down his face and nodded. “After all this is done. I’ll buy the first round.”

“Deal.” Matt took a breath, and went to find some place to sleep.

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Chapter End Notes

From Q: I put in a secret reference to one of my favorite mobster comedy movies of all time, and props to anyone who guesses it.
There was a moment of silence after Matt and John left, and Eskel listened to the two men promise to get smashed with each other after this was all done. From the look on Dracula and Alucard’s face, they were listening to the same thing.

Once the sound of their footsteps faded, their attention turned back to the room. Eskel had to wonder if Alucard had fed recently. Dracula certainly had a very faint smell of sex on him, but Eskel hadn’t gotten close enough to Alucard yet to get a good whiff.

Ciri had warned him that Alucard was trying to pass as human here, and thus was playing things very close to the chest. The last thing Eskel wanted to do was fuck that up, so he’d tried to keep his distance, following Alucard’s cues.

He could tell they were all a little stressed by it though. Alucard moved like he was tired, and he had a tight, unhappy look about him. Dracula’s energy still churned about the room, the smoldering rage and banked upset all mixed in with the prickling frustration of having nothing to do.

It was tempting to head over to Dracula and curl up into him. But Ciri was right there. Not that she was watching. Still. It felt weird to be so physically close to someone with an audience there watching. Eskel almost wouldn’t have minded so much if the touching was just sex. That was something his body could do and it felt good. He still wouldn’t be happy with a public viewing, but the embraces he shared with Dracula, Alucard, and sometimes Geralt too, were somehow far more intimate than just sex. They left him feeling vulnerable and cared for. Assailable, perhaps.

But the longer he looked at Dracula, the more he felt that churning unhappiness. Alucard looked like he wanted to join Dracula, too, but couldn’t quite bring himself too.

More than that, watching Geralt hang so dangerously close to death was deeply upsetting. Geralt was his brother. They’d been friends since they were children. Inseparable while training, and after as well; once they’d started on the Path, they still kept as close as they could.

Helplessness roiled unpleasantly inside Eskel.

_Ah, well, fuck it_, he thought, and walked over to the couch. After a moment of contemplation, Eskel sat down next to Dracula, turning a bit and slouching down so that he could rest his back up against Dracula’s side with his head pillowed on Dracula’s shoulder. He made sure to tilt his head a bit to show off the tops of the bite marks still visible over his shirt collar.

It was obvious how much Dracula liked those visible signs of, well, ownership. They seemed to soothe him a bit. As uncomfortable as the thought made him, Eskel had to admit to himself that he wasn’t opposed to Dracula laying claim to him, especially when it came with such obvious care and concern. Frustrating at times, but still obvious and genuine.

Sitting there, watching Geralt slowly piece back together his body and balance, Eskel was suddenly incredibly grateful that someone cared about them, and did so with enough vigor to maybe put a little delay on their inevitable deaths.

After a pause, Dracula shifted.
Eskel felt one of Dracula’s hands worm between the back of the couch and Eskel’s torso. Warm fingers found the edge of Eskel’s shirt and slid under. He shivered at the touch of those calloused fingers over his side, the sensation just bordering on being ticklish. Dracula moved until his hand was resting against Eskel’s belly, with his fingertips curled down enough Eskel could feel the tips of his claws press gently against his abdomen. Trust Dracula to find the creepiest way to cuddle he could.

Eskel made a conscious effort to relax under the tiny blades of Dracula’s claws. If that man wanted to hurt him, there were easier ways to do it than claw his belly open after luring him in for a cuddle.

“You weren’t careful with him.” Alucard sounded chiding as he got up. Eskel blinked his eyes open to see Alucard approaching them. Alucard’s gaze was fixed on Eskel’s neck and the bites just visible under his collar.

When Alucard was close enough, he reached for the collar of Eskel’s shirt. His fingers were cold as they slid under the fabric and pulled it away gently. He was leaning so close over Eskel that the ends of his hair fell down to tickle Eskel’s chest.

“Considering the situation, I was remarkably careful,” Dracula answered, his fingers curling harder against Eskel’s belly.

“I wasn’t helpful either,” Eskel said with a small shrug. He tried to find the right words to explain why he’d egged Dracula on, but came up blank. Ever present was the knowledge that Ciri was there listening. He didn’t want to say too much, didn’t want to expose Dracula’s vulnerable moment to her. Nor did he want to dismiss what happened and the comfort they’d shared.

So in the end, he just shrugged again and kept his mouth shut.

Eskel slid his eyes to meet Alucard’s and tilted his chin up a little bit, exposing more of his neck.

“You want a taste too?”

He had no idea why he asked it this time. Alucard hadn’t bitten anybody but Dracula as far as Eskel knew. Not even Geralt. But he looked. Looked a lot more than ever before. The fingers against Eskel’s neck were cool and still, and Alucard did not jerk away in denial as he would have before. He looked almost torn, his eyes fixed on Eskel.

Dracula shifted in place. His other hand gently rested on Eskel’s head, tilting it further, and exposing the healing bites in their full glory, as if showing Alucard where to bite.

“Those are fresh still,” Dracula rumbled, slow and seductive. “If you sucked hard enough I bet the new skin would break.”

A rampant shiver raced up Eskel’s spine as he thought about it. He wondered if Alucard would be able to taste his emotions like Dracula did when he fed.

The vampires were looking at each other; the tension was so thick in the air between them that Eskel swallowed and stayed quiet. Both of them were touching him, yet neither of them seemed to pay him any attention.

“He’s nearly healed,” Alucard said hoarsely. His fingers traced along one of the bite marks, and Eskel held back another shiver. He couldn’t help but think of how pleasurable Dracula’s bite was; even though it wasn’t his favorite side effect, it still felt nice. “There wouldn’t be more than a drop or two.”
“He’s willing,” Dracula purred, his hands like iron bands around Eskel. “Aren’t you, Eskel?”

Eskel laughed, hoarsely, shocked by his own willingness.

“Yeah,” he said, swallowing harshly against the sudden dryness on throat. “Wouldn’t have offered otherwise.” He stilled his breathing, painfully aware of how his belly was working against the claws pressed into his skin.

The fingers on his neck rubbed harder for a moment, and then Alucard lifted his hand and brought it to his mouth. He breathed in the scent of Eskel’s healing skin and his eyes glowed softly in the shadow of his loose hair.

“Just taste him,” Dracula was practically purring softly behind him. “He’s already ours anyway.”

Alucard’s eyelids lowered, hiding the gold of his eyes for a moment. His fingers went back to Eskel’s neck, sliding over the healing bites and higher. He spread his fingers out until he was holding Eskel just under his jaw, gripping his neck like the gentlest of vices.

Eskel couldn’t quite believe it when Alucard lowered his head, and let his pale lips part slightly. There was the sensation of Alucard’s soft hair on his skin first, and scent of frost and something chemical and fruity wafting up to his nose. Eskel made a noise then, mostly from surprise, as he felt cool lips touch his neck. There was a wet touch next; Alucard’s tongue sweeping over the freshly healed skin.

Dracula exhaled sharply behind him just as Alucard sucked hard at Eskel’s neck. The pressure felt good, a little achy, and woke up the bites in a strange way. Eskel tensed up as echoes of the pleasure Dracula’s bite swelled inside of him. The sensation tingled up his body like a ghost passing him by.

On the off chance that Alucard would be able to taste what he was feeling, Eskel tried to fill himself up with the fact that Alucard was his friend. That he wanted to bring as much peace and comfort as he could, for no other reason than he wanted to see his friend happy and whole.

He had no idea how long it lasted, or if Alucard broke the skin or not. All he was aware of was the harsh sucking, the cool lips on his skin, and the occasional wet swipe of tongue.

When Alucard broke off and raised his head from Eskel’s neck, Eskel realized he was panting. The only thing keeping him from squirming in place was Dracula’s hand pressed flat to his belly.

Alucard’s eyes were blown wide; the gold was just a narrow line around his pupils. His lips were wet and plush. He was breathing hard, too.

Dracula let go of Eskel’s head and reached for Alucard. With a fierce looking grip, he grabbed ahold of his son’s hair and pulled him up. Then he was kissing Alucard, hard and hungry, obviously fucking him with his tongue. A rough, needy little noise escaped Alucard’s mouth. He flailed his arms for a second before bracing his hands on Dracula’s knees and pushed back into the kiss.

Eskel was so close to them. He could feel their bodies move together, hear every soft little sound, and smell the fierce want pouring off of them. He was still resting against Dracula, and Alucard was now pressed close to him, too. It was kind of wonderful to be held between them like that. Overwhelming in a way that left him feeling flustered and confused.

He straightened, fighting to keep his body under control. Tried to push the multitude of sensations away and get ahold of himself. It only took the barest turn of his head to catch sight of Dracula
doing his best to eat Alucard.

That didn’t help him calm down one gods-be-damned bit, so he turned his eyes to the other occupant of the room. Ciri was wedged sideways into the chair by Geral’ts bed. Her green eyes were wide as they met his in the dim light of the room.

Eskel thought quickly. Dracula didn’t give a damn who watched him, but Alucard was more private. Whatever was motivating Alucard right now, the last thing anyone wanted was for him to feel embarrassed about this later. Besides, Eskel really didn’t want to be next to them while they fucked.

He snaked his hand under his own shirt to take hold of Dracula’s hand on his belly.

It was a mistake.

The moment his fingers curled around Dracula’s, the older vampire backed away from the fierce kiss he was sharing with Alucard and looked down at Eskel. His red eyes were burning as bright as flames. Eskel just had the time to think, oh shit, and then Dracula was pulling his head to the side and bending down to bite.

There was no hesitation. He just opened his mouth wide and bit right over the place where Alucard had sucked what felt like an enormous hickey into Eskel’s neck. Dracula’s fangs went in fast and deep, breaking flesh almost painlessly. Pleasure burned through Eskel at the first, hard suck, almost painful in its intensity. It lit up his body, hardening his cock so fast he gasped and tried to curl up in reaction. He couldn’t move at all, though. Not with how Dracula held him still. His heart beat frantically and he clamped down on Dracula’s hand on his stomach.

Dracula took only a mouthful. His fangs pulled out almost as soon as they went in. Then he was reaching for Alucard again. He pressed his mouth to Alucard’s, making the younger vampire gasp. Alucard flinched and then moaned again, and a tiny drop of blood escaped from between their tightly connected lips.

Eskel closed his eyes for a moment and took a breath, centering himself. This couldn’t happen here, not in front of Ciri, and definitely not on top of him. Probably involving him.

“Ciri,” Eskel panted out, grabbing hold of Alucard’s jacket and pulling. “Ciri is here,” he repeated, making sure Alucard heard him. He knew Dracula probably didn’t care, but Alucard was a different animal.

Alucard pulled himself away from the kiss. There were traces of blood on his pale lips, and a little bit was smeared over his chin. He was panting even harder than before, and his eyes were dark and wide. His hands were clenched hard into Dracula’s clothes and it clearly took a bit of time before Eskel’s words penetrated. A blush showed up high on his cheeks and over the tops of his pointed ears. He’d been covering them with his hair while the humans were around, but now that his hair was loose and wild, they peeked out through the thick locks.

Dracula didn’t seem to be bothered by Eskel’s words. He kept mouthing at Alucard’s jaw and then down lower to his neck, obviously intent on devouring his son now that he had in him his grasp.

When Alucard pulled away from him, Dracula growled. Low and threatening, the sound shuddered through the room like a thunder.

“Not here,” Alucard whispered. “Not where they can see.”

“Where.” Dracula let himself be pushed back. His hair was a mess, with strands falling into his
face and almost drifting off of him like wisps of shadow. It did nothing to obscure his glowing red eyes.

“Bathroom.” Alucard pointed to the smaller door to the left of the entrance.

Dracula turned his eyes from Alucard to Eskel. The corner of his lips pulled up in a smirk that sent a shiver down Eskel’s back.

“You did good today,” he said roughly, sliding his hand away from Eskel’s belly and reaching for his head again. His fingers tangled hard into Eskel’s hair, pulling most of it out of his ponytail in the process, and pulled it back. “So good,” he rumbled and darted in again, fast as a snake.

He bit down, on the other side of Eskel’s neck than before, fangs breaking skin unerringly.

“Fuck,” Eskel gasped just before his eyes all but rolled back at the pleasure being forcefully poured into his body. It burned, scorched him from the inside as Dracula drank. Once, twice, three times he swallowed deeply, only to pull away after. With each mouthful, overwhelming pleasure slammed into Eskel like a hammer smashing him flat.

Then Dracula burst into shadows, reformed behind the couch, and walked with quick, purposeful steps towards the other door.

Alucard made an effort to look at Eskel, to say something. He even opened his mouth, but his eyes slid away from Eskel to stare after Dracula, and then he, too, was moving. He rose up from his half crouch and was at the bathroom door seconds after Dracula, pushing it open and slamming it closed behind them the moment they were inside.

Eskel lay panting on the couch. After watching the door to the bathroom for a second, he dropped his head backwards and covered his face with both hands. He had to get himself at least a little under control.

He took three heavy shuddering breaths before he rolled up to sitting, head bowed down and elbows resting on his knees. His cock was achingly, awfully hard, and at least this position covered that up a bit. Want and embarrassment burned through him, and he just knew that Ciri was staring at him.

The soft trickle of fluid down both sides of his neck reminded him that he was still fucking bleeding from Dracula’s ungentle bites. He rubbed a hand through his loose hair and held his head.

“Wow,” Ciri said in a hushed kind of voice.

There was a loud thump and a crash from behind the bathroom door.

Both of them turned to look and then both of them averted their eyes, not wanting to actually see what was happening there.

“Are you alright?” Ciri asked quietly.

Eskel nodded, still not sure about his voice. He ran his fingers through his hair again, and forcefully settled his own heartbeat.

A couple of moments went by, and he said very quietly, “Alucard needs to feed more. It won’t kill him if he doesn’t. Not much will, I think. But…it’s not good for him.”

The bright hot fire in his cheeks didn’t fade. He was still so damn embarrassed about Ciri seeing
any of this. But it had felt right when he offered. Alucard’s hand was so cold against his skin, and
the man had worked so hard the last couple of days. Eskel wanted to comfort him the way he’d
comforted Dracula. Ease some of that awful tension and give them all some peace.

“Doesn’t he…” she trailed off, obviously looking for words. “Drink from my father? Or…you?”

“No. Not yet.” Eskel shrugged. “He won’t drink from humans. He only drinks from Dracula and
even that is not a regular occurrence. From what I gather, Dracula has to maneuver him into
feeding each time. He starves himself more often than not.”

The body-wide pleasure was starting to fade. He couldn’t quite stand up without further
embarrassment yet, but at least his breathing was more even. Cooling sweat prickled on his skin,
and he was struck by a sudden chill. The flimsy cotton of the button up shirt he was wearing
suddenly didn’t seem like nearly enough. He chafed his arms for a moment and thought about his
options. If his neck looked bad before, it must look wrecked now. Not something that the hospital
staff could see if Alucard wanted to keep his nature a secret.

“How does my neck look?” he asked eventually.

“Like you just got mauled by two vampires,” Ciri said flatly. She paused a moment, and then
added, “Gently mauled. There isn’t much ripping.”

Eskel sighed.

“Dracula is more careful, usually.”

“…Well that’s good.” Ciri still sounded mildly uncertain though, like she hadn’t quite decided on
what to think of the whole scene laid out in front of her.

A few more breaths and Eskel finally felt calmer. No less embarrassed though. Fuck, just because
Dracula didn’t mind who saw him put his mouth on people didn’t mean that everyone else was
alright with it. Eskel grimaced and fished out a Swallow potion from where he’d stashed it in one
of the pockets on his new pants.

“Stupid flimsy clothes. Donno why we couldn’t just keep our armor on,” he grumbled to himself.
Then he bit the cork off the potion, and downed the red liquid in one go.

“Would you really want to be in armor when they…did that to you?” she asked, one eyebrow
raising.

Eskel raised an eyebrow back at her, and thought about the question. “Depends, I guess. They’re
just biting. If we were somewhere safer…” He looked around the room. “This city feels wrong.
And there are too many people in this building. If we were home back at Kaer Morhen, or even at
the castle, I wouldn’t mind being out of armor so much. But here.” He shook his head.

“I think you look good in them,” Ciri offered, still sounding uncertain.

“Aww, Ciri, you know nothing’s gonna make me look good, not with a face like this.” Despite the
words, Eskel’s cheeks heated up with pleasure at the compliment. He thought Ciri was just being
kind, but it was still nice to hear such things once in a while.

“Clearly, they think otherwise,” she pointed out.

He looked at her, tilting his head in confusion and narrowing his eyes. “They’re not looking at
me.”
Sure, the vampires saw him; they noticed when he was there. But they weren’t looking at how attractive he was in his new clothes.

Then it hit him. She was still thinking it was a sex thing.

He rubbed his face again, hiding his eyes. “Arggh, Ciri. It’s not like that. They’re not interested in me like that, and I certainly don’t want that from them. We’re just…close.” He waved his hands about. “This is not sexual.”

That got her to raise both her eyebrows at him and then look pointedly down to his covered lap and back up again.

“Clearly,” she drawled.

He hunched his shoulders further, and frowned. “Unavoidable side effect of the biting.”

“Eskel,” she said gently, as if talking to a child. “You know as well as me and any other witcher anywhere that vampire bites are not pleasurable. It’s just a myth. Now, if those bites feel good, it must be by design, not by nature.”

Now he looked back at her, eyes a bit wide. Something trembled inside of him, and he struggled to find anything he could say.

“I saw texts describing the war this city fought with Dracula in the past,” she said, pressing on. “It was stated clearly and without doubt that his bites were not only deadly, but absolutely horrifying and painful.”

He ducked his head again, unable to think of anything to defend himself. He damn well knew that Dracula’s bites felt fucking amazing because the man wanted them to feel that way. What could Eskel say to that? That he preferred it to feel good, rather than it be like every fucking thing else in their lives? Painful and cold?

Eskel stood up and stalked to the door, and briefly debated about leaving. He could just go up to the roof and sit for a while. But the whole point of being there was to check on Geralt, to keep Dracula and Alucard safe and balanced.

He couldn’t leave yet. But he was very done talking about this.

He put his back to the door and slid down to sitting, propping up his arms on his knees, his head tucked down. Maybe Ciri would get the hint and leave him the fuck alone.

The silence of the room was broken suddenly by another series of loud thumps coming from behind the closed door, followed by what was definitely a loud groan.

Eskel ran a hand through his hair and pulled it tight, letting that little bit of pain be a replacement for the bad things he really wanted to do.

_I fucking hate my life_, he thought miserably.

Only that wasn’t true anymore. His life now was better than it had ever been before. Something he was missing for all his years was fulfilled now. The vulnerability of the close contact with Dracula and Alucard was so worth it to feel accepted and taken care of.

He did hate the situation he was in right now, with Geralt down for the count, and Ciri watching him with those wide eyes and thinking god knows what. That there were people seeing what should
be only between him and the vampires.

The soft beeping from one of the things Geralt was hooked up to sped up. It was his heartbeat, Eskel realized, raising from the slow thrum of deep meditation to something more normal.

“Ciri?” Geralt slurred from the bed, his head turning towards his daughter.

Eskel straightened, watching as Geralt took much longer than usual to come out of his healing trance. That was something Eskel knew that both Dracula and Alucard would want to be in the room for.

He stood up slowly, because gods, he felt like he’d been run through a wringer.

“I’m here,” Ciri said, reaching for Geralt’s face and kissing his cheeks. “I brought Eskel.”

Eskel waved at them, then let his hand drop like a stone. He kind of felt like shit. It was good to see Geralt awake though.

It took Geralt a moment to find Eskel with his eyes, and then blink at him several times.

He frowned.

“...Were you having fun?” he asked eventually, his eyes settling on Eskel’s neck. Or maybe on the bloodstains on his collar, since the bites had already healed.

Eskel snorted, disgruntled. “Me? Not as such. Them?” He pointed to the closed bathroom door. “Yeah.”

Geralt looked to Ciri.

“Was he having fun?”

“Yes,” she said because she was merciless and ruthless like any witcher anywhere.

“Damn it,” Geralt said mournfully. “I bet they won’t want to bite me for days on end after the surgery. Gods know what I would taste like anyway.” He sank into the bed unhappily.

Eskel hung his head, and now he really wanted to run to the roof. The best he could do was turn around and rest his forehead on the door.

“Alucard? Dracula?” Geralt asked after a moment.

“They’re probably still busy fucking,” Eskel said, feeling grumpy.

“Again?!” Geralt sounded horrified. “And without me?!”

“How are you surprised?” Ciri asked. “You know them.”

“Actually,” Geralt said after a moment. “That is surprising. At least for Alucard.”

“It’s been a goddamn weird couple of days.” Eskel took a breath, and forced himself to be functional again. He walked over to the bathroom door and gave it a good hard knock. “Geralt’s awake, and asking for you,” he said to the door. “Pretty sure the nurses are gonna be in here soon, wanting to check his...whatever the hell he’s hooked up to. You might want to finish up.”

After that, he stalked over to the far wall and leaned on it, crossing his arms. Better to just stay out
of the way. He wished he had his armor and his swords. They would have been a comfort. Whatever look Ciri was giving him, he completely ignored.

He could see Geralt looking back and forth between Ciri and Eskel, but before anything more could be said, Dracula and Alucard came back into the room. Both looked reasonably well put together, which wasn’t much of a surprise. They weren’t out of the room for that long. The scent of sex and come tickled at Eskel’s nose, so he knew damn well they had enough time for at least someone to get off. Eskel could actually feel the satisfaction radiating off of Dracula, and Alucard’s cheeks were still flushed pink. More than that, there was still the faint smell of Eskel’s blood in the air, too.

As soon as they came in sight of the bed, Geralt smiled, though the expression still looked a little weak.

“You look better,” Alucard was the first to speak, going to the bed to lean over it and look at Geralt. “Much better.”

Geralt snorted softly, and closed his eyes. “I feel so much worse.”

Right as Dracula reached the bed, he frowned and turned to Eskel, tilting his head in confusion.

*Damn him and his perceptiveness.* Eskel hunched a little farther down and looked away, face burning. This was stupid. Dracula shouldn’t be looking at him at all. He should be happy with Geralt waking up, not bothering with Eskel’s bullshit.

Now he felt stupid on top of embarrassed and exposed.

Then Dracula was there in front of him, one hand on Eskel’s neck. He lingered there long enough to feel the smooth, newly healed skin. Then he threaded his fingers up into Eskel’s hair in just the right way. After months of spending time cuddling Eskel close, Dracula knew exactly how to make him melt the fastest, and this was definitely the start of it.

But standing there, knowing that Ciri was watching them, judging him, only increased his hurt and unhappiness. He wanted to run, to be alone for a while. Trying to get out of the room would do him no damn good, though. Dracula would just give chase, and right now Geralt needed his lovers around him. So Eskel just ducked his head away from Dracula’s hand and stared at the floor.

Dracula just pressed closer, pinning him to the wall. But he wasn’t looking at Eskel. He was looking over his shoulder to stare back at where Ciri stood next to Geralt.

“What did you do?” Dracula’s voice was cold, and he curled his hand around the base of Eskel’s skull. Almost protectively.

“She didn’t say, do, anything.” Eskel said quietly, not wanting to further escalate the unhappiness. Still, he was struck by how nice it was that Dracula actually cared, and how good the hand in his hair felt. A little of the tension left him and he tacked his head down into Dracula’s shoulder, hiding his face from view.

Dracula just hummed low in his throat, clearly not convinced. But he started threading his fingers through Eskel’s hair, and Eskel felt a little more tension drain out of him under the soft movement.

“What did you do?” Geralt asked, sounding confused and a little alarmed.

Before she could say anything, Eskel jumped in. “Nothing. Nothing happened. It's fine. I’m just tired.” And upset. And fucking stupid. He didn’t even know why he was so bothered by it all.
Before anyone else could say anything, there was a knock at the door. Realizing the position he was in, Eskel’s misery deepened.

“Not in front of more people,” he said softly.

Dracula hummed unhappily again, but backed away. He left his hand on Eskel’s neck, though, and Eskel took a moment to ruthlessly cut off his body’s reactions, shoving his upset down into a dark hole. He forced his face blank and his heart rate down, and settled into an easy tensed relaxedness. It was the same state he settled his body into before a fight. Loose, but focused. He looked up to see a room full of faint frowns.

There was another knock.

“Come in,” Alucard called out.

A couple of nurses bustled in. While Dracula’s hand on Eskel’s neck got a couple of sideways looks, they were fleeting. Alucard carefully took Dracula’s armored coat off of Geralt and held onto it while the nurses went about their checks.

After a few minutes of quietly changing fluid bags and checking bandages, another man walked in. He wore a long white coat and had on loose, dark blue clothes underneath, similar to what the nurses wore.

“Good morning, Geralt,” he said with an easy smile. “How are you feeling?”

“Dr. Miller,” Geralt waved a few fingers in greeting. “Terrible.”

Dr. Miller looked to Ciri and Eskel, then did a double take at Eskel’s eyes. “Family?”

“My brother and daughter. They can stay.” Geralt looked faintly amused.

Alright. Well, we’re gonna check those incisions again and, I’m sure, cut out a few hundred more stitches.” The doctor leaned over one of the areas where a nurse had just taken a bandage off. “This looks amazingly healed. Swelling is down, bruising color is coming along.”

He hummed, and put on a thin white glove, then pressed into some of the wounds. Holy fuck, but Geralt looked like a damn mess. Like they’d sewn him together from a pile of parts. The heavy scent of blood, lymph fluid, fresh scar tissue, old potions, and poison wafted off of him. Eskel’s lip curled up at the smell of it, and anger coiled up inside of him at the people who did this. He shoved that all down, too, and forced himself to be impassive.

“Mmm, yup,” Dr. Miller continued, gently pressing. “This looks very progressed. Even at the rate you’re healing, these deeper incisions are going to take a while to set and granulation tissue to grow in. I think we should leave the staples in on this chest incision in for another twelve hours at least. Maybe longer, we’ll have to see how you’re healing. It would be very bad for that wound to open up again.”


“If you were any other patient I’d tell you where you could put that question.” He gave Geralt a slightly sour look. “But as it is, based on your healing…” he sighed. “I’m gonna tentatively say pureed foods would be alright. Eat very slowly, and drink lots of liquids. We sewed up several holes in various parts of your digestive system. Even as advanced as the healing is, you don’t wanna tax those organs.”
“My aide set up food to be delivered as soon as needed,” Alucard said. “All we need to do is let my staff know we’re ready for it.”

After that, the doctor and nurses proceeded to pick out a fair number of stitches, cleaning and rebandaging as they went. The whole time, Dracula kept his hand on Eskel’s neck, rubbing small circles into the skin there with his thumb. It felt unreasonably good, and Eskel found himself relaxing bit by bit, despite himself.

“The bones all look pretty good, too,” Dr. Miller said once they were done. “Based on the swelling, bruising, and what I could feel as we were changing the bandages. It’s been just shy of twenty-four hours. You said your fingers might be useable by now, but not completely healed. How are they feeling?” He picked up one of Geralt’s hands and gently moved the bruised, splinted fingers around.

Geralt furrowed his brow in effort and the very tips of his fingers moved. “Doesn’t hurt too bad. Can’t even really feel it over the painkiller, anyways. I feel weak, though. Tired.”

“That’s normal. Your strength should come back as you recover. What that process will look like, well, I think we’ll know more as we progress.” Dr. Miller cast a critical eye over Geralt’s body once more, and shook his head. “Amazing. I think we can skip x-rays until later today. For now I’d like for you to get some liquids into you and rest. Use the bed to help you sit up, and someone else here holds whatever you’re drinking for you. No strain at all on those healing wounds.”

He gave Geralt the hairy eyeball, and then turned to Eskel.

“You have blood on your shirt collar.”

“I do,” Eskel agreed evenly.

The doctor gave a short start at his voice, and then squinted at him, eyeing his neck and Dracula’s hand that still rested on it. “Are you still injured, or otherwise in need of medical attention?”

“No.”

He glowered at Eskel for a moment and then pinched the bridge of his nose, sighing. Then he walked out.

Alucard settled Dracula’s coat back onto Geralt’s lap, and pressed a button on the bed. Geralt, Ciri, and Eskel all blinked in surprise as the top half of the bed began to slowly rise up, gently easing Geralt into a sitting position.

“Handy,” Geralt said, and dug one hand into the collar of Dracula’s coat.

Eskel caught Dracula’s gaze, and jerked his chin over in Geralt’s direction. “Go on. I’m gonna go get the food on its way.”

Whether or not Dracula went to go see Geralt, Eskel didn’t know, but he made no move to stop Eskel from walking away.

Eskel poked his head out of the door, and made eye contact with the guard there. “Which one of you should I let know that we’re ready for food?”

“I can relay that message, sir,” the man said. Like all of Matt’s people, this guy looked like a reasonably attentive guard. Fit, alert, and armed. What he was armed with, Eskel wasn’t sure, but he was more than a little curious to find out. Maybe when Matt woke back up they’d get a
demonstration.

“Thanks,” Eskel said with a nod, and shut the door again. He stayed there for a moment, settling himself. He could deal with his shit on his own time.

When he walked back to the bedside, Geralt was mid-explanation.

“...Supposedly had a signed decree from the head of their Order Grandmaster, but I know Siegfried, and he’s a good man. That doesn’t sound like him at all. We met in Vizima some time ago, back when Jacques de Aldersberg was the Grandmaster.” Geralt shook his head and frowned. “That guy I could believe would want me dead, but I already killed him. Had to fight Siegfried to get to him, but that wasn’t personal and we both knew it. Now...well, he’s kept the Order killing monsters, but they’re still branching out. Some of the Order very much preferred hunting down anything with a whiff of non-human about them, and others followed the teachings of the Eternal Light more closely.”

“Do you think there’s been a schism?” Ciri asked, leaning forward in her chair. “Could they have been misled?”

“Anything is possible.” Geralt tilted his head in a half shrug. “Who would bother though? That’s a hell of a lot of knights just to hunt me down.”

Ciri looked torn a moment. “It’s possible that someone got wind of your involvement in Novigrad.”

“Ah. Fuck. One of the leaders of the Redania Regency Council sort of hates my guts.” Geralt winced.

Ciri blinked. “Since when?”

“While you were in school,” Eskel piped up, “Dijkstra, head of Redanian Secret Service at the time, discovered the identity of your birth parents. He came a-looking for you. Geralt and Yennefer stopped him. That whole thing ended in a bit of a clusterfuck. Didn’t realized the man had made it onto the Regency Council.”

Geralt nodded. “The other council leader is Philippa Eilhart, head of the Lodge of Sorceresses. I haven’t met her, but Triss and Yennefer both know her. Whether or not they’re actually friends or are just pretending to be friends, I can never keep track. I try to stay out of sorceress business.”

“They did say they had suspicions about Redania being involved, but didn’t tell me their source,” Ciri mused. “But Redania isn’t the only group who could benefit from this, and if one group of spies could fake an order from a Grandmaster, another easily could as well.”

“You’re thinking of Nilfgaard.” Geralt sounded certain.

Ciri nodded. “They are meddling, pushing at every place they can. So much so that the Lodge hasn’t been able to track where all the threads tangle. Not only that, but Vesemir looked at the poison on the arrows they took out of you. It’s not uncommon, but it is found mostly in the south.”

“Temeria borders Nilfgaard. Trade still happens through there, though much of it is black market,” Eskel said, tapping his fingers against his arm. “They could have just bought it.”

“But the Order of the Flaming Rose doesn’t usually bother with poison arrows. Once they go hunting something, they tend to make a show of it, show off how good their blades are,” Geralt said.
“Plus, purchasing enough poison to supply that many men.” Ciri raised an eyebrow. “That’s not a light decision.”

“They could have had someone make it for them. The Viper school is down there.” Eskel hadn’t really run into many of the Viper witches, so he couldn’t say if they were as psychotic as the Cat school.

“From what I heard the Viper school isn’t really doing all that well. Nilfgaard refuses witchers entry into any cities. As far as I know, they’re not hunting the witchers, but they are making life impossible for them.”

“Fuck. That’s not good news for them.” Eskel winced in sympathy. “Even witchers can get desperate. I don’t know much about them, though. Cats, they’d hunt anyone and anything for a price. Wolf never would. We hunt monsters only.” He rolled his eyes. “And whoever is stupid enough to try and attack us.”

“There are plenty of people who could brew that poison,” Geralt said. “Considering the rumors about Nilfgaardian Secret Police and their Emperor’s drive to secure any and all possible advantages, I wouldn’t be surprised if they collected knowledge of rare poisons just to have them handy.” He hifting a little on the bed, clearly looking for a comfortable position and not finding it judging by the tired sigh.

Ciri grabbed a cup of water with some kind of white tube in it, and held it up for Geralt to sip at. “I admit, I wasn’t really expecting to get to the bottom of this right now. But I’m glad I was able to talk with you anyways.”

“How many were there actually?” Geralt asked, after sucking some of the water through that straw. Eskel had to admit it looked handy, so much easier than trying to deal with an open cup.

Ciri side-eyed Dracula for a moment. “Triss, Yennefer, and I looked through all the Order barracks, scrying. So far every single one in South West Temeria is empty. If there were twenty to thirty men in each, you were looking at maybe two hundred men. Maybe more.”

“Why couldn’t you just investigate the bodies?” Geralt asked with a frown. “You might have learned more, maybe got some written orders or other missives.”

The silence that followed that question was profound.

“Geralt,” Dracula said almost gently. “My Chaos power eats through enchanted armor as if it was paper, you think some flesh and bone would manage to survive?” Dracula shrugged. “There are no bodies.”

“There’s no nothing,” Ciri added, lips tight. “The land has been scorched to bare earth.”

Dracula looked pleased with himself.

Geralt took a breath and held it for a moment. Then he looked Dracula in the eye, calm as could be. “I’m glad you killed them all. And I don’t give a shit about the forest being destroyed.” He swallowed. “How far did you get before you stopped?”

“We caught up to him before he reached the first city,” Eskel said, side-eyeing Dracula. “The inhabitants probably already saw the darkness coming in, but they hadn’t seen Dracula.”

A tiny smile tugged at Geralt’s lips. “You moved slow enough that they could see you coming.” The smile grew a little. “Fuck, I wish I could move to properly thank you.”
Eskel shuddered, remembering the Hell on Earth that Dracula made of that forest, with the ash floating thick in the air and the heat so unbearable that it burned his skin within seconds.

That was the first time he’d ever seen Dracula as a god, not just a powerful vampire. Dracula usually did very well at appearing mostly normal. Even with the way he easily used his power around people, he still looked and acted human. In that forest, he abandoned all such pretenses and was just power incarnate. Eskel had no idea why he’d came up with the ridiculous idea to hug Dracula then or how in the hell it had worked, but he was grateful it did. He didn’t even want to think what would have happened had Dracula reached the city.

“Call for help earlier next time,” Alucard said, sounding chiding and colder than usual. “Don’t wait ‘til it’s too late.”

Geralt looked down, abashed. “I tried. I ran a bit, but it wasn’t a problem. I was free and damn clear by the time I called the first portal. Hell, I still had my horse then. Some arrows stuck in us both, sure, and a few scrapes and cuts, but nothing a round of potions wouldn’t fix. But the mage they had with them.” He shook his head, and swallowed hard. “It was like they were watching for it. The portal dropped before I could even get to the Wolf, and then they just got closer. Every time I opened it they found my direction and it was harder to run.”

“The Wolf portals open in places naturally suited for that purpose, places where ancient connections between worlds exist,” Alucard explained. “They can’t open just anywhere. There has to be a proper amount of natural power and ambient shadows around. Since they lead to a dark place, there can’t be too much light power around. Their purpose is to protect the traveller, so they will close by themselves if conditions change enough travel wouldn’t be safe for the traveller.”

Geralt stared at the coat on his lap. “I’m sorry.”

“For what?” Dracula asked, watching Geralt with unreadable eyes.

“For cutting things so damn close. For nearly dying on you all. If I’d been smarter about the whole damn thing none of this would have happened. I should have just tried to get to you the first chance I could. If I’d gotten to you sooner, I wouldn’t have been so hurt and you wouldn’t have been so angry. I just thought...everything that dies around me, that’s on me.” His face twisted into a pained grimace.

Eskel rubbed his face. Geralt and his stupidly large heart. How anyone thought that witchers were heartless when confronted with Geralt, Eskel had no idea.

“It’s not your fault somebody set a trap for you,” Ciri said, leaning closer to Geralt. “It’s theirs. They chose a side when they decided to hunt you down like some kind of animal.” She shrugged. “They didn’t count on you having any support, but that’s on them. Next time don’t cut it quite so close, and all will be well, right?” She looked at Alucard and then, briefly at Dracula. “No rampaging then?”

Alucard looked at Dracula and then back to Ciri, raising his hand with thumb and forefinger almost touching. “Maybe just a smidge.”

Dracula huffed but didn’t oppose his son’s statement.

Rather than answering, Geralt hung his head a little farther. A difficult task considering how injured he was, to be sure. Eskel knew damn well what was going through his mind, and he was having none of it.
He walked over to Geralt’s side and lifted up his chin so they could look each other in the eye.
“Geralt. You’re fine. You’re not dead. We’re not dead. No one anyone gives a shit about is dead. If
you want, after this we’ll get blackout drunk and have a good row about it. But quit fucking
blaming yourself for every damn bad thing that happens around you. Leave the sulking to Lambert,
he’s better at it.”

“You’re grumpy today,” Geralt said, watching Eskel with wide eyes.

“That’s my default setting,” Eskel growled and then jumped when he felt Dracula’s hand on his
head, patting him like he was a goddamn cat.

“It is true,” Dracula said, still running his hand over Eskel’s hair. “He is often grumpy.” He
sounded very…fond of that actually. Eskel gave him a hairy eyeball. “I think it’s cute,” Dracula
announced after he caught the glower.

Heat flooded Eskel’s face and he ducked his head a little, which only meant he got a good look at
Geralt’s smirk. “Argh,” he grumbled under his breath and took a step back. What Ciri said rang
back through his head, about how both Dracula and Alucard seemed to find him appealing. He
didn’t know what to do with that, especially in light of Dracula calling him cute.

The idea of fleeing the room once again sounded pretty ridiculously good, but Dracula’s hand was
still on his head, running through his hair. It felt awfully nice. He glanced towards the door, and
debated.

The hand in his hair changed, clawed tips on Dracula’s fingers pressing gently against his scalp in
mute warning that Dracula was a predator and should Eskel try to run, Dracula would hunt him
down. A tiny shiver raced up Eskel’s spine, then he sighed quietly.

Out of options, the only other thing he wanted to do was lean right into Dracula’s hand. Or maybe
lean into Dracula in general. But he very much didn’t want to do that with Ciri watching. He was
well and truly full up on additional commentary about what he should be doing or feeling about
whatever he, Dracula, and Alucard did together.

“Now that I told you everything I remember,” Geralt looked up at Alucard through his lashes,
trying hard to look cute. He failed, but given all the bandages, that wasn’t too much of a surprise.
“Can I get a kiss?”

Alucard smiled, leaning down to fulfill that request.

“Yes.”

Alucard’s hair covered most of what happened next, falling in a silvery curtain around him and
Geralt. Eskel could hear the faint, wet sounds of a kiss that Alucard obviously tried to keep gentle.
Geralt’s hand closed on Alucard’s forearm, keeping him in place.

“And a bite?” Geralt asked, looking at Dracula once Alucard pulled up.

“No,” Alucard, Dracula, and Ciri chorused together, frowning at Geralt.

Eskel just snorted and rolled his eyes. “Step one, stop bleeding on accident, then maybe they’ll
consider making you bleed on purpose.”

Geralt just sighed softly, like he expected that answer but had to try anyways. “Kiss?” He looked
hopeful up at Dracula again.
“Yes,” Dracula said with a smile, abandoning Eskel to move closer to Geralt. "I'm glad to see you awake again," Dracula murmured as he leaned down. His kiss wasn’t nearly as careful as Alucard’s. He used one hand to tilt Geralt’s face for better access and proceeded to fuck Geralt with his tongue---slow, deep, and wet.

While they kissed, Eskel wandered over to the door. The food would probably be here any minute. Ciri got up to meet him, clearly angling to chat with him while the others were occupied.

“Whatever I said--” she started softly.

“Forget it,” Eskel interrupted harshly. “It doesn’t matter.”

She frowned at him unhappily. “...Alright. Now that I’ve had a chance to talk with Geralt, I’m headed back. I’ve got to meet up with Triss and Yennefer, and see where this goes. Do you want to go with me? I can drop you at Kaer Morhen, or you could come with me to meet up with them.”

Truthfully, Eskel wasn’t really even that tempted. He wasn’t particularly good at intrigue, or even politics in general, and he knew damn well he’d go bonkers waiting in Kaer Morhen with nothing but Vesemir and Night’s antics to keep him company.

So he pretty quickly shook his head. “I’ll stay here for a bit. Come back to check on us when you can, though. Now that Geralt’s awake he’s gonna be climbing up the walls from boredom.” He smirked at her. “And you have a pretty guard to woo.”

Ciri blushed.

“What did I say about your nose?” she grumped.

“I’m being helpful,” he mock-protested, happy at least that things had settled between the two of them.

She growled playfully at him.

“Don’t break Matt while I’m gone.”

“...I won’t break anything you’ll want to use,” Eskel offered. When she just glared harder at him, he threw up his hands. “Fine, fine. Maybe only a little bending.”

“Don’t get over-excited old man, your heart may give out,” she grumped, hitting him none too gently on his arm. Damn, he knew he should have insisted on keeping the armor. The shirt was no protection at all.

“Ahhh, but witchers are heartless, so I’m safe on that front.” He grinned at her, refusing to show even a wince at her punch to his arm.

“Take care,” he said, sobering up. “Don’t let yourself be caught in a trap. If somebody hunted Geralt down so brazenly, they can do it to any of us.”

Ciri nodded.

“I’ll find Lambert and tell him to be careful.”

“Good girl,” Eskel said quietly, and gave her a hug. He hoped very much that whatever powers had decided to move against Geralt wouldn’t bother to look any further. Their little family was small enough already.
Then he looked to where the vampires were both crowded around the bed and Geralt, and amended his previous thought. Their little family seemed to be growing. He thought of the sex demons, Iga, Eyra, and Ian, back at Kaer Morhen, and how lived-in the keep felt again. Even Night messing around in the garden had a strange flavor of nostalgia to it. Because now there was someone there to cause trouble at all.

“I like what they did to our lives,” Ciri said unexpectedly. When he looked at her, she was staring at the vampires, too. “Geralt is happier than I have ever seen him. More careful, too. There were times when he wouldn't call for help at all, not just wait too long.” She looked at Eskel then. “Vesemir looks more alive than I have seen him in years, grumping about demons in the castle but picking flowers and making food for them at the same time. And you.” She touched her fingertips to his scarred cheek. “You look happier too, most of the time. No longer so removed.”

He looked at her for a long moment, and then looked down. “That’s what you’re misunderstanding. It’s not about sex. It’s about family, and closeness. They actually give a fuck about me, Ciri.”

“Why do you think I don’t get it? I do. I can also see what you can’t. It may not be about sex now, or for you, but if you ever indicated otherwise, Dracula would have had you on that couch, audience or no.”

Painful heat flushed Eskel’s cheeks, and he couldn’t quite look her in the face. That wasn’t actually news for him. He’d always been pretty sure that Dracula would have been happy to fuck him. But there was a lot loaded into that issue.

He knew Dracula wanted sex, but sex for Eskel was always an impersonal thing. Something he did to let off some steam or scratch an itch. Sometimes it was just to feel someone else next to him, touching him in a way that wasn’t painful.

What he had now with Dracula and Alucard was so much more than that. He couldn’t bear the thought of losing the closeness that they shared, just so he could be the casual fling on the side. He didn’t want to lose what little joy he had now just to get off from time to time. Nor did he want to turn into Dracula’s backup-fuck for when his real lovers were busy.

There was also the fact that he really wasn’t sure if he was interested in men at all. He wasn’t attracted to other men, but he was attracted to Dracula. Alucard, too, a bit. Maybe that was only because of the effects of the bites and the power breathing; Eskel couldn’t be sure.

Eskel knew that he liked Dracula beyond the sudden lust the bites invoked, liked the man and his often unbearably honest approach to life. He also knew that while he craved the contact, he would have never accepted it if the decision was left completely in his hands. Dracula pushed things at him, forcefully more often than not, but never beyond what Eskel was ready to accept.

Alucard was a different matter. His power made Eskel just as ridiculously horny, but he’d only swallowed Alucard’s power once. And, sure, sometimes when Alucard showed up looking to cuddle, smelling of spent sex and power, Eskel had a reaction. That was just the scent of it all getting to him, and the aggressive way Alucard wrapped around him. Probably. Prior to today, Eskel would have said that Alucard didn’t have any interest at all in Eskel. But when he was sucking on Eskel’s neck...that felt different.

The truth was, now that Ciri had started him thinking on it, Eskel wasn’t really sure. About anything.

“I’m not…I don’t want to interfere with Geralt’s relationship,” he settled on finally, unable to
express himself properly. While he had many concerns, that was his biggest one. No matter what Eskel might want, he’d rather fling himself into hell than fuck with a relationship that obviously made Geralt ridiculously happy.

Ciri tilted her head.

“You should maybe talk with Geralt. I think he knows a lot more than you think he does. I think he already gave you permission to do as little or as much as you want.” She shrugged with a wry little smile on her face. “There’s not a single selfish bone in that man.”

“Which is exactly why the rest of us need to look out for him.” Eskel sighed.

“Try and talk to him, you might be surprised by his perspective.” Ciri put her hands on Eskel’s shoulders and pulled him in for a hug. “Don’t be so hard on yourself, Eskel. Have a little fun, you’ve earned it.”

He crushed her close for a moment, grateful beyond words that she’d shown up in Geralt’s life, and therefore Eskel’s as well. When he pulled back, he gave her a wry smile. “Go say goodbye to the others, and be on your way. Else we might convince you to stay a bit longer. But there’s work to be done, and the Path doesn’t want to go unwalked.”

Eskel watched her go and couldn’t help but feel stunned by the scope of her acceptance. Of everyone’s acceptance really. The way Dracula easily followed that original request Eskel made about there being no sex, and how Alucard and Geralt just joined them in bed whenever Dracula tracked him down for some forceful cuddling. Now that he was a bit calmer and looked back at other people’s reactions, Ciri and Vesemir might have made plenty of comments about his closeness to Dracula, but they hadn’t actually asked him to stop or outright claimed he should stop. They ragged on him, yes, but as Ciri proved right now, not because they disapproved.

Maybe he would talk to Geralt, just to clear the air between them. They’d let things go unsaid for too long now.

Ciri went back to Geralt and hugged her father, whispering something very softly to him. When she straightened, she gave a small wave towards Dracula who was hovering close by.

“Take care of my father,” she said, looking at Alucard. “I’m going to go find my things before I leave.”

Then she ran up to Dracula and kissed him on the cheek before he had a chance to do anything. In the next heartbeat, she was running up to Alucard. He bent down obligingly for her, letting her kiss his cheek, too.

“Thank you for saving him,” she whispered. Then she was out the door and talking to one of the guards.

Eskel followed behind and made sure the door was shut firmly behind her. No sense in inviting intrusion.

When he turned back to the other occupants of the room, he was surprised to find Alucard leaning on the couch and watching as Dracula and Geralt made out, with Dracula perched on the edge of the bed. Damn, but Dracula was fast. Eskel didn’t even hear him move.

“My Father decided to leave with Ciri,” Alucard said. “He decided it would cause less commotion than if he left after.”
Knowing Dracula, Eskel wasn’t sure that any exit the man could make would be anything less than dramatic. He pursed his lips.

“I need my swords back before he goes.” He had absolutely no idea where Dracula even put them. One moment he had them, and then Eskel had looked away for two seconds and they were gone.

“You gave him your swords?!” Alucard sounded shocked enough he turned to look at Eskel with wide eyes.

“It was either that or let random humans have them.” Eskel shivered.

“Humans would have been a better choice,” Alucard said. “Do you know what he does to swords or other weapons he takes?” He looked a little frazzled.

“No idea, but I know he’ll never sell them or give them to his drinking buddies or fucking…” Eskel rubbed his eyes and tried not to think about watching his blades, his life and livelihood, stolen from him and given to drunken idiots who wouldn’t know the ass end of a good sword if they fell on it. Drunken idiots who then proceeded to beat the shit out of him for weeks.

It was possible that Eskel still had some lingering issues leftover from the past summer.

“He shoves them all willy nilly into that place out of time he keeps stuff in and then forgets about them and you have to wait for days for him to remember to give them back!” Alucard raised his arms. “I couldn’t even summon my sword and I can summon it from a different world if I have to!” He took a deep breath. “Never give him anything for safekeeping, god only knows what mess he has in that space and how long it’s been there.”

Eskel just rubbed his face and sighed.

“Nothing is ever easy,” he grumbled, resigned to the fact that this was probably gonna be a pain. “Although now I’m curious as hell about what else he’s got squirreled away.”

Alucard looked conflicted.

“On the one hand, I’m curious too. On the other, I’m a little afraid of the answer.”

That made Eskel huff out a laugh. “So situation normal then, for Dracula?”

Alucard looked conflicted.

“No idea, but I know he’ll never sell them or give them to his drinking buddies or fucking…” The thought of his blades with drunken idiots made Eskel shudder. They weren’t good with people.

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That was sort of what he’d been thinking about too, in a way. “I think what we did was alright. Maybe there was a line, but I don’t mind that we crossed it.” He looked at Alucard out of the corner of his eye. “I’m not yet sure myself where it’ll go. If anywhere.”

“It wasn’t…like the cuddling,” Alucard said, looking down and then at Eskel and down again. “You know that right?”

Eskel winced and then blushed. “Ciri brought it to my attention, yeah. I’m,” he paused, grasping for words. “I’m mixed up about it. Not sure what I’m feeling. Not sure what you all think about it either.”

“Then why did you go with it?”

“It felt right.” He shrugged, and fidgeted with his sleeve cuff. “That moment felt right.”

Alucard was watching him from the corner of his eye.

“You knew he and I were heading for sex,” Alucard said slowly. There was a hint of a blush on Alucard’s cheeks. He wasn’t one to show off his relationship or physical closeness to other people.

“When I offered a taste, no. I didn’t think that far ahead. By the time you and he were kissing, yes.” Fuck, but this was hard to talk about. “I think,” he said slowly, “I think I just got used to the feeling of that. You three always smell of each other. That want is always there for you.”

He paused, and swallowed heavily. “I didn’t think I wanted that, too, but now I don’t know.”

Alucard shifted.

“I know you haven’t,” Alucard started. He swallowed and then turned to look at Eskel. “But did you want to?” Alucard looked to where Dracula was still doing his best to eat Geralt alive. “With him?”

And that was the question, wasn’t it?

“I don’t know,” Eskel whispered, but there was just as much curiosity in his voice as there was confusion. “There are times where I wonder. What we have now is more important to me, but his power, his bite…” Eskel’s face burned, and he ducked his head. “It makes me want him. And you. I don’t know if that’s something I can…do. And I don’t know if that’s something you all want, too. I’d sooner leave than fuck things up for you three.”

“You can’t,” Alucard said. “What we have with Geralt is solid, you don’t have to worry about damaging it. We are the only ones that can destroy it. You?” Alucard looked to him. “You are already part of us. Whatever you choose to do…we will accept. For me, sex is less important than connection. My Father, for all his physicality, is not one to share affection easy or at all, really. You shouldn’t worry about us. Just about yourself.”

“I didn’t even want to consider the possibility for, for more, until I figured out if you all wanted me like that. I’m not really the type people wanna keep around.”

He thought of the witcher lullaby. He comes, he’ll go, leave naught behind, but heartbreak and woe.

“It doesn’t have to be all or nothing,” Alucard said gently. “Geralt was a bit of a revelation for me. My only relationship before was my wife and then my Father.” He shrugged. “I know Geralt loves you like a brother, like family.” He looked to where Dracula and Geralt were still making out. “I
haven't talked to Geralt yet, but I think he would agree with me. Nothing is expected of you. If you
need time to make any decision, that’s all right. If you decide you only feel comfortable with my
Father, that…that is also all right. You have a very special place in our hearts.”

Pleasure bloomed in Eskel’s chest, filling him up to an almost painful degree. “Yeah, I need to talk
to Geralt, too. But you know, I’m still alright with you drinking from me. Even if you just want a
taste. If you think it could…only be a sex thing for you, we could have Dracula or Geralt there to
help with that, until I figure out if I’m alright with that, too.”

The thing was, he remembered how easy and wonderful Alucard’s power felt inside of him. How
much he wanted to touch and taste Alucard when he was filled up with that warm energy. Who was
to say what he might feel when, if, Alucard drank from him? Based on the shadows of pleasure he
felt while Alucard’s mouth was on his neck, he could bet it would be good.

“It felt good, you know,” Eskel said quietly, his face on fire with his blushes.

“That’s thanks to him.” Alucard nodded towards his father who was still, unbelievably, making out
with Geralt. “I don’t know how to control what a bite might feel like. He is often harsh, but he
cares a lot. Enough to make sure he causes pleasure instead of pain. He would have to…teach me.”

Eskel smirked at him. “You know I don’t actually care if it hurts or not. That sort of thing doesn’t
get me off, but it wouldn’t bother me.”

“Causing pain doesn’t interest me.” Alucard frowned. “I don’t like that there are aspects of my
abilities that I can’t control.”

Eskel shrugged. “Let me know if you want to practice. Once he’s healed up, Geralt will trip all
over himself to volunteer for that. He likes things rougher than I do, too. But there may be less
pressure with me.”

“He does like it rough,” Alucard agreed with a tiny smile.

After a moment, Eskel asked, “What did it taste like? When you…when you tasted me.”

It was embarrassing to ask, but only a tiny bit. They’d already talked about so much, and Eskel was
intensely curious how Alucard experienced drinking Eskel’s blood.

“You were thinking of him, of how it felt to be bitten,” Alucard said slowly. “That in itself was…
intense. Hot. But you also tasted like welcome and acceptance. Sweet. Like you wanted this to be a
comfort.”

“Yes,” he said roughly. “Our lives are filled with such precious little comfort. I wanted you to feel
at ease. Like you make me feel, and how he makes me feel”---Eskel nodded towards Dracula---
“when the world is too much for me.”

“He has a way of making you feel safe.” Alucard shook his head. “Him of all people.”

Eskel leaned in a little, brushing their shoulders together again. “You do, too. I didn’t realize how
much I wanted it, needed it.”

“You have it now. He’s not going to take it away you know.”

Eskel ducked his head and took a moment to breathe. It was still hard to believe that this wouldn’t
end. He could have this closeness, have people to hold and touch, whenever he wanted or needed.
“Did you like it?” Eskel asked. “The taste of me?”

This time Alucard looked him right in the eye.

“Yes.”

For whatever reason, a small wave of relief went through him. “I’m glad.”

Eskel looked at Alucard and remembered how the younger vampire let Ciri kiss his cheek. He realized that he never touched Alucard outside of very specific situations. Mostly Dracula was the trigger. He either already had Eskel squished under him like a particularly unruly cat or Alucard was all high on blood and snuggly, looking for warm bodies to snuggle up to. There was a definite pattern, one that Eskel let develop because he felt uncomfortable reaching out first.

This whole debacle made him think about how it must look to Alucard, that Eskel never came to seek him out for an embrace. That he only waited until Alucard or Dracula found him first. He touched Alucard’s arm, feeling a sharp pang of guilt at the brief flash of surprise he saw in his face before it was hidden. He kept pulling until Alucard was facing him fully and then a little more, until he could wrap his arms around the vampire. He held on to him until he felt Alucard respond, and his tall body curl down to fit into Eskel’s arms.

Eskel held him close, letting his scent envelop them both and then kissed Alucard’s cheek, just like Ciri did.

“I’m glad Geralt stumbled into your castle,” he whispered against Alucard’s skin.

“Me too.”

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Dracula stepped into his castle. His clothes changed to his more familiar attire the moment his boots touched the stone of his bedroom’s balcony.

There was a giddy sort of warmth curled deep in his chest. Alucard was making progress. He’d tasted Eskel’s blood. It wasn’t drinking, wasn’t anywhere close to any feeding, but it was such a huge step nonetheless. He tasted human blood, a willing donor, and he did it himself.

When Eskel offered, Dracula honestly didn’t expect anything to come out of it. When Alucard put his mouth over the half healed bites that Dracula had left earlier, Dracula had to lock his body tight not to react and maybe spook his son.

Eskel was being so good, such a good witcher as he held still for Alucard and as he let Dracula position him for better access. He was even better when he offered himself for another bite, not fighting him at all. Dracula touched his lips remembering the taste of Eskel’s blood, how it felt to share it with Alucard, and his son’s reaction to it pouring down his mouth.

Eskel deserved gifts. A reward. Everything he wanted. Dracula never expected the witcher that Alucard had brought home like a stray kitten to turn out to be so instrumental in teaching Alucard not to starve himself.

As pleased as he was with that turn of events, there were still other issues that Dracula needed to deal with. Mainly, being a proper deterrent for those out to hunt what belonged to him.

Seething, black, vicious anger still bubbled up inside of him over what had happened to Geralt. He’d listened to his little witcher family talk about who might truly be responsible, and he’d
debated about laying waste to all of them. It would only be a couple of countries, but every potential enemy would be very thoroughly burned to ash and thus no longer a threat.

As satisfying as that would be, Dracula had to remind himself why he hadn’t interfered in Geralt’s world earlier. His actions had consequences, not the least of which that both Geralt and Alucard would be displeased with such vast destruction.

Had Geralt actually died…well, Dracula couldn’t say if he would have been able to stop himself from leveling that kind of destruction anyways. But Eskel was correct. Geralt was alive and would recover fully. Dracula could read in between the lines of Geralt’s apology, too. He feared the destruction that Dracula would wreak if called too quickly.

That had him very minorly torn. Anything Dracula could do to encourage the witcher to actually fucking ask for help would be worth it. But the burning need to wipe out any who might dare to touch his people, his souls, was extremely hard to derail.

He’d have to reserve judgement. It was good that Geralt admitted that he should ask for assistance earlier. That was a good first step. Dracula would just have to watch and see how that all played out.

But in order for Dracula to actually watch the situation closer, he couldn’t be worlds away any longer. Never again would he find himself waiting, unable to reach out and directly see if Geralt was dying alone in a ditch somewhere. Just the thought of it made him bare his fangs and sent ripples of Chaos fire wafting off of him.

He knew that his plan of action would drastically, drastically, shift the balance of powers in that world. But this was still the less invasive of options. No one could fault him for simply wanting to secure a safe stronghold in Geralt’s world. And if in doing so he protected Geralt and the rest of Geralt’s little family, all the better. The rest of humanity would cope.

And, really, Kaer Morhen was tiny. He could just tuck it into one of the inner courtyards. Granted, the mountain it was attached to was a tad bigger but he was confident he could fit that in, too. It would give the witchers a little room to run around in without getting into the castle proper. No doubt they’d like the space.

He stepped through the heavy double door into a mostly dark corridor of old stone and high, arching windows. The ceiling above him was full of gold and green patterned glass and the sharp arches gave a sense of height to the already high ceiling. Some of the windows were broken. Cold wind and snow howled in from the outside and glass crunched under his boots as he walked.

The castle was movable and malleable, but it still had a backbone of sorts. There were hallways, corridors, and whole sections of it that he made sure Geralt, Eskel, and even Alucard wouldn’t be able to access.

This part was built by the Bernhards originally, back when the castle was still a regular building, before they summoned the demon that changed it. It was one of the few parts of the castle Dracula couldn’t change as he pleased.

He found a way to control it anyway.

The room at the end of the long corridor was sealed heavily and only his blood could open the locks. He’d only used this room once, to bind his own demon to the castle and make sure it would be his, not the other way around.
The heavy stone door was plain, covered in just the simple carving of an old tree. The roots were as heavily defined as the leaves above, all of it carved into the white marble of the door. On the floor just under his feet, there was a small basin carved into the stone tile. Thin channels lead out from basin to run along the edges of the door. They curled up over the wall around, encircling the whole door to meet in the middle above the arch of the door. There at the very top was the stone visage of a fanged mouth, jaws open and empty.

Dracula raised his wrist to his mouth and ripped his flesh open, severing arteries and veins and causing blood to gush out in a thick wave. The dark liquid splashed into the shallow basin; the moment it touched the spelled stone, it began to glow bright red. His wound healed immediately, closing up without a mark.

The smoldering blood in the basin began swirling by its own volition. Against all natural order, it flowed in the grooves connected to the basin, along the floor, and up the channels on the wall. With every inch, a new set of glowing seals was revealed on the stone door.

His blood reached the top of the frame and filled into the snarling maw, creating a shining orb of red within those teeth. The seals on the door were so bright that he had to raise a hand to shield his eyes from the glare.

A click echoed through the castle as the door opened, loud enough that Dracula could feel it in his very bones. This was more than just a room that he had opened; it was the very center of the castle.

The inside of it was plain. From the color and wear on the stone it was clearly older than the part of the castle where Dracula had his personal quarters.

There were only two major features to the small stone room.

The first was the intricate seal carved into the smooth floor. It was large and round with runes covering every inch of the outer circle. Similar to the templates used for his Map Rooms, but far more advanced. A shallow indent lay right in the middle. That was where the focus for the castle would sit.

The second was a slightly raised dais with two large activation spikes rising up out of it. They weren’t as streamlined as the ones in the Map Rooms, being the early version of them, but they served the same purpose. His power gave life to the castle, and to its inhabitants, too, in many cases. That power was in his blood, therefore it was his blood that was needed to activate the seal.

Dracula stepped into the room, and the moment he did he could feel the castle go still and turn its attention to him. The last time he was here, he had stripped it of most of its free will, forcing it into obedience the same way he blood-oathed the vampires and demons that had come into his service.

The castle was a complicated being though, and as such Dracula had to bind it in a special way. Rather than make himself the focus of the castle’s bindings, he’d used another demon to be that proxy. One that was completely and utterly *his*, and once the binding was done, it was intrinsically entwined with the castle. Over the years, that demon had changed, losing its shape and becoming a fluid being that had no beginning and no end as the castle grew. It had lost its consciousness as a singular being, but it gained a different kind of awareness. Dracula could feel it now being centered on him.

“Orlaith,” Dracula called out, letting his power ripple and flow through the word and down into the stones of the foundation. “I summon you.”

It only took a heartbeat or two for those ripples of energy to seek out its target and come back to
the room in a wave. Blood soaked through one of the side walls, squirming out of the seams like worms. It pooled down onto the floor, and then rose up, manifesting into the shape of a woman.

She was clad in pale gray, and her skin and hair matched. The style was severe. Dracula knew it was because of the room they were in. Orlaith reflected the castle in many ways, for she was bound to it as thoroughly as anything could be. Her eyes were the only part of her that stayed the same color no matter where she appeared; they were glassy green with just a touch of blue, like deep, frothing waters.

“My Prince,” she said, kneeling before him with her head bowed. The heavy sleeves on her long dress coat flared out around her as she knelt, and she clasped her hands in front of her.

“Orlaith,” he returned the greeting. He stepped up to the activation spikes. “I have a task for you.”

“I live to serve, My Prince.” Now she looked up at him, giving him a dry look and a raised eyebrow. “It is good to know My Prince remembers me after such a long time.”

He snorted.

“Are you unhappy about something?” he asked, motioning for her to get up from her knees.

She stood and dusted off her leather pants and tall boots. “Not...as such. But there is much to do. Many things to keep in order. So much fell into decay in the last centuries while I, while we, slept. And there are a few inhabitants that need a careful hand. Nothing that cannot be handled, but it is time consuming.” Then she cast him a shrewd look. “But I think you do not summon me for those small matters.”

“You won’t like what I am about to do,” Dracula said. Already he was focusing on the power he could feel buried deep in the stones of the room. He’d need every scrap of it to do what was needed.

Orlaith frowned a bit and furrowed her brow, then looked around the room they were in. She looked back to him, her eyes a little wide. “There are only so many things you would need this room for, and all of them are drastic.”

“I’m moving the castle to a world of my choosing.”

He knew that would mean he would have to tear down every single mooring, every root that Orlaith had built in the several hundred years that she had managed the castle. Since the castle was her, bound so deeply they were one body, he would be tearing off parts of her own being in the process. And he would need her to work with him during it, to shore up the wards, and to keep the castle as contained as possible for the transfer. She was the only one capable of dealing with the unfathomable fluidity of the castle and how it existed on multiple levels of reality at once.

Her eyes grew wider still and he could see her hands shake a bit. More than that, he could feel a slight tremble in the stones, a reflection of her worry.

She licked her lips, clearly at a loss. “When?”

Dracula looked at the only spot in the seal without runes etched into it, that indent right in the middle of the floor, and then back to her. What he was about to do probably wouldn’t be as bad for her as the binding was, but it wouldn’t be much better.

“Now.”
A shudder raced through her, and she closed her eyes. “Tell me of the place we are going. Are there mountains? I liked the mountains here. Nice firm rock to grow into.”

Dracula stared at her for a moment, feeling something that felt surprisingly like guilt.

“There are some. Smaller than what the castle is rooted in now, though there is a larger range to the east,” he said, watching her face fall. “We can take some of the mountains with us if you want?” He was already planning to spend a lot of power, what’s a little more in the grand scheme of things.

A tiny smile flickered across her face and she opened her eyes to look at him. “The more we move, the worse it will be for both of us. I can always grow my own once we get there.”

“Whichever you choose is fine by me.” He shrugged.

He wasn’t afraid of pain. Nothing he would ever feel would compare to that moment so long ago when Zobek returned his memory to him and showed him all the atrocities he committed while under his control. No physical pain could even register in comparison to that agony.

She hummed at him, squinting a bit. “Some of our buildings are built on them, so those will have to come with. Overlook Tower. The Old God’s garden. Carmilla’s wing. The rest we can leave. Once we’re established in the new world, I’ll set my will to the lands around us to make it a little more palatable. Nothing like a nice, tall mountain range to keep interlopers out.”

“We’ll be settling around an existing keep. It has a tiny mountain, too.” Dracula hoped Vesemir liked mountains. His was tiny, but it was still a mountain. He hoped the old witcher would like to see a proper range.

“Aw. How cute.” The smirk was back now, but he could tell that Orlaith was pleased at the idea of a captive mountain. “Any idea where you want to put it?”

She made a gesture and dark blood seeped out from the cracks in the stone floor. It swirled together, clumping up until it formed a sprawling mock up of the castle, at least its above ground parts.

“Since there are people coming in and out, I was thinking of somewhere close to a gate but still protected by the walls,” Dracula said musingly.

“This wouldn’t have anything to do with that sweet talking lover of yours, would it? He’s so nice.”

Dracula raised his eyebrows. Orlaith was generally unwilling to like any guests at all.

“Sweet talking?” he asked.

“I can see why you like him,” she said with quiet amusement. “He always remembers to say thank you, even when lost, and doesn’t leave a mess.”

Dracula shook his head.

“He makes friends wherever he goes, doesn’t he?”

“Perhaps,” she said. “I haven’t tested that theory yet. I keep him out of some parts of the castle.”

“Good,” he said approvingly. There was no need for Geralt to see all that inhabited the castle.

“Be warned, though, My Prince.” Orlaith gave him a serious look. “He is kind and curious, and
more than one denizen of this place has become curious in return. I sense no ill intention yet, but at
some point they’ll start looking for an excuse to meet him.” She sighed, and the roots of the castle
sighed with her. “Though this move will distract them for a while.”

There were ghosts in this castle, souls trapped in here forever, some attracted by its dark power,
some born in it. So far, neither Geralt or Eskel had managed to stumble onto any of the more
dangerous inhabitants, but they would eventually. Dracula knew it was unavoidable. He would
have to deal with it when the time came.

The smile that crossed Orlaith’s face wasn’t quite vicious, but it was a touch predatory. “It’ll be
good for him. He’s got to learn at some point. I’ll supervise.” Then she looked over the map before
them, and pointed to one of the courtyards. “There. Will that fit the tiny mountain and the little
keep? Nice heavy towers. A good large wall.”

Dracula could see her already thinking up plans. “That will work.”

He put his palms on the activation spikes.

“Step into the circle,” he ordered.

Orlaith clenched her fists and then relaxed them, just once, before she bowed shallowly and did as
he bid her.

The moment her foot crossed the first line of the seal, her clothes melted away. She was naked as
she stepped into the blank spot left for her in the middle. Glowing runes lit up her pale skin,
covering every inch of her from the top of her head to the soles of her feet. They were the marks of
ownership and the binding ran bone deep. So deep that any attempt at separating her from either
the castle or from him would destroy her. Orlaith existed for one purpose only, and that was to be
the bridge for Dracula and the yoke for the unruly castle that thought it could make Dracula its
host.

She knelt down on the spot left for her and the seal shivered. It moved around her, twisting in place
and glowing with a faint blue light. It rippled and shifted until the grooves cut into stone had
stretched out to touch Orlath’s body, ready to receive and transfer Dracula’s power.

“Shore up our defences, Orlaith,” Dracula said. “We don’t want things to be left to grow
unchecked. Whatever we can’t take with us has to be thoroughly destroyed.”

“Yes, My Prince.” Her voice was a distant echo and a cavernous thunder at the same time. Power
writhed around her, and he could feel her stretch out her influence, touching every part of the vast
castle complex.

He pushed his palms against the spikes. The sharp stone broke through his flesh and sunk deep into
his palms, and the pain sparked, bright and awful up his arms. His blood began to flow, dripping
down the spikes and onto the floor where shallow indentations directed his blood towards the seal.

The moment his blood touched the seal, Orlaith started working. Stone and lava and brick were
viciously pruned. Each bit was dug up with power, scooped out of the world they were currently in,
and held tight to the castle’s main body. Ward after ward flared along his senses, each one being
uprooted along with the buildings they were attached to. There was a sound, not quite audible to
the physical ear, but a low shuddering screech nonetheless, as both the castle and the world around
it were ripped asunder.

It wasn’t enough. Dracula knew it wouldn’t be enough.
The spikes in his palms changed and opened, spreading the wounds and cracking his bones. He grunted and clenched his teeth. Blood poured faster now, and the first ring of the seal changed color from blue to red. He could feel the castle coming to attention, feel it struggle against Orlaith’s grip. She pulled at his power, the drain hitting him hard as she worked, despite the agony of cutting out pieces of herself while doing so.

The blood reached the second of the three rings around Orlaith and slowed. Even the opened spikes were not enough. It wasn’t only about his blood and power. It was about pain, too. The castle would obey, but it would extract its price from those wanting to control it.

Orlaith was pale. Her eyes were half open and sweat beaded down her forehead as she worked for him. Her lips trembled and there was already a thin line of blood coming out of her nose, skirting her pale lips and dripping off her chin to splatter on her small breasts. She looked skinnier, her ribs were starting to poke out from under her paper thin skin. He could see the bumps of her joints become more pronounced as the damage intensified.

They would both pay the price of this spell.

The opened rosettas of the spikes turned in his wounds, dragging the shattered pieces of his bones apart. Another smaller spike emerged from the middle and lanced up and into his palms. The pain from the additional spike was negligible in comparison to the agony of his hands, but that wasn’t all. At first, Dracula felt a spreading cold, feeling like almost almost a relief as the new spike released liquid into his body.

It took a moment for the poison to hit.

The anticoagulant in the poison sped up the bleeding, making his blood pour twice as fast out of his wounds. Any natural creature would have long since bled out by now, but Dracula’s blood was a physical manifestation of his power; endless and corrosive.

As the poison spread, it burned. It seared him from the inside like fire, seizing his lungs and belly, bringing forth agony at such levels that he had to toss his head back and scream. His power raged around him, storming and pouring itself down the seal, down through Orlaith, and into the castle proper.

In that moment they were one, all three of them. He could feel the agony of the poison, and of his broken hands. Could hear the wail of Orlaith losing pieces of her very being as she cut and tore, unmooring the castle from where it had grown for so long. Dracula was them all and nobody at the same time. He was power. Energy. Rage and pain that howled in the room, tearing at the stones, and set the seal to burning.

His blood was at the third circle now, touching Orlaith and climbing up her body in thick streams, setting her binding marks ablaze.

It crawled up her folded legs and her chest, covered the withering shapes of her breaths and skinny neck, and then slithered over the reedy thin hair and onto her face. It poured in to her half open eyes, changing them from sea green to solid red, and finally into her panting mouth.

As soon as it did, something clicked. A harsh, deep resonance sounded through the castle, and the storm of Dracula’s power died with it.

Dust trickled down around them, and the floor vibrated and rolled under them. Orlaith’s agonized cries were barely audible above the overwhelming sense of moving.
The world shattered and shifted around them, torn apart into a thousands bits and reforming around them. Dracula couldn’t see anything in the room anymore, but he knew every inch of it as he knew the skin on his body, just as he could see and feel every part of the castle. They were one, and through him, they moved to where Dracula chose.

He could feel the sky burst into being above them and the earth shudder below them as the new world received his castle. They dug into that fresh earth, watering the transfer with blood and molten rock, while the keening fear of the castle’s many inhabitants vibrated through the walls.

The ground settled and the screaming din of the rush of power faded away, until all Dracula could hear was his own panting breaths and Orlaith’s pained moans.

He was on his knees.

The achingly cold stone floor was painful under his joints. His hands were still speared by the spikes, the stone punched right through his mangled palms.

With a wet, sucking sound, he pulled his hands off the spikes. He gritted his teeth at the pain, and let them rest on his knees as he breathed and waited for his body to heal and reform itself into its proper shape.

It took much longer than usual.

By the time he managed to pull himself upright, dizzy and sick to his very stomach with exhaustion, the last vestiges of power had faded from the room.

Orlaith was lying curled up on her side, her body nothing but ravaged bone and skin. Her cheeks were sunken and her belly was nothing but a concave piece of flesh. The bones of her hips stood out in sharp relief. Her heavy, shuddering breaths came out with a rattle, and she was still bleeding sluggishly from her nose. Her eyes were half open, though, and were moving enough that Dracula knew she was conscious.

“Take a smaller form,” he said. He put his still bloody hand onto her shoulder and pushing some power into her. It hurt. He was so raw and ravaged inside that even that tiny push of power was agony.

It was enough, though.

Orlaith’s form shivered and became insubstantial. Once the dark mist cleared, instead of the emaciated woman, there was a small black cat laying on the floor. The cat didn't look much better than her human form. It was skinny, too, and it had matted fur and sunken sides as it lay panting on the floor. It still looked significantly better than her human body. The smaller form would be marginally easier for her to manifest.

“Put everybody on lockdown while I sleep,” he ordered, sitting back.

Dracula didn’t bother trying to get up. Instead, he let his body burst into shadows and float away.

He needed to rest, to shore up his resources after pouring such an insane amount of power into the castle and the surrounding lands.

The process wasn’t finished. There was a lot of work to be done, but Orlaith would be able to do that on her own once she recovered some.

Dracula reformed in his bedroom. The balcony showed him a sunny, calm winter morning instead
of the ever raging blizzard that characterized the last world the castle stayed in. Sunlight blazed off of the snow caps of the mountains he brought with them, and he could see the deep green forests around Kaer Morhen and the keep itself just peeking out from behind Overlook Tower.

He laid down on the bed sheets, still smelling of Alucard and just barely of Geralt, and let himself rest.

Chapter End Notes

From Quarra: Now you know why the working title for this fic was Dracula's Moving Castle, or just Moving Castle for short.

I cackled a lot over that.
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Note from Q: We deviate slightly from witcher canon here again with how quickly and by what means Geralt acquired Ciri. It's only mentioned in passing, but I figure a heads up is good.

Matt took just enough time off to get a few hours of sleep and a meal to-go. As much as he needed the rest, he knew he'd be fine with a couple less hours than normal. It wasn’t like he’d be able to sleep a full night anyways, not with all the crazy bullshit he’d had to cope with in the last day or two. His head was too full up with possibilities and plans.

Because of that, he was back on Trevor’s floor in the hospital by early evening. He’d set up the basic security plans for the press brief before he’d slept, so there wasn’t much to do once he got back in, just a regular check up on final details to fill him in on everything that had happened while he slept.

Part of him was extremely grateful that Belmont Sr. apparently left sometime during the day; that took one volatile element out of the equation. Another part of him would have preferred Belmont Sr. to stay where Matt could see him. The way Belmont Sr. had waltzed into the hospital, unseen and untraceable, was incredibly disturbing. Matt’s imagination kept running impossible and terrible scenarios of the man showing up again just as unexpectedly and with more sinister plans in mind.

He had no idea what to feel about the fact that Ciri left, too. Eskel had stayed, apparently acting as Belmont Sr.’s own guard dog at Geralt’s bedside.

Trevor met him in the hall on the way to Geralt’s room. He was back to looking like the primly collected CEO that Matt was used to. Every strand of hair was neatly braided into place, his dark grey suit was crisp and clean, and his eyes were safely covered in contacts once again. As ever, John was just a step behind, briefcase in hand.

“Matt,” Trevor said quietly, carefully adjusting his sapphire cufflinks. “I appreciate you keeping an eye on Geralt and Eskel. Eskel is generally quite sensible, as witchers go anyways, but Geralt.” He paused, clearly choosing his words. “He is getting restless.”

A guy who looked like a patchwork quilt somehow had enough energy to be restless. Matt blinked hard, but then he remembered how little he liked to be laid up in bed.

“I could turn on the press conference? I’m sure they’d be interested.” Nothing like TV to keep a person occupied.

That actually made Trevor furrow his brow. “Yes. You may have to explain things to them. They both are…sheltered in some ways.”

Sheltered.

Matt thought about the scars and strangely antiquated weapons. Maybe his original cult idea had
some merit.

“Noted, and I appreciate the heads up. Should we expect more company this evening?”

Trevor shook his head. “I won’t rule it out, but it’s unlikely. Ciri has other matters to attend to. As for my Father…” He shrugged. “He comes and goes as he pleases. Best not to make any assumptions on that front.”

Matt held back a sigh.

“I assume that Eskel is Geralt’s personal bodyguard?” Matt asked, even though he already knew the answer. If it were any other family, he’d say that Eskel was just there to support Geralt as his brother. But from what he’d seen of the witchers so far, that didn’t seem very likely. Not with how Eskel was armed and how he moved like the whole world was suspect.

His boss gave him a tiny smile of approval.

“Yes and no. If somebody manages to get through your people, Eskel will take care of them. And he will make sure Geralt doesn’t get too out of hand in the meantime.”

Matt did not envy Eskel the job. Not only constantly on guard, but doubling up as a nanny to boot.

Right before Trevor walked off, he paused. Almost as an afterthought, he said, “If you do end up knife fighting, keep in mind that Eskel fights dirty. And try not to get too much blood on the floor.”

Matt blinked. That was maybe the oddest thing he ever heard his boss say to him. He looked over at John, who was staring at him with wide eyes. Giving him the same exact look he gave Belmont Sr. earlier. Matt felt offended. He wasn’t that bad!

“Thank you, Matt. We’ll be back in a couple of hours.” With that, Trevor and John headed to the elevator, to be joined there by an additional security detail.

Matt rubbed his eyes and wished he’d thought to get himself an extra coffee before he got in. Something with espresso shots.

He made his way into the room.

He knocked on the door out of politeness, and got a faint, “Come in,” in response.

Geralt was resting upright in his bed while Eskel held a spoon in front of his face. Both men looked ready to strangle the other.

“This is bullshit,” Geralt grumbled, but dutifully took a bite.

“Shut the fuck up and eat your mush,” Eskel bitched back, digging out another spoonful of something vaguely orange.

“I want to eat real food,” Geralt said after swallowing his mouthful of mush.

“I want my swords, but life fucking hurts sometimes.” Eskel sniffed at the orange puree and shrugged a little, clearly not finding anything to be offended by in the smell.

“What did you do with your swords? Didn’t you just get a new set?” Geralt raised an eyebrow, then waved a couple fingers in greeting to Matt as he walked in.

“Arrrgggh. You know how I can’t stand people taking them.” Eskel tossed the bowl onto the small
table next to the bed. “Not after last summer, anyways.”

“More,” Geralt demanded with the grumpiest expression ever. “And I get it. They fucking stole all of your stuff and pawned it. I would have gone bonkers if it was my gear.”

Eskel sighed, grabbed the bowl again, and held up another spoonful. “Stole it, pawned it, and then came back to fuck me up some more. Anyways, this asshole—” Eskel pointed the spoon at Matt just as Geralt was trying to bite, which earned him a growl. “Shit, sorry.” He angled the spoon back so Geralt could eat. “This guy wanted me to give them my stuff. All of it.”

“I’m Mr. Belmont’s head of security. Letting armed people in to see him isn’t generally a wise plan,” Matt said logically, taking a seat along the wall, something that gave him line of sight to the door and to the witchers. He remembered how Geralt said the standing made him nervous. Based on how unhappy both Eskel and Geralt looked, adding extra nerves was the last thing any of them needed.

“Might as well have told you to bend over and drop trou,” Geralt grumped, eyeing the bowl of mush in Eskel’s hand. “Maybe we can funnel this stuff down my throat?”

That just made Eskel shudder. “No. You get a spoon.” He held up another bite. “In any case, Trevor’s father offered a compromise. We got these flimsy things to wear, I got to keep half my gear, and he got my swords. But the asshole wandered off without giving them back. Who the fuck even knows where he put them?”

Geralt forgot about his incoming bite and looked up at Eskel in obvious horror.

“He took them away!?”

Eskel just nodded glumly. “I’m sure I’ll get ’em back eventually, and it’s not like I’m doing any hunting here. I keep reminding myself that he’s the one who got them for me anyways. He can replace them if need be.”

Geralt thought for a moment, then tilted his head in a shrug. “You’ll get them back. Eventually.”

“Yeah.” But Eskel still sounded like someone ran over his pet hamster.

It was tempting to feel bad for him. But there was the fact that Eskel was still covered in enough weapons that he could probably easily go on a fairly lengthy murder spree and still not run out. Plus, while Matt understood the compulsion to keep favored weapons close at hand, it’s not like Matt and his people were bums on the street. Trevor hired carefully and paid for the best. Eskel’s swords would have been well cared for.

The spoon feeding went on in silence for a minute or two. Then Eskel looked at Matt and nodded towards a table filled with a rather lavish looking spread of various foods.

“Help yourself. Babysitting is hungry work.”

Matt’s lips twitched in amusement at the wording. At least everyone was on the same page with what was happening here.

A sour expression twisted at Geralt’s face. “Everyone gets real food but me.”

“Yes, because yesterday your stomach was filled with poison arrows! Feel lucky you’re getting mush instead of clear broth!” Eskel held up a cup with straw for Geralt to sip from.
While Matt didn’t have any siblings, he could see the behaviors as clear as day. As pissy as they both were being, Eskel was careful and considerate with his nursing, and though Geralt talked a good game, he submitted to the care with a minimum of fuss. It was obvious they cared about each other. It also made for a pretty funny picture, but Matt was too much of a professional to show just how amused he was by the squabbling.

But as he watched, something about Eskel caught his eye. Some brownish red on either side of his collar. Dried blood.

He frowned, and pointed to the collar. “Did something happen?”

Geralt snorted softly in amusement, but still glowered a little.

“I’m fine,” Eskel said dismissively, and fed Geralt another spoonful.

Right. Sure he was. The skin next to the collar looked fine, so whatever may have caused the bleed had already healed. Or maybe the blood came from someone else.

Since everyone who’d entered the room had come out of it safe and sound, Matt had to discount that theory. Unless Eskel had been stalking around murdering the nurses while everyone else was distracted. Matt couldn’t help but think of the trophy hook on Eskel’s belt. But that idea was ridiculous, too. The bloodstain was too small and placed too awkwardly for that.

Matt was tempted just to ask him, but held his tongue.

The grumbled, “Everyone else has all the fun,” from Geralt didn’t help ease his suspicions any, though. “I can’t believe you did it with both of them,” Geralt muttered under his breath.

Oh wait what now.

A bit of a blush colored Eskel’s cheeks. “Like you wouldn’t,” he muttered back.

“I’ve been fucking trying for ages!” Geralt looked extremely sullen now.

Eskel cast him a sympathetic look. “Trust me. I know. In more detail than I ever wanted to.” He paused and held up the drink. As Geralt sipped, he glared. Eskel blushed a little harder, and looked off to the side, avoiding Geralt’s gaze. “We talked a bit. Once you’re better…they, I, might. Uh.”

Geralt raised an eyebrow at him. “Yeah?”

Eskel’s gaze flickered to Matt, so quickly that Matt almost missed it. “I donno. For me anyways, I donno. But you,” he raised an eyebrow and pointed the spoon at him. “Think of it as incentive to stay put. The less stress on your wounds, the faster you’ll heal.”

“The things you get up to when I’m not looking...” Geralt sighed, shaking his head sadly.

“Oh don’t give me that shit, Mr. Got Lost In A Castle And Staggered Out Bowlegged.” Eskel gave him a look. “Have you fucked the castle yet? There’s a betting pool for when you get around to it.”

Matt wasn’t even sure what the fuck they were talking about with the castle stuff, but he couldn’t help but think the conversation had veered wildly away from bloody shirts.

“I’m not stepping out on him!” Geralt looked wide eyed at Eskel. “Would you in my place?”

The look that crossed Eskel’s face was a complicated one, and he bought himself some time by feeding Geralt another bite.
“Only if I was feeling particularly suicidal,” he said finally. “But sometimes it’s hard to tell what he’ll go for.”

Okay, now Matt was fairly damn sure they were talking about a shared lover, and he was guessing that lover was Belmont Senior. Which was mildly terrifying. Were they both kept...boys? Kept assassins? That theory also made a staggering amount of sense. Belmont Sr. clearly had a type. Big, scary, scarred to hell and back. Matt couldn’t imagine it though. There was something so wild, so untamed about the older Belmont, Matt couldn’t see him as anything but a potential threat.

What was more interesting was how much Trevor seemed to care about Geralt and Eskel as well. Usually, that sort of arrangement didn’t really lend itself to close ties with family members. Then again, after listening to them talk the other night, they all seemed to share similar terrible past experiences.

“He’s not that bad.” Geralt’s expression softened. “You just need to talk to him and be clear about what you want. He’s receptive.”

Eskel side-eyed him, and hummed noncommittally. He scraped the last spoonful out of the bowl and offered it to Geralt.

“So finishes the creamy carrot. You want another? Some egg? Maybe some fruit mush?”

That earned him another glare, but if it was because he skirted the conversation or if it was because of the mush, Matt couldn’t tell.

“I want real food,” Geralt said mournfully. “But give me the fruit mush.”

Eskel wandered over to the table, and looked around the bowls there. He snuck a bite or two of some bread while he looked. “I donno what half of these are. Smells sweet though. How about blue. Blue smells like a good option.”

While he got that ready, Matt spied the remote for the flatscreen on the wall. “You two want to watch Mr. Belmont’s press brief?”

The men looked at each other, looking strangely confused, and then back at Matt, nodding in unison. Matt had a sinking suspicion they didn’t know what a press conference was, but dismissed that notion as impossible.

He grabbed the remote off one of the end tables and turned on the TV. He did not expect the reaction that simple move made. As the image popped up on the screen, both men started in place, eyes wide, though Geralt’s flinch ended in a wince.

“Everything okay?” Matt asked, straightening up in alarm.

They looked at him in unison, and he was struck suddenly by the intensity of the gaze. He’d been able to mostly ignore their odd looking eyes, but the way they both focused on him like that made the hair on the back of his neck stand up. There was something in the way their vertical pupils narrowed and honed in on him that felt vaguely predatory.

Sheltered. Trevor said they were sheltered.

An awful thought occurred to him. They’d been raised to do nothing but fight, and fight with blades at that. Geralt had side-eyed a hell of a lot in the hospital, from the x-rays to the automated bed to the monitors taped onto him. And now the TV.
What if they’d never watched TV before? Matt had heard of some deeply fundamentalist religious groups who banned it within their sects, but he had to assume that the members at least knew what it was. Could wherever Eskel and Geralt have been raised be worse?

Then he thought about that creepy as shit lullaby.

_Yes. Yeah, let’s go with worse._

Then another, even more awful thought struck him. If they haven’t seen any of the modern things like this hospital or the TV, yet still followed direction no matter how strange, that meant they had a type of obedience that sent shivers down Matt’s spine.

“TV,” Matt said, waving a hand at the screen. He was aiming for casual and calm, hiding the tension deep down. Whatever they knew or didn’t, if he didn’t make a big deal out of it then they’d feel more at ease. With men that heavily armed, or wounded, the more at ease, the better. “Mr. Belmont’s question and answer session will be on in a few minutes. I just need to find the right broadcast channel.”

He specifically used the most explanatory language he could while still sounding normal. ‘Question and answer session’ instead of ‘press briefing’. ‘Broadcast channel’ instead of just ‘channel’.

That seemed to help, because both Eskel and Geralt relaxed minutely, and nodded. It also had the added benefit of not making Matt sound like an utter idiot on the off chance that his assumptions were off target.

He flipped channels for a minute while they watched with rapt attention. After a moment, he brought up the channel guide on screen, and started scrolling though.

Matt paused to read the small font and barely paid attention to the pop up ad playing, showing commercials with half sound on.

It was the startled reaction from the witchers that pulled his attention back to what was showing on the screen.

“Allucard the Vampire, the ambitious remake of the cult movie from 1982!” the announcer was saying. “_He’s a knight born of darkness, a tortured soul trapped in a forever young body. He longs for love, yet is doomed to be eternally alone. While battling evil, this dark antihero brings out the hidden desires in the young heir of one of the most prominent families in Castlevania._”

Across the screen flashed images of a handsome man with long, black hair, looking out over the city rooftops. His face was twisted into a grimace that showed off delicate fangs on his canine teeth.

Matt glanced back at Eskel and Geralt.

Eskel’s jaw was dropped to its widest extent, and Geralt had one bandaged hand shoved over his open mouth. Both of them had eyes so wide Matt could see the white all the way around the iris.

He looked back to the screen in time to see a flashing image of the handsome man crawling over a mostly naked woman. There was hunger in his eyes, and his teeth were slightly bared. She arched under him, gasping. The camera panned through a risqué shot down her side and over her naked thigh, cutting away just before something inappropriate for daytime TV was shown on screen.

Then there was a flash of some type of combat. This was followed by the clash of a combat cross.
chain as it wound around a sword, while two darkly dressed figures snarled ferally at each other.

There were a few other one-second flashes of various combat scenes and beautiful women with blood trailing down their necks.

**On Demand Now!**

“Alucard the Vampire,” Geralt said in a kind of awed glee.


“---*The Vampire,*” Geralt finished for him. He was clearly dying to laugh, his whole body hunched up with the effort not to.

“Do you think he saw it?” Eskel asked, eyes just as wide and voice hushed. His face was doing strange things, as if he was fighting ten emotions at once.

“I don’t care, I want to see it.”

They both turned to Matt. If their gaze was uncomfortable before, it was nothing compared to the absolutely ferocious focus they leveled on him now.

“We need to see that,” Geralt said, his voice holding all the gravitas of a man delivering a death sentence.

Matt looked at the yellow ‘on demand’ button displayed prominently on the looping add. Trevor could afford to pay for one movie. He paused a moment, and looked at them.

“The press conference is going to start soon. Do you want to watch that, or the movie?”

They looked torn.

“Can we watch both?”

“The question and answer thing will be shown in real time, so it’s broadcasted as it’s happening. The movie is a recording, we can start that any time we want, pause it, rewatch it.” Matt waved the remote at the TV. He still felt vaguely like he was being an idiot explaining it this way. But on the other hand, if they were insulted he was certain they would let him know. “Most stuff on TV are just recordings like that. If you want to see both, we can watch Mr. Belmont talk to the press, then put on the movie after?”

“Sounds like a good idea,” Eskel said, dragging his chair around so he was facing the TV. Geralt was mouthing something that looked suspiciously like *Alucard the Vampire,* with the oddest smirk on his face.

It took effort not to shake his head, but Matt was a professional. He could keep his incredulous disbelief to himself.

After another minute of searching through the guide, he found the right channel and settled in to watch.

The brief hadn’t quite started yet; there were still people milling around, finding their seats. The chatter was quiet, but Matt could hear the note of excitement in the air.

Not surprising.
Trevor never talked about his private life, and any questions asked in that vein were deflected or refused. This would be the first time he allowed the subject at all. Matt sort of dreaded what questions might come out of it, and he dreaded the post conference speculation more.

“This is happening right now?” Eskel asked.

Matt nodded. “Downstairs. There’s probably a minute delay or so, but yeah, it’s live.”

“Reminds me of Triss’s megascope,” Geralt mused quietly. Whatever the fuck he was talking about, Eskel seemed to know because he just nodded in agreement. “Hey, can I have that blue stuff?”

“Oh, right.” Eskel absently scooched his chair closer to the bed and held out a spoon of the fruit mix. The effort wasn’t a great one. Neither one of the men were really paying attention.

On the screen, John walked up to the microphone lectern. The press immediately settled down, taking their seats and holding up recorders.

“Mr. Belmont will be giving a short statement and then take a few questions.” John spoke clearly and calmly; by now this was old hat for him. Trevor got a lot of press, and John handled crowds like this with regularity.

There was a quiet excited murmur as John stepped away and Trevor stepped up. He looked smart and crisp, seemingly not noticing the multitude of flashes going up at him or the barely controlled murmur of the crowd. Matt was pleased to see that his security detail were all in place, looking calm and collected. He’d spent some time planning their movements, organizing where they should stand, and making sure they swept the room slowly and carefully. Every member of his team knew their job, but Matt liked to double check everything anyways.

“Thank you all for coming,” Trevor said evenly. “I know that there has been a great deal of speculation in the last two days, but I’d like to assure you all, I am in the best of health. Roughly a day and a half ago, a close family friend had a life threatening emergency. I immediately had us flown here for medical attention. Most of yesterday was spent in emergency surgery. To my vast relief, it was successful. I have to thank the wonderful staff here, as well as the hospital director, Dr. Bryce, for their swift expertise, incredible skill, and unfailing compassion in handling this delicate situation.”

There was a short pause, and then hands shot up as each reporter called out hoping to get their question answered first.

Trevor pointed at one in front.

“Mr. Belmont, can you tell us the identity of this close family friend?”

Matt had to swallow a laugh. Yeah, right. They always asked questions they knew they wouldn’t get answered.

“For security reasons, no. The Belmont family values privacy a great deal, so I appreciate the press’ discretion in that matter.”

That was also laugh-worthy. The press would dig as much as they could and everyone knew it. Only they hadn’t dug up much about Trevor. Never even a hint of anything about his parents or his past, nothing about past relationships. Matt’s boss drove the collective representatives of various media insane with curiosity. He was an impossibility in the modern world, and up until now Matt not only had never needed to cover up any uncomfortable skeleton from Trevor’s past, but he also
barely had to worry about his employer so much as stepping outside of the Tower.

Trevor pointed again, this time at a different side of the room.

“Are you willing to say what the nature of that life threatening emergency was?”

“For privacy reasons, no.”

Geralt and Eskel both snorted in amusement.

“Are there other members of your family here with you in the hospital?”

Trevor paused a moment. “My Father has visited.”

After that, a rush of shouted questions flooded the air, all dealing with Belmont Sr., someone that there was no public information on.

Matt had a terrifying moment of imagining Belmont Sr. going out to meet the press in his intimidating black suit and armored coat combo.

But Trevor held up a hand, quieting them instantly. “My Father values his privacy even more than I do. I won’t be answering any questions about him.”

The disappointment was palpable even in the broadcast.

“Will you be staying here until the hospital releases them?”

Trevor nodded. “I will.”

“How much longer do you anticipate being in the hospital?”

“We are unsure, but if all goes well only a few days, after which we will retire to a private location for the duration of the recovery.”

Matt noted the look of surprise on Geralt’s face, as well as the quick glance down to all the bandages.

“If you keep healing well, we’ll probably head out to the Tower soon,” Matt explained. “We need to make sure more surgery is unlikely, but after that the Tower will be more comfortable and more secure.”

Eskel fed Geralt another bite of fruit slush. “You all that worried about getting attacked?” he asked.

“Honestly? Yes. Mr. Belmont is both wealthy and famous. People are willing to do some really crazy things to get in on that. Plus there’s still the lingering threat of the Infected.”

While they chatted, the questions kept coming. From the sounds of things, Matt expected they were almost at the limit of what Trevor was willing to suffer through.

“Mr. Belmont! Is this close personal friend actually your significant other? Is there another addition to the Belmont family?”

Eskel and Geralt dissolved into snickers and giggles.

“Ow, ow, ow,” Geralt said in between laughs. “Oh gods, that hurts. Haha! Ow.”
Trevor blinked at the reporter, for once looking truly surprised. A small, sad smile crossed his lips. “I am afraid that my wife and only child died many years ago. No more questions.”

With that information bomb dropped, the press went crazy, shouting more questions at Trevor’s retreating form.

Matt stared, shocked speechless. Wife and child? Fuck. Not only was the man a child soldier, kidnapped as a little kid, but he also lost his own child, too? Matt suddenly felt his respect and sympathy for Trevor ratchet up. He’d survived the horrors of his past, and he also managed to do a lot of good in his life, too.

“I’m surprised he mentioned that,” Geralt said softly. “He doesn’t like to talk about it.”

“It’s a good bit of misdirection, though,” Eskel said, raising up another spoonful. “They’re gonna be so worked up over that old news that they’ll completely forget about looking into you.”

“You know him. He doesn’t like strangers knowing things about him,” Geralt said, watching the ads replacing the conference room image on the TV screen.

“He likes you significantly more than some brief discomfort.” Eskel pushed another spoonful of mush at Geralt.

Sensing that the mood was spiralling down, Matt turned the guide back on and switched to the on demand selections.

“So,” Matt asked, watching as the preview came up on the screen. “You want to see the movie now?”

That had the desired effect. Both Geralt and Eskel immediately looked at him like Matt had offered them a shopping spree through Knives R Us.

“Yes.” Geralt nodded vigorously once, then winced. “Please.”

“Mind your stitches,” Eskel said sourly.

“Don’t be so pissy, you’re not the one with the stitches.”

“I am the one who’s gonna have to calm everyone down if you decide to be a fucking idiot and re-injure yourself. Eat your mush.” Eskel glowered at Geralt, who had the grace to look abashed.

It was interesting that Eskel even acknowledged that. Was that an official part of his…job? Position? Or did he just take it upon himself to do it?

“Yes, mom,” Geralt mumbled around another spoon. For as much as the man kept eating the mush, he didn't seem any less hungry.

Eskel snickered, and scraped up another spoonful.

Matt set about getting the movie set up. While he fiddled with the buttons, he felt Eskel’s eyes on him.

He waited it out. The look didn’t feel menacing, just evaluating.

“You should eat, too,” Eskel said, nodding towards the table. “Or get a drink.”

Matt shook his head. “I’m on duty. I’ll take a lunch break later.”
“You know nothing in this city can get through me to him, right?” Eskel tilted his head curiously. It wasn’t bravado. He said it like it was just plain fact. Frighteningly enough, from everything Matt had seen so far, he was starting to believe it.

“With one or two exceptions,” Geralt grumbled.

“Shut it, they’re on our side.” Eskel scowled at him and held up a drink which Geralt sipped gratefully. He looked back to Matt. “I’m just saying, you look tense. There’s no need to be.”

Matt thought about Belmont Sr., and about all the things everyone involved with this whole affair was talking around. He thought about the blood on Trevor’s lips and Eskel’s collar, and the scars that all of them sported.

“Says the man who didn’t want to give up his blades.” Geralt raised an eyebrow at Eskel.

“Hush you. You sleep with things much more dangerous than simple blades.”

“So do you.”

Eskel looked like he swallowed a surprise lemon at that rebuttal.

“Shut up and eat your mush,” he grumbled, all but forcing the spoon into Geralt’s mouth.

The hell were they sleeping with? Rockets? On one hand, that level of paranoia was a little unsettling. On the other hand, given everything else that Matt had heard in the last day or two, just sleeping with some knives didn’t seem like that big a deal.

Matt pressed play on the film, and decided that a cup of coffee wouldn’t kill him, or them. Eskel had a point, after all. There were plenty of guards out in the hall. He was only in the room because both Belmonts had asked him to be.

It turned out that the scrumptious spread didn’t offer anything with caffeine. Water, some iced and some flavored with lemons. A couple different kinds of juice. No coffee. Not even tea. It made sense, though, if they were trying to keep Geralt from taking any stimulants. Anything that would tax his system would be something to be avoided.

He settled for a glass of apple juice and turned around just in time to see the gleeful looks on both Eskel and Geralt’s faces. The intro had just started, and already both men were practically vibrating with excitement.

To be honest, he hadn’t really thought that they’d be the type to go for supernatural romance. Though if his suspicions were true, they probably didn’t have any preferences at all. If nothing else, both of them were consummate fighters, and Matt kind of dreaded their reaction to seeing the action scenes. He’d learned to watch adventure movies with a grain of salt, or really a whole truckload of it in some cases. They would be exposed to the ridiculousness of commercial movies for the first time.

Matt had never seen this film; it was still fairly new and sort of outside his regular area of interest, so he wasn’t sure what to expect. He had seen the original, but it had been a long time.

Ominous music started playing, and the camera panned over parts of Castlevania City. Must have filmed on location, or at least got good aerial shots. Some credits flashed over.

“Is that the garden?” Eskel asked. “The forest one, not the herb garden.”
Geralt squinted and tilted his head. “It kinda looks like it? But that is definitely one of the towers.”

“Huh.”

For all that the two of them seemed to be rather out of place here, they obviously recognized Castlevania City. Which was odd. They should have seen more tech, then, if that was the case.

“I guess the city really was built over Dracula’s castle. So strange. It’s like the people here literally ask for trouble.”

Cold dread pooled in Matt’s gut. They didn’t recognize Castlevania City. They recognized Dracula’s Castle. His jaw dropped.

“You two—” He swallowed hard. “You two know the ruins of Dracula’s Castle, but not the rest of the city?”

Eskel and Geralt shot him a look, then looked at each other.

“Honestly? Probably best you don’t know,” Eskel said. “Safer.”

That was a yes. That was definitely a yes.

Matt thought of the City Memoirs that he’d read as a kid, and then thought of the strange nature of Geralt’s injuries and his and Eskel’s strange weaponry.

Another stray thought hit him. When Trevor had told them that Dracula was alive, elsewhere, Ciri wasn’t surprised. She wasn’t even worried. It would make sense for Geralt and Eskel to have the same information she did. The implications kind of hurt his brain, so he shied away from them. Instead he tried to focus on the movie and not on how well the scenery fit into the old stories about Dracula’s castle.

The voiceover started. As Matt sort of expected, it was the smooth, cultured voice of the pretty boy actor they’d got to play Alucard.

“For over a thousand years, I have watched this city. Cared for it. Bled for it. In all that time, no sacrifice has pained me as much as the emptiness in my heart...”

Commentary from the witchers on the ruins of Dracula’s castle was replaced by stifled snickering. When the camera panned to Alucard, with his long, black hair and a heavy flowing cape blowing in the night’s breeze, Eskel snorted, and Geralt rolled his eyes.

“The hair. Look at the hair.” Geralt waved a few fingers at the screen.

“Gods. This is great. This is so great,” Eskel said, one hand on his face, trying to hold in laughter. Matt wasn’t completely sure what was so funny, but as long as they were amused he was going to count the whole thing as a win.

“The hell is with that giant cross he’s got?” Geralt asked.

That was probably rhetorical, but Matt answered anyways. “It’s a combat cross.” He raised an eyebrow at them. With their love of ancient weaponry, he was sort of surprised that they didn’t recognize it. “You know. Holy cross with an extendable chain on the end? Sometimes they have a weighted ball or blades at the end of the chain?”

They looked at him like he was the crazy one here.
“Where the fuck does the thing keep the extra chain? How does it extend?” Eskel asked.

“If the point is to have something holy, why wouldn’t they just get a plain old chain, and put the blessed object at the damaging end? Wouldn’t that do more damage?” Geralt tilted his head in confusion.

Matt shrugged. Not like he didn’t have the same exact questions when he was introduced to the idea of a combat cross as a kid.

“Maybe it’s magic?” he said offhandedly.

The really scary part was both Geralt and Eskel nodded, as if that was a perfectly acceptable answer.

“Seems like a waste of power.” Eskel held up a spoonful to Geralt. “He could just carry a chain.”

“Are these things really a real weapon?” Geralt looked to Matt.

“They used to be. No idea if anyone uses them now,” Matt said with a shrug. “Legend has it that Alucard fought --- or fights, because many believe he’s still around somewhere --- demons, though the stories mix up how he goes about that. Some say he’s got a broadsword, others say combat cross, since that’s the traditional weapon of the Brotherhood of Light.”

He raised up an empty hand, absently showing his utter confusion. Matt had never really studied up on any of this stuff. Most of it had long since passed into myth and fanciful legend, anyways. How much was historical truth and how much was elaborate hyperbole was a hotly debated subject.

Matt hadn’t thought about it much, himself. Maybe once upon a time there were creatures like that, but he’d assumed that most of it was rumors and scary stories, spread by people who had survived the rule of a terrible tyrant, and exaggerated by centuries of retelling.

At this point, the film had sped along to some kind of combat. Matt had to admit, the effects were good. Alucard whipped his way through a series of vampires; each one was dressed in thematically appropriate gothic apparel and had glowing blue eyes and sharp fangs. The chain of the combat cross burned right through them, cutting them in half and turning them to ash.

“Wait, wait, are these supposed to be vampires?” Geralt asked in between bites.

“Lower bred vampires don’t look like that at all. And where are the bodies?!” Eskel shook his head.

“Bodies?” Matt asked. Critique of the vampire slaying wasn’t really what he was expecting when he rented the film. Also, lower bred vampires? As if vampires in general were a thing that actually existed?

On second thought, he really should have expected this.

“Can you imagine if they really did burn up?” Geralt looked at Eskel in horror. “We would get no pay at all.”

“Right?” Eskel just shook his head at the screen. “Hard to hook a pile of ash onto a belt. That’s a racket right there. Someone walks in, ‘Oh yeah, I killed all the vampires! Here’s the dust!’ and then just waltzes out with the bounty after forking over the leftovers from their fireplace.”

Matt’s jaw dropped. John was right. That…that couldn’t be true.
Geralt turned to look at him, noticing his absolute shock. “You alright?”

There were still no words coming to mind, so Matt just snapped his jaw shut. He swallowed hard and tried to get his shit together. “What is it that you two actually do?”

The question popped out unbidden, and he prayed to god that they would answer with something normal. Or at least vaguely normal.

“We’re witchers,” Eskel said with a smirk. “We kill monsters.”

“And get paid for our trouble,” Geralt added. “Gold, if people have it. Silver if they don’t. And sometimes other things, if they have no money to speak of. That’s how I got Ciri. I did a job, and they gave me her as payment when she was just a small child. My child of surprise.” He smiled softly, though it was hard to tell if he was pleased at a job well done or if he was just fond of his adopted daughter.

Matt had no idea how to react. He knew perfectly well that in some places children had no value at all and were traded just like any other goods, sometimes even less than that. But to hear it in action was more than a little terrifying.

“Did you…did you ask for her?” he asked quietly, almost afraid to know the answer. Everything he’d seen and heard about Geralt implied that he was a kind and generous man. But what kind of monster stole someone’s child?

“It’s called the Law of Surprise,” Geralt explained nonchalantly. “If they don’t have anything to pay with, or want to gamble away the cost of the hunt, sometimes people invoke the law. Rather than paying in coin, they’re required to give the first thing that comes to them as a surprise. Something they don’t know that they have. In Duny’s case, it was a child. He wasn’t aware that he’d sired one.”

Well, that was slightly less horrifying than Geralt outright demanding a child as payment. Still. What the fuck kind of law was that? “They just…gave her to you after she was born?”

“A few years after, but eventually, yes. Her birth parents ended up passing away on a voyage. I claimed her from her grandmother when she was eight.” He smirked ruefully. “Her grandmother was pissed, but Ciri was pretty excited. I would have shown up earlier, but I was distracted by other hunts.”

A bit more of the horror drained out of Matt. That was still kind of awful, but not nearly as bad as it could have been.

Still.

“Could she go visit her birth family if she wanted?” None of this was any of Matt’s business, but now that he’d started down this rabbit hole he had to see where it led.

Geralt shrugged. “If she wanted to. Especially now that she’s older.” He looked almost like he was about to say more, but then the movie caught his attention again.

Alucard had just rescued a young woman from some kind of undead revenant. He carried her off, unconscious in his arms, away from the site of the attack. The camera cut to her waking on a lavish bed, decorated with with gauzy ivory curtains and plush pillows. As she awoke, she sat up, confused and worried. Circling around the bed in the shadows was the dark-clad figure of Alucard.

“If they only knew just who likes the four poster bed monstrosity,” Geralt muttered with a strange
grin.

Eskel snorted in amusement.

“Who’s there?” she cried out.

“I could ask you the same question,” Alucard’s voice rang through the darkness. “Who is foolish enough to roam through these haunted ruins, so very alone?”

“I am Ava Belsera!”

The name made Matt sigh and roll his eyes. Both Geralt and Eskel looked at him.

“The name,” Matt said, pointing at the screen. “It’s clearly a rip off of the Belmonts.” He shook his head. “She’s supposed to be the last scion of a prominent family. The Belmonts have a reputation for being defenders of the Brotherhood of Light and humanity as a whole, going back centuries. These kinds of shows always like to play on that.”

“You mean…” Geralt’s eyes grew wide as dollar coins.

“She’s the stand in for Trevor,” Eskel whispered, his whole body tensing up with glee. He made this ridiculous eeeeeee sound, before dropping his head on the bed and laughing. Geralt nearly followed suit, but managed to at least stay upright, no doubt because of his injuries.

“Trevor…” Geralt gasped. “The damsel in distress!”

“Saved by Alucard!” Eskel guffawed into the sheets.

“Oh gods, oh gods, is she the love interest?” Geralt hit Eskel on the shoulder, urging him upward again, his eyes still glued on the screen.

“Holy fuck, are they going to make out?” Eskel straightened up, and leaned forward eagerly.

Sure enough, the scene had progressed to the point where Alucard was sharing the same space with the young woman, his fanged mouth just barely an inch away from her parted lips. The closer they leaned together, the more tense Geralt and Eskel became.

“Do it, do it, do it, do it,” Geralt whispered almost to himself.

“This cannot even be happening.” Eskel shook his head, still focusing on the screen with rapt attention. “This is great. I can’t wait to tell Lambert.”

Geralt took his eyes off the screen only long enough to give Eskel the strangest look of wide eyed glee, and then went back to watching the scene with rapt fascination.

Right before Alucard and Ava kissed, Alucard veered away, disappearing into the night.

“Noooooooooo!” Eskel shouted at the screen.

“Booooooooooo!” Geralt couldn’t quite yell, but he clearly wanted to. Even after that effort, he held his chest and winced, but still looked more disgruntled at the screen than he did at the massive wounds on his torso still stapled together.

“Awww, the fuck was that?” Eskel looked around the room, maybe for something to throw.

“Cockblocked.” Geralt shook his head. “Fucking hell, you’d think that little make out session
would be easier.”

“Maybe he should practice on a mirror first,” Eskel said, looking slyly at Geralt and grinning.

For whatever reason, that comment just slayed them both. Eskel was face first in the sheets again dying of laughter, and Geralt was gasping, nearly crying from it.

“Stop it,” Geralt said weakly, still silently laughing. “Stop the…thing. I can’t. I can’t breathe.”

“Shit,” Matt swore quietly and paused the film. He stood up and walked over to the bed, edging towards the nurse call button. “Should I get someone in here?”

But Geralt shook his head. “It’s fine. I just…I just need a minute. Oh fuck, that hurts so bad.” He shook again with silent laughter, and wiped his eyes with a bandaged hand.

Matt was feeling conflicted, unsure if he should let the man watch the movie at all if it caused this kind of reaction.

Eventually both men started to calm down, but every time they looked at the screen, it sparked another giggling fit.

“We gotta take it easy, Geralt,” Eskel said in between snickers. “This can’t be good for you.”

“That can’t be good for him!” Geralt waved a shaking finger at the screen. “Look at that! For fucks sake. If he goes to brood in a corner after this I’m going to cry.”

Of course, the very first scene after that was Alucard shown standing lonesome in a darkened corner of a high rooftop, watching the city morosely.

“Fuck me,” Geralt said, choking back another laugh.

“I think they got their characters wrong,” Eskel said watching with a strange smirk on his face.

“Right? At least they got the setting right.”

That was when Matt noticed the building that Alucard was lurking on was one of the ones that was still mostly made up of a building from Dracula’s time, a remnant of the castle.

It was disturbing how fast they recognized the buildings. Actually, it also disturbed him how fast they were catching onto technology that they supposedly had never used or seen before. It implied adaptability and intelligence way beyond what he assumed when he first met them, and even then by no means had he thought either of them stupid.

“I wonder if they’ll show Alucard’s father in this,” Eskel said as they watched the action progress. Alucard was tracking the source of the new resurgence of the creepy crawlies in the city, sneakily killing his way through the city underground.

“I’m sort of terrified to see what they come up with,” Geralt said, easing back into his bed. He looked at Matt. “What does legend say about Alucard’s origins?”

“That’s an interesting question, but as far as I remember, the stories vary. Some say he’s Dracula’s son. Some say he was some other noble, or even a priest that had been so holy that he kept his soul even after being turned into a vampire.” Matt frowned. “The Church isn’t really keen on the legends, actually, but they don’t actively try to deter them. Every once in a while, some researcher or some such tries to get access to their records. Church records are the only reliable ones from the Dark
Ages. They always get denied, though.”

“No fucking wonder, considering what they did,” Geralt muttered, sounding like he would very much like to spit on the Church. “Fucking double faced bastards.”

“You have something against the Brotherhood?” Matt asked, surprised. He himself didn’t have much of an opinion. The Brotherhood was a fact of life; something that existed long before Matt and would exist long after him.

“Geralt,” Eskel warned, but his companion was clearly too agitated to listen as he’d already turned to Matt.

“They---” Geralt began.

“Don’t.” Eskel’s voice held warning, but not menace. “This isn’t for us to tell.”

Geralt swallowed and looked sour. He paused with his mouth open. It was obvious he was trying to find the right words. Hiding something, or at least not letting himself speak plainly. “You said that every Belmont was a champion for the Brotherhood, right?”

“Yes,” Matt answered cautiously. That was general knowledge, every kid learned that in school.

“And Trevor and his father are Belmonts right?”

Matt nodded, not seeing the connection yet.

“They are fighters, too. Do you really think every single child of that line wanted to be raised like they were?”

An awful truth unfolded for Matt as he put the pieces together. Both Trevor and his father were raised in barracks, trained to fight and kill. He hadn’t made the connection before this moment. If they were champions of the Brotherhood of Light, and they were raised in such a manner, then it was the Brotherhood that did that to them. The church itself stole Trevor away from his mother the day he was born, and raised him to fight. Matt thought about how his boss had never, ever, not once spoken of the church in a fond light. Or even at all, if he could help it.

It was tempting to say that the church did what it had to, to fight the creatures of Darkness…but what creatures of Darkness? Even if there were such things, Dracula had been banished centuries ago. Humans had long since reclaimed every last bit of land.

“Also, a hint,” Geralt said, watching Matt’s face carefully. “Don’t ever mention the Brotherhood anywhere that Trevor’s father might hear.”

Eskel actually shuddered at that.

The sick pool of dread and suspicion that had been growing inside of Matt since this whole crazy thing started swelled up once more. Eskel. Brave, fearless, Eskel, who had stepped in front of Belmont Sr. while he was in full rage. Even he wasn’t willing to mention the Brotherhood where Belmont Sr. could hear him.

Still, Matt was a careful person, willing to confirm his suspicions multiple times before acting on them.

“Would you?” he asked Eskel, remembering the affection Belmont Sr. seemed to have for the man. “If there was a need, would you mention it to him?”
Eskel pursed his lips. “If there was an actual need. Or if he brought it up first.” He licked his lips. “He likes me. I would probably escape without any permanent damage.”

Permanent damage. Matt looked at Geralt, who survived what no normal human should have, and would most probably have no permanent damage after. The very idea that Belmont Sr. could cause similar levels of damage was terrifying. Both in the kind of cruelty the man was clearly capable of and in the implied reaction.

But then Matt remembered that his boss already brought the Brotherhood up, when Eskel had first arrived.

“Mr. Belmont mentioned it to his father, in this very room,” he said. “Belmont Sr. looked angry, but he didn’t seem unreasonable.”

“That’s because it was Trevor saying it,” Geralt answered. “And his father was trying very, very hard to be nice. And I do mean he went way out of his way here.” He smiled, a wry little smile. “What his son can get away with, nobody else can even dream of.”

Then Geralt looked at Eskel and motioned at him with one hand. “Case in point.”

Eskel blushed. “Watch the damn story,” he grumbled.

And like that, they’d lost Matt again. By now, though, he felt comfortable enough with them to actually ask about it.

“What’s the case in point?”

The blush on Eskel’s cheeks grew. “Nothing. Just that I should be dead, many times over. Because I am a fucking idiot.”

“Apparently he’s very good at cuddling,” Geralt informed Matt with that strange sparkle in his eyes. It was the same look that made Matt think Geralt and Belmont Sr. were lovers. Matt seriously had to wonder who the cuddling comment applied to, and why Eskel needed Trevor to vouch for him.

“Geralt,” Eskel growled. “It would take so little to murder you right now. So very, very little.”

“We both know you won’t,” Geralt said with a scoff.

Eskel looked at him with a narrow-eyed glare, one that made Matt think he was considering methods of revenge.

“Let’s watch the movie, okay?” Matt asked. His head was spinning with trying to figure out who was sleeping with who in this triangle. It was worse than a Spanish telenovela. Next thing he would learn is that it was not only did Belmont Sr. that had his own little harem, but that Trevor did, too. Ridiculous.

“Hmmmmm.” Eskel gave Geralt a cool gaze for a while longer, but reluctantly turned his attention back to the TV. “Did I tell you I ran into Hans Gerhard a few weeks ago while I was in Ard Carraigh?” he asked offhandedly. Geralt froze in place. “He seemed really worried about you.”

“Oh?” Geralt’s eyes grew wide and his gaze slid over to Eskel. He swallowed hard. “Is, uh, that so?”

“Mmmhmmm. Boy, did he have some stories. Poor man was pretty concerned.” Eskel kept up the
nonchalance, but it was clearly a calculated effect.

“He wouldn’t,” Geralt said desperately, his eyes getting steadily wider.

“Oh, yes he did,” Eskel said with a smirk. “In loving detail even. Let’s watch the story, eh?” Eskel grinned at him.

“Yes.” Geralt nodded eagerly. “Please.”

Matt held back his amusement at the bickering, despite his lack of knowledge of what they were talking about. They really did act like brothers.

There was some more plot development in the film as Alucard went to see his contacts in the city. Matt had to admit that the side characters were pretty interesting and well designed. For all that they had very little screen time, they were well fleshed out. After a bit of a conversation about how Alucard and Ava’s families were connected, there was a flashback scene.

Alucard was shown as a young boy in medieval clothing sitting under an apple tree. He was listening attentively to an older man, a frail and gentle looking scholar, talk about the sanctity of life, about the responsibility of the nobility to protect those less fortunate than them. It was a beautiful scene, very emotional and well played.

“Oh Gods.” It was Eskel, eyes wide and jaw dropped, apparently trying not to choke on laughter. Geralt looked even worse. He was red in the face, and his eyes were watering as he tried to breathe through gurgling laughter.

“The sanctity of life,” Geralt said, his voice high and strained.

“Be kind to all things,” Eskel replied, equally strained.

“Do not use your power lightly,” Geralt choked out, sounding like a dying mouse.

“True strength lies in restraint.” Tears were welling up in Eskel’s eyes, and he was practically biting on his fist to keep quiet.

“You two don’t approve of the message?” Matt asked, both curious and mildly concerned. It was obvious these two had killed before. Maybe often. But, still, they seemed like decent men. He didn’t expect that level of irreverence from them at the peaceful message.

“Oh, no. No, that’s fine.” Eskel waved a hand at him, still choking back laughter. “It’s just---” That was when he lost it, guffawing into his hands so hard he doubled over.

“Just imagine,” Geralt squeaked out. “Gabriel Belmont....” He waved at the TV. “Saying that.”

Matt blinked. The very idea of casting Belmont Sr. in the role of Alucard’s father was odd, but if he followed the thought and imagined Belmont Sr. in place of that older, frail man...saying those things...yes, okay, the image was hilarious. Mostly because he thought that Belmont Sr. would probably choke halfway through the first sentence. If Matt was kind of disturbed that they both put Belmont Sr. in as the parent figure, he put it out of his mind.

The laughing got so bad that Matt had to pause the movie again, just to give Geralt a chance to calm down.

“Break time, boys,” he said. “Get a drink, take a breath.” They were gasping too hard to object, so Matt figured he made the right call.
He pulled out his phone and sent a quick message to John.

*ETA for you guys getting back?*

The response was prompt. *2h. How are Geralt and Eskel holding up?*

*Happy and occupied,* Matt sent back. The little dot dot dot mark under John’s name kept flashing and Matt waited. And waited. It took long enough that Matt had to wonder just what was up.

*ETA 1h* came after a few more seconds.

“Looks like the boss will be back in about an hour,” he announced to the room, smothering a snort of amusement.

“Shit,” Geralt and Eskel chorused.

“Quick, put it back on.” Geralt waved a hand at the TV. “We need to watch as much as we can before Trevor gets back.”

Eskel nodded furiously. “We’ll be good. See?” He grabbed the forgotten blue mush bowl and held up a spoon. “He can eat while we watch.”

Matt narrowed his eyes at them but cautiously put the movie back on. As much as Geralt’s incessant laughter worried him, it was a good movie. Plus, watching those two lose it for no apparent reason was entertaining, too.

The movie progressed. Plot was woven in with progressively more naughty scenes with Ava and, apparently, a surprise threesome with two pretty vampires. Because of course that’s how saving the city goes. Kill some creepy crawlies during the night, get shagged within an inch of his life by two hot ladies during the day.

The camera work was bold. Never as crude as outright porn, but it was still pretty easy to imagine what was happening just out of view. Lots of interesting positions and even more interesting conversations. Matt had to squirm in his seat a little as the blond vampiress described just what she wanted Alucard to do to her, and then again at her breathy little encouragements when he obviously delivered.

“Having two lovers at once is the best,” Geralt said with a happy and mildly wistful sigh.

Eskel nodded, a similar nostalgic smirk on his face.

Matt shifted uncomfortably. He’d never had two lovers at once. While that had never been a problem before, he didn’t quite want to admit it out loud in front of two men who obviously had vast experience with threesomes. Maybe it was a monster hunter thing? Most of the men he talked to didn’t have quite so adventurous a love life. Or possible cult life.

Part way through the sex scene, Alucard dramatically opened his mouth, showing off his fangs, and then bit into one of the women. She moaned with pleasure and arched into it.

For whatever reason, *that* was the thing that made Geralt and Eskel’s cheeks turn pink. Not that Matt really blamed them; blood wasn’t really a turn on for him, but the way the characters rocked together wrapped up in sensual pleasure was pretty hot.

“On one hand, there’s the idea of Alucard the Vampire feeding on two beautiful women.” Geralt shook his head a little bit. “On the other hand, it’s *Alucard feeding on two women.*”
“Right? Kind of a silly spot to bite, too. She’d bleed out so fast.” Eskel huffed in laughter.

“Looks good though,” Geralt murmured. “All that hair against those pale thighs.”

“You and your hair fetish.”

“Look at this and tell me it’s not hot.” Geralt pointed at the screen where things were obviously reaching a crescendo. The moans were surprisingly loud. Something about the acoustics of the room, maybe.

For a moment it looked like Eskel was going to argue. Then he just pursed his lips. “Yeah, it's hot.” An evil smile crossed his face. “We should make Trevor watch this.”

Now that was something Matt didn’t ever want to think about. He felt grateful enough that he never had to deal with any of his boss’ past indiscretions. Finding out what kind of sex scene got Trevor going would be worse.

“I think he might kill us before we even get to this scene,” Geralt said. His eyes were still glued to the screen.

“He might be too frozen by horror,” Eskel said pragmatically. “If we distracted him during the other scenes, we could get him to watch this one.”

“That might work.”

“Does Trevor ever watch stories like this?” Eskel asked Matt, waving a finger at the screen.

Matt answered before he had the time to think what he was saying.

“I have never seen him do anything but work.” Then he paused to think about that statement and realized how sadly true it was. Trevor never went out to parties, unless it was a company or press gala. He never entertained guests. He never even went out to a restaurant unless it was a corporate thing.

Both Geralt and Eskel frowned.

“We need to fix that,” Geralt mused.

Matt approved. He wouldn’t mind some extra work with securing Trevor if it meant that the man got some fun in his life, especially in light of all the recent developments. The things he’d already gone through…Trevor deserved some joy. It might be a good plan to collect some ideas for Geralt and Eskel to propose to Trevor. John could help, too.

“Not really a surprise, though, is it,” Eskel said with a sigh.

“Kinda hard to gauge. We work all the time, too.” Geralt pursed his lips. “Hunting, sex, and making potions. That’s about it.”

Matt raised his eyebrows. That was a hell of a life, though he had to wonder about the potions thing. It had been mentioned more than once in the past couple days, and he was really starting to wonder if they were all meth addicts.

Eskel snorted. “We tend to enjoy our pay when we have it in hand.”

“Ha. True. Although I’m far more flush with coin now that I skip the brothels.” Geralt smirked happily again.
“You and your lovers are ridiculous. I don’t know how you’re not dead. Or walking with a permanent limp.” Eskel shook his head and held up a spoonful of mush.

Given Geralt’s abilities, those had to be some lovers. Also, lovers? Plural? How many did the man have? Was it like a multiple wives thing? Or husbands, if Matt understood the limp comment correctly.

“Who would have thought the mutations would be helpful with this, huh?” Geralt said with a grin.

“Pfft, it’s not like you weren’t taking full advantage before. All us witchers do. Now you just found partners who can keep up.” Eskel gave a short huff. “Plus extra.”

Geralt pointed towards the TV. “Hush. We need to watch how it ends before Trevor comes back, or we may not get a chance.”

Matt didn’t know whether to be relieved or disappointed that he wouldn’t hear more. Already Geralt and Eskel had been far more forthcoming than he expected, even if their answers didn’t always make sense.

Eskel promptly quieted down, but still proceeded to push food on Geralt. They continued on absently, most of their focus on the TV.

The movie was clearly reaching its climax, with old allies changing sides and betraying Alucard at every step. In a furious display of fighting ability—that caused another round of hoots from the two witchers—Alucard and Ava brought her father’s company down in a great blaze of fire.

Geralt and Eskel cheered like they were at a sporting event when Alucard cut off the villain’s head. Right after that, the body and severed head turned to ash, and the cheering turned to boo’s.

“Now he can’t get paid!” Eskel bitched, tossing up one hand in disgust.

Matt looked at how Alucard was enthusiastically swapping spit with Ava, and raised an eyebrow. “Pretty sure he’s looking at a reward of another type.”

“But…money!” Eskel sounded personally offended. Matt had to lower his head to hide the smile that kept trying to creep up onto his face.

The credits rolled by and music swelled. All in all, it was pretty entertaining. Not quite as funny as watching Geralt and Eskel react to it, but well made. No wonder it did so well in the theaters.

“Amazing,” Geralt said, in between offered sips of water from Eskel.

“Pretty good for a remake,” Matt said, nodding in agreement. He looked around for the TV remote and wondered if they’d want to watch it again. Probably.

Then he realized the room had gone deathly quiet. He looked up to find both Eskel and Geralt staring at him like he owed them money.

“Remake,” Geralt said.

“Meaning there is another one of these?” Eskel added.

“Yes?” Matt answered cautiously, the little hairs on the back of his neck raising up.

“Can we watch it?” Geralt asked, though the intensity of his question was broken by the huge yawn after it.
Matt waited a moment to respond. He took note of Geralt’s blinks, and he could see how the time lengthened for each one. Geralt was excited and fighting to stay awake, but Matt could see the exhaustion dragging at him. The brain was willing but the body was succumbing slowly to the damage. Matt considered his options carefully.

Eskel eyed Geralt, too, and a very slight wrinkle showed up on his brow. He looked down to Geralt’s hands, and Matt saw how they shook just the tiniest bit.

“After a short break, eh?” Eskel said. “I gotta get up and walk around the room. All this sitting in one place is driving me bonkers. Might get a bite to eat, too.”

Geralt all but gasped.

“Food,” he said in the voice of a starving man denied a measly piece of bread.

The look Eskel gave him was completely unimpressed. “Tomorrow, if you’re healing fine. You bust something in there”---he pointed to Geralt’s gut---“and they’re gonna have to cut you open again to get it cleaned out. Can you imagine the look on Trevor’s face?” He raised his eyebrows and leaned in, lowering his voice. “Or his father?”

“Er.” Geralt clearly lost his steam at the mention of the Belmonts. Especially Trevor’s father. “We could not tell him?” he asked after a moment, but he didn’t sound too confident.

If Eskel looked unimpressed before, now he looked down right unamused.

“Just a reminder,” Matt said calmly, “I’m literally paid to snitch on you.”

Eskel just pointed to Matt, as if to say, see? Then his expression softened. “It’ll be over soon, Geralt. Just sleep it off, and before you know it you’ll be back to eating us out of house and home.”

“Can we at least watch the threesome scene again?” Geralt sounded so hopeful, Matt felt bad even thinking of denying him.

Eskel gave a little shrug, and then looked at Matt and raised an eyebrow. “Sounds reasonable.” Then he looked at Geralt. “We should lower your bed a little bit though, just so you can rest easier.”

That earned him a hard side-eye, but Geralt sighed and nodded.

Matt made sure to say nothing and started to rewind the movie, looking for the, frankly, extremely hot scene. This wasn’t what he expected to be doing when he got in to work today. He was all ready to fend off knife attacks or listen to more crazy-as-shit ghost stories. Not watch almost-porn On Demand.

As the scene started up again, Eskel and Geralt settled in to watch. Matt could see that Eskel was keeping a subtle eye on Geralt, though.

Sure enough, just minutes into it and Geralt was nodding off.

At that point, Eskel abandoned watching the movie and watched Geralt a little more obviously. Maybe making sure he was really down for the count. When a few more minutes had passed and Geralt looked truly, deeply asleep, Eskel leaned back and sighed.

“Yay, food time,” he said softly, and got up to head over to the buffet table.
“Should I stop the movie?” Matt asked, just as quietly.

“Hell, no. Keep it going. That’s hot as fuck.” Eskel grinned at him wolfishly. He proceeded to pile a plate with an incredible amount of food, and took his seat back at Geralt’s side, clearly ready to enjoy the rest of the film again.

Matt suppressed a sigh and got a drink refill himself.

Within the first few minutes, Eskel had emptied his plate and then went back to the buffet table to pile another load of food on. Matt got up to get himself some water, strangely uncomfortable with watching Eskel watch the almost-porn.

“That’s probably the worst part for Geralt,” Eskel said randomly.

“What?”

Eskel pointed at the screen. “No sex until he’s healed up. Pain, eh, whatever. Injuries happen. We barely feel them most times. Or we suppress the pain. But this is gonna drive him nuts.”

That made Matt blink. “You’re telling me that after having his organs taken out, stitched up, and then put back inside of him, it’s the lack of sex that’s gonna really bother him?”

Eskel just nodded, looking almost sympathetic to Geralt’s plight. He tilted his head a little, as if listening to something. Then he turned and looked at Matt. “Would you mind turning up the sound just a little? Geralt is pretty damn deep asleep. It won’t bother him any.”

The movie was right in the middle of that sex scene, complete with moaning and cries of pleasure. Matt closed his eyes for a moment and used every bit of his willpower to not facepalm. Because of course Eskel wanted to hear this part extra loud.

Rather than answering, he just grabbed the remote, ticked up the volume a few notches, and resigned himself to listening to two women moaning out, “Alucard!” for the next several minutes. At least he knew it wouldn’t last forever.

The door opening was almost a relief. He turned to greet his boss and was struck with the image of Trevor, his cool and collected, level-headed boss, frozen mid-step as he entered the room. Trevor’s eyes were wide and his lips parted as he stared first at the screen, and a gentle flush rose high on his cheeks. He stayed frozen for several long seconds, his face frozen and his eyes wide. The cries of Alucard and yes and more reached a crescendo just as Trevor turned to stare at Eskel. Matt noticed the flush was now creeping down Trevor’s neck, too.

Eskel looked absolutely guilty as he tried, and failed, to hide his grin behind the food he was shovelling into his mouth.

Trevor transferred his gaze to Geralt, who was now snoring very, very quietly in his bed, proving once and for all that Trevor knew Geralt really well and suspected him of being the instigator. Then he turned to stare at Matt, face full of betrayal.

Matt swallowed, feeling as if he kicked a puppy.

“Geralt insisted.” Matt wasn’t above throwing Geralt to the wolves if needed. After all, it was Geralt’s idea in the first place. Matt was merely the hapless witness. He shrugged a bit, and added, “He seemed to be really entertained?”

That set off a short round of barely concealed snickers from Eskel.
“So, so entertained,” Eskel said as soon as he swallowed and cleared his mouth. “So amazingly entertained. Matt says there’s an older version, too. Are there books?” He looked to Matt, raising an eyebrow in question. “I hope there are books.”

Trevor just stared at him, his eyes just a little wide and his face flushed pink. He opened his mouth to speak, but then shut it again. The silence was unnerving, and Matt couldn’t help but wonder if he’d done something really wrong by showing a random movie to them.

It was just a movie. Granted, one that took some potshots at the Belmont family legacy, but not directly. It was all sort of inferred.

“Don’t worry, Eskel,” Trevor said, not quite looking at anything. Especially not at the screen where the movie still played. “I will tell my Father about the kind of entertainment you like.”

Now it was Eskel’s turn to freeze in place. Then he swallowed hard. He had this look like he was considering if it was worth it. Finally, he slumped a little bit and let out a huff. “Shit,” he cursed under his breath.

Matt nearly snorted in amusement. The way these three used Belmont Sr. as a threat among each other was sort of hilarious. He especially couldn’t quite deal with the fact that, “I’m telling dad on you,” still worked with grown men.

Then again, he’d met Belmont Sr., and found he couldn’t quite blame them for the reaction.

“How is he?” Trevor asked as he settled in to the seat.

“About as expected,” Eskel said. Then he looked a bit sheepish. “He maybe went a little overboard laughing at the story”---he waved a hand at the TV---“but honestly I think it would have gone worse if there was nothing for him to do. If they’re not too expensive, you might want to think about getting him some books to read. He’s already going mad stuck in that bed, and it’s only going to get worse.”

Matt blinked. “If it’s not too expensive?” he couldn’t help but ask, because what the fuck.

There was a pause as Eskel looked at him, and Matt suddenly wasn’t sure if he’d accidentally offended the man or not.

“Printed text is pricey where we’re from,” Eskel said finally. Which, again, made Matt wonder just where the fuck these two hailed from. What ass end of nowhere third world country did they live in
that didn’t have books available?

“I can easily afford books,” Trevor said softly. “Something on herbalism?”

Matt couldn’t help but notice how gentle his voice was. He didn’t notice before, probably because Trevor had spoken that way all the time here in the hospital, but after hearing his calm, cold voice during the press conference this was a shocking contrast. After a moment of thought, Matt realized that this softer tone showed up whenever Trevor spoke to any of the new arrivals.

“Herbalism. Bestiary. Geography. Maybe some poetry if you know of a good volume. He likes stuff with a good meter. Skip any epic adventures, we all get enough of that. I know you’d hate it, but he’d read the hell out of anything about this…” Eskel licked his lips and smiled wryly. “…Alucard the Vampire legend.”

It was sort of surprising to hear such a serious set of subjects. Matt would have expected that both Eskel and Geralt would be more the pulp action type. This only reinforced the idea that they were both far smarter than maybe he originally gave him credit for.

“No erotic novels?” Trevor asked wryly.

“Oh, sure, if you like,” Eskel said with a grin. “But I thought the point was to keep him calm.” His expression sobered up. “But seriously, I think that might make him more annoyed, and mad to get out of bed. He’s already anxious enough with the lack of…with everything. And the smells here. I don’t know how you can stand it.” Eskel wrinkled his nose.

“You are right,” Trevor sighed. “What was I thinking.”

“You were thinking about the million other things that are needed to make all of this work well,” Eskel said. “You’ve got a lot going on. That’s why we’re around.” He waved a hand towards Matt and John. “To help.”

“I can draw up a book list for your approval?” John said. “We could have them delivered quite quickly.”

Trevor looked at Matt suddenly, something hiding in his eyes before he turned to Eskel.

“I tried contacting Father,” he said eventually.

“Tried.” Eskel straightened up, his face turned grim. Without even a glance to the side, he set his now empty plate on the end table nearby and focused all his attention on Trevor.

“Yes,” Trevor confirmed. “I couldn’t get through. It’s as if nothing’s there to contact at all anymore.” He spread his arms, betraying nerves he was keeping under wraps until then. “I got nothing at all.”

“Well, that’s concerning.” Eskel bit his lip and furrowed his brow. “Should I not have come here? I could have waited in Kaer Morhen. Or at…your father’s home.”

“I prefer you here,” Trevor said immediately. “I wasn’t even aware he could…move the whole thing like that. Or lock it down. Or whatever the hell he did, but at least I know you are safe here.”

All of the blood drained out of Eskel’s face and his jaw dropped in shock. “Move it? He could do that?”

John and Matt exchanged a narrow eyed look. It was obvious that Trevor and Eskel were talking
around something, but what exactly that was Matt didn’t really have any idea. It was unsettling just how much he didn’t know about his boss’ life. What was more disturbing was the notion that Belmont Sr. had just gone AWOL.

“This is my Father we are talking about,” Trevor said grimly. “What limits are there that apply to him?”

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Chapter 7

Vesemir felt himself waking up, but he could tell there wasn’t any sunlight reaching his room yet, so he only rolled over in his bed, squished the flat little pillow more comfortably into the crook of his shoulder, and made himself drift off to sleep again.

The next wake-up happened not long after that and he remembered getting irritated at himself for this constant sleep interruption. He would be so damn tired come morning.

When the sun finally did start to shine through his bedroom window, he actually felt very, very well rested. Despite all the interruptions.

Vesemir sat up in bed and rubbed his eyes. There was a notable lack of sex demons in his room. While that was odd, it wasn’t unheard of, so he shrugged it off. Maybe they had other things to do?

He promptly made sure not to think about what chore all three of them would be needed for at the same time.

Or partner. Maybe Eskel had showed back up sometime in the night. Vesemir paused in his dressing and wondered briefly if the succubi had finally guilted Eskel into fucking the incubus. He shook his head and pushed that out of his mind as well.

He spent a few minutes rummaging around the room, gathering up clean clothes for the day and the rest of his gear.

Something in the window caught his eye. He grabbed a new shirt, and wandered over to the glass to take a look.

What he saw made him freeze in place.

There was a wall and a tower out there. And buildings. Low buildings, high buildings, and towers that stretched up far into the air, so high he couldn't see their tops for the clouds. He rubbed his eyes because there were also...additional mountains?

Kaer Morhen was built into the side of a mountain, and they were nestled right into a long valley framed with much smaller mountains that eventually tapered off into gentle hills. Farther behind the keep to the east at the border between Kaedwen and Hakland, the Blue Mountains rose higher, but the peaks around Kaer Morhen weren’t nearly as tall as those.

Now there were huge-ass foreign mountains around the mountains that he was used to. A massive range of steel grey peaks topped with shining white snow caps. As with some of the towers he could see from his window, the mountains reached high beyond the cloud cover, making it impossible to judge how high they really were.

Vesemir blinked. Then rubbed his face. Then blinked again.

Still there. The wall wrapping around the side of the mountain Kaer Morhen was built into had blocked out the sun, stopping it from shining into his room until now. From the looks of things, it was already mid morning or later.

He stood there, staring.

How the fuck did a bunch of buildings just…move in around Kaer Morhen in the middle of the
night?

He couldn't see that much from his window. He needed to go out, get a horse and investigate the buildings immediately, even if he already knew who was to blame for this insanity.


Geralt.

“This is what happens when you fuck chaos gods, you idiot,” Vesemir muttered to himself. Some mix between frustration, fury, and worry raced through him. What the hell had happened? And why the fuck was Kaer Morhen in the middle of it? Literally. Suddenly, the urge to get outside and see just how much around their keep had changed magnified by about a thousand.

He flung on the rest of his clothes and gear, and dashed down the stairs. As he moved, he peeked in a few of the other doors. No sign of any of the succubi or the incubus. No sign of anyone. On his way through the kitchen he grabbed a bit of bread from the previous day and headed straight to the stable. Usually the kitchen had fresh bread; a result of Dracula’s unseen servants tending to the fire and providing basic supplies. But there was none today. No new loaves resting on the table, no hot water on the hob.

Night wasn’t in the stables, though Vesemir’s own horse was still there eating hay placidly in its stall. The courtyard was empty, too. The demon horse was nowhere to be found. The sudden lack of Dracula’s minions made the tension ratchet up in his body. It was funny just how much he’d gotten used to them all living around him.

Within moments his beast was saddled, his cloak was wrapped tightly around his shoulders, and they were through the courtyard and out the front gate.

Just looking around from that vantage didn’t actually help much. The massive wall that extended through the valley stretched behind the mountain Kaer Morhen was built into. He’d have to head down to the river to get a better view. Maybe follow the wall around a bit.

The farther out he rode, the more buildings he saw, though none of them invaded the forested valley that Kaer Morhen overlooked.

A few smaller structures stood nestled into the massive wall now encircling Kaer Morhen, and the rest stretched out into the mountains behind the keep, turning into a vast city. The architecture was like nothing he’d ever seen, either. There were tall, pointed spires and enormous statues so large he could see them from clear across the valley. It all looked almost organic, but sharp and grim, too. The stone they were made of was dark and smooth, seemingly untouched by the winds and rains, and large windows graced several of the buildings, their glass shining like sheets of ice in the sun. The way the lines of the buildings flowed reminded Vesemir a bit of hawthorn spines in winter, wickedly pointed but beautiful in their own way.

Vesemir made his way down the Witcher’s Trail that ran around the keep, and out towards the river in the valley. The trail itself was a hard one, former students often called it The Killer, but Vesemir had been riding it for many, many decades now, around four centuries at this point, and he found it no problem at all. He knew its twists and turns like he knew himself.

When he finally got into the valley proper, he headed towards the river. Occasionally there were breaks in the tree cover. Most of the forest here was made up of various types of pine, but other deciduous trees were sprinkled in. The first tiny buds of spring had just started to form on their twigs, but it wasn’t nearly time for actual leaves to come out. Snow speckled the ground here and there, and the sun was warm on his dark cloak.
Nothing in the forest appeared to be changed. The Trail was exactly as he knew it. But when he steered his horse towards the river proper, he could see that the water level was much higher than it should be at this time of the year. The river was fast-flowing enough that it never froze, but there should still be some ice visible along the edges of the water. Instead it flooded up onto the icy banks, making his horse hesitant to approach.

He dismounted, approached the water cautiously, and crouched down. He pulled his glove off and stuck his hand into the freezing water. Four inches under the surface he could feel the ice that should be framing the banks of the tempestuous river. Now it was under water. He pulled his hand out and shook it off, before stuffing it into his glove. The water level was far higher than expected and as cold as it was, Vesemir still expected it to be colder. His hand was chilled, but not numb as it should have been.

There was another source feeding into the river now. Or, perhaps, something else was heating the water.

He got up and mounted his horse again, nudging it back towards the trail.

He had to wonder why his medallion hadn't woken him up. Granted, Vesemir didn’t spend much time out on the Path any longer, but he’d hunted monsters for a very, very long time. The reactions were still ingrained. At the first vibration of his medallion, he would have been wide awake.

But it didn’t even twitch. Not once.

He looked to his wolf’s head medallion, and for the first time wondered if maybe it was broken.

Taking an easy pace, he wound his way along the river bank, following it towards the side of the massive wall that was slowly rising up in front of him. It looked like the river would end up passing through right by one of the massive towers that he’d seen from his window.

The closer he got to the wall, the more he could feel the energy of the land around him change. There was a dark, chaotic feel to it. Demonic. But not as hostile as he expected. Then again, he’d been living with Dracula’s dark energy infesting Kaer Morhen for over a year now. This felt very similar to that. Older though, perhaps. There was a weight to the feeling that Vesemir couldn’t quite put his finger on.

This close to the wall and the tower, the land started to change, too. There were occasional hot air vents peeking up through the ground, blowing off sulfurous steam and melting the snow in rings around them. As much as Vesemir didn’t care for the implications of that, he did have to admit that the hydrothermal mineral deposits could prove to be damn useful. Already the steam around the vents was leaving off a thin film of sediment-laced condensation on the ground around the openings.

He was more alarmed to see the very small pool of hot lava bubbling up. That was, in fact, incredibly alarming.

*This is Dracula’s work*, he reminded himself. *The man is mad as can be, but he wouldn’t bring something unstable here. Not to Geralt’s home.*

He hoped.

Vesemir took a breath and kept going. There was a lot to see, and he’d barely reached the wall. It would take days to ride around all the new additions, he was sure. What was worse, he hadn’t even really reached the buildings he saw from his window. Even more worrying was that now he could
see that there were plenty more buildings out back behind the keep. Much more thickly built ones, too. These were structures able to withstand a siege.

He urged his horse off the trail and up the steep hill on his left, enough to see farther down into the valley. This land used to be empty; the combination of border, wild forests, and old magic kept it resolutely people-free for ages. Throughout the centuries, the wolf witchers had endeavoured to keep the routes into this valley a secret. That was less important now after the keep’s destruction, but it still wasn’t common knowledge how to get here.

Now, deep in the valley, behind Kaer Morhen and off beyond their little lake, he could see buildings of dark stone crammed into every available space. Some were separate, some looked melded together, and high arches connected them at various points.

From this distance he could see that the buildings had different styles. Some looked older, cruder in design than others. It was clear that they were added by different owners or at least built by different architects.

There were signs of damage on some of them, too. Crumbling walls and remnants of old scaffolding swung in the air on old chains. A few of the windows were boarded up, some outright yawned with emptiness, while others still sparkled with intact colored glass windows.

His initial assessment of this taking days had to be amended. It would take weeks to investigate just the outside of all the buildings that he could see stretching out into the horizon. From his current position, he could also see that the wall curved around not only the old valley but all the new additions too.

Vesemir turned his horse in a tight circle, and eyed it all.

It wasn’t a few buildings that appeared in the forest and along the hills. It was a goddamn fortified city that made up an ominous castle all around Kaer Morhen. The witcher fortress looked like a poor cousin squatting in a dark corner compared to the enormity of the buildings all around it.

For a brief moment, Vesemir felt every single second of his long life weighing down on him. Powerful forces were moving in his world, and he knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that there wasn’t a damn thing he could do about any of it. He and the rest of his little family had been swept up, tangled, and tumbled along. Where it would all end, he couldn’t guess.

The implications of this vast new castle around the witcher keep were many. Geralt had been injured. Hunted down, Ciri and Eskel had said as much. And now Dracula had shown his hand, firmly placing his power between Geralt’s home and the rest of the whole goddamn world.

Worry gnawed at him for a moment, but he banished it quickly. It wasn’t useful. Instead he tried to focus on what he could do.

For right now, that meant looking around for a short while more, and then heading back to the keep. From what he could see, it looked as if Kaer Morhen, the mountain it was built on, and all the immediately surrounding valley and lands had been carefully scooped up and placed in the middle of this vast, dark city. But Vesemir wanted to make sure that nothing additional had changed inside their keep.

Hopefully, by the time he finished taking stock of Kaer Morhen, someone would come tell him what the hell was going on.

With that in mind, Vesemir worked his way down the hill he was on and back towards the river.
He’d already been out riding for a few hours, it was time to head back anyways. 

As he picked his way back along the trail, he took careful note of where the new features were. Each hot air vent, and especially that tiny lava pool. It didn’t seem to be growing at all, just bubbling gas from its center.

That was when he noticed a tiny blob of black fur on one of the stones near the pool. He squinted.

It was a little black cat, asleep near the edge. Curious, he urged his horse a little closer.

The thing looked somewhat worse for wear. As he approached, he could see that its fur was matted and clipped oddly in some places. Its eyes and nose were crusted a bit, and it looked thin. It was just fur and bones.

Vesemir paused to stare at the cat for a moment. It was possible it was a feral beast, one that had always lived in the woods, and it was taking the unexpected chance to warm up during this long winter. Unlikely, but possible.

Maybe it would let him approach.

He dismounted and ordered his horse to stand. The beast was well trained, and he knew that it would stay put until he got back. As he stepped forward, he worried about startling the poor cat into the lava. If it was unfamiliar with the phenomenon, as it should be in this valley, it might try to run through the liquid rock. He decided to test how it would react to his voice first. If it was familiar with humans, it would show in its response.

“Hey, there,” he called gently and crouched down, trying to make himself less overwhelming to the tiny creature.

It took a moment before the cat lifted its head and slowly blinked its green eyes at him. It looked very sleepy and exhausted, curled up into a tight ball.

“What are you doing here?” he asked. He wasn’t really paying attention to his words. Mostly he just wanted to make sure that it could hear his voice.

The cat just looked at him and flipped its tail once. If he could guess, he’d say it looked unimpressed. But it was a cat, so that was something of a default expression. It blinked lazily at him, and then made a little chirping sound, like it might make towards a kitten or another friendly cat.

With that positive reaction in mind, Vesemir inched closer. The cat watched his progress, but didn’t even move to get up. Finally he was in reaching distance, and he scooped the cat up into his arms, cradling it against his side. It made a *merrp!* sound, protesting this new development, but didn’t try to struggle away.

“What’s a friendly little puss like you doing in a nasty place like this?” he asked absently, rubbing a gloved finger against its forehead. “This stuff is dangerous.”

The animal made a tiny huff and squirmed, so he resettled it, squishing it against his side a little harder. It calmed down after that and let him stuff it under his jacket. There was still some rabbit left over from yesterday’s traps. He could put the cat near the fire in the kitchen and feed it some meat. A warm place to rest and some food would surely go a long way towards restoring the animal to full health.
Once settled against his shirt and no doubt feeling the warmth of his body, the cat went limp. Then he felt a vibration start up in his shirt. He could hear a tiny, rusty purr, too, and it made him smile.

Vesemir mounted his horse as smoothly as he could, and turned the beast back towards the keep. He would feed the cat first and then check the keep out to make sure that nothing actually changed on the inside. Maybe he would be able to find one of the other occupants and ask what the hell was going on.

It took him a fair amount of time to get back to the keep, though not as long as it took on the way out. As they approached the last winding portion of the Witcher Trail, right as it led into the keep, the cat in his jacket perked up to get a look.

“That’s Kaer Morhen, kitty,” Vesemir said quietly. The air was crisp and cold, and the forest trail rang with his horses slow steps. “Home to the Wolf School witchers, those few of us that are left.”

As they broke through the treeline, the full line of the broken walls and battlements came into view. The cat made a grumbling *meep* sound, and Vesemir had to smile. It almost sounded like the little thing was disgruntled at the keep’s appearance.

“Hush, you,” he said fondly. “I know it doesn’t look like much, but it’s home. Those holes in the wall there, see?” He pointed to the crumbling bits of stonework. “That’s leftovers from the attack that killed us. All of us. Nearly, anyways.”

Vesemir sighed. He didn’t care to talk about the attack with the other witchers. They all had a vast mix of unhappiness, bitterness, and anger at the event. Him more than the rest. Even though Geralt, Lambert, and Eskel were full grown and off on their own Paths, Vesemir couldn’t help but still consider them somewhat in his charge. He’d protect them from what little he could, even if that was the horrors of the past.

“All the children that were learning here,” he said quietly, remembering the dark place he was in for years after the attack. The angry bitterness that drove him for so long. But time had sanded off a lot of those feelings, smoothing out the edges of memory until it no longer cut him open every time.

As they approached the walls, he paused a moment on the bridge that led into keep proper, and looked out over the dry moat. He remembered being half delirious with pain and grief as he dragged the bodies onto the bridge. He watched them fall, one by one. The teachers, the children, some as young as six. For years he could see the bloodstains on the wood of the bridge and the bones slowly whitening in the dried out moat. Now the bones were scattered, vegetation covering the old remnants, and the wooden bridge was bleached tan again by years of rain and sun.

He absently scratched the cat’s forehead, lost in thought. “All my students. All my brothers and children.” Vesemir swallowed hard. “I know you’re just a little puss, but try not to go into the moat. That’s where they rest. A reminder, to me, to all that walk over this bridge.”

Vesemir nudged his horse into moving again, and shook his head. “This is what comes of mindless hate, and this is our reward for hunting the dark things in the world.”

The cat was a negligible weight in his vest, but it felt good to have a warm, living body next to his. He could feel how skinny the poor thing was, but it was warm and offered unexpected comfort.

His melancholy introspection turned into vague grumpiness as they came up to the stable. “Dracula keeps changing things. Modifying. The keep was fine as it was.” He huffed, suddenly irritated. “He’s just being an ass, throwing his weight around so stupidly.”
The cat shifted again, and Vesemir hissed as he felt sharp little claws punch through his shirt and deep into his skin.

“Ow,” he complained, squishing the cat to his chest and stopping its frantic movements. He kept the small animal held there as it squirmed against his hold. “Cut it out. Or I will scruff you for the whole way back.”

A hilariously disgruntled sound came from the cat. Vesemir waited it out. Once it stopped growling at him, he loosened his hold again.

He stroked its forehead again, soothing it further. “Easy there, kitty. We’re almost home. You might like it here, little one, although you’ll have competition for mouse hunting.”

They headed straight into the stable, and he dismounted in front of one of the stalls, cat still wrapped up close to him. “I’m gonna set you here while I take care of my horse. Sit tight, kitty, and afterwards you’ll get a nice bit of meat and a spot by the fire.”

It didn’t take more than a few minutes to strip the tack off his beast and secure it in its stall. Given the fact that they’d been out all day, he gave the beast a good rub down, too, and added some fresh hay to the stall and oats to the feeding bucket.

While he worked, his mind stewed on the problem at hand. This massive city around Kaer Morhen was Dracula’s work, no doubt. Other people were bound to notice, not the least of which was the ruler of Kaedwen, King Henselt. Having a foreign city suddenly appear in the middle of his country was bound to cause some upset, and Henselt wasn’t a patient man by reputation. He also hated non-humans with a renowned passion, so that would no doubt weight in to things as well.

With his horse taken care of, Vesemir picked up the cat once more. The little creature had sat patiently, watching him the whole time.

“Wolf Witchers have been all but wiped out once before, and this thing, whatever Dracula did in his fit of possessiveness, will probably get the rest of us wiped out now. Geralt and Eskel are safe with Alucard, but Lambert is out there on the Path.” He sighed, shaking his head and trying not to worry over things he couldn't change. “We are going to become targets now.”

His hearing wasn’t anywhere near as sensitive as Geralt’s, his enhancements never reaching such an advanced stage, but he felt the vibration before he heard it. The steady thump of a big horse galloping towards him was offset by the vibration of his wolf medallion. Apparently, it wasn’t broken after all.

He wasn’t surprised when Night thundered in, tail high and eyes glowing red.

“Shit,” Vesemir cursed under his breath. Night liked killing rabbits and other furry critters around the place. He covered the cat more fully with his arm and half-turned to shield it from Night’s view.

“Night, no!” he barked, making the demon horse break suddenly, claws digging into the floor of the stable.

Night tossed her head back and forth and her ears swiveled towards Vesemir. Her confusion was obvious.

“No eating the cat,” he said sternly, holding the little furry body close to his chest. “I mean it. It’s not a snack.”
Night neighed, stretching her nose towards him. And the cat. Her nostrils flared wide as she sniffed. Vesemir eyed the fangs poking out of her lips. Way too close for comfort.

“No,” he repeated firmly.

Night shook her head, making her black mane fly everywhere. Her claws clicked oddly on the stone floor as she sidestepped a bit.

Vesemir gave her a long, narrow eyed look, but eventually relaxed his hold on the cat.

“Meet our new housemate, if it decides to stay with us longer than it takes for it to get better. Poor thing is just skin and bones.” That last bit was said softly, almost musingly. “Not sure how such a little one got out here. Maybe displaced when the city showed up?”

Night neighed at him, loud and long, sidestepping the other way. She was always on the move, either prancing around or jumping onto things. Now was no different, so Vesemir didn’t put much stock into her dancing around. She just seemed to be that kind of horse.

“If you’re back, are the others around now too?” he wondered aloud, knowing that Night wouldn’t really be able to give him much of an answer. “Do you need something to eat? I could bring you out something before I get the kitty here settled in.”

Night lowered her head until it hung to the very ground and shook it slowly from left to right and back again.

“...No, then. Alright.” He tapped his fingers on his arm, and furrowed his brow. “You’ll be alright here, even with the new city around, yeah?”

A wild image raced through his head of Night running amok through this vast, demonic city. The thing was, cities generally had people living in them. A place this huge had to have inhabitants. Suddenly, Vesemir was profoundly grateful that Kaer Morhen was as fortified as it was, regardless of crumbling walls and dry moat.

Night just looked at him, and he could practically feel the disdain.

“Ha, alright. Foolish question.” Vesemir huffed out a laugh. “We’ll be in the kitchen. Be careful wandering around.”

She followed him the whole way up to the door to the keep, and then danced in place as he went inside.

Once in the kitchen, he dropped his cloak on a hook on the wall, and brought the tiny black kitty over to the sink.

Quickly, he went about all the little chores needed to get the kitchen ready to make supper for them both. He started a fire in the woodstove and he refilled the kettle on top of it with water. The woodstove had a large, flat iron slab for cooking on, and it heated the kitchen oven, too. Normally, it would already be warm from the morning baking, but today it was cold and bare.

A couple more logs got added onto the massive fire in the fireplace. Unlike the woodstove, the fire in the kitchen fireplace was never allowed to go out. It would take too much effort to do so, and leave the rooms too cold in the winter. If it also reminded Vesemir of days past where the kitchens were always ready to feed a hungry witcher, well, that was something he kept to himself.

He readied a cup for some tea. Then he headed to the cold pantry and grabbed some frozen rabbit
stored there from yesterday’s hunting.

Most of that went in the stew pot over the fireplace, but he cut off a fair chunk and diced it into tidbits. A minute or two on the stovetop thawed it out enough to be tender and he served it up to the little kitty.

“Dig in, friend,” he said, scratching its head. “If we had a cow, I’d offer you milk, but that’s not something we really keep around here. Although…maybe we should. I hardly ever go out on the Path any more, not in the last year, anyways. It wasn’t sensible to keep anything more than a goat or two when I’d leave for weeks at a time, but now…”

He laughed, and shook his head. “Have I finally gotten old enough that I’m retiring? Seems ridiculous.”

The cat sniffed the meat cautiously before tentatively taking a piece. Once it had the bit in its mouth, it paused, whole body freezing in place. The tail twitched, once, and then the cat eagerly swallowed the morsel. After that, it polished out the little plate within moments, making wet little satisfied noises the whole time.

Vesemir took that opportunity to look under the tail. Ah, a girl.

The cat stopped eating long enough to give him a side eye.

He let go of the tail.

The cat went back to eating but her ears were still swivelled towards him distrustfully.

Vesemir held back a snicker. This little kitty had a fair bit of personality. While she ate, he looked over the rest of her and tried to decide if she’d need a bath.

“Glad you like the meat, kitty,” he said absently, while scratching around her ears. “Doesn’t look like you have fleas, which is a blessing. You look a little worse for wear, though. Perhaps we should give you a quick wash.”

The ears stayed trained on him, but she kept licking the last bit of juice off of empty plate. By the time she was done, the water in the kettle had heated enough that Vesemir could pour some in the sink for a small cat sized bath.

He gathered up towels and soap, and then rolled up his sleeves. Then he picked up the cat and gave her a look.

“Now. This might be odd, but we need to get you clean. So bear with me, and it’ll be over fast.”

She let him pick her up without protest, hanging limply in his grasp and looking around the room. It wasn’t until her back paws touched the water that she suddenly turned into a bite sized storm wrapped in dirty black fur.

The next ten minutes were more challenging than most of his fights on the Path. The cat did everything it could to alternatively escape or claw his eyes out, yowling as if he was murdering her while he resolutely wetted her fur and soaped.

By the time he pulled her out of the sink and wrapped in the waiting towels, his hands stung from all the scratches and the soapy water in the sink was tinged pink from blood.

She stopped howling as soon as she was free of the bath with its terrifying fifteen inches of water.
As Vesemir slowly rubbed her dry, she sat curled up and shivering, looking like half drowned pile of unhappiness. The wet fur meant she looked even smaller, and the bones under her skin were visible where there should be some flesh padding them. Her ears were huge on her tiny head. Vesemir couldn’t stop a chuckle at how pitiful she looked as she huddled on the towels, glaring murder at him.

He looked down at his forearms and hands. She'd scratched him to hell and back, but the wounds were all but healed now. His enhancements always ran towards self-healing. It was how he survived the massacre.

“A little fighter, huh.” He shook his head and laughed. “You’ll fit in fine.”

His clothes hadn’t fared quite as well as his hands. For the small amount of water that was in the sink when the bath started, most of it seemed to be deposited on him now. He washed the excess soap off of his hands and grabbed another dry towel for himself.

Furtively, he looked at the kitchen door.

If he were on the Path, he’d ignore his soaked clothes and keep to his tasks. Here at the keep, there wasn’t really a need for that. He could strip out of his wet clothes. Maybe warm up and dry off in front of the fire. No one else was here, as far as he knew. But the succubi, or hell, even Ciri and Eskel might, maybe, come back at any time.

After only a moment of thought, he shrugged, and started taking off his armor. He was in his home after all, he didn’t need to suffer discomfort here. Then he laughed at himself, at how spoiled he became.

“You made a mess of me, puss.”

The armor was the first to go. It was leather, so it would take a while to dry. He settled it on one of the benches in front of the kitchen fire.

“As much as I am worried about where everyone is, I’m not unhappy that I’ll have some quiet time to dry off,” he grumbled to himself, though it was a half hearted grumble at best. “Demons everywhere, interrupting baths, sneaking into my room. It is nice to have the company, though. Maybe I’ll teach them sword work.”

His shirt was next, soaked completely and also in possession of new holes. After it dried he would have to mend it. That, he spread on the old chair that stood in the corner. Then he looked down at his pants, completely soaked in front.

Not thinking much of it, he worked off his boots and wet pants and spread them out on the bench next to his armor. When he came back he realized the cat was staring at him. Her green eyes were bright and focused and she was purring up a storm.

“Why are you suddenly so happy? Glad to be out of the water?” he asked, feeling the cold of the stones seep into the soles of his feet. The socks were not enough to keep him warm, but considering he was as naked as a newborn baby, except said socks, he expected to be cold anyway.

The cat was shivering.

Piled on to another bench just to the side of the fire was a heap of blankets. High quality wool, as soft as anything he’d ever felt. They started appearing in the kitchen soon after the vampires moved in and considering some of the things he saw, Vesemir was sure they were all Alucard’s. For a vampire, that boy felt the cold a lot.
He grabbed the first one off the pile and wrapped it around his shoulders. Then he looked at the shivering, wet cat and went to grab some more towels, too.

He really was getting soft in his old age.

“Considering I’m mostly naked, remember to keep your claws to yourself,” he warned.

He wrapped the cat in the new towels and picked her up, pressing her close to his chest. Hopefully, the heat of his body would warm her up quickly. As soon as she realized what he was doing, her small body started vibrating with more heavy purrs. He smiled and rubbed her head softly as he went to sit in front of the fire. There was plenty of time to warm up while he waited for the stew to cook. Might as well make sure the cat dried out well, too.

As they sat in front of the fire, Vesemir rubbed the wetness out of the cat’s fur. Some part of him wished all problems were as easily solved as this.

“I hope my boys are safe,” he said quietly. “Ciri, too, though that girl can get herself out of trouble if she needs. Triss and Yennefer are even better at it. Sorceresses,” he scoffed. “I’d worry about Dandelion, but few would think to bother him for his connection to Geralt. Not like us witchers.”

The rumbling purr was soothing and the fire warmed him to the bones. Like any other witcher, he had his share of scars. The heat of the fire soaked into him, easing the ache that the cold brought to all those old tears and breaks.

“I hope Dracula and Alucard are alright, too.” The words were barely a whisper. It felt strange enough to think it, but over the last year both the vampires had grown on him. “Whatever is going on, this’ll be rough times for us all.”

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Night watched Vesemir and Orlaith head into the keep and sighed.

The old witcher was nice. Very nice. He did all the scratching and the brushing and, alright, there were some… complications as they worked out how hunting in the yard would go. But things were fine. And it was fun scaring him when she managed to get him to climb onto her back. That first time they teleported was great! She had no idea that witchers squeaked!

Now the castle was here, and Orlaith was here, too. Granted, Night didn’t actually interact with her much, but Orlaith was just below Dracula and Alucard on the pecking order. So when she called, Night had answered.

Something about a witcher named Lambert and how Night needed to go bring him here. Which… alright, transportation was what Night was good at.

Very, very good.

But she’d never met this Lambert fellow! And Vesemir was no damn help. They still hadn’t completely worked out the kinks in their communication. The way he held Orlaith was more than a little surprising, too. That took some real spine.

Night paced back and forth in the stables for a moment, trying to figure out just how to go about this. She wasn’t quite as good as a hellhound, but she had a fair sense of smell. If she could just get a whiff of this Lambert guy’s scent, she’d be able to go find him.

She looked around the stable. Then poked her head out into the courtyard. Nothing in either of
these places was going to help.

Then she looked up to the keep, and narrowed her eyes. Somewhere in there was a room where Lambert bedded down. It was probably close to where Vesemir bedded down, and Eskel. In her experience humans liked to crowd together. Where one was, more were to be found unerringly. So, if she navigated to Vesemir’s quarters, she could start her search from there.

She ran out and hopped onto the battlements, angling for a better view of the kitchen, the place with the good smells. She could see movement there and if she focused, she could hear the faint sounds of Vesemir speaking. Based on the lights that shone out of the keep at night, the actual sleeping areas were farther up.

Her extra senses told her that there were several large spaces inside that building. She just had to teleport into one and then look for the right rooms. It was tempting just to teleport into the large room next to the kitchen and start from there, but Vesemir and Orlaith were in the kitchen. Disturbing them would likely be unwise.

So Night gathered herself up and leapt, jumped through a quickly made portal, and landed in a hallway one floor above and off to the side of the kitchen. Her hard claws rang on the stone and she pranced in smug satisfaction.

This plan was going great so far!

Then something crashed and she froze. Slowly, she looked behind her only to see that her tail had caught on some kind of wooden thing that had just fallen over with a clang.

...It was probably fine.

She tiptoed her way through the hall, the floor crunching just a little bit under her feet, and poked her nose into the first door. This room definitely smelled like Vesemir. There were hints of demons, too. Succubi and incubi. No other humans though.

It was tempting, so, so tempting, to sneak in and get a good sniff of everything. Maybe it was better that she moved on, though. After all, she had a job to do. No time to dally.

Still, she felt miffed. Why were the succubi and incubi invited in and she wasn’t? That seemed unfair.

The door opposite Vesemir’s in the hall smelled of human, but female. And magic! Wards, probably, but nothing Night couldn’t teleport through if she really wanted to. That was pretty darn interesting, but Night had a task. Lambert was definitely a witcher and male, so this wasn’t his room.

She moved farther down the hall.

The next door she didn’t even get near. It smelled overpoweringly of Dracula, Alucard, and another human. Master’s lover. Geralt. Any disruption there wouldn’t be looked kindly upon.

The door directly across from Dracula’s also smelled of human female and magic. Night huffed in annoyance. How many humans stayed here? And where were they all?

She wandered farther down the hall. There was another door with human female scent. The magic was here, too, but it was well mixed with herbs and steel.

Across from that was a door that smelled like Eskel! Night liked Eskel a fair bit. That first dream of
his that she ran through was a great deal of fun.

Surely Orlaith wouldn’t mind just a tiny detour?

Night nosed the door open, and then edged in slowly. The door frame was a tight squeeze and she had to suck in her stomach, but she made it in. Mostly. She did get stuck a little about halfway through but a good push with her hind legs fixed that problem. Something creaked but nothing fell down, so it was probably fine.

Two steps in and she realized her error. This room smelled of Alucard and Dracula as well, though it wasn’t seeped in dark power like the other. Not as much anyways. Now that she was in it, she could sense the traces all around. Especially radiating off the bed.

Did Master have two witcher lovers?

Either way, it was time for Night to go. She spun in place, accidentally knocking over some other wood thing. When she tried to back away from it, she bumped into a different thing, this time with some glass bits on it. A couple may have fallen and broke. She danced in place, head tossing and claws digging into the floor, beside herself with trying to get out. Why did humans have so many things in their quarters?

Finally, she got turned around and got back through the door. In her haste, she had to dig in a little to get through that tight squeeze again, but soon enough Night was in the hall!

She turned to look at Eskel’s somewhat damaged door and gave a huff, half annoyed, half chagrined.

Oh right. The task. Probably time to work on that.

The next pair of doors both smelled of human male. One smelled of booze, fine clothes, wood, and parchment. The other smelled of leather, steel, and herbs. The leather and herbs thing seemed to be a witcher thing, so Night picked that room.

She paused a moment, and looked down the hall. There were other doors. How many could have people living in them? Vesemir seemed to indicate that there weren’t any more witchers beyond the four of them. This should be the last inhabited door.

Just in case, she wandered further down the hall for a sniff. As she suspected, these farther rooms were mostly cold and bare. Some of them smelled like a nice little snack, but she abstained. She could get a juicy rabbit or a fox outside the keep.

Thus justified in her assumptions, Night went back to what had to be Lambert’s room and shimmied her way in. The best scent would be on the bed.

This room was just as stuffed full of little things and wooden bits. Just to be thorough, she got a good sniff of them all as she wandered around the room. Lesson learned from Eskel’s room, she was exceedingly careful, gently nudging things out of the way as she investigated.

Here, too, she could smell succubi, especially on the bed. Again, she huffed in offence. Why were succubi invited everywhere and nobody even came to mention there were things to do in the bed? She might have not taken the invitation, granted, but the fact she wasn’t invited stung.

She tossed her head in irritation. Her mane went flying and ended up catching on something small. It fell with a loud crash. Night froze mid shake, and then slowly turned to look at the glass thing that now lay shattered on the floor.
Damn.

She looked towards the hall really quick and waited, ears perked forward.

Nothing. Maybe no one heard.

With a sigh of relief, she continued sniffing around the pillows. It was saturated with the scent of male and danger, with just a hint of something demonic mixed in with a strong potential for magic. She liked the scent. It was defined and sharp, different from mundane humans. This one didn’t smell like a snack. None of the witchers did.

She paused, realizing that in itself was odd. She was used to demons not smelling like food, but humans were a new thing. At first she thought it was her master’s gift that made the humans smell non-edible, but she was starting to wonder now. The scent in this room wasn’t new. She couldn’t sense an older, different scent here at all. She could smell years passing, but the sharp tang of danger was always there. It was as if the witchers were this way before her master came along.

Very strange.

Eventually, she decided this was enough. She could feel the potential, the tiny streak of darkness glowing somewhere out there. All she needed was to follow that scent until she found it, and with it the witcher Lambert.

Pleased, she stomped her feet and leaped, leaving the confined space and landing on the stone courtyard.

One more leap and she was out beyond the keep walls, following that scent.

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King Henselt looked out over his map of Kaedwen, his kingdom, and frowned.

Something was amiss in the north.

No. It was far worse than that. Something was drastically, deeply wrong, and none of his people seemed to know what the hell was going on. Not his generals, not his spies, and not even his bloody mages.

Sometime in the last half day, a whole Gods be damned city had appeared in the northern Blue Mountains, on the Kaedwen side.

Kaedwen was a country of magic, and sorceresses and mages were plentiful. Thus, word traveled fast, especially to him.

Local townsfolk had gone to their city guards, who’d gone to their mayors, who then in turn had sent word off to the capital. In short order, Henselt was made aware of this…this invasion. To think that there was a whole city hidden from him, right there under his nose, made his blood boil.

Not that he’d seen this city. He’d had to rely on word of mouth descriptions because every mage he’d tasked to scrying it had ended up unconscious with blood dripping out of their nose and ears.

“Are all of you bloody useless?” he snarled at his advisors, throwing the half full goblet of wine he held at the nearest one. He wasn’t the young warrior that he used to be, but his aim was still damn good. What did it matter if some wine spilled on his own velvet sleeves? He was the king. He had all the clothes he could want.
Just looking at the map made him think it might be time to switch to armor again, though. This situation was outrageous.

“Your Majesty,” Prince Merwin began. When Henselt leveled a furious gaze on the young man, Merwin only paused a moment. He licked his lips nervously, though that was the only tell for his discomfort. Henselt always did like to keep his people a little nervous. It was good for them.

“We’ve sent mages to portal to the towns that can actually see this phenomena. We have some information, and more will be forthcoming soon.”

“If they were portalling already, why haven't they portalled straight to the invading city?” he snarled.

“They did,” Sabrina Glevissig said, her tone slightly irritated. She was a sorceress, and a powerful one. Part of their little lodge, in fact, though Henselt didn’t know or care to know about the politics in that group. It was enough that she served him with all her abilities. Though he had to admit, he was more than a little wary of her sheer power. At least she was pretty to look at. “The ones who attempted are still unconscious. They’ve been drained magically, and broken in a way I have never seen before. Nothing we’ve done has been able to reach them or wake them.”

A sour frown twisted across Henselt’s face. He hated not having proper intelligence.

“What do we know?” he said finally.

“That there is a city that has appeared, easily as large as Ard Carraigh, and very well fortified. Those who have eyes on the place noted very tall, very thick walls. With towers. They encircle the whole city, and the place is locked up tight as a drum.” Sabrina smirked, and shifted a little in place. The movement brought attention to her low cut bodice and loose flowing hair. Like all sorceresses, she loved to flaunt every power she had, looks being part of that. “The place stinks of demonic energy. But so far, nothing has come out of it.”

“That we know of,” Baron Jalenth stated, his irritation obvious. Jalenth had been on Henselt’s council for more than a decade now, and though he was on the stubborn side, he could usually be shouted into acting reasonably. The man wasn’t much of a fighter, already his body had softened with age and rich foods, but his mind was quick as a whip.

“That we know of,” Sabrina agreed with a tiny sneer.

“Send forward scouts,” Henselt ordered. “Make sure to keep a mage in each group. I want reports back on the half hour. With details.”

There was a small flurry of activity as someone rushed out to send out his orders.

After a moment of silence, Sabrina spoke up again. “You realize what’s up there, don’t you?” she asked. Henselt looked at her out of the corner of his eye. Perhaps she would realize how displeased he was and get to the damn point quickly. “Kaer Morhen is in those mountains.”

Henselt frowned. “Kaer Morhen? The old witcher keep?”

“That place is supposed to be a ruin,” Merwin said, shaking his head. “There’s nothing left there but crumbling brick and the last few freaks who couldn’t die along with their fellows.”

“So we thought.” Sabrina shrugged and then winced. Every mage in his presence was red eyed and holding their heads, as if all of them had a headache. Sabrina was no exception. “And…Majesty, I’m inclined to believe that the witcher keep was all that was ever there. This demonic city isn’t something that was hidden and has now been exposed. It’s new.” A thoughtful look passed over
her face.

“Why would you say that?” Henselt asked, his voice low and irritated.

“I have not personally been to the keep, but some of the other sorceresses from the Lodge have, and their reports were clear. The fortress is ruined, destroyed decades ago by a rabid mob. It was never rebuilt.”

He ran his tongue over his teeth. “So what you’re telling me is that a whole city, a demonic city at that, has just appeared in the mountains overnight. Right on top of where the ruins of a witcher keep once was.” The words were delivered flatly, because the very idea of it was ridiculous.

“Yes.” Her answer was simple and serious.

A cold wave of fear washed over him. Henselt was no mage, but he’d been commanding mages all of his adult life. He knew what they could reasonably do. The sheer amount of power it would take to move a whole city overnight was mind boggling.

Henselt gritted his teeth and took a breath. “Get me that intelligence. I want to know who, or what, is responsible for this. And find me a witcher to question.”

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Once Ciri was out of the hospital and back in her world, she went straight to Triss’s house in Vizima. While Triss did travel a fair bit, she was on the Temerian Royal Council, acting as advisor to King Foltest. Because of that, her main residence was in the Trade Quarter of Temeria’s capital.

Cautious of Triss’s privacy, Ciri portal ed into the main sitting room. That way if Triss were in the middle of some spell work in her private quarters then Ciri wouldn’t be interrupting her.

The portal must have alerted her because as soon as Ciri stepped into the room, Triss walked down the stairs.

“How is he?” Triss said without preamble.

“Geralt is recovering. Talking easily, though he can barely move.” Ciri sighed and shook her head, flopping down on a chair. Damn she was tired. While she could portal between worlds if she had to, it took a toll on her. She felt a tad queasy and hungry like a wolf at the same time. “I left Eskel with them. From the looks of both Alucard and Dracula, they might need the extra support.”

Ciri’s last conversation with Eskel played through her mind. It was a little worrisome. Her adopted uncle was prone to brooding, stewing in his own unhappiness, and then soldiering along like everything was alright. She hoped that the four of them would figure out whatever tangled relationship thing was going on between them, and soon. Maybe being stuck in that hospital room together would help.

“Did Geralt have anything useful to say?” Triss asked, and poured a couple glasses of wine from a decanter on an end table. She handed one to Ciri, and kept the other, sitting in a nearby plush chair. For all that she was acting cool, Ciri could see the lines of exhaustion on her body as she sat, and there were dark shadows under her eyes.

“Not much. He confirmed it was the Order of the Flaming Rose that had gone after him, and mentioned that they had a signed order from their Grandmaster proclaiming him a heretic.” Ciri sipped the wine. It was a good vintage, but light. Maybe mixed with fruit juice. Perfect for giving back a bit of energy while keeping anyone from actually getting drunk. Triss was subtle in a lot of
ways. The product of so many years of playing politics.

“Siegfried?” Triss raised her eyebrows in surprise, and smoothed back a stray lock of hair. “That
seems out of character. I thought he and Geralt were friends. Or at least on speaking terms.”

“That’s what Geralt said.”

“Geralt wouldn’t cast accusations lightly, not at a person with that much influence.” Triss said
slowly. “He was always careful about assigning blame. Probably why he ends up with so many
friends.”

“How about you and Yen? Find anything more?”

Triss sighed, and crossed her legs. She was fidgeting. A sure sign she was more upset than she was
letting on.

“Does a headache count?” she asked with another sigh. Ciri snorted.

“You seem disturbed,” Ciri said gently. “What did you find?”

“Mostly more questions. I’ve been working with the Temerian secret service, and according to
them there have been hints of Nilfgaardian spies at work. Right now they’re chasing each other
around like cats and mice.” She paused for a second and then winced. “There’s been an upswing of
the production of the Monstrum.”

Ciri grimaced.

*The Monstrum, or a Portrayal of Witchers.*

That nasty piece of fiction was one of the primary reasons witchers were hunted in the first place.
It was a book of mostly horrific lies mixed in with enough truth to be an excellent bit of fear
mongering. Witchers never held much love from the common populace; their powers were always
as unsettling as they were needed. But the book tilted the balance in the wrong way. The initial
spread of that bit of propaganda spurred the mob that destroyed Kaer Morhen, and several other
witcher keeps, if Ciri’s information was right.

The sudden increase in circulation of that vileness was telling.

“Someone is having them printed and spread,” Ciri said flatly.

Triss nodded. “I’m working to get them off the streets, but whoever started the reproduction has
ghosted. It could have been anyone.”

“Someone in Order of the Flaming Rose could have had them printed to shore up the belief that
non-humans should all be killed. If it wasn’t Siegfried, it could be a rival attempting to oust him,”
Ciri mused out loud.

“Do you think Geralt was targeted specifically or was it just any witcher that they would have
hunted?” Triss asked, rubbing her hand over her face.

“Geralt said the warrant for his death specified him in particular.” Now Ciri was getting a headache
too.

Triss sighed and sipped her wine. “Still could be spycraft. Maybe taking advantage of split
opinions in the Order. Yennefer is looking in Redania right now, seeing if this has any connection
to what happened Novigrad last summer. The Order is based up there now, in Castle Barinemurg. After the uprising here years ago, their cloister in Vizima was seized and sold off. Turned into a warehouse by the crown. I’ll contact Yennefer and see if she can drop by to visit Grandmaster Siegfried.”

“What does King Foltest think about all this?”

The King of Temeria was a just ruler, and more importantly, he disliked the Order and personally liked Geralt. After the way Geralt saved Princess Adda from her curse, Foltest happily welcomed and routinely employed Geralt in various hunts. Other witchers wandering through Temeria found themselves more likely to be looked upon kindly because of it, too.

“Foltest is furious.” Triss winced. “That portion of forest wasn’t really inhabited by his subjects, but it was a valuable resource. There are a whole host of refugees flooding the neighboring towns, little homesteads that saw Dracula’s power coming and fled. That land bordered on Brokilon Forest, and so had a very high non-human population, too, though the vast majority aren’t sentient races. Now those creatures are flooding the surrounding area as well. Most retreated into Brokilon proper. I’m sure, but some are making their way through Foltest’s lands. And the Order…” she shook her head. “Not only are they all dead and gone, at least in that region, but their hate mongering has scared off even a rumor of other monster hunters. So those refugees are having a hell of a time. The royal huntsman about had a stroke.”

No wonder Triss looked tired.

Ciri sank a little farther into her chair and let her cup dangle from her hand.

After a moment of thought, she asked, “Whoever planned this, do you think they realize the kind of…connections Geralt has?”

“You mean Dracula?”

“Yeah.” Ciri gave a half-shrug, gesturing with her cup. “I mean I doubt they know the name, but do they think there’s a definite connection between Geralt and the dark dragon from Novigrad? Or are we just grasping at straws? Geralt has pissed off a lot of people, after all. Though he has been a little better about it in the past few years,” she added in a low grumble.

Triss pursed her lips. “I think,” she said slowly, “that whoever planned this knew there was a connection, but not the extent of what force they were dealing with. Dracula’s power is mostly unknown here. We get demonics, but that level of dark energy is…very unusual. Now if the intent was to control, kill, or simply sow chaos?” she shrugged. “Too soon to tell.”

“The only good thing is that Dracula is not here,” Ciri said, shuddering at the memory of the forest he incinerated. “That’s the unexpected benefit of Alucard taking Geralt so far away, I guess.”

“I still can’t believe you two managed to stop him.” Triss shook her head and drained the rest of her cup. Then she stood up. “I need to go update Yennefer. Why don’t you take a nap? You look about ready to pass out. Once she and I are done catching up, I’ll wake you and we can figure out where to go from there.”

Since Ciri was nearly horizontal already, she just nodded and slumped a little farther down in the chair.

Triss snorted softly in amusement and rolled her eyes. Before she went upstairs again, she grabbed some sliced bread from the little kitchen area and dropped it off near Ciri’s chair. “Eat something
first, then take the couch.”

It only took a moment to wolf down half the loaf. The sweet, soft apple bread tasted divine after all the hard work of portaling all over the place. After that, she didn’t even bother to take off her boots. She just sprawled on top of Triss’s couch, feet dangling off the end.

She was asleep in moments.

If she dreamed, she had no recollection of it. There was only the deep, hard sleep of exhaustion.

A stabbing pain through her temple woke her up long before her body was ready for it.

“Ahhhhhh! The fuck?!” She moaned and clutched her head. By the time she blinked the blurriness out of her eyes, Ciri realized that she’d drawn her sword and was standing with the blade held ready. The room was empty though. Nothing had changed.

Fuck, but her head hurt though. It felt like magical backlash of some kind, though what exactly it was, she had no idea. It wasn’t like she was casting any spells while asleep.

Then a different thought percolated. She wasn’t casting. But Triss was.

She sheathed her sword and staggered painfully towards the stairs, hurrying towards Triss’ work room.

“Triss!” she called, wincing at the sound of her own voice, and pushed the heavy door open.

Triss was kneeling in the middle of the rich wood floor. The metal protection seals embedded into the wood of the floor were dark and calm around her. Her head was lowered and she was clutching it with her hands, rocking gently in place.

“Triss?”

“Shh,” Triss moaned. “Give me a moment.”

Her hands started glowing with blue-white light that promptly settled on her head. After a moment or two, the glow went away and Triss straightened up. Her eyes looked bloodshot and somewhat glassy, but she stood up easy enough and walked over to Ciri.

“Let me help first,” she said softly, pressing glowing palms to Ciri’s head.

The light felt cool and gentle. It seeped into her aching skull and eased the migraine into a dull ache somewhere in the back of her head. The pain wasn’t gone, but it was something that she could work through and ignore.

“Oh, thank Gods.” Ciri groaned with relief, and rubbed her temple. “Thank you. What was that? Are you alright?”

Triss shook her head very slowly, still half wincing. “I’m not sure what that was. It felt like…like a shock wave, almost.”

She frowned a moment and got a far off look on her face, one that Ciri was intimately familiar with. Triss was trying to reach out with her senses to feel if there was anything happening nearby.

After a moment, Triss’s frown deepened. She walked over to her work table. Once there, she rummaged around in a shelf next to it and pulled out a large scroll. With a quick snap, she laid it across the table.
It was a large map of Temeria. Cities and roads were marked in black, but there was also a web of other colors drawn across the surface.

“Leylines?” Ciri asked.

“Mmhmm.” Triss smoothed out the edges of the scroll and placed heavy crystals on each of the corners, weighing it down. “Each line and color shows the path of a natural channel for magical energy. I update this with regularity. There are shifts, but not generally drastic ones. It takes too much power to move those sorts of things in any meaningful way. Rather like changing the course of a river, actually. But here you can see the different types of energy.” She pointed at the different colors on the map.

Then she grabbed a glass jar off of the shelf behind her; inside was sand. At first Ciri thought it was a single color, some kind of brown, but when she looked closer she realized that every grain was a different color. It had just homogenized when all mixed up.

Triss poured the sand into the center of the map and spread it out. “We’re gonna do a little divination, and let the grains of sand show us where the disruption was. If there was an incident near by, the sand will show us if things have shifted.”

“Like a well drawing on underground water? It’ll suck it up from the area around it?” Ciri asked. She was trained as a sorceress, true, but there was still a fair bit that she didn’t know. Also, this was very prosaic for a sorceress. Usually they worked on high casting, pure focused power rather than the quieter, softer earth magics.

“Maybe. Or if something was dammed up it could have burst and spread, like a flood. If someone had a magical artifact, something with a great deal of power and it was destroyed, that might have caused a shockwave like that. Although,” she winced again, “I’m a little worried about how powerful an item would have had to be to cause that.”

“Where did you learn this?” Ciri asked, suddenly insanely curious.

“Druid. And old friend of Geralt’s. Word to the wise, never waste any tool just because it looks different than what you’re used to.”

Triss raised her hands over the map and gathered just the tiniest bit of power. It wasn’t very much. So little that Ciri was actually quite surprised. But it made sense when she thought about it. The grains of sand only needed to reflect the energy matrix of the land shown on the map. And they were very tiny grains. From the way they sparkled on the map, they looked like ground up crystal. Perfect for holding energy.

Again, a soft pale blue glow gathered around Triss’s fingers. This time it wafted down to settle into the sand. Ciri could feel a faint vibration, a tingling as the energy settled into the grains. They bounced and rumbled across the map, moving themselves around, sorting into colors.

“There we go,” Triss said with satisfaction. “Now we’ll be able to see wher-fuck!”

Both Ciri and Triss jumped back from the table. The grains had moved into a pattern, yes, but it was drastically different than what was on the map. All the colored lines had been warped, twisted, and moved; threaded through them all were veins of dark purple, deep crimson, and solid black, all radiating out from the north east.

The moment the pattern was set in place, those dark colored grains started to sizzle. Tiny little wisps of smoke rose up from the map and the paper turned black, curling and withering away from
the sizzling bits of sand.

It only took a minute or two for the map to be utterly destroyed.

Ciri stared at the ashes in horror. There was something familiar about the scent of the smoke, but she couldn’t place it.

The grains were still hot, sizzling hard enough to eat into the top layer of the wooden table Triss used to place the map. The sorceress cursed and ran across the room to a cabinet, grabbed a carafe of water and ran back, splashing the contents over the table. The water hissed and steamed where it touched the grains, but it seemed to be enough to stop the reaction.

Triss and Ciri shared a wide eyed look, then both stared back at the table.

“That’s…that’s not possible,” Triss said flatly.

“Seems like it is.” Ciri just blinked, and blew a harsh breath out of her mouth. “You got a bigger map?”

Triss glanced at her, thinking for a second, and then turned to her shelf and dug around for a minute.

She came back to the table with the scroll but hesitated.

“I really like this table,” she said, looking at the damage already done.

“It’s pretty much fucked already. Might as well go all in.” Ciri shrugged.

Triss sighed and rolled out the map. It was much bigger, not just in physical size but also in the land mass that was detailed on it. It showed not only all of Temeria, but most of this side of the continent as well. Ciri looked at the countries delineated with green borders, at the forest that no longer was drawn in detail on the map, and then higher up, through Redania and over to Kaedwen and the Blue Mountains. She touched her finger to the valley she knew so well, and smiled.

“Kaer Morhen,” she murmured. For all that she didn’t spend all that many years at the keep, it felt like home to her. “I hope they are okay.”

“The old keep survived so much already, I’m sure it’s fine,” Triss said, before going back to the shelves lining the walls of the room. She returned with another jar full of mixed sand.

“Let’s try again.” She motioned for Ciri to step back.

After the results of the first spell, Ciri was eager to give the table some space. She also grabbed another carafe of water. Just in case.

Once again, Triss dumped the sand over the map and gently imbued it with magical energy. Then she, too, took a quick step back. The grains rumbled across the map, spreading out and separating into veins of different colors.

Before the sand had even settled, a small pillar of fire burst up from the map.

Right on the valley where Kaer Morhen rested.

It burned hot for a few seconds, and then died down immediately, leaving a hole an inch or two around. The black, red, and purple, sizzling veins spread out from that hole, eating into the map. This time they worked faster, as if the fire had chased the power out into the other grains. It
couldn’t have taken longer than a minute, and the map was nothing but black, greasy ash. The grains burned so hot that their pattern had been seared right into the table, making the wood smoke and hiss.

Ciri didn’t wait. She doused the table with water, filling the room with noxious smoke.

“I don’t want to say it but…” Triss said hesitantly.

“Dracula.” Ciri finished for her. “I remember the corrosive feel of his power. It incinerated the whole area and everything in it without much visible effort from him. If there’s anyone who can cause this,” she waved to the destroyed table. “It’s him.”

Triss shook her head at the table. “I can’t believe that he’d hurt or destroy the keep. Geralt means too much to him. Unless——” She shot Ciri a worried look.

“He’s alive,” Ciri said. “I was just there. He’s safe and alive. Alucard is with him, Eskel is with him, and there are a formidable number of well trained human guards there with them, too. He was stable when I left.”

“So what did Dracula do, then?” Triss frowned.

“I have no idea.”

“I could try and scry, but after this…” she trailed off uncertain.

“I don’t want you to end up like that map,” Ciri said, also looking at the ruin of the table. “I can portal in somewhere close by and travel the rest of the way on foot.”

“Be careful,” Triss warned. “Whatever power is guarding that place is vicious. If it reacts this powerfully to a simple divination spell, there’s no telling how it would treat an actual intrusion.”

Ciri swallowed. She remembered how she’d been knocked unconscious the first time she and Geralt had stumbled in to Dracula’s power. This time, Geralt wouldn’t be around to save her.

“I’ll portal to just outside the Blue Mountains, there’s a small village there. I’ll get a horse and ride up the rest of the way. It will probably take me a few hours. Winter trails aren’t easy this time of year.”

“I’ve got extra gear here. It should fit you.” Triss moved over to another side of the room, and started digging through a heavy cedar chest. From it, she pulled out several bags and a heavy fur cloak. She held up a tightly sealed bag from the pile. “Before you go, eat these. High energy rations. Eat one, take the rest with you. You’ll need them.”

Ciri loaded herself down, all while ripping into the little bar of food. It was compressed honey, dried fruits, and nuts. Sappy sweet, and on the dry side, but Triss was right. Ciri would need every bit of energy she could get.

In moments, she was ready to go. She shared one last worried look with Triss.

“As soon as you find anything, you contact me.” Triss handed her a small hand mirror, one Ciri knew they’d be able to spell-talk through.

Ciri gave her a quick hug. “Thanks.”

“Good luck.” Triss tried for an encouraging smile.
“You too,” Ciri said softly. Then she gathered up energy around her, and portaled away.

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Vanessa had been an innkeeper for over ten years now, ever since her good-for-nothing, lout of a husband got himself killed while drunk. Happiest day of her life, really.

It was mostly a quiet job. Their town, Goose Landing, was small, and their downtown only consisted of a few streets of buildings. She ran the bar at her inn, but she had a cook, a table girl, and a stable boy, too. Her own son was the cook, and the girl and boy were hired from her neighbors.

They got some traffic from the nearby homesteads and the hunters that lived off of the mountains. Some traders would come up every few months to trade trinkets and goods from the larger cities for skins and horns or dried mountain herbs. Those were exciting days.

In spring and fall, the witchers would come through, heading in and out of Kaer Morhen. No one knew where the old fortress was, but everyone knew it was in the mountains up there somewhere. It was always a good day when a witcher stopped in. They were courteous and drank a lot, and afterwards they always tipped well. The stories they had, too! Ah, kept the locals entertained for weeks after.

That was usually the most exciting thing that happened, at least as far as visitors went. The town had its fair share of drama---all small towns did---and as the tavern owner and barkeep, she heard it all.

It wasn’t an extravagant life, but it at least kept the business going and kept her busy. Vanessa brewed her own mead with honey harvested from her hives out back; she definitely wouldn't be able to afford to buy any. In winter time, she made her own Applejack from the late season cider, trading for apples with her mead and extra honey. On busy days, she got a couple of local kids helping serve and clean for a few coins.

The old inn had a large common room on the ground floor, filled with long tables made of roughly hewn wood and there were three rooms upstairs she could rent if people came by. Sometimes Mary from the next village over paid her for using it for a few hours if she got a customer that didn’t want to be seen in her town. That was a nice additional income. Vanessa regretted they didn’t have any more enterprising women, it would have filled her coffers nicely if they did. She also had stables in the back, they housed her old gray and had two stalls for rent. Sometimes she got more money for stabling the horses than she got from feeding the people.

It was only mid-morning when Jack Grous, a woodsman from up the mountain way, came blundering in, pale as a damn ghost.

"Vanessa! Vanessa! I need a drink, the strongest you have!" he bellowed.

Since it wasn’t even damn well lunch time yet, and she’d barely even opened the front door, she raised an eyebrow at him but fetched a glass anyways.

“What’s got you in a tizzy?” she asked, and dug around for some home brewed brandy. She waited until he put the coin on the bar before she poured it though.

“Haven’t you been outside, woman?” Jack said after downing half of the glass in one go.

“Do I look like I’ve had time to get out and do the outside chores yet? It’s not even lunch, and cold as hell.” The words were a bit harsh, but she kept her tone amused and gentle. Teasing, almost. It
paid to be pleasant to whoever walked in, even if they weren’t the kindest of customers.

“Go look. Go look now. After you pour me another drink.” He waved the empty glass at her.

Vanessa frowned at him, more in confusion than in actual annoyance. She poured the glass, but grabbed him by the collar and dragged him outside with her. No sense in leaving him unchecked near her bar while she went to go gawk at whatever nonsense had gotten him all worked up.

“Alright, what am I looking at here--- oh.”

She trailed off as she noticed the tall spires of towers off in the distance, piercing so high into the sky that they disappeared into the clouds. Below them was a black, shining wall that stretched as far as the eye could see in either direction, cutting off sight of most of the mountain range she was used to seeing her whole life.

There were other mountains there, too, steel grey and so tall that their snow capped tips disappeared in the clouds that usually topped the more familiar peaks. The structures couldn’t have been within a couple hours ride, based on what little remained of the hills she knew so well, but their sheer size made them seem closer.

“What in the gods is this?” she whispered, swallowing the sudden terror.

“I’m not sure I want to know,” Jack said, tugging away from her slack grip. “I just want a drink. I don’t want to think of how the hell am I going to go into the mountains for wood now. Or what else is there waiting.”

Vanessa thought quickly. As the innkeeper, she had a bit of clout in the town. People listened to her, and she often heard the news first thing. “Does Mayer Luthor know?”

Luthor was sort of the default leader of the town, basically elected by popular vote to liaison with visiting government officials. He was the only one who could read and write in their town so he was the only choice, really. Vanessa herself knew her figures and enough chicken scratch to keep track of things, but real reading wasn’t a thing she had time or opportunity to learn. The other folks in town were in the same boat. So it wasn’t like any of them knew what the parchment those officials waved around even meant.

“John the baker said he saw a mage portal in a while ago. He said it was a pretty lass with hair as black as night and colorful dress. He said she went straight to Luthor’s house after gaping at the… castle… for a bit.”

“Makes sense that a sorceress would want to know about this.” Vanessa nodded, feeling so much better now that she knew that somebody more learned in those matters was looking into things.

She side-eyed Jack. The man was pale as milk, and staring at the towers in the distance like they might walk up and bite him. Granted, one never knew with magic, and Vanessa herself wanted to sit and stare, too. But leaving people frightened like that was a dangerous idea. She knew if she was calm and matter of fact about the whole situation, Jack would start to calm down, too. As well as others, because no doubt her inn would be full come evening time, if only to share gossip.

So Vanessa slapped Jack on the back and nodded towards the inside. “Let’s get warmed up. Come help me with the chairs. Daisy won’t be over to help for an hour yet, and I’m sure more folk will be coming in soon.”

He blinked at her. Then a bit of sanity and reason came back to his gaze, and he scowled. “Aww Vanessa, you putting me to work?”
“Aye, I am, but I’ll give you a small beer in thanks if you help me get set up right quick.” Vanessa knew damn well that she’d soon be too busy to breathe, even after her helpers got in for the day.

She was more than a bit relieved by it. Being busy meant that she’d have no time to hide under her bed and panic about the terrifying castle that was now their closest neighbor.

Suddenly a thought occurred to her, one she definitely didn’t like.

“Have you heard if Mika and Palo came back from the mountains yet?”

They were hunters, father and son. Mika had just married not long ago and his wife, a nice lass by the name of Doria, was Vanessa’s goddaughter. The girl was expecting her first child. If Mika was lost in that fortress with his father, there would be no one to put bread on the table for the girl and her soon-to-be babe.

If anything, Jack turned a bit green in the face, and turned to look at her in horror. “No,” he whispered. “Not due back ‘til later today.”

“Somebody has to see to Doria,” she decided. It wouldn’t do if the girl realized what could happen while alone. The stress of it could make her lose the child. “Can you go get one of the kids to bring her here?” She could hear some chatter out back. The farmers kids running about already. One of them should be enough to get Doria here where Vanessa could at least keep an eye on the lass.

Jack shook his head, and waved a hand dismissing the idea. “I’ll bring her myself. But I still want that small beer when I get back.”

“You will get it,” she said. Hell, she might even make it a big one.

He took another glance at the castle, shook his head, and was off down the road.

Vanessa hurried back inside and scrambled to get the common room ready. She poked her head into her son’s room, and knocked. He was still asleep. Not unusual considering how late they kept the tavern open at night. He often closed up for her in the wee hours, and she’d get up early to open them up in the morning. But Vanessa already knew that she’d need the extra help for lunch.

“Wilhelm, wake up!”

There was an unhappy grumble from the bed.

“Wilhelm! Come help, as soon as you can get yourself together. Something’s happened.”

She didn’t waste any more time. He’d get up soon enough now. By the time she walked back to the common room, two more of the local farmers were there, pale and ready for a beer.

Then the sorceress walked in.

She looked young, but from the stories Vanessa heard about Sorceresses, they never got old anyway. Pretty face, unblemished by work and wind. She had big, dark eyes with dark kohl around them. Vanessa could see how the farmers looked at her, stunned by the shocking brightness of her long, yellow and purple dress. Or perhaps it was how the low cut bodice exposed the tops of her smooth, perky breasts. The sorceress had a fur lined shawl, but Vanessa had no idea how that even kept her warm at all. The thing barely covered her shoulders. Everything about her seemed to be made to draw attention.

The men all but salivated as they stared.
Vanessa sighed in irritation. Men were so stupid. Much like farm animals, the very idea that they
could dip their wick into something young and pretty was enough to make them do anything.
Really, she saw more sense from the bulls on the fields than from men who saw a pretty lass.

Despite her beauty, the woman looked tired. Her eyes were red and she squinted like the mid-
morning light pained her.

“Tell me you have wine,” the sorceress said as soon as she laid eyes on Vanessa behind the bar.

“I’m afraid I’ve only mead, beer, applejack, and brandy, my lady.” Vanessa made sure to sound
truly apologetic, though the idea of wine was a bit laughable. Did it look like they had vast
vineyards around their village? Or that anyone did in Kaedwen? The whole damn country was too
cold for grapes, and everyone knew it. Still, it paid to be nice to people who could summon fire.

The sorceress grimaced, but took a stool at the bar anyways. “Mead, then.”

Vanessa made sure to find her best glass she could before she poured the mead. She wondered if
the sorceress would notice if Vanessa hiked up the price a bit, and if it was even worth the risk.

Before she could worry about it, another couple of farmers wandered in, quickly followed by John
the baker. He had with him a large tray of hot buns and sticky honey rolls. He raised an eyebrow at
her and she smirked, but waved him in. He knew damn well she wouldn’t have lunch ready to sell
yet. By bringing in his food, they’d both sell more.

Things picked up as more townsfolk trickled in to share gossip and drink their worries down.
Vanessa could hear Wilhelm in the kitchen, chopping root vegetables for the stew.

They still had meat; winter served them well in the regard that they could store the meat longer
without salting or smoking it. Vanessa bought most of Palo’s haul two weeks back.

That made her frown. If Palo and Mika didn’t come back, who would get them meat? All the local
farmers grew either wheat, rye, or flax, with several small orchards mixed in. There were no
breeders, just the few chickens, goats, and an occasional sheep. None of that would be enough to
supply her inn for any length of time.

Then the second mage came in, an older man dressed in outlandish furs and shining baubles. He sat
right next to the sorceress and waved a finger for a drink, indicating he wanted the same as the
sorceress. The din in the common room grew noticeably quieter as everyone tried to get an earful
of whatever the magic users might say. From the sour look on the mage’s face, this fact hadn’t
escaped him.

“Well?” the sorceress said impatiently.

The mage just shook his head. “Nothing. Not a thing,” he bitched. She huffed at him and took a
drink. “The other groups are still out. We’ll know more soon.”

Vanessa held back her frown. She very much did not like how it sounded as if the magic users were
just as stumped about whatever was going on as the townsfolk were.

“How’s m’lord taking it?” the sorceress asked.

“How do you think?” The mage drained his cup, then waved for a refill.

“You think that’s the same thing that destroyed the Temerian forest?” the sorceress asked, lifting
her cup but not drinking from it.
“I don’t know.” The mage shook his head. “That land was incinerated and this is clearly a creation. But the darkness and demonic stench seem to fit.”

Vanessa shuddered. *Darkness and demonic stench.* She wondered if life now was going to be like what her great-grandmother talked about. Monsters kidnapping people in the middle of the night, strange powers demanding tribute and keeping people under a terrifying yoke.

They had it peaceful here now. A drowner happened from time to time, or some other beastie, but the fact the witchers came by every so often was enough to take care of that business. A bit of coin, a message outside the tavern and the critter would be dead sooner or later.

She thought of the huge, black walls in the distance.

One witcher didn’t seem like nearly enough to fight *that.*

“I don’t even want to think how a caster capable of something like this can exist.” The sorceress shook her head, and her black, shining hair rustled over the white fur of her shawl. “Whoever that is must be monstrous.”

“Don’t forget the dragon,” the mage chimed in.

“While a dragon may incinerate a forest, even a dark dragon no one has ever seen before, it makes no sense for it to suddenly create a fortress like that. And mountains. The Mayor told me that the larger dark grey mountains? They weren’t here yesterday.”

“I don’t know what’s worse,” the mage said with a groan. “This whole thing being a dragon’s creation or there being two separate dark powers we that have no knowledge of. I wonder if the witchers know anything.”

The sorceress snorted. “If the *good people* hadn’t slaughtered most of them, it would be damn sight easier finding one to question.”

“You are right.” The mage sighed. “There’s not many of them left. And rumor has it that the Wolf school in particular is practically nonexistent. Just a handful of them scattered in the world.”

“Makes you think, doesn’t it?” The sorceress finally took a drink from her glass, grimacing again. “When there were more of them, we never had a problem like this happen. No witchers and we suddenly get dragons and gods know what else crawling out of the cracks.”

The mage was the one to snort derisively this time.

“Don’t tell me you bought into their whole motto of killing monsters. They were just mercenaries that did some monster hunting on the side. They were too dangerous as fighters to leave them be. You heard the stories of what one witcher can do. Imagine a whole regiment of them. They could change the course of a war. It’s better that they’re all but gone.”

Vanessa hid a frown, turning her back to grab a bar rag. She wasn't the only one shifting to hide dissatisfaction, either. The witchers were well liked in Goose Landing, and hearing anyone talk bad about them was a hard pill to swallow. They all knew better than to show their displeasure, though. Magic users were both powerful and capricious.

Their cups were empty by now, she noticed. It was time to play the good host. She threw away the rag she was using to clean the bar and grabbed a jug full of mead. When Vanessa came over to replenish their drinks again, the mage’s eyes lighted on her. “You. Bar wench.”
Vanessa held back a groan. She knew damn well that she was built like a horse a couple years past its prime. Strong, sturdy, and healthy to boot, but no competition for any court lady. But every once in a while, some traveler thought she sold more than beer. Slapping a mage’s wandering fingers might be trickier than a peddler, though. Hopefully that wasn’t what he wanted.

She smiled at him, the impersonal stretch of the lips that any salesperson might give to a passing by client. “Yes, My Lord?”

“Are there any witchers around? Or any that have come through recently?” he asked, eyes narrowed.

“Not recently. ‘Tis winter, late winter anyways. They won’t come through ‘til spring. Weeks from now at the earliest.”

Granted, the last year has been extremely odd, with a witcher wandering through every few weeks. But that could be disregarded as an anomaly, and thus didn’t need to be mentioned. Or at least, she didn’t feel the need to volunteer it. It was a relief to be able to answer the man honestly without fear of endangering the witchers or herself.

The mage sighed, but the sorceress looked unsurprised.

“Worth a try,” the mage said with a sigh, and took a drink.

“Would have been nice to have a witcher just walk into our hands like that,” the sorceress said.

Vanessa resolved to make sure to warn any witcher who might come by. For once, she hoped that they wouldn’t. The mages were right about one thing; there were very few witchers left in the world. No sense in making that number dwindle further.

While the magic users had been chatting, more and more townsfolk had filtered in, including Jack and Doria.

Doria was waddling along, pale and crying, as Jack did his best to lead her in. Vanessa couldn’t blame the girl. If her man was dead, then she would be facing starvation and destitution. Her parents were long dead and while Vanessa wanted to help, she wasn’t sure she could afford two more mouths to feed.

Behind them came in someone Vanessa was not expecting.

It was Ciri, the witcher girl. Wrapped in a heavy winter cloak, but unmistakable. A child of surprise, she’d lived up with the witchers in the keep for years, training with them. They’d wander through with her in tow from time to time when she was just a lass. The village saw less of her now that she was older, but Vanessa still considered her a local.

The moment Ciri saw the magic users at the bar, she froze.

Thinking quickly, Vanessa headed over to Jack and Doria, and cried out, “There, there, my dear. Come into the kitchen and rest a bit.”

She moved to stand behind Doria, standing right in the line of sight between Ciri and the mages. Then she herded them all, Ciri included, into the back room.

Ciri was smart, she kept her hood up and turned her back to the mages giving them only her sturdy yet unremarkable cloak to see.
As soon as they got safely into the kitchen, Vanessa pulled up a stool for Doria and nodded to her son. “Wilhelm, watch the bar for me.”

He looked between them all, clearly seeing the worry on everyone’s faces. Then he nodded, tossed a kitchen towel over his shoulder, and headed out to the bar.

“Thank you,” Ciri said softly, taking her hood off and setting down at the table there. Jack followed suit, flanking Doria’s other side.

Vanessa tut-tutted at her, shaking her head. She absently rubbed Doria’s back in comforting circles. “It’s no trouble, girly. You’re a townie.”

There was a pause as Vanessa chose her words. Finally she asked, “Do you know what’s going on?”

Ciri pursed her lips and looked between them, her forehead crinkled in worry. “Somewhat. I can’t tell you how things will turn out, though.”

“Are we in danger? Should we be packing up and heading south?” Vanessa asked. It was drastic, but a practical question given all that talk about dragons and dark powers.

“You are alright as long as the Wolf witchers are alive.”

Vanessa raised her eyebrows in surprise. That statement implied some interesting things. Either that the wolf witchers controlled whatever dark power had taken up residence, or they were all that stood between it and everyone else.

“The witchers are keeping that…place...in check?” Jack asked in a loud whisper.

Ciri hesitated and nodded eventually. “Yes, they are. So it’s as much in your interest as it’s in theirs that no outsiders learn anything of them.”

“I wouldn’t want to chase off my best customers,” Vanessa said with a wry smirk, albeit a bit of a forced one.

“My Mika,” Doria said, scrubbing tears from her eyes. “He was up there. Is he…? Will he…?”

It was easy to see that Ciri hurt for Doria, the way her brows were tight and worried and how her lips went white as she thought. In the end she had to shrug. “I don’t know. If he survived the castle showing up, and the witchers found him, he still has a chance of coming home.”

Doria nodded and crumpled into tears again, hiding her face in Vanessa’s shoulder. That was grim news, but honestly more hopeful than Vanessa expected. Any hope was a relief.

“Has anything come out?” Ciri asked.

“Not that anyone has seen,” Vanessa said, shaking her head. “Even those pretty mages out there are stumped.”

Ciri snorted. “They would be.” Then she hummed in thought.

“They’re looking for you,” Vanessa said quietly. When Ciri raised an eyebrow at her, she continued. “Those court mages. I overheard them. They’re looking for witchers to question.”

It was left unsaid the things they might ask, or the ways they might persuade the witchers to talk.
Ciri grew a touch paler, but nodded. “Thank you for telling me.” She glanced towards the common room. “I need a horse to get closer to the walls,” she said, looking at the people around the table. “I have coin to pay for it and I will return it, I promise.”

A lot of people didn't realize how important horses were in towns like this. They didn't have a breeder right here and if a horse died, it took months to travel to a bigger town and buy another one, even if they had the money for it. The witchers were usually fair with them and if they asked for a horse that they expected might not return, they always paid extra.

Vanessa sighed.

“You can take my gray.” She extended her hand for the promised coin and Ciri dug into her purse. “I need it back before the end of the week though.” It was a risk, sure. If she didn’t get the horse back, she wouldn't be able to get the supplies she needed to pick up from the monthly market two towns over. Still, the castle’s looming presence in the distance and the coin in Ciri’s hand convinced her to try.

“Come on.” Vanessa nodded towards the door leading to the storage room. “There’s a ramp out back. We had it made to easier unload the cart with supplies. You seem young and fit enough, you can probably jump down from there.”
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

Notes from Q: Ok, so this chapter is coming just a touch early... Mostly because I'm having surgery on Friday. It should be fine. I'm nervous as hell, but it's low risk, with a quick recovery. But, uh, I don't think I'm gonna be up to getting a chapter ready the day after that, so you guys get it early. Part of my "OH SHIT MUST PREPARE" list of chores.

The posting schedule should not be disrupted at all. So that's good.

Lambert was having a very bad night. Evening, day, what the fuck ever. It was bad.

First, his harpy contract turned out much harder than he expected. Instead of three skinny harpies he found a giant, fucking Calaeno harpy, a Dream Stealer. He won that fight, of course he did. He was damn good at what he did, but already the hunt proved harder than expected.

Then, of course he only got paid for normal harpies. The mayor of Ban Gleann was unwilling to pay more for what he saw as just another harpie anyway. That was particularly annoying, since it wasn’t like Ban Gleann was a small town. Granted, it was no capital city, but it was big enough to have its own fortress. Since the beastie was dead anyway, the mayor didn’t much care about pissing Lambert off.

Like any good witcher, Lambert promptly went to the nearest tavern to spend some of his hard earned coin on booze and whores. The whole way he had a feeling there were eyes on him, but it wasn’t unusual for people to stare at witchers so he put it out of his mind. The booze was surprisingly good, considering, and the food even better. Once he sated one kind of hunger, he retired to the upper level where the brothel was located to sate another.

That did not go as well as the drinking.

The madame offered him a drugged up wine. It was something a lot of brothels did. Give the patrons a free drink before they even start to play with the girls and most of them will fall asleep in the middle of it if not before anything happened. It meant less work for the whores and easy income for the madame. He just smirked as he downed the wine. He was a witcher and the madam really should have done her research first. Such a paltry amount of drugs wouldn’t even make an impression on his ability to metabolize it.

The sex was passably good, nowhere close to as expert as what the beautiful succubi at Kaer Morhen could deliver, though. The golden haired Eyra and even more beautiful Iga were capable of things to a man no mortal woman could imagine. And they could keep up with a witcher on potions. He knew. He’d tested it, and that was a beautiful night.

Still, this brothel’s girls were good enough that he had the itch scratched, and a soft bed with a soft companion to sleep for the night.

It was only thanks to his light sleep and enhanced senses that he escaped the trap set for him. Somewhere in the middle of the night, when he was sleeping, satisfied, half drunk, and cuddling up
to a nicely full bosom, he heard the tell-tale thump of armored boots. There was a different cadence to a soldier’s walk than to any other’s. It was jarring enough in this place that it woke Lambert right up. By the time the door to his room burst open in a shower of splinters, he was already rolling off the bed.

All he had on him was his pants that he pulled up after he finished with the whore, and his witcher medallion. His swords were on the floor, just in reach of his hand as he rolled off the bed, flipping the frame as he went to cause more confusion. The woman shouted as she was dumped onto the floor, but Lambert felt like she should have been more grateful than that. Being on the floor saved her from being cleaved in half by the over-eager mercenary. Or city guard. It was the bed that took the damage.

There were three men in the room already with more crowding in the hall. Now that he listened for it, he could hear even more of a commotion outside the building.

Damn, he couldn’t fight them all. Not if he didn't want the garrison to show up.

“All alive, you ass!” one of them bellowed at the axeman, cuffing him on the head. “You can’t question a corpse!”

Fuck, that sounded bad. Lambert would have almost preferred a straight up kill order over an interrogation. He had no desire to be tortured for information he probably didn't even have.

Lambert kicked the bed at the men. The heavy wood frame crushed them to the wall and made them tumble all over each other as they fought to lift the weight. He only had a moment to decide what to do and, sadly, fighting them was a tactically bad choice. There was too much backup waiting.

In addition to his swords, he grabbed the closest bit of gear he could reach---whatever belt he grabbed, he’d figure it out later, but something was better than nothing---and jumped through the glass window without even bothering to open it first. The breaking glass scratched the hell out of his arms and shoulders as he rolled on the tiled roof.

It took a moment for him to feel the biting cold. Snow and glass shards stung at his bare feet as he rolled to up standing and straight into a dead run. He jumped from the tavern roof to the next building over, hissing as the uneven tiles and ice cut into the soles of his feet.

“He’s on the roofs!” came a shout from below. The sound of heavy boots pounding along the street below echoed up to Lambert.

He put the discomfort out of his mind and ran faster. It was easy to clear the space between the tightly packed buildings. As he ran along the edge of the city square, he searched for a roof that would give him a path out.

It took a bit of a leap, but he found what he was looking for. This one was lower and he had to roll again, to deal with his momentum as he landed on the iced-over roof. Something tore at his back, pushing deep under his skin, and his feet were starting to go numb from the cold. It didn’t matter. He rolled to his feet and kept on over the roofs of the closely built houses.

He had his swords. The harness bumped familiarly against his back as he ran. He was clutching the strap of gear that he’d managed to grab, but he still didn't have the time to look at what it was. All of his focus was on getting out of town before the mob got to him.

Lambert spared a thought to be grateful that Ban Gleann hadn’t gotten around to building more
than a wooden wall around the outer ring of the city. They also weren’t as worried about things getting out as they were about things getting in. That meant that the roofs of several buildings got fairly close to the top of that wall. He angled his approach to get as close as he could to it.

It would be a hard jump, and a worse landing, but better than getting caught. It also had the benefit of forcing his pursuers to go around to a gate. From the increasingly frantic shouts below and behind him, the armed guards had realized this, too.

He had just enough time before the jump to think, *This is bullshit.*

The short distance over the top of the wall wasn’t the issue. It was the two story drop after that had Lambert cussing to himself. On the bright side, there was some snow to cushion his fall. On the downside, he wasn’t wearing any damn boots.

He landed with a hard *thud,* and something wooden shattered to splinters under him. A roll took most of the sting out of the fall, but that wooden-whatever surely left fucking bruises.

Other than his feet, the cold hadn’t yet started to be a problem, but that was only a matter of time. He needed clothes, supplies, and his horse to get away from town.

The stables weren’t far from where he landed. He chose the cheaper ones, and those coincidentally were the ones farthest away from the city gates. At the time, he’d been thinking only of saving a bit of coin. It worked in his favor now, and he was relieved to know that he’d have some avenue of escape. The farther away his horse was from the inner city, the less likely it was that the stable was already occupied by hostile mercs, and the more likely that he’d be able to ride off without guards stopping him.

Quiet as he could be, Lambert slipped through the sparse buildings. He could hear some commotion from behind the wall, but it faded fast as he ghosted through the outskirts of the town. It only took a few minutes for him to get to the stables.

Once he got in sight of the building, he approached cautiously. That whorehouse had been a damn trap, and one he wasn’t interested in repeating. He crept around to the back of the stable, and listened. It was dark there; only the front doors had a light.

It turned out that his caution was well placed.

After a few moments of a miserably cold wait, he saw an armed man amble out of the shadows, obviously patrolling the back. That meant it was just as likely that others were watching the front. Lambert hunkered down behind the stack of straw bales and waited for the man to come closer. His teeth were starting to chatter and he clenched them tightly, to make sure the sound wouldn’t give him away.

_Fucking winter,* Lambert cursed absently in his head.

When the man was close enough, Lambert launched out of his hiding spot. He slapped one hand over the man’s mouth to keep him quiet, and bore them both to the ground. His other hand closed around the man’s throat, crushing his trachea, while Lambert’s knees kept the man’s arms pinned to his sides as he choked.

The man died after only a moment or two, gurgling quietly and thrashing weakly in Lambert’s hold. As soon as his heart stopped, Lambert jumped off of him, cursing the dull ache of numbness in his feet.

He grabbed the dead man by his jacket, and pulled him behind the stack of straw bales piled next
to the wall. Then he started unbuckling the dead man’s boots. They weren’t anywhere close to what he was used, quality wise, but it was all he had right now. He pulled them off, grimacing at the stink. Did the man never goddamn wash his feet?

Despite the stench, he stuck his own feet into the blessedly warm boots. They weren’t anywhere close to what he was used, quality wise, but it was all he had right now. He pulled them off, grimacing at the stink. Did the man never goddamn wash his feet?

Next, he struggled with the jacket. By now his fingers were numb enough that even simple latches were a problem. He cursed quietly as a seam gave under his pull. Struggling with a dead body wasn’t the easiest thing to do and undressing them was even harder. Especially while trying to be quiet.

Finally, he was able to pull the damn thing off, wincing again at the stink of old sweat and unwashed body. Damn, but this guy was rank. Lambert gritted his teeth and went to work pulling off the man’s shirt too. He could deal with the stink as long as he didn’t freeze. He’d certainly smelt worse, and survival was the most important issue at hand.

After a few long, harrowing minutes, he finally had the clothes off the dead man and onto his own back. His open wounds, the multitude of scratches he acquired while running, stuck unpleasantly to the rough cloth. They’d long since stopped bleeding, though. Even without a Swallow potion, his normal mutations would make short work of light wounds.

Lambert settled his swords on over the jacket and took a look at what else he’d managed to grab on his way out of the whorehouse. It was one of his knife harnesses.

He sighed. While the extra weapons would be useful, he’d hoped for maybe his potions or even his money pouch. It would take time to replace all the potions and his collection of ingredients, time and much effort, and having no coin to ease his way out of here was an unpleasant prospect, too.

Mindful of his time constraints, he slunk into the back of the stable, careful to keep to the shadows. There wasn’t a back door, so he had to shimmy up the wall and slip in through a high window. While that was doable, it was also a pain in the ass, and Lambert swore to himself the whole way.

For a regular human, the stable was probably pitch dark, but Lambert’s mutated eyes saw through the gloom easily. So much so that he caught sight of a few figures huddled in the open stalls near where his beast dozed. He blessed his knee-jerk reaction to do everything as quietly as possible.

“You think they got the freak?” one of the men hidden in the neighboring stall whispered to his companion.

“Shut your yap and watch out,” the other man snapped back.

Lambert pulled the only knife he had and crawled low on the ground until he was right on the other side of the stall door. He made sure the men outside the front of the stable were as far away as they ever got in their patrolling, and then vaulted the stall in one leap.

He landed on top of the man closest to the door, his knees locked around the man’s head. With a sharp twist of his body he snapped the man’s neck. In the same motion, he let the knife fly from his hand, straight into the other man’s trachea. All three of them fell to the ground with a quiet thump, and Lambert was then kneeling on two corpses. Neither of them made a sound as they died.

The moment he stood up, he realized just how shitty the jacket was. He’d gotten a whole new set of splinters down his side, through the jacket’s quilted exterior, from the roughly hewn wood of
the stall door. He hadn’t really noticed that he’d slid down the wooden planks while he was riding the dead body to the floor. Hopefully, it didn’t make much sound.

It was going to be such a bother, pulling all those splinters out by himself. Especially after they’d all healed over. Maybe he’d be lucky and his healing skin would force the wood out.

Yeah, right.

On the bright side, he had access to his horse now. He snuck around the partition, startling his beast as he popped up in its stall. It took some shushing before the horse settled down enough for him to be able to saddle it. Thankfully, the people after him hadn't taken his tack. It took a little longer than he expected to have everything strapped on; the horse was strangely agitated under his hands. It probably smelled the blood, though Lambert thought he’d trained his horse out of its skittishness at that.

He opened the stall door quietly and looked out, making sure nobody was watching. All he had to do was get the horse into the wide corridor leading out of the stable, mount up, and then force his way through the men guarding the door. If he got enough speed going, he knew the men wouldn't even try stopping him. The risk of being trampled was too high. Lambert wouldn’t feel an ounce of regret about running them down, either.

The way was clear, so he grabbed the lead and led his horse out into the corridor.

It was the uneven sound of the horse’s gait that caught his attention.

He looked back, his chest filled with dread and burning hot anger, and watched as his horse limped behind him. It took everything he had not to swear out loud. Lambert closed his eyes and took a breath. Then he went back to the beast and picked its hooves up, one by one.

They fucking took off two of the horseshoes. Not just one. Two. Both on the left side. The horse was limping on both the front and hind legs.

Lambert stood there for a moment, fuming uselessly. He was so damn close to escaping, so fucking close to getting out of here. Now it turned out that the whole excursion into the stable was a useless waste of time. There were, of course, no other horses there that he could take instead.

He was gritting his teeth so hard that he thought he might break a tooth as he tried to think of what to do. The angry part of him wanted to go out there and kill every single man waiting for him, just cut them open and let his rage loose. But the colder, rational part of him urged him to climb out a high window and ghost into the woods that surrounded the town and attempt escape on foot. It would be slow, but he could survive in the wilderness. He had swords and a knife. He would be alright.

As sweet as revenge sounded, Lambert liked the idea of living to see tomorrow more.

Abandoning any thought of a very justified murder spree, Lambert went back towards the back of the stable and jumped up to grab hold of a window frame, a different one than where he entered at. Better to get the window closest to the forest and farthest away from the front door.

Squeezing through aggravated some of his scrapes. Blood was starting to flow again, thick and sticky on his back. At least the jacket would soak it up, though a dog would be keen to notice it. Lambert hoped they wouldn’t bring dogs to find him. He landed hard on the ground below, but thankfully it didn’t sound as if anyone noticed.

Cursing the brothel, the town, and even his goddamn fucking horse that he actually liked, Lambert
started running. The snow wasn’t deep, but there was enough to show tracks. He’d have to find a way to hide them eventually, because he would be damn easy to track. For now he needed distance.

The too-big boots rubbed at his heels painfully, and the jacket not only stunk to high heaven, but it was also too small, riding up in the back and exposing just a sliver of skin. The only thing that actually fit was his sword harness and his pants.

Two hours into his run, and the sky was starting to lighten in the east. His feet were bleeding and he felt like a kid running The Killer again. Only back then, there were more boys stumbling alongside him. Now there was just him and the forest.

As he traveled, the sparse underbrush closer to the town was replaced by older, more unruly growth. There were thick brambles everywhere, with thorns long enough to cut through his leather pants to bite down into the skin beneath.

He slowed down for a bit to think through his situation. It would have been nice to take a rest, but Lambert knew that wasn’t really an option at the moment. Anyone so focused on capturing him that they drugged him, ambushed him, and laid a trap where his horse was stabled wouldn’t stop looking for him anytime soon. Especially with the snow being so good at showing his trail.

Which meant the first order of business would be to make it harder for them to track him.

A lot of that issue could be solved by being more careful about moving through the underbrush. Now that he had a good head start, he could afford to take a little more time. The next thing he needed to do was keep his eyes peeled for a little stream. He could use the water to fuck with his tracks; maybe he’d leave some obvious boot marks headed in one direction, but backtrack through the stream and come out at another spot.

Still, the very idea of getting his feet wet in this cold was not a nice one. He would have to find a way to dry out somewhere, and possibly need to ditch the boots too.

It would be so much better if he could find a wolf den or other predator. The scent of them would at least fuck with any dogs that may be following him. But he didn’t have the time to track. All he could do was keep his eyes peeled for anything that could help him. The thick undergrowth meant that horses would have as much trouble going through as he did and the pursuit would be slow.

He grabbed a fallen branch and began using it to help move through the undergrowth; partially to save himself some skin, but also to muddle the trail further. As he moved, he watched for thick, lower branches. Any distance he could cover running along the treetops would only screw with his pursuers more.

All in all, it was exhausting work. Setting false trails, climbing from limb to limb, backtracking, and leaving as little evidence of his passing as possible slowed him down a lot. Hopefully, it would help in the long run. He briefly wished for a potion or three.

Just when he thought he might be in the clear, things went to shit again.

It was late morning, pushing onto midday, and he hadn’t heard even a trace of sound behind him. He was so focused on potential pursuit, he didn’t notice the fucking bear until he was practically on top of it. None of them should be goddamn awake yet, but this one looked lean and hungry, as pissed off about its early awakening from hibernation as Lambert was to see it.

There was no space to run. He had to block the first swipe with his arm. The claws cut into his forearm, ripping the cheap armored jacket to shreds and leaving savage gashes in the flesh under it.
He lunged into the bear, just barely managing to fit under it. The lunge carried him right under its reach and back out again, behind and away from it. He slashed at its belly as he was moving. His sword was able to cut through its thick fur, but didn’t penetrate more than a couple inches deep. Just enough to make it even more angry.

The animal roared and Lambert had to push hard to get out of its range. People always underestimated the speed that a bear was capable of. It was only thanks to his enhancements that Lambert was fast enough to jump out of the way of the next charge. He rolled to the side, counting on the fact he was able to turn faster than the bear to give him an advantage.

His wounded shoulder hit a brambly patch; the thorns ripping into his savaged arm and made him shout in equal parts anger and pain.

The noise made the bear hesitate. Lambert took the opportunity and launched himself at the bear again, going at him from the side. This time he managed a deep cut from the underside of one arm all the way to the middle of its chest before he had to roll away again.

The bear reared up on its back legs, roaring in pain. One of its front paws hung limp at its side and blood poured down, red and hot on the snow-scattered ground. Lambert knew what was coming next, and he had absolutely no desire to be trampled and mauled.

He switched holds on his sword and threw it as hard as he could, cursing at the pain the move caused him. Somewhere in the back of his mind, the voice of Vesemir was bitching at him about throwing away a perfectly good weapon, but fuck it. He had two swords. He could pick the first one up after he killed this damn thing.

The blade sank hilt deep into the animal’s chest but it didn’t stop the charge. It fell onto Lambert with its whole weight, knocking them both to the ground. At the last second, Lambert managed to get off a Quen shield, stopping the beast from immediately biting his head off. Its large teeth snapped right in his face, gnawing away at the magic shield.

Lambert managed to get his legs between the enraged animal and himself and heaved. At the same time, he pulled his second sword and wedged the hilt of it right up into the bear’s large maw. The quillions scraped over its gums and teeth leaving great bloody furrows in the bear’s mouth. He pressed his back into the ground and kicked up again with both feet, heaving the bear completely off of him and gaining another set of cuts to his leg for his trouble.

“Die, you fucker,” he snarled. He bounded back up to standing and lunged in again, pressing his advantage while the bear was still down. He hacked in with his second blade, all but cutting the damn thing’s head off.

Lambert stood there for a moment and panted. Pain from every new injury slowly started to seep in as he watched blood soak the churned up snow. He needed to retrieve his sword and patch up his cuts. He couldn’t afford to leave more of a trail than he already was. He also needed to get the hell out of there. Even if he wasn’t being hunted by an unknown group of guards or mercs, the local wolves would surely smell the fresh kill and come looking for a taste.

It was impossible to know how long he would be forced to run; it was at least a few days’ walk to the nearest town, even if he was going in the right direction. He’d need food and he probably wouldn’t have the time to forage for anything along the way.

He looked over the bear’s body. Nothing would beat bear meat for fat and energy value, even a lean bear fresh from winter sleep like this one.
He knelt down in the snow and dragged his steel sword out of the carcass, making sure to cut through as much of the chest area as he could. Quickly, he wiped both of his swords on a clean bit of fur and sheathed them, before reaching for his knife. The dagger he’d managed to grab on his way out wasn’t as helpful as a good skinning knife would have been, but it would serve.

Every other slice of meat that he cut off, he ate. Cooked meat would have been better, but raw would do, too. It had been a long fucking time since his last meal, and the rich meat tasted fantastic. He didn’t have anything to pack the meat into, so he decided to just cinch the strips with the belt and carry them that way. Not like he cared about keeping any of this gear clean.

Afterwards, he used snow to clean up as much as he could. None of his wounds were deep enough to cripple him, and so they were ignorable; most had stopped bleeding already. It didn’t change the fact he was cold, tired, in pain, and beyond pissed off. He’d lost most of his gear, lost his horse, lost his goddamn clothes, and was now being hunted like a damn animal.

What was even more frustrating was that after all of his hard work covering his trail, this little fight with a fucking bear would probably draw attention right back to him. Not to mention all the fresh blood smell, both on the ground and on his body.

He rubbed a hand through his short cropped hair and sighed.

This was all the rest he could afford to take. With a shake of his head, he was off again, moving as fast as he could while still leaving as little trail as possible.

It was barely past midday when he heard the first faint howls of dogs in the distance. They’d found the bear remains and had picked up his scent.

_Fucking fuck._

He moved as fast as he dared and cursed as he saw there weren’t any good branches for traveling above ground.

Over the next hour, the distant howls seemed to inch closer. A stream would have been a blessing, if only so he could get a drink. The little bit of snow he’d eaten back at the bear carcass had long since worn off, and Lambert’s mouth was painfully dry.

If that weren’t bad enough, his wolf medallion had started to gently vibrate. Because this day couldn’t get any better. Whatever the medallion had sensed was still at least a little distance away, though, so maybe there was still time to avoid it.

Lambert switched directions, veering sharply to the left. Still, his medallion shivered against his skin. Which meant whatever it was sensing had started to follow him, too.

There were times Lambert wondered if he’d been cursed at birth.

It was the rhythmic thump-thump of a horse in canter that he heard first. He couldn’t see far, not in this undergrowth, but he could all but feel the thrum of those hooves hitting the frozen ground. The sound of the dogs was still far enough away that he didn’t think the rider was with them, though.

He veered to the side and put on a burst of speed, keeping an ear out for the rider. The horse sped up too, but only enough to keep pace with him. It didn’t even seem like it was trying to catch up.

Then his medallion started vibrating harder.

Lambert slowed down to a stop, pulled out his silver sword, and waited for the rider to catch up to
him. Better to face this new threat while he still had the energy to fight than wait until he was stupid with exhaustion.

The rider slowed down too, keeping just at the edge of his senses and not coming closer.

The fuck was going on, were they *playing* with him?

At this rate, the damn dogs were gonna catch up. He growled in frustration, and debated about just holding his ground. Running might be just what the rider wanted him to do.

“You gonna come out and fight, or are you gonna join the dogs and just chase me all day?” he called out. Not too loud, no sense in giving the people with the dogs more help, but loud enough he hoped the unearthly rider would hear.

He swung his sword in a long arc through the air to loosen his wrist, and shifted his leading foot forward. He was as ready to fight as he was going to get.

A loud neigh was his answer. Then there was a crash and the creak of branches being crushed under a large body as a horse trotted out from the thick brush and into view.

The beast was black as night, with a hide so glossy that it couldn’t have been a wild living creature. The head was down, and its mane was long and shiny, falling in waves over its wide forehead and strong, arched neck. Tall and powerfully built, it had feathering on its legs the same color as its hide. It approached slowly, almost dancing sideways towards Lambert, showing off its powerful yet streamlined body. The thing was the size of a knight’s mount, or maybe a draft horse, but significantly more elegant.

It only raised its head and tossed it when it was close enough Lambert could really see the *huge fucking fangs* poking out of its black lips and the *burning, red eyes*.

“What in seven hells are you,” Lambert muttered in shock. He raised his sword higher and switching to double grip.

The beast pranced in place, arched its neck in an attractive way, and neighed in what Lambert was sure was laughter. The thing was laughing at him.

He couldn’t quite figure out why it wasn’t attacking him. He knew damn well why he wasn’t attacking it. Trying to chase after a horse, even a demon horse, with a sword in hand to stab it would be an exercise in frustration. Better to wait for it to engage first.

“You know, if those guys catch up to us they will kill us both,” he said, shifting to keep the demon horse in sight. The problem with fighting something as big as a horse was actually reaching the important bits.

The demon horse turned its head so it could look at him directly with one eye. From the way its head was tilted, Lambert got the distinct impression that it was trying to say, *bitch, please.* The contempt in that gaze was a heavy thing.

He sighed.

Alright, fighting an intelligent demon horse would be even worse than fighting a demon horse with only beast level intelligence.

It was still pretty fucking odd that it hadn't attacked yet, though.
The horse sighed, literally sighed, in what Lambert guessed was exasperation, its sides heaving with air leaving it in a long, loud exhale. Then it looked towards the distant sounds of the hounds baying, and then it looked back to him. Next, it turned to look at its own back. After that it stared at Lambert again. 

Expectantly.

“What?”

At this point, Lambert was beyond fucking confused.

It danced a little closer, sidling up to him. Almost like it was presenting its back for a ride.

“Oh, you have got to be fucking joking,” he said flatly.

It huffed again and neighed at him, inadvertently exposing the finger long fangs again. Pewter black fangs, now that he got a good look at them. Like shining dark metal.

Lambert just stared, jaw a little slack. Was this how this beastie got its meals? Find a person who couldn’t refuse the ride, and then drag them off into a lake somewhere?

“No way,” he said flatly, and then turned to start walking again. He kept a wary eye on the demon horse, but decided moving was more important than fighting this beast.

The damn thing just followed him, though, and before Lambert could even so much as flinch, it was right there. Walking next to him. It reached out with its fanged muzzle, maybe to nudge him, maybe to take a bite.

Lambert nearly jumped out of his skin. He dashed to the side, sword at the ready again, and stared at the demon horse.

She, because he could see that it was a she now, neighed at him and shook her head, her mane flying around as she stomped her feet in frustration. Lambert noticed that instead of normal hoofprints, her feet left three-pronged prints more befitting a predator than a herbivore. The damn thing had claws.

Another howl sounded in the distance. The dogs sounded really damn close this time. Fuck, he really needed to move. No way in hell was he trusting the demon horse, though.

He turned away from the sound of the dogs and started running. The horse just trotted alongside him, snorting in frustration.

Yeah, the feeling is mutual, he thought sourly.

It was too little, too late, though. The first dog broke through the underbrush and launched itself towards Lambert, snarling viciously.

Before he could do more than spin to meet it, the damn demon horse wove in between them.

The way she pounced on the dog was far more reminiscent of a cat than anything with hooves. She stomped with her front claws, missing with one, but the other crushed the dog’s spine with a sickening crunch. The dog had just enough time to whine, brief and high, before she bit into the back of its neck. Those wickedly sharp teeth cut right through the flesh, nearly severing the head. She tossed her head and bit again, lightning fast, and sunk her teeth into its skull. Then she pulled, ripping the damn thing in two.
Lambert gaped at her, shocked.

Well, *fuck*.

Two more dogs made it through the underbrush, and they died just as quickly as the first. From the sounds of the shouts in the distance, the human part of the pursuit was still a short ways off. Probably just following the howls.

The demon horse looked at him and pranced proudly, neck arched up and tail flagged. Her velvety muzzle was soaked in blood, and she licked at the gore on her lips with a long, black tongue. Every bit of her body language radiated smug pride.

“Oh, *fuck* no,” Lambert said flatly, and strode away in a fast walk. Watching the demon mare effortlessly dismember a small pack of dogs did not make him more inclined to get on her back.

There was a loud huff behind him and a stomp. Then she was up next to him again, this time with part of a dog in her mouth. She perked her ears towards him and nudged the carcass into his arm.

Like she was trying to give it to him. As a present or something.

He stopped to stare at her, and she looked at him hopefully, red eyes liquid and beseeching.

“If I give you some bear meat, will you go away?” he asked finally, totally at a loss of what else to do.

She dropped her head and sighed, deep and long, ears pointed backwards in annoyance.

Then, quick as a snake she nipped at him. He jumped away just in time to avoid her fangs.

“Will you stop that?!” he growled, watching her warily as she again looked from him to her back.

She neighed at him, a short, irritated sound.

“No,” he said stubbornly, shifting his grip on the silver blade.

There was a flash of blue-white light nearby, startling them both. The mare rose up and her clawed front feet lashed out in surprise towards the flash of light.

Lambert lowered his sword as soon as he raised it, recognizing the lithe figure emerging from the light.

“Ciri!” He couldn’t help but be happy at the sight of her. She could take him out of this damn forest.

“Lambert,” she said with obvious worry. Her green eyes flickered over his injuries. “You alright?”

“Yes.” He nodded and sheathed his sword.

“Hi, Night.” Ciri turned to the demon horse. “Were you taking care of Lambert for us?”

The demon horse neighed again and snaked her head out to nip at Lambert. He jumped away by reflex.

“F*cking stop that!” He glared at her, then turned to Ciri. “Night? A mare named Night? Really?”

Ciri had the oddest expression on her face, part fondness, part exasperation, and part resignation.
“She’s Dracula’s mount.”

Lambert thought back to how quickly and viciously she dealt with the hounds. She certainly had her master’s disposition. Still, why send a horse?

“That…makes no sense at all. Why does he even have a horse? Can’t he just…appear where he wants?” Lambert complained. Night huffed so hard that her snot splattered his shirt. “Okay, a ride would have been helpful but it’s not like I’d be able to cross Kaedwen on a horse like this and not make a sensation out of myself.”

Ciri just shrugged. “Eskel said that Night carried him and Dracula from Temeria to Kaer Morhen in a couple of hours.”

Night gave him another sideways look, head and ears tilted smugly.

Just then, shouting rose up behind them, far, far too close.

“Shit,” Lambert grimaced. “We need to leave.”

“Fuck, you too?” Ciri gave him another look up and down, the worried wrinkle on her forehead growing more pronounced. She held out her hand to him, clearly ready to portal them both out.

Before Lambert could grab on, Night shoved herself between them, huffing in irritation. She shook her head madly, making her mane toss this way and that.

“Night we need to leave, I can teleport all of us—” Ciri didn’t get to finish her words as Night tried to nip at her hand. Ciri jumped away from the irritable horse and hid her hand behind her back.

Night looked at Lambert, then at her back. Next she looked at Ciri and…tilted her head to an odd angle, ears flattening sideways.

They all stared at each other in silence for a moment as the sounds of shouting got closer. From all the swearing, Lambert guessed they found the dog bodies. Another few seconds was all they had.

“Night, can you take us to Kaer Morhen?” Ciri asked.

‘Why are you asking her? You can take us,” Lamber said, looking Ciri over. “Right?’

Night just huffed loudly and rolled her eyes. Again, she turned sideways, and tossed her head towards her back. She stomped a foot for good measure, too, clearly done with this whole song and dance.

“Get on,” Ciri said, grabbing Night’s mane and hoisting herself up onto Night’s back. “Explanation later.”

Lambert grabbed Ciri’s offered arm and pulled himself up behind her. Just as he settled on Night’s back, armed men burst through the brush, shouting and brandishing swords.

He could feel Night tense up under him; all that powerful muscle hardening and shifting to prepare for a jump. Just for a second, he saw red glowing lines curve all along her neck and muzzle, forming fantastic shapes. Then she leaped.

Every sense he had took a spin as the world turned on its head. Before he had a chance to react, or even yell, Night was landing on a familiar stone courtyard, her claws clicking against the old stones.
“What the---” he shook his head, trying to clear it from the strange sensation of the teleport. He could see Ciri doing the same, but the girl was also talking softly.

“Wow,” she said. “That was amazing.” She patted Night’s neck. “I didn't even feel you pull power at all. And the teleport, so smooth for how sudden it was.” She kept petting Night in appreciation as the demon horse danced under them, preening with her head high and tail flagged.

And then Lambert looked up.

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Alucard blinked and rubbed his face. He’d forgotten to take out his contacts. His eyes ached and stung, but they looked too inhuman not to cover them up. It was critical that he appear as ordinary as possible for the humans.

He sighed and carefully took the little lenses out. John had delivered a small jar of contact fluid to him the day before, and Alucard took a second to fish it out of his suit jacket. He dropped the contacts in the little vat of liquid, closed it up tight, and put it back into his pocket. It was a relief to be able to take them out. No one would interrupt them here in Geralt’s room, other than Matt and John. It didn’t matter if Matt and John saw his natural coloring. They already knew.

Alucard sighed quietly and went back to staring at the papers in front of him.

The quarterly financial reports and the market assessment reports were boring. It was far more work than usual to keep his attention on the figures in front of him rather than on the man sleeping in the hospital bed.

Geralt was waking up regularly, but his energy flagged just as soon, causing him to nod right back off. In the last day and a half, Alucard was forced to watch bits and pieces of all the Alucard the Vampire remakes that were done over the years, as well as the reactions those shows caused in the witchers. The television series from the sixties was a particular hit, making the witchers laugh so hard Matt had to stop the episodes every fifteen minutes or Geralt would have probably burst a stitch or ten. It was like sharing room with a pack of hyenas, really.

Thankfully, none of the older movies were as embarrassing as the newest one. Probably because none of them showed him fucking two women quite so graphically. Alucard rubbed his face as he thought about it. Of course, that was the scene that greeted him as he came back from any meeting he had during the day.

John converted the adjoining rooms into ad hoc conference rooms. It was efficient, and allowed Alucard to take care of business while not straying far from Geralt, but it was tiring. He didn't have any time to rest or relax. Couldn’t even train to relieve the stress.

Every time Geralt winced at some pain or other, every time he checked his movements halfway through, wincing, or whenever a nurse came in to check on the staples and various incisions on his body, Alucard felt a tight knot of tension just twist that much harder in his belly. Every time he closed his eyes, he saw Geralt on that operating table, his body cut open like a specimen in a scientist’s lab with impersonal doctors pulling things out of him. It disturbed him in ways that very few things did.

Eskel was a mostly quiet companion. He dutifully entertained Geralt when the other witcher was awake, but tried to keep unobtrusive when Geralt was asleep. The forced confinement wasn’t doing him any favors, either. Just a while ago, Eskel had spent three hours doing push ups and sit ups while Geralt slept. Granted, the witchers all trained quite a bit when they weren’t out hunting, but
usually it was more varied than just simple repetitive exercise.

It made Alucard wonder how much of that was restless energy and how much was something else. Ever since Alucard had tasted him, sucked the barest few drops of blood from his already wounded neck, something had changed. For both of them, maybe.

The memory of that sweet, hot life in his mouth, on his tongue, whole and vibrant, made Alucard shiver with more than one kind of hunger. It was true that sex wasn’t as important to him as connection was. In that way, Alucard thought he and Eskel were the same. But sex was still something they both enjoyed, and feeling the pulse of Eskel’s life under his teeth was incredibly alluring. It actually reminded him of when he breathed power into Eskel before they escaped from Steingard’s dungeon.

But up until now, Eskel had made clear his disinterest in sex with any of them. More than clear, actually. So Alucard hadn’t even really considered it. Not until he tasted the sweet comfort that Eskel’s blood had offered. Dracula being so near, smelling of want so strongly, was just another thing that broke through Alucard’s composure.

It was what Dracula did best, after all. He nagged and nudged, radiated so much want, so much hunger, that it was impossible not to react. Alucard blushed at the memory of how hot the tasting of Eskel’s blood made him. How eager to touch and be touched. Even now, he couldn’t believe that he’d had sex so obviously close to Eskel and Ciri. Just a room over, with only a very thin door between them.

Geralt watching him with Dracula was a different thing; they were lovers, too. But to think he’d sucked his Father down, just a few feet away from Eskel…he could still feel the tips of his ears burning whenever he thought of it.

But that was how he reacted near Dracula. It was as if his body realized that Dracula was ready and willing to give it all the things Alucard denied it for centuries. Care, touch, nourishment, pleasure. Dracula was the first one that Alucard fed on willingly and that was so tightly woven with the sexual tension between them that Alucard wasn’t capable of separating it anymore. For him, it seemed, feeding would be a sexual experience whether anything else happened or not.

His thoughts kept circling back to what he tasted in Eskel’s blood. That was the truly amazing part of the whole experience. Alucard could taste just how much Eskel wanted it to happen. The easy way he gave into both of them, how he let Dracula bite him again. It was there in the blood Dracula passed to Alucard through the kiss, too. How willing Eskel was, how much he cared.

It shook Alucard to the core. Tempted him, too. He wanted to experience that again, and he couldn’t stop thinking about what Geralt might taste like as well. Alucard wondered if he would be able to taste the love in Geralt’s blood the same way it flowed in Dracula’s veins.

But whatever had happened during that embrace had shaken Eskel as well. Ciri obviously had said something while Alucard and Dracula had retreated into the bathroom, something upsetting, and now Eskel seemed to be reconsidering his stance on sex with men.

Much to Alucard’s surprise, he found that he wouldn’t mind it, and he didn’t think either Dracula or Geralt would mind either. To be honest, Dracula would probably be thrilled. Every time Dracula finished with a particularly close cuddle session with Eskel, either Alucard or Geralt usually found themselves fucked within an inch of their lives the moment they were alone again.

Sometimes Alucard wondered if Dracula even knew how to separate affection from sex, or maybe it was the demon in him that made the connection. Dracula was always hungry and something in
Eskel seemed to sate at least one of his hungers. Still, Alucard had no misconceptions. If given half a chance, he was sure his Father would be all over Eskel to mark him as his in more carnal ways.

...As if the huge mark of ownership on Eskel’s chest wasn’t clear enough.

Alucard sighed and lowered his head, trying to pretend he didn’t feel the stirring in his belly at that mental image, and at the thought of having Eskel skin to skin. The quick glances and thoughtful looks when Eskel thought Alucard couldn’t see weren’t helping. Eskel was clearly mulling things through in his head and Alucard had no idea what conclusion he might arrive at. It was a little strange to find himself wishing that Eskel would decide the carnal solution was the best one.

A gentle touch to the braid on his shoulder brought him out of his musing. Alucard glanced up sharply, his cheeks just a touch warm, to see Eskel standing there looking hesitant.

This was different, too. Eskel never touched them first, not when he wasn’t completely stoned on breathing in power, anyways. But he’d pulled Alucard into a hug the other night, and now here he was again. Reaching out.

The poor man looked like he was about to bolt, though. Alucard shoved aside his earlier thoughts and let a little bit of a smile quirk his lips. Just because Alucard wasn’t expecting the touch didn’t mean that it was unwelcome. And there was no way Eskel could have known was Alucard was just thinking about.

“You’ve been staring at the papers for hours now,” Eskel said quietly. His warm hand rested more firmly on Alucard’s neck. “I think you should take a break.”

Eskel tugged at Alucard’s tightly woven braid and Alucard realized that his scalp was aching, too. His hair was naturally so unruly and messy that the only way to make the braid look nice and clean was to make it exceptionally tight. Conveniently, that was also the best way to keep his slightly pointed ears out of sight, too, tucked under the tightly bound hair. It was uncomfortable after a few hours though. After a day like today, the skin on his head felt hot and achy from it.

After a few more gentle pulls the lower tie on Alucard’s braid came out. Just the relief from that alone was enough to make him sigh. Then Eskel stepped closer. With careful fingers, he picked apart the braid, easing out each woven lock until the whole unruly mess was free. Then he cupped his hand around the base of Alucard’s skull and dragged it up, fingers pointing up, fluffing the strands of hair and massaging the scalp at the same time.

After being bound so tightly for so long, that movement felt like bliss. Alucard couldn’t hold back a tiny groan of pleasure. His eyes fluttered and he sagged a little into Eskel’s hand.

Eskel hesitated. His hand froze and Alucard could even hear him stop breathing. He froze too, afraid to move and scare Eskel off.

After a long moment, Eskel moved again. He shifted to stand closer, moving behind Alucard and putting both hands on Alucard’s head. He pushed his fingers through Alucard’s hair and really dug in, massaging hard circles into the aching skin and bringing back circulation. The shock of it was strong enough that Alucard moaned out loud. One of his hands flailed back to grab hold of Eskel’s leg because what Eskel was doing felt so good.

Eskel didn’t stop this time, even if the leg under Alucard’s hand felt tense and hard. His fingers dragged over Alucard’s tired scalp, pressing the hair follicles into a different position than they’d been forced into for so long. Each touch sent another series of amazing sparks down Alucard’s spine.
It felt fantastic. Alucard’s mouth fell open a little and he was absolutely blind to anything in front of him. He didn't even know if his eyes were open or not; all he could do was ride out the sensation. He’d never felt anything like this. It wasn’t anything like the feelings when he brushed his hair out. It was sheer bliss, tingled with the random sparks of pain when hair forced into one direction relaxed again.

His head felt hot as blood rushed to the skin that Eskel was massaging. The tingling heat spread down his neck and spine with every pass. Eskel continued, growing bolder. He shifted some of Alucard’s hair forward, over Alucard’s face, and continued to work the sides of his head. There, he really pressed in, kneading the abused skin, back and forth, rubbing gentle circles after each repetition. Alucard was all but gone by then, ready to move, stay, or do whatever Eskel said as long as the bliss continued.

The gentle massage halted for a moment, as Eskel drew one hand out of Alucard’s hair. A small noise of complaint made its way out of Alucard’s mouth, and he could hear the small huff of amusement behind him.

“I’m just gonna set your papers aside, alright?” Eskel said quietly.

Sure enough, at some point in the last few minutes Alucard had closed his eyes and slackened his grip. He hadn’t even noticed that his reports were about to spill out onto the rest of the couch.

With one hand still buried in Alucard’s hair, Eskel helped him pick up the various pages. Then he took the whole stack and set it behind them on the floor.

There was another moment of hesitation, and then Eskel gently nudged him to the side. It took a very long moment for Alucard to realize that Eskel was trying to make room to sit behind him.

Alucard just slid down to the floor, let his head rest on the couch seat, and waited for Eskel to get behind him and continue.

There was another little huff of amusement, and then Eskel sat down on the couch behind him with his legs framing Alucard’s body. Heat radiated out of him. Against Alucard’s shoulders and sides, where Eskel’s legs framed him. Behind him, too, where the center of his body felt hot, even where they weren’t touching. Then that wonderful bliss started again as Eskel dragged his fingers along Alucard’s scalp. Another small moan of pleasure forced its way out of Alucard, and he sagged into Eskel’s hold.

With the new position, Eskel dipped down to Alucard’s neck as well, rubbing circles into the base of his skull and along his spine. Each firm touch eased some of the strain there. His hands were so warm on Alucard’s cool skin that they nearly burned. The heat soaked in and helped soothe the muscles even more. Then he dragged his fingers up again, filling his hands with thick locks of hair. At the very apex of that drag, he paused, gripping Alucard’s hair slowly, but tightly, and very gently pulled.

Alucard shuddered hard enough Eskel had to feel it. The pleasure of that pull radiated down through his body, making his eyes roll back a little, and eliciting another quiet moan.

But Eskel didn’t hold the pull for long. He just worked his way back down Alucard’s scalp and neck, rubbing and lightly scratching as he went. Then Eskel worked his hands up and did it again, gently fisting his hands in Alucard’s hair and pulling.

If it was Dracula or Geralt doing this to him, Alucard would have fully expected to be flattened to the ground and fucked any second now. Considering how good he felt, he would have absolutely
no problem with that. But Eskel wasn’t a lover and Alucard regretted that in this moment fiercely. He didn’t know how to deal with pleasure outside of sex, not really. He never let himself have any before he reconciled with his Father. After they did, well, Dracula was a very sensual creature. So was Geralt. It was very common for any kind of touching to devolve into sex.

“I like this a lot,” Eskel said quietly. “When Dracula runs his hands through my hair. When you do.” He swept his fingers up the sides of Alucard’s skull and gently scratched down. By now he was holding all the weight of Alucard’s head in his hands, because there was no way Alucard would have been able to hold himself up alone.

Alucard tried to blink some sense into himself and licked his lips, scrambling to find words. All he wanted to do was keep moaning at the treatment.

“I will remember,” he managed finally, his voice hoarse and wrecked.

Another minute went by before Eskel answered. “It’s not something I let anyone else do. And it… sets me at ease, I guess. I’d hoped it might help you, too.” There was just a touch of a question on the end of that statement.

“This is fantastic,” Alucard said wholeheartedly, wrapping one hand around Eskel’s ankle. “You have to teach my Father to do it. Exactly like this.” Alucard was very carefully not moving anything above his shoulders. He wasn't sure he could if he wanted to. His neck felt like it didn’t have a single muscle there.

A tiny bit of tension went out of Eskel’s legs, and Alucard could hear him take a deep breath. Despite the fact that they’d been cuddling close for months now, it was still astonishing how bashful Eskel was about much of this. Although in this case he was taking more control of the situation. Instigating, even. Perhaps that had something to do with the hesitance.

From what Alucard heard the succubi say, Eskel wasn’t shy with them. Didn’t hesitate to take what he wanted, and left the girls with a really good impression. Both witches did actually, though Lambert was the wilder one in the bedroom, apparently. Alucard learned a lot more about the witches' bedroom habits than he really wanted to know. For Lambert at least. He didn't mind the knowledge about what Eskel liked or how he treated the succubi he slept with.

Eskel rolled Alucard’s head to the side, resting its full weight on one of his hands. Then he used the other to massage the muscles of the newly exposed part of Alucard’s neck, rubbing up behind his ear, and then very gently caressing the pointed tip there. That little touch felt both electric and sedating. All Alucard wanted to do was melt a little further into Eskel’s hands. Those wonderful fingers trailed back down, easing strain as they went and replacing it with bone deep pleasure.

Eskel shifted Alucard’s head, tilting it to the other side, and repeated the whole process.

Alucard was, quite possibly, never getting up from this floor again. He was just going to stay here. Forever.

“Geralt is doing better,” Eskel said quietly. “He is awake more often and for longer periods of time. His appetite is good, too. I think the doctors will remove the last of the staples from him soon.”

“Yes,” Alucard agreed, eyes closed. “I already told John to start the preparations to move us to the tower. Maybe we can do it tomorrow if nothing unexpected happens.”

He could vaguely feel Eskel nod behind him. That was far less interesting or important as the fact
that he’d started that gentle pulling on Alucard’s scalp again. Each tug made Alucard want to shudder and groan, but he found he didn’t even have the muscle power for that.

With one hand still supporting Alucard’s head, Eskel ran his fingers all the way through Alucard’s hair. Smoothing it. Pulling it out of the way to settle over Eskel’s knee. Then he slid forward and down, squeezing himself in between the couch and Alucard’s body, so that Alucard was cradled in his arms.

Eskel pulled Alucard in against him and Alucard went bonelessly, letting his face nestle in the crook of Eskel’s neck. He could smell the witcher’s scent strongly there, familiar and comforting, with the undercurrent of burning embers that was his Father’s signature scent. He liked it, how closely entwined they were. Eskel already felt like family, like a part of this little group Alucard allowed himself to have.

“Maybe Geralt will be well enough that I can breathe some power into him?” Alucard asked, not feeling all that sure about this course of action.

He’d only done it once, and that was with his Father coaching. He wasn’t sure he could do it again by himself. Dracula had a talent, a unique way of using his vampiric powers on instinct. Alucard wasn’t built that way. He needed to understand what he was doing and how it worked before he could do it properly. Dracula seemed like an instinctive caster and that meant he wasn’t always that good at explaining things.

“I hate to see him so weak,” Alucard said quietly.

Eskel hummed, considering it. “If it were Dracula’s power, I’d definitely say no. It’s too harsh. Yours was…” A little shiver ran through Eskel’s body.

Alucard pressed his nose to Eskel’s neck.

“Yes? How was it?” he asked against Eskel’s neck. He tried not to remember how it felt to suck the blood off of it.

“So very good,” Eskel replied, voice low and rougher than usual. “Softer. Gentler. Just as overwhelming, but in a different way than Dracula’s.” He shivered again, even though his body was furnace hot against Alucard. The way they were so tightly wrapped together, Alucard could feel the interest growing in Eskel’s body, could smell it mixed in with the other scents that wrapped around them.

When Alucard had breathed power into Eskel that first and last time, it was to heal him. To keep him from suffering. The pleasurable side effects were ignored.

Apparently not forgotten, though.

“You’ve felt how Dracula’s power tastes,” Eskel said finally. “It’s like a brutal fuck. As painful as it is pleasurable. Yours is like sweet lovemaking.” He turned his head to the side, glancing away, and Alucard could feel the heat of the blush radiating off of his face. “It’s pleasure drawn out, the kind that fills you up until nothing else exists. But there’s no urgency to it.”

“What if I can’t do it again?” Alucard mused, breathing in Eskel’s embarrassed scent with the hints of interest threaded through. “I’m not as good at this as my Father is.”

That got him a little snort of amusement. “Dracula makes everything look easy.” Eskel paused, and then asked, “Are you truly worried that it might go wrong? Has that happened to your powers in the past?”
“I never used them on anybody,” Alucard shrugged. “I never fed on humans. Never had lovers I would want to share power with.” He sighed. “In a lot of ways, this is all very new to me.”

Eskel rubbed his cheek along Alucard’s head, and tightened his hold for a moment, crushing Alucard close. Alucard sighed happily, rubbing his nose into Eskel’s neck again. If he moved close enough, he could just feel the edge of the scar on Eskel’s throat across his lips.

“If you need to practice, you could on me,” Eskel said quietly, sounding a little unsure, but not unwilling.

“Really?” Alucard whispered. “Even if I wasn’t very good at it?” Alucard remembered his first try and how he ended up kissing Eskel instead of sharing his power.

“Yeah. I wouldn’t mind.” There was a hint of a smile in Eskel’s voice now. “But we’d have to try when Dracula is around. To drink from me after. Otherwise—-” He licked his lips and swallowed. “Otherwise I’d be strung out until the extra power is taken out of me.”

Through feeding or sex, was what he wouldn’t say.

Geralt tended to process the excess power better than Eskel, able to come down from the high of it on his own. On the other hand, whenever Geralt came to them, there was always sex. Alucard remembered only one instance of Dracula feeding power into Geralt without fucking right after, and it was when Geralt was wounded. Still, Dracula had much better control over how much power he was transferring and a better grasp of the consequences. There was also the fact that Geralt’s pact with Dracula had changed him physically, though so far those changes had been slow to manifest and extremely subtle. Geralt also had taken Dracula’s power a lot, further changing how his body processed it.

With all the variables in play, there was no telling how Geralt would process Alucard’s power. Especially not while he was still so badly wounded, and with Alucard’s inexperience on top of that. Practice beforehand would be extremely helpful.

Alucard wasn’t sure if he would ever feed on a human, though he was now considering it. And Eskel was in the same boat with sex, unsure if he was willing with a male partner, leaving them at an impasse.

As disappointing as it was, Alucard had to nod in agreement. The last thing he wanted to do was leave Eskel in an untenable situation.

He tried not to think of Eskel swallowing down his power and crying out under him with the joy of it.

“What am I?” Geralt asked hoarsely from his bed. “Chopped liver?”

“You sure look like it,” Eskel snarked back. To Alucard’s surprise, when he eased up to standing, he lifted up Alucard with him, supporting his weight until he got his feet under him.

“Geralt,” Alucard said, going towards his once more awake lover. “Eskel gave me a head massage.” He couldn’t help the sappy smile that stretched across his face. “It was amazing.” He reached the bed finally and bent down to give Geralt a chaste kiss. “Eskel has amazing hands.”

Geralt sighed up into the kiss, arching into it the tiniest bit.

“Why is Eskel getting so much action and I get none?” he grumped when Alucard pulled up from the kiss.
"Because we’re trying not to kill you,” Eskel grumbled next to them, flopping quietly into a chair near the bed. “If you want, I’ll give you a head rub, too. Or maybe Alucard should do it.”

Both Alucard and Geralt turned to look at him, eyebrows raised.

“Head rub?” Geralt asked with amusement.

It took Eskel a moment, but then he turned bright red. “No, arghh, that’s not what I---aww.” He rubbed a hand over his face and then just left it there. “I hate you. It was totally innocent!” Eskel said pointing at Alucard. “Right?”

Alucard looked at Eskel. Then at his hands. He remembered the sheer bliss of that touch and how nice Eskel smelled with the faint thread of arousal in his scent.

“...Yes,” he said after a moment of thought.

Geralt looked back and forth between them, his eyes narrowed. He looked more curious than upset, though, so Alucard counted that as a win.

“So innocent he had to actually think about it?” Geralt raised an eyebrow towards Eskel.

If anything, Eskel only turned a brighter red. He studied his hands, and hunched his shoulder just a bit. It really was incredibly easy to get him flustered.

“It feels nice. He looked stressed,” Eskel said quietly. “I forgot about how you both have a hair fetish.”

“I do not have a fetish,” Geralt defended.

Alucard stayed silent. He damn well knew he had a certain weakness for his hair being played with. He especially loved it when Dracula or Geralt got a fistful of it when they were taking him and used it to keep him in place.

He shifted, trying not to show how the memory affected him. It didn’t help him much because Geralt turned his head towards him, nostrils flaring wide as he took in a deep breath.

Before Geralt could comment on Alucard’s scent, Eskel turned to give Geralt a flat look and said, “Really? You’re gonna deny it? After all the stories I’ve heard? How often have I listened through you monologuing about those long, pretty silver locks? How nice they feel on your hands and skin? Eh?”

Now it was Alucard who could feel warmth in the tips of his ears.

“You talked about me?” Alucard asked, feeling oddly charmed.

Geralt looked a little abashed. “Only to Eskel and Dracula. And all nice things!”

“It’s true,” Eskel said wryly. “All very nice things.”

Alucard put his hand near Geralt’s on the bed, just brushing their fingers together. He wanted to touch, but wasn’t sure he should when Geralt was in such a public place and busy with discussion. Publicly displaying his affection wasn’t something he was used to doing. It was easier with his Father. Dracula just took what he wanted and made it look easy. Natural. Alucard was different. Touch mattered to him in ways he couldn’t easily explain. He always felt unsure about just expecting it and even worse about taking it without permission or invitation.
The moment their fingers touched, Geralt wrapped his hand around Alucard’s. It wasn’t a tight grip, and the weakness there made a spike of anxiety rear up inside of him. But there was more strength there now than there was yesterday, and there was less strain on Geralt’s face.

Eskel’s eyes flickered between them. Then he stood up. “You two take some time to be together. I’ll guard the door.”

With that, Eskel took himself out of the room, quietly shutting the door behind him.

Geralt blinked and stared at the shut door. “Huh.”

“I miss you,” Alucard said.

Several emotions flickered across Geralt’s face, but in the end he just looked tired and a little sad. “And I, you.” He raised a hand to gently brush Alucard’s cheek. “I miss touching you, smelling you around me. I know why you act human here, how you want to keep this separate. But it drives me crazy to see you across the room and be unable to say or do anything.”

Alucard could feel warmth filling his chest, and a hunger growing inside of him. He wasn’t used to having an appetite, for anything really, and this gnawing need was a new thing for him. Dracula woke it up with his touch and his passion, and Geralt stoked it higher with his easy desire and even easier affection.

Alucard wanted and slowly, laboriously, he was learning that his need could be fulfilled, whatever it was.

He shed his jacket, threw it over the nearest piece of furniture, and bent over Geralt’s bed again.

“Do you feel you can shift onto your side?” he asked, taking hold of the edge of the blanket and waiting for Geralt’s response.

“Hell yeah,” Geralt said and obviously tensed up to shift.

“Stop!” Alucard yelped. “I’ll help. Don’t do anything that would tear your stitches open.”

“It’s been three days already,” Geralt protested. “The holes have to have closed by now.”

“You can’t know.”

Alucard pulled the blanket down and reached under Geralt, slowly helping him shift to the side. Geralt didn’t protest, too focused on breathing. For all his talk, he did get a shade paler and was breathing heavily by the time he was settled onto his side.

“Damn,” he groaned. “It feels good not being on my back again.”

Alucard smiled, toed off his shoes, and carefully slipped into the bed, cuddling up close to Geralt’s back. The bandages and splints were so numerous that they hadn’t even bothered with a hospital gown. Despite that, there was still very little exposed skin. He slid one arm under Geralt’s head, pillowing it, and carefully rested the other on Geralt’s hip.

He pressed his nose into the back of Geralt’s neck and inhaled, trying to get his real scent from beneath all the medications and chemicals that muddled it. Geralt’s hair tickled his face. It needed a wash, it still held the barest traces of smell from the forest. Blood and dirt, leaves and pain.

A shudder ran through Geralt’s body, and he leaned into Alucard just a little bit. That little
movement was probably all he could do comfortably.

Alucard pushed his leg between Geralt’s, letting Geralt rest his outer leg on his own. Geralt sighed.

“Oh, that feels good,” he said with a groan. “I didn't realize how tight my lower back was from all this laying around.”

“You are getting better,” Alucard murmured. He slid his hand over Geralt’s waist and down to his belly, resting it there very gently.

“I’m sorry I’m not better now,” Geralt whispered sadly. “It can’t be easy to look at this.”

Alucard had to make sure he didn't tighten his hold and hurt Geralt by accident.

“I’m just glad you are alive.” He shivered. “The moment my spell worked on you…it was the best, worst thing that ever happened to me.”

“Worst?” Geralt asked, tilting his head slightly to peek at Alucard out of the corner of his eye.

“Geralt.” Alucard could feel his throat tightening. “Time shift spells work only on inanimate things. Dead things.”

“Oh,” came the soft reply.

“You were so close to being nothing but dead meat, and I was pouring so much power into the spell, that it clicked. I could feel it hesitating, could feel how weakly it held you. That was the only thing giving me hope.”

Geralt moved just a tiny bit, enough to cover Alucard’s hand with his own.

“I thought I was dead,” he said softly. “Seeing you two was the last thing I wanted. I thought that was it.” Light fingers stroked over the top of Alucard’s wrist.

“My Father promised you that you wouldn’t die alone,” Alucard murmured. “When he said that, I thought I would probably try to stop him when he did whatever he needed to reach you in that last moment.” Alucard pressed his face into the crook of Geralt’s neck. “It wouldn't be pretty or safe for anyone, but now…” Alucard closed his eyes. “I would have helped. I can’t stand the thought of you leaving me, leaving us like that. Permanently.”

He could feel the shape of the staples under the layer of gauze on Geralt’s stomach. It terrified him still, how much Geralt looked like a patchwork quilt. There were bruises still blooming on his skin, green and yellow, purple still in some places. He was still so very fragile.

“I’m so sorry that I almost did.” Each word held a wealth of unhappiness. It was plain that Geralt was truly regretful, and Alucard could almost taste the guilt on him.

“Not your fault,” Alucard sighed, rubbing his face against the warm skin on Geralt’s neck. He needed a shave, his beard was coming in strongly already.

The way Geralt didn’t answer that at all made Alucard frown. He remembered what Eskel said, about how Geralt was prone to self recriminations. Part of it could be just the pain and inactivity, though. That was bound to make Geralt feel moody. He’d have to keep an eye on this in the future.

“Where’s Dracula?” Geralt asked after a minute or two. “Did he come back yet?”

“I…have no idea where he is,” Alucard said with a sigh. “I haven’t been able to reach the castle
since sometime yesterday evening.”

Geralt’s breath caught for a moment, then he clearly forced himself to breathe. “Well, that’s unsettling.” He took another slow breath, and Alucard could feel Geralt’s heartbeat steady a little under his lips. They had long since turned the volume off on the heart monitor next to the bed, so there wasn’t any noise to bother them. “I hope he’s alright.”

“You are the only one with a key to the castle now,” Alucard said.

Granted, if he really wanted to get in and didn’t care about the cost, Alucard could have found a way. Probably. He doubted his Father would have purposefully locked him out of it. But he didn’t see the need for forcing his way in when Geralt could open the door for him.

Geralt patted a hand up around his neck, but there was nothing there. “I think you must have it. Unless Dracula took it along with my witcher medallion.”

“It’s keyed to you,” Alucard said. “It’s yours.”

Geralt chewed on that thought for a moment, and then returned to stroking Alucard’s hand. “When I can move again. If he’s not back by then, we’ll go find him.”

There was steel in his voice, and a certainty that Alucard appreciated. Witchers were persistent beyond reason, and if Geralt set his mind to finding Dracula, he wouldn’t stop until he did.

“I don’t think it will come to that,” Alucard said, and hoped that he wasn’t lying. “There’s more, though.”

“More,” Geralt repeated flatly.

“I think…that the castle is no longer where it used to be? That place feels empty now.”

“So what you are saying is, not only Dracula is gone, but the castle is gone, too.”

“Pretty much.”

Geralt huffed out a small laugh.

“So, situation normal, all fucked up?”

Alucard could feel his eyes grow heavy. He was still exhausted, the strain of holding that spell for so long plus keeping a collected image for everybody was taking its toll. Feeding on Dracula helped restore his energy a bit, and the unexpected encounter in the bathroom served even better to quiet the edge of panic churning in his stomach, but he still felt strangely tired.

It had been days, and every time he saw Geralt in the hospital bed, he remembered how close he had been to losing his lover. Having to look and act calm and unaffected for the people working for him was exhausting in ways he hadn’t expected.

“You should sleep,” Geralt said softly, his fingers still stroking over Alucard’s hand. “Let me have you here for a while. Rest with me.”

Alucard hesitated to take him up on the offer. He wanted to be awake and aware for every moment he could while Geralt lay in his arms.

But Geralt was warm. His body radiated enough heat to warm up Alucard’s ever cold hands and push him that little bit closer to sleep.
“Just for a little while,” Alucard murmured, closing his eyes and finding a comfortable spot to rest his face in the crook of Geralt’s neck.

“I’ll wake you up,” Geralt promised sweetly.

Alucard knew it was a lie and couldn’t help but smile at the manipulation. Geralt really had to be feeling better if he had the energy to try and deceive Alucard.

He fell asleep still smiling.

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Eskel leaned back in his chair next to the closed door to Geralt’s room. He’d almost put the damn thing in front of the door, just to be that much more of a road block, but decided against it. He didn’t want to be tripping over the chair himself if he needed to get in.

It wasn’t that he was worried, per se. Alucard’s people were well trained and very alert, even if they did have some flaws that he could pick out just by watching them. Regardless, the hospital floor was well guarded. And it wasn’t like Eskel, or even Alucard, couldn’t stop nearly any nuisance themselves if the human guards failed.

It was just that the whole damn situation here had left Eskel extremely unsettled. Geralt being so damn injured, and in such an insecure building. One siege weapon attack to a lower floor and this whole place would be ready to collapse. Plus there was the fact that Alucard was hiding his nature here, so he was basically a civilian. On top of that, Eskel was still smarting from the loss of his armor and swords.

Little things just kept piling up. Dracula was missing. Ciri had left. Lambert was in the wind.

There were too many people here. Granted, most of them on this floor were Alucard’s guards. But Eskel still didn’t know them. Given what he’d seen of Matt so far, Eskel had to assume that his subordinates were competent, but he still hadn’t seen any of them fight. Nor had he seen what weapons they carried, or how they worked. It was driving him to distraction.

Then there was all this stuff with Alucard tasting his blood. It wasn’t a real feeding, but maybe that wasn’t as far off as it once seemed. Ciri’s words echoed in Eskel’s skull, and he kept chasing the possibilities around in his head.

Was he really interested in men? He didn’t think so, but after so many months of being close to Dracula and Alucard he had to admit to himself that something had grown there. Was it real attraction, or just the side effects of their vampiric powers and habits?

Ciri was right. How those bites felt were completely under Dracula’s control, though it seemed Alucard didn’t know what he was doing with that. Yet. So the pleasure he felt there was on purpose. But there was also the rampant desire he felt towards them when he was filled up with their power.

It was confusing, and Eskel wasn’t sure how to deal with it. Or if he even should. Things were good as they were, and he was extremely hesitant to upset the status quo.

All of this added up to making him extremely twitchy. He wanted to train. To fight. To do something, anything at this point.

It wasn’t bad when Geralt was awake, because Eskel had taken it upon himself to keep his brother occupied and happy, for the greater sanity of all.
But when Geralt slept, which was often, Eskel tried to stay out of the way. Alucard was very busy, and looked more stressed than a cat in a bath house. Maybe the humans didn’t see it, but Eskel did. He hoped that spending some private time with Geralt would ease them both.

As quickly as he was healing, by human standards at least, Geralt was still gravely wounded and antsy as hell. More than that, Eskel could see how Geralt’s eyes lingered on Alucard. Every time his nose twitched with distaste, Eskel knew that he was smelling the rank stench of death, infection, and harsh chemicals that saturated this building. Dracula had taken his armored coat with him, and Alucard couldn’t summon his without causing suspicion. The lack of his lover’s touch and scent around him was clearly driving Geralt a little nuts.

Maybe Eskel should ask for his armored jacket back. See if Geralt would prefer that scent over the smell of the hospital. It wouldn’t be as good as anything of Dracula’s or Alucard’s, but it would have traces of them on it.

He sat and stewed over his worries.

After the first half hour, he started watching the guards extremely closely. Categorizing their weak points. Matt might like to know. Maybe they could do a few quick training sessions with them. Not only would they get some valuable practice out of it, but Eskel could have a chance to see what they were made of. Eskel was not as competent a teacher as Vesemir---few were---but he was reasonably good. Especially for basics, which from the looks of these men, they might need a brush up on that.

As he watched, he absently tossed a knife in his hand, running through simple exercises that would keep up his agility and awareness. When he first drew it, the other guard at the door looked like he was about to say something. One quick glare was enough to keep him silent, though.

When he finished the exercises with one hand, he switched to the other.

Fuck, this was boring. Guard duty always was. He thought briefly about trying to engage the guard next to him in conversation, but the way the man was side-eyeing him didn’t really lend itself to friendly chatter.

He wished he’d brought dice. Or cards. He had his gwent decks, but those were stashed away with his armor somewhere. Even with them in hand, he’d still have to deal with the guard’s obvious distaste.

The nurses were giving him wide-eyed looks, too. They didn’t even try to come over and ask to get in for regular check ups like they would have if Eskel wasn’t there. While that was unfortunate, it wasn’t really a shock. Eskel damn well knew he didn’t look approachable. Hell, intimidation was something witches were good at.

Ciri said he looked nice in his borrowed clothes, though. John had brought him a whole array of options. Eskel found that he favored the heavy blue pants and button up shirts the best. They were the most comfortable and the easiest to hide a wide array of weapons in.

Target practice was a tempting thought, but there wasn’t really anywhere to throw his knives into. The walls all looked like some kind of fine plaster or metal. Hell, even the chairs and desks were made of the weird colored smooth stuff. Not to mention the fact that Alucard might get annoyed with him if he damaged something he wasn’t supposed to.

After a couple hours had passed, Eskel started to reconsider striking up conversation with the other guard.
He’d been awake for so long that his eyes were starting to burn a bit. It wasn’t something he noticed when he was entertaining Geralt; he was busy then. Witchers could go a damn long time without sleep. Hell, they could skip it entirely if they meditated at least once in a while.

Eskel liked to sleep, though. It was soothing. But he couldn’t here. There was too much to stay aware of. Even if none of it was an active danger or issue, it still nagged at him in the back of his mind.

He didn’t even feel right meditating. He hated the idea of being unaware here, surrounded by so many people he didn’t trust, and he especially hated the idea of leaving Geralt and Alucard vulnerable.

There wasn’t much point to it anyways. The toxicity from the Swallow potion he’d taken before Dracula had left was still in his system, but it was minor. Easily ignored. He didn’t really need to meditate.

He started the agility exercises over again, this time slightly faster. Just quick little flips and tosses with one hand, something that could be done absently. At this point, he didn’t even need to look at the blade to do it; the swift little movements came as easily as tapping his fingers.

The guard next to him was staring.

Rude.

Although, maybe he just wanted to talk and didn’t quite know how to start that conversation. Eskel could sympathize. People here were wildly different than what he was used to. He wasn’t quite sure himself how to bridge the gap. Normally, he’d try offering to buy a round of beer, but Alucard and the doctor had been firm; no booze allowed.

This guy seemed to be particularly interested in Eskel’s practice, so maybe that was a good way in.

Eskel met his eyes and raised an eyebrow.

“You a knife fighter?” he asked quietly.

The man swallowed, and his eyes flickered back to Eskel’s blade. “I learned when I was in the service.”

Eskel puzzled over that for a moment, humming quietly to himself. Maybe this guy did a stint with the city guard, or some royal’s army somewhere. From the looks of this man, he didn’t have more than a single blade on him. Not even a throwing knife. That implied that the man knew a bit about knife fighting, but wasn’t really day to day proficient with it. Again, Eskel wondered about what other weapons they carried. Clubs, maybe?

“I need to ask your boss if I can have some fun with you all,” Eskel said finally. “He said no bloodshed in the hall, but maybe we could set up a side room.”

The service.

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“I need to ask your boss if I can have some fun with you all,” Eskel said finally. “He said no bloodshed in the hall, but maybe we could set up a side room.”

A little practice fighting would be a great way to pass the time. The guards here were a little stiff, but fighters everywhere loved to share styles. It was just too much fun seeing how other people dealt with the same type of attack. Matt seemed interested when Eskel had brought it up before, so maybe some of the other guards would be, too. Once the practicing started, they’d all loosen up. Nothing makes friends like shared techniques, after all.
The man blinked at him, then swallowed again. “I’ll be sure to talk to Mr. Snow about it. He can discuss options with Mr. Belmont.”

If that wasn’t a formal dismissal from further conversation, Eskel didn’t know what was.

He held back a sigh and went back to staring at the wall across from them. Time to run through the agility exercises again. At least that would keep one hand busy while he waited. Hopefully Geralt and Alucard were getting some solid rest in there. That would make the boredom worth it.
As soon as Vesemir changed into dry clothes, he finished up the rounds of Kaer Morhen to make sure that the keep itself remained unchanged.

As far as he could tell, nothing more had been changed than what Dracula had already done prior to this week. There still was no sign of any of the sex demons. Even the elemental in the baths seemed to work at half strength at best, its fire banked and hiding deep in the enormous kettle. The water was still warm, but no longer piping hot as before.

There was a strange sense of waiting around the keep, as if the whole place was holding its breath.

Once he was done, he went back to the kitchen. The little black cat sat in front of the fire. She was tucked into a comfortable little lump, but her tail twitched in agitation. Maybe she smelled the stew.

The whole day seemed surreal, and Vesemir had to wonder if the keep was still even in the same world. Had Dracula gotten so paranoid for Geralt’s safety that he just scooped Kaer Morhen up and took it away? He tried to console himself with the fact that the river still flowed in and out of the valley and despite the new additions, there were still a few of the old familiar mountain peaks on the horizon. As far as he could tell, the land beyond the wall was the same as ever. He hadn’t yet taken a trip up the mountain that Kaer Morhen was built into just to double check that, though.

It felt very isolated here, especially with everyone else gone. Not that Vesemir minded being alone. He liked a certain amount of quiet time, actually. But the quiet after so many months of company was unsettling. More so, given everything else that was going on.

Just as Vesemir was serving himself up a bowl of rabbit stew, the cat stood up from the hot stone in front of the fire and leapt up to go stare out the window. Her tail thrashed with interest at whatever she saw.

Vesemir ate one spoonful of the stew and watched the agitated cat. Then he ate another, his eyes tracking the lashing tail. It was probably nothing.

He was curious, though. The way the cat was walking back and forth on the windowsill it was obvious that she was watching something outside. A bird, probably.

Vesemir kept eating, though he ate a bit quicker than he’d originally planned. Once he was done with his food, he stood up and went to the window, willing to indulge his curiosity. He was ready to smile at whatever small creature the cat was watching with so much attention.

But there were no birds perched outside the window.

There were, however, two huge, armed demons dragging what looked like two tied up humans through Vesemir’s courtyard.
“Fuck,” he swore under his breath. In a heartbeat, he dashed to the door, grabbing his cloak on the way out. As he raced to the courtyard, he settled its heavy weight on his shoulders. Centuries of habit guided him to settling it so that his swords could be drawn easily despite the wrapped fabric.

He took a second to wonder if he should draw his silver sword. Again, he thought of Dracula’s promise. No dark thing would ever harm him here.

Now was a hell of a time to test that theory, though.

Vesemir hit the courtyard in just short of a run, but slowed immediately as soon as he was outside. The last thing he wanted to do was look aggressive. Not on the chance that this could be solved without bloodshed. In normal circumstances, Vesemir wouldn’t hesitate to gut any monster that dared set foot in Kaer Morhen. But, well, life had changed pretty drastically for him in the last year. More so in the past day, too.

As soon as he stepped into view, the large armored demons stopped in their tracks and looked at him. They were both tall humanoid creatures, with bits of plate mail strapped to them. Some kind of lower form vampire, Vesemir suspected. It was late enough in the evening that the sun had already pulled back behind the wall in the east. He had to wonder if the creatures had waited until after the sun went down to show up with their little delivery.

He approached cautiously, but calmly, and stopped within an easy talking distance. Not too close though; Vesemir was more than aware of the potential reach those creatures could have.

The men they dragged behind them looked vaguely familiar. A couple of folks from one of the closest villages, perhaps? They would have had to be quite a ways up into the mountains to get up into this valley, but it wasn’t impossible.

One of the demons held up its bundle and screeched at Vesemir. Whatever guttural demonic language that creature spoke, Vesemir had never heard it before. All he could do was blink. The men, both gagged, stared at him with wide terrified eyes.

The other demon spoke something at its companion and then back at Vesemir. It raised up the human it had in its clawed hand and shook it at Vesemir, as if saying, see this?

Vesemir pursed his lips.

“Are those for me?” he asked. When the demons just looked at him, he sighed. If he didn’t understand what they were saying, logic held that they wouldn’t understand him.

Vesemir pointed at the two men. “Those two can go right here.” Then he pointed at the ground off to his side. Hopefully, the demons would get the gist of what he was saying and go with it.

The demons looked at him, and then looked at each other. Then they looked behind where Vesemir stood. As curious as Vesemir was about what they might be looking at, he wasn’t about to take his eyes off of the monsters in front of him.

There was a bit more of the guttural language, but the demons dragged their prey over to where Vesemir pointed to and dropped them like one would a sack of potatoes. The two demons grumbled a bit more, but took themselves out of the courtyard after that.

Vesemir waited until they were out of sight before turning to the two men. To his lack of surprise, the little black cat was giving them a good sniff.

Fearless little thing, Vesemir thought with amusement. Based on her familiarity with people, the
cat had to be someone’s barn cat, lost when the city showed up. A good addition to a witcher keep, though he had to wonder what caught the cat’s attention in the courtyard in the first place. Probably just birds. He considered planting some particularly seedy flowers under the window. Echinacea maybe. That would bring a whole host of critters to tease the cat. Useful herb, too.

He went to the bound men, pulled one of the small knives he had hidden along the insides of his sleeves, and started cutting the ties on them.

One was older, definitely over forty. Grey and wiry, he had the look of a longtime hunter. His leather gear and weathered face were usual for what Vesemir saw the local hunters use. The other man was younger; something in the shape of his bone structure told Vesemir that the two were related. Probably father and son. The younger one had four rabbits strapped to his belt and a squirrel. Definitely hunters, then.

“Master witcher!” the older one gasped as soon as his mouth was free. “Thank you!” He was already scrambling to his feet and seeing to his son, looking him over for injuries.

“What happened?” Vesemir asked. He stepped back and let the man take care of his son. The younger hunter must have resisted more. There was a large bruise on the right side of his face and his brow was cut through. None of those injuries looked serious.

“I’m Palo,” the older man said. Vesemir noticed he was missing the tip of the little finger on his left hand. “And this is my son, Mika. We are hunters from Goose Landing.”

“Isn’t it a little far for you?” Vesemir asked cautiously. The locals never went this deep into the mountains. The travel just wasn't worth it and they didn’t have any game worth the risk of the dangers they could meet there. There were a hell of a lot of bears in these woods, come the right time of year.

“We weren’t anywhere near,” the younger one chimed in, fending his father’s worried hands away. “We were near the springs.”

He was referring to a spot just inside the valley proper; it was several hours walk from the nearest town, at least. A small creek there took life from a series of natural springs. The underground water was warmer than the freezing air and that meant it usually didn't freeze during the winter months. It was a good hunting spot for game. It was almost a whole day’s travel from Kaer Morhen, at a witcher’s pace, too.

“Those things…they came just after the walls appeared,” Mika said.

“We were out early checking the traps,” Palo said. “We have good spots along the creek,” he said. “When the walls appeared, we hid in a hollowed out tree. We didn't want to start a fire.”

“We thought we could hide.” Mika carefully wiped his swollen nose on his sleeve. “We waited until full daylight and then tried to look for a way back home.”

“When night came, the demons came, too,” Palo said in a shaking voice. “It was like they knew exactly where we were hiding. Just came right for us and dragged us out.” He turned his pale eyes to his son again. “Mika fought.”

Vesemir couldn’t blame the young man. It was obvious he wouldn't be able to fight off two of those vampires, not without knowledge and equipment. It was equally obvious that the man was physically well built, possibly used to winning fights. Clearly, he’d decided he wasn’t going to go to his death quietly. Admirable spirit, though not very useful.
“They knocked me out,” Mika said, looking down in shame.

“Me too,” Palo added. “I woke up when they were dragging us through the bridge.”

That was a small blessing. As glad as Vesemir was that the demons weren’t openly killing anyone found in the valley---though he had to assume that a witcher might be safe---he also hated the idea of the path to Kaer Morhen being known to anyone else.

“Come on,” he said, helping Mika stand up. “I’ve got some stew ready in the kitchen. We can get you patched up while you warm up.”

The cat kept pace with them as they walked, sniffing at the new men curiously but keeping enough distance that they couldn’t touch her.

They trudged together into the keep, and Vesemir got them settled at the kitchen table. Luckily, he’d made a fair amount of food under the assumption that Ciri or Eskel might be back at some point, so there was plenty to serve both men a bowl each. They practically inhaled the hot liquid as he rummaged around for something to put on their bruises.

In the meantime, he puzzled over what to say to them. If anything. He wondered even harder on what the hell he was even supposed to do with a couple of random huntsmen. So far, he hadn’t seen any doors in the damn wall around the valley, though he knew he hadn’t done anywhere near a comprehensive check. The area the wall covered was just too vast.

Vesemir also had to wonder if Dracula was just going to keep them in here, like fish in a bucket. Where was the vampire anyway? Why hadn’t he shown up yet to admire his new creation?

“Master witcher,” Palo said hesitantly.

“Vesemir. My name is Vesemir,” he replied.

“Vesemir. Are we prisoners here?” So many things were mixed into that question. Caution. Worry. But there was also a flat earnestness that Vesemir liked. Farm folk didn’t tend to beat around the bush much, not like the high court types. It was a relief to have them just ask outright.

He sat down next to Mika at the table and laid out some healing salve and a few clean rags.

After a moment of thought, he said, “That is a more complicated question than it might seem to be. Short answer, I don’t think so.”

Mika and Palo exchanged a look.

“And the long answer?” Mika asked.

Vesemir sighed. “The long answer is that I have just as many questions as you both no doubt have, and I’m not sure when I’ll get the answers to them. But if I can, I’ll make sure the two of you find your way home.”

With that, he made a short gesture towards Mika’s face, waving him to come closer, and proceeded to get the man cleaned up.

“Neither you nor I are the…target of this whole thing.” Vesemir waved his hand around indicating the huge fortress that had grown around them overnight. “If luck holds for you, that will mean you and your village will escape mostly unscathed.”
“And for you?” Palo asked shrewdly. “You do not think you will?”

Vesemir huffed out a dry laugh. He thought about all the changes to Kaer Morhen in the last year, the extra people and improvements to the keep. He thought about how much happier Geralt and Eskel seemed, and how even Lambert, Ciri, Triss, and Yennefer all stopped by more. Hell, he thought of the damn demons just bringing the hunters here instead of eating them on the spot.

“I think I will not escape unchanged,” he said finally. “But I don’t know if that’s a good thing or a bad thing.” He finished up spreading the salve over Mika’s face, and looked both men up and down. “Anything else that needs seeing to?”

They both shook their heads.

Vesemir cleaned up the various debris from the table and poured them all some hot tea. He took a minute to enjoy the warmth of his mug, and was pleased to see that both Mika and Palo had relaxed into their drinks as well. As much as could be expected anyways. This was still likely a very trying day for them.

“It’s too late to do much more tonight. I’ll set you up a place to sleep, and we’ll see what comes in the morning.”

After a moment, Mika said, “Vesemir. Why did the demons bring us to you? Why didn’t you fight them? I thought---” Palo shot his son a sharp look, but Mika forged on. “I thought that witchers killed monsters.”

Vesemir sipped his tea. He had to give the man credit, that was a ballsy question to ask in his position. After all, if Vesemir controlled the demons, then these two might be courting his ire by bringing it up.

Maybe it wasn’t so foolish, though. After all, Vesemir had been a hospitable host thus far, and both men were warm and safe at the moment. In the comfortable light of the kitchen, it was easy to think that things dark and evil were far away. There was a sense of safety in that.

“Witchers do kill monsters, but generally only for gold. And us Wolf witchers only kill monsters who are menacing others. Not much point otherwise.” A general statement, but not an untrue one. “What other schools do, I can’t attest to. These demons didn’t seem hostile and if I engaged, I could have killed them, or they could have killed me.” He paused, to make the impression, making them really listen. “In either case, the chances of you two surviving that fight were miserable at best.”

That seemed to sink in, at least for Mika. Palo looked unsurprised, possibly because he’d already considered that eventuality.

“As for why they brought you to me…”

He paused to think it over. If these two did make it back to their village, no doubt every word he said would be spread around as quickly as possible. Vesemir sipped his drink and considered how much he wanted strangers to know, and how much trouble that might get them in later.

“That, I might have to get back to you on,” Vesemir said finally, erring on the side of caution.

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Vesemir woke up the next morning stiff beyond reason. His legs and lower back ached. It took him a moment to realize there was a warm weight over his covers, just between his thighs. He shifted
his legs and sat up; his joints unusually creaky and sore after hours of no movement. Nestled in the seam between his legs, there was a small puddle of black fur curled tightly into a ball.

The cat.

“How did you get here?” he asked, picking her up and looking at her reproachfully. He was sure he left her in the kitchen when he went to bed.

She had the gall to yawn; her tiny pink maw was full of equally tiny white fangs. After the long yawn, she blinked her sea green eyes open. She didn’t even bother to try and escape. She just hung limp in his grasp like a warm pillow and looked at him as if he was disturbing her well deserved rest.

He shook his head at her and set her on a chair next to the bed.

“Donno why you’d want to be up here when there’s a nice warm fire place in the kitchen. I even left you a little blanket to sleep on,” he grumbled quietly while he wandered around and got ready for the day. A quick peek out the window proved that it was closer to when he normally woke in the morning. The sun was still hidden behind the enormous fucking wall that circled the valley.

Vesemir sighed.

He would never get used to the damn city all around his keep.

It only took him a minute to gather his clothes and gear, then he was off to the baths. When the cat followed him out he looked at her with a raised eyebrow.

“You know we’re headed to the baths, right? Lots of water. You sure that’s where you want to go?” Not that he expected the cat to answer, but it was amusing to talk to her anyways.

The cat just looked at him with narrowed eyes, but kept on following him. She did stay a healthy distance away from the water once there, but sat primly and watched him clean up. Then she followed him out to the kitchen when he was done.

“Strange little critter, aren’t you,” he mused. “Gonna have those woodsmen start whispering about animal familiars with how much you follow me around.”

Still, he stooped down to give her an affectionate scratch. If this was how she dealt with people, maybe she’d stick around for a while. It would be nice to have something normal around the keep for a change.

“You gonna stay here for a bit, kitty? Be a kitchen cat while I’m out on the Path?”

Vesemir snorted in amusement at the thought of the cat riding pillion on the back of his horse while he was out hunting.

Quickly, he got the kettle ready and the woodstove and oven lit. Soon enough those woodsmen would be up and he’d have to figure out how to deal with them.

“Can’t leave them to wander around here alone,” he muttered to himself. That sounded like a terrible plan on a couple of different levels. Not only did he hate the idea of leaving strangers to wander the keep, but he also didn’t want to imagine what would happen if Dracula showed up while he was out and found them here alone.

He looked down at the food he was making and laughed. Yeah, that’s what Dracula would
probably think too, that somebody got him a snack while he was out.

“Can’t take them out with me.” He only had the one horse, and trying to walk the valley on foot was a several day long trip.

Eventually, someone would show up again. If not Dracula himself, then one of the other demons. Or hell, if it took long enough, Alucard would bring Geralt back once he was healed up. They had the resources to wait for a fair amount of time before Vesemir would really start to worry. He’d long since made it a habit to keep Kaer Morhen very well stocked.

That decided, he set out some chopped meat for the cat and then settled in to prepare for his guests to wake up.

He didn’t have to wait long. As excited as the men were to see a hot meal ready for them, they were equally dismayed to hear that Vesemir had no plans to take them out of the valley right away. As if he knew how.

“I have a wife,” Mika said with a worried frown. “She’s with child, due in only a few weeks.”

“I haven’t enough horses to take you two with me while I try to find a way out, and it would be far, far worse for you to be found here without me,” Vesemir said calmly. When it looked like the man might object again, Vesemir silenced him with a look. The same look he’d given countless scores of students in the past. He’d had a lot of practice getting it just right. “Someone who knows more will come sooner or later. Better we wait here for them.”

“Doria will be fine, Mika,” Palo said quietly. “Vanessa will keep a look out for her until we get back.”

Now that was a name that Vesemir recognized. Vanessa was the innkeeper at Goose Landing, and she always kept brandy in stock for witchers passing through.

“Until then, you boys up for cards?” Vesemir asked easily. Might as well pass the time with a friendly game. There were chores to do, of course, but they could start them after the day had warmed up a bit. It might be the tail end of the season, but winter still had a bite to it.

It took a little while, but both Mika and Palo relaxed into the activity. By lunchtime, they were laughing and joking like friends. If there was still the telltale signs of anxiety about them, well, Vesemir didn’t blame them at all.

Vesemir’s medallion buzzed against his armor and a loud neigh trumpeted out from the courtyard. Both Mika and Palo jumped in place like they’d been poked with a stick.

“Oh, good. Night is here,” Vesemir said absently.

Finally somebody who could travel outside the walls.

The cat was already at the window, watching. He got up and peeked out over her. Sure enough, Night was there, and with Ciri and Lambert on her back.

“Heart the Gods,” he said quietly, and sagged with relief. Lambert was alive and safe, if looking a little rough. All of his boys were accounted for. Vesemir closed his eyes for just a brief moment and rested a hand on the cat’s head, giving her an absent pet. The little beast purred up a storm under his hand.

He put more water in the kettle and grabbed his cloak from the hook. Then he paused to look at
Mika and Palo.

“There’s a horse outside. Night. She has the run of the courtyard, and she’s…probably best left alone.”

Both men exchanged a look, but Vesemir ignored it. He had charges to take care of.

By the time he got out to greet them, Lambert was still staring up at the city walls and distant towers, jaw slack and eyes wide. Ciri walked up and gave Vesemir a quick hug, and he smiled at her.

“Go on in,” he told her. “There’s two humans in the kitchen, so you know. Huntsmen from a nearby town.”

“Oh good!” Ciri’s shoulders dropped a little in relief. She looked to Lambert, hesitating.

“I’ll get him,” Vesemir said, and shooed her on.

Lambert looked like he’d been dragged through hell face down. His armor was gone, replaced with shitty, obviously scrounged gear. Of his regular gear, only his swords and a dagger were still on his person. The fact that he still had those at least was a small mercy. Good swords were damn hard to replace. Blood had soaked through several parts of his worn jacket and one arm and shoulder had several nasty gashes on it. It looked like there was some kind of meat hanging off his belt, but Night was taking advantage of his distraction and was nibbling it right off of him.

“Come on lad, let’s get you inside,” Vesemir said, grabbing a hold of Lambert’s good arm and steering him towards the stable entrance.

“The fuck happened here?” Lambert rubbed his eyes.

Vesemir sighed. “I’ll give you three guesses and a hint, it rhymes with ‘Ackula’.” Lambert snorted, but allowed himself to be led. Night trailed hopefully behind them, lipping at one last bit of meat on Lambert’s belt. “Strip and get washed. I’ll patch you up in the kitchen. We can talk there.”

Lambert nodded, still looking dazed and tired.

Then Vesemir turned to Night. He crossed his arms and raised an eyebrow at her.

She pranced in place, tail flagged, clearly very thrilled with her performance.

“You teleported into the keep,” Vesemir said flatly.

Immediately, she froze. One ear flipped to the side, and she glanced away really quickly. He stared at her some more and ran his tongue over his teeth. She shifted in place and turned her head sideways to look at him with one large innocent eye. As innocent as a red, burning, demon eye could be, anyways.

“Claw marks on the stone floor,” he continued on. “Not one, but two different door frames broken. Furniture and potion bottles in shattered pieces.”

She shifted in place again, shuffling her feet. Her ears were laid back and her head dipped a little lower.

“Do you know how difficult it is to replace stone flooring several stories up in the middle of a keep?” Vesemir raised an eyebrow at her.
Night perked up, ears forward.

“No, it’s not easy.”

She dropped her head again, huffing a little.

“In the future, if you need to get into the keep for something, you get my attention and we’ll work out what you need. None of this running around destroying half the wing as you try to squeeze in and out. Understood?”

Night neighed at him, getting her fangs far too close to Vesemir for comfort. She trotted up to Lambert, who was hanging by the entryway watching the show with obvious amusement, and nudged him with her head. Then she looked at Vesemir and nudged Lambert again, harder than before, getting a “hey!” from him.

“You went to go get Lambert,” Vesemir said quietly, thinking it through.

He cast his mind back to the events of the previous day, and how worried he’d been about where his boys were. He tilted his head and frowned, remembering how most of the destruction up stairs was in Lambert’s room. Vesemir’s room had gotten away unscathed, as did the sorceresses, Ciri, and Dandelion’s room. Geralt’s room was untouched, which was no shock. Eskel’s had some issues, and Lambert’s…well, it was a bloody mess. There was an obvious trail through the hall where Night had poked around looking for something, and it had ended in Lambert’s room.

“But you’ve never met Lambert before,” Vesemir said musingly. “Did you go looking for something of his so you could find him?”

Night tossed her head and preened again, nudging Lambert one more time as if he was some kind of trophy.

Vesemir held back a smile. By the Gods, Night did a lot of damage, but it was clear that she was trying very hard. It was both kind and clever of her to go fetch Lambert, too, though how she knew that Vesemir was worried about him, it was hard to say. He didn’t want to encourage her to go romping through the keep, though.

“You understand a lot more of what I talk about than I thought,” he said with sigh. “You got that I was worried about Lambert.” He tilted his head. “So you are also getting the fact you are not allowed into the keep, aren’t you?”

Night flipped her ears back and heaved a heavy sigh.

Again, Vesemir only just stopped himself from snickering. The damage would be a pain in the ass to repair, but some things were far more important. Like Lambert being alive and well. Not to mention, this was hardly the first time that someone had done something ill advised in the keep. Some of Geralt and Eskel’s exploits as children came to mind, actually. He took a step closer and scratched behind her ears. “I am very, very happy that you found Lambert and brought him here. Thank you, Night. As soon as I get him cleaned up and settled in I’ll come out and give you a good brushing.”

She neighed at him again, prancing in place for a moment before she trotted away, possibly to investigate the courtyard. Vesemir and Lambert watched her go, and he had to admit she was one beautiful horse. With shining black coat and powerful muscles, she was an embodiment of power and vitality. Vesemir remembered how it felt to ride her, the smooth stride and sheer power of it. Dracula did like to have pretty things.
“So,” Lambert asked. “Did you just play fetch with a demon horse using me as the toy?”

Vesemir looked at him, eyeing the mauled shoulder and arm. Then he looked down, taking in the lack of gear and obviously stolen jacket. He looked back up to Lambert’s face and raised his eyebrows. “Are you complaining?”

Lambert’s face puckered like he’d swallowed a lemon for a moment. “...Did I hear correctly that said demon horse got into my room?”

That made Vesemir sigh. “Yes. I picked up most of the broken things, but some cleaning still needs to be done. We’ll get to it today if...well, if nothing else comes up.”

“When it rains it fucking pours,” Lambert grumbled, but turned to go head up to get changed.

By the time Vesemir got to the kitchen, Ciri had already set up a bowl of hot water, towels, and a small healing kit. She’d lived with witchers a long time. She knew the drill.

Both Palo and Mika were watching Ciri’s preparation with interest. Vesemir frowned for a moment. Lambert needed to be brought up to speed, and that would be easier done with Ciri while Vesemir was fixing up those slashes in Lambert’s arm. He was hesitant to talk in front of the villagers though.

Then again, this affected them as much as anyone. Maybe they deserved to know something of what was going on.

He refilled his mug of tea, and got a cup for Lambert, too. Ciri had already helped herself. When he sat down he gave Palo and Mika a serious look.

“We’ve got a bit to talk about here---”

“You want us to leave,” Mika interrupted, face twisted with outrage. Palo shot him a sharp look. “This forest is our livelihood and now we are cut off from it. We deserve to know what’s going on.”

Vesemir raised a chiding eyebrow at him. “No lad, I wasn’t going to ask you to leave. But I was going to warn you that knowledge is a dangerous thing. This, all of this”---he waved a hand towards the window---“is going to draw the attention of very powerful people.”

“It already has,” Ciri interjected.

Vesemir nodded at her. “So, be mindful that what you hear here shouldn’t be spread around. Not just for our comfort and safety, but your own as well.”

Mika just frowned further, but Palo nodded.

“The king’ll send men,” Palo said quietly. “Mages and soldiers. They’ll question anyone and everyone who might know something.”

That seemed to sink in. Mika cast a wide-eyed look at his father. The upset on his face was already shifting to worry.

“Mages are already in Goose Landing, and every other town with eyes on the walls,” Ciri said. “When I first came here to investigate, I went to the town in search of a horse. Two mages were already there, asking about witchers and if anybody had gotten even close to the wall. Vanessa, the innkeeper, helped me remain unnoticed and gave me her horse.”
“Save the rest for when Lambert gets down,” Vesemir said with an offhand wave. “That way you don’t need to repeat yourself.”

Palo and Mika shared another look, and this time Mika was clearly looking for guidance from his father. Palo patted him on the shoulder and gave him a reassuring, if strained, smile.

“We’ll stay quiet,” Palo said, looking at Vesemir. “And we’ll be careful of people questioning. We’d like to know what’s happening, though.”

“Good man,” Vesemir gave him an approving nod.

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Palo watched the skinny cat wash its paws as it sat in the ray of sunlight on the kitchen sill. She was a small thing, extremely thin. Probably not much of a mouser. Still, she was at least something normal and familiar to look at while the older witcher and the girl set out about boiling water and laying different jars of poultices out.

His bones ached. Especially his right leg. It had a nasty break during the last war when King Henselt's father forced all able-bodied men into service. Palo got lucky; he got hurt early enough and badly enough that they sent him away before the battles started for real. It gave him time to hide what valuables he had in the woods before opportunists could come looting. When the armies came too close, he took his wife and three small children and they all spent four solid months living high in the mountains in a shack he built despite the broken leg. That was probably why it never healed completely, but it saved his wife and kids so he rarely complained.

Looking around now, seeing the demon city appear from nowhere and being dragged out of hiding by its minions, it made Palo worry about dark times coming again. He’d seen the terrible things that happened with war, and had lived through the hardships it took to survive. His family would be able to do it again, Palo was sure.

But he didn’t want them to need to. He much preferred them safe and tucked away in their little village. Vesemir was right to worry about news spreading around, but Mika was right, too. They deserved to know what had landed at their doorsteps. Palo tried not to stew over what would happen to them if they survived this week. If they couldn't hunt in the mountains, Palo had no idea what would happen to their family. Hunting and mountains was all he knew.

When the younger witcher, Lambert, came into the kitchen, he was wearing only clean pants and socks. He carried his swords sheathed in one hand, though, and held a tiny bottle in the other. Hell, but the man looked like he’d been beaten and mauled. Palo winced in sympathy at the look of the bruised ribs and sluggishly bleeding gashes down his arm and shoulder.

There were scars on his chest and arms, evidence of wounds that would kill normal men. He was built like a warrior, with powerful muscles stretched over a strong bone structure. Definitely a man that Palo wouldn’t want to meet in a dark alley. Even the older witcher, Vesemir, was built like he could wrestle a bear and win, though he looked kinder and less volatile than Lambert. There was an anger about Lambert, something that spoke of a sour temper. Maybe that was just the injuries talking, though.

Ever present was the wolf medallion around Lambert’s neck. The sign of a witcher.

The bruises and nasty scrapes that covered his upper body were many and varied, some still with wooden splinters sticking out of them. In addition to the badly lacerated arm, there was a deep cut over the ribs. One of Lambert’s pant legs looked a little extra padded at the thigh, and Palo
suspected that he already took care of at least one wound there.

Lambert sat down with a groan. “My room. My room.” He set his swords under the bench he’d sat on and rubbed his face. “How the fuck does a horse get in the second story of a fortress anyways?”

“Teleport,” the woman said. Ciri, Palo thought he heard her name was.

“Since when do we have a teleporting horse in our keep?” Lambert grumbled. He didn’t even flinch when Ciri took hold of the first long splinter with a pair of pliers and pulled it out, obviously not trying to be gentle.

She threw the bloody, finger length piece of wood into an empty bowl, and then leaned in to grab another one.

“At least try not to take a pound of flesh with those splinters, eh?” Lambert complained, but he didn’t move away from her rough treatment.

“Where did you get all of these?” she asked as she worked. Slowly but surely the pile of splinters was adding up.

“Ugg, the night from hell,” he grumbled back at her, barely even wincing as she picked at him.

For some reason, that made both Ciri and Vesemir laugh.

“Tell me what the fuck is going on here first,” Lambert said sourly.

That basically killed whatever humor the other two had mustered up.

“Geralt got hurt,” Ciri said quietly. Her face and hands stayed busy looking over Lambert’s torn hide, and her voice didn’t betray anything of what she was feeling.

Geralt of Rivia was a name Palo knew well. Even if it weren’t for all the stories and songs, the White Wolf was one of the witchers that stopped by Goose Landing every fall and spring. In fact, all of the faces here looked familiar, but oftentimes Palo only heard about the visits second hand from Vanessa.

“Hurt. We all get hurt.” Lambert frowned.

“Some asshole decided Geralt needed to be hunted down and killed, and gathered up a small army to do it,” Vesemir said. A bitter snarl twisted his features, and Palo was extremely glad that he wasn’t the focus of the old witcher’s ire. “Geralt’s alive, but barely.”

“Shit.” Then Lambert’s eyes got wider. “Shit, Dracula.”

Palo wondered who Dracula was, perhaps another witcher? Or an enemy?

“Yes,” Ciri sighed. “Furious doesn’t cover it. Eskel calmed him down before the rampage hit a city, but the damage is still…horrifying.”

“Where?” Lambert asked.

“Know about that huge forest on the south west part of Temeria?” Vesemir asked idly, cleaning Lambert’s arm with a cloth covered in a harshly smelling liquid.

“Brokilon? Of course. Good hunting there, lots of bounties.” Lambert winced a tiny bit as Ciri pulled out a particularly stubborn splinter.
“Not Brokilon proper, that was mostly untouched, but the lesser forest on the Temeria side,” Vesemir said, shaking his head.

“Hard to say how much is gone, given the black miasma covering the area as of a couple days ago. I haven’t had a chance to scry to see if it’s still there, but I kind of doubt it,” Ciri said. She moved Lambert’s arm around, looking for more bits of wood. “I think Dracula started on the eastern edge of the forest, and then made his way into Temeria proper.”

“He killed everyone there?” Lambert asked.

Ciri shook her head. “He burned the land down to bare bedrock.”

Palo blanched at the thought of it. Battle magics were terrible things, and destruction on that kind of scale was petrifying. Who even had that much power?

“And the people living there?” Lambert asked quietly.

With that, Ciri actually looked slightly relieved. “As far as we can tell, there weren’t any humans in that area. Aside from the ones hunting Geralt, anyways. And after that, Dracula moved so slowly that people could see him coming and run. I think the destruction was limited to just the border forest and Geralt’s hunters.”

“Even that would be a blow,” Vesemir said quietly. “People live off that land, hunt and harvest there.”

This was exactly what Palo feared when the castle walls appeared. Even if nothing else happened, how would he feed his family if the mountains were closed to him?

“Considering Dracula didn’t even look tired after destroying that forest, they should be grateful to be alive at all,” Ciri said.

For a moment it looked like Vesemir might say something back, but he visibly checked himself. Instead, he reapplied more of the pungent smelling liquid to his cloth and continued to wipe up the ragged wounds on Lambert’s arm.

“Alright, so Dracula got pissed and Eskel calmed him down,” Lambert said after a moment, clearly trying to urge the narrative on.

“Alucard got Geralt out and got him help in time to save his life,” Ciri continued looking at a loose flap of skin on Lambert’s arm. Based on how it looked, the skin was probably scraped away during some kind of fall. “I will have to cut it off. It’ll heal up faster and better that way,” she said finally.

Lambert sighed and pulled out a small, sharp looking knife and passed it to her.

“You have the worst bedside manner ever,” Lambert complained.

“Quit your bitching,” she said with a smirk. “Anyways. Eskel, Dracula, and I went to visit Geralt and Alucard for a bit. I left Eskel there to keep them company, and I came back to talk to Triss. Maybe figure out who started all this mess. Dracula…” She looked back and forth between Lambert and Vesemir, and then shrugged. “I have no idea where he went. But a few hours later, this happened.”

She waved a hand at the window.
“I haven’t seen him at all,” Vesemir added. “Nor have I seen any of the others around. Night is the first demon to show up since the city appeared.”

“The horse in the courtyard is a demon?!” Mika exclaimed.

On one hand, Palo kind of wanted to smack his kid for being so gods be damned obvious about his shock. On the other hand, there was a demon in the courtyard.

Vesemir and Ciri both shrugged, but Lambert looked at him with something close to sympathy.

“She’s Dracula’s horse. There’s a reason I told you to keep away from her,” Vesemir said offhandedly.

“She also is the only way to get in and out of here, as far as I can tell,” Ciri added. When Vesemir just raised an eyebrow at her, she continued. “The castle has wards on it. Powerful ones. No way a regular portal is going to work. Triss and I didn’t even scry, we just did a sand divination to check out the energy patterns and it still lit her table on fire. I portaled to Goose Landing and borrowed a horse. Vanessa helped me out there. Henselt’s mages are already in town, looking around, asking questions. It’s said they’re hunting witchers, no doubt because they realized the castle showed up right on top of Kaer Morhen.” She gave Lambert a significant look.

Palo realized with a start that the girl wasn’t a witcher, despite her looks and weapons. She was a sorceress.

“So that’s why I was being hunted.” Lambert sighed. “I’d just finished up a hunt yesterday. Got my bounty and went to drink it off. My whore tried to poison me, guards broke into my room, then I got chased out of the city in my bare feet. They lamed my horse and kept chasing me right out into the woods. With dogs,” he snarled and tapped his fingers on the table top. “Then, just when I thought I’d lost them, I ran into a fucking bear.”

“The winter came early,” Palo said without thinking. “A lot of the young bears had to go to sleep before they built up enough fat. They have been waking up all over.”

“Just my luck,” Lambert grumbled.

By this time, Vesemir had started carefully settling the ripped up flesh of Lambert’s arm into as even and natural a way as he could. It was odd that he wasn’t stitching it up, or even binding it, but at this point in the conversation, Palo wasn’t willing to make any assumptions on what witchers could and couldn’t do, or why.

“So,” Vesemir said thoughtfully. “Dracula is missing, as are his servants. The walls seem to be locked up.” He raised a questioning eyebrow to Ciri, and she nodded back in agreement. “There’s no magic in or out, except Night’s traveling. And we have two guests.” He turned to look at Palo and Mika.

Palo thought of his pretty little daughter-in-law, nearly ready to give birth. He looked to his son’s bruised face. Then he thought about the king’s mages and soldiers wandering through Goose Landing.

“This…this Dracula,” Palo said hesitantly. “Would he bring war to this land? Is that why the walls and towers showed up?”

“I don’t think he wants to,” Ciri said thoughtfully. “If he wanted to start a war, he would have done so already.”
“He did just annex a fair bit of land,” Vesemir murmured and started to wrap a thin piece of white cloth around Lambert’s arm. It didn’t look like any bandaging Palo had ever seen before.

“True,” Ciri admitted. “But he could have done so much worse. He didn’t make any additional attacks, after he took care of the hunters anyways. I think if he’d wanted to kill everyone off, he would have just done so. Personally. The castle here seems like more a defensive measure.”

“Henselt is not a patient or forgiving man,” Lambert said with a frown.

“Dracula is even less so,” Ciri pointed out.

“We have to expect Henselt will send some of his forces,” Vesemir said. “He probably doesn’t understand what he is dealing with here, so he’ll send limited forces first, just to feel out the defenses and gather more information.”

“I overheard the people who were hunting me saying they needed me alive for questioning.” Lambert tapped his fingers against the table again. “All of us Wolf witchers are accounted for now, but I kinda feel bad for those from the other schools who get caught up in this.”

“Henselt is fond of military intelligence. It’s very likely that it was his men who were hunting you,” Ciri said. How she knew this much about the king’s personality, Palo couldn’t guess. But she was a sorceress, so maybe she actually knew him. “But as soon as word spreads, other powers will gain interest, too. If they haven’t heard already.”

Both witchers sighed at that.

“The troops that Henselt will send...what do you think the chances are of Dracula just letting them languish in front of his walls?” Palo asked.

Ciri, Lambert, and Vesemir all snorted in amusement.

“At this point I don’t know what’s better. Dracula sitting quietly and letting the ever increasing waves of attacks come, or him making a show of power and negotiating some kind of peace.” Vesemir rubbed his face. “I would like to avoid a forty year siege.”

“At some point, he’s going to have to talk to his new neighbors,” Ciri said. “Whether that’s before or after he decimates the troops at his gates, well, I suppose we’ll find out.” She glanced over to Palo and Mika, perhaps suddenly seeing how worried they were. “I don’t know if this will spill over to your town. I hope not. And I think as long as Geralt lives and is well, he’ll be inclined towards keeping the matter contained.”

That was not as resounding a reassurance as Palo had hoped it would be, but it was better than nothing.

“All of this, because someone attacked the White Wolf?” Mika asked quietly.

“Yes,” Ciri said. “Geralt’s lover is not only possessive but also very powerful.” She pointed out the window. “He did this in a fit of temper.”

That simple statement boggled the mind. Palo closed his eyes for a moment and prayed. He prayed for his family, and his town, and the rest of the kingdoms. A being with that much power and that much spite was beyond a man at that point. He was a force of nature, and when faced with something like that, sometimes prayer was all one could do.

“Do you think Dracula would let the villagers inside the walls?” Ciri asked suddenly.
“Or extend the walls to cover the town if needed?” Vesemir mused. “Perhaps. If Geralt or Alucard asked him. He hates humans, but he would do much for those two.”

Hates humans?

“What can we do? How can we help?” Palo asked, strengthening his resolve. He was once a soldier, and he was still a father. Soon to be grandfather. He was not the kind of man who would sit and cower when faced with impending doom. On the grand scheme of things, he was a small man, with little power beyond that of his own homestead. But he knew damn well just how much difference one or two people could make.

The others at the table looked at him in surprise. Even the cat at the fireplace perked her ears at him.

He gave them a sardonic smirk. “You witches and sorceresses handle large matters. Kings and armies. But us towns folk are more useful than you might think. How can we stop war from coming to our lands?”

“You’re right,” Vesemir said. “Common farm and woods folk shouldn’t be dismissed. We of Kaer Morhen learned that to our great sorrow many years ago.” He took a breath and drew down his brows in thought. “Keep the king’s men away from any witches you find, or any trace of us. The more he harrasses us, the more it will just piss Dracula off. Don’t antagonize the demons. Defend yourselves if you must, but if you see a demon and it’s not being hostile, let it be. If it truly becomes a nuisance, perhaps we can work out a way for one of us witches to handle the problem.”

Palo and Mika nodded. The thought of demons running around unchecked was a disturbing one, but Palo was far more terrified of outright war rolling over his little village.

“Gather what information you can,” Ciri added. “Listen to the mages. Sometimes they talk as if common folk can’t hear them. I’ll stop by from time to time to exchange news. We can keep each other updated.”

That made Palo smirk. The sorceress wanted a spy network, did she? Little did she know how quickly word could spread through the distant towns. His daughters lived in neighboring villages, and it was normal for him to visit them at least once a month. He knew the same went for some of the others in town. It would be child’s play to just happen to pass on bits of information about Henselt’s men as they went.

He had to wonder, would it be worth it? Henselt was his king, and Kaedwen his country. This Dracula fellow had done nothing but show up and cause havoc.

But the witches were locals. They’d been coming through for years, spending coin, spreading tales, and keeping the woods safe for men like Palo. This Dracula fellow, temperamental though he was and terrifying to boot, apparently was just protecting them.

Or throwing fits over them getting hurt. Same thing.

“You’ll do what you can to keep our town safe?” he asked finally.

“I will try, but I can make no promises,” Vesemir said.

“Just wait ’til Geralt hears the town is in danger,” Lambert groaned. “He loves to meddle.”

Ciri rolled her eyes, but nodded. “I swear, it’s like he goes out of his way to find stuff like this.”
Well that’s promising, Palo thought with vague amusement. He’d always thought the songs of the White Wolf were likely exaggerated, but perhaps they weren’t.

“And realistically, I can’t see Alucard just standing by if the people start getting hurt,” Ciri added.

Lambert sniggered quietly.

“Dracula is going to be so fucked when they learn of this stunt of his.”

Ciri covered her mouth to stifle a snicker, and Vesemir just sighed and shook his head.

“We would appreciate your help,” Vesemir said, looking at Palo again. “And we’ll do what we can to watch out for your town, and the other little towns around us.”

“Deal.” Palo smiled at him. It wasn’t quite relief that flooded him, but perhaps just a lessening of anxiety. At least someone with power was looking out for them, and that was better than what they had started with. “We do need to get home, though.”

“I will ask Night if she’s willing to carry you both out of here,” Ciri said getting up from her seat. “Do we have any carrots or apples left?”

“Carrots are in the basket on the right,” Vesemir said, pointing towards what had to be a larder.


_Horse-like._ Palo hadn’t seen Night up close yet, but he was starting to seriously wonder if he wanted to. He couldn’t imagine a horse who would want meat as a snack.

“We’ll try both.” Ciri wandered over to go pillage the larder.

“Alright, Lambert,” Vesemir said patting the other witchers shoulder. “I got all of those that I could. Get the Swallow now.”

Lambert nodded and grabbed the small bottle that he’d brought in with him. He pulled the cork out with his teeth, gave it a sniff, and downed the contents in one go. Palo heard stories about the potions witches used and the mystical abilities they gave them. He never knew how much of that was truth. Now he could see, right in front of his eyes, as the ripped up skin started knitting itself together. He couldn't look away from the tiny tendrils of skin growing and reaching across each wound, creating fresh scar tissue which rapidly turned into pink, healthy skin. There would be a scar no doubt, but the wounds were healing at unfathomable speeds.

“I’m glad you’re here and safe,” Vesemir said to Lambert, and then he stood up. “I’m going to go brush Night. Ciri, bring Mika and Palo out when you’re ready.”

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Orlaith panted, staring at the newly created glowing orb with an angry demon ensnared inside it. Normally, this sort of entrapment wouldn’t be a problem but she was still weakened from the move. The fact that Dracula was still asleep, cutting her off from her biggest source of power, wasn’t helping.

This wouldn’t have been an issue before Dracula’s centuries-long sleep. A day or two of rest, even after something as drastic as a full castle move, wouldn’t be any cause for alarm. But then Dracula had been taken from them, stabbed by Alucard’s blade and forced into slumber for five hundred
Now, the demons inhabiting the castle had gotten antsy the moment they realized Dracula was truly asleep. His bedroom was closed, inaccessible to anyone, even Orlaith. Not that many demons were allowed there, anyways. Once in a while, Dracula gave specific permission to be served there. Regardless, his bedroom was never cut off from the rest of them, like it was now.

The demons in the castle were on a hair trigger. Half of them were afraid that Dracula wouldn't wake up for another five hundred years. The other half had more immediate concerns.

Those bound to the Lord of Hell were dependant on him for their power. It was why the vampires, succubi, and incubi didn't need to feed on the local population; they pulled energy from him directly. Now that he was so deeply asleep, they couldn’t do that. This meant that they would soon start slipping into “dog eat dog” mentality as their baser instincts began taking over. There were also those more enterprising souls eager to grab some power for themselves, thinking that Dracula would no longer come back.

Orlaith had to sit down on the floor and rest for a moment. Ever aware of the eyes watching from the darkness, she did so primly, evenly. As if there was nothing wrong at all.

This particular unruly demon was dealt with, imprisoned in an orb to be stockpiled for later use. But being cut off from Dracula as she was meant that Orlaith’s control of the castle and its inhabitants was weakening daily. She didn’t even have enough energy to take her normal form; she was still wandering around as a tiny black cat. Ensnaring this demon before it could cause more issues was possible only because nobody expected her to go straight for the final solution.

She stared at the shimmering orb and considered how to get it back to the main holding room.

This wouldn’t do. Orlaith knew that she was in no condition to hold the castle together for long. She needed Dracula. She needed somebody to wake him before the humans beyond the wall or the demons inside it pushed things too far.

Alucard had awoken Dracula from his last sleep, though part of that was likely because Alucard was the one to put Dracula to sleep in the first place. It was one of the reasons that most of the denizens of the castle despised Alucard. He’d taken away their lord. Orlaith wasn’t immune to the distaste, either, especially not after all the time Alucard had spent breaking in and attempting to kill their master.

It was looking like he might be her only option, though.

He was in Castlevania City, along with the witcher. Likely surrounded by humans, too. The remains of Dracula’s castle there were infested with them. Since the castle proper still had points of connection with the ruins in Castlevania City, she could feel the humans teeming around the edges of her awareness of that area. It wouldn’t do to bring attention to herself. Nor did she have the energy in her weakened state to go in person.

She’d have to send someone. Preferable someone who could blend in with the humans, or at least hide from them very well. Someone who knew how to track Eskel or Geralt, since Orlaith knew from experience that finding Alucard wouldn’t be as easy. He knew how to mask his presence remarkably well.

The two succubi that had slept with Eskel were both the highest of the succubi in the castle, powerful enough to shift their appearance to match the expectations of people around them. It wasn’t quite mind reading, but it was close enough for her purposes. They were strong and adept at
dealing with unexpected issues.

Orlaith closed her eyes and reached for that thread connecting her to the demons in the castle and pulled at the one leading to Iga. She was the oldest and most reliable one. She was one of the demons that chose to go to sleep when they realized Dracula wasn’t coming back the first time.

Orlaith felt it when Iga came awake with a start, waking from the forced sleep Orlaith ordered most of the denizens into during the move. It was a pity that Orlaith couldn’t keep them all asleep, but that would neither be wise nor feasible. Someone needed to guard the castle, and some areas could not be left untenanted.

*Meet me in the portal room.*

Iga sent back the feeling of assent, plus a mix of confusion and curiosity.

Luckily, Orlaith still had enough energy to travel through the walls to get to her destination, the castle’s portal room. If she’d had to stay a cat the whole way it would have taken forever to walk anywhere.

It took Iga a bit longer to meet her there. She wasn’t so lucky as to be able to travel so swiftly. Orlaith nudged the right doors open at the right time, though, to speed her travel. Too much time had passed already, and it was worth the effort to get this errand done quickly.

“Steward,” Iga said with a bow. “How may I serve?”

*I need you to go to Castlevania City. Find Eskel and Geralt. With them should be Alucard. Alucard must return to the castle to wake Dracula.*

With every word, Iga’s eyebrows raised a little more. In the end, she nodded. “I can do this. Should I return with Alucard, or stay there?”

No doubt the succubus was wondering if she had time to stop for a meal. Eskel was a favorite of the succubi who stayed at Kaer Morhen. He and the other witcher there fed them so very well that Orlaith had put them on a rotation, lest any one of them become too overstuffed. Iga always stayed, though, as the highest powered succubus among them.

*I leave that up to Alucard to decide. He has a better grasp of what is happening in that realm,* Orlaith said after a moment of thought. Dracula had ordered everything to be locked down, but this was an extenuating circumstance. Much like how Orlaith had sent out Night to fetch Lambert.

Iga nodded respectfully. “I obey.”

With that, Orlaith turned to one of the doors, and opened a portal to Castlevania City. It would lead Iga to one of the map rooms, and from there Iga would be able to find her way. Once she’d found Alucard, Geralt would be able to use the wolf portal to bring Alucard back.

Hopefully, Dracula would wake soon after.

Once Iga stepped through, Orlaith dropped the portal and heaved a sigh. There was so much to do, and she had so little power to do it all with. This body was tiny and weak and the castle was still barely grafted onto the land around it. She missed how deep the roots had grown in their previous world.

There was nothing to be done about it, though. This was their new home, and she would make the best of it.
On the bright side, there was a lovely warm fire at the kitchen in Kaer Morhen with strong, fit
witchers to watch. She was very happy with the fact the witchers didn’t seem to be overly
concerned with modesty. That made for nice entertainment.

Despite his occasional rudeness, Vesemir fed her the most delightful meats, and his tendency to
scratch her on the head was more than welcome, too. She could taste his power. The fact that he
was older than the other witchers definitely couldn’t be seen when he stripped off the layers of his
armor. He was as strong as any of them, and Orlaith found she approved of the distinguished look
that age had imparted on his face. Orlaith couldn’t remember anyone taking such liberties with her
before. It was…odd. But not bad.

Having rested long enough, she swished her tail and headed back towards Kaer Morhen.

There were witchers to keep watch over and rumors to gather while she waited.

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Matt took a bit of a detour on his way to work the next day. There was a bookshop he’d noticed
during his commute, and he decided to stop by and get some books for his boss’ friends. He knew
how boring keeping watch could be, and any kind of entertainment would be welcome.

It would have been easy to stop by a strip mall or something like it, but he chose the small
bookshop because he immensely disliked the impersonal chain shops. Everything was sterile and
so false in those places. It felt much better to get a basket off the small table near the door and see
what oddities could be found. Little places like this always had unique things.

As he browsed the shelves, he tried to get at least one book out of every category that caught his
eye.

He got The Short History of Castlevania City, Popular Myths and Folklore, a collection of poetry,
some tome on popular medicinal plants, and a few crime stories. When he was passing by a section
of colorful bodice ripper romances, he got two of those too. Who could resist a title like The Blind
and Buttonless Horseman? He was about to head to the counter when he saw the collection of
Alucard the Vampire novels. He had to get those, too.

Just as he was getting in the queue to check out, a young man with a bunch of textbooks slipped in
front of him. Matt sighed internally and resigned himself to wait a couple minutes longer.

Then he got a text from one of his guys at the hospital, Keith.

When are you gonna get in?

Matt frowned at the message. They knew when he was coming in to work.

Same time as scheduled? Why? he sent back.

There was a minute of lag time, but since they were all on the same network he could see the three
little dots that meant Keith was typing at him.

That scarred dude that Ciri brought is creepy as fuck. He keeps staring at us and tossing his knife.
I don’t know what he said to Aiden while they were both guarding the room door, but it’s got him
asking about if our vests stop blades as well as bullets.

Matt covered his face with his hand and sighed. Given what he knew of Eskel, he didn’t think that
the man was being intimidating on purpose. Eskel just seemed like one of those guys who looked
menacing all the time.

He couldn’t rule it out, though.

Images of all the damn knives, the scars, and the spooky eyes flashed through Matt’s head. Yeah, that was a tough call.

*I’m on my way now,* he sent back, glad he was already in line. Maybe he could write these books off on his taxes as work expenses.

By the time he got to the hospital, most of his guys were giving him relieved looks. He headed straight down to Geralt’s room, with the bag of books in hand.

Sure enough, Eskel was sitting there outside the door, flipping a *fucking dagger* in his hand like it was a butter knife. The thing moved so quickly that it was hard to keep track of the edge. Eskel wasn’t even looking at it. He was staring at Matt as he walked up, his eyes slightly hooded in a way that reminded Matt of a predator stalking something from the bushes. The way the light from the hall hit his eyes made them shine a little, too, and that was not fucking helping.

“Matt,” Eskel said with a nod. “Welcome back.”

The man’s voice was always a low growl, likely from whatever had cut out his throat and left that massive scar across it. Matt wasn’t easily intimidated, but it was still a bit unsettling to listen to, even for him.

“Eskel.” Matt nodded back in greeting. Then he turned to look at Rich, who was stationed at the other side of the door. “Go on. I’ve got this.”

The look he got back from Rich very clearly said, *oh thank fuck,* and then Rich was up out of the chair and down the hall. Still walking casual, but a quick casual at best. Matt had to wonder what Eskel said to him.

“Everything going okay?” Matt asked, sitting down in Rich’s newly empty seat.

Eskel shrugged, but paused the knife show for a moment. “Same old, same old.”

The taciturn answer was about as expected. When Geralt was awake, Eskel talked and joked with him like the family they obviously were. But as soon as Geralt fell asleep, Eskel was a very quiet man.

“Did you get any sleep?” Matt asked, gauging the signs of tiredness in Eskel’s face.


As happy as Matt was to hear that his boss was taking a much needed break, he had to pause to frown. “Kaer Morhen. That’s your home, right?”

Eskel nodded. “As close as we get to one, yes.”

Matt shoved that ominous answer aside, and focused on the question at hand. “You’ve been here for days, though.” He counted in his head. “That’s been, what, three days? You haven’t slept in *three days*?”

“Mmhmm.” Eskel nodded again, and went back to flipping his knife. His gaze wandered up the
hall, pausing at each guard stationed and staring a hole into them. “Four. Ciri brought me here in
the evening. I was up all day before we left.” Eskel shrugged in a ‘what can you do’ gesture. “I’ll
get some meditation in later.”

It was true that Eskel didn’t look particularly tired. His hand on his knife was steady and sure, and
there was only a faint hint of purple under his eyes. Who even knew how much the guy slept
regularly anyways, what with all the obvious enhancements.

So Matt kept his peace, and resolved to bring it up to his boss later if needs be.

His comm cracked in his ear.

“Boss, we got a stranger at the elevator. Female. Blond. Late twenties. Hot.”

Strangers were usually filtered out on the lower floor. Ever since their first day here, each time
somebody got through meant that more insanity was happening.

“We got a name?” he asked into the comm. He might as well ask Eskel about whoever this was
while he was still sitting here.

There was a pause.

“Iga. No last name. Says she needs to see Eskel, Geralt, and ‘our master’.”

Matt could actually hear the air quotes to go with that.

Before he could say anything more, Eskel perked up and said, “Iga is here?”

“There’s a woman who says her name is Iga,” Matt hedged. He wasn’t willing to accept someone's
identity on name only and besides that, how the hell did Eskel know that at all?

“Blond, beautiful. Good handful at the chest and ass. Walks like sex personified, and smiles like
she’s already imagining fucking you?” Eskel asked.

“I didn’t get a description like that,” Matt said pointedly. “But Peter did say she was hot.”

That caused Eskel to smirk and stare off in the distance in a way that screamed nostalgic
satisfaction. “Mmmhmm. Bring her down to me. If it’s not Iga, I’ll handle it. If it is, she’s here for
a very important reason and we shouldn’t delay.”

Then Eskel frowned.

“Unless she’s just hungry,” he added.

With that nonsensical answer, Matt pursed his lips. This woman’s eating habits aside, he was more
worried about Eskel saying he’d ‘handle it’, and he was very afraid that ‘handling it’ involved body
gags.

“You identify her, and we’ll handle her if it’s not the person you’re thinking of,” Matt said finally.
The last thing he needed was a goddamn murder in the hall.

“Suit yourself.” Eskel shrugged.

Matt turned on his comm and said, “Search her, bring her down to the room.”

“Yes, sir!”
That was a far more enthusiastic answer than he expected.

A few minutes later he realized why. The woman walking down the hall towards them, with Keith and Rich following behind, was a goddamn knockout.

Perfect blond hair teased into luscious curls that trailed over her shoulders. Her lips were painted dark purple-red, and her eyes lit up a lovely honey brown color against the dark eyeliner around them. The black dress she wore was floor length and skin tight, showing off without a shadow of a doubt that not only was she not armed, but she wasn’t wearing underwear either. Every curve of her figure made the fabric of her dress shine red-purple, a perfect match for her lipstick.

Briefly, Matt wondered why both the guards flanking her were flushed. Granted, the dress clung to her body in amazing ways, but surely that wasn’t enough to get them so hot under the collar.

As soon as she got close enough she smiled slow and sweet at Eskel.

“Eskel,” she purred, walking right up to him and trailing a hand down his arm. “Eyra and I have missed you so much.” The pout on her lips was as perfect as the rest of her, and Matt had to swallow against his suddenly dry throat.

Then she leaned towards Eskel, stretching down to kiss his lips lightly, and Matt saw just why his men were so flustered. Her long hair parted and hung down, showing off the fact that her whole back was naked from the neck to just the swell of her ass. The deep neckline ended just after showing the start of her crack and the amazing curve of her rear.

“Hi, Iga,” Eskel said with a warm smile, trailing his hand down her jaw. “You look lovely as usual.”

“Always a charmer,” she murmured, and leaned into his palm a bit. “And such kind hands. Strong and sure.”

Now Matt was starting to blush. It wasn’t even what she said, but how she said it. Her tone of voice, the low, throaty rumble of each word made it quite viscerally clear that she was talking about sex.

“Gotta treat a lady right,” Eskel said, still smiling. “Have you come here to see Trevor Belmont?” he asked, with an odd emphasis on the name.

Matt frowned. There was something Eskel just told the woman; a message he passed that Matt couldn’t decipher.

She stood up, but left her hand still touching Eskel’s arm. “I have. I have been sent by his father’s Steward. There’s unrest. He needs to come back immediately.”

“Shit,” Eskel cursed softly. The knife in his hand disappeared so fast that Matt couldn’t quite catch where it was hidden. Somewhere in his pants, probably. Eskel stood up and knocked on the door. He waited, listening for a moment.

Iga looked over at Matt, as if sensing his interest, and smiled at him.

“Do you not trust me yet?” she said in a low, throaty purr. She stepped closer and reached out a hand to touch his tie with just the tip of her finger. “You could search me yourself, if that would help?” Her voice was so soft that it was just above a whisper. “There are many rooms here,” she added. “I’m sure we could find a way for you to...make sure...I carry no hidden weapons.”
Matt was honestly wrong footed. He was attracted to women, and he was still alive, which meant he was interested. Any breathing, straight man would be. This woman was uniquely sexy, and her molten brown eyes just made her more alluring.

Matt looked over at Eskel and thought about the familiar way that Iga greeted him, making it no secret those two were lovers or at least in some kind of intimate relationship at some point. The witcher only rolled his eyes and smirked, but didn’t seem jealous.

Something must have suddenly occurred to Eskel, because his gaze turned calculating. He looked Matt up and down. It was clearly some kind of evaluation, but Matt didn’t get the feeling it was a sexual one. There was a coldness to that look that made the hair of the back of Matt’s neck prickle.

“Iga,” Eskel said after a minute. “This is Matt. Whether or not he decides to enjoy your company is, of course, up to him.” Eskel paused to raise a knowing eyebrow at Matt. “But if he does, keep in mind that Ciri has an interest in him. Run him through his paces. Make sure he can keep up.”

Blazing heat flooded Matt’s face and his jaw dropped.

“Geralt’s daughter, hmm?” Iga looked Matt up and down. “Still, some practice could be useful. Would hate for her to be disappointed.”

Matt sputtered for a moment, raising his hands as if to ward her off. He glanced around, for what he wasn't sure. Help, maybe. The look Keith and Rich gave him was one of raw envy.

Before he could say anything, he heard a faint, “Come in,” from the room.

Eskel headed straight in. Iga followed, but slowly, dragging her finger down his tie one last time before walking away.

After a second or two, Matt snapped his mouth shut and looked to Keith and Rich. Cautious of being overheard, he stepped closer to them and pitched his voice low.

“No. I’m not going to. And no, neither can any of you. The last thing any of us need is to get involved with Belmont Sr.’s...lady employees.” He raised his eyebrows at them and gave them a look.

“You noticed how she called him her master?” Keith said, the blush slowly dying on his cheeks.

“I did,” Matt said with a grimace.

Belmont Sr. seemed like the definition of Bad News, and as disgusting as it was, Matt wouldn’t put it past him to deal in human trafficking.

He couldn’t imagine his boss being okay with that, but it was also obvious that Trevor would quietly acquiesce to anything his father wanted. The phantom worries of domestic violence came back to haunt him, and Matt thought of that scar on Trevor’s chest. Then he thought about the vaguely cultish vibes he was getting from Eskel and Geralt, and how Belmont Sr. easily took control of any given situation.

Iga looked like she was willing, but looks could be deceiving.

“I’ll try to talk to her if I can,” Matt said finally. “In the meantime, hands off. Spread the word.”

“Yes, sir,” Keith nodded.
Alucard looked up from shaking off his jacket, and blinked in surprise at Iga entering the room just behind Eskel.

“Iga?” he asked, only registering her skintight dress after a few moments.

Iga caught his eye and inclined her head, enough to show respect but shallow enough to show her dislike. Alucard was more than aware that most of the castle denizens hated him more or less. The higher ones, like Iga, were better than others at hiding their distaste.

“Steward sent me,” she said, looking around the room. Her eyes lit up on Geralt in all his patchwork glory on the bed. “Geralt. You look awful.”

“I’m aware,” Geralt said ruefully. It was true, he still looked like hell. His skin was pale and exhaustion still dragged at him. But the bandages were off of the side of his face—the cuts there were shallow and had healed relatively quickly—and most of the other damage was covered by his blankets.

“What does Orlaith need?” Alucard asked, getting the conversation back on track. Whatever the reason for Iga being here, it had to be desperately urgent for Orlaith to ask Alucard for help.

She turned to give him a serious look. “Master has fallen asleep. He is locked in his room, and none can reach him, nor can we feed on his power. Orlaith has been weakened. Soon she will be unable to contain the castle inhabitants. You must come and wake him.”

Each word fell like a hammer to Alucard’s heart. What had his father done? What could possibly drained him into so deep a sleep that his blood and power no longer sustained the castle’s day to day needs?

“Are his power levels that low?” he asked, worried.

“He’s cut off from us,” Iga said. “His power is there, it’s simply inaccessible.”

Before he could answer, Matt walked in. Alucard stared at him for a moment, his thoughts flying through his head a mile a minute.

“Matt,” he said. “We need to move Geralt to the tower, as quickly as can be done. Contact John and make it happen.”

“Yes, sir.” Matt turned right around and left. John was already working on getting things set up, but they hadn’t planned on actually moving until later in the day, or perhaps the next morning.

But now they couldn’t afford to wait. Alucard had to go, and he couldn’t leave Geralt in as vulnerable a place as the hospital. The tower would be safer.

Still, Alucard hated to leave him.

“We’re moving?” Eskel murmured.

“Yes.” Alucard looked at Geralt. “I need you safe before I can go. Father would want that, too.” He flexed his fingers in frustration.

“I can open the portal for you,” Geralt said trying to pull himself up into a sitting position. Eskel was by his side in a heartbeat, flattening him down not very gently and keeping him flat by
pressing his hand to Geralt’s shoulder.

“Easy there,” Eskel chided. “Don’t be so eager, you’ll bust a stitch.”

Geralt looked at him sourly, but stayed still.

“Once we get to the tower, I’ll take you up on that offer,” Alucard said softly. “You will stay in bed, though.” He gave Geralt a pointed look.

It almost seemed like Geralt would argue, but in the end he just frowned. Worry etched his forehead and he looked over to Iga.

“What happened to him?” Geralt asked.

“I don’t know much,” Iga said with a shrug. “Everybody got ordered into lockdown when the move started. Parts of the castle were supposed to be destroyed so most of us were ordered to specific areas. After the move, we all got put to sleep. Only some of the guards were left awake.”

“Move?” Geralt, Eskel, and Alucard said at the same time.

Iga looked at them, looking surprised.

“I thought you knew.”

“Apparently not,” Eskel cut in. “Care to explain for us?”

“Master moved the Castle from its home to your world.” She pointed to Eskel and Geralt. “He even managed to fit it all around your tiny keep,” she added, as if that last bit of news was the most important bit.

Alucard dropped his jaw, and he was not the only one.

“The isn’t enough space for a castle as big as this whole city,” Eskel said, gesturing to the Castlevania city all around them.

“There is now,” Iga said with a smirk. “Things got imported.”

“Gods,” Geralt whispered, his eyes as round as saucers.

Alucard blinked hard. He knew it was possible to move the castle. After all, it had separated from what eventually became Castlevania City. But he was still boggled by the fact that his Father had done it. The amount of power required to move all of that mass alone was staggering.

But this was his Father. There was nothing beyond Dracula’s reach, if he desired it.

Now was not the time to worry about it. They needed to be at the tower yesterday.

“That explains why I couldn’t reach the castle when I tried earlier. That and the wards he no doubt has on,” Alucard mused out loud, all while frantically thinking up contingency plans.

Iga nodded.

“Eskel, I will need you to stay here with Geralt. John will take care of the business side. I will give control of the guards to you. Iga, would you stay here as well, to help keep Geralt safe and help ease the way?”
Succubi had their own ways of influencing people. Their beauty and desirability made them very persuasive, and nobody expected a woman as pretty as Iga to be as dangerous as she was.

“It would be a pleasure,” Iga said, smirking towards Eskel. “Better by far than being locked up with everyone else.”

“Thank you,” Alucard said, relieved to have at least one more person watching Geralt.

After that, everyone was involved in a flurry of activity.

Doctors looked over Geralt again while the nurses efficiently unhooked him from various devices and then hooked him to different, smaller ones. Some of them got put on the bed with Geralt, and others were hooked onto the bed frame.

Every second it took made Alucard itch, but he kept his impatience hidden as much as he could.

Several of Geralt’s regular nurses would be joining them at the tower, as well as his primary doctor, Dr. Miller. There were still staples and stitches that needed to come out and x-rays that needed to be done, but the equipment needed would be easy enough to obtain and set up in the personal levels of the tower. John was already working on it, organizing all the various things that would be needed to speed along Geralt’s recovery.

Within a couple of hours, Geralt was ready for travel. Alucard’s security cleared their way to one of the sub basements, and from there they installed Geralt, Alucard, and Eskel into an ambulance. Just in case anyone was watching, Alucard’s private helicopter was on the roof, waiting to take off at a different time. A red herring for any who might seek to cause them mischief.

Going to the tower by car rather than air was not so coincidentally more convenient for Alucard as well, though he didn’t mention it. It was still daylight out, and being ensconced in the dark, windowless back of an ambulance was the perfect way for him to stay out of the damaging sunlight.

This type of subterfuge was old hat to Alucard by now. Everyone in Alucard’s employ was well aware how much he liked to avoid interacting with, well, basically anyone. Most of the public likely thought that he flew everywhere, given how often his chopper was in the air. But more often than not Alucard simply had a nondescript luxury car for transport.

The transfer went smoothly, much to Alucard’s vast relief. By the end of it Geralt was looking fairly peaked. For all his talk, he was still severely wounded and his energy waned fast. Alucard saw him drift off for a couple of minutes while in transit, lulled to sleep by the rocking of the ambulance.

The tower itself was much easier to navigate. There was a private elevator that went straight from the underground parking lot up to the private levels of the tower. Even though it was on the large side, it still felt crowded with Geralt’s bed, Alucard, Eskel, Iga and the nurses plus the doctor all in it. Alucard was relieved to be out of the confined space and into the huge corridors of his private suite.

He’d changed a lot of the interior of the tower since he took over. The original marble floors, grand golden statues, and cold lighting were not at all his style. Instead of the ultra modern, glass and metal furniture, he had warm wood and soft carpets that reduced the echo. He also preferred warm, yellow light to the sharp blue or green lights Zobek had installed. The large garish gold statues had been removed. Some were replaced with subtler arts wrought in silver or blown glass, but many places were simply left empty; the open space suited Alucard’s taste much better.
They took Geralt to Alucard’s private rooms there. John had arranged for the additional staff to stay in the level below that, but Alucard knew that being in a bed that carried his scent would set Geralt at ease better than any other comfort. It also stroked something primal inside of him to see Geralt wrapped up in his blankets, his scent. Marked in a way too subtle for most of the humans to understand. Iga and Eskel saw it. They knew the meaning behind the gesture. From the brief look on Matt’s face, he suspected something as well, though he quickly schooled the expression away.

While the nurses and doctor settled Geralt into the bed, Alucard took a moment aside to talk with John, Matt, Eskel, and Iga.

“Something unexpected has come up with my Father,” he said to John and Matt. They both straightened up, alarm bright in their features. “I must leave. Immediately. John, please handle the business affairs as you normally would. Continue on with that which we have discussed already.” John nodded, already typing furiously onto his phone. He was a good employee, and Alucard definitely needed to reward him for his excellent work during this whole incident.

Alucard turned to look at Matt. This next part would be slightly trickier.

“I can have a security detail ready in under an hour,” Matt said.

“Thank you, but there is no need.” Alucard could see Matt opening his mouth to protest. That man was truly loyal and very professional about his job. “My Father’s people will handle my transportation. Until I return, please listen to Eskel’s orders on how to keep Geralt safe.”

“Sir,” Matt started, but then snapped his mouth shut with an unhappy frown.

“Cheer up,” Eskel said. “Unlike Geralt, I’m the reasonable one.”

The flat, unimpressed look Matt gave him made Alucard want to snicker, but he kept it to himself. “Eskel, please take Matt’s expertise into account. He knows this city well. You’ll have the final say on what goes, but remember that Matt and his people are very adept at dealing with the threats of Castlevania City.”

That seemed to mollify Matt somewhat, but he still gritted his teeth. After this trying time, Matt and his people probably deserved a bonus of some kind, too. It was true that Eskel was the reasonable one between him and Geralt, but that didn’t mean he was reasonable compared to regular humans.

With that in mind, Alucard gave Eskel a look. “Eskel, please don’t break my people or my tower. I need both for later.”

“What trouble can we get into with Geralt confined to the bed?” Eskel said, spreading his arms.

“I could think of a few things,” Iga murmured with a laugh.

Alucard just stared at Eskel, unimpressed. “You talk as if I don’t know either of you.”

“I promise to be good,” Eskel said finally, switching his glare from Iga to Alucard.

“I’m sure my father will be pleased to hear that,” Alucard nodded, and a light touch of pink dusted Eskel’s ears. “Iga, as usual, make sure to look at unthreatening as possible. You can spend time with my people if you wish, but not while they are on duty.” The last bit seemed to cheer the succubus up a lot and she even gave him a bit of an honest smile before she remembered she didn’t like him. She nodded her acquiescence. Like it or not, she would obey.
There was one last thing. “Matt, I will need you and your people to clear the floor for a few hours.”

He knew it drove his security mad, not knowing how he left the Tower every time or how he came back. He gave the same order always, to clear the floor. After that it was easy. There was a specially prepared room in the center of this floor, one where Zobek opened his warded portals. That was where the wolf portal would open, too, when Geralt called it.

Before whatever Dracula did to move the castle, Alucard was able to open his own portal in that room, too. That pathway was closed now. He would need Geralt to open the way.

While they waited for the nurses and doctor to finish up, John peppered Alucard with a few last minute questions. Matt had already left to go organize his staff. Whatever irritation he felt at Alucard’s orders, he kept it reasonably well hidden. By now, he was used to dealing with Alucard’s occasional eccentricities, so hopefully that tempered his irritation. Still, Alucard paid him and his people to put up with whatever he needed of them. It was good that Matt could keep his calm under such circumstances. He’d probably need it.

Soon enough, the rest of the regular humans had departed, and Alucard was free to go sit at Geralt’s bedside. Perhaps sensing that a private goodbye was in order, Eskel nodded to Iga, and the two of them left as well.

Once the door was closed and they were alone in the room, Geralt’s eyes fixed on him, expectantly.

Alucard summoned his armor. He didn’t have quite as much talent at doing it in the most flashy way possible, as his Father was wont to, but he tried his best. He knew how much Geralt liked Dracula’s ease with summoning and discarding his clothes.

His own power came in tendrils of light. The small streams curled around his arms and legs, eating away his suit and forming the well known spikes and plates of his armored boots and clawed gauntlets. His coat and pants and belts came to life around him with barely a sound as his mundane clothes of Castlevania City disappeared.

Little curls of light crawled up his neck, freed his hair from the tight braid it was in, and sent it floating down to his shoulders. With a quick blink and a touch of power, he dissolved the contacts in his eyes. Normally he would have simply taken them out, but while Geralt was there watching him, Alucard wanted the show to be as impressive as possible.

Once everything was in place, he rolled his shoulders, settling the weight of his coat better on him. He loved it; it felt so much better than any suit in Castlevania ever did.

From the naked appreciation in Geralt’s gaze, he deeply loved the extra effort. He looked Alucard up and down, tensing and leaning forward the tiniest bit.

“Pretty wolf.” Geralt’s voice was low and harsh, and Alucard knew that he was thinking of all the things he wanted to do. All the things he wasn’t allowed to do.

“Did you like the show?” Alucard asked, knowing he shouldn’t tease but not quite managing to stop himself.

“Very much. So very much.” The look Geralt gave him was a mix of hunger, pride, and longing all wrapped up together. “It’s good to see you like this.” He smirked ruefully. “Even if I can’t do anything about it.”

Geralt held up a hand to him. He didn’t lift it far, but the movement was sure, without a hint of
trembling. He was getting better. Far slower than Alucard wanted, but faster than he had any right to hope for.

Ever careful of his clawed gauntlets, Alucard sat on the edge of the bed and cradled Geralt’s hand in his own.

“How bad do you think it is?” Geralt asked after a moment.

“It’s hard to say. I don’t know what might have happened to cut my Father off from the castle. As you have seen, he and it are very much living in symbiosis.” Alucard absently trailed the smooth top of one claw over Geralt’s hand as he spoke, relishing the ability to touch Geralt however he wanted now that there was no audience. The fact that it brought a small smile to Geralt’s face was an added bonus.

“So do you think it’ll be dangerous?”

Alucard hesitated. The castle seemed mostly benign towards Geralt; it even seemed to like him at times. It definitely didn’t react that way towards Alucard. And for all its beauty, the castle could be an incredibly dangerous place.

“If my Father really is asleep, deeply enough to forget about the castle, it’s very possible the castle might try to kill me while he isn’t looking.”

Geralt’s hand squeezed his tightly for a moment as he sucked in a breath.

“Don’t hesitate,” Geralt said. “Whatever you see there, don’t hesitate.”

“I won’t,” Alucard promised. “I’ve fought my way through the castle before. I’ll find him and wake him.” He paused, savoring the sight of Geralt wrapped up in his bed. “Do you still want my coat to keep you company?”

He would understand if Geralt said yes. More than once Alucard would have enjoyed having a token of Dracula to hold close while he was here, a world away. Geralt, too, for that matter.

Geralt shook his head.

“You will need all the edge you can get in that place.” Geralt shifted his grip, gently pulling Alucard lower. “I wouldn’t be able to live with myself if I sent you into battle without proper gear and something happened to you.”

There were no reassurances that Alucard could offer, not and stay truthful. He might very well get hurt, perhaps badly. Alucard wanted to believe that whatever happened he would be more than capable of dealing with, but life was seldom so simple.

In the end, he just leaned down to give Geralt a soft kiss.

Geralt strained up to follow the kiss as Alucard backed away but grimaced and fell down into the bed with a huff.

“I don’t know what’s worse. Getting hurt or the goddamn recovery,” he growled.

Alucard smiled, tracing the tips of his clawed gauntlets over Geralt’s jaw in a way similar to what he saw his Father do. It caused a shiver to break over Geralt’s body and his grumpiness seemed to be washed away with it. He tilted his face into the claws.
“I will do all that I can to return to you,” Alucard said softly.

“You better,” Geralt playfully growled back. Then his expression turned serious. “Bring Dracula back to us.”

Alucard pulled the wolf medallion from Geralt’s pile of remaining gear, now settled in a drawer next to the bed, and passed it to Geralt.

Geralt ran his fingers across the polished flat surface of it, tracing around the wolf head design. The activation didn’t require any spoken component despite Geralt’s insistence on asking the wolf to open a portal; it only needed the will of the one using it.

“Open the way, please. Take Alucard to his father,” Geralt whispered softly to it. Alucard felt something twist and shift as the portal opened elsewhere on the floor.

A loud, lonely wolf howl echoed through the halls, and the door to the bedroom nudged open. The Wolf poked its head through, its ears perked up curiously.

“He must really like you,” Alucard said as he walked over to touch the Wolf. He felt a tingle in his fingers and a tug in his chest when his hand touched the snow white fur. There was a connection between him and the Wolf, something he didn't quite understand. Something his mother did.

“What makes you say that?” Geralt asked.

“He usually doesn't leave the portal spot.” Alucard scratched behind one stiff ear before he pulled his hand back. “But he came for you.”

That made Geralt smile at them both. “Thank you, Wolf,” he said with a respectful nod. “Be safe. Both of you.”

Alucard looked back to Geralt one last time, and then followed the Wolf out the door.

Flanking the hall on the other side were Iga and Eskel. Before he could walk by, Eskel stopped him with a hand on his arm.

“Here,” Eskel said, handing him a small potion bottle. Red liquid sloshed inside and a tiny bird symbol was carved into the wax seal. “Swallow. Just in case.”

“Eskel, this likely won’t work on me,” Alucard said softly. It was a kind thought, but a waste. He wasn’t human. The regeneration effects of the Swallow wouldn’t do anything for him.

But Eskel just shrugged, and kept pressing the bottle towards him. “Just in case. You can give it back to me if you don’t need it.”

Alucard pocketed the small bottle. It couldn't hurt to take it with him.

“Try to keep him in bed while I’m gone,” Alucard murmured, knowing how hard this task was going to be.

“Take care of yourself. Geralt is in safe hands here.”

He would. He would find his father, wake him up, and come back here as soon as possible.

As always, the Wolf waited patiently for him to follow. As soon as Alucard started moving towards it, it walked ahead, leading him down the hall and towards the room where Alucard knew the portal waited.
Dark energy filled the room, concentrating at the place where the portal lay open. To human eyes, it would look like a room shrouded in shadow with a particularly black spot in one area. Alucard could sense the rift there, and he could feel the castle reaching out to him. Hungry.

He followed the Wolf into that black rift, and the world fell away.

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Chapter 10

When Alucard stepped out of the wolf portal and into Dracula’s castle, the portal room there looked the same way it always did. The walls and floor were made of large, grey slabs of stone. It was a relatively plain room, circular with a second story balcony that wrapped the whole way around. Massive doors lined the walls on both stories, all of them shut. A few red and black banners sporting Dracula’s signature dragon insignia hung from the balustrade, trailing down nearly to the floor. There were a couple of benches scattered around on the lower floor where Alucard stood, as well as a wooden chest or two.

In the center of the room, engraved into the stone floor, was the image of a wolf’s head. The same image on the medallion that acted as Geralt’s key to the castle.

The room held no guards. This wasn’t unusual, but there was an itch at the edge of Alucard’s senses telling him that there were demons waiting in shadows. Watching.

Every door looked the same. The castle itself was a living thing, and it very much didn’t like him. Alucard didn’t even try to look for the correct door manually; the castle would change what the door led to anyways.

Instead, he lifted his hand and concentrated, pouring power into his palm to form the familiar shape of a tiny bird. A locator spell.

The swallow shot up into the air. Its long tail trailed motes of light as it flew a tight circle around him, chirping in greeting. Then it separated from him and headed for one of the doors on the floor above him.

No stairs lead to the second story. There were spots where the balcony lay crumbling, though; the evidence of previous battles still not fixed. He found a likely spot, and leaped up, changing his form mid movement into that of a massive white wolf. His paws touched the floor lightly, claws clicking on the polished floor. Then he leaped again, straight through the doorway that his spell-bird went through.

As soon as he was through, he had to jerk to a sudden stop. In his shock he turned into his human form, just to make sure that he really was seeing what he thought he was seeing.

The answer was yes.

There really was a whole forest on the other side of the door, and not just the scattered trees and statuary that could be found in the Old God’s garden. He looked up, disbelieving, at the full moon above the canopy and the brightly shining stars that peeked through the dark green leaves.

The trees around him were old and big, with trunks wide enough he wouldn't be able to circle them with his arms. The leaves were familiar looking, six pronged and a little rough to touch. Those
were the kind of trees he was raised with. He’d never really seen them in modern times.

Dry leaves crunched under his feet and his boots sank down into the soil, filling the air with the scent of damp earth and decomposing greenery so unique to forests.

He turned back, but the door he’d come through was gone. Also not unusual for the castle, but still no less annoying. The magic swallow he followed was circling above his head, chirping in a confused manner. The bird had lost the trail and was no longer capable of tracking Dracula. Alucard withheld a sigh of frustration and dismissed the spell, making the little glowing bird disappear. At least it gave him a starting direction.

The forest was unusually quiet, and after a moment, Alucard understood why. Off in the distance he heard the sound of fighting, the grunts and rips of a small scuffle. No doubt the normal night creatures were all hidden away. Assuming anything in Dracula’s castle could be considered normal.

For lack of anything better to do, he headed towards the sound of the fight. He moved quickly but took care to be cautious and silent. The demons of Dracula’s castle sometimes enjoyed fighting amongst themselves, and it would do him no good to stumble into something he didn’t need to be involved in. But just seeing what type of creature lived here might help him figure out where he was.

Or when.

Time wasn’t always a straightforward thing in this place. The scent of the forest played havoc with his memory as he moved.

The fight was finishing just as he stepped out from around a large tree. A massive beast swayed in the air only to crash to the ground with a branch-rattling thump. It didn’t look like anything Alucard had ever encountered. It was twice the size of a warg, and had a thick, gray hide bristling with sparse, coarse hair. Squat, dirty horns thrust up from what was left of its head and back, and its solid black eyes were already clouding over. Deep lacerations covered its whole body, and the leaves in the small clearing were covered in gore. The scent of blood covered the too familiar scent of the forest, paradoxically letting Alucard breathe easier.

Over the beast stood a human, a man in scarlet and gold armor. Alucard could hear how his heart pounded from effort and the pulse of his labored breaths. The scent of his sweat ghosted through the windless forest. It was oddly familiar, but at the same time Alucard was sure that he’d never met this man before.

The make of his armor reminded Alucard of the Brotherhood, because rather than being a regular suit of full plate, the gold armored plates were woven into a heavy red coat. It looked as decorative as it was functional. Not unlike what both Alucard and Dracula wore, actually.

The man had a brown hood up over his head and a heavy combat cross in his hand. It had been a very long time since Alucard had last seen a functional Combat Cross, much less one so similar to what Alucard was trained with.

As he watched, the hooked chain slithered back into the cross, settling into place with a clang.

“Who goes there?” the man asked, voice low and quiet. The sound of the accent sent cold shivers down Alucard’s spine. That was his Father's accent. The voice was similar, too, but the way the words were spoken was downright alien. They were quiet. Almost neutral.
“Just a traveler passing through. I mean you no ill will,” Alucard replied, though he was hesitant to step into the clearing. The shadows of the forest would hide him a little bit, but his unearthly nature was hard to miss. Especially for a warrior like this one. Alucard didn’t have time for a brawl, not when his task was so urgent.

“Come out into the light,” the warrior said. “I have no wish to fight unnecessary battles, but I will not trust a voice in the dark.”

Alucard took a breath and debated. If he ran, no doubt he’d be followed. If he showed himself, this warrior might attack anyways. A man with a combat cross would not look kindly on a vampire. But so far he seemed at least a little willing to talk. Perhaps he’d know where they were.

Silent as ever, Alucard stepped into the moonlit clearing. He knew well how he must look, with his armored coat, wild white hair, and inhuman gold and black eyes. Clawed gauntlets, plate greaves, and Crissaegrim belted to his side, too. There could be no mistaking he was an inhuman fighter, and a dangerous one at that.

Now that he’d stepped closer, he could see the man’s warm brown hair, obviously growing out of a shorter cut. There were tendrils falling over his face, hiding his eyes from view. He looked young. And big. He wasn’t quite as tall as Alucard, but the breadth of his shoulders and the way the coat strained against his chest spoke clearly of his sheer power. He had an armored gauntlet on his right hand; the item steeped in so much magical energy that Alucard could smell it from here.

He stepped closer to Alucard and pulled his hood completely off, shaking his messy hair out of his eyes.

Alucard sucked in a breath, finally recognizing the man.

For all the differences, the coloring, the size, the way he spoke, the fact that this person was clearly still alive and human---it was Dracula. Or, as Alucard was slowly starting to suspect, the man he was before he was turned into a vampire.

“I am Gabriel Belmont,” the man said in that low, quiet voice that was so shocking to Alucard. “Knight of the Brotherhood of Light.” There was clear pride in the title, even the man’s stance shifting slightly to reflect it. Dracula always said the Brotherhood’s name like other people vomited, full of disgust and rage. This man was proud to be part of it.

“My name is Alucard,” he managed to say despite his shock. He was still reeling from the dichotomy of what was in front of his eyes and what he knew should be there instead.

“And what is a vampire doing out in these woods?” There was suspicion in Gabriel's voice, but curiosity too.

Despite the fact that Alucard knew that Gabriel and Dracula were one and the same, he found he couldn’t bring himself to call the man in front of him Dracula, not even in the privacy of his own thoughts. Gabriel was too…light, almost. Unburdened, perhaps. The rage and belligerent confidence that so defined Dracula was absent in Gabriel. Until that moment, Alucard had not realized just how much it was a constant in every aspect of how Dracula held himself.

The contrast was so stark that it took him a moment to realize he had yet to answer the question.

“I’m looking for someone dear to me.” Alucard swallowed, looking at the familiar yet foreign face. He found himself noting that, for all his power, Dracula was much leaner than his human self. “He’s lost,” he said, realizing that fact with painful accuracy.
Where Dracula might have scoffed or sneered, Gabriel just furrowed his brow in thought.

“I’m not sure I believe you,” Gabriel said with a small frown.

“I swear to you on my sword, Crissaegrim, I mean no harm to any good creature.” Those words echoed the vow he took centuries ago to protect all human life, and they still held true. “Someone I love is missing and...” He swallowed hard, looking Gabriel up and down. “And I don’t know how to get him back.”

Something flashed over Gabriel’s face; pain and anguish, with just a hint of the anger that was such a big part of Dracula.

“I know…” Gabriel started, but he checked himself, stopping what he was going to say. “I wish you luck.”

He’d meant to say that he knew how it felt to lose someone you love, Alucard realized. His face held quiet torment but without the rage and the burning vengeance was so present in Dracula. It was as disturbing as it was different.

This couldn’t be real. But Alucard knew better than most that the castle could make dreams and fantasy into reality. His bird brought him to Gabriel for a reason. Something important was going on here.

“What are you doing here, in this forest?” Alucard asked. He stepped a little closer but made sure that his hands were kept away from his sword.

“I’m on a mission to kill the Lord of the Vampires,” Gabriel said. As he spoke, he turned back towards the fallen beast and bent down to retrieve what looked like silver daggers from the corpse. He wiped them on the monster’s fur and then sheathed them at his belt.

“The Lord of Vampires?” Alucard tried to think back to who that used to be. Perhaps Gabriel was hunting down himself in the form of Dracula?

“Yes,” Gabriel said shortly.

Alucard watched him strap his daggers to his belt and set his gear to rights. It was obvious that he was preparing to leave the clearing. Just beyond the fallen beast, the barest of a trail ran between the trees.

“May I travel with you a while?” Alucard asked, suddenly uneasy about letting Gabriel out of his sight. “These woods are dangerous, and two together might fair better than one alone.”

“I will kill any of your kind that attacks me,” Gabriel said, not looking at Alucard.

This sentiment was another shock. Dracula would rather kill enemies preemptively; he didn’t care too much about collateral damage, either. Gabriel was willing to give even a vampire the benefit of the doubt, letting it pass by him if it didn’t attack.

That didn’t fit with what Alucard had been told about the great warrior of the Brotherhood of Light. Gabriel was said to be unbending. A terror for any dark creature. Alucard had been taught from a very young age to believe that Gabriel Belmont would kill any and all creatures of the dark he met, no matter their crimes or lack of them. He was the Light’s ultimate weapon of destruction.

“I hold little love for any creature ruled by darkness and thirst. Should you turn on me, I will kill you,” Gabriel added solemnly.
Alucard lived with the knowledge that Dracula was capable of killing him, but he didn’t truly expect it, not even in a fit of temper. He only realized that fact now as he heard Gabriel issue the threat. While Gabriel seemed to be willing to let Alucard live as long as things stayed peaceful, he obviously didn’t have any qualms about killing him should Alucard prove to be a danger.

“Why do you want to kill the Lord of Vampires?” Alucard asked quietly, falling into step with the warrior of old. He tried to place where in the past Dracula had regressed to.

“He has something I need,” Gabriel said.

Alucard noticed a cut on his arm, probably the result of the fight, but Gabriel neither seemed to notice or care. The wound was healing, but too fast for a normal human. Alucard could nearly smell the magic on the wound, the power of light was almost tangible with how quickly it knitted the flesh together.

He’d always known that Dracula had been powerful in both Light and Shadow magic. Even after he’d changed into a vampire, Dracula could still use both Light and Holy spells despite being an undead creature. He simply refused to. He abhorred anything connected with the Light.

It was bizarre to see him as a human, using advanced magic as easily as breathing. As they walked together, Gabriel stayed focused on studying their surroundings, probably listening for possible approaching enemies. If he was aware that Alucard was watching him, he was ignoring it. Alucard realized that Gabriel wasn’t even truly aware that he was using the Light to heal himself. Magic that few people ever managed to master, Gabriel used with so much ease that he wasn’t even aware he was doing it.

How it did feel for Dracula to reject that part of himself, to cut out something so deeply entrenched in his mind and soul? The more he thought about it, the more Alucard realized that it must have been agony.

Then Alucard remembered. When Gabriel was alive, the Lord of Vampires was Carmilla. A she, not a he. Unease filled him at the thought that, in a way, perhaps Gabriel wanted to kill Dracula, wanted to kill himself, rather than simply relive the past. That idea was quickly masked as much as possible. He dare not let any of it show to Gabriel.

“Tell me of your lost loved one,” Gabriel said suddenly, startling Alucard out of his reverie.

It wasn’t as straightforward a question as it seemed at first glance. Should he say he was looking for his Father, thus denying any romantic connection? Or should he say he looked for a lover, and hide the fact the lover was his Father? How much of Dracula listened through Gabriel’s ears?

He took a moment to think his answer over. As they walked farther away from the beast’s body, the natural nighttime sounds of the forest picked up; little chirps of insects and the soft call of night birds slowly filled the air. It was oddly peaceful.

“We fought…for a very long time. He’d been hurt so very badly that he was lashing out, angry at all the world.” A paltry description for the destruction that Dracula brought down on the world and humanity, but in essence true. “Eventually we came to an accord, and he—” Alucard had to swallow hard again. “He gave up all hope of peace in order to destroy a greater evil. He thinks himself a monster, but there is more compassion and love in him than I have seen in many humans.”

Gabriel looked at him out of the corner of his eye, but didn’t offer an opinion. Perhaps Dracula was listening through Gabriel’s ears.
“He is more balanced now,” Alucard continued. “Though still temperamental. Something happened, though. He and I…we both do not open our hearts easily. But against all expectation, we did. We found happiness with each other. And then with another, who brought back joy to our lives. But nothing is easy, and fate is cruel. Our third was nearly killed. We are both struggling to cope with that.”

“Third?” Gabriel asked, sounding shocked. He even looked over at Alucard, pausing in his punishing pace forward.

His eyes were green, Alucard realized. The color shocked him, though it shouldn't have. It looked so alien in that familiar face.

Alucard slowed to stand next to him, tilting his head curiously. “This surprises you?”

Gabriel opened his mouth and closed it, obviously lost for words.

“You need not be shy,” Alucard said softly. “I will not judge you for your thoughts. After all, I am already a monstrous creature, am I not? Certainly I have no righteousness to stand on, no moral high ground I can claim. I wouldn’t blame you for thinking the worst of me. But I am curious what part…surprises you so.”

He had to wonder, was it the fact that Alucard admitted to a relationship with not just one, but two other men? Something the Church would have been quick to condemn. Or was it something half remembered from Dracula.

“I know…some men…prefer the company of men,” Gabriel said haltingly, still obviously off kilter. “But…why three of you?”

A fair question. One Alucard had asked himself more than once, in fact. He struggled for a moment to find the essence of the truth of their situation.

“Because we love each other,” he said finally. “In different ways, perhaps. But each of us tempers the others. I think we are better…people when we are together. We certainly are happier. There is not so much love in our lives that we would squander this chance at it, simply because it is different than what we expected.”

“There is nobody like that for me. Not anymore,” Gabriel said harshly, turning away and resuming his fast paced walk.

Alucard followed behind, his heart aching. They walked in silence for a minute or two, until he said, “I’m sorry for your loss. I’d ease your pain if I could.”

For a moment he feared he’d overstepped. Dracula was prickly at the best of times, and Gabriel was at least some reflection of him. But Alucard couldn’t see him suffer without at least offering something. He couldn’t bear it.

“I will hunt down those responsible,” Gabriel growled, low and deep. “There will be no mercy for them.”

There was a bit of Dracula peeking out from behind Gabriel’s eyes. That harshness was something Alucard was long familiar with. He nodded, confident that Gabriel would sense the movement, even if the forest was too dark to properly see it.

They had been walking for a while now, and Gabriel was fresh from a fight. Alucard eyed the cut on Gabriel’s arm---more than halfway healed already---and the way his breath misted in the cold
air, and thought that he looked tired.

“It’s late, don’t you want to rest a bit? I can keep watch,” he offered.

Gabriel shook his head.

“Sleep is not a friend of mine.”

The irony of that statement wasn’t lost on Alucard, considering he was here specifically because Dracula had slipped into too deep a slumber. It was also disturbing, knowing even as a human his father couldn't get any respite, not even in sleep.

“Here.” Gabriel motioned ahead of them, his voice a low growl in the night air. “The path up to the castle lies ahead.”

They quickened their pace, slipping in between the trunks of two massive dead trees.

As Alucard stepped through, the woods in front of him changed. No longer were they headed through a dense forest. Instead, the ruins of an old structure unfolded around him. Fallen, worn stone blocks and half crumbled walls stretched out in between scattered, withered trees. A quick look behind him showed that the forest behind had changed to match.

There was no way they’d already reached the castle that Gabriel sought, and Alucard was certain they’d been walking through a dense forest to get here. But as he spun in place, tracking the fallen stone around him, the forest behind him was gone. All that remained was the ancient stones and a few dead trees.

Gabriel was gone, too.

Creeping anxiety threaded up Alucard’s spine as he turned again and headed into the ruins. This was where Gabriel had led him, so there was something here he needed to see.

As he stepped forward, he saw Gabriel sitting on the ground, propped up against a piece of crumbled wall. His head was low to his chest and it was obvious he was sleeping, dreaming. His fingers twitched in agitation. As Alucard walked closer, he became peripherally aware of more structures behind him. What first seemed like just a few half walls became raised stone platforms and partially crumbled pillars of white stone.

“Gabriel,” he called softly, wishing to wake him up before nightmares took too deep a hold of him. “Wake up.”

Gabriel didn't hear him, though. He kept dreaming, body twitching more violently, until he gave a sharp jerk and startled away with a loud, “No!”

“Gabriel,” Alucard called, crouching in front of him, but Gabriel looked right through him.

His eyes were so green and so lost; that look hurt something deep inside of Alucard. This man was so removed from what Alucard imagined his Father to be when he was still human. It kept throwing him off. Gabriel Belmont was supposed to be larger than life, an inexhaustible and unconquerable warrior. Not this tormented man so obviously hanging to his sanity by the skin of his teeth.

Another figure stepped out, dressed in long and ragged tunic. He was hunched over, body too massive to be human, and he had long hair that couldn’t quite obscure his inhuman features. Alucard stared at the long face and the curved horns and realized he knew that visage. He’d seen it
on more than one painting in the castle.

It was Pan. One of the Old Gods.

“Do not let the Darkness possess you, Gabriel,” Pan said, pulling Gabriel’s attention to him immediately. Neither Pan nor Gabriel paid Alucard any mind. It was as if Alucard wasn’t even there.

Alucard took a step back. Whatever was going on here was just a figment of the castle’s power. Or perhaps of Dracula’s sleeping mind.

“You must remove the gauntlet from the knight,” Pan said, opening his arms towards Gabriel, entreating him. “It is a key and the moment will come when you will be in great need of it.”

Gabriel stood up and shook his head. “No. I will have to continue without it. I will not harm them.”

Them?

Alucard frowned in confusion. He didn’t see anyone else in the ruins. Not that he had had time to really look around, but still.

“He will,” a whispered voice said behind him. Alucard spun in place.

Another version of Gabriel stood there. His face was sunken and bloody, and his armor a torn, ragged mess. The green of his eyes was so bright that they looked feverish in the dim light. He wasn’t looking at Alucard at all. Instead, he stood frozen staring at Pan and his other self with wide, lost eyes.

“He will,” this wrecked version of Gabriel said again. “I will. I killed them. I kill everything I touch.”

“No.” Alucard stepped forward and shook his head fiercely. “That’s not true.”

“But it is?” One ragged, bone thin hand pointed back towards the scene in front of them.

“I am afraid it is far too late for that…” Pan’s voice was low and apologetic. He waved towards a stone slab off to the side.

On it was the corpse of a young woman, stabbed through the heart by a silver dagger. Just like the ones Alucard saw Gabriel take out of the beast in the forest.

The version of Gabriel that Pan was speaking to looked on in horror. He reached out to touch the body, but before he made contact, he stopped just inches away to stare at his hands.

“No,” he said, anguish and disbelief twisting in his voice. He dropped to his knees there, still staring at his hands like they’d betrayed him. “No, no, no…”

“Yes,” the wrecked Gabriel whispered behind Alucard. “Always yes. Every time. Ever person. And they. All. Knew.” He spat out the last word, and rage twisted his features. His eyes were all but glowing with the force of the emotions churning inside of him. “They knew and they let it happen. They made it happen.”

Then he looked at Alucard. This whole time, Alucard had been hoping that his Father would recognize him. But now that Gabriel did, it was worse than if he hadn’t. His eyes held so much sorrow, so much resignation. There was bitter acceptance there, the internalized knowledge that no
matter what he did or how hard he fought, he would always end up betrayed. It hurt so much to see that acceptance, that awareness and obvious willingness to take on whatever would happen. It was just as disturbing as the rage of before.

“You knew, too.”

The scenery shifted again. The shapes and figures around them changed between one heartbeat and the next.

This new room, Alucard knew all too well. He’d fought Dracula here, the first time. When Alucard was still human, still Trevor Belmont, Knight of the Brotherhood.

The walls of the massive grey room were lined with large statues, and off to one side was the Mirror of Fate. Crumbling stone and broken glass from the walls and windows littered the floor, and in the middle lay his own bloody body.

“...Father,” the image of his human self whispered out. His last word before dying.

A strange sense of dissonance raced through him as he looked at his human self. He’d been a warm man, once, with long dark brown hair. It wasn’t quite the shade of Gabriel’s, it wasn’t quite as red, but now that he’d seen what his Father looked like as a human, he could see some coloring similarities. Undeath had worn away at him, made him thinner and harder. Much like Dracula, now that he thought of it. As a young knight, he’d worn brilliant green and silver, adorned with bright shining plate armor sewn into his heavy coat, just as Gabriel’s coat was.

And here he was. The end of that human life, bleeding out on the floor.

He’d been raised as a weapon against evil. He’d fought and bled and suffered to get to this point. Just to get to the chance to kill Dracula once and for all, and end his nightmare reign over humanity.

All the while, he had known that Dracula was his father. But he hadn’t said anything. Never told Dracula his name while they fought. To Dracula’s knowledge, he’d simply been fighting yet another knight of the Brotherhood.

Not until his dying breath, anyways. As Trevor Belmont lay bleeding out, struck down by his Father’s hand, the Mirror of Fate had shown him all the ways that Dracula had been betrayed. He’d suddenly understood that it was pain and justifiable rage that drove his Father. Not evil.

Too late to do anything about it.

Dracula was there, snarling in satisfaction as a foe well vanquished.

“I understand now. I understand everything,” the dying Trevor whispered. Alucard remembered saying this. The pain of it. He remembered how it felt to have his own combat cross shoved deep into his chest, and the way blood filled his mouth and tripped up his voice. “I have fought against my fate, even though it was in vain. You. You accepted your fate, and you were betrayed at every turn. Yet you still followed the path set out for you. Even when that betrayal included your own wife. Fate is cruel. But in the end, I pity you...Father...” Those were his last words.

With every word, Dracula’s gaze turned from triumphant to confused. It was so painful, looking at Dracula’s wide eyes as he stared at Trevor’s dying body. The way he repeated the word, “Father?” was so shocked, without even a hint of rage in it. There was just the confusion that Alucard just had seen in the Gabriel he met moments before, right as Gabriel stumbled upon the dead woman in the ruins.
But Trevor had no more words for Dracula. He simply pointed at the Mirror of Fate.

It hurt even worse to see Dracula turn to the Mirror and watch the past that Trevor refused to tell him.

“Marie?” Dracula whispered, obviously seeing his dead wife. The way Dracula’s face lit up was both amazing and heart wrenching. The love he felt for her was still clear and obvious on his face. His red eyes softened, and then widened in horrified betrayal as the events of Trevor Belmont’s past were unveiled for him. The way Marie hid the pregnancy from him and gave her child away to keep it safe.

“Damn you! Why!” Dracula screamed, turning back to Trevor’s still body. But Trevor had already died, shuddering and breathing out his last breath while Dracula looked on in the mirror. With a burst of shadow magic, Dracula disappeared and then reappeared instantly next to Trevor’s body.

“No! No, no no,” Dracula kept repeating, tears tracking his face as he pulled the combat cross out of Trevor’s chest, ripped his own wrist open, and then pressed the freely bleeding wound to Trevor’s open mouth. “Live,” he whispered brokenly in between sobs. “Live...my son...”

Alucard didn’t remember any of this. He never saw what happened after he’d told Dracula of their family connection in a last bitter attempt to get some kind of revenge on him. He regretted that now, regretted it so fiercely.

When Trevor had fought his way to Dracula to try and kill him, he didn’t know the whole truth. That Dracula didn’t kill his wife, Trevor’s mother, out of anger or spite, but rather because he was under a spell. A spell cast by Zobek, his mentor and confidant in the Brotherhood of the Light. The Brotherhood had only told Trevor part of the truth. Just enough to shape him into a weapon against the darkness, fueled by hate and bitter regret.

But now, seeing the scene with Pan and that dead girl, Alucard realized that this last act of spiteful vengeance was just another betrayal in a long list of them.

“You knew, too.” Gabriel’s voice was full of things that Alucard could only guess at.

Alucard whirled in place, trying to place that whisper in his ear. But there was no one there. He slowly turned around, but that wrecked version of Gabriel had vanished. There was only Dracula, still crying over Trevor’s corpse, screaming his pain out.

The suffering in those screams reached out to Alucard. He knew how deeply emotions ran in his Father, but seeing that agony first hand was heartbreaking. Especially over him. They’d never met before at that point. Dracula didn’t even know he had a son. Alucard never expected Dracula to suffer this much over him.

Alucard stepped forward to where Dracula knelt, weeping. So far he hadn’t been able to interact with these images of the past, but this realm was fluid. Maybe there was still something he could do. Either way, he had to try.

But before he could take a second step, his feet adhered to the ground. Blood had pooled up onto the floor under his feet while his attention was diverted, gathering in a larger and larger puddle around him.

This was the castle’s work. Alucard could feel it. Little tendrils of blood flowed up and around his boots, wrapping around them so tightly that he could hear the metal of his greaves creak. He put a hand on the hilt of his sword. This manifestation could be damaged, especially with the power held
in his blade, but Alucard was hesitant to do so. So far the castle hadn’t tried to damage him; only show him things. Or perhaps it was Dracula’s sleeping mind that was showing him. The worst part was, he wasn’t sure which one was responsible for this.

Before he could decide whether or not to draw Crissaegrim, the tendrils on his feet pulled down. Hard.

Alucard was dragged straight into the pool of blood, down through the floor. The thick blood rapidly covered his body, coating his mouth and eyes and rendering him blind and mute. It only lasted a moment. The sticky sensation of cursed blood itching on his face only lasted a moment, and then he was released.

He fell.

Luckily, it wasn’t a long drop. He barely had enough time to right himself in mid air before he crashed into the stone floor.

But it wasn’t the floor. Alucard looked up, expecting to see the blood pool that he was yanked through, but what he saw was Dracula weeping over Trevor’s body. Both of them were pinned to the ceiling, as if the whole castle had turned upside down and Alucard was the only one who noticed. The ground Alucard stood on was the ceiling of the room he had just been in. Even the moonlight that fell through the tall windows was angled down towards where Dracula and Trevor lay.

“Everybody lies,” there was that hoarse voice again, so much like Dracula and yet at the same time completely different. Tormented and lost, angry and so full of insanity that it hurt to hear it. Just the sound of it raised goosebumps on Alucard’s neck.

Alucard whirled around to face the speaker.

It was Gabriel again, but again, he was different than the versions from before. He looked leaner. The bones of his cheekbones were sharp on his face, like Dracula’s, but his hair was still rich red-brown, if lanky and much too long, and his eyes were still so very green. His red armored coat was ragged; long rips visible in many places and his weapon was gone from his side.

“Everybody wants to use me.”

Alucard could smell the power wafting off of this version of Gabriel. Puissant and unchecked, it oozed out of him to seep into the ground, into the very air around him. Alucard’s lungs stung when he breathed in as the corrosive energy ate into him. It wasn’t contained the way Dracula’s power was. Despite his temper, Dracula always had his power under absolute control. This felt different. It spilled over from him, sharp and acidic, making the blood that was gathered around his feet bubble.

“I was wrong,” Alucard said gently, while still keeping careful eye on Gabriel. This could be only a projection, but it was a projection made by Dracula inside a place completely controlled by him.

“Were you?” Gabriel snarled at him, and his hands crooked into claws of black power. “Were you really?”

“Yes,” he answered. “I believed blindly, I didn’t question the facts I was given.” Alucard swallowed, suddenly realizing just how much he was guilty of treating Dracula like everyone else in his life did, at least at that point in life. “I should have at least given you a chance to tell your side of the story.”
Alucard was backing away slowly. He didn’t want to fight here. Not in this place that woke the memories of his death, of the loss of his humanity. He didn’t want to stay here any longer than he had to, and he wanted to recreate the scene of his death even less.

“Lies again,” Gabriel hissed. His messy hair hung in his face and his lips were dry and cracked. Slowly, he stalked forward, keeping pace with Alucard’s retreating steps. “There was the Greater Good, and, as always, I was just a damn footnote. A means to an end. Always just that. I had to be the worst, the most powerful monster, because someone had to kill all the rest. And now I am, and every. Single. One of you will see the folly of your plans.”

He screamed in rage and a torrent of dark energy blasted out of his mouth, like a dragon’s breath made of corrosive vitriol.

Alucard drew his sword and braced it in front of him, activating the power embedded in it to cut through the torrent of power blasting at him. The move worked. The Crissaegrim glowed bright blue as it split the wave in front of him. But the sheer power of the attack still sent Alucard sliding back. His shoulders stung from the strain of holding his sword in front him. His face hurt, too. Little licks of that awful, black power ate into his skin, and his body healed them almost as quickly. Almost.

“I am here for you,” Alucard said, hesitant to lower his sword. “Just for you. To find you in this castle and wake you!”

The wave of power cut off, just as suddenly as it started.

Gabriel was far closer to Alucard than he was when it started, though. Only a few steps away, just barely out of grabbing distance. His mouth was twisted into a pained grimace, and his lips were cracked, red, and looked painfully raw. Black power dripped out between them like blood, or maybe tar. But his eyes were wide and hurt, and his hands strained, almost ready to reach out but not quite able.

“You’re lying,” Gabriel whispered, but the words sounded as much like a desperate plea as they did an accusation. “There is nothing and no one for me. I am alone.”

He roared again, this time swinging his arm at Alucard in a casual backhand, sending another wave of black power crashing into him.

Alucard braced with his sword, and didn’t quite manage to shield himself with the long blade. Power cut through his coat and into his skin. He had just a split second, one moment to decide what to do. To run away, to attack, or to evade.

He sent the blade away, banishing it to a magical holding space accessible only to him. At the same time, he let his body change, let his body fade away as he shifted into his spectral wolf form.

The corrosive black power went through him, harmlessly passing his spirit form by.

The change shocked Gabriel enough that he stopped his attack, and stared at Alucard’s new form with confused eyes. Then he reached up one of his hands and pressed it to his temple. His eyes closed and he shook his head, as if fighting off something.

“You lie,” he repeated, but his voice was softer, more confused now. “Even Laura lied.” His voice broke. “I thought I was helping her, saving her…”

The scenery around them shifted yet again.
Stone walls rose up from the ground around them, black and shining. Slowly, they grew pale and crumbling, until there wasn’t more than ruins staring down at Alucard. Pieces of an older structure were floating in the air above them, hanging by the remnants of powerful spells laced into each stone. Clear blue sky and windy mountain peaks were visible all around them, and cold wind tugged at Alucard’s coat.

The magic was so thick in the air that it was hard to breathe; it was cloying and heavy, sticking in his lungs with every inhale. It felt old. Older than the Light and Shadow magics that Alucard had been taught as a child. This felt more primal, somehow. Like standing in the eye of the storm, as if somewhere just beyond his senses there was a hurricane of pure power happening, but he was too blind to see it.

Alucard shifted back into his human form again and turned, looking at the scene taking place behind him. His ears rang with the reverberations of power all around him.

The wrecked version of Gabriel was there in front of huge set of double doors. His hair was long and messy, his coat damaged and left in disarray. Alucard could smell the power wafting off of him, unchecked and so very dark.

He was bent over, gasping and gurgling. Alucard had seen enough men in their last moments to recognize that Gabriel was dying. His breath stuttered, and what air he did manage to gasp in sounded wet and thick, as if his lungs were already filled with liquid. Even the vast power he controlled wasn’t enough to fight whatever was happening. Seeing his indomitable Father in such a state was like a blow to the chest, a shock to see him broken and so physically vulnerable, to the point that he was barely managing to keep on his feet.

There was blood on his lips.

In front of him was a girl. She didn’t look older than fifteen, and she was dressed in a long, black, lacy dress. Her hair was pinned up in an intricate, high pattern. Sparkling jewelry threaded through her raven locks, her face was pale, and her body was waif slim.

This must be the Laura that Gabriel mentioned.

“My blood is killing you,” she said softly, watching Gabriel with pity and hunger in her eyes.

“You lied to me,” Gabriel gasped, pain making him bend over again.

“I told you no living being can enter that prison,” she said. “You have to drink my blood, all of it to replace your own. It’s the only way.”

“I will not kill you!” Gabriel snarled falling to one knee. It was obvious that pain was wrecking his body, making him fight for every breath. Alucard could see how close he was to death, how much he suffered, yet he could tell that Gabriel was serious. He wasn’t going to kill that child.

“You have to,” she pleaded, bending closer to Gabriel’s face, “Please, Gabriel,” she cried, her voice breaking. “Please, save me from this existence, Gabriel!”

Gabriel cried out in anguish. Somehow it seemed even worse than the sounds of the physical suffering he endured. He pulled her forward and bit into her neck. It happened so fast. Alucard started at the sudden move.

He watched as Gabriel drank the girl’s blood, watched as it spilled, dark and thick, all over him and the child. There were tears on Gabriel’s face as he drank her down.
This was the moment Gabriel turned into a vampire. This was the story that nobody knew, that nobody had ever witnessed. When Laura’s body fell limp in Gabriel’s arms, Gabriel tossed his head back and screamed.

Alucard could tell that something died in him in that moment. Some of the restless, writhing energy, the pain and anguish of before, was gone. Gabriel was still now. The feel of the room changed. The anger that laced through the power radiating out of him grew wicked and cold. Similar to what Alucard was familiar with from his Father now, but not nearly as powerful.

This was when Dracula was born.

“She was supposed to be my salvation,” a voice behind him said.

Alucard turned to see who joined them now. It was the wrecked Gabriel again. One damaged and suffering, but still barely human.

The wrecked Gabriel watched the newly born Dracula place the girl’s body gently on a crumbling stone slab. She was the first vampire Alucard had seen die that hadn’t turned into dust.

“She asked for help.” Gabriel’s lips twisted into a bitter snarl. “And all she wanted was for me to kill her.” He looked at his hands, now dripping blood. Thick rivers of it splashed down into the weathered stone floor. “They all let me kill them. They know and they never fight!”

This was Dracula’s pain made manifest. Under all that rage and horror, there was a foundation of terrible pain. The crushing inevitability of his fate.

But Alucard had fought every second of his life against the idea of inevitability. As a mortal, he trained and fought, he forced his way into Dracula’s castle to kill what he thought was the ultimate dark lord. The root of all evil. He fought and died.

And then again, as a vampire, he fought against his hunger, his need for blood. He drove himself to reject every bit of evil that Dracula embodied.

But he learned over time that Dracula wasn’t as evil as he suspected, and not everything must end in a fight.

“I fought you,” Alucard said to this sad, tormented version of his Father. “I fought you with every ounce of my being. I would not let you define me. Your darkness holds no control over me.” Black energy radiated off of Gabriel, now the same as the thick power that Alucard could feel from the doorway where the vampire girl died, but the pained look on his face forced Alucard closer. “Your darkness has never controlled you, either. These terrible things happened, but there is more to our lives now.”

Gabriel wasn’t listening, not really. Black energy was still pouring off of him. His hair whipped around his face on an invisible current, and his eyes were fixed on the scene of Dracula laying down Laura’s body into a beautifully carved, marble casket.

There was a second casket just behind that first one. His mother’s tomb. Dracula held that child vampire in enough esteem to lay her to rest next to his beloved wife.

“There was a second casket just behind that first one. His mother’s tomb. Dracula held that child vampire in enough esteem to lay her to rest next to his beloved wife.

“Through all the pain and betrayal that you have gone through, there is still some happiness left for you. For us.” Alucard pressed forward again. He was almost within reach. What he was going to do once he got there, he hadn’t the faintest idea, but he couldn’t think of anything else. “I am here for you, and Geralt is waiting for us.”
That seemed to spark a touch of recognition. Gabriel’s head tilted, and his eyes searched the room around them, bright and feverish.

“Geralt,” he whispered, rough and broken.

Something shifted behind them; the energies of the castle swirled around and the lighting of the room they were in changed to a soft warm glow.

Alucard turned, surprised to see that they were in Dracula’s bedroom now, with the huge four poster bed right in the middle. The sheets were red, the color as deep as the most expensive of roses. Geralt and Dracula were there, bodies entwined and sweaty. Geralt was clinging to Dracula, his fingers tight on Dracula’s skin as he urged his lover on. They rocked together as Geralt tilted his head and Dracula lowered his fangs to bite. Alucard didn’t think much of it, all too used to how much Dracula liked to bite and drink from his lovers during sex.

He felt a shiver of remembered pleasure at the sound Geralt was making under that bite, the wanton moans and half formed encouragements.

“Geralt,” Alucard said softly, more to Gabriel than to himself. He shifted closer to where Gabriel stood, again trying to bridge the distance. Tiny slivers of pain needled into him as dark energy roiled off of Gabriel’s body. But it wasn’t an intentional attack; all of Gabriel’s focus was on that bed. He stared, wide-eyed at their passion, and an awful grimace of pain twisted his face.

Alucard dared to slide closer, almost shoulder to shoulder with Gabriel now.

“He loves you,” Alucard said quietly, unwilling to break the mood of this scene they were witnessing. “With all that he is. And he does so with full knowledge of who and what you are. He trusts you.”

“He shouldn’t.” The words were a barely-audible growl, and the darkness around Gabriel spiked, electric and burning. It poured through the air, wrapping around Alucard and seeping into the stones under them.

Alucard gritted his teeth, and withstood the pain even as cuts were seared into his skin wherever the tendrils touched him. It wasn’t as bad as it could have been, and Gabriel’s attention still hadn’t wavered from the scene in front of them.

A flash of movement caught Alucard’s eye, and he turned to watch.

Dracula had braced his arm on the silk sheets above Geralt’s head and bit down harder, tearing Geralt’s throat open in a way he had never done, would never do, in reality. Alucard startled, lunging towards the image before he stopped himself. Geralt’s carotid artery was ripped open. Blood was spilling everywhere, soaking into the sheets.

Geralt was still arching under Dracula, moaning in pleasure, but soon the sounds tapered off. Dracula was killing him. Ripping that throat even further apart, heedless of the damage he caused and the waste of blood leaving Geralt’s body in a torrent. It soaked everything around them. The bed, the pillows. The pool of his blood spread so far that it spilled onto the stone floor. Geralt’s arms became limp and fell from their hold on Dracula’s body. His eyes were empty and blind as life left him, and still Dracula drank noisily.

“He’d let me kill him, too,” Gabriel said quietly. Most of the rage seemed to disappear, leaving only a deep, bone crushing sorrow in its wake.

It took everything Alucard had to not go to the image of his lovers. To not go running to hold...
Geralt and Dracula both. He’d just seen Geralt in pieces before him, his blood spread out like there couldn’t be a drop left in him. It had just happened, not more than a few days ago.

But the scene in front of him wasn’t real. No matter how painful. This was just a reflection of Dracula’s fears. Or perhaps something more primal than that. The castle’s influence at work, maybe. It was a jealous mistress at the best of times.

None of that mattered, though.

What mattered was Gabriel, broken and suffering beside him. Because Gabriel was Dracula, or some part of him, anyways. And right now Gabriel didn’t see the point in waking up.

Maybe that was why they were trapped there.

“No,” Alucard said firmly, swallowing down the agony, both in his body and his heart. “No, Geralt knows you, and trusts you not to do this. And you would not.”

He turned to Gabriel then, and swept him into a tight embrace. “You would not, because despite all of the centuries of pain and rage and suffering, you still have more capacity to love than anyone else I have ever met. I love you. Please, don’t leave us alone.”

Before Gabriel could push away, before he could focus that awful, corrosive power around them into an attack, Alucard kissed him.

Surprisingly, it wasn’t like kissing Dracula at all. The lips under his did not give in to the kiss. They were stiff in surprise at first, and there were no fangs behind them to be watchful of. Gabriel even tasted human.

He lifted his hands and framed Gabriel’s face with them, licking in slowly, asking for entry. He wanted to taste him, taste the human that his Father used to be. The scent of life radiated off of him, filling up Alucard’s senses with it. Mixed in was so much pain, and he could hear the thunder of Gabriel’s heart and feel it pulsing under his hands. It hurt to realize just how vulnerable Gabriel was, for all his battle prowess. How fragile.

Gabriel clearly wasn’t sure what to do. His hands rose and fell twice, never quite deciding to either push Alucard away or pull him close. Eventually Gabriel gave in. His lips opened up under Alucard’s insistent licks and his tongue slipped out to greet him. Gabriel might be confused, scared and in pain, but once the decision was made, he never hesitated. His hands settled on Alucard’s hips, gentle and above all careful as he kissed back. Slowly, he let his hands roam more, as if learning Alucard’s shape again.

With that welcome, Alucard pressed in further. He molded his body to Gabriel’s and ran a hand through his hair, giving himself up to the kiss. Letting Gabriel cautiously, tentatively take control.

Slowly but surely, the twisted energy around them quieted. Whether or not the room around them changed, Alucard had no idea. He was too focused on the feel of their lips and tongues together, and on how Gabriel’s hands gently explored under his coat. Oh, but it was strange to feel his Father so human and fragile in his arms, despite the power that was still there. It brought out a protectiveness in him, not unlike how he felt about Geralt from time to time.

Soon enough Gabriel broke off the kiss.

“Don’t let the past repeat itself,” Gabriel whispered, his lips still close enough that they brushed Alucard’s when he spoke.
Alucard couldn't tell if the words were a plea or a warning. Both, maybe. He only knew that the body he was touching was fading away rapidly, turning to nothing but smoke under his hands.

He blinked his eyes open, not even remembering when he closed them, and realized he was alone.

He was still in Dracula’s bedroom, but it looked different.

It was bigger, lighter. Alucard was facing the wide open balcony door. The sun outside was just starting to set, painting the mountain peaks a lovely shade of red and gold. For a long moment he stared at the billowing curtains, felt the crisp, fresh air fanning his face, and wondered if this, too, was another dreamscape.

He turned around, towards the large bed with its black silk sheets and white, luscious furs.

His Father was there, laying on his side, his back to Alucard. As Alucard watched, he could see the steady rise and fall of Dracula’s ribs, his breath so slow that it was obvious he was asleep.

Alucard took in a shuddery inhale and tried to push the churning emotions away. There would be time to deal with them later, he promised himself. All that he saw, everything that had happened… that could wait. There was work to be done, and people were counting on them both.

He could tell this was his Father; his vampiric powers tingling along Alucard’s senses. But Alucard was still somewhat shaky as he approached. Dracula didn’t move as Alucard sat down on the edge of the bed. He reached his hand out, but hesitated briefly before he let it connect with his Father’s shoulder.

He prayed this was the reality now. He didn’t know if he had the strength to deal with any more of his Father’s nightmares. His own heart felt fragile and brittle under the burden of all the pain he’d witnessed.

The moment his hand touched the hard muscle of Dracula’s shoulder, the vampire twitched and took in a deeper breath. Then he turned over onto his back, one hand rubbing at his face.

“Alucard?” Dracula sounded groggy, not quite awake yet.

Alucard closed his eyes and took another slow, shuddering breath.

This had to be real.

“Father. It’s time to wake up,” he said quietly.

It took effort, but he kept all the unsettled heartache out of his voice. Watching what his Father had gone through hurt like a barb lodged in his chest. The fact Alucard had believed for so many years that Gabriel wasn’t much different from Dracula, hurt even more. Seeing Gabriel’s fears, seeing Geralt die, again, was just as bad.

He swallowed it down, and shouldered on. “Your servants need you, and Geralt and I have missed you.”

Dracula frowned.

“I think…I slept?”

A little shudder worked its way down Alucard’s spine. Dracula didn’t remember.

That was probably for the best.
“You did,” Alucard said with a nod. “But now it’s time to wake up.”

Despite Alucard's best efforts, Dracula seemed to notice that something was off anyways. A little wrinkle appeared on his brow and he looked Alucard up and down, considering him.

“You fought,” he said, reaching out a hand to brush of a bit of dried blood off of Alucard’s face. Probably where the power Gabriel was emitting had cut him.

There was no sense in denying it, so Alucard nodded. “It was…mildly challenging to reach you. But I was in no serious danger.”

That was true enough, anyways. Gabriel didn’t mean to kill him, not really. He was just venting his rage and agony, and Alucard was a convenient target. Most of the pain that Alucard felt wasn’t physical either, so that hardly counted.

Dracula frowned.

“Is Geralt safe?”

“He is,” Alucard said, a small smile tugging at his lips. “He is with Eskel at my tower, recovering and waiting for our return.”

It was tempting to mention that Iga was there, too, but that would mean Alucard would have to explain why she was in Castlevania City, and right at that moment that was something Alucard was not up for. Dracula would get the whole story from his servants soon enough.

“You brought the castle into Geralt’s world,” Alucard half claimed, half asked. He wasn’t sure that he wanted to delve too deeply into Dracula’s state of mind prior to this whole mess, but he needed to verify this little fact, nonetheless.

Dracula brightened immediately and a tiny smile pulled at his lips.

“Did you see how nicely I fit Kaer Morhen in? As close to the center as I could without destroying the main part of the castle. I even managed to fit in most of their valley, too. I figured they would appreciate some space to run around.”

Alucard could feel his eyebrows climbing up at the pride wafting off of Dracula. As exasperated as he was at all of the disruption that the castle move had no doubt caused, it melted away in the face of how pleased Dracula was. Seeing him so tickled about his solution was a very nice change from the desperate, viciously miserable Gabriel.

“I have not seen it yet,” Alucard said after a moment. “I came straight here.” He closed his eyes and rubbed his temple. Exhaustion dragged at him again. As pleasant as it had been to sleep with Geralt for a few hours, something he would have to thank Eskel for later, this whole week had been sorely taxing.

There was also the fact that the castle had a tendency to warp time. It was impossible to tell how long he’d been delving in Dracula’s dreams, searching for him. Hopefully not too long.

Probably not, otherwise Geralt would be here himself, banging down the door searching for them.

“Were you worried for me?” Dracula seemed even more pleased, reaching up and touching Alucard along the jaw.

“Very much so,” Alucard said softly as he leaned into that warm hand.
“I don’t remember what I dreamed about, but I definitely like what I woke up to.” Dracula shifted again, changing his grip to Alucard’s shoulders and pulling him slowly, insistently down.

“Do you know you dreamed?” Alucard asked. He wasn’t really sure that he wanted Dracula to remember the nightmares he’d just walked through.

Dracula pulled Alucard until he ended up stretched out on top of him. As soon as he was in range, Dracula started kissing his cheeks and his forehead, purring gently in pleasure.

Dracula paused for a moment and frowned.

“I know I dreamed. I don’t remember what.” A few notes of tension crept into Dracula’s voice.

“It doesn’t matter,” Alucard said, shaking his head a little. “We’re here now.”

“I love that you are here,” Dracula murmured, shifting to make sure Alucard was resting comfortably against his chest.

He ran his hands over Alucard’s armored coat and up until he could touch Alucard’s hair. He slowly gathered the wavy mass of it up into a loose ponytail, making sure each strand was moved away from Alucard’s face. His red eyes looked dark and soft, softer than usual.

“You look tired,” he murmured, stretching up to kiss Alucard’s cheek, then his jaw, and under it. There was a careful nudge of energy as Dracula’s power probed and pushed at his armor, unexpectedly gentle in trying to dissolve it.

Alucard loved this, loved each small touch and how warm Dracula was under him. How relaxed. He braced his palms against his Father’s chest, arching his head back to let Dracula kiss under his jaw and sighed.

With a purely mental flex of his power, he yielded under Dracula’s influence and let his armored coat and clothes dissolve around him. Now he was naked on top of Dracula’s body, with nothing but a sheet between them.

“It’s been a long week,” Alucard said quietly, turning into Dracula’s soft touches. “I’ve missed this. Your hands on me.” A little shiver worked its way through him as Dracula’s burning hot hands caressed over his chilled skin. Dracula was always so warm. “I think I am getting spoiled.”

Dracula rumbled quietly in laughter. “Oh?”

There was a smile in Dracula’s voice, but Alucard had closed his eyes, the better to relish the feel of Dracula’s lips on his neck. Soft, little kisses peppered down his jaw, over his throat and the pulse in his neck, and down to his shoulder.

“Oh, yes. I hadn’t realized how much I wanted to touch you. You, Geralt, Eskel. Not until I couldn’t.” Alucard trailed one hand up Dracula’s neck and dug his fingers into the skin there, just a little. Just enough to hold on, to keep them tightly together.

Dracula tensed under him, rolling them over suddenly. Alucard went with it. He very much wanted the touches to continue.

Dracula braced himself on the bed on both sides of Alucard’s head and dragged his open, wet mouth up Alucard’s neck to his ear, mouthing at the lobe there. It left Alucard shivering at the touch. Those lips were so warm and gentle as they traced the shell of his ear. It made a thread of pure want shoot right down to his groin.
“I love touching you,” Dracula purred, rubbing himself over Alucard’s body like a big cat, heavy and confident.

Alucard trailed his hands over his Father’s sides and onto his powerful back, feeling how the muscles there tensed to keep Dracula in position. Their legs were tangled together. The bedsheets were still between them, but that didn’t stop Alucard from feeling all down Dracula’s bare back. He dragged his hands over the dips and valleys of Dracula’s body, enjoying the smooth, warm skin.

“Eskel likes you touching him, too.” Alucard laughed suddenly, remembering how conflicted Eskel seemed. “You appear to be well on the road to seducing him.”

Dracula lifted himself up on his arms. It was extremely distracting. The way his chest and arms flexed at the move, the delicious swell of his muscles that lifted his powerful body so easily. Alucard wanted to press his mouth there, to feel each curve of muscle with his lips. Maybe bite a little, too. Heat slowly, gently curled up in his chest, reminding him just how much he desired his Father under normal circumstances. Now, after all that he witnessed, he was doubly thirsty for touch, for contact. For reassurance that Dracula was fine again and his balance had been restored.

“You talked about it?” Dracula sounded both baffled and curiously pleased.

Alucard huffed out a laugh.

“You should talk to him. Poor man seems very confused right now.”

Dracula hummed at him, sounding both smug and speculative. “And what do you want with this situation?” he asked, trailing his gaze down Alucard’s neck and chest. After a moment of thought, he leaned in to lay a kiss right onto the hollow of Alucard’s throat. “Do you want to watch us together?”

Alucard blinked, surprised by the offer.

“I like Eskel,” he said after a moment. “I find the thought of watching you take him…attractive.” Alucard blushed, feeling the warmth prickle at his cheeks. “Yes.”

“I think he likes your touch better than mine,” Dracula said in between kisses. “Perhaps you’d want to hold him while I take him?” Another soft, wet kiss landed right on the pulse of his neck. “Or perhaps you and Geralt would like to watch? Or…” He shifted into Alucard, rubbing their jaws together. “Perhaps you want to touch Eskel yourself. Taste him as you did before, while I hold you both.”

Alucard laughed.

“You are generous,” he said. “But I think you are overstretching. Eskel is not like Geralt. I think whatever happens between you, has to first be only between you.”

Dracula paused for a very brief moment, and then resumed his careful kisses. He smoothed one hand down Alucard’s side and cupped his hip. “And what do you think Geralt would say to this?”

“Eskel has been a brother to him most of his life,” Alucard said after a moment of thought. “I think if they were meant to be lovers, they would be already.” He made sure to smooth his hand down his Father’s back to ease the sting of those words. He didn't think there would ever be real attraction between Geralt and Eskel, but he wasn't always the best judge of those things.

“Hmm. I still haven’t asked him if he minds me fucking his witchers,” Dracula mused thoughtfully. “Eskel is…he has become closer to us than I expected.” He mouthed along the
tendons in Alucard’s neck, dragging his teeth over the skin without putting an ounce of pressure on it.

Alucard shivered gently at the sensation.

“He’s mine now,” Dracula murmured. “I want to mark him in all the ways I possibly can.”

That made Alucard huff in amusement. “The mark on his chest isn’t enough?”

Dracula rumbled out a laugh, right into the soft skin under Alucard’s jaw, his breath hot and moist on Alucard’s skin.

“Nothing is ever enough. I want my name on his skin, on his soul. I want my scent on his clothes, my come inside him, my name on his lips. I want it all.”

Another shiver raced through Alucard. That was exactly what he expected of his Father. It was always all or nothing with him. To be honest, it was a little surprising how much of a gentleman Dracula had been about it all so far, waiting for Eskel to give in on his own.

"Mostly." Alucard thought of the deal that weighed on Eskel’s soul. He could sense it, but Alucard had already been so steeped in Dracula’s power for so long that sensing it in other places was second nature. No doubt Geralt sensed it, too, though how much or what he made of it, there was no telling.

“Does he know that he’s already struck a deal with you?” Alucard asked. While Dracula tended to be extremely blunt and obvious with his actions, he was capable of great subtlety as well. It was clear to Alucard that when the deal was struck, Eskel had no idea. Now, though, perhaps they’d talked about it. “His soul is still his, but you’ve done…something. I can sense it.”

Dracula hummed, rubbing his face over Alucard’s face like a cat marking his territory.

“It was nothing he wasn’t already doing. Now he just gets a little extra comfort for it as well.” The words were spoken directly against his skin. The warm breath made him shiver as it fanned over his neck.

“But does he know?” Alucard pressed.

There was a worryingly long pause as Dracula thought out his answer. “I think he suspects,” he said finally.

“But you haven’t told him.” Alucard said.

“He hasn’t asked, either,” Dracula defended.

Alucard shook his head, amazed at his Father’s antics. He probably should be more worried about it, but he knew Dracula meant no harm to Eskel.

“How you even managed to get him to agree to the deal in the first place, I cannot imagine. He must have made a verbal agreement for the deal to hold.”

Dracula raised up on his arms again, and Alucard got distracted by the wonderful muscles, again. He forgot what they were talking about and slid his hands up from Dracula’s belly to the tensed pecs, cupping them in his hands and feeling how the nipples tightened under his palms.

“I’m that good,” Dracula murmured lowering his face to Alucard’s. His silky hair fell all around
them, locking them in a tiny, intimate space.

A smile stretched across Alucard’s face. His Father was shameless. Absolutely shameless.

“I want to mark you too,” Dracula said quietly, his lips brushing over Alucard’s. “I liked you in that hospital bathroom, on your knees for me, your lips around me,” he murmured. “I love it even more when there’s my come inside you.” He shifted above Alucard, carefully settling his weight over him. “When I can mark you in the most primitive of ways.”

Shivers raced up Alucard’s back and his gut clenched tightly for a moment in want.

“Yes,” he breathed out, arching up into Dracula’s body. He couldn’t move much, but there was a great deal of appeal in that. Having Dracula’s body around him, holding him, filling him. Another shudder of want shook him, and heat clenched in his groin.

They were both naked already, pressed against each other without even the sheets to lend them modesty.

“I want to be inside you.” Dracula pressed his lips to Alucard’s, and his tongue sneaked out for a quick lick. “I always want to be inside you.”

Alucard moaned and arched into the teasing kiss. The constant interruptions were starting to frustrate him.

“Less talking, more doing,” he huffed when Dracula pulled away from the kiss again.

His Father laughed and shifted, giving Alucard room to pull the sheets away from their bodies. As soon as there was nothing between them, Alucard arched up into the warmth of Dracula’s naked body, relishing the smooth skin and the heat pouring off of him.

“Geralt was right,” Dracula murmured, reaching for the nightstand and the oil he kept there. “You really are picking up all the bad habits.”

“Are you displeased?” Alucard asked with a smile. “Should I tease you for days instead?” He tilted his head. “I’m not sure I’d know how, but I bet Geralt would show me.”

Dracula had the gall to look offended.

“I always deliver!” he protested with an air of wounded innocence. The effect was somewhat ruined by how his hand found Alucard’s knee and started gently nudging it aside.

“And how,” Alucard had to agree, opening his legs to make space for Dracula to move in.

Dracula wasn’t one for moderation usually, and this time wasn't any different. He pulled the cork out of the bottle with his teeth and spilled the whole contents of it onto Alucard’s belly and still soft cock. Alucard hissed and flinched from the cold liquid, but Dracula’s warm hand was already there. He pressed it flat over Alucard’s cock and belly, massaging in slow little circles to spread the oil around. Within moments, Alucard could feel his cock starting to plump up, making the sensation more intense.

The smell of the herbs that the oil was made from filled up the room, adding into Dracula’s fiery scent that already saturated the bed. It was Geralt’s oil, and it tickled something inside of Alucard to know that he would soon be scented with both of his lovers.

“Oh,” Alucard whispered and pressed his head back against the pillows. His eyes fluttered at the
feel of Dracula’s hands on him and the aromas filling up his head.

“I’m going to take care of you,” Dracula promised.

He lowered himself onto one elbow and pressed their lips together. Then he licked in, soft and wet. As he took his time exploring Alucard’s mouth with his tongue, his free hand closed around Alucard’s dick and started to pull at it with perfectly tight strokes. His calluses tugged at the sensitive skin, catching on the head as he dragged his slick fist all the way from root to tip, twisting at the end and sending sharp little zings of sensation up Alucard’s spine.

Whatever sounds Alucard made, Dracula swallowed. He never broke his kisses as he licked wetly and gently into Alucard’s mouth. He was hot, so hot over Alucard. His body was radiating heat like mad. It pressed Alucard down into the bed, making him feel safe and cherished.

Dracula let go of his cock, now heavy and hard, and let it rest in the shallow pool of oil gathered on his belly, causing Alucard to gasp and break the kiss. He arched his neck, showing Dracula without words where he wanted to be touched and moaned in appreciation when his Father followed the invitation and put his mouth against his Adam’s Apple.

He sucked there, hard, no doubt leaving marks. While his mouth worked, his slick fingers slid deeper between Alucard’s legs and two of them circled Alucard’s hole. That just made Alucard moan again, louder this time, and spread his legs wider. He could feel Dracula hardening against his hip, his cock getting hotter, heavier, insistently nudging against him.

Rather than using his fangs, Dracula sucked harsh little bruises into Alucard’s neck, setting the nerves alight. His hand worked in tandem, and as he worked over Alucard’s neck, he pushed two of his oil slick fingers into Alucard’s ass. The stretch was delicious. It made Alucard moan with wanton approval. He loved it, adored the tingle and the feeling of his muscles giving way under the pressure.

He clenched down on the invading fingers. Maybe Dracula meant to tease him, because he pulled his fingers out to dip them into the oil on Alucard’s belly again. Then he gave Alucard’s cock a single, teasing stroke before going back between his legs and pushing those wet fingers in again.

There was more of a stretch this time. Dracula had eased three fingers into Alucard’s tight body. The slight burn of it made Alucard’s breath hitch, and made his hips jerk in place. They were so warm inside of him and Dracula’s other hand smoothed down Alucard’s heaving chest, leaving trails of tingling heat across his ribs.

Alucard was panting already, shifting his legs to rub his sensitive inner thighs against Dracula’s hips. He ran one hand through the oil covering his stomach, slicking his palm, and then slid it down Dracula’s belly.

“Let me,” Alucard said hoarsely.

He reached down until he could wrap his wet hand over Dracula’s hard, heavy cock. It was so thick, such a mouthwatering handful. As soon as his hand wrapped around Dracula’s length, Dracula’s breathing hitched. That little stuttering movement made Alucard take a quick gulp of air. He licked his lips and then wrapped his other hand around Dracula’s cock as well.

He wanted it inside him so much. He ached for it. To be filled, stretched open and lost in pleasure. Alucard stroked that heavy cock, hand over hand, reveling in how hard it was as the swollen head pressed against his palms. The movement was loving, worshipful, as he spread oil over every part of it.
“Let me lead you in,” Alucard whispered, his throat dry with desire.

“Always,” Dracula said quietly. He resettled himself between Alucard’s legs.

Alucard bit his lip and closed his eyes to focus better on what he was feeling. He angled his Father’s cock down, pressed the fat head against his hole, and shuddered at the first touch. It kissed his rim, silky smooth against his skin, yet hot and hard at the same time.

As Alucard urged Dracula’s cock forward with one hand, he spread the fingers of his other hand around his hole, spreading his cheeks apart. His breath was coming out in short pants just from the feel of that swollen head and how it slipped between his fingers. This way he would be able to feel Dracula go into him in two ways, not only at his already twitching hole, but sliding through his fingers, too.

“Please,” he moaned and then promptly lost his voice as Dracula pushed.

There was only pressure first. Just a bit as his body resisted before the oil and desire made him open up. He hissed at the stretch when the head pushed past the first ring of muscle. Sparks of pleasure zinged up and down his back, coiling tightly in his groin. He could feel his Father’s cock slide against his fingers before going into him, stretching him mercilessly and perfectly.

Dracula didn’t stop until he bottomed out completely, his groin pressed tightly to Alucard’s body with Alucard’s fingers caught between them.

“Oh,” Alucard moaned around the girth of it, the fullness, the way it pressed unerringly against his prostate and stayed there. So good, so heavy, so big. He was utterly filled up, stuffed full of Dracula’s cock.

He wanted more hands. More lips. He wanted to lick into Dracula’s partially open mouth and suck at his dark nipples and scratch at his back, all at once. Alucard closed his legs tightly against Dracula’s hips and pulled him closer.

“You are so good for me,” Dracula murmured lovingly. He leaned forward, covering Alucard’s mouth with a kiss and muffling the sounds he was making. Sounds Alucard hadn’t realized were falling out of his mouth until Dracula interrupted them. Alucard sucked at his tongue greedily, shuddering at the way it mimicked the sudden thrusts of Dracula’s cock.

Alucard managed to get one of his hands free and promptly tangled it into Dracula’s gorgeous black hair. With that leverage, he pulled his Father closer, making him rest more of his weight onto Alucard. It shifted the position enough that the next time Dracula thrust in, his cock dragged over Alucard’s prostate harder than ever. The movement forced a gasp out of him, against Dracula’s lips, and made him clench down hard enough that he made Dracula gasp in turn.

Everything narrowed down to the slide of his Father’s cock inside him, the stretch of it, the weight of his body over Alucard’s, and the breath they shared through their unending kiss. He was so full. The stretch was so good that it felt like he might cry from it. A blistering hot blush covered his cheeks, spurred on by each deep thrust. He clutched at Dracula’s hair and shoulder, holding on like it was his only lifeline.

Dracula was slow, unhurriedly pushing the pleasure up and up, winding up Alucard ever so gently. Each thrust had him buried all the way in, so deep that Alucard thought he wouldn’t be able to breathe around it. Soft, little whines built up inside of Alucard with every stroke; breathy cries of delight that Dracula greedily swallowed up.
Alucard clung to him, wanting only to touch more, to have that big body as close as possible. That only made Dracula growl into their kiss. He threaded a hand up into Alucard’s hair, holding him still while Dracula wrung pleasure out of him.

Everything was so tight; Alucard could barely move. There was no way to speed up their movement, no way to chase his release as Dracula methodically took him apart. All he could do was take it. Their bodies were slick with sweat and oil, sliding against each other, filling the room with scent of sweat and sex.

His orgasm came slowly, like a long awaited tidal wave. As it rolled over him, it stole the breath right out of him. His body seized as wave after wave of pleasure swamped him. He couldn’t see, couldn’t hear anything. The hot, huge weight of Dracula rubbing up inside of him, all around him, lit his nerves on fire and filled every sense. Every part of him clenched down, his body locking tight on Dracula’s cock with each spasm. His come spilled between them, smearing over both of their bellies.

Dracula growled into the kiss. His tongue still fucked into Alucard’s mouth as he sped up his thrusts, holding Alucard tightly in place as he chased his own pleasure. Alucard gasped and squirmed. Each time Dracula pressed into him, it rubbed him in just the right way, extending his own orgasm and wringing one more spurt out of him.

He was so lost in sensation, in the pleasure that stole his breath, that he almost missed it when Dracula came. His Father’s body tensed above him. Their kiss broke on a sharp exhale as he, too, shuddered through his own orgasm. Dracula’s cock pulsed and twitched inside of him, spilling hot come and feeling larger with every release. Alucard closed his knees around Dracula as tight as he could and kept him close. He wanted to feel every bit of this, to have as much of it as he could.

Dracula pulled out almost immediately after. His still hard cock pulled at Alucard’s over-sensitive rim before popping free. Alucard could feel it, wet and hot, touching the inside of his thigh as Dracula shifted back.

Alucard moaned, wrapped his arms around Dracula’s chest, and held on, not letting him pull away any further.

“Don’t go,” he whispered hoarsely. “Please. I want to feel you inside of me.”

Dracula made a low, purring sound and leaned down to bite gently at Alucard’s chin. He nibbled his way down Alucard’s neck and then lower, licking wet stripes over his chest.

While Dracula teased and nibbled at him, Alucard let one hand slide down between their bodies, between his legs. His fingers just managed to brush the hot, hard length of Dracula’s cock before Dracula moved away. Alucard whined unhappily. Even though he’d already come, he still wanted to feel Dracula’s cock, wanted to touch that silky soft skin and hold the weight of it in his hand. But Dracula was shifting lower, licking over Alucard’s sensitive nipples. The wet, firm strokes of his tongue felt good, sending tiny sparks of sensation through Alucard.

It wasn’t enough, though. It wasn’t what Alucard truly wanted. He caught onto Dracula’s sides, feeling the hard stretch of muscle over bone.

“Harder,” Alucard whispered, tightening his legs around Dracula’s body and pulling him closer.

To his credit, Dracula didn’t hesitate, didn’t even pause to ask what Alucard meant. He just opened his mouth wide, pressed his blunt teeth against the whole of Alucard’s right pectoral, and dragged them firmly over skin and muscle until his teeth closed against the peaked nipple. He bit down. Not
hard enough for true pain, but enough to send a sharp zing of sensation jolting through Alucard’s body.

He moaned loudly, and his fingers dug into Dracula’s side as he squirmed under the harsh bite. The movement made him all the more aware of the slick between his legs, the ache of his loose hole, and how empty he felt clenching down on nothing.

“Yes,” Alucard whispered hoarsely, pushing his chest up, opening himself more to the untender caress.

Then Dracula let go of the nipple, licked it in apology, and did it all again. And again. And again. Until the whole of Alucard’s chest felt hot and swollen, his nipples so sensitive and achy that he could feel the barest brush of air against them, and every single one of Dracula’s breaths was a wild tangle of sensations.

He had no idea how long it lasted, minutes or hours. He was too busy living in the moment.

Eventually Dracula moved up again, kissing his way up Alucard’s chest. Those tiny, soft kisses on Alucard’s inflamed skin felt a hundred times more intense. Every breath that fanned over the tender skin was like a completely new caress.

Dracula kissed up to his neck, pausing to again suck at his Adam’s apple before kissing up to his jaw, and then to his ear. The soft brush of lips against there sent shivers through him, making Alucard twist into the sensation.

“I want to give you everything you want,” Dracula said in a low rumble, lazy and soft as he rubbed his bristly jaw against Alucard’s skin. “You need only show me what you want.”

Alucard’s nipples and chest tingled, abandoned to the cold air, and he ached to have Dracula’s mouth or fingers there again.

He shuddered, struck by the sudden want to see Dracula do it all again, fuck him slow and deep. He missed watching Dracula come the first time, and he wanted the presence of mind to watch him now. He wanted to see how the pleasure built within him, how he looked when he fucked and when his orgasm overtook him.

“I want to watch you,” Alucard breathed out, letting his hands trail down Dracula’s skin to his belly and then lower to his still wet cock.

Dracula was mostly soft now, but that didn’t bother Alucard. He knew his Father could will himself into hardness. But this time he wanted to make Dracula hard again with his own hands, wanted to feel that part of him grow under his touch.

He dragged his palms over his own stomach, gathering the last bits of oil and come there, and then took hold of Dracula’s cock again. He stroked it, slow and slick, feeling it slowly fill out in his hands. It was wonderful, how it swelled up slowly, giving him something large and firm to hold. Dracula was so thick, the skin so soft while being hard as could be at the same time.

He dragged his palm over the thick head, rubbing over the glans, spreading the oil, and luxuriating in Dracula’s quickened breaths. Dracula’s belly tensed up but his hips stayed still; allowing Alucard to work. His breaths sped up just a little bit and his pupils expanded.

Dracula let his eyes go dark, his lids heavy, and there was just a little bit of his fangs showing
between his parted lips. He kept himself in check, though, and wait for Alucard’s move.

“You going to lead me in again?” Dracula asked, his voice rough and low.

Alucard swallowed, strangely affected by the sound of Dracula’s voice. He felt powerful in that moment, amazed by the effect he had on his Father.

“You are beautiful,” Alucard said. It astonished him how willing to comply Dracula was.

Surprisingly, Alucard’s words caused Dracula to shift just a little. His head tilted archly, and a pleased smile tugged at his lips. He brushed a finger down Alucard’s jaw and breathed out hard through his teeth, showing his fangs a little more.

Alucard pulled gently at Dracula’s cock, pressing the head against his sensitive, swollen hole. Both of them twitched at the contact; Alucard’s rim tightening up minutely while Dracula’s cock jerked in Alucard’s hand. There was still so much slick. His hole was dripping with a mix of oil and come. For all that Alucard couldn’t help but clench down, twitching against Dracula’s cock, he wasn’t as tight as before. His over-sensitive body gave under even the lightest of pressure, opening right up for Dracula.

“Let me watch you as you fuck me,” Alucard whispered. A blush burned at his cheeks.

Dracula huffed, and his eyes grew even darker. Slowly, he pushed with his hips. Alucard kept hold of his cock all the way, feeling it slide against his fingers again as it pushed past the resistance of his body.

“I love doing this,” Dracula said roughly, switching his hold to Alucard’s hips and pulling them up to shift the angle. “I love taking you like this.”

He bottomed out. The wet sound of his cock sinking into Alucard echoed in Alucard’s ears. The stretch wasn’t so overwhelming now, but the feeling of fullness was almost enough to take his breath away. It felt so good, that slow drag of cock inside him. His toes curled and he pulled his knees up, opening more for Dracula.

“You take me so well,” Dracula rumbled. An expression of pleasure came over his face. His eyes were half lidded and his hips worked slowly, pulling out and pushing in, making Alucard feel every inch of his cock. “You fit me perfectly.”

Alucard watched as a slight blush that started at Dracula’s neck crept lower, spreading over his wide chest. He was panting now, his belly working hard with every thrust, muscles tensing and delineating sharply under his skin. Alucard touched him, slid his oily hand over that working muscle and up to his tensed chest.

Dracula shifted again, bracing his arms on the bed on both sides of Alucard’s head. It brought attention to the wonderful muscles of his his pecs and arms, and how they bunched and worked with every thrust. Alucard moaned out a helpless little sound at every push in. Each time Dracula’s cock dragged over his prostate, it sent sparks of unbearable pleasure up his spine. He was soft, though. The exhaustion of the last week still dragged at him. Despite that, he loved this. Loved being able to just feel Dracula inside him, feel that heavy cock thrusting in slowly and deeply, filling him in perfectly.

He ran his hands over the hard swell of Dracula’s shoulders. Curled his palms around the tensed biceps, dragged his fingers across Dracula’s flexing pecs, and paused to rub at his dark nipples. Dracula’s head was lowered, his mouth open as he panted through the pleasure and the effort.
Alucard kept rubbing at Dracula’s nipples, feeling the skin heat up under his hands and the buds grow firm.

“I love you doing this to me,” Alucard whispered. He tightened his knees around Dracula, enjoying the rub of skin against the inside of his thighs. He wished, suddenly, that there would be marks left, that his skin would be left abraded and sore so that he could feel the shape of Dracula’s body between his legs for hours to come. “Stretching me, filling me, taking me as if it’s your right.”

Dracula lowered himself down, pressing his weight over Alucard’s body and pressed their lips together. His chest rubbed over Alucard’s swollen, sensitive nipples and Alucard squirmed, moaning at the added sensation.

“It is. You are mine,” Dracula said feverishly. His hips sped up, each thrust pushing a sharp ‘oh’ out of Alucard. “To love, to fuck, to break, to cherish. Mine.” He was growling against Alucard’s lips, swallowing the helpless sounds Alucard was making. “I’ll mark you inside and out. Fill you with my come, smear it on you skin. Everybody will know you are mine.”

Dracula sped up again, his hips working powerfully, fucking harder and faster into Alucard and making him whine and hold with everything he had.

When the orgasm came, Dracula groaned out loud. His hips snapped in one last time, grinding there into Alucard’s ass. Alucard whimpered as he felt his Father’s cock swell up again, becoming harder and spilling burningly hot come inside him. Spurt after spurt as Dracula ground into him, trying to get as deep as possible, with his face slack in pleasure.

Alucard pulled Dracula closer and kissed him, licking gently into his mouth as he tried to gentle him through the orgasm.

“I love you,” Alucard whispered between kisses. “I love you so much.”

Dracula was slowing, his pleasure spent now. Aucard could feel how wet he was between his legs, with oil, sweat, and come slicked all over. The scent of their coupling was potent in the air the air between them.

Though Dracula was calming, he was still breathing heavily as he let himself down to lay on Alucard’s body. His softening cock slipped out of Alucard’s hole, eliciting even more shivers.

“I hate the pain that you went through, but I am so grateful it let me have this. Let me meet you like this,” Alucard said quietly, overcome by the memory of the torment he witnessed and the love he felt. He couldn’t stand the thought of not having this, not having his Father loving him with all the passion of his dark heart.

Dracula didn’t answer him in words, and some part of Alucard never expected him to, not really. Dracula just dragged his wet lips down to Alucard’s neck, sucking at the sensitive skin under his ear. His hand sneaked between their bodies. His fingers slid between Alucard’s cheeks, rubbing around the swollen and achy hole.

Alucard shivered and arched into the hard sucking at his neck, realizing Dracula was marking him again. It took him a moment to also realize that the fingers trailing from his hole to his thigh and back were rubbing Dracula’s come into Alucard’s skin. Another way of marking him. Something dark and hot twitched in his chest, turning over inside of him and growing. His breathing hitched and he moaned quietly at the sensation, at the knowledge of how much Dracula wanted him.

Sadly, the scent of come would last longer than any bruises Dracula left on his skin. Alucard just
healed too quickly for any love mark to stay for more than a minute or two. That didn’t stop him from wanting Dracula to lick and suck more bruises into his skin. He pressed his cheek into the side of Dracula’s head, urging him closer, asking without words for more.

The steady pull on his skin sharpened for a moment, and Dracula bit down. Slowly, gently, he eased his fangs into Alucard’s neck, and then pulled back to lick away the few drops of blood that welled up.

It wasn’t feeding. It was just possession.

The little spike of pain from the mark was washed away with the pleasure of that claiming. The blood connection between them flared along with the bite, making Alucard’s awareness of Dracula sharpen and then fade to normal between one heartbeat and the next.

Bit by bit, Alucard melted into the bed, too tired to really do more than accept Dracula’s doting affection. That was glorious in and of itself, that he could close his eyes and be taken care of. The heat of their bodies slowly faded as the sweat dried up. Still, Dracula covered his throat, face, and chest with small kisses and little licks. He ran his hands up and down Alucard’s body, keeping him warm.

Just as Alucard was starting to nod off, Dracula nosed at his jaw. “You should come look out the terrace with me. Look at how wonderfully Kaer Morhen fits in the courtyard. I even got part of the river in past the city walls.”

He sounded so damn pleased, too.

Alucard held back a sigh. It was cold out on the balcony. Bitterly cold, given that it was still winter here. He’d just warmed up, too, snuggled under Dracula’s burning hot body. It was the warmest he’d felt all week. He was so tired that his bones felt heavy and his eyelids were like lead weights. His exhaustion was so great that he started to really wonder just how long he’d been fighting his way through the castle.

Despite all of that, he couldn’t resist how happy Dracula sounded. It was so rare for him to be this delighted that Alucard couldn’t bring himself to dampen the mood at all.

“Blanket,” he said, trying not to grumble, but maybe failing a little. Alucard groped randomly at the bed next to him, trying to catch hold of something to wrap up in.

Dracula beat him to the punch; he stretched out a hand and one of the heavy blankets at the foot of the bed slithered up into his grasp. From there, Dracula carefully eased Alucard’s exhausted form up to sitting and quickly wrapped the warm fabric around him.

With one arm still wrapped around his now covered shoulders, Dracula urged Alucard up out of bed and towards the open doors.

“Just look at how cute it is,” Dracula said, sounding so pleased and so happy, Alucard just didn’t have the heart to say no.

From where the bed was deep in the bedroom, all he could see was familiar steel grey mountain peaks with ice caps stretching out into the horizon. But standing at the edge of the wide terrace, he could see the distant lights of the castle stretched out below and off to the sides.

Overlook tower with its waterfalls was to the north; the low hanging cover of clouds around it hiding most of it from anyone on the ground. He saw the old Bernhard wing and Carmilla’s old palace.
Among all those familiar buildings, places he was used to seeing off of Dracula’s balcony, there was a big empty space. It was filled with a blanket of trees and a lonely river that wound its way through the whole castle. On one edge of that empty, forested area there was a tiny building backed against the dark stone of a small mountain. He could just barely see a few flickering lights there, glowing in the distance.

Kaer Morhen.

It was lovely, Alucard had to admit. The deep woods of the valley softened the harsh lines of the castle architecture. But oddly, it still seemed to fit. Maybe it was the sharp peaks of the pine, or the desolation of winter. Something about it seemed to work, though, and Kaer Morhen had slipped into the patchwork of the castle’s buildings with ease. He wondered if the trees would spread through the city, or if the city structures would slowly spread into the valley.

He also had to wonder what the other castle dwellers thought of this new addition. The demons that lived in Dracula’s domain were hardly peaceful, though many of the truly disruptive ones had already been killed and eaten.

“You’re right,” Alucard said, smiling a little. A chill breeze swept across the terrace, and he tightened his blanket around him. “It looks good where it is.” He looked off into the distance, staring at those little lights coming from the keep. “Can they get out?”

Dracula turned to look at Alucard, the strangest expression on his face.

“Uh.”

Alucard looked at him and blinked. Hard. Then he looked back towards the lights of Kaer Morhen. He covered his face with one hand and just sighed.

“What did you do?” Alucard asked. He peeked through his fingers to look at how the moat around the keep was no longer dry but filled with water. Knowing this castle, it probably wasn’t just water, either.

“When I moved the castle here, I was exhausted. So I ordered a lockdown before going to sleep,” Dracula said, sounding the closest to sheepish Alucard had ever heard him.

Iga had said that things had been locked down for the move. Given how Dracula fell asleep afterwards, that was probably a very good thing. It meant that nothing could run amok while he was recovering. Still, it also meant that whoever was in Kaer Morhen was stuck there. Vesemir, no doubt. Who knew who else in addition to that, though. Perhaps Ciri?

“Do you know how many days ago it was?” Alucard asked idly, turning his eyes to the mountains and the distant walls circling the whole enormous city complex.

Dracula scratched at his facial hair, very much not looking at Alucard. After a beat he brightened, an idea occurring to him and he looked at Alucard.

“Orlaith will know!”

Alucard tore his eyes away from a cluster of small lights along the outside of the western wall and turned to his Father.

“You better call her up then.” He pointed to the lights. “Because I think that’s an army camp out there.”
Yennefer smiled serenely at Siegfried of Denesle, Grandmaster of the Order of the Flaming Rose.

She’d never really gotten involved with their little crusade, their war against all creatures of darkness. Fanatics often brought more trouble than they were worth. It was for that very reason that she kept tabs on them, though. So when Triss had informed her that Geralt’s attackers had a warrant for his death signed by the Grandmaster of the Order of the Flaming Rose, she knew just where to go.

Castle Barienmurg was the largest castle in Redania---in all the Northern Kingdoms, in fact---and it was built by the Order. It served as their home base and it was where Siegfried spent much of his time. From what she’d heard, Siegfried was not a political creature, and thus he tended to stay away from the royal court in Redania. Instead, he spent his time at Barienmurg, training new recruits and preaching the word of the Eternal Flame.

His pious and fair reputation was more accurate than she anticipated, because when she arrived and asked for an audience, it was granted within the day. She didn’t even have to rely on beauty or threats. Sort of refreshing, actually.

Yennefer knew that she was lovely. She’d magically cultivated her appearance specifically to her wants and needs. Dark hair, violet eyes, pale skin, and a fine figure. Never again would she be spit upon for being misshapen. More often than not, her looks were as much a weapon as any magic she could wield, and men were fools who thought with their cocks rather than their brains.

There were a rare few that weren’t swayed by looks, and Siegfried seemed to be one of them. He bowed politely over her hand and a light blush touched his cheeks when he accidentally caught an eyeful of her neckline, but he’d not said a single word about it. Nor did his eyes linger on anything but her face.

Siegfried himself was a plain man, both in features and decoration. His nose looked like it had been broken more than once over the years, and his sandy blond hair was cut in the short bowl cut favored by knights and monks of various orders. He was armed and armored as a knight of his Order, with pieces of plate mail and chainmail shining under his red tabard. The tabard itself held the emblem of the Order, an image of an orange flame with a red rose in its center.

She expected him to take her to an office, or perhaps some kind of private room. To her surprise, he simply led her out to walk along one of the passageways circling the internal courtyard.
After they had walked for a minute or two, Siegfried turned his head to look at her. She could read nothing is expression but earnestness and curiosity. “It is very unusual for a sorceress to seek an audience with me. How may I be of service, m’lady?”

“Call me Yennefer, please,” she said with a smile. “I am here because of a mutual friend.” Yennefer waited a beat, but Siegfried showed no reaction to that statement. “Geralt of Rivia.”

That earned her a slightly puzzled look. Either Siegfried was a superb actor, or he truly had no idea about the warrant.

“Geralt?” He hummed to himself and shook his head. “I have not seen him since we fought years ago.” At her raised eyebrow, he waved a hand at her, placating. “It was not what you might think. There is no enmity between us. Geralt had stumbled across something that the prior grandmaster had been…involved in. It was my duty to protect the head of my Order, to follow his commands and help bring about his vision of peace for the world.” He heaved a sigh. “In hindsight, I think perhaps Jacques was—” He took a breath and seemed to consider his words carefully. “He had been misguided by vanity and folly. He sought to damage those who would be better left to the Light to deal with. Geralt and I did fight, but I know why he acted as he did, and I do not blame him for his actions. He is an honorable man. A good man.”

Wasn’t that a bit of food for thought. She’d heard all about the events in question, of course, both from Geralt and from her contacts in Temeria. Jacques de Aldersberg was a gods be damned raving lunatic who wanted to murder anything with a hint of non-human about it. Geralt killing him had been a mercy for all involved.

“So you have had no dealings with Geralt since then?” she asked. “None at all?”

Again she got a curious look from him. “I have not, and it troubles me that you should ask. Is he well?”

Fucking religious orders.

Clearly, Siegfried was both the perfect choice and the worst possible choice ever for grandmaster of a military religious order. He practically radiated sincerity. He was a true believer, she could tell. Nothing about him suggested he was anything other than a pious man, from how his clothes were simple, sturdy things, to how his armor and blade shone like they were well used. It showed in how he walked through the castle, too, greeted with smiles and pride as people saw him.

This also meant that he hadn’t the faintest idea that someone else was scheming against him. It seemed rumor was true. The arena of politics was obviously beyond him.

She sighed.

“Geralt is not well. Something I’m surprised you are not aware of, since it was your Order that nearly killed him,” Yennefer said, slightly waspishly.

“What?” Siegfried stopped dead in his tracks, his eyes wide with alarm. “But, why? Witchers are protectors of the people.”

“Surely you’ve heard of what happened in Temeria but a few days ago. You personally sent over a hundred of your warriors and your mages against him.” Yennefer tried to keep her voice even, but likely failed. Even if this hadn’t hurt Geralt, whom she still cared about a great deal, it still would have been an absolute clusterfuck. Temeria held the line against Nilfgaard; a major incident there could have far-reaching consequences.
Siegfried stared at her and his face darkened. There was a tension that ran through him, though not one that felt dangerous. Not yet, anyways. No matter what else Siegfried was, he was a warrior, and she knew she would be wise to remember that.

“I’ve recently lost touch with many of the chapter brothers in Temeria, though I had not heard why,” Siegfried said with a frown. “I would not have sent them against Geralt. What could I possibly have to gain from such an action?”

“That is the question, isn’t it,” she mused. “The Order hunts non-humans—”

“Some,” he interrupted harshly. “Some of the Order do, but not the ones I train. Not those brothers who are true to the Eternal Flame. The Light loves all who wish to live in peace.”

“There was a warrant, signed by you, calling for his death. And so many of your brothers died trying to carry it out.” Yennefer leaned in closer, letting her words fall to a whisper. “They are all dead. The very land they marched upon has been burned down to the bedrock, and demonic power has soaked into the earth like poison. What were your brothers doing there, Grandmaster?”

Now she got a reaction. Siegfried turned red in the face and he leaned in close to her. “How dare you imply that any member of our noble order would bring about such vile destruction.”

“I imply nothing,” she said with a poisonous smile. “I am merely stating facts. On your signed command, several chapters of your Order gathered together and chased down a witcher. Their plan clearly backfired, and now there is a smoking wasteland where there once was healthy forest and fields.”

“I signed no such warrant,” he said, low and firm. But then he looked down and to the side. The armor on his gauntlets clinked together, betraying a nervous fidgeting. “Since I have become Grandmaster, I have worked tirelessly to spread the word of protection and safety for all. But there are…other brothers within the Order who are fond of less scrupulous methods, and I am not the only one who members of my order look to for guidance.”

Oh really?

Siegfried cast a look up and down the corridor, and then nodded towards another hall. “Come. There are things that perhaps you should know, that shouldn’t be spoken of here.”

Now they made their way towards a room that was something like an office. Yennefer had to stop herself from rolling her eyes. They could have just started there.

“Who else,” she asked the moment the door shut behind them, cutting to the chase.

“I have heard…rumblings of dissent in the Order.” He held up a hand to her, as if waving off interruptions. “No, I do not know who has started these rumors. At first, I thought it was just leftover vitriol from Jacques de Aldersberg. In his last days, I think he’d gone mad with his hatred and lust for power. He was passionate, though, and he spread his ideas far within our Order. Many agreed with his stance of human purity first. Most of those were killed in the uprising in Temeria, but some remain. As I trained new recruits and reshaped our actions out in the world, I’d hoped these few voices would be drowned out by the calls for peace and the solemn dedication to protecting those in need.”

Yennefer snorted. Right. Because that always worked.

He raised an eyebrow at her. “Truly, you underestimate people, sorceress. They would have come around. But I fear there have been others meddling. There has been talk—not here mind you, but
elsewhere in the kingdom—that someone may come to challenge me for the seat of Grandmaster. As of yet, I have heard of no contenders, though.”

He shrugged, and leaned back onto his desk, resting for a moment. There was a frown on his face and his shoulders hunched up in such a way that it had to be uncomfortable, but he didn’t look panicked. There was no hint of guilt around him, either.

“Do you think there will be a schism?” she asked finally.

“I dearly hope not,” Siegfried said with a heavy sigh. “The people need us, and, as much as I hate to say it, there is another war with Nilfgaard in the not too distant future. The Regency Council has already begun to send not-so-veiled inquiries as to where the Order would stand if such a conflict were to occur. It is not our place to fight wars with men. The witchers are disappearing, and yet there are still monsters preying upon the villagers and farmers. We cannot afford to leave them unattended, though I fear the Council will give us no choice.”

The depth of his conviction was impressive. He really sounded like he cared about the people his Order were supposed to be protecting, never mind that it was the Order themselves that continued to make life harder for witchers.

A witcher could kill any beast or monster needed, for the right price, but the Order would show up and do it for free. They were far, far less skilled, though. Many of them were young men, sent away from their fathers’ land and holdings for being an extra mouth to feed. But by sending them to the Order, the child would be cared for, trained, and bring prestige to the family name. As such, when they were sent off to kill whatever creature needed to die, the casualties were very high. Not only that, but they brought with them the doctrine of the Eternal Flame.

In its most benevolent form, the worship of the Eternal Flame was a kind, forgiving religion. It sought to bring protection and safety to all innocents, and it was said that the shining light of a blessed candle would banish evil.

In practice, many people used it as an excuse to call anyone who didn’t look like them a ‘monster’. That conveniently tended to include anyone who worshiped the other gods as well. Witchers often fell on the wrong side of that divide, too.

“I swear to you on the Eternal Flame, I did not order the death of Geralt,” Siegfried said evenly. “We had our differences, but I believe he is a guardian of the Light in this world. I had hoped he would join me in the Order, but I understand that he needed to walk his own path.”

Funny enough, Yennefer believed him.

That did bring up another problem though, which was now she needed to dig up who actually was responsible for the death warrant.

“Tell me about your allies and enemies here,” she said after a moment of thought. “Help me find out the cause of this, and maybe we can settle matters for both of us.”

Siegfried mulled this over, and then nodded. “I’ll ask for some wine for us. This may take a while.”

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Triss refilled the mug in front of her and shoved it across the table to Thaler.

They were holed up in the back of Thaler’s pawn shop in Vizima’s Temple Quarter. It wasn’t quite
dusk, and most of Thaler’s customers wouldn’t be looking for him for hours yet. They’d have plenty of time for a little chat.

Ostensibly, Thaler was a fence. Every part of him screamed criminal, with his rough and tumble way of moving, his thick, dirty accent, right down to his shabby, well used clothes. He was exactly the kind of man who would buy anything and then sell it right back to you for twenty five orens more than you got for it in the first place. He was lean and bitter, with a tongue sharper than most people’s swords.

He was also part of Temeria’s Secret Service, King Foltest’s personal spymaster, and a friend of Geralt’s to boot. They’d spent some time working together back before the Order’s uprising, though as far as Triss knew it had taken Geralt a while to ferret out that Thaler was more than he claimed to be. Eventually he did, though, and the two had stayed allies ever since.

“The fuck did Geralt get involved with,” Thaler grumbled at her, taking a deep swig of his drink. Triss knew that the harsh slur and slang was all affectation. Just another part of his role. His birth name had long since been erased, lost to time and his own clever, cautious plans. Sometimes, though, he spoke as a highborn would, and he knew more about the noble families’ inner workings than even decades of spycraft could account for.

Whatever his origins, King Foltest trusted him implicitly, and everything Triss had learned about the man had proved that Foltest’s trust was well placed. Thaler was unflinchingly, unwaveringly loyal to the crown.

He was also wickedly good at his work, and knew more about clandestine affairs in the Northern Kingdoms than anyone else Triss knew.

“What have you heard?” she asked. One of the things she both liked and hated about Thaler was that there was nothing but the job for him. He had no personal prejudices, that she could tell. Not against women, which was uncommon, nor against sorceresses, which was even more uncommon still. It meant that she could sit here and talk to him as an equal, but it also meant that she couldn’t intimidate or cajole him into revealing more than he wanted.

He could get drunk, though. Eventually. The man drank like he’d mummified his liver in a lich’s phylactery. It was no wonder why he and Geralt got along so well; they must have spent many a night drinking each other under the table. Triss knew better than to bother trying. Luckily, she didn’t need to. Her position on Foltest’s Advisory Council allowed her to simply be upfront with what she wanted.

Given the subject at hand, he probably would be thrilled to help her figure out what was going on.

Thaler hummed at her and took another drink. “I’ve heard the Order is making waves again, though what exactly is going on there is unclear. They aren’t making any moves against the Crown, and they certainly aren’t making any moves here in Vizima. My agents have informed me that some of the Order are spreading more hate about non-humans. Witchers, too.”


Thaler hummed again in agreement. “Seems that Temeria isn’t the only place that it’s being spread. Copies are floating around everywhere in Redania, too. Especially along the coast.” Near where Novigrad was, Triss was certain. “There’s news about a dragon abroad, and rumor is blaming anyone who doesn’t look perfectly plowing human for the cause of it. Elves, dwarves.” He took another drink. “Witchers. Hell, there are even rumors of mages and sorceresses stealing their energy from demonic forces.”
He raised an eyebrow and gave her a dry smirk.

“They’re grasping at straws,” Triss scoffed, sipping her own drink.

“Obviously,” he said with a snort. “But people are starting to worry. No one has seen a greater
dragon in Redania in living memory. Not in Temeria, either, though I suspect that Brokilon might
hold something of its like.”

That wasn’t good news. Not unexpected though, and for a number of reasons. It was part of an
unsettling trend that had been building for decades. Humans were driving out the Old Races, and
tensions were extremely high. More so in cities where everyone had to interact with each other.

Even here in Vizima, non-human races were relegated to the non-human district. There were no
laws that forced them there; just simple bigotry. For the most part it was a poor area, and one that
wasn’t well patrolled by the city guard. It was a recipe for trouble, and Vizima wasn’t the only city
where such areas were common. When something new and frightening showed up, people
inevitably turned on the folks they despised anyways as the cause of the new hardship.

But Vizima was a long ways away from Novigrad, and rumors of the dragon that had shown up
there were just that: rumors. Each retelling more fanciful than the last.

To see the hatred for non-humans stoked up again was somewhat out of character for this area. Especcially the hatred against witchers, who normally escaped such treatment. Vizima was the
capital of Temeria, and King Foltest had made no secret of how much he liked and respected
Geraldt of Rivia. To see the Monstrum circulated in his city was highly unusual.

It just added to the creeping dread that had become an unpleasant staple of Triss’s life. Dracula had
destroyed a massive amount of land. All of that terrible power was just barely held in check, and at
any time it could start to lay waste again. All because Geralt had nearly died.

The Monstrum was a part of that, and every second those pamphlets were on the street only
increased the chance that more danger would head Geralt’s way.

“Someone is directing this. Any leads on who?” she asked.

Now Thaler smiled, a wicked, vicious stretch of his thin lips that did nothing to dissuade Triss from
thinking about liches. “Oh, aye, lady. My boys found the man himself. And after a serious,
heartfelt baring of the soul, he confided in me that he was working for a man named Krizkirt.”
Now Thaler leaned in over the table, speaking low and fast. “Krizkirt is a black market arms
dealer, known for smuggling various military goods across the Yaruga River, and out of
Nilfggaard.”

“A man like that could have easily gotten a rather large amount of poison across the border.
Enough to supply a couple hundred troops with poison arrows,” Triss said absently, tapping her
fingers on her mug.

“Without a doubt. Tell me,” Thaler said grimly, jerking his chin forward to urge her on.

“When the Order attacked Geralt, they had poison arrows. Someone I know identified the poison
as one that originates in the Nilfgaardian Empire. It’s common enough that it wouldn’t be possible
to trace it to a specific maker, but the ingredients wouldn’t survive in the colder climates of the
Northern Kingdoms.”

“Isn’t that interesting,” Thaler mused, taking another heavy swig of his drink. “Not just that the
Order was supplied with poison, but also that Geralt managed to survive a small army coming at
him.” Thaler’s eyes grew narrow and cold as he stared at her. There something dark in that gaze, and right then Triss felt as if every bit of her was being weighed and measured, as if for sale at a later date. “You know something, sorceress. Something dangerous.”

But Triss had been dealing with unpredictable powers all her life, and it would take more than one little spy to frighten her. No matter how ruthless or well connected the man was.

She smiled at him. “Of course I know something dangerous. How do you think I got to be a sorceress in the first place.”

Casual as could be, she sipped her wine and waited to see what his next move would be.

It took another minute, but some of the callous calculation went out of his gaze. He leaned back in his chair and finished off his drink. She poured him another.

Whatever train of thought Thaler had been entertaining, he’d clearly set it on the back burner because he promptly got the subject back on track. “Now as far as I know, Krizkirt isn’t an agent of Emperor Emhyr. What he is, is up for sale, doing jobs on both sides of the river for whoever has enough gold to make it happen.”

Triss knew better than to expect that Thaler wouldn’t go looking into more information about Geralt later, but that couldn’t be helped. The comment about the poison was a bungle on her part, and now it was an irreversible one. Barring his death, Thaler was too good an agent to let anything so unusual go, especially when that tidbit was related to a newly blackened field of death on his country’s south-western border.

But that was an issue for another time. She had more terrifying things to worry about right now.

“So you’re saying someone paid Krizkirt to send people into Temeria to rile up the populace against witchers?” Triss said with a frown.

“Indeed.” Thaler took a swig. “I’ve sent a group of Blue Stripes to go check it out, not only to see who Krizkirt is working for, but where else his little shit stirrers have gotten to.” He leaned forward again, settling his ferociously intelligent gaze on her once more. “In the meantime, something happened earlier today to every mage I know. They all got hit with the nastiest headache they’d ever had. What do you know about it?”

Here was another tricky point. How much to tell him? Too much and it may bring Geralt and the other Wolf witches even more trouble. Not enough, and Thaler would know she was being disingenuous. He had enough contacts that eventually he’d find out some of the story anyways, so whatever she said would need to be able to stand up to double checking.

“Something happened in Kaedwen,” she said. “What, exactly, I’m not sure. I haven’t scryed, and based on the backlash from that energy manifestation, trying would probably knock me out cold.” She shrugged. “I can try to get in touch with the Lodge members in Kaedwen. I’d go myself, but matters here have already claimed my attention.”

Thaler looked at her, and again she got that feeling of icy calculation.

“Kaedwen, huh. So this doesn’t have anything to do with our own little magical wasteland along the border to Brokilon.”

Fuck.

“What would make you think that?” she asked, tilting her head in curiosity.
“Stands to reason, doesn’t it.” He took a sip of his drink, and raised his eyebrows at her. “Two major magical events in the same week. There are a limited number of people powerful enough to pull off a stunt like what happened here in Temeria. Or group of people, perhaps. Tell me, what does the Lodge think of that? You sorceresses don’t like to share your power.”

“The Lodge has always worked for the good of Northern kingdoms,” Triss was stalling, giving herself some time to think. Objectively, there was no way to hide the existence of the new castle in Blue Mountains. It was, simply speaking, too large. The reports she got from Ciri said the structure was actually bigger than Ard Carraigh, the capital city of Kaedwen. It had completely walled off a section of the Blue Mountains, swallowing Kaer Morhen whole.

In the end, she went for a shade of the truth.

“We’re still unsure of how this will play out. The kind of power needed to do something like this could have been easily used in a more destructive way. But it wasn’t. I think we’ll have to wait and see what the next move is.”

Thaler hummed at her noncommittally. “Bet Henselt is pissed.”

“What doesn’t piss that bastard off?” Triss took a sip of wine and grimaced. She had no great fondness for King Henselt, nor for the sorceress assigned to his court by the Lodge. Sabrina was powerful, there was no doubt about it. She and Yennefer were rivals, of a sort. Friendly enemies, one might say. But Sabrina also had a way of making Henselt listen to her, which was no mean feat. Henselt himself was a hotheaded bully who was used to getting his way. Dracula showing up in his backyard would infuriate him.

The fact Dracula could be just as much of a hothead did not bode well for anybody, because as powerful as Henselt was, he was no match for a King of Hell. Humans needed at least seventeen years to raise a soldier. Nine months for pregnancy and sixteen years to train the soldier who would need to be clothed, fed, and paid in that time. Demons seemed a much cheaper army to her and she could bet Dracula didn’t have to worry about remaining popular among his subjects. Should those two forces collide, it was the humans that would come out the worse for it.

Not only that, but an armed conflict with Dracula would all but doom the Northern Kingdoms. It was only through their combined efforts that they managed to stave off Nilfgaard. Dividing their forces on two fronts would only leave them all open to attack from the south.

That also didn’t take into account the possible reaction of the non-human races. It was very possible that those creatures who’d been constantly abused and pushed out of their territories might look upon Dracula and see their savior in him.

So far, the non-humans had never been organized. Each race, the ones more or less sentient anyways, had always kept to themselves. Only Dwarves, Elves, and Dryads had ever organized. All the dozens of other sentient species were never numerous enough to matter. But they also never had any real hope to win against the more numerous and more powerful humans. Dracula’s arrival could change that, could take the edge away from humans. She wondered what would happen once the great powers in the world realized this.

Thaler barked out a harsh laugh. “That’s true enough.” He drained his mug in one long pull and smirked at her. “I’ll see what my contacts can dig up. Let me know what you find on the matter, too.”

“Of course,” Triss said with a smile. She knew a dismissal when she heard one, and stood up to take her leave.
As much as she wanted to dig into the issue herself, she had the aftermath of the destruction in the south west to deal with. She’d have to trust Thaler and Ciri to get her the information she needed, and then get it to Yennefer. Hopefully between them all they could unravel what was going on here before it devolved into another war.

Or worse.

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Letho of Gulet panted and gritted his teeth so hard that he thought they might crack. Some might have already cracked, not like he was in any condition to be able to sense a fucking tooth anymore. Sweat stung his eyes and pain flooded his senses. He could barely see through it.

They’d started easy with whips and beating, but they’d long since gotten to the hard stuff. Burns covered his chest and back. Bones were broken, one at a time. He got doused with so much saltwater the cuts and burns screamed at him constantly with how much salt was stuck in them.

His arms were currently stretched out above him. He was on the rack. There wasn’t enough tension to dislocate anything yet.

Yet.

And all the while the men who held him kept asking him the most asinine questions.

He’d thought that they’d picked him up for another reason. He’d thought that Henselt had somehow, magically, miraculously, stumbled onto his actual job here.

But no. All they wanted to know about was stuff that Letho had never even heard of.

Demon city? What the fuck did Letho know about a demon city?

It galled, even more than letting his guard down and getting tattled on by a fucking innkeeper, that they kept asking questions he had no answer to. Letho hated not being the one with all the information, the one in control.

Even more infuriating than that was the fact that he’d somehow gotten arrested and tortured for someone else’s fuck up. They weren’t even after Letho! They kept asking him about Kaer Morhen, as if he’d ever even fucking been to the Wolf witcher keep.

He was so fucking pissed at the whole situation that he lied even more flamboyantly than he normally would have.

This had predictable results. Painful and predictable.

Letho was no stranger to torture. He would hold out as long as he could.

Pain was an old companion to him. This wasn’t his first, second or even his tenth turn on the rack. He would survive, one way or the other, and he would heal. In the meantime he was going to make the torturer get into the deepest possible shit he possibly could for not getting what he was supposed to.

Between the screams and the suffering and the lies, he did notice that there were more breaks than he expected. Specifically, the men in charge of working him over very frequently got pulled out of the room to go deal with a runner from his royal majesty.
Apparently Henselt had a bug up his ass to get some answers, and was making his displeasure known. That brought Letho a small ember of satisfaction to hold tight in his chest.

It was also clear that the men here had no idea what a witcher could do. Every single time they got taken out of the room to get bitched out by their superiors, Letho listened in through the stone wall.

Granted, this was getting more and more difficult as the pain got harder and harder to deal with. But it at least brought him more information about what was going on.

“...how we get through the walls?!” the visitor demanded.

“That mutant freak won’t even admit there are walls, let alone a whole fucking dark city,” the head torturer griped. “I’m telling you, he doesn’t know shit. He would have broken by now.”

Not fucking likely. Letho wanted to huff in laughter, but all he managed was a wet, bloody sniff.

“Just get a fucking mage to look at it,” the torturer continued.

“There’s no way to get in, there’s no way to see in. The mages are fucking useless. Everyone who tries to scry ends up passed out bleeding.”

“How is that my fucking problem?”

“It’s your problem because his majesty ordered a damn army up there. They’re gonna lay siege.”

There was a long, shocked pause.

“You’re shitting me.”

“No.”

“...That whole fucking place just appeared out of nowhere, bigger than Ard fucking Carraigh, and Henselt wants to start a siege? There ain’t shit up there to squabble over and everyone knows it. Just trees and rocks and a broke ass witcher keep.”

“And if you don’t get us some useful intelligence, you will be the one on the rack next,” the voice was scared and angry enough that Letho had no trouble believing him.

The fact the torturer seemed to be getting his ass handed to him was a balm on Letho’s soul, if not on his wounds. He wouldn’t break, if only to die in the satisfaction of dragging his torturer down with him.

There was low cursing from the torturer.

“You’ve got until the army is ready to portal over there, then you need to pack that piece of shit witcher up.”

“What?”

“You’re all coming with us. King’s orders.”

That did not sound good. Letho’s experiences with mages was limited, but he knew enough to either kill them or keep away from them. The things they could do to a person’s mind didn’t bear thinking about. If there was one thing that truly terrified him, it was the chance of losing his mind and will to some fucking spell.
“Fuck,” the torturer muttered again. “How long do you think?”

“‘Nother couple hours. Tops.”

There was a heavy sigh.

“Alright. I’ll see what I can do. But no promises. This git don’t know shit and that is not our fault.”

“Go do your fucking job.”

Footsteps and a distant door slammed.

Another couple hours.

Letho could survive that. He had to. He had a mission to finish.

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Night did not agree to take Palo and Mika back to their village, no matter how many bribes Vesemir offered her. The mare wouldn't even leave the stables, stubbornly confining herself to the stall that Vesemir had assigned to her when she’d first got to the keep. She didn’t even go to try and hunt for small critters.

At first Vesemir was annoyed, but after a while he started to wonder. All the rest of Dracula's servants were nowhere in sight. Maybe their disappearance had something to do with why she wouldn’t go out. Clearly she wanted to. Every time a bold mouse ran by or a bunny hopped by the door to the courtyard, she strained her neck towards it and sighed.

It got to the point where Vesemir and Lambert took turns practicing their archery on whatever wandered by just to feed her their kills. She seemed to appreciate the effort, but still looked despondent. Her big, red eyes sadly followed them whenever they wandered through.

Lambert seemed to get an incredible amount of joy from tossing his kills at her and watching her jump to snap it out of the air. It seemed like Lambert and Night were surprisingly well suited. His energy took up her attention, and she seemed to make him laugh.

There wasn’t much else to do, though. Ciri wasn’t willing to risk a coma by testing her magic against the city’s wards. Vesemir still felt uncomfortable leaving Palo and Mika unattended in the keep, though now he had Ciri and Lambert to help mind them.

At least he was able to get some chores done.

For lack of anything better to do, Vesemir recruited Mika and Palo to do kitchen chores and minor repairs. Night had left quite a mess in the upper floors, and while the stonework repairs would have to wait, the woodwork could be done right away. With the three of them working, they were able to get through far more work than Vesemir expected, and by the end of the first day they’d fixed all they could.

The next day, Vesemir conscripted them for some of the outside chores. Chopping wood, setting traps, and upkeep on some of the outbuildings.

For their part, Mika and Palo seemed happy enough to lend a hand. They were probably thinking it was better than getting eaten by demons. Whatever the reason, Vesemir was grateful they didn’t kick up more of a fuss. The last thing he needed was them wandering off and falling down a pit or through a broken floorboard in one of the rough parts of the keep.
Though, to be honest, Vesemir hadn’t really seen a lot of those types of places lately. The boards all seemed sound, and every time he turned around there was less and less decay. Less rubble in the far stairwells, and no windows empty of glass.

He still didn’t want the humans wandering around unattended.

Especially near the moat. The gods be damned moat that had not only been filled with fast flowing water, it also had a large, spiny thing inhabiting it. The last thing he needed was the beast to eat one of the humans who wandered onto the bridge unawares.

Vesemir found himself staring into the water late at night, after the first full day that Lambert had been at the keep.

Mika and Palo had retired to their assigned room, and Vesemir sat on the top of the forward battlements, looking down at the churning water. The night was cold, and the sky was dark with clouds; barely a hint of stars were peeking through. Still, Vesemir’s keen witcher eyes followed the slow moving beast in the water, watching as its spines rippled at the surface.

His hearing wasn’t as good as maybe some of his students, but Vesemir still heard Lambert’s approach.

Lambert sat with him for a long while before saying anything.

“I don’t think they would mind the company,” Lambert said, pointing at the water. He was talking about the bones of the dead. All those who Vesemir had tossed in the moat, the ones who’d died in the massacre.

“We all keep the company of monsters now,” Vesemir said with a dry snort. The humor of the statement fell flat, though, and his mouth twisted into a bitter frown.

He was warm enough in his cloak, and in his arms curled the little black cat. She’d followed him out, but looked miserable on the cold stone next to him. So he’d picked her up, keeping her tight to his armored chest. He could feel her shivering gently against his hold.

Lambert again fell silent. After a minute he tried again. “Given our new neighbors, I’m not sad about the extra protection.” He looked around to the high black walls looming in the dark.

That was true enough. Vesemir petted the shivering cat’s head, rubbing along its ears. He watched the dark water swish under him, swirling around the unnamed horror that now lived there.

“If I catch it disturbing our brothers, my children, I’m jumping in the damn moat to gut it myself,” Vesemir said quietly. The low words held very little of the churning unrest that the sight of the full moat had stirred up.

“Seems reasonable,” Lambert said easily. He waited a moment, then put a hand on Vesemir’s shoulder. “Come in and have a drink with me. Your cat is cold.”

“It’s not my cat,” Vesemir protested.

Lambert raised his brow and looked pointedly at the way Vesemir was protectively pressing the cat against his chest.

“She’s still fragile,” Vesemir defended weakly, hastening his steps to get away from Lambert’s judging gaze.
“Of course,” Lambert agreed. He didn’t even try to disguise his amusement.

They’d gone in and warmed up by the kitchen fire. Vesemir had placed the little cat on her pillow on the hearth, but once again, she snuck into his bed sometime in the night. He’d woken up with her curled into his side, and she proceeded to follow him around for the rest of the day.

He drew the line at letting her on the counter while he was making dinner. Despite her meowing protests, she’d gotten placed on a high stool off to the side while he, Ciri, and Palo fixed up a meal. Lambert and Mika sat at the table, idly playing a game of cards while they waited. They’d clean up after the meal, so the workload was shared.

Vesemir froze, sensing something unearthly happening. Ciri and Lambert had frozen in place, too. No doubt they felt it as well. A second later, Palo and Mika followed suit.

There was a tingling in the air, like a thrum that went through everything. The floor, the walls, them. It was as if the night itself took a deep breath and held it.

Then lights appeared outside the kitchen window. Vesemir could see them pop up one by one, far off in the distance. He quickly walked over to get a better look at what was happening outside.

Some of the lights were ghostly blue, some warm and golden. They shone in the windows of the dark buildings scattered along the wall and the mountains surrounding them, and back east beyond the valley. The archways connecting the towers, things that he could only see during the day before, were now illuminated by rows upon rows of lights. Towers that used to disappear into the darkness of the night were suddenly visible, lit up by windows that were glowing with a red hue. Small rivers of lava poured out and down the side of several of the structures, though if they were intended as a light source or for some other purpose, Vesemir couldn’t tell.

The next thing he noticed was sound. Night was out of the stable and prancing on the stone courtyard. Her claws clanged merrily over the bricks as she ran in happy circles, her tail flagged.

Vesemir glanced around the room, sharing a worried look with Ciri and Lambert.

“Can you feel it too?” Ciri asked, frowning.

“As if lightning struck somewhere near,” Palo said quietly, shifting closer to his son.

“Not lightning,” a new voice said.

Vesemir spun around, a knife in his hand before he even thought about drawing it.

There on the stool, the little cat, his little stray, grew and transformed. Shadows spun around her, swallowing her form as it stretched and solidified into that of a tall, willowy woman. Her eyes manifested first, the same sea green color as the damn cat, bright and clear. Her hair was the palest of blonds, just barely catching the orange glow of the fireplace and the lamps set around the room. It was pulled back in a smooth bun, pierced through by two long spikes. On the end of each spike a few colorful stones shined. She wore long earrings shaped like grapes and sparkling with a variety of colors, only enhancing the willowy length of her neck.

Her clothes were simple, and dark green. Her tight breeches and high boots looked to be supple suede, and her upper body was wrapped in a long coat. For all that the cut was plain, the fabric and fit were very fine. They did look worn, though. Dusty and frayed at the edges, as if she’d been traveling for weeks. There were dark rings under her eyes, and her face looked thinner than was healthy. She sat perched on the stool, prim and proper as could be.
“Not lightning,” she said again. “It is My Lord waking up.”

“Lord?” Lambert repeated, still staring at the woman.

“Dracula,” Vesemir said, only just starting to realize the cat that slept with him the last few days, that saw him change and bathe was not a cat at all, but this woman. Demon. Her.

She nodded at him and smiled. “The same. He awakens, and the rest of the castle rises with him.”

“And you are?” Ciri asked. Of all of them, she looked the least startled. Vesemir could see it was an act, though. He recognized the lines of tension in her shoulders and the tight, blank look on her face.

“I am Orlaith.” She nodded to Ciri in a short bow. “I am the Steward of the castle.”

Vesemir leaned back and scowled at her. He flipped his knife in the air once, and then slipped it back in its sheath. “You've been watching me.”

“You are very pleasant to watch,” she said evenly.

Lambert snorted in amusement. But when Vesemir shot him a glare, he had his mouth covered with one hand, as if just rubbing his mouth and jaw. Not covering up the obviously barely withheld grin.

“Why are you here?” Vesemir asked, turning back to look at Orlaith.

“In this kitchen?” Orlaith tilted her head to look at him curiously. “You brought me here. Once here, I admit, I was quite fascinated. I am bound to the castle, and this is new territory. Part of my domain, but not.” Her gaze swept across the room, lingering on Lambert and Ciri. Then she looked back to Vesemir. Another barely there smile teased at her lips. “And you are My Lord’s lover’s family. It seemed prudent to watch over you.”

Vesemir pinched the bridge of his nose, and sighed. Stone walls, magical appearing cities, demon horses, and now a shapeshifting cat. Was there nothing normal left in this whole damn valley? Should he start looking askance at the chickens next? He dragged his hand down his face and took a deep breath.

It seemed the rest of the room was waiting for him to make the next move, so he waved at Ciri and Palo to get back to their food preparation. He went back to trimming up the grouse and rabbits they’d caught that day.

“I was going to set you aside a bit of meat...” Vesemir side-eyed Orlaith, who was still watching him with interest. “But perhaps you’d prefer it in the stew?”

“I am not opposed to raw meat, but stew sounds lovely.”

Right. Demon. Raw meat likely wouldn’t be much of an issue at all. Vesemir brooded over this new development while he worked.

“Can you tell what’s happening outside the walls?” Ciri asked.

“To a limited extent, yes,” Orlaith answered. “If you’re asking about the potential army you were speculating about the other day, yes. There is an army waiting at the walls around this valley.” She sniffed in disdain. “Or a sad, pathetic excuse for one, anyways. What paltry numbers. There can’t be more than a few thousand out there. When My Lord’s castle was besieged last, they brought
forth half a million armored men, and engines of war as well. My Lord killed them all, of course, but that was at least a solid effort.”

Ciri and Lambert froze for a moment, both looking stunned, while Palo and Mika looked downright terrified. Their eyes were wide and their faces had turned as white as the snow outside.

Vesemir just shook his head in exasperated resignation. This was the man that Geralt just had to fuck. As soon as he got back from healing up, Vesemir was going to kick Geralt’s ass around the salle for a solid week. Give the boy a real reason to limp.

“They’re just waiting?” Palo asked quietly.

Orlaith turned to him and nodded. “Indeed. There is not much else they can do. My walls are built to withstand far more damage than they can dream of bringing to bear, and with everything else on lockdown while My Lord slept, there was not much I could do to deter them.”

“Stalemate,” Lambert grumbled, tossing down his hand of cards. He grabbed the ones that had fallen out of Mika’s limp grasp and began reshuffling the deck.

“It was, yes.”

“But now that Dracula is awake, you’re free to respond,” Ciri said shrewdly. She wandered over to the heavy cauldron over the large kitchen fire and tossed in several small piles of herbs and oil, mixing them up in the hot base of the pot. The savory scent of it bloomed in the room, making it seem all the more homey. It was odd, talking about armies at the gates when the kitchen here seemed so peaceful.

“Indeed, I am.” Orlaith sounded immensely satisfied at that. “Though at the moment I am inclined to bide my time. The castle is self sufficient. They cannot starve us out. They cannot force my walls open, for there is no opening while I will there to be none. They have no advantages here.”

Vesemir finally finished preparing the game, and tossed it in the cauldron to braise along with the herbs. It was a good thing that they’d been successful at the hunt. Six people, two of whom were witchers, would eat a fair amount.

Which reminded him.

He looked at Orlaith, a slight frown on his face. She did look a bit haggard, both her body and her clothes. In her cat form, she was thin and uncared for.

“Are you well?” he asked.

She blinked at him in surprise. Then a slightly larger smile curled across her face. “I am as well as can be expected, given all that has happened.”

“And what did happen?” Ciri asked, still stirring the pot. Vesemir moved to set up the second cauldron on the fire to mull some wine.

Orlaith moved a strand of hair behind her ear, making sure it was neat and smooth.

“The castle is basically a world unto itself. It grows, evolves, and expands like a living being. I am bound to it, deep enough that we can no longer be separated. When My Lord decided to move the castle from where it was, that meant that all roots, all anchoring systems keeping it in place in relation to other worlds, had to be severed. It was...”
She frowned, looking ahead with unseeing eyes. “Like amputating limbs. My limbs. We had to do it with me conscious because I was needed to keep the castle together for the transfer and then settle it here according to my Lord’s wishes.” She made a gesture indicating the kitchen, or maybe the whole of Kaer Morhen. “The space this keep and the adjoining valley is now located in was originally taken up by other buildings and part of a courtyard. We had to destroy what we couldn’t fit, and move what we couldn’t afford to lose.”

She shook her head, obviously pushing the memories away. “I was exhausted and when my Lord fell asleep too deeply, I was cut off from his power as well. I secured the castle as best as I could, but I need to grow roots. Grow connections to the other worlds, too, to anchor the castle in time and space again. Right now we are somewhat unmoored, which is why there are differences in how time flows in here and inside the castle proper.”

A deep, unsettled pain, not unlike sorrow, filled Vesemir. All of this just to keep Geralt safe. All of that pain just because they happened to be here. Now more than ever, Vesemir understood that Dracula did nothing in half measures, and he would drag everyone under his power through whatever hardships were required to make his will manifest.

He dropped the herb pouch he’d bundled up for the wine into its pot, and walked over to Orlaith. Vesemir was hyperconscious of his movements. He wanted to be slow and cautious enough to give Orlaith the time to recoil if she wanted, but sure enough to put her at ease.

She turned her head to watch him, but didn’t move. Didn’t even blink as he approached. He couldn’t tell if it was trust or just confidence in her own abilities.

Carefully, he picked up one of her hands from where it rested on her knee, and he bowed over it. “Forgive us, for causing you such pain and trouble. It goes against what we witchers were made for, and I am truly sorry that you suffered so much simply to set us at ease.”

Her green eyes softened.

“Do not take blame where it is not due. I was not bound to the castle by force. I accepted the position for the power and the safety it would give me. I knew that my Lord’s preferred way of dealing with the castle was destroying it until it gave in. The castle is conscious, in a way, but not like a human or a demon is. It knew it was being forced into shackles when the bonding was performed. This…unexpected move? It’s nothing compared to that. And now that my Lord is awake and feeds me his power again, I will be in better condition in no time.”

Vesemir nodded at her, carefully replaced her hand on her knee, and returned to his task. He absolutely ignored the sly look that Lambert gave him on the way.

“Besides, you have been nothing but charming since you put me against your naked chest,” she added in the same tone of voice, calm and gentle and matter of fact.

He pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed, deep and pained. “You were a cat. A cat that didn’t set off my medallion, so I couldn’t have known you were anything other than a cat. I’m starting to think the damn thing is broken.”

“I am also a building,” she said mildly. “Are your medallions ready for that?”

Palo finished chopping up the vegetables, so Vesemir waved him to take a seat. They could be added in along with some water once the meat had finished searing.

“I thought witcher medallions vibrated for all magic and monsters?” Ciri asked.
That made Vesemir hum for a moment. “They need to be focused. A witcher can choose what to
attune their medallion to. Mine should be attuned to unnatural creatures. Demons, monsters of
various types. But as far as I’ve seen, anything purely of Dracula’s domain doesn’t set that off.
Clearly that extends to creatures forged of his power as well.”

“With this city around us, there’s no point in trying to attune it to Dracula’s power,” Lambert said,
dealing him, Mika, and Palo up a fresh hand of cards. “The damn things would just never shut up.”

“Indeed.” Orlaith nodded at him. “Even here. Kaer Morhen is not precisely part of my domain, but
My Lord’s power has seeped into every brick and stone.”

There was a loud neigh from the courtyard and then a series of thumps and a loud squeal as
something died messily in Night’s claws. Palo and Mika both looked in alarm at the window, but
by now Vesemir was quite used to it.

“It may also be because of who you are surrounded with,” she added.

“Oh?” Ciri asked.

“Surely you didn’t think the people he allowed you to meet are merely servants.” Orlaith blinked at
them.

That earned her looks from nearly everyone in the room. Vesemir just stared at the cupboard in
front of him and wondered if he shouldn’t be putting something more potent than wine in the
heating pot. Liquor sounded much more attractive now than it did when he made the evening’s
meal plans.

“Dare I ask,” Vesemir said dryly, decided to go with the wine anyways. The way this evening was
headed, he probably couldn’t afford to get drunk. Who knew what would happen next.

“With the exception of the two guards that brought these two humans here, everyone you’ve met
so far is no less than a general and definitely a leader of their own faction,” Orlaith said, sounding
faintly puzzled. “Even those guards are high up in the ladder.”

Orlaith smoothed the cloth on her lap. “My Lord would only let the best of the best anywhere near
his lover or his family.”

Lambert pointed towards the window where the sound of claws scrabbling on stone could be
heard. Night, probably failing at whatever mad idea she had this time. That demon horse was as
curious as five cats, and just as prone to getting herself into ridiculous situations because of it.

“Night,” Lambert said, as if presenting a proof that would foil Orlaith’s logic.

“The queen of her race, her service here keeps them safe. Should she ever stray, my Lord would
exterminate them. Long ago he deemed them too dangerous to roam freely.”

Every word out of Orlaith’s mouth just made Vesemir want to strangle Geralt even more. How had
he managed to find the most dangerous meat grinder in all the realms to go stick his dick into?

“How?”

“Ian,” Vesemir said, because damn it that boy was hapless sometimes.

“Father of all living Incubi,” Orlaith said promptly. “You should see him in battle, a truly glorious
sight.”
That actually made Ciri perk up a little, and raise a speculative eyebrow. Then she caught the look on Vesemir’s face and studiously went back to turning the meat over in the pot. Lambert rubbed his mouth again, clearly covering up a smirk.

A few minutes of silence passed as Vesemir and Ciri finished up preparing the stew and mulled wine. Once everything was added in, they were covered and set to simmer, filling the kitchen with the rich scent of food and spices.

“So they are powerful enough to mask their presence from our pendants is what you are saying,” Lambert summed it up.

Orlaith inclined her head gently. “You magic is rather…primitive.”

That was nothing but the bare truth. Even by this world’s standards, witcher magic was bare bones. Hard to take offence at that.

“It’s simple, but it fills our needs,” Vesemir said finally.

“Ah, needs,” came a mournful voice from the hallway. “I’m glad at least somebody’s needs are being filled.”

Ian wandered in, looking sleepy and with his curls in disarray, with Eyra on his heels.

Both of them were dressed as they usually were around the keep; meaning both were barely dressed at all. Ian had on tight, thin cotton pants that clung to his body so closely that they were almost hose. Over that he wore a loose sleeping shirt, left unlaced halfway down his chest. The light ivory colors worked well with his tan skin and golden brown hair. Just the tips of his ivory horns could be seen through the curls.

Eyra had even less on. Just a simple blue shift that cut off mid thigh. The fabric must have been silk, for it seemed to float around her as she moved. The color set off her golden blond hair perfectly, and harmonized with the brown horns that sprouted from her crown and curled down back behind her ears. She was still yawning, her eyes heavy with sleep. It was entirely unfair that it made her look even more fetching than when she was actually trying to be seductive.

By now, all the regular visitors and residents of Kaer Morhen were used to the succubi and incubus wandering around, but Palo and Mika clearly were not prepared. Both of them blushed brilliant red and their eyes went wide as gold coins.

To Vesemir’s slight surprise, he found himself glad to see the demons. Both because it meant that they were alright, and also because he’d come to see them as people who belonged here.

“Eyra, Ian,” Vesemir nodded to them. “Welcome home.” As soon as the words were out of his mouth, he realized what he’d said. Home. These were demons and he’d just welcomed them home.

Heat burned across his cheeks, and Lambert choked at the table, doubling over and coughing so hard that Ciri had to thump on his back to help get it under control.

“Glad to be back,” Eyra murmured, leaning over Vesemir’s shoulder and kissing his cheek. It wasn’t just a peck either. She pressed her soft, full lips to his cheek and trailed them down until she was just about to reach the corner of his lips. Then she broke off, slipping off behind his back toward Lambert.

Vesemir just gave her a knowing side-eye as he struggled to keep his blushes under control. He was a witcher, dammit, not a teenage boy.
“Hungry, huh,” he said dryly, and waved a hand at the fire. “There’s stew on.” He knew damn well that wine and meat wasn’t what the succubus was hungry for, but it amused him to offer it anyways.

“Hello, Lambert.” Eyra slid into the other witcher’s lap and leaned in to kiss him on the mouth, her hands on his cheeks. “I missed you,” she purred when she finally broke the kiss.

“Please don’t fuck at the table,” Ciri said, rolling her eyes in annoyance.

Ian sat down next to her and leveled a truly pathetically hopeful look at her. “Perhaps after, then?”

Vesemir had been actually starting to feel sorry for the incubus before he learned it was the goddamn father of all living incubi everywhere.

“No,” Ciri said with a shake of her head, though she did take a moment to look down the neckline of his shirt.

Ian sighed like the world was ending, and leaned into the tabletop. Which was when he noticed that Mika and Palo were still staring at them from across the table. Instantly, a devastatingly charming smile bloomed on his face.

“Why, hello there,” Ian said smoothly, leaning just a little closer. “Non-witchers, here? How interesting.” He let his gaze roam over them, clearly thinking up dirty plans.

“No snack,” Vesemir said mildly.

Eyra and Ian looked to Orlaith, who shrugged. Both the succubus and incubus wilted.

“Mika, Palo, this is Ian and Eyra,” Vesemir said with a wave. “Mika and Palo got stuck in the valley when the castle appeared. Hopefully, we can get them back home soon.”

At the mention of their names, Palo managed to snap his jaw shut and train his gaze up to eye level. Mika was clearly still having issues with that, his eyes lingering on the way Eyra’s shift slithered over her skin.

“I am married,” Mika said to himself, and swallowed. He closed his eyes and took a sharp breath. “My lovely wife, Doria is about to have our first child.”

“I don’t mind threesomes,” Eyra said in a throaty purr, looking at Mika with a sparkle in her eye. “I bet your wife works hard, she deserves some pleasure in reward.”

Lambert held back a snicker while Vesemir sighed and got up to stir the wine for a moment. It looked hot enough to serve. Maybe it could stand to simmer for a while longer to get a better flavor, but Vesemir felt in need of a drink right now.

“I. Uh. I think I need to. Go outside. For a moment. And…” Mika stood up, straightened his leather tunic, and wandered out, muttering, “Go sit in a snowbank.”

When Eyra looked like she might get up and follow, Vesemir leveled a look at her, and handed her a mug of wine. “Not a snack,” he said firmly.

Lambert patted her hip, putting his arm around her waist as she was still sitting in his lap.

“I can be a snack later,” he promised.

The look Ian gave them was so wide eyed it was nearly teary.
Vesemir rolled his eyes and handed out mugs of wine to everyone else pretending not to see how guilty Lambert looked for a moment. How had this become his life? How had this become their lives?

“If you two are here,” Vesemir started, deliberately trying to change the subject. “I’m guessing Dracula will show up eventually.”

“Assuming he doesn’t go straight to Geralta,” Ciri said, sipping her wine.

“What of the army out front?” Palo asked. “From everything you have said, this Dracula doesn’t seem to be the forgiving type.” He opened his mouth to say something else, but then clearly thought better of it.

That was fine, Vesemir thought he knew where Palo was headed with that. Maybe Palo didn’t feel comfortable speaking plainly in front of Dracula’s servants, but Vesemir had no such compunctions.

“If he wipes them out, it would only instigate further issues,” Vesemir said blandly. “Henselt will empty the country of men before giving up a fight.”

“It would be better if we could negotiate out of it,” Ciri added. “Henselt is a warmonger, but he’s not an idiot. He’d know when he was outclassed.”

“You might have a bit of trouble convincing my Lord to…” ---Orlaith made a face--- “…negotiate.”

“Understatement of the century,” Lambert muttered, taking a sip of his drink.

Ciri tapped her fingers against the table and frowned, clearly trying to puzzle through to an answer.

“What do we need…” she mused out loud. “We need the army to fuck off, and we need Henselt to not send another one. Preferably, without needing to kill everyone involved. First, that would be a waste, and likely a pain in the ass, and second, that would leave the northern kingdoms weakened. Nilfgaard is just waiting for the opportunity to attack. Temeria is already in a bit of a tizzy with what’s happened there in the last week. They might be the linchpin for the defense, but that doesn’t mean the rest of the Northern Kingdoms’ contribution is negligible. If Henselt gets caught up here, then that makes it that much easier for Nilfgaard to take over.”

Vesemir nodded. “There might be a couple of countries between here and there, but soon enough that would mean an even larger army at the front door. Not only does Nilfgaard also dislike non-humans, barring the elves anyways, they also worship a sun god.”

“I’m sure running into a vampire city would go over well with them,” Lambert said dryly.

At the word ‘vampire’, Palo blanched, but he stayed quiet.

“Would the army be large enough for My Lord to care?” Orlaith asked interestedly.

“Last time he only cared because he ran out of drink,” Ian murmured, paying more attention to staring longingly at Lambert than the conversation at hand.

Ciri pursed her lips and hummed for a moment. “Eventually? Probably. Maybe. The Nilfgaardian empire is huge. I don’t know if they’d ever be able to field as many people as the humans of Castlevania City once did, but….” She chewed on her bottom lip for a moment. “I’m not certain.”

“You know, that might be the wrong question,” Vesemir said, looking out the window. The lights
from the city around them twinkled in the distance, and he wondered if Lambert or the other
demons could hear the inhabitants moving around there. “If Nilfgaard destroys the Northern
Kingdoms, there will be no Path for witchers to follow. We are not welcome in their cities. Didn’t
you say so, Ciri? We’d be unable to hunt. Lucky to be left alive, let alone paid for our work.” He
turned to look at them all. “If Dracula is willing to move his whole castle here just as a deterrent to
keep Geralt safe, what would he be willing to do to keep Geralt hunting as he prefers?”

“He could just take him to another damn world,” Ciri said tartly. “One that has never heard of
witchers and wouldn’t mind paying them for their services.”

“Our Lord’s choices are sometimes unexpected,” Orlaith warned. “He might agree to negotiate, or
he might decide it’s just better to just take over all of those kingdoms and end the drama.”

Silence came over the table as everyone present thought that through.

“I hate politics,” Vesemir sighed quietly. Lambert toasted him and took a drink.

Ciri turned to Orlaith. “You control the castle. Would you let me reach out to Triss and Yennefer?
We could negotiate on Dracula’s behalf. Maybe get Henselt to back off before Dracula needs to
deal with it.”

“Our Lord is on his way here,” Orlaith said getting up. “I will ask permission to lift the movement
ban.”

Eyra, too, disentangled herself from Lambert’s lap and stood up while Ian slid out from the bench
he was sitting in. All of them turned to watch the door.

None of the rest of them stood, though Vesemir contemplated readying his mug to toss it at
Dracula’s head.

Soon enough, Dracula himself walked through the kitchen door, looking exactly as he always did.
Shoulder length black hair, goatee, red armored coat and bare, muscular chest. Well, almost the
same. He looked extremely pleased. *Incredibly* pleased, his red eyes banked and nearly grey in the
soft light of the kitchen.

Two steps behind him was Alucard. Unlike Dracula, Alucard looked a bit worse for wear. His skin
had gone parchment white. The black around his irises was deeper than usual, and faint purple
rings lay under his eyes. He was also dressed as he usually was, bare chested and in his blue
armored coat, with his sword at his side. There was a slight frown on his face though, which made
Vesemir worry.

As soon as they walked in, Orlaith slid down to kneel on one knee, while Eyra and Ian knelt down
on both.

“My Prince,” they said in unison, with their heads bowed.

Dracula waved a hand at them, and beamed at Vesemir and Lambert. His gaze paused on Palo, and
he narrowed his eyes a bit.

“Dracula. Alucard,” Vesemir said in greeting. He tapped his fingers on the table, struggling not to
give into the urge to bang his own head there instead. “You’re just in time for supper.”

“Oh,” Dracula said, “you shouldn’t have.” He looked straight at Palo.

Lambert snorted in amusement and sipped his wine. Palo looked about ready to faint.
“This is Palo. He and his son were trapped in the valley when the castle walls showed up,” Vesemir said pointedly.

“...Son,” Alucard said quietly. “Is that who Night is chasing around the courtyard?”

The faint sound of Night racing around outside hadn’t stopped at all since she’d left her stall, but now Vesemir realized that it was also joined by the occasional yip and cry of alarm.

Because of course.

Vesemir covered his face with his hands and sighed, leaning his elbows on the table. This was just perfect. The perfect ending to the week.

He closed his eyes and took another breath, reminding himself that the week wasn’t over.

“I’ll get him.” Lambert got up from the table and headed for the door.

“Please don’t eat our guests,” Vesemir said flatly, his eyes still closed. He thought about the satisfying sound that a really solid clay plate would make against Dracula’s head. A good thump. A meaty sound.

*That would never work*, he reminded himself. *For a number of reasons. But it doesn’t mean that I can’t run Geralt through the Gauntlet several times when he gets healed up. No doubt he’ll need to retrain a bit, anyways. Get his muscles back in shape. Maybe I should get Alucard, Eskel, and Lambert to help with group attack tactics.*

Happy visions of the four of them chasing Geralt around with heavy wooden sticks floated through his mind for a minute. Finally, he looked back up at Dracula and Alucard, resolving himself to at least get through the night before attempting to get a stiff drink.

“Humans are so confusing,” Dracula muttered, turning to look at Alucard as if searching for sympathy. “They offer dinner and then say you can’t have it.”

The flat stare that Alucard gave Dracula was eloquent.

“Pssh,” Ciri smirked at him, and waved her hand dismissively. “As if you haven’t already had more than a bite of Eskel lately.”

Dracula hummed, looking pleased again.

“Very satisfying, yes.”

He took a seat at the table, Alucard by his side, and waved a hand at the demons, allowing them to rise. Orlaith moved to stand near his side, and Ian and Eyra busied themselves refilling everyone’s drinks.

As Vesemir watched, he noted how Alucard wrapped his hands around the warm mug offered to him. That boy looked like he’d been run through the wringer.

“Are you all right?” Vesemir asked finally, still watching the way Alucard seemed to try and soak in all the warmth he could. He even sat closer to Dracula than he usually would. For all that they never made a secret of the fact they are lovers, Alucard tended to keep his distance, loath to share touch publicly, even with Dracula and Geralt. Now he was sitting close enough that his arm was pressed against Dracula’s side.
Alucard looked at him in faint surprise, and then shook his head. “I’ll be fine.”

He would be fine, not was currently fine.

Vesemir stopped himself from frowning further. He knew that Alucard wasn’t the type to accept sympathy. Instead, he looked out the window. “It’s very cold out tonight. Winter still has teeth, even this late in the year. We’ve got blankets warming at the fire, though, for just that reason. Do you want one?”

Alucard looked at the mug he was holding, then at Vesemir. Perhaps it wasn’t an accident that this made him turn away from Dracula.

“Yes, please,” he said, studiously ignoring the way Dracula was staring at the side of his face.

Dracula said nothing, oddly enough choosing to remain quiet.

Without another word, Vesemir got up to rummage through the blankets on the bench near the fire. They were all very soft and very fine, so he grabbed the topmost one. It was hot to the touch from being settled so close to the flame. Eventually the colors would fade because of it, but Vesemir was sure Alucard wouldn’t care. Dracula might. He seemed to have a thing for strong, dark colors.

He carried the heavy blanket over and settled it on Alucard’s shoulders, warm side facing in, and then went to go collect bowls for the stew. He started ladling it in, trying to not think about the strange mix of demons, vampires, witchers, and humans gathered in the room.

“Do you adopt everyone who walks through your gates?” Palo asked quietly.

Vesemir shot him an unamused look.

“Eat,” he said gruffly and put the first bowl in front of him. He looked to Ian, Eyra, and Orlaith, and then pointed at more seats at the table. As one, they looked to Dracula, who just shrugged. The demons looked at each other for a moment, and then filed into the available seating.

“I found our lost one,” Lambert said, stomping into the kitchen again. Mika followed sheepishly behind, a few stray bits of hay stuck in his hair. “Night was really offended I took away her playmate. I promised her a rabbit tomorrow.”

“You do know she doesn’t actually need to feed, right?” Dracula asked. “She draws her energy from me.”

“As I understand it,” Vesemir said with a raised eyebrow, “even though she is fed by your power, that doesn’t mean it stops the want of a more varied meal. I could eat porridge all day and be full, but still want for a piece of candy at the end of it.”

He thought about poor Ian, desperate for a meal but unable to find someone to feed on.

“She’s a glutton,” Dracula said with a snort.

“Like master, like horse,” Alucard muttered quietly into the mug, earning himself a bit of a glare.

Ciri snorted into her cup.

As Orlaith settled herself next to Dracula, he turned to look at her. Then he leaned in and sniffed very delicately. Delight crossed Dracula’s face and he turned to smile slyly at Vesemir.

“I knew you were still a man under all that grumpiness.” Dracula nodded at Vesemir.
Don’t throw a bowl at him, don’t throw a bowl at him, don’t throw a bowl at him… Vesemir gritted his teeth.

“He is a man.” Orlaith frowned, looking at Dracula seriously. “I checked.”

Lambert, at the other end of the table, choked on the bite of stew he was just about to swallow. Vesemir sat there in stunned silence, listening to Lambert hack and cough while Eyra did her best to pound his back without killing him in the process. Even Ciri looked studiously into her bowl, suspiciously not showing her mouth.

“I was afraid not everything was in working order,” Dracula said, looking at Vesemir with what was probably supposed to be empathy. “I tried to tell him it wouldn’t matter with any of the sex demons. They have ways of making even rusty equipment work. Still, I am glad I was mistaken.”

“I am not fucking any demons,” Vesemir said flatly, “and equipment and what it is or isn’t used for is irrelevant.”

He could try to kill everyone here, but that would be ineffective and ultimately impossible. He could leave, but oh Gods, they would just follow him.

“He keeps saying that,” Dracula complained, spreading his hands. The tone of his voice implied a complete and utter lack of understanding.

Vesemir sighed and took a drink. “Maybe I should go to the Griffon school keep. Maybe they need a fencing instructor.”

“The succubi can be too forward at times,” Orlaith answered seriously. “I’ve heard that some men find it to be intimidating.”

Mika and Palo on the other side of the table nodded at that, both blushing.

“Maybe the Bear school,” Vesemir grumbled to himself. “I could learn to swing a cudgel like they do.”

“Are there many of them?” Ian asked, leaning over the table towards Vesemir. “Statistically speaking, there has to be a percentage that likes men.” Then he looked thoughtful. “Or if they aren’t choosy I could get a few of them drunk.” He frowned, as if already counting how many men he could get drunk enough to fuck. “When do you want to go?”

Vesemir covered his eyes and counted silently to ten.

“Wait.” Eyra leaned on the table hard enough that the neckline of her shift rode down so low that her ample breasts threatened to spill out onto the table. “I wasn’t paying attention.” She stretched her neck to look at an unreasonably excited Ian and then at Vesemir and back. “There are men?”

Ian turned his wide eyes at her.

“Vesemir says there’s a whole witcher school that takes the name ‘bear’. He’s going to take us there.”

“Bear because they are big?” Eyra asked, now also looking all wide eyed and excited.

Lambert at this point wasn’t even trying to pretend he wasn't wheezing in laughter between his coughs. Vesemir wished he would just choke already.
“I’m not taking anyone anywhere,” Vesemir growled, slapping his spoon hard against the table.

“Eyra, honey, aren’t I enough of a meal for you?” Lambert managed, finally mastering his wheezing and choking.

The succubus turned to look at Lambert, giving him a long, hot once over.

“You are a feast,” she purred finally, reaching out a hand and dragging it down Lambert’s chest. “But a lady likes to have some variety in her meal plan and Vesemir clearly understands that. He said so himself just moments ago.”

Lambert had the gall to give Vesemir the stink eye from where he sat.

At least when this was a school, Vesemir could keep students from sassing him by running them through particularly difficult training. Sore bodies didn’t have the energy to talk shit. But now, that wasn’t even an option. Even if he was training the demons in blade work, there was no chance of them getting exhausted in a mere practice session. He’d just have to suffer through their teasing.

Vesemir just pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed. This is what he got for having guests in Kaer Morhen.

“Is it an army camp I saw outside the walls?” Alucard asked, watching as Ciri scraped the last of her stew off her plate.

Ciri looked at Vesemir, clearly not sure how to frame the words to Dracula to get the result they needed. He was aware of the fact that Alucard shifted his gaze from Ciri to him, watching for his response, letting him have the first move.

Interesting.

“It is,” Orlaith said, looking at her now empty bowl with something like disappointment. “A tiny one, though.”

Vesemir looked at Dracula and raised an eyebrow.

“How hellbent are you on killing them all? Because we might be able to get them to piss off without all the effort. Although...” Vesemir thought about the powerful negotiation tool Dracula’s presence on the battlefield would be. Nothing like bringing a good threat to the table. He sniffed and shook his head, casting the idea aside. If Dracula started killing, there was a solid chance he wouldn’t stop.

Dracula’s lips twisted into a bitter smirk Vesemir couldn't quite understand.

“Tempting, isn’t it?” he murmured, his red eyes brighter than usual.

Vesemir tilted his head to the side, and really looked at Dracula. They’d spent a fair deal of time talking about him as a force of nature, as power to be managed and planned around. It suddenly occurred to Vesemir that such attitudes must be exhausting for Dracula.

Well, Vesemir could do him the favor of treating him as he would another witcher. A competent colleague rather than a weapon to be wielded, or even a god to be pandered to.

“Not nearly as much as you might think,” Vesemir said with sympathy. “I don’t envy you, nor the position you’re often put in.” He took a breath and straightened up. “What goal do you have here, Dracula? Let us all work towards it with the least amount of annoyance for us all.”
Dracula sighed.

“T’m interested in cutting down on the commute between Geralt’s work and the castle.”

Vesemir and Lambert both barked out a laugh, and Ciri snickered quietly.

“He does hate portals,” Ciri added helpfully, which only started up the laughter again.

Moving a whole damned city, to cut down on travel time. Gods.

“I will find the ones responsible for the hunt on Geralt,” Dracula added, “but I’m willing to let you find out the names before I step in.”

Vesemir was more than a little grateful for this concession. He shuddered to think what Dracula’s way of investigation would look like.

“I’ve been stuck here for a bit, but Triss and Yennefer are working on it,” Ciri said. “It’s tangled up. There are more than one set of spies at work.” She shook her head for a moment, and then gave Dracula a grim, vicious smile. “We’ll find you names. But that matter likely has nothing to do with the army at the gates…well, at the wall. King Henselt is likely just feeling insecure because a fortified city dropped into the middle of his countryside.”

For a moment it looked like Lambert would add to that, but he shut his mouth and sipped at his wine instead. Unsurprisingly, Palo and Mika were silent and wide eyed, barely having made a move since Dracula and Alucard walked in.

“I don’t feel like dealing with humans,” Dracula declared, slouching a little. “Especially the ones in power.”

“They are unbearably tiresome,” Vesemir said with a grimace. “Why do you think I stay in Kaer Morhen? Ug, politics.”

“You stay here to beat us all into shape in the off season,” Lambert said with dry look.

“A good strategy has multiple benefits.” Vesemir smirked and sipped his wine.

“One of you has to go out and talk to them,” Ciri pointed her spoon at the rest of the table. “It can’t be me. Not only am I not a witcher, nor one of Dracula’s people, I’m a woman. Henselt is sort of a bastard when it comes to that kind of thing. The only reason his assigned sorceress is someone he listens to is because she’s powerful enough to roast his balls with a blink of one eye.”

“The man is a bully,” Vesemir agreed. “But he’s not an idiot. He’ll listen if he needs to. Hell, that’s why he got out of Aedirn and withdrew his troops from there. Enough pressure and he folded.”

“Orlaith is the decisive one after myself and Alucard,” Dracula said pleasantly. “She can speak in my stead.”

“Yes, My Prince,” Orlaith said with bow of her head. She looked at her empty bowl, and then eyed the stew still bubbling away on the fire.

Cats, Vesemir thought with a bit of amusement. He stood up and ladled himself up another bowlful, and looked around the room. “Anyone else want more?”

He’d made the offer to discreetly see if Orlaith wanted more, but she remained silent.

Lambert raised his hand, so did Mika and Ciri. He started filling the bowls and distributing them.
As he did so, Ian stood up and refilled everyone’s mugs as well. Vesemir’s chest was filled with
with a curious kind of warmth at this, at having so many people crowded into the room. He liked
it, the sounds they made when they ate and talked. The sounds of their clothes rustling, their
heartbeats filling up his ears.

“I will need someone from here to stand with me,” Orlaith said. “A local will know how to
maneuver the humans here to get what we want, and will be able to help me understand that which
I am unfamiliar with.”

“I vote Vesemir,” Lambert said. Vesemir glared at him, and took his seat. “Not just because I don’t
want to do it, though I really don’t want to. You hate politics, but you keep up on it more than I do.
More than that, though, you’re…” He paused, and looked around, as if trying to put his finger on
something abstract. “You’re exactly the type of person that Henselt would see as a peer. You’re an
older fighter, better than any of us at blade work, really, and you’re the one in charge of Kaer
Morhen. He’ll respect you without even realizing why he respects you, because you look

While that was a solid point, Vesemir wasn’t sure he cared for the implication that he looked
ancient enough to be intelligent. He tapped his spoon gently against the rim of his bowl, and
thought it through. “I’m not very good at speaking in circles like the court types do. And if I join
Orlaith, I’ll likely insist on Henselt agreeing to keep his realm safe for witchers.” He shrugged. “As
safe as can be, anyways. That will end up including more than just the Wolf school.”

“I’m hearing so much about all the other witcher schools,” Dracula said musingly and Vesemir felt
a little shiver travel down his back. That interested sparkle in the vampire’s eyes was not something
he wanted to think on too deeply. “But I think I should first square away my witchers, then look at
others.”

Square away my witchers.

Vesemir blinked at him. He closed his eyes briefly and sighed. There would be time enough later to
worry about whatever the hell that meant.

“Most people don’t realize there are different schools,” Vesemir said. He took a bite of his soup.
“A witcher is a witcher, as far as humans are concerned. Getting safe passage for us Wolves will
likely include the others by default, since it’s unlikely most people would be able to tell the
difference.” He paused to take another bite, and his mind wandered back to old memories. “We
used to get together, you know. The schools. We held a tournament every year, both to foster
camaraderie and to spend time with others who also walked the Path. When Kaer Morhen was
destroyed, the Wolves stopped going. There were no new students to take, so why bother? We had
better relations with some schools than others, but we are still closer to each other than we are to
regular humans.”

“If you can get something you want from this mess, go for it,” Dracula offered with a shrug. “I
only care about what’s mine.”

Vesemir nodded and said, “That’s more than fair.”

“Make sure you make an entrance,” Dracula said without looking at Orlaith. Then he turned to
Alucard. “Do you want to rest more or go back to Castlevania right away?”

There was a moment of silence as Alucard swished around the wine in his mug. “I am very tired.
But I wish to see Geralt. I’ll rest better with all of us in the same place.”
What had Alucard even been up to, to make him exhausted enough to admit that he was tired? Vesemir had to wonder. The poor lad looked unusually vulnerable, wrapped up in his blanket, huddled over a mug. It was an odd sight, and one that set Vesemir on edge. He didn’t like any of his charges looking so worn.

Not that Alucard was in his charge. But sometimes it felt like he was. Maybe it was just how young he looked. Or perhaps it was something about the poise he carried himself with. He reminded Vesemir of some of his more focused students. The current batch of Wolves were all boisterous shit talkers, but that was more a reflection of the fact that Lambert, Eskel, and Geralt were all friends, rather than a trait of Wolf witchers as a whole.

“When you see him,” Vesemir said, “remind him that he’ll need to stop by for retraining before he goes out on the Path again.”

Lambert snickered evilly and even Ciri looked amused.

“It seems that Geralt has a lot places he needs to visit for retraining before he returns to his Path,” Dracula drawled, low and suggestive enough both Eyra and Ian giggled. Ciri snorted and rolled her eyes, while Vesemir just shook his head sadly. Palo and Mika shared a look, and kept to their bowls of stew.

“Do what you want with the situation,” Dracula said getting up. “If I don’t like it when I get back, I will make alterations.”

“I’ll get in touch with Triss and Yennefer,” Ciri said. “If I’ll be able to now?”

“I’m lifting the ban for travel. You are free to go as you please. I’m leaving the matter of outsiders to Orlaith.”

“My thanks,” Ciri nodded to them both. “As soon as I have concrete information, I’ll join you in Castlevania City and let you know how things are progressing.”

That made Alucard perk up. “Geralt has been moved to my tower there. Simply present yourself to the front desk and Matt or John will have you escorted up. Once you’ve been to my private levels there, I can show you the portal room, and you can come and go directly from there.”

“Can’t I just portal straight there?” Ciri asked, looking to Dracula. “The last time, Dracula gave me something that made me land in what looked like a specially prepared room for teleporting. Can’t you give something to get me straight to yours?”

Alucard shook his head. “It’s warded too heavily. There’s no way to portal in from the outside unless I key you to the spells. Which I am fairly sure I can do, but you will have to be present for regardless.”

He stood up, carefully took the blanket off of his shoulders, and began folding it back up.

“Ahh,” Ciri said with a sigh. Then a slow, pleased smile curved across her face. “Though another walk through the city might be good anyways. When I made my way to the hospital the first time, I stumbled across the most interesting theater. They had this show. A classic they said. I could stop by and get some more information. I think my father would just love to see the production, when he’s feeling better.”

Alucard froze in place and looked at her, eyes wide in horror.

Dracula looked at Alucard, his eyebrows raising, and then to Ciri, obviously cottoning on to the
“Show?” he asked, still looking from Alucard to Ciri.

Alucard dropped the blanket onto his now vacated seat. “There is no need for you to roam the city. I’ll leave transportation for you at the hospital. Someone with a car. They’ll take you right to us. Matt can have one of his men wait for you in the lobby.”

“Thank you,” Ciri said, beaming at him.

“This is not over,” Dracula said mildly, extending his hand toward Alucard in a gallant gesture.

“I am well aware,” Alucard said with a tired sigh. He still took Dracula’s hand without hesitation, and let himself get reeled in so they stood closely together.

“Don’t resist,” Dracula murmured, curling his hand around the back of Alucard’s head. “I’ll take care of everything.”

Then his body started flaking off into tiny motes of darkness, starting at the edges. As his body lost its material form, so did Alucard’s. It was slower, gentler, but his body, too, started to flake away at the edges. Soon enough, both of them were nothing more than a slowly circling maelstrom of darkness that went up in one long pillar, disappearing into the cracks of the large slabs of stone that made up the kitchen ceiling.

Silence reigned for another minute after they left.

“He really likes impressive entrances and exits, doesn’t he,” Vesemir mused quietly.

“Gods,” Palo said in a thin and shaky voice.

“I know, right?” Ian said with a nod. “All Gods love them, I swear. I’d say it comes with the position, but My Lord was just as dramatic before he became Lord of Chaos.”

Both Palo and Mika looked at Ian in horror.

Eyra nodded and Orlaith looked faintly amused.

“That was easier than I expected,” Orlaith murmured. “He usually fights our Lord a lot more.”

“Alucard?” Vesemir asked. He realized that none of the demons called Alucard by his name or even referred to him. If spoken to, they were polite and helpful, but none of them engaged Alucard directly. It was a peculiar way of shunning him that Vesemir was just starting to notice. It bothered him. He wondered how much it must bother Alucard.

“Yes,” Orlaith confirmed.

Curious. There was something there, some history that Vesemir was as of yet unaware of. Maybe later he could prise it out of Orlaith. For now, they had other worries.

He thought about the upcoming negotiations and winced. “As much as I’m not looking forward to talking to Henselt or his bully boys, perhaps we should take care of that sooner rather than later.”

“I’ll get our escort ready,” Orlaith said. “I think they will appreciate a look outside the walls.” She stood up. “And I need to plan an entrance worthy of My Lord.” Then she turned into a pillar of blood, thick and red. It splashed onto the floor making the humans yelp. The blood moved over the stone, heading for the worn out grooves where the stones were joined together and slowly seeped
into them, until there was not a drop of blood left to be seen.

“Looks like Dracula isn’t the only one who likes an exit,” Lambert said dryly. He turned to look at Vesemir. “Do you think we should start trying to be fancier, too? Maybe rappel out the window, or cast Igni every time we leave?”

Vesemir rolled his eyes, and Ciri giggled.

“Don’t tell Geralt,” Vesemir said flatly. “He might try just for the fun of it.”

That was too much for Ciri and she dissolved into guffaws of laughter. “He would,” she choked out between wheezes. “He so would!”

Snickers made their way around the room, as Palo and Mika looked on, bewildered.

Shaking his head, Vesemir stood up and gestured to the rest of them. “Come on, let’s get dinner cleaned up. I’d rather not leave a mess around before I have to go talk to idiots,” he said sourly.

“You want me to break out the brandy?” Lambert asked, already moving to help.

“Don’t tempt me.”

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Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

Notes from Quarra: Early again this week. With the holidays coming up I have no idea if this kind of momentum will keep going, but at the very least it lasted one more week. Enjoy!

Matt wasn’t very comfortable with how his boss, his main charge, had just up and disappeared as soon as they got everybody into the tower. The fact there was another entry into the tower, one he hadn’t yet found despite multiple attempts to ferret it out, was driving him insane.

The first few times Trevor disappeared this way, Matt tried to grill John and the rest of the house staff for details and got nowhere. He did his best, too. Was as intimidating as possible and persistent in his search for clues. No luck. Trevor just chased everybody out of his floor and then he was gone, disappearing into thin air.

Over the last year of working for Trevor, he'd gotten no closer to solving the riddle.

It gave Matt heartburn.

He always spent the time that his boss was away twitchy and irritable, imagining all the ways Trevor could be tortured and killed while Matt sat at his ease in the luxurious rooms of the tower.

Now that he knew more about Belmont Sr., he was even more inclined to worry. Whatever that man was involved in, it was the shadiest of shady dealings, and obviously dangerous to boot. It wasn’t pleasant to think of Trevor being forced into that world; he was too kind and generous a person. The more Matt found out about how he was raised and the people his father associated with, the more nervous Matt got.

Luckily, he didn’t have too long to sit and stew over it this time. After only an hour or so, Iga had poked her head out of the stairwell leading up, and the guard there called Matt up from his office on the same floor.

By the time he got to the staircase, Iga had already made herself comfortable on the desk beside the door, with her long, bare legs resting on the armrest of the chair his guy was sitting in. She was barefoot; her toenails were painted the same rich red color as her fingernails. She was dressed only in a button down shirt; he recognized it as one of the ones bought for Eskel. The cotton was expensive and smooth, and soft enough that he could see the faint outline of her nipples pushing at the cotton. Her long blonde hair cascaded down her back in a messy wave, and little curling strands fell forward as she bent towards Peter. Matt had to admit that Peter was doing his best to remain stoic in the face of all that woman right in his face and applauded the fact. Peter being married with two kids probably helped his self control somewhat.

“Matt!” she said, lighting up with pleasure at the sight of him. “Just the man I was hoping to see.” The sultry purr of her voice implied all the other things she was hoping for as well.

Matt promptly shoved his natural reaction far, far away and put on his most professional face. “Iga. What can I do for you?”
“Mmmm, so many things.” She looked at him up and down like she wanted to eat him, shifting her long, bare legs against each other. Matt couldn't help but follow the movement with his eyes. It was so rare to see bare legs in the corporate world. “But I’m here because Eskel and Geralt are ready for food, and to tell you that you are welcome back upstairs.”

That wasn’t a huge surprise. The two of them ate a ridiculous amount, even though Geralt was still mostly on mush and very soft foods. Trevor had a fully staffed kitchen and John had already arranged for a variety of foods to be kept ready. Matt shot off a text to the appropriate people, scheduling the food service to start soon.

“She should be up in just a few minutes with something for them to start on,” Matt said. He walked over to the elevator and pressed the call button. “Shall we head up?”

Matt did not pause to watch how she slid off the desk. No matter how good it probably looked. A second later, Iga was pressed up alongside of him, and she slipped her hands around his arm.

“Yes, let’s.”

She smelled very, very nice, and Matt was very anxious for the elevator to arrive, if only so he could politely try to move away. That effort failed. When the doors opened, she just stayed glued to his side as they got on.

When the doors closed, it occurred to Matt that this was a good opportunity to ask Iga about her...terms of employment.

He looked at her, making sure to look her in the eyes. “Iga, can I ask you a somewhat personal question?”

Her dark eyes lit up.

“Yes,” she said, leaning a little more into him. “Ask anything you want.”

“Do you work for Gabriel Belmont of your own free will? Do you have a choice in what you’re...ordered to do?”

She blinked at him, clearly taken aback by the question.

“I do not work for Him,” she said. Matt could clearly hear the capital letters in her voice. “I belong to Him.” She sounded proud of that fact.

Abject horror filled Matt up. He’d hoped that this wasn’t the case. Desperately hoped. He licked his lips and scrambled to find something to say. “How long has he owned you?”

His first instinct was to try to offer to smuggle her out of the city. But to what end? It was obvious that Gabriel Belmont had more power and influence than a man like Matt could hope to compete with. During his time in spec ops, he’d seen nasty situations like this before. People in bad spots. He’d done what he could at the time, but there were some people he hadn’t had the resources or manpower to save. He knew he’d made the right calls for his men and his mission, but those choices still haunted him.

Iga tilted her head, watching him with thoughtful eyes.

“Are you worried for me?” she asked after a moment, avoiding the question.

“Very much. And for everyone else in Gabriel Belmont’s power,” he answered honestly.
“His power is absolute,” she said gently, patting Matt’s arm as if it was him that needed the reassurance. “But do not worry about me. I understand my Master’s wishes very well, and he has always been more than fair in how he treated me.”

“As you are someone who is currently owned, I’m not sure you are an objective observer on what is fair treatment,” Matt said quietly, hoping he hadn’t stepped too far. But maybe no one had ever said these things to her. Someone should, at least once.

“You are such a charming man,” she said with a smile. “You shouldn’t worry about me.” Iga looked away then, obviously lost in memories. “Back when He took over, He gave us all a choice. Serve, or flee and hope to never cross His path again.” She shrugged. “I don’t regret my choice.”

Matt had to admit that was slightly better than he’d feared. Somewhere along the line, Iga possibly, maybe, could have fled. There was likely a whole host of dependency issues floating around here, as well as some extremely dubious consent. But Iga felt like she’d had a choice and didn’t mind the outcome. Matt would have felt far worse about his inability to act if she were actively in distress.

It was still a bitter pill to swallow, and Matt had a hard time believing her choice was a real one. Maybe she didn’t have anything else to compare with. People sometimes didn’t know there was anything outside the cage they lived in, so they never longed for it.

The elevator had come to the top floor, but he paused before stepping out. Iga waited with him, one eyebrow raised.

“Are you under orders to sleep with me or anyone else here?” Matt asked. That was critical information, and Iga had been frank enough with him so far that he hoped she would actually tell him the truth.

Her amusement deepened. “You heard my orders. I’m allowed to spend time with you and your guards, but only if you are off duty. I’ll follow Trevor Belmont’s orders until I leave here or until my Master arrives.” She ran a soothing hand down his arm, and pulled him into the hall. “You needn’t worry so much. Come on, Eskel and Geralt are waiting.”

He must have been taken off guard by her sudden pull, because before he knew it he was out of the elevator and halfway down the hall.

She was stronger than she looked.

When they got into the bedroom, Eskel and Geralt were in the middle of an argument.

“---solutely not!” Geralt protested. His gauze wrapped arms were very loosely, very gently crossed over his still bandaged chest and he’d been propped up by several large fluffy pillows. He still had a few tubes and wires trailing out of him, hooked up to equipment sitting next to the bed. “Use your knives!”

“Oh wait what now.”

“Knives?” Matt asked, walking quickly across the large room to get into comfortable talking distance with them.

Eskel was perched on a chair at the bedside and a frown twisted at his face. “I need to practice my sword work. I was just asking to borrow Geralt’s swords.”

“You already lost your own! I’ve no desire for you to lose mine, too.”
“I didn’t lose them, I gave them to...Trevor’s father. I’ll get them back.” Eskel’s face puckered like he’d bit down on a lemon. “Eventually.” He cast an exasperated look at Geralt and sighed. “Come on. I won’t leave the room, you know that. They’ll be right here.”

Matt pulled up a chair, watching them both with interest. Iga didn’t bother to join him; she just sauntered up to Eskel and shimmed happily into his lap. He wrapped an arm around her waist to steady her, but didn’t take his eyes off of Geralt.

That only made the pout on Geralt’s face grow, and he hunched his shoulders a little. “It’s not fair.”

Eskel sighed. “No. It’s not. But I’m going crazy here, and I haven’t done sword work in days.” He pursed his lips and looked around the room, his gaze landing on the little tables of equipment next to the bed. “You could throw things at me while I train?”

“Yeah?” Geralt said, perking up a bit.

He also started looking around, as if assessing what was nearby and gauging each item’s utility as a projectile. Soon his shoulders slumped. He held out one hand flat front in of him and watched as it trembled. After only a few seconds, he dropped it with a sigh and then shook his head. “I’m too tired. Gods, I feel like all I do is sleep.”

“Sleep is good for you. It’ll help you recover faster.” Eskel’s voice was filled with sympathy. He turned to look at Matt. “Matt could throw things at me. You could point at what you want him to throw.”

Matt blinked, a little nonplussed at this turn of events.

“I could throw things at you, too,” Iga said with an artful pout. One beautifully manicured nail trailed down Eskel’s neck to his chest, pausing where the buttons closed the shirt up just below the hollow of his throat.

“Oh, I know you could,” Eskel said. He turned to look at her, his face quirking into a warm smile. “But if you threw things at me I’d have to spend all of my attention on staying alive and I’d never get any form work done.”

That had to be flirtatious hyperbole. It struck Matt as a little odd, though. So far Eskel had struck him as a fairly literal person. Iga certainly seemed to enjoy the implication, though, so maybe this was just how he flirted.

“That is very true,” she said with a sultry smirk.

Geralt sighed. “Fine. You can use my swords. After we eat.”

“Food will be up in a minute,” Matt said. He eyed Eskel for a moment. “Now that you’re calling the shots, I’m guessing you want your stuff back.”

“Yes,” Eskel said with a relieved nod. Then he looked down at his shirt, a nice light green button up today. “Though I think I’ll stick to wearing these. For a while anyways. I do want my gear in reach, though.”

Geralt looked at him in surprise. “Really?”

Iga smoothed her shirt down her ample chest, stretching the cotton over her curves. “I like them, too,” she said with a sultry smile. “Especially the way it makes your men look at me,” she purred.
Eskel’s eyes crinkled in amusement. “It’s a good look for you.” Then he tilted his head in a half shrug. “This place is safer than the hospital. Much easier to defend.”

“Smells better, too,” Geralt grumbled.

“Yes.” Eskel nodded. “This room smells like Trevor.” He looked around, his gaze slowly roaming over the walls and furniture.

“That’s not it, though,” Geralt said shrewdly. The look he gave Eskel was almost calculating. Matt had been on the wrong end of that type of gaze from both witchers, and he had to wonder if the way they seemed to look through a person was a trait of all witchers, or just these two. “That’s not why. We all wear our armor at Kaer Morhen, and where is safer than there?”

Eskel sighed. “No. That’s not why. Not all of it, anyways.” He glanced at Geralt. It was such a sidelong glance that it made him look almost bashful. Or maybe just nervous. There was something unsettled about it that made Matt worry; it nagged at the steady pile of anxieties he’d been building up ever since this whole thing started.

Geralt raised an eyebrow at him.

“Trevor’s father wanted me in clothes from this place,” Eskel said with an almost bitter twist to his mouth, some parody of a smile. “To set Trevor at ease.”

Matt struggled to keep his face blank. He almost wasn’t able to manage it. Everything he’d learned about Eskel pointed to the idea that here was a man both dangerous and over cautious to the point of paranoia. But he was deliberately going to let himself feel open to attack just because Gabriel Belmont wanted him to look a little more normal. That level of obedience, or devotion, was profoundly disturbing. More so because Matt had met Belmont Senior.

“They wouldn’t care. Neither of them,” Geralt said gently.

Eskel just shrugged.

Geralt watched Eskel with piercing eyes.

“Are you doing this for Gabriel or for Trevor?” There was a weight of meaning in his voice that Matt could hear but didn't really understand.

He understood the way Eskel blushed and lowered his head even less.

“Both.”

A slight worry line formed on Geralt’s brow, but Iga just smiled and ran a finger down Eskel’s jaw.

“You witchers really are well suited to our Prince,” she said.

That only made Eskel’s face turn fire engine red, and the smirk that grew on Geralt’s face was nothing short of filthy.

Matt looked at the attractive sight that Iga made perched on Eskel's knee, and then at Eskel's scarred face and throat, and wondered how someone could choose the witchers over the bombshell that Iga was. If anything, that just confirmed that Belmont Sr. had a definite type. Also, it made Matt think that both the witchers were sleeping with him.

He was starting to consider keeping a scorecard for who slept with who.
There was a knock at the door. Probably the food.

Matt went to check it out. Logically he knew that they were so far up the Tower that everything was vetted twice, but since he was here already it wouldn't hurt to make sure.

He didn’t step in front of the door. Never even crossed the sightline. Instead, he stayed right, keeping himself facing the titanium reinforced, ytong walls. When he reached it, he pushed a tasteful picture of the Castlevania Bridge at night aside to show a digital screen behind it.

At a touch, the screen came to life. On it was the video feed from the space in front of the doors, as well as the view along the rest of the corridors on this floor, all filmed from hidden cameras. They were all on a closed circuit. No wifi to hack into, just real cables hidden in the walls. Only the people on this floor had access to those cameras.

He touched a small trackball set into wall just below the screen and manipulated the cameras, making sure that they moved freely and that the hard drive was properly storing the last ninety hours of recordings. The screen showed the kitchen server departing from the elevator, pushing a cart filled to bursting with food along the plushly carpeted corridors.

Matt recognized the server. He made sure to know and vet all the people who had access to the personal floors of the tower. This server had been hired about six months ago. He had a degree in hospitality management and a long term boyfriend. They had a dog, an old german shepherd.

Matt turned off the screen, pushed the picture of the bridge back into place, and went to the door. When he took hold of the handle, he could feel two small bumps on the back of it. One would release the lock and all sixteen bolts on the titanium reinforced, fireproof door, and the other would trigger a silent alarm.

He opened the door.

“Hey, Jeff,” he greeted the waiter and stepped aside, letting him enter.

“Hey, Mr. Snow,” Jeff said with a friendly wave. “Where do you want this?”

Matt motioned to one side of the room, next to a small table. It only took a moment for Jeff to unload all the various dishes, drinks, and silverware, and he did so with barely a glance towards the bed. Then he was out the door with as much haste as was reasonable.

The speed of service wasn’t just because he was a good server, though he was. It was because Eskel, Iga, and Geralt all watched him like he owed them money. There was a sharp, predatory feel to their gaze; one that Matt hadn’t really noticed directed much toward him or his security team.

Iga was the first one to move. After the server left, she sighed and slumped in Eskel’s lap, her lips turned into a sad moue.

“That one is more Ian’s than mine.” She sounded incredibly sad about that fact.

“How is Ian doing?” Geralt asked. “He found someone to fuck yet?”

Matt turned to get himself a cup of juice from the table, hiding his expression from the group until he could get it under control. Holy shit, what was with these people?

“The last time I saw him, he was still bemoaning the fact that was living like a monk. Every man willing to sleep with him was already taken, and he hadn’t found a way to talk the ones who only liked women into trying his attentions.” Then she turned to Geralt. “Your daughter also said a truly
horrible thing to him, by the way.”

“What?!”

Matt turned around in time to see Geralt gasp in shock.

“She said he’s not her type,” Iga said, sounding outraged. “He’s everybody’s type!” Then she pointed at herself. “Like me.”

“Ahhhhh.” Geralt calmed a little, and started chewing on his lower lip. “She’s...reserved. As well as she’s kept track of my,” he coughed, “numerous exploits, I’ve kept my eye on her. As much as anyone can keep an eye on someone like her. She doesn’t show interest in hardly anyone. Which is fine!” Geralt held up a hand, forestalling nonexistent objections. “I’d care about her either way. I just want her to be happy.”

“You know…” Eskel said, a little haltingly. “Maybe she looked at us witchers when she was growing up and now expects men to look more like us?” He waved his hand at his scarred face. “Ian is very…” He trailed off.

“Pretty,” Geralt finished for him.

“Yes. Very, very pretty.” The way Eskel said it didn’t sound like he was admiring Ian’s many charms. More, he sounded like he was just stating a fact. The sun rose in the east, Ian was the prettiest man alive.

“Ian is very gifted,” Iga added with a smirk. “If you know what I mean.”

Both witchers snorted in amusement.

“I’d be shocked if he wasn’t,” Geralt said.

Eskel shot a look to Matt and narrowed his eyes.

Oh shit.

“This one looks more like a witcher than a pretty boy,” Eskel drawled thoughtfully.

“Reaaaally.” Geralt looked Matt up and down, clearly evaluating his goods.

Matt had never felt quite so objectified.

“Iga...” Geralt turned to the woman. “Have you had any luck with him yet? He any good?”

“She has not,” Matt said firmly, walking over to take his seat closer to the group. He could feel his face burn, but he ignored it. “Nor will she.”

She tilted her head and watched Matt.

“If I had to guess, he has all the traits of a good lover. Attracted to women. Men don’t seem to make an impression beyond the professional kind. Rather on the soft side. He’s empathic but also confident, so I don’t think he would be tempted to use his partner as a way to stroke his own ego. Well trained. I suspect good stamina. He tends to avoid physical contact with me, definitely doesn’t initiate it so I would say he would let his partner lead until he was sure of the limits. Can’t say anything about his experience, but he’s been very controlled when dealing with me. I would say he is a good choice for inexperienced or first time lovers.” Iga rattled the evaluation off fast, sounding damn sure of her words.
Matt blinked. Hard. Then he pursed his lips. A part of him could not believe this was happening. Another part of him was completely unsurprised.

“While I appreciate the positive review, I’d much rather we choose a different subject of conversation,” Matt said evenly. It was important to stay polite, but boundaries were important too, and the last damn thing he needed was for them to start demanding measurements.

Now both Geralt and Eskel looked at him with eyes narrowed, then they shared a glance.

Worrisome.

“We’ll let it slide for now.” Geralt said after a moment. “But should Ciri decide she’d like to take you for a ride, we’ll be talking again.”

Matt rubbed his face for a moment. Fucking hell, he hadn’t even asked her out on a date yet and already he was getting the shovel talk. He thought about the look of her legs as she slipped off her leather pants, and the shining green of her eyes. Then he thought about her obvious strength, both physically and in the way that she wasn’t afraid to ask Belmont Sr. some pointed questions.

Despite her family, Matt found himself still interested.

He looked back up and with as much dignity as he could muster, he said, “I haven’t had a quiet moment to talk to Ciri yet, but it would be massively unprofessional for me to get personally involved with my client’s…family.” That netted him nothing but frowns. “Even if I were to ask her out, I would be a gentleman about it.”

Geralt snorted. “If you’re not well mannered enough, Ciri will just gut you. I’ve no worries on that front. I would like to make sure you’ve got enough staying power to please her.” He paused, and frowned. “How often can normal human men come? Twice? Three times?” He cast a worried look to Iga.

This couldn’t be happening.

“Once is the norm,” Iga said. “Depending on age they can go more than that but need rest between the rounds. Longer rest than the two minutes it takes Eskel.”

“I was high on potions that time,” Eskel protested with a slight blush.

Holy shit, this was really happening. Matt covered his face with one hand and dragged his palm down to cover his mouth.

Iga smiled, her eyes sparkling. “Eyra and I walked out of your bedroom bow legged,” she said with a sigh. “I wish you would get high on potions more often.”

“How often can normal human men come? Twice? Three times?” He cast a worried look to Iga.

“Can we not discuss that night please?” Eskel asked pleadingly, still faintly blushing.

“Seconded,” Matt added.

“You were a beast,” Iga said, looking dreamy. “Over and over and over again. Amazing.”

“When was this?” Geralt asked with interest.

Eskel rubbed his face and sighed. “When we got back from Steingard’s dungeon. After the baths.”

That sounded familiar. Matt furrowed his brow and thought about it. Something Trevor had mentioned…
It suddenly hit him. Back when Trevor and his father were talking about Geralt’s wolf medallion, they’d mentioned something about a dungeon. Holy shit, did that mean that after getting freed from someone’s private prison, Eskel went on a marathon sex spree?

“Oh.” Geralt nodded slowly, then stared off into space, also with a dreamy look on his face. “That was a good night.”

“Yes, it was,” Iga confirmed, leaning in to kiss Eskel on the corner of his lips. From the way Eskel tilted into her just slightly, Matt could tell they were close and that Eskel liked her a great deal, more than one usually liked a whore. The fact both men asked her for opinion also indicated respect Matt wasn’t expecting to be directed at a sex slave. It made him wonder if there was something more going on here.

“Just so you know...” Iga said quietly, and one of her hands slid up over Eskel’s arm until it rested on his bicep. The small size of her hand only served to emphasize the sheer size of Eskel’s muscles. “Both of us are very willing to help you out if you ever need it again.” She kissed the corner of his lips again, and then moved in for a more direct hit. “Very willing.”

Matt could see how Eskel first tilted into the kiss before pulling away and gently forcing more distance between them.

Eskel gave her an apologetic smile. “I need to watch Geralt---”

“Hey!” Geralt pouted.

“---But I bet you could bring a smile to that doctor’s face. Poor man looks incredibly stressed out.”

Matt did his best not to hear that last comment, grateful that his boss’s guests got distracted by food soon enough. Just to make sure that the conversation got diverted in that direction, he nodded towards the food. “Dinner’s up.”

It was a bit like watching a swarm of locusts descend. All the soft foods were reserved for Geralt, who all but inhaled them while looking with a jealous eye at the steak Eskel demolished. Matt knew some guys that could put away food like nobody’s business, what with serving in the army for years, but Eskel definitely took the cake here. He put away three steaks like it was nothing and was still picking through the spread. Geralt was at least feeling good enough that he could feed himself, no longer relying on Eskel to spoon feed him.

Iga was a surprise. She descended on the spread with no less appetite than the men, and she was definitely aiming for the juicy meat offerings rather than the salads. The way she sighed mournfully at the rare steak made Matt think she’d probably just like a piece of raw meat instead.

Far faster than Matt ever would have expected, the food buffet had been picked clean. Geralt seemed grumbly, but mostly satisfied. Eskel kept eyeing the empty plates. The furtive little looks were enough for Matt to send a text down to the catering requesting a slight increase in the amount of food. After a moment of thought, he also requested some tartare and sushi. He hoped that he was completely off the mark with his gut feeling on Iga’s food desires, but just in case he wasn’t, those foods might satisfy her more.

As weird as it was to even think about that, at this point in the week Matt was just going to roll with it.

While he really wouldn’t have minded a cup of coffee, he had to admit it was probably a good thing that there still weren’t any caffeinated beverages in the spread. He couldn’t even imagine
what Eskel and Geralt would be like hyped up on espresso.

“If you all were so hungry, why didn’t you just call John or I and ask for food to be sent up?” Matt finally asked. “You didn’t have to send Iga downstairs.”

He’d kept his seat while they ate, despite it going against his usual protocol. Somewhere on Geralt’s body was a knife, and one that couldn’t be picked up by any scanning equipment that Matt knew of. The last thing he wanted to do was make that man nervous.

There was a pause as Geralt, Eskel, and Iga all exchanged a look. What that look meant, Matt couldn’t guess at.

“How would you prefer us to call you in the future?” Eskel asked evenly.

Matt opened his mouth and almost said ‘by phone’, but hesitated. He remembered, suddenly, their reaction to television.

“There are communication devices in this room,” he said, pulling out his own phone and showing it to them as an example. “I could get each of you one like this. You could call me whenever you needed to.”

An extremely worrying look of glee crossed Geralt’s face.

“Really?” Geralt said. “Would you show us?”

Okay, that was it. They needed to be trained in modern technology. This finding out after the fact shit was not something they could keep up long term.

“Yes.” Matt made sure to keep the exasperation and concern out of his face and voice. They’d really just confirmed what he’d feared; they knew nothing about how the modern world worked.

“I’m also going to ask John to prepare a few lessons for you. There is a lot of advanced technology in this room and in this tower. You need to know how to use the camera, security system, communications systems, and the panic rooms.”

He was texting as he spoke. There might have been a few more exclamation marks in the texts than he usually allowed himself to use, but he felt the situation justified it.

“Lessons?” Geralt asked, sounding interested.

“Knowing John, you will get a full multimedia presentation with interactive quizzes,” he said a tad wryly. John had a habit of being a perfectionist, which was probably what landed him this job in the first place.

Both Geralt and Eskel looked intrigued, but Iga simply looked amused.

In under a minute, John had texted him back.

Wait. How little do they know? Do I need a ‘welcome to the 21st century’ crash course, or just ‘this is what an iphone is’?

Don’t know what a phone is or how to use it. Didn’t know what TV was. They learn extremely fast though, Matt sent back.

...Check. I’ll have a crash course put together in an hour, and we can figure out what else we need once I’m up there.
“Were you just talking to someone?” Geralt asked, eyeing Matt’s phone.

“Yes. This allows me to send short, written messages to other people who have the same kind of device.”

“Talking without talking,” Eskel said. “Brilliant.”

“Humans have come a long way,” Iga said, her eyebrows raised.

Which was an incredibly weird way to phrase that particular statement.

“Do you think Triss and Yennefer have something like this?” Eskel asked.

Geralt shook his head. “They have their mirrors, like the rest of the Lodge. Granted, they’re limited to contacting someone else who has one as well and can activate it, but it offers sound and an image.”

Alright, so maybe they weren’t totally ignorant of technology, although whatever this ‘mirror’ tech Geralt was talking about obviously didn’t look anything like a phone. He wondered if ‘mirror’ was the product line or the name brand.

Unless they were really talking about an actual mirror. A week ago he would have completely disregarded that idea. Hell, it wouldn’t even have come to mind. But the events of the last few days had left him questioning a lot of things. Every time he started to forget about the strangeness, all he had to do was look at Geralt and Eskel’s eyes to be reminded that he was mostly in the fucking dark about whatever the hell they were involved in.

“Phones can do sound and image too, but John will be up in a bit to show you all that,” Matt said, pocketing his phone. “He’s better at this sort of thing than I am. Part of his job, really.”

“He seems like a smart man,” Eskel said, standing up and stretching. Damn, but Eskel was built like a brick shithouse; the muscles straining at his shirt as he rolled his shoulders only emphasized that.

“Kid needs to relax a little.” Geralt shook his head. “Maybe go for a roll in the hay with you, Iga. Poor guy looks so damn overworked.”

Iga raised her hand like an eager student. “I’m on it!”

Matt did not facepalm, but he wanted to very, very badly.

Geralt nodded at her encouragingly. “You’re a gem,” he said warmly, taking a moment to trail his gaze down her neckline.

“All in the name of balanced nutrition,” she said. “Lambert is fantastic and all, but Eskel barely visits. You are off the market completely and Vesemir is stubborn as a mule about it.” She shrugged. “A girl needs some change once in a while.”

“Trust me, if I wasn’t very, very taken, I would give you a ride you wouldn’t forget.” Geralt smirked at her.

“So you keep saying.” She waved her hand dismissively. “Without proof, I won’t believe it.”

Right as Geralt was opening his mouth in outrage, Eskel pointed at him sharply. “No! No, I am not listening to another story about how long and how often and how you nearly passed out, and how
you did make…other parties pass out. There isn’t nearly enough booze here for that.”

“Pfft,” Iga snorted. “Men like to try and convince women that this,” she held her pointer and thumb fingers about an inch apart, “is actually this.” She moved her hands about two feet apart. “It’s why I don’t believe stories.”

The look Eskel gave her was one of pure longsuffering. “They are not just tall tales.” He rolled his eyes and looked up to the ceiling for a moment. Possibly praying for strength.

“Male loyalty,” Iga shot back. “You like to back each other’s play up.”

“You’re telling me that you can’t smell it when they’re done?” Eskel raised an eyebrow at her. Geralt just smiled smugly.

“Well…” she drawled and Matt knew, just knew, that she was going to say something outrageous. She had that sparkle in her eyes and her lips curled up wickedly. “I do know Geralt is the one that gets taken for a ride most of the time, not the one…offering the rides.” She was all but wiggling her brows in delight.

What was even more outrageous was how Geralt just sighed happily. “So many rides.”

“See?” She turned to Eskel. “He might as well have forgotten how to offer a girl a proper ride, if he ever knew in the first place.” Then she turned to Matt, while Geralt sputtered in outrage. “And you Matt? Do you know how to be a good ride?”

Now everybody was looking at him expectantly. There was no goddamn way he was answering the question honestly, though. Hell no.

“Riding is what one does on horseback,” he said calmly. “Yes, I have been trained how to handle the beasts. I have also been trained to drive a whole variety of cars and motorcycles, as well as sea and air transportation devices.”

“He’s got you there, Iga,” Geralt said, snickering.

While they’d been talking, Eskel had been running through a series of warm up stretches. His range of flexibility was very surprising, given his size. A lot of big guys that Matt knew weren’t nearly that limber. They focused just on building muscle rather than caring for their joints as well.

At Eskel’s raised eyebrow, Geralt pointed to the chest where Matt knew Geralt’s blades had been stored. Eskel took both swords out and set them on the bed. Within easy reach of Geralt, Matt noted. Both were damn long blades, though Matt didn’t really know the right name for what type they were. One had a round pommel emblazoned with a sun in glory, and the other had twin silver wolf heads. He could tell that the craftsmanship was both exquisite and unique. They had to be handmade.

Eskel unsheathed the one with the round pommel, and walked over to an open space in the middle of the room. It was interesting to see how Geralt’s hand rested on the wolf head pommel, even as he watched Eskel move away. His fingers trailed over the hilt like he was petting a cat, not a sword.

As Eskel moved, he spun the sword in lazy circles, clearly stretching out his wrist. Then he switched hands and repeated the movement. On the last spin of the blade, he ended up with the sword held the way some knife fighters held their blades, tucked up under their forearm. Considering the weapon was a fucking broadsword, Matt was more than a little surprised. Not that he knew jack shit about swords, but that kind of weight in that position had to be rough to hold.
At this angle, he could see that strange runes and glyphs had been etched all down the length of the steel blade. They seemed to shine, almost. If Matt didn’t know better he’d say that they glowed even. The other one must have been the silver blade. Matt should have guessed, actually. The wolf head decoration was a big clue, and it seemed like Geralt had aesthetic preferences.

“Matt,” Geralt said with a wave. “Start getting stuff to throw. Like knives, get your knives ready.”

Matt blinked. He was wearing a couple of knives, but that was still only two blades. One of which was a utility knife, the same type that paramedics kept on hand. Not suited for throwing, not even a little. He might as well throw a rock.

Besides, he wasn’t about to admit to having the knives nor would he show where he’d hid them. Instead, he reached into his pocket for the change that rattled there and pulled out a handful.

He was a goddamn chief of security, he was not going to throw live blades at any of his charges, no matter what they asked for.

He threw a penny at Eskel’s head, not really expecting much. Maybe a dodge. That would have made sense. What actually happened was Eskel swung the blade, almost so fast that Matt barely saw the movement; he only heard the sharp ping of steel on steel.

“Man, and I thought I was getting rusty,” Geralt heckled from his bed.

Eskel growled but didn’t stop the slow movements of the sword through the air, switching from holding it in his right hand to his left after every full circle.

“Come on, throw something else at him!”

Eskel nodded at Matt, clearly on board with the harebrained idea.

This time Matt flung the coin low, almost at Eskel’s knee, and then threw another one at his shoulder in quick succession. The flash of blade coming down to shield the knees was almost expected, but the tight, almost horizontal flip in place to escape the second coin was not. Eskel landed softly like a cat, exactly in the place he started, and continued the slow circles of his blade.

There was a worrying movement off to the side, and Matt glanced over to see Geralt twirling a small blade in his hand. It was the one Belmont Sr. had given him. Geralt’s movements were slow and careful, probably in deference to his injuries, but it was obvious that they flowed naturally.

What was also obvious was that he was thinking about throwing it at Eskel. There was a speculative quality to his gaze.

Eskel must have noticed too, though he didn’t seem to even be looking at Geralt. “You throw your only blade at me and I’m not giving it back.”

“I wouldn’t throw this one. Gabriel gave it to me.” There was a pleased smile on his face.

“Lucky dog,” Eskel muttered, speeding up his movements. “Those things are unreal.”

“Master gave you one of his blades?” Iga raised her eyebrows in surprise. She flicked her fingers and Eskel jerked. Instead of using his sword to deflect the projectile, he caught it in his hand and popped it into his mouth without looking at her. She smirked, lifting up the grapes she was picking at.

Realizing he was slacking, Matt threw three more coins in rapid succession. Each one was
deflected adroitly.

Fucking hell, Eskel was fast.

Rather than answering Iga directly, Geralt just looked more smug. “Eskel, give me some of yours.”

“You can barely lift that one, you think I want you tossing steel?”

“I don’t have to toss them far,” Geralt grumbled.

“Iga, give him some grapes,” Eskel sighed.

Now Matt was interested to see how fast Eskel could get. He started flicking the coins as fast as he could, choosing directions at random. Whatever Eskel didn’t manage to block, he avoided by performing amazingly tight aerial jumps that Matt was frankly in awe of.

Throughout it all, Iga and Geralt peppered him with grapes. Some he caught in his hand, and then tossed in his mouth. Some he directly caught in his teeth. For all the beauty of his quick and efficient movements, there was something incredibly feral about it all. He was aware of his body in ways very few trained soldiers were. Matt knew; he worked his ass off to build that kind of awareness and he had to admit that his skill was nothing much compared to the easy, almost effortless way Eskel was conscious of everything happening around him.

Sooner than he liked, Matt found himself out of change to throw. “I’m empty,” he said, holding up his open hands.

Rather than stopping, Eskel just took a few steps back and said, “Grab them, and throw them at me again. Or find something heavier.”

“So you have wood blocks?” Geralt asked. “He could practice his cutting while we throw.”

Really?

But everyone involved looked serious, despite the fact that they’d just requested he start tossing two by fours at Eskel’s head.

“Mr. Belmont might object to the mess,” he said instead, hoping that would be enough to discourage them.

Geralt sighed sadly and Eskel actually pouted for a minute.

“This is a nice room,” Iga said, looking around.

“This has good taste,” Eskel said. The words came out conversationally, as if he hadn’t spent the last half hour swinging around a giant piece of metal and jumping every other minute. As if he still wasn’t swinging said piece of metal. Hell, even if it was a plastic wand, he should have been at least a little winded by now. But he wasn’t even breathing hard.

Holy fuck, who were these people? When Eskel had first shown up, he’d looked around at Matt’s men in open scorn, stating he could easily take them all himself. Matt had been a little offended at the time, but now he had to really wonder.

The chime at the door sounded again and Matt’s phone vibrated. John. He had the code for the door, but preferred to wait to be let in, always conscious of his employer’s privacy.
Matt took a look at the security camera just to lead by example, and to appease his very well developed paranoia.

John was standing in front of the door, the employee ID pinned neatly to his pocket. Matt wished everyone at the Tower wore their ID’s in such a visible spot.

He opened the door, letting the other man in.

“John,” he nodded in greeting.

He was shocked by the surge of camaraderie he felt when he saw him. John was the only one he could talk with about the ridiculous things that kept happening to him this week. He worried a little about how vulnerable John was with Belmont Sr. around. Of all of the staff in close contact with Geralt, John was the one with the least physical training. On the other hand, that also meant that John wasn’t being asked to join in on training with Eskel, so maybe he was actually getting off light.

“Matt.” The other man smiled at him. He held up a stack of tablets. “Ready for Tech 101?”

“Yes, please,” Matt said with no little relief, moving aside to let him in.

John only made it a few steps before stopping in his tracks, jaw dropped and eyes wide. While Matt had been at the door, Eskel had grabbed Geralt’s other sword, and was now spinning both around him in a way that looked effortless but couldn’t possibly have been. Iga and Geralt continued to pelt him with grapes, but this time Eskel wasn’t eating them. It took Matt a moment to see, the grapes were just so small, but it looked like he was twisting his blades as he spun them, bouncing each grape off the flat of the blade.

The sheer skill it must have taken to do that, to actually make sure each piece of fruit was bounced and not cut open, was mind boggling.

“Holy shit,” John muttered. Matt had to agree.

They stepped forward and Matt took his seat. John stood there nervously for a moment, watching Eskel move.

Then Iga spotted John, and her eyes lit up like it was Christmas.

“Hi, there,” she purred, stretching out where she was perched on the edge of the heavy mahogany table. “My name is Iga.”

John visibly swallowed. “Hello. I’m John Smith, Mr. Belmont’s personal assistant.” He held up the tablets. “I brought you all something to get started on. I just need to, uh. Get this set up.”

Very quickly, John hustled over to a panel in the wall. A press of a hidden button opened it up to reveal the controls for the projector on the wall.

Suddenly, Matt remembered the conversation he and Iga had had in the elevator. Hard on the heels of that was how Geralt had asked her to find John and fuck him. It seemed like, well, not an innocent request, but a willing and good natured one. But after finding out that Iga was a slave and not an employee, Matt couldn’t help but worry about her ability to consent.

There wasn’t really anything he could do about it right at that moment, though. He had to watch, quietly, as Iga smiled and fluttered her eyelashes at John.
As far as he knew, John wasn’t seeing anyone. Serious relationships had to be investigated in the regular background checks, but short term things weren’t looked into. At the very least, it meant that John didn’t have a spouse at home to distract him from Iga’s charms.

While John was setting the screen up, Eskel had slowly come to a stop. There was a bit of sweat on his shirt, but he still didn’t look like he was at all tired.

And this was the guy who wanted to fight Matt. *For fun.*

Briefly, Matt hoped that whatever John had set up would be particularly engrossing. Maybe they would all get lucky and Eskel and Geralt would spend the next week surfing the internet.

Eskel returned the swords to Geralt’s sheaths and laid them both back on the bed. Then he took his regular seat as John wandered around handing each of them a tablet.

“We’ll start with these,” John said. “This is a tablet. It has all the functions of Matt’s phone, plus a whole bunch of others. Some of which, like how it can hook up with the security interface, Matt will have to show you later. But for right now, I’m going to show you how you can call either of us and send us messages, either voice or text.”

As he handed one of the tablets to Iga, she arched up a little in place, showing off her very attractive and very low neckline.

“How can I sit next to you and look over your shoulder?” she asked with a hopeful smile. “I love being able to see what I’m working with.”

John actually squeaked, and took a step back. “No! No. I mean, that’s, uh, that’s not really needed. I’ve got a powerpoint…” He waved inanely at the wall that the projector screen had scrolled open on. “You’ll all be able to see, uh, just fine. And step by step.”

She made a little moue of regret, her full lips pulling down, and made sure to cradle John’s hands before she actually took the tablet from him.

John scrambled backwards, and turned around to give Matt a look. Matt couldn’t quite pin exactly what that look meant, but he guessed it was somewhere between ‘what the fuck’ and ‘why didn’t you warn me?’ The best he could do in response was purse his lips a bit and blink. Anything more would definitely give their table talk away, and Geralt, Eskel, and Iga all seemed like extremely perceptive people.

John took a seat next to Matt, and pressed a button on a small remote. The projector screen lit up to display his opening slide, ‘Technology 101: Saying Hello!’

Before he could even say a word, Geralt piped up. “What are the numbers one-oh-one for?”

“…It’s a school thing,” John said. “Like, in college, the classes are numbered in the hundreds. A basic class is one-oh-one, but an advanced class might be numbered in the four hundreds or higher.”

“Ah.” Geralt blinked, and then looked down to the blank screen on his tablet. “And college is…?”

John took a breath, clearly reorganizing things in his head. “Advanced education, basically. It doesn’t matter. The title just means that this is basic information.”

Over the next half hour, John stepped them through how to make a phone call, how to send a text message, how to specifically contact Matt or him, how to contact each other, how to take pictures,
and how to use the paint program.

Matt wasn’t sure what to think of the fact that within five minutes of being shown what Google was, Iga managed to find a porn site. Geralt was, oddly enough, sucked into watching cat videos on youtube. Eskel had managed to stumble into the security app without any help. The speed at which they were learning was astounding for grown people, especially for people who Matt expected would have some misgivings about advanced technology.

While they were all distracted, Matt quietly pulled John aside and asked, “Meet me before our shift ends? So we can go over plans for the next few days?”

John just nodded, looking a little exasperated. Several times over the lesson, he’d been struck dumb by some of the questions asked.

On the one hand, all three of their guests were very well behaved and eager for learning, obviously paying attention and not once letting their attention stray. Matt saw that kind of focus in a mixed adult group only during Ranger training, where soldiers were too well trained to do anything else. On the other hand, some of the questions were outlandish while others were almost too insightful.

Iga had questions about prostitution and how it could be facilitated through online communication. This led to John pointing her in the direction of an archive of municipal and national laws, detailing out what was restricted and what wasn’t. To Matt’s mild surprise, Iga actually stayed interested, even when confronted with the wall of text.

Geralt’s comments about take-out dining were even less logical, but made Eskel laugh so hard he almost choked on the grapes he was eating. This only caused Iga to accuse Geralt of being jealous.

Eskel very firmly asked Matt to show him how the security app worked, and quickly began browsing through the directory and help functions. Soon enough, he was flipping through security feeds and looking over building schematics.

Geralt seemed to hop from subject to subject, asking questions about everything from pet ownership to modern weaponry to city history.

All of them had a ridiculous number of questions about the technology that they’d seen in the past few days. It seemed that once the flood gates on that was open, a deluge of questions came tumbling out. It was enough that John promised to come back the next afternoon and give them another tutoring session.

Eventually, it was time for the doctor and nurses to come in and get Geralt set up for the night. Matt and John both stayed long enough to make sure that everything went smoothly. There was a quick cleaning and Geralt got another set of stitches out. The staples in his torso were still in, but after giving them a solid evaluation, Dr. Miller suggested they might be ready to take out in another day or so.

Right as the medical staff were finishing up, Matt noticed that Iga was distracted by Dr. Miller, and Dr. Miller looked equally distracted by her. He knew, he knew, there wasn’t anything he could do if Iga was hellbent on getting fucked by someone here. All he had control over were his own people. But Iga’s distraction was a good opportunity. As subtly as he could, he caught John’s gaze and nodded towards the door. Immediately, John caught his meaning, and had slipped out without another word. At the very least, Matt could save John some trouble.

So when the doctor and nurses filed out, Iga trailed along right after, much to Geralt and Eskel’s amusement.
“You two need anything before I head home for the night?” Matt asked once it was just the three of them.

Eskel and Geralt looked at each other for a moment, and then they both shook their heads.

“We can order our own food now,” Geralt said, pointing to his tablet. It was still silently playing cat videos.

“Just make sure everyone is cleared out of the floor before you leave,” Eskel added. “Except Iga. She’s welcome up here whenever.”

Geralt looked sourly at Eskel for a moment.

“Hush,” Eskel said with a roll of his eyes. “I won’t fuck her in front of you. Besides, I think she’s busy already.”

Geralt snorted.

“You got that right, poor guy didn’t even know what hit him.”

“Right? Gods.” Eskel snickered. “She’s a force of nature.”

Matt blinked hard and tried not to rub his hand down his face. “Alright,” he finally said. “I’m headed out, then. Please, please, call me if there is an issue. Being on call is part of my job.”

“I promise not to kill anyone while you’re gone,” Eskel said mildly. “I’ll make sure Iga doesn’t either.”

With that dubious piece of humor? Reassurance? Matt decided to get the hell out of there and meet up with John. He needed a drink, a strong one, and they needed to figure out what the hell to do for the next few days. And maybe try and figure out what was going on, too.

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Eskel flipped through the views from the different security cameras, getting familiar with the angles and how the technology worked. There were views of corridors, other bedrooms, and offices, as well as what he immediately knew to be Alucard’s portal room. It had more than one view, with different angles and zoom options.

He liked the little gestures needed to make the image bigger or smaller, or turning it around. The whole ability to take pictures and then be able to look at them at his leisure would have been so helpful while investigating things on the Path. All he could normally do was rely on his memory—which, granted, was good—but often he didn’t have the time to investigate a scene right before he had to run. Or fight. Or the weather washed away all traces. The pictures could make an amazing proof, as well as addition to the bestiaries they kept for other witchers.

He looked at the marks carved into the green marble walls in the portal room, recognizing the same glyphs he saw in the portal room in the castle. Here they ran up and down the four walls of the room, carved deep into the stone. The floor was black, and when Eskel zoomed in he saw that similar glyphs were carved into the floor, circling around in the room. On the walls, between the panels of green marble, were black wooden doors polished to high shine. They were probably portals keyed to different places. Outside of the gold-colored trim along the base of the wall, there were no other decorations in the room.

“Eskel,” Geralt said, interrupting his train of thought. “I didn’t get a chance to ask earlier.”
“Hrm?” Eskel looked up and raised an eyebrow. Geralt was looking at him with a sly kind of curiosity. It didn’t precisely unsettle him, but it did make him sit up at attention.

“You never told me the details about Dracula and Alucard both biting you.”


“But?” Geralt leaned forward a bit.

“At the hospital, while you were sleeping. Dracula bit me and I, uh.” Eskel rubbed a hand over his neck absently. “I offered Alucard a taste. And Dracula egged him on. Alucard didn’t bite, didn’t even really feed. He just…tasted.”

The sensation of Alucard’s lips on his throat, tongue on his wounds, came flooding back, right along with the feel of Dracula’s impossibly strong hands holding him still.

“Tasted,” Geralt repeated.

Eskel nodded. “The bites Dracula left hadn’t healed up. So Alucard...sucked.” He shrugged, trying to downplay how much that whole event had affected him. Still affected him. He took a breath. “Sucked,” Geralt repeated again, sounding strangled.

“Yeah. Then Dracula bit me again. He drank, and then shared my blood with Alucard in a kiss.” Just thinking about it made his cheeks burn, and a little curl of warmth glow inside his gut. “I don’t think Alucard has ever had human blood like that. Or at all.” He swallowed hard, and shook his head. “But Ciri was right there, watching. And you know how Alucard is. He wouldn’t have been alright with her seeing anything else. So I got him out of there. Or, at least, I reminded him that Ciri was watching and he got himself and Dracula out of there.”

Geralt rubbed at his face.

“It must have been amazing,” he said after a moment, sounding rough.

“Yeah. But…” Eskel ran a finger across the soft bedspread. “Confusing. I...might be reconsidering my stance on no sex with men.”

He looked up at Geralt out of the corner of his eye, trying to gauge his reaction. Prior to this relationship with the vampires, Eskel would have never, not once, pegged Geralt as being jealous. But more than once Geralt had snapped and growled about Eskel stealing Dracula and Alucard’s affection. Not seriously, not even a great deal, but it was enough that Eskel worried. Geralt was his brother, not by blood, but in every other way. Eskel would sooner be celibate for the rest of his life than fuck up Geralt’s chance at happiness.

Geralt looked at him, his brow wrinkled in worry. “Men in general or Dracula and Alucard in specific.”

Time to fess up.

Eskel clenched his jaw. “Dracula and Alucard in specific. Maybe. I--- I don’t know. Yet.” He lifted up his chin and looked Geralt in the eye. “I wouldn’t have done anything until I talked to you about it. And I don’t have to do anything, either. It’s alright for you to want to have them for yourself.”

“I know you wouldn’t go behind my back,” Geralt said gently. Almost too gently.
Eskel waited, eyeing Geralt warily.

“But?” he prompted, sensing that Geralt clearly wanted to say something.

Geralt exhaled slowly.

“It’s not a surprise, you know.”

A bitter grimace twisted on Eskel’s face. “So I’ve heard.”

“Heard what?” Geralt shifted on the bed, turning more fully towards Eskel.

It was easier to focus on the soft feel of the blanket under his hand than it was to look at Geralt. Cowardly, maybe, but this whole situation was a bit fucked, and Eskel was feeling the need for at least a little distance from the churning emotions inside of him.

“Seems everyone is pretty certain I’m already fucking both of them, and if I’m not, that I should be.” Eskel sighed and shook his head. “I guess I’m the slow one here.”

He wasn’t sure, though. Eskel didn’t know if that was what he wanted at all. And as much as he loved his shit-talking little family, sometimes the teasing really didn’t help.

Geralt ran his tongue over his teeth, obviously mulling through something.

“You react to Dracula in a way that…” Geralt hesitated. “I don’t think you would let him this close if you didn’t want to go there, too, at least on some level.”

Eskel raised an eyebrow at Geralt and gave him a dry smirk. “As if I have a choice most of the time.” He looked into nothing for a moment, thinking back to Steingard’s dungeon. How he’d been chained up, hurt, writhing with both pain and pleasure as Dracula forced power down his throat. “I didn’t at first. Sometimes I think I do now, but I can’t tell. And…” he swallowed. “I need it so much I don’t think I care. It’s driving me crazy.”

“He marked you as his a long time ago. From his point of view, there’s no question about what he wants.”

“Oh yes, he’s made that quite clear.” Eskel rubbed his hand down his face. “He’s waiting, I guess. Watching what I’ll do. But he pushes a lot.”

“He’s gentle, you know,” Geralt said quietly. “I mean, he’s also ruthless and thinks himself incapable of gentleness, but he is incredibly protective. And forgiving. At least towards the people he cares about.”

Eskel mulled that over in his mind for a moment. That actually did set him at ease a little. Only a little, because Geralt was absolutely crazy, and Eskel knew it. Better than most. Geralt often threw himself, and his heart, into crazy situations, and though he had the same ruthless brutality that all witchers enjoyed, he also was keen to see the good in people.

“When I landed in his castle that first time, I met Alucard first,” Geralt said. “I had no idea he was in a relationship. And he was hot.” Geralt grinned. “I did my best to get him. Damn near succeeded, too.” Then he lost his smirk. “And then Dracula introduced himself, after catching us red handed, almost.”

“I’m sure that was memorable,” Eskel said with no little amusement. Fuck, he was almost afraid to try and picture the look on Dracula’s face.
Come to think of it, that look was probably similar to the one on Geralt’s face that first time he caught Eskel and Alucard cuddling in front of the fire at Kaer Morhen.

“It wasn’t, though,” Geralt said. “I didn’t know him enough then to know, but he was seething. Angry and possibly hurt, which is damn dangerous for a man with that kind of effortless power. Yet he did nothing beyond some veiled comments.” Geralt looked Eskel in the eye. “He gave Alucard the space to choose. Looking back, I think he would have let Alucard do whatever he pleased then and would have accepted the choice no matter how painful to him.”

“He loves Alucard more than anything, except perhaps you. He’d burn all existence down for you both.”

Geralt shook his head.

“He basically runs on two settings. Somebody is his, or he just doesn’t care. Which category do you think you are?”

As much as Eskel wanted to protest, what Geralt said lined up with what Eskel had observed. Dracula was focused as hell. More so than anyone Eskel had ever met.

Perhaps he didn’t need to be quite so afraid of what Dracula might do to him, if given free rein. Maybe Dracula would listen, would continue to keep him safe and cared for. It was a big idea, and one Eskel wasn’t quite sure he was willing to accept. He’d need to test the theory at some point. At the very least, it was definitely going to be food for thought for quite a while.

He pursed his lips, and then looked at Geralt. “Regardless, I’ve still not heard how you are with all this. What you think about me getting involved with sex with them.” He narrowed his eyes. “Because, on one hand, I know that you’re nearly always all for anything involving sex. But I also know damn well that you’re feeling a little possessive yourself.”

“He’s been so pleased with you for so long, and so eager to share what he managed to get out of you, I got kinda used to thinking of you as his?” Geralt shook his head. “I worked through my jealousy half a year ago, already.”

That was surprising, but maybe it shouldn’t have been. This was Geralt, after all.

“So you’re alright with me maybe having sex with Dracula and Alucard,” Eskel stated plainly. He had to be clear on this.

Geralt blushed, just a little, but nodded. “I just don’t want to take part in it.”

“Oh, thank the Gods.” Eskel rolled his eyes with relief, and rubbed a hand down his face. “Geralt, I love you like family, but I never want to touch your dick. No offence. I’m sure it’s great. But no.”

Geralt gave him a look of mock offence, and tilted his head jauntily. “My dick is great, thanks. I can’t believe you’d want to pass up this glorious opportunity.” He waved a hand down, pointing out his still bandaged torso. “I’m so damn sexy that they have to staple it in.”

Eskel snorted. “Something sure is stapled in.”

Geralt laughed and then winced, pressing his hand to his stapled-together chest.

Eskel was quiet for a long moment.

“You sure you don’t mind?”
“You make him happy.” Geralt shifted in the bed again. “You give in to him the way he enjoys the most. It makes him happy.”

At the mention of giving in, Eskel shivered a little. That was exactly what it was like. Nothing he’d ever done before was even remotely similar.

“He can take care of you in ways he can’t me or Alucard. You give him something we can’t,” Geralt said gently.

And wasn’t that an interesting thought. Eskel frowned a little. “You two don’t... give in like that?” He’d heard a fuckton of stories, and many of them revolved around Dracula absolutely wrecking both Geralt and Alucard. “From how you two talk about it, you both seem to let him do what he wants.”

That made Geralt pause and think for a moment. “I do it differently. I don’t... I like what he does to me, I enjoy it a lot and I let him know that. But I don’t...” Geralt hesitated, casting Eskel a furtive look. “I love pleasing him, but I don’t do it the way you do.”

Eskel opened his mouth but Geralt raised his hand to silence him.

“You do, Eskel. Even in little things, you like following his orders, and not for sexual reasons.” He lowered his hand. “Alucard is a different animal altogether. He loves, absolutely loves it when Dracula is rough and demanding with him, but he eggs Dracula on something fierce. He does it without words most of the time, but believe me, Alucard is the one that’s being pleased when Dracula pushes him down face down and fucks him for hours on end.”

“Alucard…”

“Is not as innocent or gentle as he looks,” Geralt said firmly. “And believe me he will push for what he wants and how he wants and where he wants.”

Somehow, that fit, too, when Eskel thought about it. How many times had Alucard shown up in his bed or next to him at the kitchen fire, asking without words to be held and cared for? Every move, every look, the way Alucard was so soft and needy, it all added up to a demand that Eskel didn’t have the will to ignore. The fact that it made Eskel feel wonderful as well just added to the appeal.

“He is a menace,” Eskel said, voice low and rough, thinking about Alucard’s lips on his neck and hands cool around his body.

“You just now catching up?” Geralt snickered. “Sometimes he and Dracula are so alike it hurts.”

The look Eskel gave him was of resigned self-deprecation. “I told you, I think I’m pretty much the slowest one on the uptake out of all of us.”

Geralt just gave a little half shrug. “No shame in taking your time.”

“I still don’t know if I’m really attracted to men, or if it’s just Dracula and Alucard’s breath and bite fucking me up. But I didn’t want to even look at that until I talked with you.” Eskel leaned in a little, slouching on the side of the bed.

“You should think of some kind of, I don’t know, training regimen?” Geralt said thoughtfully. He twined his fingers together and rested then on his belly, obviously thinking.

Eskel raised an eyebrow, then paused to think that idea through. “Yeah. Maybe some kind of test run. Ease into it.”
“Err,” Geralt looked at him wide eyed. “Not a good idea, unless you really, really don’t like that person.”

“What do you mean?” Eskel frowned.

“If you fucked some other man when Dracula is still waiting to get a chance at your goods, he would probably skin that person alive and spread their hide all over your bedroom.”

A little shiver of panic raced through Eskel, and he shook his head. “Oh Gods, no! That was not what I was thinking.” He shook his head again, tensing up at the mere thought of it. “No, I was thinking more...I don’t know, seeing if I don’t mind touching Dracula or Alucard a little more, uh, personally. I’d rather not wait until Dracula is about to shove it in before I figure out that dicks just don’t do it for me.”

“Dracula will be a better choice to experiment,” Geralt said after a moment of thought. “His absolute control of his body makes it easier for him to handle frustration and, well, Alucard is difficult on that front. He’s sometimes hit or miss with sex and if you got him all riled up, he wouldn’t say anything, but he would probably give you that look.”

“I’m not sure I know that look?” Eskel had to wonder. Had he seen it and just totally missed it?

Geralt looked grim.

“He says nothing. It just makes you feel like he’s this fragile little creature, that you have to do anything in your power to cherish because he will shatter otherwise.”

Eskel stared at Geralt in horror. He knew that look. It was that look that made him cuddle the vampire that first time in the kitchen. Alucard just seemed so vulnerable, so needy, Eskel didn’t have the heart to refuse.

Oh gods.

“He does that on purpose?” Eskel asked disbelievingly.

Geralt looked even more grim.

“I have no idea,” he said. “I’m afraid to know the answer.”

Eskel considered that statement and his own history of folding like wet paper in the face of cold, sleepy, sad Alucard.

“Have you ever managed to refuse?” he asked after a moment.

Geralt looked at him with wide eyes.

“It never even crossed my mind.”

“You are so whipped,” Eskel said with an edge of panicky laughter bubbling up from deep in his chest. Here he was worrying about Dracula pressing for things, making it hard to refuse any kind of demand from him, and Alucard already got whatever he wanted. Eskel felt like he needed to find the nearest wall and hit his head a few times there.

“At least,” Geralt said slowly. “I’m not the only one.” Then he shook his head. “Besides we were on the matter of you getting some training in before the big event.”

Eskel raised an eyebrow. “Training.”
“Eskel,” Geralt said with an edge of laughter in his voice. “If you think you can take Dracula without a fuckload of prep, you are going to be stumbling around limping for weeks.”

Stunned horror froze Eskel for a moment as various terrifying scenarios played through his head. He swallowed hard. “He wouldn’t go right for that, would he?”

“I’m sure he will stretch you first, but you will feel better if you learn to stretch before the main event.” Geralt said pointedly. “Trust me, there’s a lot of him. You will thank me later for the advice.”

Eskel side-eyed Geralt, now significantly more anxious about the whole idea. “…And you like this? It’s...enjoyable?”

It seemed like a lot of work for sex. And a type of sex Eskel wasn’t even really sure he would enjoy receiving for, regardless of his still questionable attraction towards men.

“I love it,” Geralt brightened immediately. “It didn’t use to be a regular thing for me, I usually like to be the one in charge, but fuck. His stamina is unreal, and that’s coming from a witcher. And he has wicked patience. He’s also a fucking overachiever, but I’m not above reaping the benefits of that.” Geralt was still grinning. His grin faded soon enough though. “The doctors are very adamant on no sex for the foreseeable future. It’s horrible,” he mumbled, slumping against his pillows.

“I know,” Eskel said sympathetically, and he patted Geralt on the shoulder. “Maybe once you’re fit enough to move around the room a little, you can convince Alucard to blow you in the shower. Something nice and easy.”

“No.” Now Geralt sounded even more glum. “They forbid anything that would raise my heart action.” He looked with sad eyes at Eskel. “They told John, too. I bet he’s gonna tattle…”

“But your heart was fine!” That was unfair. Especially since there was no doubt that Alucard and Dracula would continue to work out their frustrations on each other, making the scent of sex apparent to everyone enhanced enough to smell it.

“They threw a lot of strange words at me, but ultimately what they meant is no fun at all until they tell me the ban is lifted. I wouldn’t care about them, but Alucard and Dracula looked way too serious about all those restrictions that the doctors were rattling off before.”

Eskel leaned in towards Geralt and took a long smell. It had been three days since Eskel had shown up, four since Geralt was injured, and Geralt still had the subtle tang of old potions on him. He shook his head. “You reek of toxicity. You won’t be up for potions to help speed things up. Probably not for a while yet.”

The look Geralt gave him was both eloquent and pathetic.

“They had sex in the bathroom,” Geralt said mournfully. “I couldn’t even watch.”

“I know.” Eskel patted Geralt’s shoulder gently in sympathy, though his mind was dragged back to the feel of Dracula and Alucard holding him and drinking from him. He licked his lips and tried not to get too caught up in it. “At least you’ve got Alucard’s scent around you now. That’s something.”

“There are all these humans around watching them. They barely touch me!” Now there was a definite edge of whine to Geralt’s voice, which was rather unusual. He bitched a regular amount, they all did, but Geralt was seldom whiney.

That was when Eskel noticed how Geralt’s hands were shaking where they rested on his stomach.
It suddenly occurred to him that Geralt had been awake and relatively active for hours now. First with settling in, and then food, training, and phone lessons. And now with talking.

He’d been pushing himself, Eskel realized. Trying to keep up and stay awake when he really should be sleeping or meditating. More than that, there was the matter of touch. Geralt was very tactile. Very. And for the past few days, he’d been more injured than maybe he ever had been before, and had to watch his lovers keep him at arm’s length. The stress of it was likely brutal for him.

Eskel frowned a little. “You’ve been suppressing your pain and exhaustion.”

The slightly guilty look he got in return only confirmed it.

“I hate being immobile,” Geralt grumbled quietly.

Eskel sighed. “You need to rest. Actual rest, and not just pretending to take it easy while you push yourself to stay awake.”

Geralt just slumped his shoulders and stared at the blanket in his lap.

Fuck, he was really gonna make Eskel do this. He groaned and rubbed his face.

“You owe me so much booze,” Eskel said sourly, and climbed onto the bed.

“Wait, what?” Geralt turned to him in surprise.

But Eskel was already gently rearranging Geralt and his pillows so he was resting on his back, careful that neither of them got tangled up in the tubes and wires still attached to him. Once Geralt was settled, Eskel scooted in close, cuddling up to him as cautiously as he could. He kept his weight on the bed, laying on his side next to Geralt. Then he threaded his top hand across Geralt’s throat and up to his jaw, so that his palm cradled Geralt’s head.

“Shut up and sleep,” Eskel said, already closing his eyes. He wouldn’t sleep. Couldn’t, not with so much anxiety spinning in his head and the ever present worry for Geralt layered over everything. But if he pretended to rest, Geralt would be more inclined to follow suit.

He could feel the tension in Geralt’s body, but after a minute it drained away.

“Thanks,” Geralt said softly.

“So much booze,” Eskel grumbled back. He squeezed Geralt’s neck in reassurance, though, and rubbed his thumb in soothing circles. Geralt leaned into it just a little and let out a breath.

Without anyone to talk to, or even interact with in any way, Geralt was letting himself relax. It only took a couple of minutes more for his heart to slow and his breath to deepen.

Once Eskel was certain Geralt was asleep, he opened his eyes and stared into the dimly lit room. He stayed that way for a long time, thinking about everything Geralt had said and what that meant for the future.

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The Silver Fox was a classy kind of pub. John had a whole list of respectable avenues prepared for the myriad of possible outings his boss might want to have. There were tables reserved constantly at most of them, too. The cost was negligible and considering how haphazard his boss’ schedule was, it was the most expedient way of dealing with unexpected requests. Of which there were plenty in the last several days.

He was still feeling somewhat jittery, surprised by the invitation to drinks at all. He and Matt had worked together for many months already, but they were never friendly. John always thought Matt didn't quite like him, preferring to keep company with all the ex-military guys that served as security. He was polite and professional with John, but never friendly.

However, the whole situation right now was forcing changes on them. Trevor Belmont had power, John knew that, but he rarely wielded it outside of the boardroom. This situation with Geralt was the first time John had ever seen Trevor really use his influence for something outside of business dealings.

He thought he was prepared for that, thought he was ready to help Trevor achieve his goals. John wasn’t prepared for Trevor’s father, or all the things he learned about the Belmont men. It had been days since he’d had a good night's sleep; his mind was too taken by heavy thoughts. He believed Trevor Belmont was a good man, but he would have to be blind and stupid not to have realized that Geralt and Eskel were clearly the products of illegal medical experiments. The latest revelation about their lack of familiarity with technology only deepened his confusion, making him consider things he didn't want to believe were true.

“This place is way fancier than my usual haunts,” Matt’s voice startled John out of his thoughts. He looked up and gave a relieved smile at the sight of the bodyguard.

“They take very seriously to protecting their guests' privacy, and the table is already paid for. Why not use it?”

Matt tilted his head in acknowledgement and took a seat. Within moments, a server came by and got their order, and only a couple minutes after that they were served. John knew from past experience that food would arrive promptly, and then they would be left to their own devices. There was a call button in case they needed additional service; the people here were accustomed to the patrons of these tables lingering over their meals, so they’d learned to accommodate. One of the perks of paying for the VIP treatment.

After the drinks arrived, they sat in silence for another minute, both of them sipping their drinks. To John’s complete and utter lack of surprise, Matt’s beer was as dark as tar and almost as thick. John himself wasn’t much of a drinker. Mostly, he indulged sparingly for social occasions. This week it felt necessary though, so he’d ordered himself something light. A good flavorful craft beer. Something pleasant to sip on, but wouldn’t get him smashed. Even if he did want to get a little drunk, he knew he had too much work to do to waste the time on it.
He stared into nowhere for a minute, just thinking about all the crazy shit he’d seen and heard in the last four days.

“So you were right,” Matt said, wincing a little. Maybe from the taste of his drink, because seriously it looked more like a bread product than a liquid.

“I’m right about a lot of things,” John said with mild amusement. “But what in particular did I get right this time?”

“Er, Geralt and Eskel. They are absolutely monster hunters.”

It took a solid two seconds for those words to sink in. “Wait…really?”

“Oh yeah.” The look Matt gave him was wide eyed and serious. “They told me a bit about it while you and Boss were at the press conference.”

“All right. After watching Eskel today…” Matt blew out a breath and shook his head. “I believe it. What he was doing with those swords? That was unbelievable.”

Understatement. Eskel looked like a devil swinging those things around. Although some part of John cringed when he saw all the fruit flying. He was going to have to hire a whole team of people just to find all of them, he was sure.

“I’m also really starting to consider that cult idea,” Matt said, taking another sip.

John grimaced widely. That was a massive point of frustration for him. “Look. If there is a cult, it’s one that there is no information on. Not at all. Not even a little.”

“So you did look into it.” It was a statement, not a question.

“Of course I did.” John would have been mildly offended, but he knew that Matt had been crazy busy the last week. Logic would hold that John would be too, which was true. He did have a lot to deal with.

Not so much that he couldn’t look this up, too, though.

“Seriously, though,” John continued, sliding his glass back and forth between his hands absently. “Every place that they’ve mentioned? Kaer Morhen? All those weird ass city names? Witchers in general? Yeah, I got nothing. No mention of any of it anywhere. If it weren’t for the fact that I was there to see Geralt wake up on the surgeon’s table, I wouldn’t believe any of it.”

“The eyes are a big hint, too,” Matt said dryly.

“Right? Oh my god.” John shook his head. “First Geralt, and then Trevor.”

He thought about those eyes. John had never seen anything like it. Not even Geralt or Eskel’s odd cat-eyes compared. Trevor’s bright gold irises nestled in their fields of black were incredibly unsettling.

At first, anyways. Sometime over the last few days John had kind of gotten used to it. He was
actually sort of pleased that Trevor trusted them enough to take out his contacts from time to time. But still. What kind of drug or accident of breeding could cause that coloration?

“Still doesn’t hold a candle to his dad.” Matt shook his head.

“Creepy McCreepydude?” John asked with a shudder. “Yeah, if there was nothing on the witchers, there was an aggressive nothing on him.”

John had looked, partially because it was his job, but also because he was worried. Very, very worried. The way Trevor just folded to his father’s frankly terrifying possessiveness was beyond disturbing. Nor had John missed the bit of blood on Trevor’s mouth that day in the hospital, and right after Belmont Sr. asked if Trevor had been eating, too. Knowing about the scar on Trevor’s chest, John had to wonder if there was a way to sucker punch someone in the face hard enough to make a lip bleed but not enough to leave much of a bruise. Maybe his lip was cut on the inside on his teeth.

Something deeply fucked up was going on there.

Then there was the way that Trevor planned around his father. John had never, not once, seen anything like that out of his boss. In the face of corporate rivals and opposition, Trevor made plans, methodically working out the fastest, most effective way to destroy them and take possession of their holdings. When faced with allies, he positioned himself and everything around them to ensure that everyone’s interests were met. Even those he felt responsible for, like his employees or the city as a whole, Trevor created active plans to shift the situation to meet his goals.

Belmont Sr., on the other hand, Trevor planned around. As if his father were a damn hurricane to be avoided or weathered.

“How can nothing be aggressive?” Matt asked, dragging John’s thoughts back on track.

John sighed and took a drink. “Okay, so. I looked into witchers and Kaer Morhen, and I found nothing. There’s just no information. But when I looked into Creep Master Spooky Eyes, people actively stop talking to me.” He shook his head. “Not, like, all people. A bunch of sources just didn’t have information. No data. But other places? Like contacts in various...well connected organizations? They stopped talking to me. In fact, they requested I never talk to them again. Which sucks.”

Matt tilted his head forward, eyes wide in disbelief. “Wait, really?”

John just nodded and swished around the bottom half of his beer in his glass. Maybe he should have ordered a pitcher.

“You really surprised? The fucking cameras didn’t even want to film him.”

Not that John really thought that Belmont Sr. had intimidated the cameras into not recording. That would be ridiculous.

...But he had to admit that he couldn’t really discount it entirely. It had been a really weird week.

“Fuck,” Matt said under his breath, and took another drink.

A server wandered up and dropped off several plates of finger food as well as glasses of water and refills on their beers.

They both picked at the food a little. It wasn’t bad. Places like this could turn even pub food into a
“Do you think he’s the cult leader?” John asked.

“I mean, it’s likely.” Matt leveled him with a stern look. “You, by the way, need to watch out for Iga.”

“Oh my god,” John muttered, his cheeks burning. “She can’t really be serious, right? I’m not the guy women like that hit on. Not that I think I’m hideous by any standards, but she’d definitely an eleven? And I’m more of a five? It’s crazy obvious that the only reason a woman like that wants to sleep with me is for shady purposes.”

It had happened before. Or rather, it had been attempted before. John had no delusions about his male prowess, and was a workaholic to boot. He was a good guy, sure, and he’d treat a lady right. But a sex god, he was not.

“Geralt put her up to it,” Matt said matter of factly.

“What?!” John had no idea why, but a little sting of betrayal went through him.

“Yeah, he thought you looked stressed. But that’s not the important part here.” Matt dismissed the idea with a wave. “The important part here is you need to know that Iga is a slave. Probably a sex slave, given how she looks and tries to sleep with everyone.”

John’s jaw dropped open. “Oh my god.”

Every time he thought things were weird enough, they just kept getting worse.

“Yeah.” Matt looked grim. “Belmont Sr. owns her. She said so herself. And she was someone else’s slave before he,” Matt brought up his hand to make air quotes, “‘took over.’”

John thought about how Trevor had given her orders along with the rest of them, right before he left. Then he thought of the possessive way that Belmont Sr. ran his hands all over Trevor, Eskel, and Geralt. “Holy shit, are they all slaves?”

“I think so. Although, I am seriously thinking that Geralt and Eskel are both, uh.” Matt made a confused face for a moment. “Kept men? Concubines, maybe? Whatever. I’m fairly sure they’re both fucking Belmont Senior.”

John snickered at the thought of the scarred, muscle bound witchers wearing stereotypical harem costumes. “Wow.”

“Right.” Matt grabbed a piece of fried cheese and wolfed it down.

“There is no way the boss is okay with that.” Impossible. No way a kind, generous man like Trevor Belmont would be alright with human slavery in any form.

“Man, I do not think he has a choice.”

And that was the sad damn truth. Whatever Belmont Sr. was involved in, there wasn’t a single thing any of them could do about it.

Given the futility of that line of thought, John jumped back subjects. “Do you think Iga was owned by the same people who trained and raised the witchers?”

“I don’t think so,” Matt said in between bites. Now that he was started on eating, the food was
disappearing at a surprising rate. After catching sight of John’s look, he said, “Hey, look. Those three demolished every scrap of food that came up there. This is the first I’ve eaten since breakfast.”

John raised his hands in surrender. “Eat if you need, there’s lots. So, not the same cult? Group? Whatever?”

“Look. Belmont Sr. has got to be some kind of a crime lord. The way people follow his orders? The fact that he has goddamn killers and sex slaves on staff?” Matt shoved a bit of bread with melted cheese on it into his mouth. He shook his head as he chewed. “Then let’s talk about that knife he gave Geralt. That thing wasn’t picked up by x-rays. Not at all. I have no idea how that is even possible, and I saw it right there. Who keeps untraceable weapons? What the hell else does he even have on him? No, the guy has got to be some kind of kingpin.”

“Cult leaders can be crime lords, too. And often are, if my research shows anything.” John started nibbling at some of the deep fried broccoli. Might as well get in something to eat. There wouldn’t be any time to cook later. The dipping sauce was pretty good, actually, and it went well with the taste of beer.

“I kind of assume that he is doing both, but I think whatever cult Geralt and Eskel were raised in was a different one. After all, both Trevor and Belmont Sr. seemed surprised at what Eskel said about their childhoods.”

A terrible thought occurred to John. It might make sense though. “Do you think the church had anything to do with it?”

“I don’t even know. God, I hope not. If only because I don’t really want to think about the church kidnapping children.” Matt drained his glass and then took a sip of his water.

It made an awful kind of sense, though. They were all child soldiers. They all had weird eyes, though clearly the Belmonts had a different type than the witchers. They were all trained to fight and kill. Belmont Sr. clearly hated the church with a passion, though Geralt and Eskel seemed a little more…brainwashed.

John stared off into nowhere, thinking about their little technology lesson earlier. They were all so smart, picking up proficiency with the tablets at a frighteningly fast rate. But at the same time, they all had obviously never seen anything like it. That meant that these people were deliberately kept in the dark about the modern world.

Sheltered. Trevor had said Geralt and Eskel were sheltered. That was putting it pretty fucking lightly.

“Do you think Trevor will be pissed at us for teaching them how to use tech?” John asked. It seemed unlikely. Prior to this week, John would have put the possibility at zero. But after everything he’d learned, everything that had happened, he couldn’t discount it.

“No,” Matt said after a long moment. “But I’m not sure about Belmont Senior.” He ran his tongue over his teeth. “I still think we should do it, though. Just in case they are all…owned. It might help them in the future.”

“If they ever try to get out,” John finished for him.

“Yeah.”

Grim silence settled over the table for a moment as they both considered that possibility. It was
nothing but the stark truth that they couldn’t do a damn thing for Iga, Eskel, and Geralt. If even Trevor wasn’t willing to get involved, what could just John and Matt do?

This. They could do this. Anything that would give the three of them an edge against their owner.

John nodded, and swallowed hard. “Yeah, I’m gonna start compiling some additional information for them. Stuff I can slip into the lessons. They’re all, I donno, hungry for information. I think they’ll be interested even if it is a little out of scope.”

“Good man,” Matt said quietly.

Another couple of minutes of silence went by as they both steadily munched on the platters in front of them.

“Is it just me, or is Belmont Sr. weirdly touchy-feely?” John asked.

“It is not just you,” Matt said grimly. “Though he only does it to Trevor, Geralt, and Eskel. Everyone else he seems to avoid touching.”

Shivers clawed up John’s spine. “The hand on the neck all the time.”

“Right? Or the face.” Matt bunched up his shoulders and winced, clearly unsettled. “I bet you lunch that if Geralt were less injured, Belmont Sr. would be all over him, too.”

“No bet. He totally would be.” John frowned for a moment and thought about it. “Though Geralt is really, very sad that sex is off the table for a while. So I’m not sure he’d really be against Belmont Sr. touching him.”

“Unless that’s what he thinks is expected of him,” Matt said glumly. “If he’s been conditioned that way…”

If anything, that only made the shivers worse. John looked at him in horror. “Oh god. Why are you filled with nightmare fuel?”

“Gotta know about a threat to avoid it.” Matt shrugged. “Besides, I have seen some weird shit in my tours of duty.”

“Weirder than this week?”

That earned John a wide eyed stare. “Not even close,” Matt said seriously.

Which was just great.

John sighed. “How can he even think about sex when he’s still stapled together?”

“Man, you have not come close to hearing the horrors I have.” Matt took a long drink. “They talk details. Lots and lots of details. And ask about it. And watch softcore vampire porn.”

“Iga was watching hardcore porn this evening on her tablet.”

Fuck, John was going to have to deal with her browsing history later. It honestly hadn’t occurred to him to restrict her device to safe for work sites, and by now it was too late. She knew she could get access, so she no doubt would want that access to stay. And aside from general personal discomfort there wasn’t any good reason to deny her. Even viruses weren’t really an issue. There wasn’t anything worth stealing on her tablet and even if it died it could be effortlessly replaced.
Maybe he would just burn the thing when she was done with it. Or, better yet, give it to her as a going away gift. Say it was from Trevor, that way John wouldn’t have to deal with her thinking he was flirting. Especially when all he really wanted to do was avoid seeing just how many orgy videos she could download onto her machine before she ran out of storage space.

_Oh god._ John was suddenly struck with the paralyzing fear that Iga would figure out the tablet’s camera function and become a cam girl in her free time. Maybe he should go disable some functions. For security reasons. And maybe also sanity reasons. The last thing they all needed was an amateur video of Iga and Dr. Miller on Pornhub.

“On the bright side, both Geralt and Eskel seem to treat her with respect, even though Eskel already admitted to sleeping with her,” Matt said. He leaned back in his chair and sipped his beer.

“Oh, really?” John was sort of curious, but not super shocked. Iga seemed like she got around.

“Interestingly enough, Geralt is apparently ‘forbidden’ to partake of her offerings. They were both pretty clear that she wouldn’t touch him and he admitted to being ‘taken’.”

“He’s got to be fucking Belmont Sr.,” John said. “That would make sense, right? Or maybe someone else high up in the cult. Do you think Belmont Sr. has a second in command?”

“Yeah,” Matt said. “But so is Eskel, I think, and he is not under the same restrictions.” Matt paused. “I think there must be some kind of lieutenant. If his organization is as big as we think it is. I just don’t really want to think who it is, you know?”

John nodded glumly. From the way Trevor seemed to know what was going on with his father, it seemed possible that he was more than just a treasured son. He could be involved, too. Iga had come to him for help, after all, saying his father needed him.

Until faced with evidence, John didn’t want to think of the possibility that Trevor might be just as involved with slavery and murder as his father. Nothing in his bearing implied that, after all, and he’d shown so much generosity and concern for people he’d never met. It was also true that they’d never even heard of Belmont Senior. Based on that, it was equally likely that they wouldn’t have heard of his second in command, either.

John was willing to give Trevor the benefit of the doubt. Maybe it was like Matt said, and whatever Trevor did, was because he didn’t have a choice about it? It’s not like people get to choose their parents.

“The hell are we gonna do with them for the next...however long it takes for Trevor to get back?” John asked.

“There are tech lessons. Which, thank you, by the way.” Matt toasted John. “Hopefully that will keep them occupied. At least for a little while.”

“There’s always training,” John said, thinking of Eskel swinging around those massive fucking swords.

But Matt winced. “Yeah, Eskel’s said he wants to do some sparring with me. And earlier this week I was feeling a hell of a lot better about that. But now?” He gave a wide eyed look to John. “Did you see how fast he was moving? I’m good. Really. One of the best in my field, and I stay in shape and in practice. But that guy is gonna kick my ass.”

“Movies?” John asked. “They liked the Alucard movies. Maybe we should feel out their opinions on other sci-fi horror stuff?”
“John,” Matt said seriously. “Have you actually seen the latest Alucard movie?”

“...No?” Truthfully, John didn’t have a lot of time for movies. When he did get around to watching TV, it was usually just some reruns on television.

“Remember that softcore porn I mentioned?” Matt drawled before biting into a crunchy fried chicken leg.

“Yes?” John grabbed a nacho chip and nibbled on it. Then went for more. This was junk food, sure, but it was comfort food, too. Right now he thought he could use it. It would be hard enough to keep weight on with all the stress anyways.

Matt continued eating his chicken, staring at John from over it and waiting for the dots to connect.

*Softcore vampire porn.*

“No.” John dropped the chip he was holding. “That thing we walked in on after the press conference? I didn’t really get a good look at it.”

“Oh god.” John closed his eyes, briefly grateful that he spent most of his time in meetings.

“Uh huh. They’ve watched it over and over and over again. The first time wasn’t even that bad. Now that they know all the scenes, they have commentary. Very graphic commentary.”

“Yeah. Whatever you’re thinking of? Go worse. Because Geralt isn’t the only one obsessed with sex. Eskel is just as damn bad. He’s just less aggressive about it.”

“It’s like watching toddlers,” John muttered. “With the skills of a ninja and the sex drive of a porn star. I’m kind of tempted just to hire them strippers and call it a day, but Geralt can’t take the pressure on his heart. He took too much damage. If it gets too high, there’s risk of rupture or clotting or...” He shrugged. “There are a lot of problems. Mainly because he’s a damn pincushion.”

Matt just shook his head. “Maybe a shopping spree? Iga and Eskel both need clothes. So does Geralt, though he won’t need them for a while.”

“I ordered stuff for them, but having them choose what they want might distract them for a while.” John started to mentally tally all the online stores he would show them; most of the bespoke tailors he knew at least had a showcase on their website. That would be enough for them to pick out styles that everyone liked and then get items made to their measurements.

Though the thought of the measuring process gave him a bit of a fright. Between Iga’s tendency to wear very little and ignore such things as underwear and Eskel’s scarring, he wasn’t sure how any tailor would deal with them.

They polished off the last of the food in silence.

“When do you think Trevor will be back?” John asked quietly.

Matt went tight lipped. Then he shrugged and finished off his beer.

John sighed and grabbed his phone. He had plans to make.

He never knew when his boss would disappear or when he would be back. It made for challenging work at times, but it also meant he got a lot of decision power. Even though he was an assistant, a
lot of people in charge had learned to respect his opinions. He was used to running with company matters and keeping things flowing smoothly in Trevor’s absence.

Recent events had put John in place to deal with some things out of the norm for him. Trevor had really thrown his influence around with this incident, and outside of normal business realms, too. He’d also opened himself up to character debate with the new information released about his past and private life. That brought up a whole host of new problems for John to deal with. It made him wish even more for his boss’ return. Preferably alone, without his father in tow.

“I’ll plan activities for tomorrow,” John said. “Keep me updated on how it’s going, and I can try to send you help as you need.”

“Let’s hope we don’t need it.”

They both looked at each other and snorted in laughter.

Fat chance of that.

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In the end, John had to take on separate tailors for Iga and Eskel. Their clothing choices were too different. Geralt was still not well enough to be out of bed; he was still connected to too many tubes to be eligible for measuring. So John focused on Eskel and Iga.

Eskel’s measuring went smoothly. Well, better than John expected anyways. His tailor was Trevor’s regular one and he was at least familiar with dealing with muscular guys, though the amount of scarring did make him hesitate at first.

Still, Eskel was remarkably relaxed for the whole event. He didn’t react to being told to assume certain positions and ignored the tailor touching him to get the measurements. That was what John and Matt were most afraid of, that Eskel would treat the close contact as a threat.

At some point, Eskel must have caught their slightly relieved looks. He smirked ruefully at them, and shook his head. “This is a cakewalk compared to when Trevor’s father got me outfitted last summer. Because of course he was there to make commentary.”

Geralt just snorted at him.

“We all heard the stories of Eskel getting a sugar daddy!” he called from the bed. “The whole market at Ard Carraigh is still buzzing about it.”

Eskel turned bright red and grimaced. “I don’t want to hear it. He was your damn sugar daddy first, and half the shit he made me try on was for you to wear later!”

John shared a look with Matt, feeling like all their speculations had just been confirmed.

“At least that’s what he told you,” Geralt said with a smile that showed an alarming number of teeth.

“Gods, you are both assholes,” Eskel grumbled. “All I wanted was armor! And swords!”

“And you got them.” Geralt smirked. “Gabriel got an evening of fun, too. Everybody got what they wanted.”

Eskel pinched the bridge of his nose and muttered something that made Geralt bark out in laughter.
“I do like the way he thinks,” Geralt admitted eventually. “Though his ideas of ‘help’ are somewhat…unique most of the time.”

“Help. Yes. He does like to help.” Eskel sounded so incredibly grumpy.

“You like it,” Geralt said, still sporting a shit eating grin.

“Now you really do sound like him,” Eskel shot back dryly.

That just made Geralt laugh again.

“I swear, you all are just a bunch of gossiping old aunties.” Eskel shook his head and held up his arms for the tailor.

“I have said nothing,” Iga said with a smile, raising her hands in innocent surrender.

John had been a little surprised that they all wanted to stay in the same room while measurements were taken. Though maybe he shouldn’t have been. They were obviously all close, and weren’t at all self-conscious. Plus, Eskel was taking Geralt’s safety very seriously. He seemed to be even more paranoid than Matt, and that was really saying something.

“Oh, please. Like we all don’t know that you and the others sit around and compare notes.” The look Eskel gave her was both knowing and amused.

She rolled her eyes. “If Vesemir would just give in and put out, we wouldn’t have to wait around in his room every morning.” Both Geralt and Eskel laughed. “Although, it looks like the Steward has taken an interest.” She waggled her eyebrows at them and tapped her nose.

“Seriously? Wow, I thought he’d never fold,” Geralt said.

“I’ll believe it when I smell it,” Eskel said, shaking his head.

The tailor stood up, thanked Eskel for his patience, and started to pack up his stuff. After a sigh of relief, Eskel took Iga’s spot next to the bed. He’d insisted that one of them be free to guard Geralt at any given time. If Matt was annoyed by that, he kept it under wraps, and the tailors were too well paid to show irritation with the wait.

“I will have a few items for casual wear ready by tomorrow morning, the rest will be delivered throughout the week. For the suits, I will need another fitting to make alterations for any weapons sir chooses to wear.”

“Thank you,” Eskel said. “You’ve been very courteous. I look forward to the next fitting.”

The tailor, an older man who Trevor had worked with several times in the past, just smiled broadly and nodded at him. There was a note of real appreciation in the man’s face, too. “The pleasure was mine.”

Eskel caught the raised eyebrow that Geralt gave him. “What? Unlike you, I have manners.”

Geralt just snickered. “Manners aren’t what witchers are for. Besides, who was it who showed up to King Foltest’s court completely smashed?”

“Both of us, if you’ll remember. And at least we weren’t high as a kite like Dandelion.”

John just stared at them and tried not to facepalm. So they were like this everywhere they went.
How did Trevor ever get involved with these people?

Iga walked over to the space cleared for the fitting and asked, “My turn?”

The other tailor, a younger designer who had become a sensation in the last year, was already waiting. His creations were colorful and interesting, catching Iga’s eye above all the others that John had showed her. He’d tried steering her towards the more conservative designers, but she wanted the showy, flashy clothes and nothing he said could convince her.

“Please stand here,” the man said with a wave.

As she moved closer, Iga pulled off her dress with a single fluid motion, and tossed it onto the bed. Underneath she was absolutely, gloriously nude.

*Oh my god,* John thought frantically, immediately dropping his gaze. Burning heat flooded his face and he was sure he must be bright red.

“Make sure the clothes fit well,” she said, pushing her chest out, her unbelievably perky breasts leading the way.

Desperate to look anywhere but at her displayed bosom, John took in the reactions from the rest of the room. Geralt and Eskel watched with a mix of amusement and appreciation, yet both seemed oddly unaffected at the same time. They sported what looked like kind smiles, and there wasn’t even a hint of a blush on their faces. Aside from a hint of pinkness at the cheeks, Matt looked pretty nonchalant, too. The older tailor, Eskel’s designer, was utterly uninterested, not even sparing her more than a bored glance.

Iga’s designer, though, had on a smirk that set John’s internal alarms off. It was more than just appreciative. There was also a hint of something else there that John couldn’t quite put his finger on. For some reason, he was reminded of a used car salesman, though he had no idea why.

As a rule, John didn’t like working with people who got famous or rich in a short period of time. Especially with things like fashion or entertainment. He was sadly met with a distinctive lack of class. Since his boss was an extremely elegant and collected person, a true gentleman, he extrapolated that Trevor wouldn’t like working with people who didn’t share his sensibilities.

So far, that assumption had served John well. Both Trevor and the designers he’d ended up working with left their arrangements satisfied.

This guy, though. He was new, and that look on his face was making John consider investing in some unknown designers instead. Iga would get her dresses, but if she needed more, John would assign an agent to more thoroughly vet the candidates.

Everything started as expected. The designer began with Iga’s arms and shoulders. Things got dicey when he had to measure her bust. He kept fumbling with the tape, his fingers working uncomfortably close to her nipples.

John didn’t keep too close an eye on it, feeling too uncomfortable to keep watching Iga’s naked form for long. He was also feeling very hot under his collar. Thank god he was too uncomfortable to get hard. He’d not forgotten how Eskel had said that they could smell people’s interest, and the sheer embarrassment of that was keeping his libido in line.

It was the slight frown on Iga’s face that caught his attention next, as he was doing his best not to look anywhere below her eyes. From the corner of his eye he saw Matt straighten suddenly and move forward. At the same time, Iga *growled.*
She moved so fast that John didn’t even understand what was happening at first. She had her fingers clenched around the man’s neck, and was squeezing hard enough that his skin went all white and bloodless around her grip.

“What did you think you were doing just now?” she hissed, squeezing even harder.

The muscles in her arm tightened and the man’s eyes all but popped out of his head. Little, weak noises bubbled out of him, but he clearly couldn’t get enough breath to make more sound than that. His lips were already going blue and bloodless. He tried to wrap his hands around Iga’s arm, but she caught his right hand and pulled it away like it was child’s play.

“You dare touch me with this filthy hand?” she hissed again, and then twisted sharply.

The sound of breaking bone was shockingly loud in the room. The man squealed and his knees gave out. He was now literally hanging from her grip. She looked enraged, incandescent with it.

“I will keep breaking it,” she hissed, “and then I will start in on the other one.”

“Iga,” Matt said firmly. He stepped forward slowly with his arms out, as if heading out to defuse a bomb. “Let him go. My men and I will take care of him.”

“This pathetic piece of shit thought he had a right to touch me!” she snarled. “To try and take what I had not offered. A slimy little pissant like this should be happy I haven’t gutted him. Yet.”

“Iga,” Matt said again. “You are killing him.” He sounded remarkably calm.

“Yes?” she said, as if that was exactly what she was aiming for.

John looked to Eskel and Geralt for help, but they merely watched without showing any empathy or concern towards the designer. Eventually Eskel sighed.

“No killing Trevor’s people, Iga,” Eskel said from his seat. He sounded almost bored. Hell, he hadn’t even moved out of his slouch. “We’re not supposed to break his tower or his people. As much as this fucking moron deserves it.”

Holy shit, holy shit, holy shit. John did not think that Trevor was being serious when he told them that.

“Well,” Geralt said. “This guys isn’t exactly Trevor’s, is he? And besides, if one starts it with her kind, one has to learn the consequences.”

“No,” Eskel said, getting to his feet. “Iga.” He turned towards her. “Let him go.”

Iga hissed again, but released the tailor from her grip. He dropped like a rock, and curled in over his broken arm, gasping.

For a moment it looked like she would curb stomp him, but instead she turned and stalked over to where Eskel stood.

“You witchers and your mission to protect the humans,” she growled. She brushed past Eskel, her shoulder bumping into him hard along the way. Eskel said nothing. He only picked up her discarded dress and tossed it at her.

She snatched it out of the air with a sneer, quickly slipped it on, and then dropped into the chair next to the bed with a glare.
“Don’t be so hard on him,” Geralt soothed. “He waited ‘til after you had a little fun, after all.”

John was aware of Matt talking quietly in the background, organizing transport to the hospital.

“I’m going to call the police,” the man whimpered once Iga was safely away from him.

“No, you won’t,” Matt said calmly, kneeling down next to the tailor. “You will get the best medical service that can be bought, and you are going to be very grateful for it.”

“What?” he gasped. “There are witnesses!” He looked to John, and then to the older tailor that hadn’t yet left.

John shook his head. “I didn’t see anything. Just came into the room.”

The man looked to the older designer, who just studiously avoided looking at him.

Eskel walked over to where the younger tailor lay squirming in pain and looked him over. There was an absolute apathy to the gaze that set John’s skin crawling.

“Fisk!” the tailor hissed towards the older man.

“I’m afraid I was out of the room, too,” the old tailor said.

Eskel crouched down next to the man, and tilted up his chin to look at the bruising along the neck there. “Not bad. Iga, you are talented.”

The tailor jerked his head away, wide eyed and almost heaving with how heavy he was breathing. Eskel just ignored him though, instead he shifted his gaze to the broken arm. Before the tailor could worm away, Eskel grabbed ahold of it, fast as a snake.

“No, no, no,” the tailor whispered. He’d started crying again. Nausea rolled in John’s stomach.

“Eskel…” Matt said, taking his attention away from his phone for a moment.

“It’s a very clean break,” Eskel said evenly. “I can set it now.”

He looked through his eyelashes up to Matt. The way he sat, crouched over the injured, crying man, the way his eyes shone in that moment, and the utter nonchalance of his words made him look terrifying. He was calm and focused and cold as marble.

“We should let the paramedics do that,” Matt said evenly.

“Hmmm.” Eskel let his gaze roam back to the tailor. “This is a learning moment for you, isn’t it?”

“Fuck you!”

“Don’t scream,” Eskel said mildly and reached his other hand for the broken arm.

John felt queasy, the contents of his stomach inching up his throat as he watched the tailor’s face become wax paper white when Eskel twisted his arm. The man did not scream, but that was only because he choked on it and squealed in terror instead.

“All set,” Eskel said just as mildly as before, with no sign of tension, empathy or even anger in his voice. He was absolutely unaffected by the violence that just took place or the terror he was raining down on the man.
“Eskel.” Matt inched a little closer, putting a protective hand on the tailor. “Please let me and my people handle this.”

“This one is lucky he didn’t take such liberties with Trevor. Or with Geralt or I while either of the Belmon ts were here,” Eskel said mildly. He tilted his head to the side and looked at Matt curiously. “He should take this lesson to heart and understand how incredibly lightly he’s gotten off.”

“I’m sure he knows.” Matt was calm as could be. Which was great, because John was one more snapping sound away from crawling into a corner and having a nice breakdown.

“Good.” Eskel looked down to the tailor, who by now had given up on doing anything but crying. He leaned in and took a good long sniff. Catching his scent, John realized in horror. “You need help carrying him out?”

“No, but thank you.”

Eskel shrugged and walked back over to the bed, taking a seat on its edge.

After that, a couple of the security guards hustled in with a pair of paramedics. They quickly got the man onto a stretcher.

One of them looked to Matt and asked, “What happened?”

“He slipped,” Matt said without much of inflection. He looked remarkably like Eskel in that he didn’t seem affected at all.

John suddenly realized he had a job to do, too. In a heartbeat, he was contacting legal, having them prepare funds for medical expenses as well as additional NDAs. Both tailors had to sign several just to get in the door, but this situation would require a little extra something. Just in case, he also requested them draw up a sexual assault lawsuit. If this designer wanted to play nice, they would pay for his bills and the cost of lost revenue from his recovery time. If not, a case probably could be made for self defense.

Though he had to admit, if only to himself, that retaliation for a sexual assault wasn’t usually so draconian.

Bribery was something that John had experience with in this job, but usually it was bribing otherwise corrupt individuals to accomplish something for the greater good. It left a bad taste in his mouth to consider using that influence to cover up an assault. Truthfully, though, he didn’t think it would come to that. The designer would take the path of least resistance and most profit and not just because of the money. If Trevor Belmont publicly blacklisted the man, that would be massively damaging to his career.

The way Eskel smelled him stuck out in John’s mind, too. He couldn’t help but wonder if Eskel could track the man down later by it, or if it was just an intimidation tactic. A terrifying vision floated through John’s head of Eskel skulking through the city at night only to ferret the man out and murder him in his sleep.

Just in case, he set up a reminder to check on the man’s health in a few days. Not that he could do anything about it if Eskel had taken deadly offence, but it would be nice to know.

While John had been frantically setting plans into place, Matt had gotten the injured tailor out, as well as the rest of the security and paramedic team. Silence fell over the room afterwards, and John noticed that the older tailor had stuck around.
Fisk. His name was Sean Fisk.

“You know, my niece just finished up design school,” Fisk said offhandedly, still straightening things in his tailoring trunk. “She’s young, but her designs are very provocative. Racy, I’d say, but the line work is inspired. If you have interest, I could contact her. If not, it is no problem. I have always enjoyed the work I do for Mr. Belmont and I look forward to continuing that relationship.”

He raised an eyebrow to Iga. She straightened a little out of her slouch, looking intrigued. “Do you have examples of her work?”

Fisk beamed at her. “On my phone. I was at her senior runway show. May I join you to show you?”

Iga perked up even more. “Please.”

He walked over and passed her the phone, screen already showing colorful pictures. Iga flipped through them, sometimes coming back to look at one more closely before moving on again.

“Yes,” she said with a smile. “I like those. Girl has spirit.”

Fisk smiled warmly at her and reclaimed his phone. His gaze flickered to John, who nodded. “I’ll call her as soon as I leave here. She’s in town, so I’m reasonably sure she will be available for a consultation within the next day or so.”

John sighed with relief. One less thing for him to worry about. “Let me get her information before you leave, as well.”

“Of course,” Fisk said with a nod. Then he turned to Iga again. “I’m terribly sorry for that cad’s wandering hands. People like that give us all a bad name.”

“Thank you,” she said with a warm smile. To John’s vast surprise, she didn’t seem flirtatious at all. Just courteous.

With that, Fisk gathered up his trunk and exchanged contact information with John. Then he was on his way out.

The whole room sighed in relief when the door shut behind him.

“Well, that was exciting,” Geralt said into the silence.

“I might get some nice dresses out of it,” Iga murmured, stretching out her legs in front of her. Damn she was hot. Just so very hot. And dangerous apparently. John still couldn't quite get over how ruthlessly and easily she broke that guy’s arm.

“All your kind cares about is the bling,” Eskel said, going to the other side of the room and getting another chair. He brought it over to the bed, setting it up on the opposite side of the bed from where Iga sat. John wondered if he was angry at her.

Iga snorted.

“And you don’t, Mr. 'I will kill any beastie for gold'?”

“Children,” Geralt chided gently. “Let’s not make more of a show than we have to?”

Both of them gave Geralt a look of dry amusement.
“You’re starting to sound like Vesemir,” Eskel said.

“Gods forbid.” Geralt laughed.

“You stop putting out like him and your lovers will be most displeased,” Iga said, half amused, half sour.

Lovers? John blinked in startlement. The conversation he heard before indicated Geralt was in a committed relationship. This was the first time John heard it was something other than just one lover, whom he expected to be Belmont Sr., and he couldn’t imagine that man sharing a lover with anybody.

“That’s when you know I’m dead,” Geralt said seriously.

“Somebody want to tell me what just happened?” Matt asked. He closed the door carefully behind him and stood in front of it as if he was making sure nobody could escape.

“You were here, weren’t you?” Eskel grumbled from his spot across from Iga. The two kept looking at each other over Geralt’s bed. Geralt had to keep turning his head to look at one or the other. It looked exhausting. John always hated to have speakers on both sides of him.

“I was, and yet I am still confused.” Matt raised an eyebrow at them, glancing between Iga and Eskel.

Geralt snorted. “You only engage her kind if you know you can win. This guy got off easy, believe me.”

Iga looked at her nails, not even trying to look innocent as a smirk pulled at the corners of her full lips.

“Her kind? And what is her kind that nets someone a possible killing because he touched when he should have only looked?” Matt asked with just a slight edge to his voice, an obvious sign of his frustration leaking through.

Geralt, Eskel, and Iga all shared a glance. It looked like this was another one of those things they were gonna try to dance around. John held back a sigh. It wouldn’t be so bad if the witchers were any good at talking in circles. The truth was, they both sucked at it. What they weren’t allowed to say practically tried to break out from behind their teeth.

“That fool thought he knew what he was dealing with,” Eskel said, sounding rather tired suddenly. “None of us fit into what the people here expect, and he should have seen the obvious warning signs and acted accordingly.”

“For fuck’s sake, one look at me and Eskel should have told him that he needed to be on his toes,” Geralt grumbled. “Trevor’s obvious wealth alone should have reminded him to keep his hands to himself.”

“That’s not an answer,” Matt said.

“That’s the best answer you will get,” Geralt said with finality in his voice. “Iga is no danger to any of Trevor’s people. That guy didn’t belong to Trevor, though.”

Matt gritted his teeth. After a beat, he nodded, and then wandered over to take his seat along the wall. Once he sat down, he sighed and let out a breath. “If I told you all not to kill anyone, Belmont’s people or not, would you listen?”
Privately, John also had to wonder about the attachment to the concept of ownership. *Trevor’s people.* As if only what belonged to him had value, and everyone else was irrelevant. It reminded him of feudal times, with lords and vassals. John thought of Geralt’s swords and Eskel’s armor, and had to wonder.

“No,” Eskel said simply. “I have my orders already and if I have to kill somebody, or a few dozen somebodies to get it done, I will.”

For a brief moment, stark cold terror shivered down John’s spine. He knew without a doubt that Eskel was serious. More than that, he knew Eskel was dangerous enough to make it happen. Easily.

Then his brain kicked in and John contacted the legal team. There were already contingencies drawn up in case Matt or any of his people had to kill to protect Trevor. Might as well get those safety nets expanded a bit. That included notifying them of a more present threat to Trevor and his...retinue.

Matt just pursed his lips. “Good to know.”

After a moment of silence, Geralt piped up. “Don’t worry so much. The chances of someth---”

“Don’t. Say it,” Eskel said sharply. “Gods know you breathe trouble.”

“...Does this happen often for you?” John asked quietly, glancing between Geralt and Eskel.

“No,” said Geralt but he was drowned by both Iga and Eskel chorusing, “Yes.”

Something of his internal freakout must have shown on his face, because Matt nudged a chair in his direction. Yes, sitting down seemed like a good option.

Trevor hadn’t even been gone twenty-four hours. If this was what the first day was like, how was the rest of the week going to go?

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Matt was stressed.

More than that, Matt was also confused and flustered, struggling to keep to his professionalism.

At first, having Iga around didn’t seem to be much of a problem. She was beautiful and provocative and made it no secret that she was also available for a quick romp in the hay, but Matt’s people seemed well equipped to ignore her presence.

Matt hadn’t taken into account the medical staff.

On the second day after Trevor left, a rumor started circulating among his people that Iga had a fling with somebody in the supply room on the floor below the private ones.

Given Iga’s flirtatious behavior, rumors were bound to start up. Matt tried not to put much stock in them. But he saw how Geralt and Eskel talked with her, how casually they all acknowledged that she’d be doing her best to screw as many people as she could while here.

Matt hadn’t taken into account the medical staff.

So on the third day after Trevor had left to go help his father, Matt found himself in need of a visit to the supply closet and he couldn’t quite make himself go in. Not without knocking first.

It was stupid. This whole thing was stupid. There was no way Iga had dragged one of the medical
staff into the damn closet.

But yet.

He sighed, and tried to rub away the tension headache building in his temple. Feeling like a goddamn idiot, he knocked on the supply room door.

And was stunned to hear a muffled squeak come out from inside. This was quickly followed by a, “Just a minute!”

That was definitely a woman’s voice. Not Iga, either.

Two long, embarrassing minutes later, one of the nurses slipped out of the room, adjusting her scrubs. Her face was bright red, and her hair looked like it had been hastily drawn back into a ponytail. Matt just looked at her, eyebrows high up on his forehead.

She avoided his eyes and rushed away, disappearing behind the corner within seconds.

“All yours,” the second voice did belong to Iga. She came out of the closet after the nurse, her hair loose and a little messy. She was gently flushed, but not from embarrassment. As he watched, she checked that her dress was in order while she stepped out of the closet. “I hope you are having a good morning,” she purred, looking like the cat that got the canary already.

“Probably not as good as hers,” he muttered, his eyes still feeling kind of wide.

Iga smiled, slow and wicked.

“I can help with that,” she offered.

He blinked and tried not to think about how Iga’s lips looked wet and inviting. “Thank you, but no.”

She put her finger against her lips. “Hmm, at least not all of your guards are so resistant to having a little fun.”

She patted his shoulder gently.

“I’m having a good time during this stay.”

Annoyance flickered through him. Matt had expressly forbidden his team from getting involved with Iga, but apparently someone couldn’t quite resist. It would be pointless to bust Iga’s chops for it; that would be ineffective as well as alienating.

“They are off duty while you are having fun, I hope?” he asked instead. That was part of Trevor’s parting orders, after all. Matt was sure he could get her to agree to that at least.

“Of course,” she said easily. “I would never go against orders like that.”

He nodded. “Thank you. Please let me know if any of them treat you poorly.” The last thing he needed was another incident like with the tailor.

She smiled at him. The expression was surprisingly honest, the wicked edge to it softening.

“You chose good men.”

“Thank you.”
With that, Iga wandered off down the hall, looking over her shoulder at him while she walked.

Matt took a moment to count backwards from ten before going into the supply room.

This week was going to kill him.

---

John was going insane.

On top of all of his regular duties for Trevor, which were a lot of work by anyone’s standards, he also had spent the last few days scrambling to keep Geralt and Eskel entertained.

To his vast relief, they at least seemed to ask about things before they did them. But each damn question only made his blood pressure go up. Since they’d learned how to text, even leaving the private floors of the tower didn’t make him safe.

*John, is there a store of extra rope in this building?*

He found out later that the reason that Eskel asked was because he was wondering if the side of the tower could be rappelled from. John didn’t know the answer to that, so he’d asked the only person who was liable to know about such an improbable scenario. Matt. The fact that Matt texted him back with not only the confirmation of supplies in stock, but also a quick list of needed equipment, including the goddamn brand names and catalog numbers, was as disturbing as Eskel’s question.

*John. Matt said that Trevor is fairly famous and thus likely knew other famous people. Does he know the man who played Alucard in the movies?*

Yes, Trevor knew many famous people, but no, he did not socialize often with them. Or at all, really. Not to mention the fact that the idea of introducing Geralt and Eskel to *anyone* gave John hives.

He was able to dissuade them from attempting to contact the actor in question, but that started them on creating plans to entertain Trevor once he was back. They seemed annoyed that he didn’t have much of a life outside of work. While John privately agreed with them, he was more than a little terrified of their plans.

Some were normal enough. Theater and movie trips. Eating out, though when they mentioned that they both snickered to themselves like teenagers getting away with a prank.

Then there was the idea of chasing down the last of the Infected. That one made both John and Matt blanch.

“How big can they get?” Geralt asked.

“There were reported sightings of creatures up to two stories tall,” Matt replied. When both Eskel and Geralt lit up with glee, he hastened to add, “But there haven’t been signs of any that large in months and months.”

They slumped a little in disappointment, and John sighed with relief.

“You could always import something in,” Iga suggested helpfully.

“No,” both Matt and John said at the same time.

“They’re right,” Geralt sighed. “Trevor wouldn’t like that. We’ll have to find something else.”
“Or we could just go kill something and bring the trophy back to him? I’m sure this city is crawling with things that need to get killed,” Eskel said thoughtfully.

“Hmmmm.” Geralt frowned. “But would that be any different than what we normally do? He needs to relax. Have some fun.”

“Master would love it if you killed something and brought back a trophy for him,” Iga added. Oh so helpfully. God, John kind of wanted to gag her, but deep down he thought that might only encourage her.

“Maybe, but Gabriel already knows how to have fun.” The grin on Geralt’s face was nothing short of filthy.

Why. Why did John have to hear this. What had he done to deserve this?

Thankfully, he’d gotten a call shortly after that and was able to make his excuses and leave. He was haunted by the look on Matt’s face, the betrayal and desperation. It was fine. Matt would let him know if he needed to come back. Just as an apology, he sent Matt a text letting him know he’d found a collection of Alucard inspired artwork to keep the witchers occupied.

The real trouble came, though, when Geralt got most of his staples out. No sooner had Dr. Miller walked out, after adamantly telling him to stay in bed, then Geralt had tried to get up.

Eskel was right there, pressing him back down and threatening to tie him to the bed posts.

As tired and stressed as John knew both he and Matt were, he felt even worse for Eskel. Every night after work, John and Matt would get together for beers and food, and both of them had noticed that Eskel had started to look a bit frayed. Matt said that Eskel hadn’t slept at all, and John believed him. There were deep purple circles under his eyes, and as the days progressed, he’d gotten grumpier in general. He still acted and moved like he was fresh, though. John had to assume it due to his enhanced biology.

As far as they could tell, Iga and Geralt hadn’t noticed. That was mildly worrying. The three of them seemed to keep each other in line and entertained, as much as possible anyways. Iga regularly wandered off to go have relations with as many nurses and doctors as she could, and Geralt still slept most of the time, though it seemed to be in short stints.

But Eskel never seemed to rest. He was always watching, always keeping guard and making sure Geralt didn’t stress himself. It made John worry. People made mistakes when they were tired, and Eskel was a trained killer. John didn’t want to see what would happen if he slipped with one of those blades during his terrifying daily training routine.

Their work all doubled once Geralt got it into his head that he needed to be up and about. Every chance he got, he was pushing himself, trying to be more active. He was wrong, and they all knew it.

Just to make the transition a little smoother, John and Dr. Miller had arranged for a physical therapist to come in. That ended badly almost right away. The physical therapist kept insisting that Geralt couldn’t possibly be able to do very much, and both Eskel and Geralt were right there ignoring her and doing the stretches anyways. She ended up quitting after the first session, and walked out looking like she was ready to tear her hair out.

Eskel helped Geralt with stretching after that. Or what he and Geralt claimed was helping. John was sure it was just an example of torture. Eskel had Geralt sit on the edge of the bed, then he knelt
behind him and braced the side of his body against Geralt’s back. He’d take a hold of Geralt’s arm and stretch it back into nearly a ninety degree angle. He kept increasing the angle and the time held until Geralt became pale like paper and his face was beaded with sweat.

Geralt must have been in horrible pain. After all, the same guy refused painkillers fresh out of surgery. Eskel didn’t offer any words of comfort, any encouragement. He just counted out the seconds out loud. He kept repeating the stretches, ruthlessly holding Geralt still whenever the man flinched too hard. By the time they went through both arms, and thirty repetitions, Geralt was looking green and woozy. He dropped off to sleep the moment he laid down flat.

John couldn’t get the sound of Geralt’s uneven, painful breathing out of his ears and his mind for hours afterwards. The fact that Eskel and Geralt repeated the process just eight hours later was almost no surprise. John couldn’t stop wondering what kind of life they led, that they would be so used to treating their own bodies so brutally.

John couldn’t wait for Trevor to come back.


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Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

Notes from Quarra: Happy holidays folks, if you celebrate. I have to admit, this past week and a half has been pretty difficult for me, and the next month looks to follow suit. At the very least, I'll keep to the once-per-two-weeks posting schedule. If things go well, I'll try to be faster. But, uh, given my next 5 weeks, no promises. Just. Heads up for you all.

Dracula wrapped himself around the light of Alucard’s presence with all that he had. He put himself between that life he held so dear and everything else as he tore through the borders between the worlds, challenging any darkness to try and touch his precious cargo.

He was careful, oh so careful, when he pulled Alucard’s body together, letting it reform gently in his hold, keeping his being around like it a shield. Only when he was sure that Alucard’s consciousness had taken over the control of his physical presence did Dracula let himself reform. The darkness rushed with a silent roar to create his body, still holding his son. Instead of the kitchen at Kaer Morhen, the two of them stood in the middle of the portal room in Zobek’s tower in Castlevania City, what was now Alucard’s tower.

Warmth curled up in Dracula’s chest as Alucard blinked his eyes open and looked into his own.

“Is this where you wanted to end up?” Dracula asked gently, not letting go of Alucard. He stretched his thumb so that he could put the pad of it against his son’s lips and feel how soft they were.

“It’s exactly where I want to be,” Alucard said quietly. His lips moved against Dracula’s finger with every word, and he never took his eyes off Dracula.

Alucard’s hair was so soft, and his body so close.

“Thank you,” Alucard whispered. He raised his hands to rest them on Dracula’s hips. A tiny shiver of pleasure traveled down Dracula’s back at the close contact.

“For what?” he asked, pulling Alucard a little closer in hopes that some of his warmth would pass on to his always-cold son. Alucard seemed colder now than ever before.

“You have been good to me.” Alucard parted his lips and licked at the finger still there. It was just a tease, a quick touch that was there and gone, but it pulled Dracula’s attention to that tiny spot anyway. “You have been so good to me.” Alucard’s hands slowly inched up Dracula’s sides, cool against his heated body. “Stood by me.” Now they were flush against Dracula’s ribs, and Alucard pulled them closer together. “Thank you,” Alucard repeated, and kissed him.

The kiss was slow, but not innocent. Alucard caught Dracula’s lower lip between his teeth and pulled at it, biting gently, waking the beast inside Dracula with this promise of violence. He kept at it until Dracula growled, low and soft; the barest hint of a warning. Then he licked in, wet and deep, tasting and challenging again.

Dracula relished the way that Alucard’s hands dragged over his skin. The way his nails scratched
at his ribs just hard enough to leave gently stinging marks in their wake.

He put his hands on those slim hips that he had such fond memories of, and pulled Alucard even closer until they were pressed chest to chest.

“You are tired,” Dracula murmured in a quiet attempt to slow Alucard’s seduction. But he was already hardening. The desire for his son—something he normally kept under very strict control—was spiking with Alucard’s blatant invitation.

He ground his hips against Alucard’s, relishing the pressure against his hard cock.

Alucard made a small sound, barely more than an exhale. He pulled his hands away from Dracula’s sides to frame Dracula’s face with his cold hands.

He bit Dracula’s lips again, and dragged his own cool, wet mouth across Dracula’s cheek, to his ear.

“Every time I look at you,” Alucard said quietly. His lips just barely brushed the shell of his ear as he spoke. “I want you.” He caught the lobe of his ear in his teeth and pulled slowly. “I can’t stand it sometimes,” he said through clenched teeth. “I can’t stand it when the demons touch you as if they have a right.” His voice dropped to a low growl, and his hands slid to Dracula’s shoulders and dug in.

“I want to touch you,” he breathed right over Dracula’s skin. “I want you to touch me, mark me, fuck me.” He pressed his lips against Dracula’s jaw, trailing a line of kisses over the bone, which he then finished off by a shallow bite there. “You being so good only makes it worse,” he complained.

Dracula growled, his good intentions unraveling fast.

“I don’t have anything to ease the way.” Dracula pressed his face to Alucard’s neck and took a deep breath in. He smelled exhaustion, power, and lust on his son. So much lust that it made him dizzy.

“We don’t need it,” Alucard breathed. As he spoke, he let his head fall back, giving Dracula access to his long neck and allowing him to mouth at the pulsing vein there. “I’m still slick,” he said on a moan. Dracula bit down harder, making a line of indentations in the skin. “I made sure of that.” Dracula jerked him close and let took in a sharp breath. That knowledge lit an unbearable fire in him. “In the baths, before we cleaned up to head to Kaer Morhen,” Alucard added when he noted the reaction.

“You are a menace,” he growled, and then he kissed Alucard hard.

He licked deep into Alucard’s mouth, asserting his ownership, his right to have him. He curled his hands in the fabric of Alucard’s pants and pushed power at the garment, into the very make of them, and forced them to dissolve. Then he spread his power to the rest of Alucard’s armor, all but ripping it off of him.

His claws scratched at Alucard’s bare skin as he gripped his naked, firm cheeks and pulled them apart. The feeling of those tight muscles in his hands only served to push his lust higher. The little hitched breath Alucard made when his clothes faded away merely brought the beast closer to the surface. He pulled his claws in as he slid his fingers lower, between those amazing cheeks and over that little hole he’d loved so well just hours before.

He pushed two fingers in, feeling how easily they went in. Alucard’s hole was so soft and slick on
the inside that it made a tiny squelching sound. Alucard moaned loudly; his hands locked around Dracula’s neck and shoulder as he held on for dear life. His legs were spread, letting Dracula do as he pleased, and his already mostly hard cock pressed against Dracula’s belly.

Dracula let his own clothes disperse. He was hungry for the contact, for Alucard’s skin pressed to his.

He fucked Alucard with his fingers, deep and slow, making sure to pull out a breathless gasp out of him on every thrust. Oil and probably remnants of his own release started to leak out at the rough treatment. Alucard panted against his neck, his hole clenching against Dracula’s fingers on every thrust.

Dracula pulled his fingers out and threaded his other hand into Alucard’s hair. Then he pulling Alucard’s head back, forcing another tiny gasp out of him.

“Get me wet,” he growled, and pushed Alucard down.

Alucard’s eyes were dark and liquid. His lips were wet and parted as he stared at Dracula for a long moment, before he lowered his lids and gave in to the pressure, falling gently to his knees in front of Dracula.

He wrapped his hand around Dracula’s wrist, and turned his face and pressed his lips there to the inside of it. He kissed with his eyes closed, soft and sweet, and then licked along the tendons and veins there.

Dracula groaned at the sensation of Alucard’s cool lips against his skin. At the sight of Alucard on his knees, his cock hanging hard and lonely between his thighs, and his hair silky and warm against Dracula’s fingers.

“I want to devour you,” Dracula said quietly, pulling at Alucard’s hair to make him look up at him. “I want to eat you whole.”

He put his fingers against Alucard’s wet lips and pushed in, enjoying the feel of how Alucard loosened his jaw, and the wet, soft tongue sliding slickly around him. Alucard closed his lips around the invading fingers and sucked, licking over and over against the intrusion.

Dracula moaned, unable to bear it, and pulled his fingers out. He wrapped his hand around his own cock and pulled Alucard closer, showing him what to do next. Alucard curled his free hand around where Dracula held himself, and leaned in with open lips.

He mouthed at the swollen head, tracing the thick shape of it with cool, wet lips. He mapped every inch, from the tip to the slit, over the glans and down where both their fingers were. He mouthed there too, licking over Dracula’s cock and his fingers alike, as if he couldn’t live without tasting it all.

It was messy and eager. His lips and tongue wetted Dracula’s achingly hard flesh, soothing and arousing the skin. He came back to the head, opened his mouth wider, and sucked. As he did that, he licked around the glans with tiny hitched breaths that stroked the burning fire in Dracula’s chest even higher.

Every wet slide of tongue against the head, every suck and moan, shot zinging pleasure up Dracula’s back. He was leaking already. His cock pulsed in Alucard’s mouth, and he was panting hard. His eyes were stinging, for he didn’t dare close them. He couldn’t bear to lose a single second of this, of Alucard licking and sucking at the head of his cock as if his life depended on it.
He moved his hand, letting go of his cock. Quickly, he caught Alucard’s wrist and held it tightly. With his other hand he tightened his grip on his son’s hair and let himself thrust forward. He did it slow, slow enough that Alucard would know what was going to happen, and would know there was nothing he could do to stop it. He pushed until the whole head was sheathed in the wet heat of Alucard’s mouth, until he heard a tiny whine leave his son’s throat, and then he kept pushing.

He pushed until his cock hit the back of Alucard’s throat, and then pushed past that resistance, too, cutting off the nearly subvocal whine. Alucard’s eyes were wide and liquid, almost unseeing as they teared up. Dracula kept pushing, keeping Alucard immobile, until Alucard’s nose was pressed to his belly. He stayed there, as deep in Alucard’s throat as he could get, feeling the desperate contractions as Alucard swallowed around him. Shudders raced through him at the pleasure of that tight, slick grip.

He pulled back just as slow, and watched, mesmerized, as fresh tears made their way down from the corners of Alucard’s eyes. He watched the way Alucard’s pupils ate up all the gold in his eyes, leaving nothing but pools of darkness. His throat contracted again and he choked when Dracula’s cock head left the tight confines of his throat. But even suppressing coughs, Alucard strained to lick at Dracula’s retreating cock, his tongue warm and slick against it.

Dracula pulled out completely, hissing at the sting of cool air after the heat of Alucard’s mouth. He watched the way Alucard panted, his lips open and so wet, already a little swollen. Then he thrust forward again, deliberately not aiming at the invitingly open mouth. He let his wet cock slide against those smooth cheeks, feeling the difference in texture and temperature. He took his time spreading wetness all over that pale skin before he moved again to let the head of his cock rest against those parted lips.

Alucard was so beautiful in that moment, eager and desperate. So lost in his lust that he seemed incandescent with it.

Dracula pushed in again, slow and ruthless. He gave Alucard no choice as he filled his mouth and then his throat, ignoring the resistance and going where he wanted. Alucard’s throat clenched against him, his involuntary spasms massaging Dracula’s cock each time. It felt beyond amazing. Dracula pulled back, but only a little. Then he pushed in again, never really leaving Alucard’s throat.

He bent over so he could wrap his hand around that long, pale throat that he was fucking, and shuddered at the way he could feel his own cock stretching Alucard from the inside.

“I can feel it,” he rasped, staring into Alucard’s liquid black eyes. Alucard was shoved so close to his stomach that he could barely turn his face up enough to see anything, but still he strained to look at Dracula’s face. “I can feel my cock in your throat, stretching you. Fucking you.”

He pulled back just enough for Alucard to gasp in a desperate breath around the cock in his mouth. Then he pushed in again. The hand he held around Alucard’s neck marked his progress. He could feel his cock make its way down Alucard’s throat, how it stretched him, how it choked off Alucard’s moans.

“I’m wrecking your voice now.” He pulled back halfway and thrust again, squeezing a few more tears out of Alucard’s eyes. “Everyone you talk to after this will know it. You won’t be able to hide the evidence,” he promised, pushing in again and again, not letting Alucard breathe in between the thrusts. “But that’s not what I want to do to you,” he admitted, pulling out the final time. Alucard choked and coughed, panting for breath he didn’t really need. His blown eyes never left Dracula’s own.
When Dracula pulled him up to his feet, Alucard went easy. He stumbled when Dracula let him take his own weight again, but steadied quickly at the hard grip Dracula took of his hips.

Dracula pushed until Alucard backed up the two steps needed for his back to fetch up against the wall.

“Hold on,” he warned, but just the once.

His hands gripped his son’s hips tightly and he lifted him up, taking over Alucard’s weight. Alucard scrambled to comply; his rasping breaths were hot in Dracula’s ear as he held onto Dracula’s shoulders.

Dracula moved in close between those long, amazing legs, and pushed his body against Alucard’s, pinning him to the wall. Alucard’s cock was pink and swollen between them, already spilling precome against his pale belly.

“I won’t touch your cock,” Dracula said in a low rasp. His heart pounded in anticipation. “If you want to come, you have to do it on my cock alone.”

He shifted his hold so that he was holding Alucard by the cheeks of his ass more than his hips; his fingers pulled the muscles apart even as he pressed forward. Alucard made a high-pitched, lost sound as Dracula’s cock pressed against that vulnerable, wet little hole. Dracula shuddered at the way Alucard’s nails dug into his shoulders and back as he started pushing in.

There was resistance at first. His head pushed harder and harder at the ring of muscle that wouldn’t give. Alucard panted, and his whines got louder. Suddenly, they choked off right as the resistance gave and Alucard’s little hole, still slick from before, opened up to let him in.

The heat inside his son was devastating. The tight slickness was almost overwhelming him with pleasure. It made him push harder, past all resistance, until he was seated all the way and his groin pressed hard against Alucard’s ass.

His son was twitching and moaning against the wall; his head was tossed back and eyes closed as he panted for breath. Dracula circled his hips, hard and deep, and watched as Alucard’s pink cock, resting forgotten against his son’s belly, twitched and jerked with his every move.

Dracula couldn’t stand it. The pleasure, the sight of Alucard so wrecked. He surged closer to cover those open, vulnerable lips with his own, and fucked slowly into his son. He didn’t let himself go as hard or as fast as he wanted; he kept the beast on a tight leash.

He fucked his tongue into Alucard’s mouth, licked and sucked at him as he pulled back almost to the end, until the flared head of his cock was pulling at Alucard’s abused rim. Then he thrust all the way in, shuddering wildly at the way Alucard bore down on him, his insides clenching and fluttering. Alucard’s knees were tight around Dracula’s sides, keeping them locked together and urging him closer at the same time.

Dracula fucked him deep and slow. He made sure to drag against his son’s prostate on every move, to light Alucard’s body on fire even as his own mind was slowly consumed by pleasure that blotted out everything else. His whole world narrowed down to this. To the weight of his son in his arms, the taste of his shuddering moans in his mouth, and the tight, wet clench of Alucard’s body against his cock.

His throat, his ass. Dracula had it all. Fucked it all. Marked him in every way possible.

His nose was full of the scent of their sweat and Alucard’s precome spilling on his belly as his cock
jerked uselessly against it. On every thrust in Alucard whined and twitched, scratching Dracula hard enough that he could feel wounds opening and healing at his back. Alucard’s legs were trembling where they were pressed against his sides, and his breaths were shuddery and uneven as he strained for a release his tired body seemed incapable of reaching.

Feeling his own orgasm just a hair’s breadth away, Dracula pressed himself harder against Alucard. He sped up his thrusts, finally letting more of the beast out, and breathed power right into the kiss.

Alucard screamed. Right into his mouth, even as he swallowed the power. His body clenched down on Dracula and his cock spilled come weakly against his belly. It filled the space between them, breaking the last of Dracula’s control.

He kept breathing power into Alucard as he let his hips go as fast as his lust dictated, pounding hard and ruthless into his son’s body. The room was filled with the wet sound of their coupling. The oil and come inside Alucard dripped down their bodies. He breathed more power into Alucard, keeping him coming, keeping him thrashing and twitching, his cock jerking again and again between them. Dracula extended Alucard’s orgasm, prolonged the delicious contractions against his own cock until he came, too, pressing himself hard into Alucard and spilling into him.

Alucard sobbed into his mouth as Dracula eased off on the power, letting his orgasm end finally. He shuddered and clung to Dracula, shivering and spent, looking like the most beautiful thing Dracula had ever seen.

“Father,” Alucard gasped out as he wept, and clung even harder to Dracula.

Dracula ran his hand over his son’s side, trying to pet as much as he could while still holding him up.

“Alucard.” Dracula kissed him again, softer this time. Just a press of lips against swollen lips.

“Mark me,” Alucard whispered hoarsely, pulling his knees up and pressing them tightly against Dracula’s ribs. “Now, before I feed.”

Possessive want surged up inside of Dracula and he couldn’t help the growl that escaped from him. At the noise, Alucard let his head loll back, leaving himself open, baring his throat to Dracula’s teeth. It was irresistible. Dracula buried his nose into his son’s neck and licked all across the sweat salty skin there. He nipped and sucked as he went, rubbing his smartly trimmed goatee into the sensitive flesh.

When he found just the right spot, he sucked. Alucard shifted under him, clenching down on his cock still sheathed in him. Each little moan and breath from Alucard only egged Dracula on, driving him to mark what was his. He worried at the skin, biting just enough to leave bruising, but never so much that it broke the skin.

Alucard wanted to be marked, and Dracula would do his best to do it. To suck his claim right into the skin so everyone could see it. The taste of it flooded his senses, and he clamped down on Alucard’s squirming body, holding him in place while his neck was ravaged.

When Dracula pulled away, Alucard whimpered in distress.

“Hush,” Dracula said quietly. “I have marked you. So pretty. Bruised and mine.” He darted in to lick up that stretch of sore skin. “You should drink from me now. Regain your strength.”

“I don’t want to feed yet,” Alucard said in his destroyed voice. “I want to keep your marks
longer.” He looked incandescent to Dracula. There were still the last traces of a blush on his skin. His lips were soft and swollen, and still a little wet. His eyes were just pools of velvet darkness and his long, pale neck was all marked up. He smelled of sweat and sex, softness and exhaustion. He was fragile and beautiful, giving himself up in the sweetest of ways.

The beauty of that look made Dracula hesitate. His son still felt cool to the touch, was visibly weak and shaking. But the soft way he looked up at Dracula tugged at his resolve.

“Please,” Alucard begged, his hands clinging to Dracula’s shoulders tightly, fingers digging into the sweaty skin there. “Let me wear your marks for a while longer.”

That dark possessiveness inside of Dracula surged up and he squeezed Alucard tight. Just because he could, he shoved his cock a little farther inside of that wet, welcoming hole, savoring the gasp it worked out of Alucard’s mouth. He leaned in to lay a delicate kiss on the heavy mark on Alucard’s neck.

“Alright, my pretty one,” he murmured. “After you rest, then.”

They stayed there, pressed against the wall, as Alucard trembled in his arms. Throughout it all, Dracula kept up the pressure, holding him tightly and lavishing affection on him. He stroked down Alucard’s side and nuzzled into his hair, whispering soft endearments.

Eventually the trembling slowed and stopped. The sweat dried, and Alucard’s breathing steadied. Exhaustion ran through every line of his body, and Dracula found himself hesitant to let go at all.

“We should go in to see Geralt,” Alucard mumbled softly. His lips brushed against Dracula’s neck and his hands lay almost limp on the shoulders they were wrapped around. Dracula treasured that feeling. There was nothing quite like having Alucard’s soft, cool body draped against him, fucked into exhaustion and breathy with how well he’d been used.

“Then you will rest,” Dracula said. The words were soft, but no less firm for it.

He did not like how quickly his son was losing his body heat. Not that the cold would kill him, or even damage him, but it spoke of a deep, draining exhaustion. Alucard would need to feed when he awoke from his rest, there was no doubt about it.

Maybe they could convince Eskel to join in for another taste. The thought of it curled up pleasurably in Dracula’s gut. His good witchers. Geralt, helping his son learn to enjoy the pleasures of the body, and Eskel, showing him that he didn’t have to starve.

Alucard nodded. He didn’t pull away, but he did try to straighten up a little. Dracula took that to mean that Alucard was ready to get up, and he gently unseated Alucard from where he was still impaled deep on Dracula’s cock. A small rush of hot fluids came out as they pulled apart, and a massive shudder raced through Alucard’s body.

It was impossible not to rub a finger or two over that abused, wet hole. Sweet and plaint, Alucard just leaned in as Dracula let his fingers explore over that conquered ground.

“So open,” Dracula said quietly. He was careful to keep Alucard’s still-wobbly body supported while he played. They should get ready, he knew this. But he wanted to rub his scent and his come into Alucard’s skin for a little while longer. “They’ll all smell me on you the moment we walk in. Mine.”

Just as Alucard was starting to pant again, Dracula pulled his hand away. As fun as it would be to wring another orgasm out of his son, he knew Alucard wasn’t up for it.
“Father,” Alucard moaned quietly.

“Yes,” Dracula answered. The word was more than an acknowledgement. It was a reassurance, too.

It took a couple of minutes, but Alucard steadied himself. Shakily, he walked over a panel on the wall and pressed his hand against a hidden scanner. This made a panel open up to a closet of sorts, holding a wide variety of clothes and other accessories common to Castlevania City.

Alucard briefly towelled himself down, wiping up all the excess come, oil, and sweat, and then began to dress in a dark grey-blue suit. He didn’t seem to even be trying to go for his normally polished and professional look. This was just something to make him presentable enough to pass muster.

It didn’t take long for him to finish. While he worked, Dracula summoned his own clothes; another solid black suit with his normal armored coat thrown over it. It was tempting, oh so tempting, to stick to his regular armor. But despite this being Alucard’s private domain now, his human servants would no doubt abound. Better to be cautious. Especially since it was obvious that Alucard himself was going to great lengths to keep up the fiction of being human.

There was a curious sense of satisfaction in watching Alucard pull clothes onto his marked up body. There were bruises scattered over his thighs and back, his neck a riot of dark red marks. Dracula watched him dress, feeling lazy and pleased.

He let himself lean against the wall, and admired his son’s long and lithe form, the legs that stretched into infinity. His pale thighs were smeared with slickness, glistening gently in the banked light. He wanted to go there and touch it, to rub it into Alucard’s skin. He sighed with regret when Alucard pulled his pants up, the dark wool covering all that marked up skin.

It wasn’t all that bad, he supposed. He knew Alucard could feel it; he was wet and probably still dripping from his abused hole. Dracula closed his fist, letting his fingers rub against his palm, remembering how it felt to touch the smooth, swollen rim.

Alucard wasn’t looking at him, but Dracula knew he was aware of Dracula’s thoughts. He could see it in the slight blush that crept back over the back of Alucard’s neck. He didn’t stop dressing though, leaving Dracula to mourn the flesh quickly disappearing from view.

Soon enough, they were both ready. Alucard led the way through the halls towards wherever Geralt was being kept.

Portal room aside, the space looked very different from when Zobek lived here, and Dracula found himself relishing every little change. Every place where Zobek’s influence had been blotted out and overwritten by Alucard’s desires was a triumph, bitter though it was. Laced over everything was Alucard’s scent, growing stronger as they walked further into the floor.

The room they came into was clearly Alucard’s bedroom. It was everything Dracula expected; elegant, tasteful, and spacious.

Geralt lay in the bed, propped up by several plush pillows. The many tubes and wires were gone, but he was still covered in bandages, with a few splints still strategically placed. He looked thin, pale, and more than a little exhausted, but he lit up when Alucard and Dracula walked into the room.

A chair had been pulled up close to one side of the bed, in between Geralt and the door. Eskel sat
there with a tablet in hand.

Alucard walked up to sit on the edge of the bed, and leaned in to kiss Geralt softly.

“Again?” Geralt said sadly, no doubt smelling the scent of sex and come covering Alucard. Old and new, too. The depth of the scent would let him know that they had more than one round.

“Think of it as incentive to take your recovery seriously,” Alucard said firmly.

Dracula smirked. He admired how ruthless his son could be, given the right situation.

Geralt just grumbled at him, but not too much. The pleasure at seeing them clearly outweighed everything else.

“You look beat, pretty wolf,” Geralt said softly, running a shaking finger down Alucard’s jaw.

“So do you,” Alucard replied, his voice hoarse. The sound of it was enough to drag a shiver out of Dracula. And Geralt, judging by the look on his face.

But Geralt just shook his head. “Eskel’s been helping me get these scars stretched out. They tighten up something fierce when they heal. Bright side, I can move a bit.” He sighed, and rubbed the bandage over his torso. “It’s still a bit of a challenge,” he admitted quietly.

“You look better though.” Alucard smiled at him, his shoulders dropping a little in relief. Or maybe weariness.

“Go wash yourself,” Dracula said, leaning in behind Alucard to trail a hand down his back. “I know that you are dying to do so. I will tell them of the goings on at Kaer Morhen. Once you are done, you can lay here and sleep.”

Alucard hesitated, his eyes flickering between Geralt and Dracula.

“I would love to sleep next to you,” Geralt said wistfully.

That was enough to make Alucard fold. He nodded, slowly at first, closing his eyes for a moment.

Then he sat up and turned to Eskel, still lounging in his chair at the edge of the bed. Alucard leaned in and wrapped him in a one armed hug, resting their foreheads together.

Eskel sighed quietly and leaned into it, closing his eyes. He wrapped one arm around Alucard’s waist and held on tightly to the fabric there.

“Thank you for being here,” Alucard whispered, his voice still completely wrecked from the way Dracula pushed his cock inside it just minutes before.

A light blush dusted across Eskel’s cheeks and pinked up the tip of his ears. It was enough that Dracula tilted his head a bit, scenting the air. Something about that made Eskel interested.

It was difficult to hold back the smug smirk that threatened to spill out onto his face, but Dracula managed. Barely. The situation with Eskel was coming along just fine.

No doubt Alucard smelled it, too, though he didn’t let himself show a reaction.

“Go on,” Eskel said gruffly, letting go of Alucard’s waist. “We’ll be here when you get out.”

Alucard nodded heavily, and walked stiffly over to the bathroom, gently shutting the door behind
him. A few seconds later, the quiet sound of the shower filtered out.

Dracula took Alucard’s seat on the bed and leaned in to kiss Geralt as well. He licked into that wet heat, so pleased to taste Geralt’s unique flavor again, to breath in the scent of him. There was still the faint odor of poison, medicine, and rancid potions about him, as well as the heavy, metallic scent of scabbed-over wounds. But Geralt’s natural scent of skin and herbs and metal was stronger now. It eased something inside of Dracula to see and sense for himself that Geralt was on the mend.

“I’m so glad you’re alright,” Geralt said softly, once the kiss had broke. “We were worried.”

Dracula frowned.

“Why?”

Geralt shot Eskel a tight glance, before looking back to Dracula. His gaze drifted down Dracula’s body, as if checking for some sign of invisible wounds.

“When Iga showed up asking Alucard for help, we thought things at the castle must have turned pretty bad.” Geralt chimed in, his words interrupted by a yawn. He looked almost as tired as Alucard.

“Iga is here?” Dracula asked.

“She’s off getting a meal with Geralt’s nurses,” Eskel said quietly, amusement evident in his voice. “Those ladies have never been so happy.”

That only made Geralt pout a little. “Everyone is having fun but me,” he grumbled.

“You’d been gone a couple days, and then Iga showed up. Said that you went to sleep and that everyone was cut off from your power. There was unrest. So we moved here and Alucard went to go wake you.” Eskel looked to the bathroom door, his forehead wrinkled in worry. “That was several days ago. I’m glad you’re awake and alright. Geralt and I were planning to come find you both once he was up and able.”

Several days? Dracula knew there was always a bit of a time shift between the castle and the other places it was connected to, but he was sure it wasn’t ever quite as much as a few days. He remembered going to sleep, but he didn’t feel like he slept all that long.

But he dreamt.

He never dreamt.

Not since he’d became a vampire. The Void power leeched all of his nightmares and dreams away. Yet he was sure there had been dreams this time. He couldn't remember any of them, just the general sense of disquiet.

Alucard had been exhausted when he’d woken Dracula up. Dracula had assumed that it was still the lingering effects of his long-held time spell on Geralt mixed with stress and worry. But how long had Alucard been searching through the castle for him before finding him to wake him? Dracula knew better than anyone how dangerous a place his realm could be, and how unpredictable.

He would need to interrogate his son. But not today, not when he was so soft and tired, when he welcomed Dracula in the gentlest of ways.
Dracula could interrogate Iga, since she was close enough.

“We need to make sure Alucard rests, first.” Dracula said. “We will come back to this issue later. For now,” he looked from one witcher to the other, “you need to know I moved the castle to your world.”

“Iga said.” Geralt looked a little wide eyed at that statement.

“Kaer Morhen fits in very nicely,” he added, remembering how cute it looked all tucked in between his old buildings.

Eskel snorted in amusement, and shook his head.

“Why?” Geralt asked softly. He ran a gentle hand down the collar of Dracula’s coat. There was a slight tremble to his fingers. Not so much that it could be seen, but Dracula could feel it. He found he disliked it greatly. For a brief moment he wished he could go back and burn the army that hunted Geralt to the ground again.

“I have had enough,” Dracula said with finality. “Enough of waiting, wondering what was going on.” He looked at Geralt. “Unlike your previous lovers, I will not let you go because that’s easier.” He shrugged. “I prefer to alter the reality around you.”

Geralt’s eyes grew wide and shiny, and he gently tugged Dracula forward. “Kiss me. Please.”

Dracula obliged, tangling his hand into Geralt’s hair and holding on tightly as he kissed him, slow and deep, filthy and possessive, making it clear that Geralt belonged to him and he wouldn’t be letting go anytime soon. Geralt yielded sweetly to those kisses, tangling his hands into Dracula’s coat and hair. Soft little sighs escaped from him as Dracula devoured him.

After several, pleasurable minutes sped by, Eskel said quietly, “Your heart.”

Geralt groaned into Dracula’s lips and pulled back just far enough to glare at Eskel. “I will stab you.”

“At least you’ll be conscious to do so,” Eskel replied evenly.

“What’s the matter with your heart?” Dracula asked with a frown. He placed a hand over Geralt’s bandaged chest, feeling the slow steady rhythm there.

That question only made Geralt glare at Eskel harder. “Nothing,” he said defiantly.

Eskel sighed, as if on the wrong end of a long running argument. “His heart is fine, but he needs to keep his heart rate down. His system took a lot of damage, and the doctors are worried that elevated blood pressure might rupture something, or cause a clot to release and plug something up somewhere.” He shook his head. “I’m not certain on the details, but they sounded pretty adamant about it. So Geralt’s been explicitly told no sex until they give him the go ahead.”

“It’s bullshit,” Geralt grumbled, his head hung sadly.

Dracula ran his hand over the sharp jut of Geralt’s cheekbones and down to his lips.

“I won’t risk your health for sex,” Dracula said, making it clear Geralt wouldn’t be allowed to risk his own health either.

“Easy for you to say!” Geralt squawked. “You are having plenty right now!”
Dracula was aware of Eskel making an odd sound, but his attention was taken by Geralt.

“Yes.” Dracula confirmed, staring Geralt down with raised eyebrows. If need be, he could tie
Geralt down to the bed for the next few weeks. He had absolutely no problem with that plan.

Geralt could see that. Dracula could tell in the way his lips turned down and he sighed, grumbling
uncomplimentary things under his breath.

Dracula, magnanimously, pretended not to hear.

As he sat there, he could smell another scent gently layered over Geralt.

Eskel.

It was on the bed and on Geralt himself, filling Dracula with a sense of proud possessiveness. He
knew very well how much Geralt loved and needed touch. It looked like Eskel was making sure he
got it.

“Yes,” Geralt sighed. “I know. Eskel’s been keeping me in line.” He waved a hand at the tablet
on the little table next to the bed. “There’s an infinite supply of recordings of sex on there, but I
can’t watch any of them.”

“They’ll be there when you’re all healed,” Eskel said, again sounding like he was repeating
something he’d said a million times already.

Dracula looked at him, at the circles under his eyes and the general feeling of exhaustion he was
getting from the other witcher. Eskel had worked hard to fulfill his promise. He’d been more than
loyal to Geralt. To them all.

Dracula pulled back, focusing on his bond with the succubus. He could feel that she was already
on her way; her presence moved steadily towards him.

“There’s some kind of army at the walls of my castle, but Vesemir was adamant I don’t go and
smite them.” Dracula shrugged, still feeling disappointed about that. He wouldn’t mind a bit of a
snack. A thousand or so soldiers could have hit the spot for him.

Both Eskel and Geralt blanched a bit at that.

“Henselt?” Geralt asked.

“Seems likely,” Eskel said. “What’s going to happen there then?”

“I left the matter to Vesemir and Orlaith to deal with.” Dracula shrugged again.

He had thought that this would set both the witchers at ease, but they just exchanged another
worried look.

“Do you think he’ll be alright?” Geralt asked Eskel. “An army at the gates is likely to bring up
some bad memories for him. He survived the attack that killed Kaer Morhen, but he was the only
one. And it took years for him to be...steady, after that.”

“I almost wouldn’t be surprised if he snuck out at night to go murder them all in their sleep. Just
out of spite,” Eskel replied.

“He could do it, too. He’s been on his Path for centuries. Even if the past year he’s been at Kaer
Morhen more often than not, he’s still the most deadly witcher I know.” Geralt looked pensive for
It was curious to hear them talk about Vesemir that way, as if he were a dangerous creature rather than a beloved father figure. There were glimpses of that ruthlessness in Vesemir, little hints that Dracula had noticed over the course of their interactions. But to admit that he would easily go out and kill hundreds of men, in their sleep, in cold blood. Dracula was impressed.

“He seemed well when I left,” Dracula said cautiously. “No more grumpy than he usually is.”

That seemed to set them at ease, or at least was enough reassurance for them to put the matter out of their minds. Dracula had discovered that was another interesting trait of witchers; if there was a problem they could directly impact, they worked to solve it. If it was beyond their abilities or influence, they briefly mapped out the possibilities and then set the matter aside. It might still bother them, like an itch that couldn’t be scratched, but they wouldn’t worry incessantly at it. Very practical. Likely part of their training, too. As warriors, they would be focused on fixing the most dangerous and immediate problems first.

Sure enough, Geralt just nodded and said, “I’m sure they’ll be able to figure something out.”

“Orlaith might enjoy it,” Dracula murmured. “That one has odd hobbies at times.”

“Oh yeah?” Geralt raised an eyebrow.

“I generally don’t pay much attention to what she does,” Dracula admitted. “As long as things are under control in the castle.”

Geralt nodded, though Dracula could tell he was still curious. Whatever he was about to say after that got punctuated by a deep yawn.

“Matt should be here any moment,” Eskel said reluctantly. “I let him know that you both had returned. He insisted that he’d be on his way.”

As reluctant as Dracula was to put some space between him and Geralt, he couldn’t help but be a little intrigued. So far, Matt had proven to be amusing. He wondered if that would continue to hold true.

Either way, he would keep his hands on Geralt for as long as possible. It would be easy enough to keep an ear open for the sound of the human’s approach.

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As thrilled as Matt was that Trevor was back, he was not excited at all to hear that Belmont Sr. had joined him. He wanted the sanity to return to the tower and that man was not indicative of that.

He knocked at the door and waited to be let in.

Eskel was the one that opened the door. He looked tired, even Matt could see that. In Matt’s experience, a person who hadn’t slept as long as Eskel hadn’t should be hallucinating by now, but he was obviously too enhanced to let such a trivial matter as lack of sleep stop him.

“Trevor is in the shower cleaning up,” Eskel said, standing aside to let him in.

As soon as Matt entered, he shut the door behind them and made sure it was relocked. Then he wandered back towards the bed, perching in a chair across from it.
Gabriel Belmont sat in what Matt had started to consider Eskel’s chair. It was the one placed right next to the bedside, directly in between Geralt and the door. He was dressed exactly as he had been before; in a black on black suit and button up, no tie, with that heavy red and gold armored coat slung over his shoulders. Whatever had happened that required Trevor’s attention so urgently, Belmont Sr. didn’t look any worse for wear because of it.

Matt did not frown, but found it strange that his boss would go for a shower instead of getting an update from him or John.

“Matt,” Belmont Sr. said, an odd glint in his red eyes.

“Sir,” Matt responded, nodding respectfully.

He didn’t know if Belmont Sr. wanted to say anything more to him. Before he could find out, the door to the bathroom opened and his boss left it in a cloud of steam.

Matt looked over and froze. This was the first time he’d ever seen Trevor in this particular kind of disarray. He was dressed in a midnight blue robe with white cranes printed on it, the silk clinging to his still damp body. It was barely closed, with most of his chest and the enormous scar across it exposed. His normally pale skin was flushed with heat, and the muscles delineated sharply in a way that told Matt that Trevor might be a little dehydrated. His hair was loose around his shoulders, reaching almost down to his waist, still damp and much darker than usual. Almost blue, actually. Strands of it clung to the robe and his skin, leaving damp spots everywhere.

“Matt,” Trevor greeted him. The sound of his voice was startling. It was hoarse and wrecked in a way that Matt had never heard from him before. When Trevor shifted to look at him, Matt saw the vicious hickey sucked into his pale throat, glaring at him offensively from across the room.

Holy shit, his boss had gotten laid.

That had never happened before, to Matt’s knowledge, anyways. Not that he thought Trevor couldn’t find someone to spend a pleasurable evening with. It was just that he never had. Nor had he ever seemed even vaguely interested in such a thing.

But there was the evidence right there.

He finally realized that he was staring, and quickly glanced away.

“John is at a meeting in one of the lower offices, but he can be up here to brief you whenever you’d like.”

Matt risked a look back up. Both Eskel and Belmont Sr. looked faintly amused, but Trevor just waved a hand at him. “There is no rush. I’m rather tired.”

He looked more than just tired. He looked like he was about to fall over where he stood. And his voice. Matt tried very, very hard not to think about what would make Trevor’s voice go all rough like that.

“Which is why you were gonna come here and sleep, right?” Geralt said, his voice a mix of stern and hopeful. He’d even pulled back some of the covers, leaving the side open for Trevor to slide under them.

For a moment it looked like Trevor would object. But then he sighed and nodded. It was harder than ever not to stare at the way he slipped into the bed and curled up next to Geralt. There was a kind of familiarity to the movement, as if he was used to curling up next to somebody. From
experience of a long term bachelor, Matt knew it was no easy feat to learn to sleep with somebody.

Almost the moment Trevor was horizontal, he fell limp, already fast asleep. He looked younger with his face relaxed and damp hair spread everywhere.

“Eskel,” Geralt said softly, trying to reposition Trevor a little more comfortably. Before he could so much as reach a hand out, though, Eskel was there helping. The two of them arranged Trevor’s sleeping form so he was close to Geralt’s side, head comfortably rested on a pillow, and tucked in under the heavy blankets.

Somewhere along the way, they must have discovered the heating controls on the bed, because Eskel grabbed the remote for it out of the end table. He poked a few buttons and then raised an eyebrow to Geralt.

“He’s cold,” Geralt said softly, one hand rested on Trevor’s head. “Go ahead and crank it up.”

Eskel nodded, set the controls, and then dropped into the chair there.

Geralt lingered, watching Trevor’s sleeping face with a kind of tenderness that kept taking Matt off guard. Geralt was slowly pushing individual strands off of Trevor’s face, making sure they wouldn’t fall into his eyes or stick to his lips. This gesture, too, spoke of familiarity. He knew he was allowed the touch, and Trevor wasn’t a man that invited touch, even from friends.

Interestingly enough, Belmont Sr. watched the gestures with an expression that Matt couldn’t read. He wasn’t reacting, and Matt knew that he was unreasonably possessive of Trevor.

It was almost bizarre to see how tenderly the two witchers cared for Trevor. First, because of the sheer physical closeness of it. Trevor was never so tactile, not with anyone. Second, because it was a stark contrast with the dangerous ruthlessness that both witchers had displayed so far this week. Up until now, Matt thought that they were specifically Belmont Sr.’s bed partners, but now he really had to wonder.

Again, Matt caught himself staring. What was worse, he caught Belmont Sr. staring back at him. Watching. Assessing.

Ever cautious of Geralt’s original request, and now even more conscious of not irritating the heavily armed killing machines in the room, Matt found a seat and made himself less of a threat.

A second knock at the door startled him. When he got up to check on the camera who it was, he wasn’t really surprised to see Iga there, with her dark green dress hugging her curves lovingly.

“Hi, Iga,” he said as he stepped back and let her inside the room.

She didn’t respond. Her eyes were already glued to Belmont Senior. She side-stepped Matt and headed straight for him.

The last thing Matt expected her to do was kneel.

But kneel she did, gracefully and smoothly, as if she’d practiced the movement a million times. She came to rest just beside Belmont Sr.’s chair, took his hand, and kissed the back of it, murmuring a quiet, “My Prince.”

Maybe the most shocking part was Belmont Sr.’s utter lack of reaction at the beautiful woman kneeling for him.
It was one thing to know that Iga was owned. It was another thing to see that in action.

Matt watched as Iga turned Belmont Sr.’s hand and pressed it to her cheek, kissing the palm briefly. Her eyes were closed and she looked absolutely and totally submissive, as if she was ready to spend hours kneeling beside Belmont Sr.’s chair. Matt looked at Geralt, but he was still busy with fussing over Trevor. Eskel watched Iga without much of an expression. Matt couldn’t tell if it was because he was already used to the sight or just didn’t care.

The incident with the tailor was enough to show him that Eskel, much like Geralt, could turn from an affable and friendly man into a stone cold killer at a drop of a hat. It made him uncomfortable, this ability to lose all empathy and emotion seemingly effortlessly.

“Why are you here,” Belmont Sr. asked, looking down at Iga finally.

“Steward sent me, My Prince.” Iga kept her eyes cast down, but continued to hold onto Belmont Sr.’s hand worshipfully. “You were out of reach, not even Steward could contact you. And the more unruly residents started getting…” She cast a look towards Matt. “Frisky, so to say, in your absence.”

“You came to summon my Son for aid.” Something in Belmont Sr.’s tone of voice made Matt think that he was a little incredulous over this. Why that would be, Matt had no idea. While he would have never pegged Trevor for being involved in whatever deeply shady business that Belmont Sr. must control, obviously he was at least familiar with it.

“My loyalty is greater than my dislike,” Iga said, still on her knees and holding onto Belmont Sr.’s hand. It seemed that the ability to touch him was a reward in itself for her, the expression on her face clearly speaking of pleasure.

It made Matt feel slightly nauseous.

So Matt wasn’t imagining the faint distaste he’d observed. It made him wonder about what sort of situation Trevor had grown up in. It also made him wonder about who Trevor had spent his night with. Was it someone else whose loyalty outweighed their dislike? Belmont Sr. seemed like the kind of man who would insist on his son taking care of a carnal itch, whether or not Trevor was very interested. How much had Trevor gotten used to giving in on, simply because it wasn’t a battle worth fighting?

“You remained here.” Belmont Sr. made it sound like both a statement and a question.

“Steward commanded that I follow your Son’s orders. He had me stay and guard Geralt in his absence.” Iga sighed happily and leaned a little closer to Belmont Sr.’s hand.

Any moment now and she would be rubbing up against it like a cat. That little twist of nausea in Matt’s stomach grew. What had Belmont Sr. done to her to give this kind of reaction? Was it drugs? Some kind of brainwashing or training?

“And were there any incidents?”

“No, My Prince.”

Matt held back a snort. No incidents, his ass. That whole little mishap with the tailor flashed through his head. But as unpleasant as that was, Matt absolutely did not want to give Belmont Sr. reason to punish Iga. Regardless of what she may or may not have done. Though Matt couldn’t fathom if Belmont Sr. would be more annoyed at her assaulting the tailor or for letting him live.
Something of his internal struggle must have shown on his face, though, because Belmont Sr.’s red eyes snapped towards him.

Fuck.

“Is there something you want to say?” Belmont Sr. asked, his eyes fixed on Matt. He didn’t like the intensity of that gaze, the almost physical weight of Belmont Sr.’s attention.

Silence stretched for a moment as Matt frantically tried to figure out what to say.

He was saved by Eskel, who snorted in amusement, drawing Belmont Sr.’s gaze away from Matt.

“Matt and John had us fitted for clothes,” Eskel said. “Iga’s first tradesman decided to take liberties when he wasn’t invited. She very gently taught him the error of his ways.” He shrugged.

“And that’s a problem how?” Belmont Sr. frowned and looked from Eskel to Iga. “Were you told to entertain the tradesman?”

“I was not, My Prince. For which I am grateful. He smelled like he would be a poor lover. Cruel and selfish.” Iga wrinkled her nose in distaste.

“As if you care about gentleness,” Belmont Sr. snorted, but then he pulled his hand away from Iga and motioned for her to get up. “You did well. I don’t appreciate anybody partaking in that which is mine, not without paying for it first.”

The casual brutality of those words forced a shiver up Matt’s spine. Not only did it mean that Belmont Sr. could and did spend Iga’s time and body like money, to be used as a commodity, but it also meant that Belmont Sr. felt that he was getting something out of Matt’s people and all the medical staff that Iga had been sleeping with.

Dammit, this was exactly why he told his people to stay away. He needed to ferret out who partook of this particular service and weed them out. They’d disobeyed orders and they got themselves beholden to Gabriel fucking Belmont.

“It wasn’t really a problem,” Eskel said with a shrug. “I even set the man’s arm for him. But I think Trevor’s people aren’t used to such immediate repercussions for poor behavior.” He cast a dry look towards Matt.

“There are laws,” Matt couldn’t help but grumble through gritted teeth. He knew he should just keep his mouth shut. He knew it. But the urge to speak was impossible to ignore.

“Besides,” Iga chimed in, louder than Matt spoke, arranging herself attractively at the foot of the bed. “I’m having fun here.” She looked to Eskel. “No offense, but Kaer Morhen was getting boring.”

“None taken,” Eskel said easily. “You aren’t the type to enjoy routine.” As far as Matt could tell, Eskel truly wasn’t annoyed by Iga seeking new...hunting grounds?

“You can do as you wish, as long as your actions don’t impede my goals.” Belmont Sr. said, waving his hand at Iga.

She smiled winningly at Belmont Senior.

“I’m loyal,” she said. “My extracurricular activities will never impede your goals.”
“If you did move on from Kaer Morhen, you should still stop by from time to time. I think Vesemir likes having all the people around.” Eskel stared off into the distance, thoughtful. “The keep feels alive again.” Those words were said softly, almost wonderingly.

“Kaer is where the three of us are stationed now,” Iga said, looking at Eskel oddly. “Ian, Eyra, and I will be there unless ordered away.” Then she smiled. “I love torturing Vesemir. He’s almost gotten used to us spending time in his bedroom.” She looked down at her nails. “We will have to come up with something else to make his mornings more lively.”

Again, Matt felt incredibly bad for this Vesemir fellow.

“Is this your vengeance for him not putting out yet?” Eskel asked, obviously stifling a grin.

“He can always decide to bed one of us.” She paused. “Or all of us.”

“Good luck with that,” Eskel laughed, shaking his head.

“I kind of feel bad for Ian,” Geralt said, finally tearing his attention away from Trevor. “We should find someone for him to spend time with.” Then he yawned widely. He was obviously fighting sleep, his body slumping more on the bed.

“He’s fine,” Belmont Sr. said dismissively. “It’s not like he’s starving.”

“He looks so pitiful though,” Eskel sighed, looking conflicted.

“He can always try and get Lambert drunk,” Iga said cheekily. “It’s not like Lambert is very picky, you know.”

That made Eskel laugh.

“You think Lambert wouldn’t notice he had a guy in his bed?”

“You never know. Ian is resourceful.” Iga smirked.

“And desperate,” Geralt added, yawning widely again.

The look Eskel gave Geralt was an odd one. If Matt had to guess, he would have called it envy, or some softer, subtler version of it.

“You should lay down and rest,” Eskel said to him.

That absolutely did make Matt snort softly in amusement. “Pot calling the kettle black.” Then he froze as he realized everyone was staring at him. Eskel practically glared daggers at him, while the others mostly looked confused.

Matt kicked himself. He’d gotten too used to just talking casually with Eskel and Geralt. But some part of him was pleased. Maybe now Eskel would actually get some rest.

Belmont Sr. frowned and looked at Eskel.

“You really don’t look well,” he said unexpectedly, and got up from his chair. “When was the last time you slept?”

Eskel glanced away. “It’s been a little while. But I’m fine.”

“He hasn’t slept while here,” Matt tattled promptly. “At all.”
“What?!” Geralt shot up straight, and then winced hard. “Here at the tower? We’ve been here for days. Did you meditate?”

“I have not seen him sleep since I met him at the hospital,” Matt continued snitching.

Eskel glared at him. “Not since Ciri woke me at Kaer Morhen. And no, I haven’t meditated.”

“Why?” Belmont Sr. asked, frowning.

Eskel shifted in his chair uneasily, unwilling to catch anyone’s gaze. “There is work to be done.”

“And you’re anxious,” Geralt said. When Eskel shot a glare at him, he raised up a hand in surrender. “You are. I can practically smell it.”

Belmont Sr. approached Eskel, his presence oddly dominating over the still-seated witcher. There was something strange in the way that Eskel’s eyes flicked to him and then flicked away, as if he couldn’t quite get himself to look at the older Belmont for long.

Belmont Sr. reached out and took hold of Eskel’s jaw. The moment his hand touched the scarred skin, Eskel blushed. It wasn’t much, just a pink dusting along his neck and cheeks, but it was unexpected enough from the usually very composed man that Matt noticed right away.

“You are very tired, aren’t you?” Belmont Sr. said, almost gently.

“Yes,” Eskel whispered. “I can’t rest.” His eyes flickered around the room, taking in Geralt, Trevor, and every single potential entry and exit point. “It’s better if I’m awake and on guard.”

Belmont Sr. dragged his thumb over the scars on Eskel’s cheek; the gesture was tender as well as possessive. “You did well,” he murmured, his voice low and the odd accent was stronger.

“I…”

“It’s enough. You will rest now.”

“Wha---”

“Sleep.” The word sounded powerful, and Belmont Sr.’s voice was dark and strong. It resonated oddly in the room, enough that it raised the hair on Matt’s neck.

What happened next was even worse.

Eskel’s lids dropped as soon as the last sound passed Belmont Sr.’s lips, and his whole body went limp, sliding off the chair. Belmont Sr. caught him, unsurprised, ready for him to lose consciousness.

Matt watched, horrified, as the older Belmont picked Eskel’s powerful body up as easily as if he was picking a child, and carried him to the bed where Geralt was already pulling the covers back.

“I hate it when you do that,” Geralt sighed as he watched his friend being lowered to the bed.

Disbelieving, Matt watched the slow raise of Eskel’s chest, and the way his eyes were moving under his lids. He was limp in a way that indicated deep sleep, maybe even REM stage.

After a single word.

The kind of power that implied, the control, was deeply unsettling. More so because Matt had been
watching Eskel train for days. Not only did Belmont Sr. knock someone out with a word, but he had the kill switch on someone as dangerous as Eskel. Someone willing and able to murder without care or thought.

The simple idea of it was terrifying, and reminded Matt of every cold war era spy thriller he’d ever read. Brainwashed assassins and deep cover sleeper agents. Geralt’s words only drove that fear deeper. It implied Belmont Sr. did this often. Maybe with both witches.

Then Matt remembered how he’d walked in to find Trevor sleeping on the couch at the hospital. He’d looked like he would wake, then with a single word Belmont Sr. had pushed him back into deep sleep.

Holy shit, Belmont Sr. brainwashed his own son. Implanted command words into his mind.

What else could Belmont Sr. make them all do? And no wonder why Trevor believed his father’s power was inescapable. If that man had control over even Trevor’s body like that, it must have felt as if Belmont Sr. was nothing else than a god.

Matt believed that he’d met a lot of terrifying people in his life, seen a lot of terrifying things. He realized now that he was in the presence of the most dangerous man he ever had the misfortune to meet.

That’s when he remembered that the Belmonts were famous for fighting Dracula and his minions. If this is what kind of power they held, what must Dracula be like?

“Matt,” Belmont Sr. asked, still looking down at the sleeping, defenseless Eskel. “Is there anything that requires my Son’s attention right away?”

“No, sir.” It was true after all; everything was taken care of by John or Matt long before Trevor came back. While John did have things that Trevor should know about, none of it couldn’t wait for another day.

“Then leave us.” Belmont Sr. commanded. “Both of you.” he looked to Iga. “They need time to rest and I can be whatever protection they might need during that time.”

“My Prince,” Iga stood up, her eyes demurely lowered as she bowed gently. She then turned towards Matt and caught his eye. “Let’s go.”

She threaded her arm through Matt’s and started pulling him towards the door.

He didn’t want to follow, not and leave Trevor alone with Belmont Senior. At this point, he was even worried about Eskel and Geralt. The two of them might drive Matt nuts, but the idea of leaving anyone so defenseless against Belmont Sr.’s power alone with him buzzed under Matt’s skin unpleasantly.

Unfortunately, Matt also knew he didn’t have a choice. He let himself get ushered out of the room, and hoped that everything would be alright at least until he got back.

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It was something of a relief for Dracula to be alone with his lovers. Some part of him wanted to amend that thought; Eskel wasn’t a lover yet.

Yet.
Regardless, he had time to wait, and until then Eskel was still his.

A deep, possessive pleasure welled up inside of him when he looked at them all curled up on the bed. Safe and warm, nestled in each other’s scent and embrace.

“He kept dressing in this world’s clothes for you, you know,” Geralt said quietly, watching him carefully.

“Hmm?” Dracula dragged his attention away from the enjoyable view, and focused at Geralt.

“Eskel.” Geralt said looking down at his friend. “He would have preferred his armor, but he stayed in those flimsy clothes because you asked him to.”

Ferocious pleasure bloomed up inside of Dracula, and hard on its heels was hunger. He’d told Eskel to blend in, to keep to these human clothes, and Eskel had. Despite personal displeasure and discomfort. He’d obeyed. Submitted to what Dracula wanted.

Oh, what a good witcher.

So good and all for him.

The very thought of it made him want to press his lips and fangs against that strong, scarred neck and bite. To penetrate that body in all the ways he could, to mark him, eat him, take in all of Eskel that he could. He wanted to own Eskel, possess him, devour him.

Dracula sat on the edge of the bed, close to where Eskel was resting, and ran a hand through Eskel’s hair. He would allow himself that much touch. There would be time for more later, but until then he knew that Eskel liked this particular touch very much. So much like a cat, he loved to be petted.

“You really like him, don’t you?” Geralt asked.

“He’s been an unexpected pleasure.”

Geralt bit his lip and looked down to Eskel. “You like how he listens to you. He’s more...biddable than either Alucard or I.”

Dracula narrowed his eyes, looking at Geralt more carefully. Yes, he did like that. He liked the way Eskel could give in so sweetly to him. He had no illusions about the man’s strength, knew how well the witcher could fight and take care of himself. But there was something there in the way he seemed to like giving in to Dracula that woke up the deeply possessive, powerful instincts inside him.

“Are you jealous?” Dracula asked, curious. There was a bit of a flutter inside him, something almost like nerves. He never once thought that his fascination with Eskel could be a problem to Geralt. Was he wrong?

“Ha, no.” Geralt smiled warmly at him. “Maybe a little at first, but not for a long, long time. I like how happy you are with him, and how much happier he’s become in general. Eskel is not a man who makes connections lightly. I think what you two share, and what he shares with Alucard, has been really good for him.” He hesitated.

“But?”

Geralt’s wrinkled his brow a little, and a tension wound up inside of him. “But I think you need to
be careful. Eskel is...” He opened his mouth, visibly struggling to find the right words. Then he sighed. “Eskel has no fucking idea what he’s doing. The way Alucard and I give in to you, we know what’s involved. We understand the risks, and we trust you to care for us and see us through. More than that, we’re...armored, I suppose, against hurts.” He smirked ruefully at Dracula. “We can handle some rough treatment.”

That brought to mind all the wonderful ways that both Alucard and Geralt deeply enjoyed that rough treatment. Alucard loved the bruises as much as Geralt loved his claws. Both of them, in their own way, dared Dracula to do more, to stretch them to their limits.

“When we yield to you, we do so with the knowledge of what to expect.” Geralt’s voice went low and rough for a moment, and Dracula could smell the faint hints of arousal on him. “He does it on instinct. I have no idea why he acts like that with you, when I don’t think he’s ever done this with anyone else, but you need to be careful because he doesn’t know what he is doing.”

Dracula thought those words over, and as he considered them he absently continued to pet Eskel’s hair.

It was true that Eskel seemed very anxious, fearful at times of their connection. But Dracula could taste the need on him, the way he craved someone to care for him and make him feel safe. It was that very need, repressed though it was, that drove Dracula into forcing the issue at times. Eskel was very much like his son, in some ways, ignoring his own needs beyond sanity or reason.

“He is so much more vulnerable than Alucard or I,” Geralt said. “He’s likely to be far more sensitive to you than either of us.”

“But I like him vulnerable,” Dracula admitted, for the first time admitting he might not fully know what he was doing, not always, not with everybody.

“I think he likes it, too. So often he’s the one taking care of everyone around him. Don’t get me wrong, I think he likes that as well, but…” Geralt paused. “We weren’t built for soft things, and Eskel has long since cut that out of himself. To his detriment, I think. I think you forcing the issue for him, is freeing in a way. He doesn’t have to choose if you do it for him.”

“So what’s the problem?” Dracula was still confused about this.

“It’s a very thin line you are both walking,” Geralt said, catching Dracula’s hand and squeezing it. “It’s an act of willful blindness, and it can one day end. If you are not careful, if you push too hard, if you don’t take care of him properly, one day he will stop letting himself be blind and that may end in tragedy.”

Geralt shook his head a little. “I’m not sure how to explain it. But push too much, and he’ll break. He’ll start thinking he doesn’t deserve any of it and run. If you aren’t careful enough with him, he could break another way, and lose whatever comfort he’s getting out of this. He feels safe with you now, and I think he might start allowing more, as he becomes more secure with that.”

“I wouldn’t hurt him.” Dracula frowned. But then he thought back to a few months ago, when Geralt and Alucard were both occupied and he’d tracked Eskel down instead and fed from him. “Much,” he amended.

That made Geralt snicker, but he shook his head. “It’s not physical damage I’m worried about. You hold his sanity and heart in your hand, and it is far more fragile than you think.”

“I will be careful,” Dracula said, looking down at the sleeping witcher. “I have no intention of
harming him by accident, just as much as I don’t want to harm him by deliberate action.”

Then he looked at Geralt, both eyebrows raised.

“Does that mean you want to have him in bed, too?”

The look of horror on Geralt’s face was deeply amusing. “No. Absolutely not. You and Alucard are welcome to enjoy yourselves, and I have no problems with that, but no. Eskel and I are close, but not like that.”

“Are you sure?” Dracula pressed, leaning lower. “I wouldn’t want to deprive you.”

Now it was Geralt who looked slightly panicked.


The temptation to tease was just a little too much for Dracula to resist. “And yet I could smell him on you, and on the bed.”

“Not like that!” Geralt yelped.

“If we are talking orgasms,” Dracula continued. “I also didn’t have any with him. So we are both in the same boat.”

“Trust me, I’m aware of your frustrations,” Geralt said dryly. He shifted down a little bit in the bed, making himself more comfortable. Or perhaps he was just running out of the strength needed to stay upright.

“So how is your sharing bed with Eskel different from mine?” Dracula licked his lower lip. “Since all of that is, let’s say, platonic?”

“Are you kidding me? You two practically ooze sexual tension. It’s a wonder you haven’t driven the rest of us insane with it.” Geralt paused to yawn, and then winced as the movement stretched his wounds in a painful way. “Eskel gave me a pity cuddle. I’m gonna have to buy him some top shelf booze as a thank you.”

He tried shifting again, but winced and paused.

Dracula leaned forward and lent him an arm for leverage, and Geralt tossed him a grateful look. Between the two of them, they managed to get Geralt horizontal in the bed, cuddled in close between Alucard and Eskel.

“How are you feeling?” Dracula asked, feeling tender and worried at the lingering signs of damage on Geralt.

“Better than I was, but Gods I hate being so laid up.”

“Good enough to take my power?” He asked, trailing a hand over the pale neck he used to mark up so much.

The look Geralt gave him was filled with so much longing, such a fierce want that Dracula almost leaned in to give that power regardless of the answer. After a long, pained moment, Geralt slumped down and shook his head.

“My insides feel wrecked,” he admitted. “Eskel worries too damn much and the doctors keep shifting between shaking their heads at me and trying to wrap me up in bandages. I don’t like being
so weak. But...I don’t think I can take your power yet. Everything still feels all broken inside.” His jaw tightened stubbornly, and he looked into Dracula’s eyes. “I won’t risk leaving you all permanently just because I want to get out of bed a few days early.”

Dracula leaned down and pressed his lips to Geralt’s. It wasn’t even a kiss, just a touch. He wanted to be able to touch Geralt freely. This vulnerability, this fragility was killing him. He was afraid he would cause damage when he wasn’t intending it. He was used to Geralt being this unquenchable force; somebody he could push and push, and who would always bounce up demanding more. This whole situation was beyond uncomfortable and Dracula wished he could just end it, fix it. Waiting for Geralt to fix himself was unbearable.

“Soon,” Geralt whispered into his mouth. “This will be over soon. Witchers heal fast. And once I’m feeling better, I plan on locking us all in your bedroom until one or more of us passes out.” Very delicately, he licked up into Dracula’s mouth, and one of his hands came to rest in Dracula’s hair.

“I hate waiting,” Dracula grumbled, pulling away before he gave into the urge to just sprawl and rub himself all over them just to make sure they smelled sufficiently like him. He could also change shape into something bigger, something that could cover all of them, but he didn’t want to break Trevor’s people.

“You and me both,” Geralt said sleepily. His eyes had already grown heavy, and he pressed into the bodies around him. He blinked, and then blinked again, clearly struggling to stay awake. “Want your scent.”

Pleasure curled up inside of him at the request. Geralt wanted to be marked by him as much as Dracula wanted it. He shrugged off his coat and settled its heavy, armored length over them. It was just barely wide enough to cover them all, though he had to nudge Eskel a little closer and help Geralt shift to his side.

By the time he was done arranging them, Geralt was fast asleep.

Dracula growled with both pleasure and frustration. They were all so pretty together. Perfect, wrapped up in his power and coat. But they were all, every one of them, exhausted beyond measure, and Geralt was still too damaged to really press into.

It was moments like this that showed him again just how different he was from any living being. He was not tired, didn't feel real hunger or much weariness. When he watched them rest, he felt like there was this huge distance separating them. He would live, through everything and anything that happened, until the end of days. They would be gone one day, leaving him alone with his immortality.

Reluctantly, he pulled up a chair and eased into it, leaning as close as he could towards the bed and its precious cargo. He stretched out one arm and rested it on his coat. The soft movement of breath under that fabric was soothing on his palm. He inhaled slowly, taking in the combined scents of them all. Then he settled in to watch, and wait.

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