

Ciri was tired. Hissing as she wiped at the cut along her upper arm, the cloth came away covered in blood. 'They got close, far too close.' Every moment since she freed Geralt from the Wild Hunt had been exhausting. There was never more than a week's respite between their arrivals, and they seemed to be shorter by the day. Now that they had her scent, they were truly relentless and worse yet, her separation from Avallac'h had only made things more complicated.

She'd lost track of the number of worlds that she'd stepped between in her flight from Eridan and his ilk. Floating cities, barren wastelands, forests so thick no light could penetrate through the canopy, and more than one consumed by the cold of the White Frost, she'd seen it all as she ran across space and time.

It was nice to have a brief reprieve. 'Finally.' She was in an open field, sitting on a low, smooth stone. One of many laid out in a circle. There was a small fire flickering at her feet. There was every chance that she was intruding on some ancient place of worship, but from the state of the world around her. It appeared that there hadn't been anyone around to use it in centuries. 'At least.' It wasn't the first of its kind that she'd seen, and she doubted that it would be the last.

Reaching into her bag, she pulled out a thread and needle. Her grandmother had been a warrior, through and through, but that didn't mean that it wasn't expected that Ciri would learn how to be a proper lady of the court. 'Perhaps, she only ever wanted me to learn so that I could sew up my own wounds.' It was the only use she ever got of that skill anyway.

There was thunder off somewhere in the distance and a flash of light in the dark sky, but it was miles away, and she had every intention of being gone before it got there. Staying still for too long only made it easier for her pursuers. 'Still should have enough time to get myself sewed up.' She knew that there were simpler ways of knitting the wound back up, but there was something about the needle and thread that she preferred.

It took time, mostly because of the inconvenient location of the cut, but she managed. It was a crude job that would likely leave another scar, but that was nothing new. The one on her cheek was one of many. 'Such things are inevitable when you spend part of your childhood amongst witchers.'

Another roll of thunder echoed in the distance and she should've taken it as an ominous warning of what was coming. There was an all-too familiar 'woosh' as the fabric between worlds was torn open. The glowing portal licked like fire at the edges as out rode the braying horses of the Wild Hunt. The Red Riders tore across the field toward her. Before they could cover half the distance, she stepped through time and space with a now practiced ease. She was far from being fully in control of her unique abilities, but this had become simple.

In the next moment, she was running along the bottom of a crystal cliff, bathed in rays of sunlight. The multicolored lights that danced off its sheer face were something to behold. But she didn't stop running, she knew that they would be close behind. 'One jump just isn't enough anymore.' As she got better at evading them, they only got better at pursuing her.

Again, she shifted to another world, her ears popping as she found herself on a cold peak, so high that she could see the tops of the clouds around her, like a great rolling landscape for miles in any direction. It was beautiful, but there was no time to appreciate it. While she could control her ability to jump in

moments like these, it was even a surprise to her where she was going to end up. Though it was probably better that way. 'Harder to find me if I don't even know where I'm going myself.'

There was no sign of them, but that didn't stop her from shifting again. The top of a mountain wasn't exactly the best place to rest, after all. So once more, she stepped through space and time.

'Thud.' And right into someone... at a full sprint. They went tumbling to the floor of a stone corridor. She only knew for sure that it was stone because her head hit it... hard. In her addled state, it was difficult to disentangle herself from the person she so carelessly bowled over.

"Fucking twatting hell." The string of curses that came from the, she now realized, man was perfectly understandable. It was largely on him to get them separated. One hand accidentally squeezed her breast through her blouse, but she couldn't really blame him since he pulled away like he'd touched a fire and a mumbled, "Sorry..."

Finally, he managed to shift them, and he stood. She found herself on her back, looking up at a young man, probably even younger than her, with emerald eyes and hair darker than coal, "You alright?" He seemed confused, and she could understand why. 'It isn't everyday that you have someone crash into you out of thin air.'

He was wearing what looked like a uniform, if she were guessing, from the lion crest on his chest. They were far from the clothes that she was used to in her own time and place, but not the most outlandish garments she'd ever seen either.

It was also obvious that he was on alert. His eyes darting to the sword on her back, his right hand flexed almost instinctively as though he were ready for a fight. But when she made no move toward aggression, he seemed to relax if only slightly.

Rubbing at the back of her head, she was just glad that she didn't feel any blood, but there was certainly already a bump forming, "Been better." If it weren't for that very bump, she might've been surprised that they seemed to be speaking the same language, but there were more pressing matters.

He offered a hand, "Yeah, I can imagine." She took it and he carefully helped her to her feet, "How'd you even get in here?"

Ciri quirked an eyebrow at that because all things considered, he was taking this odd happening rather well. There weren't many that could keep her out, but that wasn't something she was going to explain in the middle of a corridor to a stranger. She didn't exactly have the time, "Trade secret." She made to turn and go, but she found her legs wobbly, and she nearly fell over right where she stood.

The wound on the back of her head was smarting something fierce, and she could feel her eyes growing heavy. There was panic as her heartbeat quickened in her chest. 'This is bad.' The young man gripped her arm, right where her fresh stitches were, to keep her upright, "Hey, steady on. Maybe we should sit you down somewhere. Seems you're a bit out of sorts."

As reasonable as that sounded, she heard it from the end of the corridor, and knew that her time was up. 'Fuck...' She was in no state to run, and in even less of one to fight. But the portal was there, and out they charged. Somewhere in the back of her mind, she cursed the random chance that left her crashing

into a stranger because it looked to her like it was about to cost her, her life. 'And the lives of many more.'

Still, she wasn't one to just lay down and die. Her hand found the hilt of her sword, finger wrapping around leather binding, and she pulled it free. She made to step between the Hunt and the young man, but she wasn't the only one who reached for something. It was a stick, a wand if she were guessing, and before the Hunt made it halfway to them, they were stopped dead in their tracks.

Two bolts of light exploded from the tip and collided with the horses. They were stopped as though they went straight into a wall. From the crunch and the sharp kink in their necks, she doubted the horses survived. Their riders didn't suffer the same sudden stop and went clattering to the ground. All it took was two simple flicks of his wrist, the magic silent and powerful.

Ciri knew plenty of powerful sorceresses and sorcerers in her time, Vilgefortz and Yen came to mind, but this seemed truly effortless. He glanced in her direction as he stepped between them, "I'm guessing this lot aren't here to help you..."

At the portal, she saw someone step out that she recognized. It wasn't Eredin, but it was Caranthir, the Navigator, the best of their navigators. Avallac'h's golden child, and the only elf that could hope to match her abilities. It closed behind him, and they were left in the corridor with eight of the Red Riders. Looking over at her new ally, at least for this little skirmish, she answered, "No, definitely not."

"Thought not..." His wand spun tight concise circles. With every new twist, a light leapt from the tip and toward her attackers. Not all of them hit their mark, at least not the first time, but the two nearest to them died in a quite horrible way. The metal armor that they wore exploded into shrapnel and tore their chest to ribbons.

There were words of angry, quite vile elvish thrown in his direction that just caused him to chuckle, "I've no idea what you're saying lads! It's just wasted breath."

This person was powerful and skilled, and she suddenly couldn't be happier about having stumbled into him in the first place. More spells and more dead Red Riders, they fell to flames and explosions and one likely snapped every bone in his back from the force spell that sent him hurtling all the way to the other end of the corridor. One by one, they fell, long before she even had cause to raise her sword. She let it drop to her side, the tip resting against the stone floor.

It went on until only Caranthir was left. She couldn't see his face, but she knew he was clearly panicked as he made another portal, one to escape the slaughter. This was an opportunity, an important opportunity and one that she wouldn't see slip through her fingers, "Don't let him escape."

The only indication that he heard her was a quick glance to his right. There was every possibility that he could ignore her, there was no reason to trust her, after all. But then, he'd already killed so what was one more?

Luckily for her, he listened. Just one foot remained in that plain, but even from a great distance, he snared it in a flaming whip. It was no ordinary fire, burning bright and hot, melting down through the metal as he yanked Caranthir backward. There was a smell of burning flesh as the elf screamed in agony.

It retracted back into the wand and pulled Caranthir toward them. When he was at their feet, Ciri hefted her sword and drove the tip of the blade down into his throat, just below the protection of his helmet. There was a gurgling of blood as he took his last breaths.

A sigh of relief escaped her as she watched him still. It wouldn't stop them forever, but the loss of Caranthir would certainly give Eridan pause. 'As would the person who made it possible.'

Casually, as though it were something he did almost daily, her helpful new ally transfigured the bodies littered around the corridor into twigs and then just burnt them. The blood was cleared from the walls just as quickly, and within seconds it was as though nothing had ever happened. Ciri gave an amused shake of her head, "This sort of thing happen often?"

"This specifically... no." He shrugged his shoulders, "But... I find a way of getting into trouble, usually through no fault of my own, so I got used to dealing with it." There was more, she was sure. While looks could be deceiving, especially for those with magic, it was obvious that he wasn't very old. It was something about the way he held himself though from the look in his eyes, she might be wrong.

With a mirthless chuckle, she agreed, "Well... I can certainly relate to that."

The corner of his lip twitched as he looked at her, "Yeah, I'd wager you can."

As she put her sword back up to its sheath, she felt a sudden wave of nausea, and as she went to take a step her head throbbed. Catching her at the arm yet again, he looked concerned. She wasn't conscious long enough to hear what he said next though.

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Gently, Harry washed the unknown young woman's face with a washcloth. There was no blood, but it just gave him something to do. There was a part of him that wanted to take her to Poppy, but even though he trusted the matron, it would raise a whole host of questions that would undoubtedly lead to problems. Lucky for him, after dozens of times getting into his own trouble, he'd taken the time to make sure he could patch himself up if the need arose.

Granted, head injuries were a fair bit more complicated, but magic was an impressive thing. And fortunately, from every spell he cast, he seemed to have dealt with the issue. It was only a matter of resting at this point. There was a potion simmering away on a plinth that should help with any aftereffects once she woke up. The only other thing he'd done was take her sword from her back and rest it against the side of her bed on the far side from him.

It certainly wasn't how he expected his evening to go, but he couldn't say it wasn't exciting. The cause behind that excitement chose that moment to stir awake. It was slow at first, her shockingly green eyes fluttering open, before she seemed to remember herself and she bolted upright and away from him. Cloth still in one hand, he raised them both to placate her, "Hey, it's fine... don't worry. Just me, remember. Helped you out with some skull mask wearing bastards."

She calmed as quickly as she frightened, "Right... right... thanks for that, by the way." Scanning the room for her sword, she relaxed even more when she found it.

"Just... don' make me regret it, yeah?" He gave her a teasing smile, "No knowing if I picked the right side."

She smirked at that, "Too true, but in this case, I guarantee you that you did."

“Wouldn’t they tell me the same thing?”

“Good point.” She moved to the side of the bed that the Room of Requirement provided and swung her legs over the side.

They looked at each other for a long moment before Harry coughed uncomfortably and went over to the potion. He tipped it into a vial with practiced ease, and handed it over to the young woman, “This should set you right.”

She eyed it skeptically, and he couldn’t blame her, “If I was going to do something to you... why would I take the time to fix you up first?”

Conceding the point, she took the vial and downed it in one. The effects were almost immediate, and she gave him a grateful smile, “They always taste vile, don’t they?”

“Most of them, the only ones that don’t aren’t much use.” He had questions, quite a few of them, but there was one that seemed most logical to start with, “So, I’m Harry... and you are?”

“Cirilla, but most people just call me, Ciri.”

Looking at her, and considering their earlier assailants, he had a feeling that she wasn’t where she was meant to be. ‘Among whole bunch of other oddities... like how in the bloody hell she managed to make her way into Hogwarts like it was nothing.’

Still, hopefully there would be time for that in the future. For the time being, he simply told her, “Rest, if you can, you’ll be safe here and if you’re hungry...” he thought for a moment and called out, “Dobby...”

The little house elf appeared in a blink and looked between the pair of them eagerly, “Yes, Harry Potter, sir.”

“This is Ciri, if she needs anything would you be able to get it for her.”

“Of course, Dobby would be happy to help.” His excitement was quite literally palpable.

“Just ask Dobby!” Harry finished turning his attention back to the young woman.

“Right...” She was looking at Dobby like she was trying to figure out what exactly he was, “I think I might just do that... particularly the resting.”

A week later, she was still there. In fact, she seemed to be enjoying herself even if she’d remained in the room the entire time. There were worse places to stay considering it could change into nearly whatever she needed. He’d walked in to find her training on three different occasions at that point.

The longer she went without being harried by, what Harry now knew was, the Wild Hunt, the more she seemed to relax. He’d spent more time with Ciri than any of his friends lately, but they didn’t seem too bothered by it. That’d been a rather normal set of circumstances over the course of their sixth year. With the Ron and Hermione barely on speaking terms most of the time, he’d taken to working by himself... bettering himself, wherever he could.

“So... you have an insane, megalomaniac wizard out to kill you?” Ciri couldn’t hide the laughter from her voice.

“That about sums it up, yep.”

She shrugged her shoulders, “Been there before.” At his curious look, she explained, “Vilgefortz wanted my blood. Geralt cut his head off when he finally tracked him down.”

They’d talked enough for him to know about her surrogate father, “I wish it were that easy to kill Voldemort.”

“It should be.” She told him as she took a bite of chicken off the bone, “There are some things that can survive without a head, but humans generally aren’t among them.”

“He has these things, they’re called horcruxes... they’re basically soul containers, and until they’re all destroyed, he can’t be killed. Well, at least not permanently”

“And that’s exclusively your problem, why?” She was genuinely confused, “Is there no one else in this world capable of helping you sort that out?”

“As far as I know, there’s only a few people that even know they exist.” He hesitated, but he couldn’t think of a better person to share the information with, “There’s also a prophecy, says that one of us has to kill the other.”

“Of course, there is. There’s always some horrid prophecy in your sort of situation.” Ciri sounded understandably bitter about it. ‘She would know.’ Hers made his seem like child’s play. ‘At least the fate of multiple worlds doesn’t rest on my shoulders.’ Though given Voldemort’s obsession with power, that might not be true.

“But just because there’s a prophecy doesn’t mean you have to kill him... or at least not now.”

He didn’t really get her meaning, and just told her, “Good chance he manages to get me first, so I suppose you’re right about that.”

She didn’t seem to appreciate his dark humor, “Not what I meant, Harry.”

“What then?”

“You know there’s no magic, well at least none of your magic that can keep me out...” She had a mischievous glint in her green eyes that was ridiculously appealing, “So, what’s to stop me from going to wherever it is he’s hidden and simply plopping him on some barren, desolate, uninhabited world where he can be no harm to anyone.”

“Things are never that simple.” In his experience, there was no way a solution that straightforward would actually work, “With my luck, he’d find a way back.”

“There’s no way back, trust me. Traveling between worlds is nigh-on impossible. It took the Aen Elle generations to breed the navigators. One sorcerer on his lonesome with nothing to eat or drink, isn’t going to manage it.” Ciri sounded particularly confident on that point. So confident that it was hard for Harry not to give it some thought.

“It would be dangerous.” Something about that very simple fact gave him pause. Then it was in his nature. He was never pleased with any of his friends putting themselves in danger for his sake, and while it was only new, he was quickly coming to view Ciri as a friend.

From the way she waved him off, it was obvious that she didn't share his concerns, "I'll be fine, bit of magic from you and maybe that cloak of yours you were telling me about and no one would even know that I'm there." She was doing a rather good job of convincing him.

"Only one problem... this whole thing is entirely hypothetical because I don't actually know where Voldemort is."

"No idea?"

"Oh, I'm pretty certain I know exactly where he is, Malfoy Manor. I just don't know where it is." After the train ride at the start of term, Harry was certain that's where Tom was firmly ensconced. It appeared he enjoyed tormenting the Malfoys for Lucius' many failings.

"And there's no way you can think of to find out where this Manor is?" There was one way that Harry could think.

"Well, there's one person I could ask, but I doubt he'd be willing to help."

"Who says it needs to be done willingly?" Her finger ran along the blade of her knife, and he could take her meaning. If it meant removing Voldemort, Harry couldn't say he cared about hurting Draco. 'Besides, we can always patch him up when everything is said and done.'

For a few minutes, Harry just sat there looking at her. Ciri didn't push him, didn't try to get him to decide one way or the other, she just let him think. In the end, he came to a decision. Heading over to his bag, he pulled out a large, blank piece of parchment and pressed his wand to its surface, "I solemnly swear that I'm up to no good."

Harry couldn't help but think that fate was smiling on him since the moment Ciri crashed into his life. As luck would have it, he was just outside the door, "Ciri, I think I have a plan." She was all ears.

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Dumbledore could feel a headache coming on just behind his right eye. The rather unhelpful explanations he was getting were largely responsible for it, but the fact he was slowly dying probably helping either. Folding his hands in front of him, he was acutely aware of the cursed appendage that would soon take his life, "Severus, I'm afraid I need you to explain it to me again. Just once more." What he was hearing simply didn't make any sense.

"I don't know how many times you need to hear before you accept it." The ever-snide potion's master seemed amused by the whole thing, "They're simply gone."

"Just... poof. Out of thin air." If it weren't for the fact they lived in a world of magic, it would sound entirely absurd. Not that it didn't anyway.

To prove his point, Severus pulled up the sleeve of his right arm. The Dark Mark that just the evening prior had been as vibrant as the day it was branded into his skin was faded just as it had been the day after Tom's first fall.

At Dumbledore's intent stare, Severus sighed and explained, one more time just so the message could sink in, "I was summoned to a meeting of the inner circle last evening, as you know. I went, as you know." He couldn't hold back his acerbic tone, tired of the story after a third time telling it, "I was the last to arrive at Malfoy Manor and the Dark Lord began the proceedings."

“The purpose of this meeting?”

“The same as any other, as I’ve told you. Discussing plans, the progress with the werewolves and the giants and Lucius’ many failings.” Tom didn’t have a merciful bone in his body, so it wasn’t hard for Albus to imagine that he wouldn’t let the elder Malfoy ever forget his mistakes, “Narcissa was forced to watch as her own sister gleefully tortured her husband. And then... the pair of them just disappeared. There was no pop of apparition, no indication that it was what they intended, they simply vanished without a trace.” He slid his sleeve back down to cover the mark, “Of course, the meeting was thrown into chaos, I helped Narcissa deal with the riffraff and then, a few short hours later, the mark faded.”

“This is... an unforeseen circumstance. One that will delay things, certainly.” It was rare that Dumbledore had no inkling toward the right course of action, but that sadly the case, “But, he will return.”

“You have no way of knowing that.” Dumbledore frowned at Severus’ bluntness, but it didn’t deter him in the slightest, if anything he was boasting, “Sixteen years ago, you understood the circumstances behind his disappearance... this time you don’t. For all you know, he’s gone forever.”

“It would be irresponsible to think like that.”

“Yes, because you did such a fantastic job of planning the last time.”

It was hard not to rise to his jibes, but Albus managed to keep himself under control, “I was unaware of his Horcruxes after his last disappearance... this time, I’m not.”

“Well, in the few short months remaining to you, hopefully you manage to find them all.” He stood and looked down at him almost with pity, “But your plans are ruined. I’ve already discussed the matter with Draco, and he has no intention of continuing with his mission. Nor will I finish it.”

“We’ve discussed this...”

“When it mattered.” Severus cut him off and he couldn’t remember anybody doing that since he was a young man, “It no longer does. And with that in mind, I believe I’ll be resigning effective at the end of the year. Something tells me that Minerva won’t be as lenient with me as you’ve been. Goodnight, Albus.” With that he whipped around, robes billowing behind him and headed toward the door.

He left behind a truly bewildered headmaster. Fawkes trilled a hopeful tune, and Albus turned to look at him, “Just what in Merlin’s name is going on here, my friend?”

Just a few floors above him, the only two people that knew exactly what happened were laughing their arses off at a plan gone flawlessly.