

These Gifts He Gives Me

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These Gifts He Gives Me

by [vands38](#)

Summary

Geralt is being nice - *disturbingly* nice - sure, Jaskier nearly died and maybe that justifies the hideous clothing and the late-night cuddling but Geralt's little silent gifts are starting to stack up and between all the heroics and heartache, Jaskier is starting to suspect that Geralt might more-than-care about him.

Notes

quick warning that as well as Jaskier being tortured, our poor little Roach is mistreated by the Nilfgaardians and some readers may find that distressing - I promise you that she comes out of it on the other side and is given many lovely treats to make up it

Chapter 1

Jaskier knows how Yennefer and the others must see him when his beaten and broken body is dumped unceremoniously before them.

Oh Jaskier, they're probably thinking, a man of such beauty, and courage, and wisdom... but sorely lacking any survival instincts whatsoever. The poor waif of a bard needing to be rescued, once again, by the legendary White Wolf. Jaskier - they're thinking - the perpetual damsel in distress.

It looks pathetic, for sure, but little do they know that Jaskier didn't get "captured" at all - he got *caught*.

Jaskier's tale begins - as all good stories should start and end - with a kiss.

Jaskier is in Novigrad, bidding farewell to his most notorious lover, Geralt of Rivia. Admittedly, the moment where desire temporarily overrides his senses and he pleads for the witcher to stay may not have been his finest moment but the parting kiss that follows most certainly is. Geralt has the most marvellous habit of kissing you like he's drowning and this is no exception as Jaskier clings to him and eagerly accepts every gift bestowed upon him.

They had spent a couple of very pleasant days together in Novigrad - Geralt sharing more of himself with Jaskier than he had ever hoped for - and now Jaskier is reluctant to part ways. However, when a terrifying sorceress apparates into your bedroom at sunrise to spirit away your heroic lover in order to save the heroine of future ballads, there's not much you can do to persuade him otherwise.

That was his Geralt - always nobly sacrificing himself for others.

"Look after Roach for me," the witcher says in lieu of farewell because godforbid the man actually address his feelings, and then, his spectacular physique strides towards adventure and Jaskier is left, still mostly naked, and feeling very much bereft.

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Jaskier is lamenting over Geralt's departure - strumming a tender tune on the lute - recalling their final words and final kisses to extract the most excruciating moment (for lyrical purposes, of course) when he recalls a particular line -

"We need to go. They're approaching Novigrad."

Jaskier sits bolt upright, his tune forgotten (okay, temporarily put aside) as the implications of that phrase ripple through his mind. It comes to him in three stages -

It's a known fact that Nilfgaard are approaching Novigrad looking for Geralt.

It just so happens that Jaskier's talents are so acclaimed that not only does everyone know that he travels with the witcher but they also highly suspect that they are intimate. (A rumour, for once, not of his own making).

Therefore, if he informed Nilfgaard of Geralt's whereabouts then they would surely be inclined to believe him.

With a single word, he could divert the Nilfgaardians from Kaer Morhen and be a hero of his own making; one that keeps Geralt and his family safe. And thus, because Jaskier is possessed with an uncanny (and some might say *unwise*) amount of courage, he immediately goes about trying to get himself *caught*.

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Jaskier's prowess at subterfuge ensures that he locates the disguised Nilfgaardians within a matter of hours. Admittedly, all one reasonably had to do was wait at the bar of the Kingfisher, with the knowledge that anyone seeking a man's whereabouts would first and foremost head to the inn.

Jaskier has already bribed Marjorie, the delectable barmaid, with another night of musical entertainment if she denies any knowledge of the witcher's residence in her fine establishment to any inquiring parties, and Marjorie, every obliging, agrees.

Jaskier senses when Fringilla and her men enter the Kingfisher despite their deceitfully drab garb. Even dressed as merchants, they still carry a certain air of confidence and murderous whims about them that sets every patron on edge.

Jaskier stays true. Strums his lute softer as he leans against the bar and catches Marjorie's gaze just briefly enough to confirm that *Yes, this terrifying band of thugs are indeed the clouts after my sweet lover of the North*.

"I'm looking for someone-" the woman, Fringilla, states. No time for small talk it seems. "A witcher. Yellow eyes. White hair. Likely accompanied by an ashen-haired girl, heading north."

Jaskier glances at them under the guise of tuning his strings and sees the sorceress slide a not insignificant sum towards the barmaid.

"I see, miss," Marjorie says, eyeing the coin eagerly. "Well, seeing as you've travelled all this way it would be remiss of me not to tell you all that I-"

"I once knew a girl who was dignified and true-" sings Jaskier, loudly, abruptly; immediately springing to his feet and circling the Nilfgaardians so he can give Marjorie the most withering glare in his arsenal. His music was, at least, rousing enough to stop their conversation short.

"Our most humble bard," Marjorie bitterly introduces over the enthusiastic strumming of lute.

"Well what about you, bard?" Fringilla asks him, tossing him a coin. Jaskier may be a hero but he never turns down coin as he halts his playing to catch it. A copper. Hardly worth the effort. Do they think him cheap? Do they not recognise the bardic legend to whom they are speaking? "Have you seen this witcher?" she asks plainly.

Jaskier wants to say something smug along the lines of "oh, I've seen him - I saw him come apart on my cock last night," but if the Nilgaardians don't recognise him as the 'witcher-favoured bard' then it would likely do well to play along. His original plan to get captured and feed them incorrect information is evidently flawed if they *don't know who the fuck he is*. However, he may be able to dissuade them otherwise.

"Oh, I've seen him," Jaskier says after a moment's hesitation, throwing in a saucy wink for good measure. "Posters. Rumours. Above me in my dreams." It is, after all, still very much true.

Fringilla narrows her eyes in a way so terrifying that he begins to perspire, but her men, meanwhile are chortling. "Bards," one of them is muttering derisively, "They're all such fucking whores." If Geralt was here he would have punched that man straight across the bar. Alas.

Fringilla rolls her eyes, giving into the humour of her men, and turns back to the barmaid. "So?" she asks expectantly. "Were they here or not?"

"No ashen-haired children have passed through my tavern, miss, witcher or no."

Fringilla gives her the same scrutinous look. The barmaid fidgets under her gaze, but shockingly, Marjorie stays true.

"Very well. We'll be on our way."

Jaskier watches them leave with a frown. "You know," he ponders to Marjorie as the door closes on the Nilfgaardians, "I think they *genuinely* don't know who I am."

Jaskier had naively assumed that everyone on the continent at least had some idea of who he was and who kept him company but he rationalises that the Nilfgaardians were travelling from afar and so perhaps word of Jaskier's legendary talents had not yet reached Southern ears.

"Not everyone listens to such petty gossip, my sweet," Marjorie says, examining the gold in her hands.

"I was talking about my sheer artistic talents, Marge, not the fact that the witcher is bedding me. Although," he indulges, with a wink and a swig of mead, "he is, in fact, very much bedding me."

Marjorie rolls her eyes and pockets the coin. She's a good lass; he can't fault her for earning a pretty penny. "So I heard," she grumbles with a meaningful glare.

Right. He supposes they had been rather vocal in their lovemaking over the last couple of days. So much so that at one point, Jaskier genuinely had to leave the room to reassure her that, no, Geralt hadn't been murdered, he'd just been on the receiving end of Jaskier's very talented fingers.

What can he say? He's a man of many talents.

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Jaskier follows the Nilfgaardians out of the tavern. He's not sure if it's necessarily a wise decision but the Nilfgaardians did rather ruin his original plan to get captured and he doesn't want to lose track of them while he formulates another idea to divert them from Kaer Morhen.

He follows them down to the fish market and eavesdrops on their conversation with the blacksmith there -

"Aye, I saw him," the smith says without a moment's hesitation and Jaskier has the deep desire to smash his head into the nearest wall.

"How long ago?"

"A matter of days. Killed a pest for me. Gave him a good sword in return."

Ah, so this is the man Jaskier has to blame for the kikimore guts in the bathtub. Good to know.

"Where he was travelling?"

"Didn't mention, love."

Jaskier *feels* more than sees Fringilla's cold reaction at being patronised thus. He wonders if the blacksmith would still have the balls to call her "love" if he knew she had raised Sodden Hill to the ground. Unfortunately for all parties, she resists killing the man.

"Travelling alone?" she asks.

"Aye, from what I could tell."

"No girl with him?"

"A girl? No. Though my wife saw his bard hanging round town."

"This bard," Fringilla asks sceptically, "What did he look like?"

Jaskier gracefully dives behind a barrel of fish as her eyes start prowling the market.

"Ah, you know, the usual Oxenfurt type. Pale skin, brown hair, blue eyes-"

Cornflower blue, some might say, the blue of an early summer's morn -

"-bit of a toff and a dandy."

"A toff?"

"Aye, you know, a prick. The privileged kind."

Ah. Very well. Good to know where they stand. He wasn't planning on making friends with the gruff blacksmith any time soon anyway.

"I see," Fringilla says thoughtfully and he swears he can feel her gaze on the back of his head. "Thank you for your assistance. You've been very enlightening."

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Jaskier watches them leave the market and follows at a respectable distance while he formulates a plan. While they didn't know who he was this morning, by the time the Nilfgaardians have finished interrogating the populous of Novigrad, they will no doubt have an excellent idea of who he is and who shares his bed.

Meaning, after all, that his original plan to divert them from their course to Kaer Morhen may still be operational. He will walk past them, casually mention that the witcher is heading south to Toussaint, and then head to the stables and make a quick leave of this place.

It's a solid plan, up until the moment where he's following it through.

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Another town, another man, another knife to his throat...

Jaskier thought he had actually thought this one through for once. He had waited for them to split up before approaching one of the soldiers. That, by anyone's standards, is a smart move. He had done the "oh, a thought just occurred to me" routine. Also a smart move. But then the brute grabbed him by the scruff of the neck and hauled him towards the stables and Jaskier is forced to re-evaluate the intelligence of his approach entirely.

Roach is watching at him from across the stables with a look one could only describe as *condescending*. Once again Jaskier wishes he had taken Geralt's advice and had - what was it he always said? - "carry a needle, at least, to poke in the husband's eye when you raise his ire." Yes, thank you Geralt, very sage advice.

"Why do you follow us, bard?" the man growls. He's a burly fellow with a permanent snarl that only draws attention to his missing teeth. Hardly as attractive as the last man that pushed him against a wall and *growled*.

"Told you," Jaskier gasps as his feet dangle an inch off the ground. "Thought you might want to know - after our earlier, very memorable encounter - that your man is heading south."

"Why the sudden interest?" he asks. His breath is terrible - ale and pickled onions - and gods, if it doesn't make him miss Geralt all the more. The witcher tastes like secrets and *magic*. It's probably just all the potions he chugs but it still renders him enchanted. This man, however,

Jaskier isn't sure he'd take to bed even on his most desperate of days. "You didn't seem so talkative earlier."

"Ah," Jaskier says, giving the man an easy smile, even as the knife lowers its way to... his groin. Excellent. This situation just keeps getting better and better. "Because you were asking the wrong question, friend. You'd asked if I'd *seen* him and, technically, I didn't see him go anywhere. He left before dawn, you see."

"But you *did* see him," someone states and Jaskier is mortified to note that Fringilla has now joined this pleasant little stableyard interrogation. "'Posters, rumours, above me in my dreams...'" she quotes. "You didn't mention you had also seen him in your bed."

"I'm not the kind to kiss and tell."

"Why do I find that hard to believe?" Fringilla asks, stepping towards them. Jaskier is dismayed to note that her man's grip doesn't loosen any, nor his knife lose its placement.

"Believe what you will."

"They call you the 'witcher-favoured bard,'" she says. "Tell me, if you favoured this witcher so, why would you give up his location to us so readily?"

"Ah," Jaskier says, "You see that's quite easy to explain. We had what you might call a lover's quarrel."

At this, Fringilla finally signals to her man to lower him, which he does, begrudgingly, but his knife doesn't go anywhere. "And you didn't find it prudent to share this information with us earlier. Why?"

"Because I am a kind, gentle, loving soul, who lied to you thoughtlessly out of long-standing loyalty," Jaskier whimpers, praying to whatever gods were listening that his single acting lesson at Oxenfurt Academy was enough to sustain him through this interrogation. He *had* wanted to be caught after all, albeit with less knives. "And then I asked myself 'why?' - 'Why should I protect him when he treats me so? Do I, the greatest bard of our generation, not deserve more than just a quick roll in the hay? Do I-'" and at this, Jaskier gets the waterworks going. It's surprisingly easy, actually. (Because of his stellar acting skills, naturally, not because it's at all close to the truth.) "'Do I not deserve to hear an apology? Or hear praise at my talents? Or, even-'" he bawls dramatically, "'Deserve to be *loved*?'"

His performance, if he says so himself, is quite spectacular. Fringilla's watching with cold, calculating eyes, but she also doesn't look as sceptical as she had been. She's close to being bought. "He left me," Jaskier gasps with wide watery eyes and quivering lip, "this morning before I had even opened my eyes," he lets his voice fall to a moroseful baritone and then looks Fringilla straight in the eye as he carefully lets a lick of anger surface. "I don't see why I owe someone like that my *loyalty*."

Here's the thing: Jaskier has spent enough time with Yennefer (and hearing Geralt pine/bitch/whine about Yennefer) that he's fairly certain scary witches like Fringilla are capable of reading minds. This is why he had wisely waited until she had left the men's side

to approach. But, he's also hoping now this shit's gone sideways that his genuine heartache over Geralt will be enough to convince her of the lie.

She is silent - eerily silent - as she stares at him. "And you say that-"

"He's heading south to Toussaint," Jaskier blurts in relief. "Yes."

"Girl with him?"

"No," Jaskier says because he's fairly certain they picked that up around Novigrad anyway. "She's with someone else. A mage. Meeting them there."

"A mage. Who?"

"A very scary, rather unhinged, and wholly intimidating woman by the name of Yennefer of Vengerburg. I assume you two are already acquainted."

Fringilla frowns in consideration. She likely already suspects Yennefer's involvement. Jaskier is also more than happy to push Yennefer in harm's way if it keeps Ciri safe. Yennefer's a big girl and can take care of herself.

"And you say they're meeting in Toussaint?"

"Yes."

Fringilla stares him down again. Jaskier feels a bead of sweat form on his brow. If she believes him then Ciri will be safe, if she doesn't however...

"What a shame I don't believe you," she says coldly and Jaskier feels dread sink into his bones. She turns to the soldier, "Gregor, darling, be a good boy and extract the truth from him. Whatever it takes."

As the first punch hits his guts, Jaskier starts to think that maybe getting caught wasn't his best idea after all.

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Jaskier withstands more torture than he thought himself capable. Somewhere between the first broken bone and the second, he remembers what Geralt said to him once - "You've got an awful lot of balls for someone who can neither wield a sword nor form a fist". Jaskier had thought it an insult at the time but now he understands Geralt a little more he recognises it for the compliment that it was intended to be. He was calling him *brave*. Stupid, yes, but *brave*.

If he had to explain it, Jaskier would say that he doesn't really experience fear the way other people do - he gets a *thrill* from potential danger in a way that isn't wholly connected to survival instinct. When he first saw the witcher, for instance, scowling and formidable at the tavern, he was more intrigued by the fact that he was alone (and fucking gorgeous) than by the fact that he was a killer. Jaskier doesn't often recoil in horror from the monsters Geralt faces until they start to spill blood. Jaskier isn't even particularly afraid of jilted lovers (or

their jealous husbands) as he flees the scene - it's actually quite invigorating. Simply put, Jaskier loves the taste of *danger*.

Until, that is, his smart mouth gets him into a situation that surpasses the 'thrill' of danger and into actual 'life-threatening' danger. Torture by Nilfgaardians, for instance. Then he does rather wish he had some defence other than screaming for Geralt.

Because this time, Geralt's not coming. This time, it's just him and Gregor's fist.

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They're in his room at the Kingfisher - too familiar, sheets crumpled, everything still smelling of Geralt - as the Nilfgaardians have deemed the stables too public for the levels of depravity that they wish to inflict upon him.

It's been hours. Or maybe even a whole day. Who knows. Pain has ceased acknowledgement. Gregor has attacked him over, and over, and over again, and every time Jaskier tells him the same thing. "Heading south," he says. "Toussaint."

That is, until Gregor picks up his one true love - Filavandrel's lute - and dashes it against the wall.

A bard's instrument is their livelihood and their life - they pour their very blood and soul into it - but this particular instrument has his heart too. Filavandrel's lute is... magnificent. In beauty and in sound. But she was gifted to him by Geralt and when Geralt would leave him, sometimes for years at a time, Jaskier could hold onto her and remember that day - remember the smitten optimism he had as he composed his first song about his White Wolf as he walked by his side through the bountiful valley - and remember the small smile on Geralt's lips and the hope that it brought him.

At the sight of shattered spine and untethered strings, Jaskier finally admits to the Nilfgaardians that Toussaint was a lie.

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Fringilla is an impatient one. She lets Gregor beat him and curse him and piss on him until he is a beaten, bloody mess, but when Jaskier still does not reveal Geralt's location, she asks the man to hold him still and presses her fingers to his temple -

- sharp, blinding, pain. Then -

- *Geralt*. The smell of burning wood; a campfire. His sister on her wedding day. The sound of his name on Geralt's tongue - panicked and frightened - as he dropped from the sky. The smell of sex. Plucked notes from his current composition while he watches him sleep. *Not always*. The way Geralt's eyelids flutter closed when he enters him; the way his mouth falls open in awe. Ale. Hot baths. Summer blooms. The kiss goodbye - *gods*, the kiss goodbye. *Look after Roach for me* -

Jaskier comes out of it screaming - a white hot pain flaring across his temples. She had pried open his mind and found his true happiness. Found secrets too. He remembers with tears in his eyes and guilt in his heart what Geralt had said to him when he discovered an eavesdropper during their intimate discussion - *I don't want them to have what is yours, lest of all before you take it* - and now Geralt's deepest secrets, his purest desires, his most sacred moments, belonged in the hands of the enemy. Jaskier is filled with rage.

Jaskier spits at her feet - blood among the spittle. He lost a tooth some hours ago. Split his lip too. Fringilla seems less than concerned though as a wide menacing smirk takes over her features.

"You made a promise," she says, nonsensically.

At least, he thinks it's nonsensical until she drags him back down to the stables.

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Roach.

Roach is the noblest of steeds. Jaskier knows because every time Geralt abandons the two of them to roam a forest or scour a cave or otherwise track unsuitable terrain, Roach is Jaskier's only protector. She kicked a bandit in the balls once on Jaskier's behalf and he gave her sweet apples in gratitude for a full week afterwards.

But, she's more than just a horse and good company to Geralt. He knows this and honours this. It didn't take him long to realise that Geralt has much the same relationship with Roach as he has - *had* - with Filavandrel's lute. The witcher has had the same horse throughout their entire acquaintance and while Jaskier, of course, would never do a lady the dishonour of enquiring about her age, he recognises that she is no longer as spritely as she once was. Yet, Geralt still rides her. She must be slower than she was, must have injuries to take of, and aging needs to be met. Yet, Geralt doesn't leave her.

Roach was the first piece of evidence Jaskier had that witchers were, in fact, capable of love. *Don't touch Roach*, Geralt had growled after their first adventure, and now, years later, Geralt's departing words were to look after her.

Geralt had at last entrusted Jaskier with his most beloved. An honour, he realises, and now, as a man approaches her with a sharp knife, also a most grievous error.

Gregor pins Jaskier to the stable wall to watch. Roach is a smart girl; she knows what's coming and it makes it all the more harder to witness. She whinnies and bucks and neighs, and beside her, good young Belle - his own grey mare - stamps her feet in her own frustration in her own stall, no doubt feeling as useless and trapped as her human does in this situation.

"All I'm asking for is a little honesty," Fringilla says to him patronisingly over the distressed neighs of the horse. "Tell me where your witcher is going, and I promise, Tristan here will let it be."

Jaskier closes his eyes - or, at least, the one that isn't swollen. He imagines Geralt here. Imagines what he would do. What choice he would make.

Jaskier hasn't slept but he remembers a night passing. He's delayed the Nilfgaardians by a day, at least. At this point, surely, all he needs to do is keep delaying them. He could give them a little truth now, to keep them away from Roach, and then delay them further at the next opportunity.

He opens his eyes, determined. "North," he gasps, through a throat that is long-since deprived of water. "They're heading North."

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Jaskier, as always, is smarter than anyone takes him for. He tells them enough to distract them from Roach but doesn't tell them the details, meaning that they have to, for the time being, keep him alive to find out.

"He'll crack," Fringilla says confidently as she binds his hands together and attaches him to the horse. "If he doesn't, then we'll ride to Kaer Morhen and burn the place down, girl or no girl," and then she looks at him with disdain as the horse begins to canter and Jaskier is jerked forward, "Toss him into the fire too."

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Fringilla takes Roach and Belle with them as if she knows how much it will hurt Jaskier to see them mistreated. She probably does, actually, from her unsolicited probe into his mind.

Jaskier is bound and tied to a tree as they make camp the next night. He is covered in his own blood and piss and as much as he would like to believe himself still the attractive, charming, legacy of Redania that he is... he wonders if even Geralt would recognise him in his current state. They had broken his leg during the first round of interrogations, meaning that he either hobbled beside Gregor's midnight black horse, or, when their pace increased - as it often did - simply dragged behind them to be scraped by every passing stone and skin rubbed raw by the friction of the road. At last, when the rope that tethered him began to suffer under the strain, Gregor dumped him unceremoniously over Midnight - allowing the bumps in the road to aggravate his injuries on horseback instead.

Everything ached. He had countless broken bones. He couldn't remember the last time he ate or drank or *slept* - and just when he thinks he might have the privilege of a moment's peace, tied to this tree, blissfully alone, Fringilla appears at the edge of his vision.

"Fuck off," he murmurs. He won't beg. He won't give her the satisfaction, but he's closer to cracking than he would like to admit.

"You have secrets, bard," he taunts. "I would like to know what they are-"

"Ah fuck, not this again-"

- sharp, blinding, pain. Then -

- undercover, at night, the first time - *Julian, you have a responsibility* - the boy at the stable, his chapped lips on his - a few stolen coins not noticed - a man he slighted - a bed he should not have frequented - a white-haired man in the corner of a tavern, something developing in the pounding of his heart - watching their bodies entwined in the wreckage at Rinde and he's jealous and doesn't understand why - he went back to Cintra, more than once, just to hear the news, to make sure she's okay - *You write about him a lot* - okay, let's not find the scary witch attractive - the ache in his heart when he sees him, when he holds him, when he - *sorry, my pearl, but I'm afraid I am indisposed this fine evening* - seeing him this undone, this pliant, this vulnerable, the way he cries in his arms - *Yen has a plan, she wants to* -

No

But it's not enough to keep her out. Fringilla is pushing and pushing and he yells as the searing pain pries open the scene in the marketplace -

- Novigrad. Walking together. How desperately he wants to reach out. Geralt wants to do this. He wants another night. Another two nights. Jaskier wants it too, more than he ever thought -

The dialogue, bard, Fringilla orders. What was he saying?

"-she found me in Cunny-" Geralt's voice, its rolling timbre, seems to relax his muscles, his mind *"-needs for me to return to-"*

No

Fringilla withdraws with a knowing smile. He has already given her what she needs. His vision goes back slowly, his head still pounding at the intrusion. "Return," she muses with that damn smile.

There's only one place witchers return to.

-

More time passes. He doesn't know how long. He bleeds. He is beaten. He barely has a bite to eat. He almost wishes they would leave him on the side of the road to die. They don't though.

"He could still be useful," Fringilla states. "Bait. Blackmail. Food."

"I'm flattered," Jaskier manages to say before Gregor hits him again.

-

The weather gets colder. They must be near the mountains. Roach is tiring - the cold affects her joints, he knows. Geralt normally supplies her with potions when he heads north. But the Nilfgaardians ride her relentlessly. From his weary, tilted angle, on the front of the Nilfgaardian gelding, Midnight, he can see that she is struggling.

Midnight is no doubt used to this fast pace. His young Belle resents it but can take it. Roach, however, cannot.

“Please-”

The first time he begs, and it’s for the horse. He cringes at his predictability. He is becoming too easy for Fringilla to read.

The word does what he intends though and she pulls back on the reins. Roach collapses onto her hind legs as soon as she’s dismounted. A distraction, that’s all he needs to provide. A chance for Roach to recover.

“She needs water,” Jaskier says. “Rest. Herbs if you have them. Or she won’t get you to Kaer Morhen.”

Fringilla looks at the horse with a concentrated frown and then turns back to Jaskier. “I don’t understand. Her demise would surely delay us; a fact that ought to be beneficial to you.”

“I made a promise,” Jaskier pleads. “Please. She cannot die.”

“This horse outweighs your own life?” she asks curiously, as she yanks his limp body off the front of Midnight and onto the cold ground. The impact hurts, but everything hurts.

To Geralt, Jaskier is fairly sure that it still does. Sure, one Julian Alfred Pankratz is a renowned lover - ballads have been composed in his honour, he has pleased countless beauties across the continent from barmaids to lords and all have walked away singing his praises - and, consequently, he is under no illusion that Geralt enjoyed his time in his bed. He definitely did. He may even wish to repeat the experience if that passionate parting kiss is anything to go by. But... Jaskier is not deluded enough to believe he has earned a place in his heart too.

Geralt has Yennefer, he has Ciri, he has Roach. A family.

If Jaskier survives, he doesn’t know where he would fit into the equation. It’s highly likely that he wouldn’t. He knows he is a distraction, at most, to Geralt. A good time. A good lay. He tried to be a good travelling companion too but if Geralt’s harsh words on King Niedamir’s mountains were any indication then he failed spectacularly at that. Geralt *tolerates* Jaskier, but he adores Roach.

“Yes,” he confirms, as unwise as it may be. “I value her life above mine.”

“What would you do?” Fringilla ponders. “To prove this to me?”

Fuck, is Jaskier’s one, coherent thought. He knows he is close to death. They know it too - he’s been horse-bound for the last two (three?) days. They’ve been giving him water. They wanted to keep him alive for - what was it? - *bait, blackmail, food*. Lovely. But Fringilla’s phrasing implies that they will happily trade his life for Roach’s if he so requests.

He doesn’t answer her question fast enough. Gregor kicks him in the head. Jaskier feels warmth spurt from his forehead - blood - a fresh wound.

He doesn’t want to die. He really doesn’t want to die.

He remembers the last time he thought it was the end of him - in the ruins with the harpies, Geralt's voice calling his name so urgently that it almost sounded almost like he *cared* and then looking at his earnest face afterwards so desperate to kiss him that the desire could no longer be contained and then... then the overwhelming elation when Geralt *kissed him back* -

A zest for life had surged through him then as it does now. That's all life is, he realises, the chance to quench desires. He has many more he'd like to quench.

"I'll tell you," he gasps. It's weak and pathetic but he doesn't care anymore. He just wants to see Geralt again. Even if he hates him for doing this, even then, at least he'll get to hear his name on his tongue again and know peace. "I'll tell you where they're going."

Fringilla frowns. "Your weak thoughts already told me everything I need to know," she says as she returns to Roach. "We're going to Kaer Morhen-"

"No!" Jaskier pleads as her foot reaches the stirrup of the exhausted mare. He can't believe he's doing this. Not after so long. He had resisted all this time and yet - Roach, on her knees, unable to go any further - he has to delay them; has to give them what they want - "They're not going to Kaer Morhen," he whispers. "They're going to Talgon."

"What?!" Fringilla screams, enraged as she striding towards him and for the first time, grasps him with her own two hands.

"Talgon. I swear it," he says, the words choked out through the surge of pain. "Check my thoughts if you will. I tell the truth."

Her stormy expression doesn't alter as her fingers rise and Jaskier prepares for -

- sharp, blinding, pain -

- *Talgon - where the fuck is that?* - Geralt's chuckle, his gaze to the ground as he leads Roach to the stables, gods how he wants to kiss the stubble on his cheeks - *on the seaboard, west of Kaer Morhen, over the mountains - why? what's there? - if Yen is to be believed not much at all* -

Fringilla withdraws from his mind and he falls to the ground with the exertion it costs him. It's probably a bad sign that the headache afterwards has faded into insignificance. It's good she didn't linger in his mind long enough for the 'why' though. With any luck she will assume they are hiding in the forgotten fishing village, not heading to Skellige as soon as a ship can be found.

"Is he telling the truth?" Gregor asks.

Fringilla looks down at him inscrutably. Finally, she looks away towards her men. "Perhaps. But I felt the truth in Kaer Morhen as well." A beat. Then, "We should diverge paths. I'll investigate Kaer Morhen. You go to Talgon."

"Alone?" Gregor asks, and if Jaskier is not mistaken, there is fear in his voice.

Good, Jaskier thinks. You should be afraid of my White Wolf.

“No,” she says. “With him.”

Him, who? Him... “me?”

Fringilla looks at him with disdain. “Yes, let’s hope your witcher friend cares about you at least half as much as you care about him.” Before his slow, sleep-deprived mind can muddle the meaning out of that, she turns to the others and explains quite succinctly. “If they’re there, use the bard as blackmail. Exchange him for the girl. If not, send me the red stone and I’ll burn Kaer Morhen to the ground.”

Jaskier starts laughing - hysterically, manically - at the idea. He knows he should shrug it off and play into their plan to guarantee failure but the idea of Geralt giving up someone he loves for him is... hilarious. It’s just hilarious.

He is slung back over Midnight’s saddle, still laughing, as the Nilfgaardians diverge.

-

The fishing village of Talgon is appearing on the horizon when the full weight of what he has done sinks in. They could be here. *Ciri* could be here. And all he’s done to delay them will have been for nought.

“Forgive me,” he whispers to any deity that may be listening.

The others might understand. But Yennefer? If he survives this ordeal, he’s pretty sure Yennefer is going to skin him alive. She, who can withstand anything, knowing he broke because of a damn horse? She won’t understand.

Guilt clogs his throat and when he next surfaces into consciousness, raised by the sound of Geralt’s voice, he wants to cry and he wants to scream and he wants to be erased from existence. The sound is too beautiful. He doesn’t deserve to hear it yet alone be comforted by it.

Jaskier is hauled in front of them and he falls to his knees. Geralt says his name - broken and heavy - and Jaskier feels what is left of his heart wither and crack. He must be so disappointed in him.

He wants to look and he doesn’t want to look. Doesn’t want to see the disappointment - the betrayal - in Geralt’s eyes but he hears that voice and his heart aches. This could be the last time, he realises, and what a way to sail into the afterlife, with a vision of his White Wolf etched into his memory -

It hurts, physically, like everything else, to raise his head to look at him but what he sees reflected back leaves him speechless. Geralt’s eyes are *burning* - with rage, with passion, perhaps even with guilt - but not a speck of disappointment. Jaskier is caught so off-guard, his body too tired to fight his heart, that he no doubt projects more affection than is wise in return.

At least, if he is to die, he has this gift to take with him. His voice, his eyes... the peace that settles into his bones at his presence. The knowledge that Geralt *does* care if he lives or dies - he *does* - at least enough cause the anguish written into his eyes. He could not have asked for a better gift.

Jaskier drifts in and out of awareness as the Nilfgaardians and Yennefer exchange taunts but his eyes do not leave Geralt's even as a knife is pressed against his throat. Safe. Mesmerised. Like staring into the sun.

He feels like he can read everything into them. An open door. An invitation.

Geralt has a plan. Jaskier doesn't know how but he has a plan. Geralt is asking for his permission, to trust him, to await his signal -

It's not really a question at all. Jaskier conveys his answer the best he can in his gaze. *I trust you to the end of my days.*

Geralt nods, ever so slightly.

A signal.

-

It all happens very quickly - the potion, the sword, the words they need to know to save Kaer Morhen, the knife moving across his neck -

As he dies, Jaskier closes his eyes and remembers the important things -

Geralt. Bathed in the late afternoon light. Dozing peacefully. Naked chest rising and falling, slow and steady. Remnants of their lovemaking still stuck to his skin. The sleepy twitch of his fingers. His face relaxed in a rare moment of peace. And, above it all, the song Jaskier was writing him, now never to be heard, as Geralt slowly stirs to wakefulness -

Jaskier wakes with a gasp, clawing at this throat which stings something fierce. It was bleeding. He was... Geralt was... He can't breathe.

Something grabs his hands, tears them away from his throat and he thrashes against the hold. No. They will not have him. Everything aches. His ribs. His throat. Every fucking bone in his body. But he will not be captured again.

"Jaskier-"

He knows that voice. *Oh*, does he know that voice.

He looks at the hands that hold him. They are not the fierce hands of strangers. They are... familiar hands. Hands which have held him and pleased him and captivated him. The smell. The warmth. The voice -

“Jaskier-”

Geralt. And immediately after that realisation comes the next: that he is *safe*. Because if Geralt is here then he is *safe*. He sags against his chest, cocooned in his arms; the fight gone out of him. He is alive and in Geralt's arms and even if life gives him nothing else, at least it has given him this.

“Geralt?” he asks, twisting to see his face. It hurts like everything else but he doesn't *care*. “You're here. I can't believe you're -”

But. How. He had been in the mud, bleeding out, watching as Geralt's eyes widened in horror.

“What happened? I thought I was-” *dead*. But his hands trace his throat with wonder. There is no more than a scar remaining. How? But then-

Yennefer. Of course. The sight of her in bed with them isn't nearly as strange as Jaskier would have supposed. Nor does she look as angry by his betrayal as he had feared. In fact, she's looking at him like one might look at a particularly pitiful puppy.

“Well, hello,” Jaskier says, unable to stop himself from flirting even in his dire state, “this is certainly an unusual arrangement.”

Yennefer smirks and tells him she saved his life which is *baffling* but nice, and then, when Jaskier realises that actually his ribs more than ache, that maybe he's struggling to breathe more than a little, she saves his life *again*.

“You know,” Jaskier says, breathless and still utterly bewildered, “if you carry on like this, I might start to think we're friends.”

She doesn't outright deny the statement which Jaskier has learned is the best he can hope for. Jaskier thinks he's almost got his head around the Not Dying situation and the Sharing A Bed With My Lover And His Scary Witch situation when Yennefer throws him yet another curveball - “You are now, effectively, mutated by magic,” she says. “Your cells altered. Your lifespan extended.”

Right. Her healing spell went awry. He is going to live forever. Or, like, the equivalent of forever. Another hundred years or whatever. It makes sense except that it really fucking doesn't and then Geralt is getting all concerned on her and they're making out beside him and certain parts of his anatomy are getting very excited and for a moment - just a brief moment where some sanity peaks through the windows - he wonders when the fuck his life got so fucking weird.

Jaskier wants to interrupt them or join in or something but then Yennefer is looking at him all sincerely, apparently feeling guilty for “altering” his “fate” without “consent” and things just get even more mushy and convoluted in his chest.

He didn't think he even *liked* Yennefer but this bizarre (and bizarrely *intimate*) conversation seems to be turning that on its head.

She leaves soon after and Jaskier is still reeling from the blood loss and the pain and the revelation of his whole not-aging and not-dying thing, and bloody *Yennefer*, and then there's the fact that his near-naked body is pressed against Geralt and it's really just a *lot* to take in. He's still crawling with guilt but he doesn't even have the brain space to process that right now. He fucked up. Geralt's here. He's alive.

He may, or may not, be having a panic attack.

"Are you alright?" a gravelly voice asks by his ear and it sends exhilarated shivers down his spine.

"Uh-huh," Jaskier manages to get out but it must sound too pained that Geralt immediately fusses over him, arranging him to lie back down on the bed which is precisely the *opposite* of what Jaskier was angling for.

He may be overwhelmed, and exhausted, and have no room in his mind for coherent thought at all, but he is also horny as all fuck. He's *alive* when he didn't think he would be. His battered body is somehow, mostly, healed, and *gods*, he's in bed with the most beautiful man in existence. His blood is *singing* in the same way it did seeing Geralt approach him in the ruins drenched in harpy gore and he has the same singular thought as he did then - a very, very, carnal thought -

"Fuck me," he growls.

Geralt's expression does something very convoluted. Jaskier is too frazzled to even contemplate the idea of translating it. He hasn't seen Geralt since their tryst in Novigrad. He has no idea if he had planned on continuing their affair, only felt the desire in his kiss, but his thirst pushes aside all doubts as he fists his hand in Geralt's shirt and *pulls*.

Geralt brackets his arms around Jaskier's body just before impact, a grunt of surprise leaving his mouth at the sudden movement.

"Please," he begs. "I need-"

"Jaskier, your ribs-"

"Yen just healed them," he says, distantly wondering when the hell he started abbreviating her name. "I'm *fine*."

Geralt looks unconvinced; his forehead furrowing and his lips downturning and Jaskier is worried if he doesn't initiate this soon that Geralt might actually leave him unsatisfied.

He surges up to kiss him, ignoring the stabbing pain in his neck as he does so, and tugs Geralt back down with him, tangling his hands in his hair in the way he knows Geralt likes. Geralt groans at his silent pushy commands and it makes something in Jaskier sing with joy because of course he noticed Geralt likes being submissive in bed. *Of course* he noticed. But that doesn't mean he doesn't revel in it every time.

Jaskier remembers the first time someone suggested that Geralt would receive in bed and he had naively dismissed it out of hand. Jaskier had seen Geralt's towering defensive walls and peeked at what was inside - anger, and bitterness, and raised barbs - and thought that no one would ever break through such fortifications. But, he didn't have to. Geralt opened the fucking door. Because he *wants* this - he *craves* it - he wants vulnerability, and affection, and trust... and sex is the one place he allows it.

And like everything Geralt offers him, Jaskier takes it with greedy hands. They made love so tenderly in Novigrad that it eclipsed all fantasies he had. He didn't think Geralt had such gentleness within him but now he's seen past the walls it's all he can see - the softness in his eyes, the reverence of his hands, the affection he so clearly craves like a gaping wound in his chest. *It's okay*, he wants to tell him, *Yen and I will take care of you*.

He pours this sentiment into the kiss, edged with a fierce desperation and before long Geralt is kissing him back with the same intensity, as if he, too, has just realised how close they came to never having this again. There's a hunger to his kisses that makes Jaskier dizzy.

I'm alive, Jaskier wants to breathe into his lungs. *Look at me, touch me, I'm alive*.

Jaskier wants to fuck in every way physically possible but they are short on time and Jaskier is short on energy so he does the most efficient thing he can think of and reaches into his pants to free himself.

He groans at the first feel of his sensitive skin trapped between their stomachs but it's not enough, it's not-

Geralt gets there first, rearing back a second to discard his open shirt, and then he's back, freeing his own member as he goes.

"Fuck," Geralt groans when they first slide together and isn't that just the word.

Geralt moves desperately against him, their members trapped between their bodies, and everything is hot and close and overwhelming; it feels like every single inch of Geralt is pressed against him and it hurts and it doesn't and it's *divine*. Jaskier encircles his arms around him, holding on as Geralt bears down on him, driven and impassioned. Geralt is making anguished noises that Jaskier has never even heard before; whines, almost, but gruff and broken.

The sound is fucking devastating and Jaskier can't stand it. He smothers the sounds with his mouth; kisses Geralt as deeply and as passionately as he can. Geralt moans into his mouth instead which is somehow so much better and so much worse. *I'm alive*, he wants to scream. *I'm alive*.

When Jaskier spills between them, Geralt makes the most obscene sound he's ever heard before falling back on his haunches and providing Jaskier with a simply devastating view. He watches with dry mouth and wide eyes as Geralt pleasures himself before him.

"Please-" Jaskier begs, needing the possessive act Geralt is offering. *I'm yours, I'm yours, I'm-*

And, gods, he forgot how much Geralt loves it when he *begs*. Geralt is finishing not a moment later with a wondrous look on his face as if he too had underestimated the effects of Jaskier's words on him.

The act is about as miraculous as Jaskier had predicted. His heart is *pounding* as he feels Geralt's release on his skin, combining so poetically with his own. He could write a song about this moment. Then again, he could write a song about almost everything that Geralt does.

Geralt brackets Jaskier with his arms again, just briefly, to kiss his mouth and his throat and his neck... and then he begins cleaning their combined release from his sticky skin with a single-minded determination of lips and teeth and it's... something else entirely. A gift, almost.

Jaskier's hand - the one with three broken fingers so lovingly bandaged - fall atop Geralt's head as he goes, too exhausted to move but reluctant to let him go.

There's a reverence to the act that makes Jaskier's knees weak. Or, like, weaker than they already are. He murmurs Geralt's name, unable to form any coherent words, until Geralt has finished his work and he's tucking his nose into Jaskier's neck and breathing deep, as if scenting him.

Gods, witchers are so fucking weird.

Jaskier wraps his aching arms around him. They will have to move soon, but not yet, not *yet*.

"I'm alive," he murmurs as Geralt begins to shake against him and he feels his own exhaustion take hold. "I'm alive," he repeats. "I'm alive."

-

It takes Geralt a good few minutes to dig his face out of Jaskier's neck and pretend that he hadn't been overwrought by emotion. He knew, as soon as he saw Geralt's devastated face from the ground in Talgon, that he cared if he lived or died. It was no longer a question. He saw it in his damn eyes. But it was still something else to hold him in his arms and *feel* that release of tension.

Jaskier spends all those minutes slipping in and out of consciousness avoiding his own guilt and his own questions and instead wondering how on earth to address Geralt's obvious distress without drawing attention to it.

He needn't have worried.

"Promise me something," Geralt grunts as he retreats from his little safe space and brackets his body atop Jaskier's again.

"Hmm?" Jaskier asks distractedly, his attention taken by the momentous effort it takes to tuck an errant strand of Geralt's hair behind his ear.

"Don't do that again."

“Hmm?”

“Getting caught. Playing hero. Coming after me. Any of it. Don’t do it again.”

Jaskier laughs at the unexpected comment. “Oh good, my efforts at heroism didn’t go unnoticed-”

“I’m serious, Jaskier,” he growls. “Don’t try to save me again.”

Jaskier rolls his eyes. He knows when Geralt’s being serious; he didn’t get this far in their acquaintance without being able to tell a playful growl from a serious one. “I know you are, darling,” the errant pet name falling from his lips, “but I can’t promise such a thing.”

Geralt glares in a way that would scare most people senseless but that merely makes Jaskier smile - all that bark and never any bite. “Whyever not?” he demands.

Jaskier shrugs and then winces at the immediate burst of pain it causes across his neck and shoulders. Geralt’s expression turns even stormier. Right. Probably shouldn’t remind him about the injuries if this argument is to be won. “You get yourself into trouble at least three times a week,” Jaskier reasons. “You can’t expect me to stand idly by if there’s something I can actually do about it.”

Geralt growls and Jaskier knows it’s a serious 'I'm annoyed with you' growl but it’s still unfairly sexy. “Except that you *can’t*, can you?” Geralt shouts. “All you do is-” but whatever insults he is about to hurl are interrupted by an impatient knock at the door.

“Not to hurry your blissful reunion-” Yennefer. Of course it’s Yennefer. “But we are currently at the behest of a raven.”

Right. They only had an hour, maybe less, before the raven Jaskier told them to send would arrive at Kaer Morhen and into Fringilla’s hands. They had to be gone by then.

Geralt reassures her that they’re on their way with a terse shout and then he turns back to Jaskier, “This conversation isn’t over.”

By all that is holy, only Geralt of Rivia could go from practically crying into his shoulder to righteous indignation in the span of a single minute. Jaskier wants to be angry but he’s kind of stuck on 'impressed'.

Jaskier tries to follow but his entire body protests as soon as he attempts to move. He inhales sharply through his teeth, trying to get a handle on the pain that hadn’t seemed all that bad when Geralt had been distracting him. “Sorry to interrupt,” he gasps as Geralt angrily yanks his shirt back over his head, “But I’m not sure if I can move unaided.”

Geralt’s face softens in the fraction of the second it takes for him to understand and then he’s striding towards him and lifting Jaskier with a tenderness that belongs behind the walls.

“Clothes,” Jaskier mutters distractedly as Geralt heads towards the door. “Geralt, I need clothes.”

Geralt's step hesitate and his shoulders tense and for a moment Jaskier doesn't understand why until he follows the witcher's gaze to the bloodied, torn, no-longer-brilliant turquoise clothes by the tub. Jaskier feels his own muscles clenching in tandem. He also doesn't want to be reminded of his torture, yet alone be wrapped in the very clothes he wore for the duration. He doesn't have any other clothes with him however; the Nilfgaardians left everything that they didn't deem valuable at the Kingfisher and he hardly doubts Marjorie has held onto his possessions. Even that ugly little charm Geralt gave him once, tucked safely into the pocket of his lute case has probably already been pawned for a pint. He's never been one to hoard possessions but he was fond of that hunk of metal; he considers it a gift from Geralt even though it was likely just some piece of junk thrown at him to end an argument.

Geralt grunts, displeased, and lowers Jaskier into a chair. "Then I shall give you some of mine."

Give, Jaskier notes, not *lend*. Geralt is a man of few words and he means the ones he chooses to speak. Geralt travels light, he probably only has three shirts in total, yet still he chooses this. The thought lets something loose within him.

Geralt dresses him with perfunctory movements and amends the clothes with a handful of coarse stitches without so much as a grunt. Jaskier spends the mere minutes this takes observing the task with quiet awe and willing himself not to misinterpret the demonstrated care as something else besides.

-

Jaskier isn't sure what to expect when he meets Ciri. Geralt isn't one for talking so what little Jaskier knows of the girl is inferred from the snippets of conversation he's permitted to hear regarding the prophecy and her powers, and, of course, because it's *Geralt*, her ability with a sword. Jaskier is therefore pleasantly surprised that she actually has some personality.

As soon as they're through the door to the other room and Geralt has placed Jaskier on his very wobbly feet, Ciri is bounding into him. Geralt's very firm palm on the small of his back is the only thing that stops him from falling over at the impact.

"Hello," he huffs against her hair. "Nice to meet you too."

"Thank you," she says, and it's so warm and sincere - traits absent from the public persona of her adoptive father - that it warms his heart. Geralt had described her as fierce and formidable, not gentle, not *kind*. And Jaskier can't help but wonder why they don't all hate him. He led them here. He endangered them all. They shouldn't be thanking him - they should be *blaming* him. The peace that Geralt had cast over him gives way to the crushing wave of guilt that had been steadily building inside.

"I'm sorry," he says, voice laced with genuine sorrow. "I gave you up. I never intended-" he swallows his guilt.

"I know," she says sweetly, pulling back. "And if you had not resisted for as long as you did then they would have ambushed us here. And if you had not spoken at all, they would have attacked Kaer Morhen. I owe you my thanks."

“That’s very sweet of you, my child,” Jaskier says, taking her hands between his. “But I-”

His protestations are cut short by something being forced into his hands. A leather bag. An oddly familiar shape, yet nothing he recognises. “What’s-?”

“I got you a replacement. I know it won’t be as special as the one you lost but...”

It’s a lute, Jaskier realises. Made of light-coloured wood with an intricate floral pattern carved onto the body. The strings smell metallic with the faintest hint of rust, but there is also the smell of resin as if she’s recently been cleaned. He runs his fingers over the strings experimentally and is delighted to discover that she has been tuned. The lute is clearly well loved but neglected... that is, until Ciri found her, and gave her a new life.

Jaskier had mourned when his beloved Filavandrel’s lute was decimated before him because a gift from Geralt could never be replaced by some trinket he found on the market, no matter how expensive or how rare. But now Ciri hands him this battered beautiful instrument and he realises how wrong he was; this gifted lute somehow more meaningful than the last. Embarrassingly, he feels his eyes beginning to water.

“Is it okay?” she asks meekly.

He must have been silent for too long. Jaskier tears his eyes away from his new love to smile appreciatively at the girl, who has so utterly endeared herself to him with this singular act of kindness. He cradles the lute to his chest and feels Geralt’s strong hand on his back and in the middle, somewhere, he feels complete. “She’s beautiful,” he says earnestly and if his voice cracks on the words then it’s only because it’s been a very long, very stressful day. “Thank you.”

Someone clears their throat. Yennefer. Of course. If there’s anyone that can’t stand sentiment, it’s her. “Jaskier,” she states and he’s both annoyed and turned on by the fact that it sounded like an order. He obligingly turns his gaze towards her and realises that there’s a woman in her shadow and probably has been this entire time. “Meet Triss Merigold, Ciri’s tutor.”

“I got you some potions,” Triss says without preamble, brandishing three identical sludgy liquids before him. “Take one now, one tonight, and one in the morning, then you should be fully healed.”

“Thank you,” Jaskier says with only the slightest bit of hesitance as he accepts the medicine. He doesn’t understand why everyone seems so intent on helping him all of a sudden. He doesn’t deserve it after giving them over to Nilfgaard so readily but as he looks around at their open and honest faces he notes that none of them seem outwardly resentful or angry. Not even Yennefer, as he had so feared. As it is, they’ll all *helping* him - Yennefer saved his life, Ciri bought him a lute, Triss is giving him potions... these women don’t even *know* him. But, he looks back to Geralt - his neck twinging at the movement - and sees his sheepish look and realises that these women *do* know him. Through *Geralt*.

Jaskier flushes at the implication. Geralt has spoken about him; enough to have made an impression. He wonders what he said. If he maintained that they weren’t friends. If they

know that they share a bed in Yennefer's absence. Or if he barely said a damn thing but he *did* something profound enough to demonstrate his affection.

Likely the latter, he realises. Geralt has always favoured action over words.

It's a buckwild theory but it's the only explanation that makes even a lick of sense. Geralt is the only thing that connects him to these women, therefore they must be doing these things on his behalf. The thought fills him with a peculiar sense of belonging; standing here in Geralt's clothes, being doted on by strangers.

He has barely exchanged a word of thanks with Triss before Geralt is manhandling him into the sole chair and forcing food into his hands. It's not until he smells bread that Jaskier realises he's *starving*. He eagerly starts on the meal as Yennefer leans against the cabinet and gets right to business -

"Fringilla could well be here before midday. We need to leave. More importantly, we need a plan to divert her. She will know that Ciri was here and that we killed her men. We're starting from scratch."

Geralt shrugs beside him; he's taken to hovering behind Jaskier protectively and putting more food in front of him whenever he can. It's oddly sweet. "Then we stick to our plan. Set sail for Skellige."

Jaskier downs the first potion with a shudder. Gods, that was disgusting.

"Do they know that's our plan?" Yennefer asks, looking directly at Jaskier. There's a surprising lack of judgement in her voice as she poses the question, as if she genuinely wouldn't be offended if he had given away all of their secrets. He had been convinced that she would not forgive him and had been so deathly afraid of her wrath, but now she looks at him, as intensely as always, and all he can see is her empathy. It's also very touching that she spoke the question out loud instead of raiding his mind for the answer, which would no doubt be easier and more conclusive. Either she knows about Fringilla's less than pleasant mind-reading techniques or she wishes to respect his space. Both possibilities are... very thoughtful.

Jaskier shakes his head and immediately regrets it as pain shoots across his neck. Geralt's hand falls to the strain in his shoulder and starts massaging it with skilled hands like that's a perfectly normal thing to do in mixed company. Jaskier wants to melt right into the intimate touch and struggles to stay coherent as he puts together an answer. "No. They know nothing. I told them I didn't know where you were going afterwards if you were going anywhere at all."

"And they believed that?" she asks.

Jaskier lets out a bitter laugh, remembering Gregor's knuckles against his stomach all too well. "No, not really," he says and preys they don't ask follow up questions. Geralt's hands tense on his shoulders nevertheless, as if he can smell the remnants of fear that the memory dredges to the surface.

“Skellige would be the logical answer though,” Triss says. “Why else would we be on the coast this far north?”

“Triss is right,” Yennefer agrees. “Fringilla’s smart. She’ll make that assumption.”

“So what do we do?” Ciri pipes up.

“We could play into her expectations,” Yennefer muses. “I’ve been thinking about it for sometime. She might not realise we were thinking of taking a boat. She will be more inclined to believe we were simply rendezvousing here and then portalling to Skellige. If she does indeed have the ability to track portals, as I suspect, then I could lead her there and take her on a wild goose chase through the islands. If she cannot track, then as long as Triss publicly portals you somewhere safe, then she will still hear of the portal from the villagers and come to the same conclusion. Portalling to Skellige is what she will be expecting. It’s tempting to play into it.”

“So you make a public spectacle of portalling us, then what?” Geralt asks.

Triss shrugs. “Head south to Blaviken-”

“No!” Jaskier shouts and belatedly realises that the sound came from Yennefer’s mouth too. He looks across the room and matches her gaze. He can *feel* Geralt’s pain at the word alone; there’s no way they’re going through Blaviken.

“Okay,” Triss says warily, looking between them for an answer that no one is brave enough to voice. “Not south then. But we can’t go much further north and the west is the sea so...”

“East,” Geralt grunts. “We go back to Kaer Morhen. The long way. Will she expect that?” she asks of Yennefer.

Yennefer seems to ponder this for some time. “There’s no way of knowing what Vesemir has told her, or if she found evidence of our presence there herself. If she believes we have been there then she will expect our return. If she truly believes we never set foot there... then. Maybe. It could work.”

“A double bluff,” Ciri muses.

Yennefer nods.

“Vesemir won’t have cracked,” Geralt states defiantly. “Not for anything. And I trust in your methods, Yen. We took every precaution that there was to take.”

“You want to risk it?” she asks.

Geralt shrugs. “I don’t know what other choice we have. Not by foot.”

“We can take the horses,” Jaskier says, finally having a worthy contribution. “Belle, Roach, and Midnight. There’s enough for the four of us.”

“Three of you,” Triss says, and then looks to Yennefer when she frowns. “I can stay in Talgon for a couple of days. If Fringilla doesn’t fall for Yennefer’s trap then I’ll know and can portal to warn you.”

Yennefer’s jaw tightens with concern. “She could sense you-”

“She’s not looking for me-”

“But-”

“*Yennefer*,” Triss says, and shockingly Yennefer actually falls silent. “Let me do this. If she senses me here then she will know that I am working with you and that is all. I swear, I will leave before she can hold me.” Yennefer seems to soften at this reassurance, and so Triss turns to address Geralt, “I will portal to Kaer Morhen either way. If Fringilla falls for Yen’s trickery then I will return to share the good news, if not, I will portal you out of there before she can get to you and take you somewhere where you can start anew.”

“Very well,” Geralt says, and then tacks on awkwardly, “Thanks, Triss.”

“Right,” Yennefer says, her voice oddly hesitant, as her gaze lands on Geralt. “So we’re agreed. Triss stays in Talgon. I leave for Skellige. You leave for Kaer Morhen.”

-

Jaskier doesn’t loiter to witness Geralt’s farewell to Yennefer - doesn’t want to witness the pain of their too-soon departure and know he is to blame. Instead, he walks to the stables, bolstered by Triss’s healing potion and puts his natural charm to good use on the grumpy farrier. In exchange for selling Midnight, Jaskier negotiates new shoes for the mares and a new saddlebag that can hold Ciri’s belongings with enough coin left over to replace a handful of essentials from the general merchant. He spends a good long while just apologising to his girls, bribing them with apples and grooming and flowers. They both seem to have survived the long and fast-paced journey, although Roach is noticeably weary. He regrets that they cannot rest for long before they must return to the road but he can take some solace, at least, in the fact that they will never be treated so poorly again.

“I like your horse,” Ciri says, joining him at last. There’s a shadow in her wake - tall, radiant, fucking divine - *Geralt*.

Jaskier smiles and lets Belle nuzzle his hand for the last scraps of food. “That’s my Belle,” he preens. “Bet she had you under her spell within minutes, huh?”

Belle snorts in agreement and Jaskier pats her flank encouragingly. She is beautiful and everyone should love her. Even the Nilfgaardians didn’t give the grey mare too much grief. Ciri laughs at Belle’s comic timing and it’s a lovely sound; definitely worth nearly dying for.

“Belle,” Geralt muses as he steps into the stables, putting his hand on her flank as he admires her. “How many languages do you speak exactly?” he asks of Jaskier.

“The four love languages of course,” Jaskier replies as he helps Ciri up into his mare’s saddle. Belle is very good and accepts the new rider with no more than a snort and shake of her head. “Elder, Common, Scholar, and Beauclairloise. The only languages you need to be an exemplary bard and lover.”

“Four,” Geralt states in a monotone as he greets Roach and if Jaskier’s not mistaken he sounds *impressed*. Jaskier supposes for a man who has walked this earth for a hundred years and barely manages one language, the feat must seem quite impressive.

Jaskier rolls his eyes as he mounts Belle, settling in the saddle before Ciri, who obligingly wraps her arms around him. “I do have the finest education from Oxenfurt Academy you know. You can stop acting surprised when I actually know something.”

Ciri chuckles behind him and he turns in the saddle (less painful now, thank you Triss) to give her a wink.

“I’m not ‘surprised,’” Geralt rebuts as he mounts Roach and starts moving her out the pen and into the stableyard. “I was merely... observing. Not many people have minds that can learn like that.”

Jaskier kicks Belle to catch up and she obediently trots alongside Roach. “Was that a *compliment*?” he asks with disbelief. When Geralt only answers with a thin press of his lips, Jaskier turns round to Ciri for back up, “That was a compliment, right? You heard that?”

Geralt gives a long, exasperated sigh as Ciri giggles behind him. “Yes, Jaskier, you’re extraordinarily clever,” he states in a monotone that could be sardonic if it weren’t for the slight smile tilting his lips.

-

Yennefer portals them in the end because she figures Fringilla will write off a portal that only travels a mile away and she wants to ensure they are seen with “the right sorceress” just in case. That’s what Yennefer says anyway but Jaskier suspects a much more sentimental reason behind her late decision to see them off.

She portals them to a farmer’s field on the outskirts of Talgon and despite time limitations, actually takes a moment to say goodbye. Not long enough for them to justify dismounting but long enough for Jaskier to wager that beneath her hard exterior is a mother and a lover who does not want to leave her charges.

She kisses Geralt goodbye, long and slow, and Jaskier finds himself looking away with a blush on his cheeks. Unlike the passionate kiss he witnessed earlier, this one feels private, and he definitely shouldn’t be watching and definitely *definitely* shouldn’t be deriving some sort of twisted pleasure from the sight.

After a moment of tremendous awkwardness, Yennefer tears herself away from their White Wolf and makes her way over to Belle. Yennefer wordlessly pulls Ciri towards her until their foreheads rest together, and Jaskier can sense the love between them as clear as day. “Stay safe,” she whispers to her. He hears Ciri whimper behind him and wishes he had some

assurances to make but the truth is they don't know *when* Yennefer will be coming back. His gut starts twisting itself into knots at the thought.

Despite Yennefer's amused scowling at his words, he really is starting to think of them as friends. As Geralt-adjacent relations if nothing more. He cares about her wellbeing and hopes, more than anything, that she returns to them alive.

Jaskier isn't expecting a goodbye so he startles when Yennefer takes a step forward to address him. "Do I get a kiss goodbye too?" he can't help but tease.

He hears Geralt smother a cough or a chuckle but can't see to look away from her lilac eyes long enough to check which. She ignores the flirtation as she always does. "Look after him," she says low and sincere; too quiet for Geralt to hear.

The words leave her mouth and lodge in his throat. The exact opposite of what Geralt wanted him to promise only hours ago. "*Don't try to save me again.*" Geralt didn't understand, but Yennefer did - she doesn't even mean physically, she means *look after the fragile man that we both know is inside him, look after his heart*, and this he cannot deny her. Now he has seen behind his walls, he feels duty-bound to protect what lies within.

He nods sincerely, holding her gaze. "I shall." He swallows his nerves at her departure. "Be safe."

"And you, bard."

Then Yennefer is gone, and the three of them set out on the road before them.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

This entire chapter could just be described as “Geralt attempts to express emotion through sex” and I don’t even give a fuck. That is, like, 90% of my work.

Jaskier will never say that travelling on the road is pleasant - it is muddy, and tiring, and sorely lacking in warm baths and fine wine - but he will admit that it’s markedly less dull with Cirilla for company. Normally when they’re travelling he talks and Geralt grunts and the exchange feels as futile as conversing with a castle wall. Cirilla, however, is a natural conversationalist and it seems even Geralt is not immune to her charms because when she asks him questions, he actually *answers*, sometimes even in full sentences.

It is wholly enlightening and oddly heart-warming and he wishes more than anything that he could give the discussion the attention it deserves. However -

“You’re in pain,” Geralt observes, halfway through a fascinating tirade about the nesting habits of harpies.

It’s been two hours, perhaps, since they left Talgon. Jaskier was hoping he could have disguised the fact for a little longer but nothing escapes Geralt’s notice it seems. “Eh,” he says, neither agreeing or disagreeing as their horses continue to trot along the frosty road south.

He *hears* Geralt’s sigh even over the kicking of hooves as he halts Roach with a tug on the reins.

“I don’t want to be a bother,” Jaskier says, but obligingly halts Belle alongside him. “And I was rather enjoying your lecture about harpies.”

Geralt frowns. “It was not a lecture.”

Jaskier looks over his shoulder to catch Ciri’s eye and then, in a manner that they already know annoys Geralt endlessly, turn back to him and say perfectly synchronised - “It was a lecture.”

It elicits the reaction that Jaskier predicted - a frustrated growl laced with the smallest smile - Geralt *likes* that Ciri gets along with Jaskier even if it is at his own expense but the man is too proud to admit such a thing.

“Trust me, I know a lecture when I hear one,” Jaskier says. “I used to give them. Albeit with much less gore.”

Geralt tilts his head at that, curiosity passing over his features in a manner that's normally reserved for rare beasts. "What did you-?" he begins, and then visibly shakes off the question, no doubt realising it would derail his argument entirely. "You're in pain," Geralt repeats stubbornly.

This time it's Jaskier's turn to sigh. He wraps his hands around the reins so he doesn't have to look at Geralt's earnest, worried, expression. He saw enough of that in Talgon. It twists his stomach into knots every time he sees it. "My bones are regrowing," he admits. "It aches. And I'm tired. But I can keep going."

Geralt's growl sounds so fierce this time that Jaskier *does* look up - looks up and sees Geralt dismounted. "Geralt," he urges, "We don't need to-"

"We're resting," he states bluntly, with no room for disagreements. He's already tying Roach to a tree. "Ciri-" he instructs her "-dismount and find the gill net. You remember what it looks like?"

Jaskier feels the movement of Ciri dismounting behind him and then she's rifling through Roach's saddlebags, presumably haven given Geralt an affirmative.

Geralt, meanwhile, is standing beside Jaskier, beckoning him with an impatient hand.

"I don't need your help to dismount, Geralt, I'm perfectly capable of-"

"I'm sure you are," he says, with another jerk of his hand. "But indulge me, nevertheless, if you will."

Jaskier takes a deep breath, preparing for the embarrassment to come - he does not want to be *pitied* - when he swings the furthest leg over Belle and all his efforts at being stoic fail when he lets out a muffled mewl of agony. He had underestimated, perhaps, while saddle-bound, how much the movement would hurt.

When he opens his eyes, Geralt is looking at him with a concerned frown but with a twist of his lips that looks awfully like 'I told you so'. "We could have stopped earlier."

"We shouldn't delay."

"You're in *pain*-"

Jaskier dismounts and Geralt barely has time to catch him. Pain bursts from every limb as his feet touch the ground and through it all, he sees Geralt's nostrils flare. He can *smell* it.

"Ah," he says, still cradled in Geralt's arms. "That's how you know. Of course. Tell me," he says, as he takes a shaky step forward and Geralt's arms continue to *hover*, "Is there anything of mine that remains a secret?"

Geralt hums as he unlatches the bedroll behind him and then loops his arm around Jaskier's waist, leading him towards a nearby patch of land. "Much. Apparently."

Jaskier rolls his eyes as Geralt unfurls the bedroll one-handed on the frosty ground. "I've told you about my life in Oxenfurt many times before, Geralt. I can't help if this is the first time you've deigned to listen."

Geralt frowns at this as he lowers Jaskier slowly - painfully - to the ground. He doesn't immediately pull away as Jaskier expected him to do as soon as he is prone on the bedroll. He just hesitates there - arms beneath him, eyes above - a mockery of their time together in Novigrad. He blinks; a question in his eyes.

Oh, how Jaskier wishes he wasn't so weak to his charms. Geralt doesn't deserve the answer but he gives it anyway. "Music, poetry, and history."

He blinks again.

"It's what I taught at Oxenfurt Academy. I lectured for a year before I became tired of it."

"As you become tired of everything," Geralt grunts.

There's a curious look in his eyes, something Jaskier can't place, but when Ciri is calling him over, and Geralt is retreating, and there's a dark, heavy, weight in his mind that he wants to give into.

-

Jaskier wakes sometime later to gentle, calloused, fingers on his cheeks. He knows the touch. Craves the touch. His eyes open to white hair and amber eyes and... something white being pushed towards him.

He sniffs. His eyes focus. "Fish?"

Geralt grunts. "You should eat."

Confused, Jaskier glances around the clearing, wondering how long he slept. They don't usually eat until nightfall but the sun is still high. "You... cooked?" Jaskier blearily asks, "There's no fire."

Geralt chuckles with a slight flush to his cheeks and it's a sight that Jaskier will never tire of. "I used igni. You must swear never to tell Vesemir."

Jaskier glances past him to where he sees a handful of very charred fish skins on the ground. He feels a smile of his own tug at his lips. "Vesemir..." he muses. "Your mentor. The old witcher at Kaer Morhen."

"Hmm," he says, and Jaskier knows him well enough to translate it as agreement. "He can't abide misuse of magic."

"I thought you couldn't either," Jaskier muses, but bites into the fish nonetheless, feeling stronger with every mouthful.

"Hmm," Geralt says thoughtfully as he stands. "Eat."

-

They ride for another two hours perhaps before dusk settles upon them, bringing with it a cold, frosty, chill. Jaskier is still dressed in Geralt's amended clothes but as soon as he begins to shudder under the thin white shirt, Geralt retrieves some sort of knitted over-garment from his saddlebags and tosses it back to him. It's an old, a moth-eaten, beige jumper but he doesn't recall Geralt ever possessing such a thing before. Jaskier frowns at his turned back, trying to work out if Geralt purchased it specifically for him in Talgon or whether it was just something he found at the back of a tavern cupboard. Knowing Geralt, probably the latter. It's a hideous thing - just like that medallion Geralt also may or may not have bought him some years back - but it's practical, and warms him instantly.

There's a familiarity with the campsite routine - Geralt hunting, Jaskier gathering firewood (well, the best he can in his current condition) - it's like it's always been, except this time Roach has no need to stamp her hooves impatiently because Ciri can tend to the horses with the attention they deserve. It's a pleasant evening, even more so when Jaskier unpacks his new lute for a fine tuning and Geralt does no more than give him a passing glance when he starts to practise his voice alongside it.

Ciri seems to enjoy the music at least, even if Geralt remains apathetic. Since his admission in Novigrad that he didn't "mind" his music - "not always," at least - Jaskier realises he hasn't actually griped about his music once. Geralt has allowed him to compose between carnal activities in their room, avidly watched his performance in the Kingfisher, and now lets him murmur ballads by the fireside. It's as close to praise for his craft that Jaskier will likely ever receive from the witcher having long ago learned to translate the man's lack of complaints as his silent acceptance.

Jaskier plays only a handful of songs before he feels his eyelids getting heavy with slumber. The second dose of Triss's medicine seems to have alleviated the aches further but has done nothing for the tiredness. He yawns, just the once, before Geralt comments on it as brusquely as everything else.

"You should sleep, both of you," Geralt addresses. "We have a long ride ahead of us."

Jaskier, grateful for the excuse, crawls to the tent and falls asleep before the others even join him.

-

He's awoken, sometime in the night, by movement behind him. Before he can startle awake, he recognises the smell and the shape of the intruder and relaxes back into a doze. He may, or may not, ask what Geralt is doing.

"Warmth will ease your aches," he explains as he puts his arms around him, his front pressed firmly to Jaskier's aching back.

Is that true? It sounds like it could be true. He lets out a contented sigh and settles back further into the warmth of Geralt's embrace before sleep takes him once more.

-

Geralt is gone by the time he wakes. Ciri too. He hears the distant sound of pans and saddles and realises they must be preparing to leave. He reaches for the last of Triss's bottles and swigs the vile concoction down, hoping it will heal the last of his aches.

It's only by the light of day that Geralt's actions from last night seem out of place. Geralt doesn't *cuddle*. Even in the blissful sanctuary that was their room at the Kingfisher, Geralt didn't *cuddle*. They would cling to each other in the act, and caress each other before and after, but when it actually came to sleeping, they did so independently. Sure, Geralt held him when he first woke in Talgon, but only to restrain him from clawing at his throat - and, if he's being sentimental, Geralt might also have known that he needed the sense of safety - but Geralt rarely shows any tenderness towards him outside of their lovemaking, lest of all, to *spoon* him, in a tent that they share with his adoptive daughter.

If anyone else had done anything so familiar, so tender, Jaskier would have to conclude that some feelings were involved; that the man wrapped around him in sleep without any intention of sexual intimacy was after another kind of intimacy all together.

If it were anyone else, he would make that conclusion. But it's Geralt. Geralt is practically minded at all times; he could have legitimately slept beside Jaskier precisely for the medical reasons that he had cited in the early morn without any other connotations even passing through his mind.

Yes, Jaskier thinks. Yes, that must be it.

Because the alternative is much too much to think about.

-

During the day, Jaskier is pleased to find that his wounds have completely healed and they can ride without delay.

As they approach Blaviken, Jaskier senses a tension to Geralt's shoulders, one that he wants so desperately to reach out and ease away. He can't begrudge Ciri her presence - he loves her already, and dotes on her like a spoiled niece - but he can't help but think if he was alone with the witcher, that he may be permitted to ease the burden that is so clearly upon him in the only manner that the witcher will allow.

By nightfall, the tension is palpable. They have already skirted east from Blaviken to join the track along the river Buina but the surroundings must still be familiar enough to Geralt to warrant the restless ghost in his mind. After taking no more than two bites out of his dinner, Geralt stalks into the wilderness and towards the river, leaving Jaskier to answer a concerned Ciri.

"He's been like this all day," she observes.

Jaskier frowns, his gaze still fixed to Geralt's departing figure. "There's a ghost that haunts him in these parts," he explains.

“This is why you and Yennefer did not want him going through Blaviken?”

Jaskier nods and puts his food aside distractedly. “Will you be okay here a moment? I should-”

Ciri nods and makes a show of pulling her sheathed sword towards her. “I’ll be fine. Go.”

-

Jaskier finds Geralt naked, floating in the icy cold river, with his eyes fixed to the starry night above. His body is bathed in moonlight and nothing else. It’s a beautiful sight. And a haunting one. Jaskier finds himself transfixed by the riverside as time keeps ticking by.

“I told you not to come after me.”

Jaskier jumps at the sudden voice in the darkness. Geralt hadn’t even moved. He knew he was here, watching, for an indeterminate (but likely inappropriate) amount of time.

Geralt hadn’t told him as much, not tonight, but he means to reference their argument after their coupling in Talgon. *Don’t do that again - Getting caught. Playing hero. Coming after me. Any of it. Don’t do it again.*

Fucking unbelievable.

“I wanted to check that you were-”

“There are wolves roaming these plains.”

“Geralt-”

At this, Geralt does finally turn his head towards him to fix him with a glare.

Fine. If he wants to play that way, then he’ll play that way. Jaskier starts stripping; disposing his boots on the riverbank.

“Don’t-” Geralt warns, startling from his prone position until he is upright. The river is deeper than he thought; it comes up to Geralt’s chest. “It’s too cold. You’ll freeze-”

“Has it occurred to you,” Jaskier asks as he yanks the white shirt over his head and it joins the rest of his discarded clothing, “That sometimes people will come after you whether you bloody well like it or not.” Admittedly, he is beginning to shiver in the night’s air, and as his toes dip into the icy cold ravine, he does rather wonder if, yet again, words got ahead of him before common sense caught up.

“Jaskier,” Geralt snaps. “Don’t be stubborn-”

“Oh?” Jaskier asks with a startled laugh, the sound stuttered with cold. “I’m the stubborn one?”

Geralt's jaw clenches but Jaskier is now close enough to see the subtle movement so he finds it hard to care. He reaches out with a shaking, white, hand to rest against Geralt's cheek and he knows he's made the right call - he *knows* it - by the way that Geralt's eyes flutter closed at the touch. "You need release," he says, stroking his thumb over Geralt's cheek as gently as he can, "Let me give it to you."

Geralt's jaw is still clenched in anger even as he leans instinctively into Jaskier's touch. "You're cold," he bites.

"Then keep me warm," Jaskier flirts, and tilts towards him until he can brush their lips together.

Geralt's sharp intake of breath is all the permission he needs as he steps closer, slotting his legs between Geralt's and pressing their bodies firmly together.

At the press of skin-on-skin, Geralt breaks from his stoicism and wraps his arms around Jaskier's waist, urging him closer and making good on Jaskier's request to keep him warm.

Jaskier keeps it slow and teasing, bestowing the witcher with sweet kisses and lingering touches because he knows that the "release" Geralt craves isn't so much a climax as it is the grief within him, one that needs teasing out slowly and delicately. Geralt barely returns the affection at first, just stands there and accepts Jaskier's offerings, until the tension eases enough for him to lay his head down on Jaskier's shoulder.

"Look after him," Yennefer had said and this is what she had meant.

Jaskier rewards him by running his hands through Geralt's hair, a gentle, reassuring, touch that makes Geralt sigh into his skin. Touch by touch, Jaskier feels the tension drain out of him and into his filling erection below the waterline.

He's freezing but Geralt's body keeps him warm as he finally lowers his hand and gives Geralt what he needs. He keeps his ministrations slow and purposeful, giving the act as much as reverence as the head massage and the tender kisses against Geralt's bowed head - they are all movements in the same symphony. Geralt melts into the embrace, allows Jaskier to lead him through it, and the trust he bestows upon him fills Jaskier with pride.

Geralt spills between them with no more than a gasp and a gentle scraping of teeth against Jaskier's shoulder. Jaskier slips his hand from his spent cock to the small of his back and holds Geralt in the embrace as firmly as he can as he shudders through the aftershocks, the other hand still petting his hair as innocently as one would a distressed child.

Geralt lays a kiss on Jaskier's shoulder - one that radiates through him and warms even his numb toes - and one hand leaves its home on his waist to find Jaskier's own member, only to find it woefully lacking. Geralt looks at him with a questioning frown.

"I admit," Jaskier admits with a shudder, finally allowing himself to feel the cold. "That you may have been right about the inopportune temperatures."

Geralt huffs a laugh, then tightens his arms around Jaskier's waist and lifts him effortlessly out of the water. Jaskier yelps a little in surprise as Geralt carries him to shore, but holds on, relishing in the playful and wholly unnecessary touch. Geralt is blissfully absent of the tension that he previously carried; his movements have lost their harried edge and his shoulders have released their burden. Jaskier knows Geralt won't thank him for his service but he *is* thankful - he can see it in his contented eyes - and for Jaskier that's more than enough.

Geralt deposits him gently on the ground and uses his own discarded shirt to dry him.

"Hush," he says over Jaskier's protests. "I've another at camp."

And, then, even sweeter, begins to dress Jaskier.

Once again Jaskier has to remind himself that the man is only being practical - that Jaskier's hands are shaking too much for the dexterity that the task requires and that without some assistance he will surely suffer the cold. It's practical. But that doesn't stop his heart aching at the sight, nor, later, when they return to the fireside and Geralt wraps a blanket around his shoulders, his hands lingering.

-

The rest of their journey passes pleasantly enough. They follow the river through the mountains towards Kaer Morhen and although the path is rudimentary in places they have a much easier time of it than they likely did over the mountain pass. It takes them the better part of a week to traverse the path to Kaer Morhen and although the tension never returns to Geralt's shoulders, his affection never returns either. It reminds him, in fact, of the couple of days that passed between them after their first tryst amidst the ruins and his departure for Oxenfurt - full of hot gazes and lingering hands - except this time there is less uncertainty.

Back then, despite Geralt's implication that he would happily take Jaskier to bed again on the occasion that they actually had a bed, Jaskier didn't know for sure that they would partake. He figured as soon as he left his side, Geralt would be back in Yennefer's arms and as soon as he were in Oxenfurt, he would be in a maiden's bed and all would be forgotten.

Until, he got that damned letter on the first night of the festival. The one full of innuendo and the invitation to meet Geralt in Novigrad and he thought *well, maybe he does want something after all*. He did get approached by a maiden that night, as it happens, and dismissed her advances before he could comprehend the reason why - "*sorry, my pearl, but I'm afraid I am indisposed this fine evening*" - and only afterwards did he realise his motivations for doing so.

Jaskier had been brave in first kissing Geralt and so he thought *maybe I can be brave in this too* and boldly asked him upon their reunion, "*If perhaps you did want to continue what we had started now we were somewhere more... comfortable.*" He remembers Geralt's sharp intake of breath and the sound became as addictive to him as everything else about the man.

This time there is no doubt in his mind that they will tumble into bed again as soon as they have some semblance of privacy and it's... good. In a terrifying sort of way. Jaskier normally

doesn't last longer than a month with a lover before they become tired of him and they are approaching that precipice awfully fast.

Nevertheless, an excitement starts to build within him when he sees a ruined fortress on the skyline that Ciri calls home. He is looking forward to a bath and a fire and other homely comforts. But he's also very much looking forward to some time alone with Geralt. He looks across to Geralt, eager to see his expression, but Jaskier is dismayed to find that there is no sparkle of joy in his eyes, only a tension in his shoulders that Jaskier thought he had banished in the moonlit river.

Geralt notices his attention and looks back to the skyline with a sigh. Jaskier doesn't expect an explanation. Geralt never explains his dark moods; he just has them and Jaskier is expected to grit and bear them.

"If you thought I had ghosts in Blaviken..." Geralt murmurs and Jaskier snaps his head up to hear the explanation. "Kaer Morhen houses many good memories-" he says with an indulgent smile at Ciri. "But many old, best forgotten ones too."

"The ransacking?"

Geralt frowns, looking at him with curious eyes.

Jaskier sighs. "I do wish you would stop looking so surprised every time I know a piece of what is considered very common knowledge."

A small smirk makes itself known on Geralt's face before the weight of the location falls back down upon him. "Before that," he says. "Long before."

His eyes are distant, locked on the horizon, and Jaskier returns his focus to the cold, marshy, unforgiving landscape, sure that he won't get a further explanation until he speaks again, a mile further down the path.

"Do you know of the Trail of the Grasses?"

Jaskier frowns. It sounds familiar, like something out of folklore, but distant enough that he couldn't attempt to define it.

Ciri does though. "It's how they make witchers."

"Hmm," Geralt says. "Did Vesemir tell you as much?"

Ciri shrugs and Jaskier feels the movement behind him. "I found the equipment. I asked what it was for. He got weird about it."

"Why?" Jaskier asks. "What is it?"

"Alchemy, mainly," Geralt answers. "But the pain you undergo is... excruciating. And not many boys survive."

Boys.

“How old were you?” Jaskier whispers tightly, fearing the answer.

Geralt shrugs tiredly, his eyes still fixed on Kaer Morhen. “Truthfully, I do not remember. Old enough to have befriended many of the boys at any rate. Old enough to mourn.”

Jaskier does not know how to comfort such an old and monumental loss, but Geralt catches his eyes and knows he must see the sympathy he wants to display, before he turns back to the horizon.

“Don’t stray to the laboratories, either of you,” he warns. “There are wraiths wandering the halls even to this day.”

-

Kaer Morhen is perhaps only a mile or so ahead of them when Geralt pulls tightly on the reins and brings them to a halt.

“What-?” Ciri begins to ask, but Jaskier recognises this particular scrutinous expression of Geralt’s and holds his hand high to cease Ciri’s questioning. She falls obediently silent and Jaskier watches as Geralt strains his ears for the troubling sound he must have heard.

“The forktail,” he murmurs. “She’s on the move.”

At this, Jaskier does squeak, “A dr-draconoid? *Here?*”

“Hmm,” Geralt says, meaning *yes*.

“We saw one in the mountains last we travelled,” Ciri explains. “You said she wouldn’t be interested in us.”

A winged beast appears over the mountains to the east of them and Geralt unlatches his crossbow from the saddle. “Clearly she missed a meal or two.”

Jaskier tries to stop the terrified whine escaping his lips but he fears some of it escaped when Geralt turns to look at them both. “Ride hard to Kaer Morhen,” he orders. “Don’t look back until you are safe behind the fortress walls.”

Belle starts to panic beneath him, her hooves stamping, as Geralt dismounts and heads towards the descending beast. But Jaskier is hesitant to leave. This isn’t just drowners or ghouls or any of the usual fare they encounter on the roads. This is a beast of such a magnitude that Geralt normally spends *weeks* preparing for the battle. One wrong move and Geralt will be lost to these marshes forever.

“*Geralt-*” he calls, and he can’t help the desperation that slips out with the name.

Geralt turns back, his eyes flickering between them, as if, for the first time, he realises that someone will bloody well notice if he doesn’t come back from a hunt alive.

Fear lodges in Jaskier’s throat. He doesn’t know how to phrase any of the overwhelming emotions surging through him. Geralt’s looking back at him with an unreadable expression -

a slight frown and thinned lips - and Jaskier wonders if he also has sentiments he would like to express if only they were not so beyond him.

“Be safe,” Jaskier says in the end; awkward, and burdened with meaning.

Geralt nods, swallowing the words and looking back at the approaching beast, before his eyes land once again on Jaskier. “I will see you at Kaer Morhen,” he says, a promise, and then he is striding towards danger and Belle is spiriting them to safety.

-

The gates open upon their approach and heeding Geralt’s advice, he does not halt Belle until they are through the doors and a secure roof is over their heads.

“I heard the horse-” a man with grey hair and a stern expression greets them. “Geralt not with you?”

Ciri dismounts behind him and Jaskier is not all that surprised to see the old witcher’s expression soften as she bounds into his arms.

“We encountered a forktail not a mile from here,” Jaskier explains as he dismounts and takes Belle’s reins in his hands. She’s still skittish from the encounter and he doesn’t want to leave her so hastily. He turns towards their host with her reins still in hand. “You must be Vesemir,” he greets with a humble bow. “I am Julian Alfred Pankratz, Viscount de-”

“The bard,” Vesemir grumbles.

“I, uh. Yes?” Jaskier comes up from his bow with a certain amount of confusion. It seems everyone in Geralt’s life already knows of his existence which given Geralt’s insistence that they’re not even friends is... noteworthy. “Mentioned me, has he?”

Vesemir grunts and folds his arms. It’s not an answer, Jaskier can’t help but notice. “This is the forktail from the eastern mountains?”

Straight to business, then. Jaskier didn’t know what else he was expecting from a witcher. Jaskier nods his confirmation.

“Hmm. I saw her circling the valley this morn. Winter must be setting in.”

“Will he be okay?” Ciri asks Vesemir, and Jaskier pretends he doesn’t also need the comfort that Ciri is requesting from the elder witcher.

“Geralt has fought them before,” he says, another not-answer. Then he looks to Ciri and must see the reassurance that she needs because he adds, “He’ll be fine.”

Despite himself, Jaskier releases the breath he was holding, and it seems Belle follows suit as her restless hooves finally still. “All fine here?” he asks on Geralt’s behalf, eyeing Vesemir for potential injuries, but it’s been a week since Fringilla was here and even if Vesemir had suffered the same torture at her hands, the evidence would have long gone by now with the aid of witcher potions.

Vesemir shrugs, his arms still folded. “The witch found nothing, and your raven arrived before she could inflict much damage.”

His twenty years with Geralt allows him to hear the gratitude between Vesemir’s clipped words. Jaskier nods, accepting his thanks. If someone was important to Geralt, then they were important to him - there was no need to acknowledge the fact when there seems to be a consensus amongst Geralt’s acquaintances. But the mention of the raven does raise another question. “Has Triss Merigold arrived yet?”

Vesemir inclines his head towards the keep. “Some days past. She informed me that Yennefer has successfully led Fringilla away.”

Another sigh of relief. They will be safe here, then, for a time.

“Lambert sent word too,” Vesemir says, and although Jaskier only has a fleeting idea of who this other witcher is, the name seems to catch Ciri’s attention, “He’ll be joining us for winter.”

Ciri frowns. “No Coën? Eskel?”

Jaskier wonders how Ciri knows so much about the other witchers, but then, belatedly, he realises that the Battle of Sodden was over a year ago now; Ciri must already have spent a winter here. He loves that Ciri is already so embedded in Geralt’s life, he *does*, but there’s also a little coil of jealousy in his gut that in the two decades they have known each other, Geralt has never once invited him here; that he’s heard no more than a passing comment about Kaer Morhen and its occupants. He hasn’t heard mention of Coën before but Eskel, he recalls, is the closest thing Geralt might have to a friend.

Vesemir shakes his head. “Coën’s across the seas and Eskel is too far south, amidst the war.”

“Yikes,” Jaskier says before he can stop himself.

Vesemir looks at him with a curious - and some might say *derisive* - expression.

“I mean,” Jaskier starts, and then realises he meant exactly that, “*Yikes*. Why would he do that? Voluntarily?”

Vesemir grunts but leads him to the stables with Jaskier will take as acceptance. “There’s work in war, there always is,” he explains. “Missing people. Ghouls. Wraiths.”

“Cheery.”

“Indeed.”

Despite Vesemir’s dismissal, Jaskier can’t help but wonder if this Eskel is there for something other than work. If Geralt has deemed him worthy of companionship then he likely has a heart just as pure.

“So what’s Lambert like?”

Vesemir rolls his eyes and walks away towards the keep. “Oh, you’ll see.”

Jaskier stares after him, his hands stilled on Belle’s reins, wondering what the hell that is supposed to mean. Before he can ask, Ciri is on the heels of the old witcher, excitedly telling him about the ghouls she fought in the mountains, and Jaskier turns back to Belle instead.

The grey mare neighs in response to his questioning look.

“Oh, you’re probably right, my girl. No sense in trying to puzzle out cryptic witchers.”

-

By late afternoon, Jaskier has reason to be concerned. He’s unpacked and poked around the keep in search of clothes and even attended to his new lute but it’s been nearly an hour since they left Geralt with the forktail and there’s still no sign of him. He returns to the gates and finds the watchtower, but mist has fallen over the valley and he can’t see more than a few feet. He’s strongly considering saddling Belle and riding back out when a very familiar horse comes into view, cantering up the hill to the fortress.

“*Roach*,” he breathes.

He jumps down from the watchtower and opens the gates just as Roach neighs for attention outside them. She is riderless.

Jaskier approaches and calms her with a hand on her flank. “What happened, girl? Where’s your witcher?” he tries to keep the panic out of his voice, knowing it will unnerve her further, but he feels it nonetheless. Vesemir and Ciri are in the mountains, hunting for dinner. Triss is locked away in the library. He’s the only one Roach can go to for help.

“Okay, okay,” he schools himself. He can do this. He hears Geralt’s voice in his head - *a needle, at least...* - and checks the saddlebags for a weapon. Ciri’s sword. Right. Okay. He unsheathes it - feeling the peculiar weight in his hands - and puts a foot in Roach’s stirrups. “Sorry, girl,” he says as he mounts her, “Hopefully Geralt will forgive me this transgression.”

Roach doesn’t seem at all concerned by her previously banned rider as she neighs in warning and then canters back the way she came. Jaskier holds on for dear life - the mare moving faster than he’s ever known. She must be tired, so tired, but she doesn’t relent until she reaches their destination.

Or, at least, what he assumes is their destination.

They’re at the point in the road where there’s nothing but thick marshland either side of the path and through the dense fog, Jaskier can’t see shit. He tries to recall Geralt’s lectures about bogs - *“water hags, drowned dead, drowners, wraiths, kikimoras. If it exists, it’ll be in a fucking swamp”* - and it does not fill him with confidence.

“Geralt?” he hazards, his voice shaky and quiet.

He takes a deep breath. Geralt needs him. *Geralt* wouldn’t abandon him. He can do this.

He dismounts, Ciri's sword gripped firmly in his hands, and tries again, louder this time, "Geralt!"

Then, distantly, he hears a very familiar, very severe "fuck" - and the curse word has never sounded more beautiful and terrifying.

He's alive. Thank fuck, he's alive.

Jaskier takes another deep breath and then takes his first step towards the sound. His foot immediately falls several inches into the bog.

"Urgh," he swears, feeling the mud seep past his socks and his trousers and onto the skin below. It is cold. And muddy. And if Geralt's life wasn't in danger, he would *at least* go back to Kaer Morhen to change out of the clothes Geralt so kindly procured him. However. "You owe me a bath after this, witcher," he calls out into the wilderness.

He receives a grunt in exchange and adjusts his course to match.

When he's muddy to his knees and he has passed a grand total of three drowner corpses, he finally sees black armour amongst the marshes and nearly trips over his feet in the hurry to get to him.

Geralt's lying amongst the reeds propped up by his elbows, with a silver sword in hand, and his blood doing its best to turn the surrounding pools of muddy water red. Jaskier's not sure if he's ever seen a more devastating sight. As he approaches, he sees that there is a trail of this blood - and a trail of beastly corpses - stretching out into the mist towards a rather large mass that he assumes is the forktail's corpse.

"Fuck, *Geralt*," he swears, kneeling down beside him to inspect the brutal laceration on his leg. "How long have you been here?"

Geralt growls and counters his question with one of his own. "What the fuck are you doing here, Jaskier? I told you not to come after me. There's blasted drowners everywhere-"

"And I told you I wasn't going to listen," he snaps, not in the mood to entertain Geralt's bullshit as he inspects his body for further damage. "What happened?!"

"Damn forktail got me in the leg-"

"Yes, thank you Geralt, I can see that. I mean, where the hell are your healing potions?"

Geralt groans. "Lost my satchel. In the bog somewhere. It doesn't matter."

"*Geralt*-"

"I mean to say that it's the poison that's the issue; that's what's stopping it from healing."

"The *poison*?!" Jaskier exclaims with his hands in the air. "Oh that's just bloody brilliant. 'Just a forktail' he says 'no big deal' except, turns out, it's a *big fucking deal*. You needed Golden Oriole," he states and rolls his eyes at Geralt's gormless expression. *Yes, Geralt,*

unlike you I actually listen when people tell me things. “Whereabouts did you lose your satchel?” he says, his gaze searching their immediate surroundings.

“Don’t-” Geralt warns. “I mean it. There’s drowners everywhere. Get back to the path.”

“No,” Jaskier insists. “I will not go back to the path unless you are walking it with me. Where are your goddamn potions?”

Geralt growls and for a moment it’s just the two of them staring each other down in this godforsaken marshland. Then, eventually, he cracks with a nod of his head. “That way. I think. But don’t-”

Jaskier is striding away, sword in hand, before Geralt can protest any further. The mist is heavy and the last light of the day is leaving so it takes a good five minutes to locate the satchel and a further few minutes to return to Geralt. By the time he has, Geralt has turned a distressing shade of white.

He hands Geralt the yellow-ish potion, ignoring Geralt’s look of surprise as he does. It’s really starting to grate on him that Geralt thinks him so bloody useless. Of course he knows what Golden Oriole looks like; he’s seen Geralt drink the toxin-cleanser enough times to have memorised it. He’s about to retort as much when a quick movement registers at the corner of his eye -

He turns to face the intruder with fierce double-grip on his sword but meets resistance mid-movement and is shocked to find the beast already cut clean through by the weapon.

“Oh, *shit*,” he says in awe as the head of the drowner slips down into the mud and the rest of the body collapses with a thud soon afterwards.

“*Fuck*,” Geralt swears.

“You let Ciri handle this thing?!” he exclaims. He had expected it to be half-blunt. The girl’s fourteen for fuck’s sake but when he turns back to Geralt - wound healing now, thank gods - the thought seems to be the furthest thing from his mind. Geralt’s eyes are blown wide and dark, an effect from the potion perhaps, as he stares up at Jaskier. It’s odd. He can’t quite place the look.

“You okay?” Jaskier asks, suddenly unsure, as he reaches a hand down for Geralt.

Geralt accepts and struggles to his feet with Jaskier’s arm wrapped tight around him in support. Geralt grunts in the affirmative but it sounds distant; distracted. “I see you finally took my advice,” he says weakly with a tight smile, indicating to his bloodied sword.

“Well,” Jaskier says, trying to play it off, “I thought it best. Apparently there’s all sorts of beasts that live in swamps.”

“Is that so?” Geralt teases, a little of his usual warmth returning. “Then I must thank whoever taught you so wisely.”

“Piss off,” Jaskier says with no heat. Once they are firmly standing waist-to-waist, their swords dangling from either side, he finally looks around the desolate marshland and realises he has no idea which way the road lies. “Don’t suppose you remember which way is home?”

Geralt grunts. “No, but Roach will.”

He whistles for her and moment’s later, they hear her resounding neigh and impatient hooves on solid land. Jaskier smiles at the proud, loving, expression on Geralt’s face.

“She fetched you, I presume?” Geralt asks as Jaskier starts leading them towards safety.

“Yes,” he admits, “She’s a very loyal steed. Although let it be said, I almost came here of my own volition, Roach or no Roach.”

“Did you really?” Geralt asks with an amused side-eye.

“Yes, I did!” Jaskier defends. “But, you know my dear Belle, she wouldn’t abide bog mud on her pristine coat.”

“Hmm,” Geralt says disbelievingly, but Jaskier doesn’t miss the way his thumb strokes over his neck from where its slung over his shoulder. The closest he will get to ‘thank you’ and he hoards the silent gift with all the others bestowed upon him.

-

They walk back to Kaer Morhen as the mist turns into night, their swords sheathed and Geralt ambling beside Roach with something approaching his normal gait. Geralt had deemed Roach worthy of a rest, and Jaskier can’t find it within himself to disagree - Geralt may be pale from blood loss and shaky from the poison, but he still looks a damn sight better than the elderly mare beside him.

Jaskier lets them have their stoic silence but if, on the journey back, Geralt stays close enough that their fingers sometimes brush between them, then Jaskier reassures himself, once again, that it is no more than a practicality - a way to tether himself in the event of weakness, or in an unthinking search for warmth - he assures himself it’s meaningless, no matter how his heart pounds at every touch.

-

When they arrive back at the keep, late and tired, Geralt only exchanges the briefest greeting with Vesemir, clasping hands with a gruff, “good to see you” and a couple of short sentences about the forktail before Geralt continues on his way, Jaskier in his footsteps.

Ciri is eating in the main hall with Triss but shouts across that she has prepared a bath for them in the tub by the kitchen. Geralt merely raises an eyebrow, as if he doesn’t know if it was by intuition or prediction that she knew they would need one. Jaskier thanks her on their behalf and scuttles after him.

Just as Ciri described, there is a large tub on the other side of the wide fireplace - the lit grate acting as a divide of sorts in the grand hall. Geralt is already divesting himself of his muddy

armour by the time Jaskier appears and he finds himself stepping forward to help, just in case the poison is still slowing Geralt's movements. He doesn't think it is, but Geralt allows him to assist in any case, and when they're both stripped of their clothes, Geralt dips his fingers into the water with a frown.

"Vesemir watching?" he grunts.

Jaskier casually backsteps enough to peer round their barricade to find Vesemir returned to his dinner, scolding Ciri for something or other, and returns to Geralt with a shake of his head.

With a mischievous smirk on his lips, Geralt holds his hand over the bathwater and moves his fingers just so, until fire bursts forward from his hands.

Jaskier tuts teasingly but can't truly begrudge him for the "misuse of magic" Vesemir would claim because by the time Geralt has cast *igni* three times the water is steaming beautifully and his muscles are already relaxing at the anticipated relief.

Jaskier climbs into the tub with a barely suppressed moan. Gods, how he missed the simple pleasures when he was on the road. Geralt makes no such desperate sound, but his eyelids flutter in that way that Jaskier is beginning to recognise as bliss and it's just as good. Better, even.

Geralt undertakes a rudimentary wash but he lacks the patience to clean the mud caked into his white hair and Jaskier can barely stand to see it so clumped and matted and after a moment's deliberation, shuffles forward to take the matter into his own hands.

Geralt stiffens at his first approach but then, as if remembering who exactly shares his tub, relaxes, and turns his back towards him, tilting his head back until his hair is gifted to Jaskier's diligent hands. They've done this before, of course they have, except that Jaskier is not usually permitted to share the tub *and* groom him. It's used to be an 'either/or' situation. Novigrad changed that though.

Jaskier unties the ribbon and uses the jug to gently pour water over his hair, again and again, until the water runs clear. He soaps and rinses his hair as a further excuse to grant Geralt the gentle touches he craves. Then he reaches for his satchel, pulling it closer, until he can fish the comb out from within its confines. Geralt grunts a little at this movement and at first Jaskier worries it's in pain but when he returns there's nothing to confirm his suspicions so he writes it off as just another one of Geralt's wordless complaints - the water has gone cold, or Jaskier is taking too long, or his injuries are still bothering him but he's too stubborn to say anything - you know, the usual.

"This okay?" he asks, just to make sure, as he brandishes the comb before him.

"Hmm," Geralt says, and Jaskier smiles because he *knows* that "hmm" - it's his favourite one. It's the sound that means "yes, I would dearly love that, my sweet bard, but unlike you, I am not renowned for crafting such wonderful meanings with these humble words and thus must rely on mere guttural sounds that I am assured you can translate into my wholehearted agreement."

Or, at least, the sentiment falls something along those lines.

Geralt tilts his hair further into his hands, as pushy and taciturn as ever, and Jaskier gets to work, untangling knots and running his hands across Geralt's head, and neck, and shoulders, until he feels the tension beneath his hands dissipate.

Jaskier has fallen deep into the meditative state, his hands unconsciously massaging Geralt's shoulders to the sound of crackling fire and distant laughter, when Geralt mumbles with a voice just as distant, "Do I meet your standards?"

Jaskier chuckles and presses his lips into Geralt's exposed shoulder, unable to resist the chaste touch. They are both clean, he supposes, and the water cooling between them. But he's not quite done. "Almost," he whispers, and reaches for the razor.

Geralt raises an eyebrow over his shoulders but dutifully turns around to face him as Jaskier runs the blade through the water.

"Got plans for me later?" he asks, in a tone that Jaskier optimistically classifies as 'flirting'.

Jaskier smirks as he inches closer and Geralt obediently lathers his face. "I've always got plans for you," he flirts, but as his fingers land on Geralt's jaw, the words seem to change their meaning.

Always.

The word is too heavy, too meaningful, to be contained in this scene. Geralt's eyes flicker down to him, as if he also noticed the slip of words. Jaskier closes his eyes and mentally scolds himself - this is meant to be a casual arrangement. Geralt does not seek affection outside the bedroom. He does not want Jaskier 'always', he wants him 'for now' and that is enough.

Jaskier schools a smile onto his face by the time he runs the blade across Geralt's jaw. And then, at the first flutter of Geralt's closed eyes, it becomes a genuine smile. Geralt trusts him with a blade against his neck and this silent declaration is the only one he requires.

He puts the razor aside when his work is completed but he is reluctant to leave the peaceful space they have created between them. Geralt must feel it too, because his eyes are still closed, his nostrils flaring - scenting something? - and his hand reaching for Jaskier's hip underwater. Jaskier shudders at the touch, reminding him of the last time they could steal away; of standing in that freezing river, taking Geralt slowly apart with his hands.

Geralt opens his eyes and the sight of his black pupils blown wide with desire cause his exhale to stutter unexpectedly. His manhood is filling between them. His tongue darts out to lick his lips. Jaskier feels his lust surge, boiling over, like a pan left unattended -

"Are you boys quite done in there?"

Vesemir, *fuck*.

Geralt ducks his head and chuckles, with a slight colour to his cheeks that wasn't present before. Jaskier has no such natural defences and flushes profusely at being caught out. Witchers can *smell* lust, he knows.

Just as Geralt can probably smell his humiliation now.

Geralt's hand moves from his hip, upwards, stroking his side in what some might call an act of reassurance and calls an affirmative back to Vesemir.

"Good," Vesemir shouts. "Any longer and Ciri would have eaten your dinner."

-

The venison has long gone cold by the time Jaskier has donned some scavenged clothes and they join the others for dinner. Despite Vesemir's taunt it looks like the others are long finished with their meals. Jaskier eats briefly before returning to the tub to wash their clothes, wanting to give Geralt some time with his mentor, and Ciri time with her tutor.

It's an easy repetitive task to fall into. He takes extra care with Geralt's armour, checking for any damage as he goes. He's seen Geralt fix his things after battle often enough that he knows what to look for - testing the strength of the fabric with the prying tips of his fingers. He's fixing the recent tear in the trousers with a needle and thread when Geralt joins him.

"Pass me my armour, it needs-" he starts but his words fall short when he sees the armour in question either hanging on the line or strewn in Jaskier's lap.

"Cleaned - with a cloth, not tub - polished, and cared for, my friend," Jaskier says, raising his work so that Geralt can inspect the stitching if he so desires.

Despite his usual attention to detail, Geralt doesn't spare his work more than a glance, his eyes fixed on Jaskier instead. "You-?"

Jaskier sighs, dismayed that they are hitting this hurdle, yet again. "Yes, I know how to do it. You need to stop acting so surprised every time I show the slightest competence. My ego is a fragile thing-"

"No, it's not."

"Yeah, okay, it's not," Jaskier concedes. "But, still, I-"

"Thank you."

Jaskier startles so much at this unexpected praise that the needle goes right into his thumb. He yelps and brings the slight to his lips, sucking the blood clean before the witcher can scent it.

He failed, judging by Geralt's black eyes and flared nostrils, as he strides towards him and forcefully grabs Jaskier's wrist so he can inspect the damage for himself.

“It’s nothing,” Jaskier says as Geralt’s eyes roam over his spit-slicked thumb. “You just caught me off-guard is all.”

Geralt’s expression twists into something sad and difficult to read. No doubt it’s meant to read as some kind of disappointment in Jaskier’s clumsiness. Jaskier sighs in defeat, and returns to his work, tying off the stitching with a few flicks of his wrist and then putting the material aside.

Geralt hasn’t moved from his knelt position before him and Jaskier is about to question it when Geralt’s eyes lock with his and he very purposefully draws Jaskier’s pricked thumb between his lips and into the heat of this mouth.

Jaskier’s arousal spikes immediately and he looks around in a panic, only to see the fire burned to embers in the grate and beyond it, bodies under bedrolls, the others already bedded down for the night. He must have lost more time in chores than he thought. He turns back to see that Geralt’s intense gaze has not lifted. His breath catches on an inhale.

Geralt opens his mouth, lets the thumb fall from between them, still slick with his saliva, and tilts his head towards the kitchen; a question in his eyes.

Jaskier scrambles to his feet in response and Geralt grins, grabbing his hand, and leading him across the room and through the kitchen to the other side. It comes out to a dark passageway and Jaskier is about to ask where Geralt is taking them before Geralt renders his questions mute by taking his lips forcefully between his and pushing him back against the cold stone wall. Ah. This was their destination after all.

Jaskier is helpless under Geralt’s onslaught of kisses as he takes and he takes and he *takes*. It reminds him of the desperation he himself felt in Talgon. Geralt is ruthless, kissing so hard that teeth clash and lips bleed and his tongue delves so deep it feels like Jaskier is drowning in it.

Jaskier pushes his hand against his chest, needing to fucking breathe, and despite Geralt’s apparent desperation, he wordlessly follows the demand, easing back to give them both a chance to catch their breath. Geralt has never been so forceful with him, not ever, and it’s intoxicating and thrilling but also rather disconcerting. He thought he’d understood Geralt when he saw the soft affection behind his walls in Novigrad. But this is something else entirely. He doesn’t understand how these biting kisses are born from the same place as the hands that pleased him so lovingly. His mind is struggling to comprehend his sudden need for rough kisses over tender ones.

“I need you to fuck me,” Geralt growls, and turns them until it is Geralt’s back pressed against the wall and Jaskier pressing into him.

Despite his concerns, Jaskier feels himself harden at those words. Given Geralt’s demanding kisses, he had expected the request to be the other way round, but he can work with that. If it’s what Geralt needs, he’ll give it to him.

“Okay,” Jaskier says, rocking his hips against Geralt’s, just to show how on board he is with the idea. “I’ll grab some oil from the kitchen-”

Geralt reaches out and snatches his wrist, the grip tight enough to bruise. He's shaking his head. Jaskier can barely make out the movement in the darkness, but Geralt's eyes are shining fiercely enough for him to gather the meaning.

"Geralt," he warns, "without oil, it will--"

"I know," he says. "I want it to. Please."

Fuck. He wants it to hurt.

Jaskier has no idea what to do. He wants to give Geralt what he needs. He does. But he also has no idea where this is coming from and if he doesn't understand it then it means he might not be giving Geralt what he actually needs at all.

Geralt must sense his hesitation because he's pulling on his arm desperately. *Please*, he had said. Jaskier doesn't remember the last time he had said *please*. Geralt really does want this.

"Tell me why," he implores. "Tell me why you need it and I will give it to you."

Geralt whines, the sound caught in his throat somewhere as he throws his head back against the wall hard enough to hurt. Jaskier can see the wheels turning - Geralt is wise enough to know that Jaskier doesn't make these requests lightly. He can normally rely on Geralt's silent cues to guide him. The fact that he's asking now is because he sincerely needs to know. Geralt must know - he *must* - that if he doesn't give Jaskier a satisfactory answer that he might be left unsatisfied.

"It's this damn place," he murmurs, eyes to the ceiling. "And you."

His face is crumpled in concentration as he drags the words to the surface and Jaskier knows how hard this is for him, to voice his deepest thoughts; that's why he speaks to the crumbling roof, not to Jaskier. Geralt drops the vice-like grip on his hand and Jaskier steps closer as a reward.

"You came back for me," he grunts, and at this he finally turns his head to look at Jaskier. "You keep coming back for me."

"And I always will," Jaskier says.

Always.

That damn word again.

Geralt makes another strangled noise in his throat; eyes thrown to the ceiling once again. "I'm alive," he says, like a confession. "I want to feel alive."

Oh.

Jaskier gets it then - his comparison to Talgon wasn't so far off after all. Geralt could have died out there today; his body lost to the marshes to join the rest of the witchers' ghosts that

haunt this land. If Jaskier hadn't come back for him... *oh, Geralt*, he wonders suddenly with an aching heart, *has no one ever come back for you?*

"Please," Geralt pleads again, turning in the bracket of Jaskier's arms until his face is pressed against the wall and his fingers are clawing at the stone. "I need it. I need to feel you."

Fuck.

It's too much. Jaskier can't recall Geralt ever pleading for something in bed (except, perhaps, for that first time he was permitted to fuck him) but it's never been so blatant, so honest, so *desperate* -

He rests his head against Geralt's exposed neck and leaves an open-mouthed kiss at the top of his spine. Geralt shudders beneath him, more responsive than perhaps he's even been and it only serves to confirm to Jaskier how much he wants this.

"Okay," he murmurs. "I'll give you what you need."

Geralt whines, loud and unrestrained, and Jaskier takes a moment to be thankful for the thick stone walls between them and the rest of their party.

"You tell me if it's too much, if you need me to stop--"

Geralt grunts with a firm nod of his head, and Jaskier figures that's all the confirmation he's going to get after pushing him for so many words earlier. He knows that Geralt has three times the strength (at least) of his average bed partner; that if he does go too far, Geralt could easily remove himself from the situation, but Jaskier doesn't want to push him to do so. He prays that by this point he knows the tells of Geralt's body well enough to know when he crosses the pain threshold from pleasurable to uncomfortable. Geralt must trust him to toe this line if he's asking him for this and that thought alone is enough to fill him with desire.

"Okay," he murmurs again, more as a confirmation to himself than anything else.

And, then, he begins to take Geralt apart with no more than spit on his fingers. It's rough and needy and just what Geralt needs if his loud grunts and cut-off moans are any indication. His fingernails are digging into the wall, hard enough to bleed, and he doesn't stop asking for more - and Jaskier learns rapidly when he actually means it and when he merely *wants* it but can't yet take it. The man is insatiable.

Jaskier's buried deep within him and they're nearing their climax - Jaskier knows how sensitive the deepest part of Geralt is and takes every strangled moan that falls from his lips like a prize - as he moves within him and Geralt's hand snakes around his neck to tangle in his hair, bringing him ever closer.

Jaskier bows his head to rest at the crook of Geralt's neck and when he tongues over the skin exposed by his crooked shirt, Geralt moans his name in the most delightful way. Jaskier bears his teeth and repeats the movement; a proposition. He remembers Geralt's possessive act in Talgon and the graze of teeth in the river and is asking if he needs to be claimed in this way

too. Geralt's strangled moan is answer enough and when Jaskier peaks and digs his teeth into the flesh, Geralt near-screams with it, and stumbles over the abyss with him.

They stay entwined, pressed against the wall, as they both come down from their climax. Jaskier releases his jaw from his shoulder and trails his lips over the reddened flesh instead.

Sex with Geralt was always earth-shattering but this felt... different somehow. They've been desperate, yes, but never rough. There's never been blood or bruises between them. Jaskier doesn't know how much aftercare he needs; whether Geralt will be content to lace up his breeches and return to his own bedroll, or if he needs to be held through the night. It's not something they've done before - cuddling after sex - but the man craves affection and if he didn't receive it during sex for once then he might require it afterwards.

Jaskier nuzzles against his neck and into his hair, smelling the soap that he placed there himself only hours ago. "You okay?" he murmurs into his skin.

Geralt hums in response, but his hand comes to rest atop Jaskier's, where it's still pressed against his belly. "Good," he says, and that single word filters through him like sunshine through the trees.

Jaskier bestows more sweet kisses upon him and Geralt doesn't object at the affection, merely tilts his head to give Jaskier more access. They are suspended in this delicate moment, one that Jaskier does not want to leave, but one where he fears their weakened legs may no longer sustain them.

Be brave, he thinks. *Be brave*.

He wraps his arms tighter around Geralt and whispers in his ear a question that would - with any other lover - not be bold at all, but with Geralt feels monumental: "Lie down with me?"

Time stretches on for eternity as he awaits an answer; breath caught in his lungs.

"Hmm," Geralt finally says, and it sounds neither positive or negative. It sounds *contemplative*.

Then, Geralt is levering himself from the wall, causing Jaskier's softened member to fall from between his legs, and then turns to face him. Jaskier looks on with interest; whatever sharpness that was in his eyes before has faded. His movements are sluggish and his fingers gentle as they come to rest against Jaskier's cheek. Jaskier feels his eyelids flutter at the touch and they stay closed when Geralt presses his lips softly against his.

Jaskier moans into the tender kiss, so freely given. He recalls their first coupling amidst the ruins. Their desperate rutting and Geralt's gentle kiss afterwards that seemed at the time almost contradictory.

He understands it now, though. The little kisses he bestows upon Jaskier after a desperate coming together - it's a way for him to confirm to himself that it meant something; that, despite the similarities between this and a visit to a whorehouse that his partner was *willing* -

it's a way to remind himself that he is capable of softness - and, more often than not, a chance to apologise too. It's a vow. A confirmation. A little romantic declaration.

It may be one of Jaskier's favourite gifts to receive.

"Hmm," Geralt says again, and Jaskier can feel the vibration of the sound against his lips. "I know a place."

They gather their clothes and Geralt leads him back into the large hall, pass their sleeping comrades, and towards the library. He climbs - with a little wince and smile - up the ladder to the top, where a handful of blankets and bedrolls already reside.

Jaskier gives him a questioning look and Geralt answers with a shrug. "I used to sleep here as a boy. When I needed to escape. And recently, when Ciri had nightmares."

Jaskier smiles sadly in understanding. It's a safe space for him. And it warms his heart that he invited Jaskier into it.

Jaskier slips under the blankets and takes him in his arms, bestowing kiss after kiss upon him, keeping his witcher as close to his heart as he dares.

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

geralt!!! actually!!! using!!! his!!! words!!!

don't worry though, we're back to porn and miscommunications next chapter

Sorry this chapter took a few days to write. I have a book coming out soon and keep getting Overwhelmed. The update schedule might be slowing down a bit in general while I go through this - sorry!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Jaskier wakes up alone on the balcony. He would feel bereft if not for the sounds of laughter coming from below. He sleepily rolls over until he can glimpse the white hair running through the halls below - Geralt chasing Ciri, Ciri laughing in glee, and above it all, Vesemir grumbling - and Jaskier softens at the sight.

He remembers, years ago, Geralt's insistence that he didn't need anyone - "*and the last thing I want is someone needing me*" - and now he was a veritable father to the girl that he swore to reject. The evidence of change, of love, of acceptance, fills Jaskier with a curious hope in his chest.

He lies there for a moment - or, more than a moment - recalling their lovemaking last night. Geralt bestowing him with words for once. Now he knows Geralt can voice such deep desires, he finds that he *craves* them. He wants to hear Geralt confess to his every whim, his every want, his every *need*.

It is folly to wish for this vulnerability outside the bedroom he knows; that it would require Geralt learning to lower his walls and actually put words to what's there, but he finds himself longing for it nevertheless.

-

While the witchers train Ciri outside, Jaskier starts to familiarise himself with Kaer Morhen. The old fortress is mostly derelict, with many passages and doorways leading to nothing but rubble, but the witchers have done their best to keep the intact rooms liveable. A new, sad, song starts pulling at his mind as he wanders the empty hallways. It's like he can *feel* the ghosts of the boys here.

"*There are wraiths wandering the halls even to this day,*" Geralt had said upon their approach to Kaer Morhen and Jaskier doesn't doubt it.

He heeds Geralt's advice and backtracks a couple of times when the feeling of another presence grows too strong, or when he sees abandoned alchemy equipment, remembering Geralt's specific warning about laboratories.

He tries to imagine Geralt growing up here but it's at once both too distressing and too distant for him to envisage.

However, amongst the old boys' belongings he finds himself more clothes and, curiously, a recorder wrapped in linen.

He turns the small wooden instrument over in his hands and wonders when the poor thing was last played. It's perhaps a century old, he can tell that, just from its design - no joints, simple shape, very little in terms of curvature - probably carved by a woodworker, not a professional. It's dusty and the mouth is a little chipped but when he plays a rudimentary scale in the lower register, it seems perfectly in tune. He ought to leave it be, he knows, but he looks at this old forgotten instrument and is filled with such pity that he simply must take it with him.

-

It's a beautiful day as it turns out, the late autumnal sun bearing down on the courtyard as Geralt puts Ciri through her paces. Triss is studying in the library and Vesemir is preparing food in the kitchen so Jaskier can take his sweet time watching his witcher and his ward in the sunshine. Sun is at its highest and Jaskier has a basket of food to appease them but he doesn't want to interrupt, not yet, as he sits on the ramparts and watches them.

He doesn't often have the opportunity to watch Geralt like this. Normally when Geralt's swinging a sword it's at something that Jaskier is desperately running away from, and by the time he's turning back, that something's insides are now on Geralt's outsides and the sight isn't nearly as pleasant. Here, now, he has time to admire the way Geralt's wrists twist with the movements of the sword, the way his body moves as gracefully as the most talented dancer, and the firm but gentle way he teaches Cirilla. It's really quite captivating.

Geralt is... lovely. Jaskier has always thought as much but it wasn't until the whole 'tossing more than a coin' rumour started that he realised *why*. In retrospect, it should have been obvious. He was enamoured with Geralt the moment he saw him in a way that is normally reserved for hard and fast crushes. He followed him around for two decades even though Geralt was - and still sometimes *is* - frequently unpleasant to him. He had been infatuated, immediately and wholeheartedly, and, naturally, because it was the most impactful and most meaningful relationship in his life, Jaskier had somehow managed to overlook the fact that he desired him otherwise.

As soon as Jaskier had realised the fact, it was like a dam had come crumbling down. It was sheer desire at first. But then, as soon as that desire had been quenched amongst the ruins and Geralt brushed his lips so softly against his... Jaskier knew he desired more than just space in his bed. He tried to initiate several casual touches between them while they were on the road to see if he'd be open to more and although Geralt didn't dissuade him, he also never encouraged them, and never initiated touches of his own. When they parted ways some days later, Jaskier had made peace with the fact that sex was all it was to him. He was okay with

that, especially when Geralt invited him to Novigrad and gave him more than he thought he'd ever have. But, now, between all of Geralt's little silent gifts, the lines are starting to blur, and Jaskier cannot help but look at Geralt and feel overwhelmed by *possibility*.

It would be so easy to let himself love the man. Jaskier now has another hundred years or so in this realm, and as he watches Geralt, he can see himself trailing after him for all that time if he were so permitted. But that's all it would be... trailing after him, begging for scraps. If Geralt truly is only interested in sex, then soon he will tire of him just like everyone does, whether it be a day, a week, or a year from now, and then they will return to being friends-but-not-friends just as it had been all these years previous and Jaskier is no longer sure if that's something his heart can take.

But, today is too beautiful to ponder on such dire eventualities. He must savour every minute that he is permitted by Geralt's side and if that means his eyes linger for longer than necessary on Geralt's flexing muscles and talented hands then so be it.

He doesn't know how long he stands there before Geralt dives to block Ciri's attack and his shirt slips *just so* to reveal the reddened skin underneath. Jaskier's breath catches in his throat at the evidence of their lovemaking. He thought it would have healed by now. Geralt's certainly not showing any signs of pain from other aspects of their coupling last night... but, then again, perhaps he didn't take a potion at all, perhaps he *is* feeling the effects and just...

Geralt's eyes lock onto his and Jaskier flushes at having been caught out. His lust must have spiked at the thought.

Jaskier breaks the gaze and holds up the basket of food as a peace offering. Geralt's lips curve to the side in that half-smile of his before Ciri takes advantage of his distraction and tackles him to the ground.

Jaskier laughs at Geralt's surprised grunt and makes his way down towards them as they start wrestling in the grass.

"Eat," he commands them, and lobs an apple at Geralt's head to underline his point.

The bastard catches it one-handedly with a smug grin, but obligingly, ceases wrestling and drags Ciri upright with him.

"A picnic, bard?" he asks, eyeing the wicker basket. "You're spoiling us."

"Hardly," Jaskier says, tossing Ciri some cured meats wrapped in linen. "I merely anticipated the struggle of dragging you two away from your swords long enough to eat something and came to the inevitable conclusion that bringing the food to you would be considerably less of a bother."

Geralt grunts in a way that means *thank you* and bites into the apple. He's not expecting Geralt to make conversation so he's caught off guard when between one bite and the next he asks, "You found more clothes?"

Jaskier nods, swallowing the handful of dried fruit in his mouth with difficulty. "Belonging to some of the old boys, I fear. Vesemir suggested that I should but if you-"

"No, it's fine," Geralt interrupts. "We've all done it," he comments with his head indicating to Ciri's own amended cotton trousers. "Waste not, want not."

"Right," Jaskier says. "That's what I thought."

The clothes are scratchy and entirely unflattering and their age is evidenced by the smell of damp if nothing else, but Jaskier long ago learned that he couldn't afford luxuries on the road with Geralt and until he could purchase new silks from a merchant this was all he had to hand. It helps, too, that he had that hideous knitted garment Geralt gave him to wrap around his shoulders when it gets cold. It was warm, and sentimental, and still smelled faintly of Roach. It's all he needs, really.

The three of them eat in companionable silence, bar the occasional thought that comes to Ciri's mind or the occasional snippet of music that comes to Jaskier's. When Ciri eventually grows tired of their silence and goes in search of Triss, Jaskier tilts his head up at Geralt's perpetual frown and dares ask the question that he's been skirting around for some days now.

"I've been meaning to ask," Jaskier starts, and waits for Geralt's answering hum of acknowledgement before continuing. "It was never planned for me to come here. To Kaer Morhen. I'll happily stay if that's what... I mean, if it's useful to you, but I know it's..." his fingers start twisting restlessly in his hands as he tries to find the words to phrase this. "That this is difficult for you," he says, leaving Geralt to interpret whether he means the location or the undefined thing between them, "So if you rather I go then-"

"The first snow will fall soon."

"Right..." Jaskier says hesitantly, trying to translate the unrelated sentence into the simple 'yes' or 'no' that he needs to hear. He wanted to give Geralt the option to bow out now if he is overwhelmed by his presence, or bored of his presence, or generally give themselves the opportunity to stop this thing from developing into something that Jaskier won't be able to recover from, but it's not a decision that Jaskier can make on his own. He just wants some indication, one way or the other, if Geralt still means what he said on King Niedamir's mountains or if he actually wants him around. At this point, he doesn't even care if it's just for sex. He just wants to be... wanted.

He risks a glance over to Geralt and finds his amber eyes looking at him, steady and unreadable. "Stay," he says, and Jaskier feels the word to his bones.

Stay.

His eyes close in an attempt to bury the emotions that word evokes. He relishes the word like a gift - buries it in his heart where the others reside. *Stay*. It might be the most beautiful word he's ever heard. He understands that the word doesn't have the same weight for Geralt, that he spoke it out of practicality - "*the first snow will fall soon*" - but it is still unbelievably lovely to hear.

“If you want,” Geralt adds belatedly.

He wants. Oh, how he *wants*.

Jaskier doesn't trust himself to speak, afraid he will say something that he is, himself, unprepared for, and instead reaches out until his hand covers Geralt's on the grass.

Stay.

-

That night the four of them are up late, discussing tactics (or, in Geralt's case, fretting about Yennefer) and fall asleep in the boys' bunks in the main hall. Jaskier doesn't realise he's fallen asleep until there's a warm, gentle, hand on his arm and a whisper in his ear, and Geralt is tilting his head towards the back of the hall in a way that even his sleep-addled brain can translate as *do you want to get out of here?*

Jaskier grins and tries not to seem too eager as Geralt leads him, not towards the kitchens, but towards the towers. Trepidation begins to creep in at the edges of his excitement when he realises that once again, there is no oil in Geralt's hands. Although Geralt obviously enjoyed last night, they're going to have to have a conversation if Geralt thinks Jaskier will take him roughly every time, not when he's seen behind his walls to the softness that resides within. But as Geralt keeps leading him further and further away from the hall, Jaskier suspects that's not what he's intending at all tonight.

Geralt closes the creaky wooden door behind them and lights the torch nearby with igni until it illuminates the derelict round room they stand in. A stone spiral staircase crawls up the interior of the tower as far as the eye can see.

“I fucked Yennefer here,” Geralt states bluntly, and Jaskier is brought back to the ground very quickly.

It's a test, Jaskier knows. He can tell by the way Geralt is looking at him. But Jaskier doesn't get jealous, never has done, he gets *horny*. And if this is how Geralt chooses to miss Yennefer then he's definitely on board.

He smiles coyly and steps towards Geralt until their chests are pressed together. Geralt must be able to smell the desire rolling off him if his flared nostrils and black eyes are any indication. “Where?” Jaskier asks with a deep, seductive voice. “Show me.”

Geralt growls and without further ado lifts him off his feet. Jaskier instinctively wraps his legs around his waist as he's carried across the room and pressed against the cold stone wall. An unconscious whine leaves his lips as he does so; he didn't realise he enjoyed being manhandled quite as much as this, but then, he realises that before he actually knew Geralt intimately, this is how he imagined it would always go - forceful hands and wordless demands and being fucked roughly against the nearest surface. It was unbelievably lovely to discover that that's not how Geralt is at all behind closed doors but he also finds that this sudden realisation of his initial fantasy is *doing* things to him.

“Here?” he asks as he’s pressed against the wall. His voice comes out just about as wrecked as he feels as Geralt allows his feet back onto the floor. “Like this?”

Geralt nods against his neck, teeth nipping at his throat. Ah. Still in the possessive mood then. Very well.

Jaskier swallows down some of his desire before he can get overwhelmed and asks, “What did you do? Tell me.”

Geralt growls, his hips canting forward and grinding himself against Jaskier, like he just can’t help himself. Jaskier rakes his fingers through his hair, rewarding him, because he loves Geralt when he gets desperate and uncoordinated like this and he can’t believe he’s already there. He wants to say something teasing about Geralt’s obvious desire for a threesome but then Geralt is falling to his knees and any such taunts are banished from his mind.

“I put my mouth on her,” he says as he draws down his breeches, and okay, maybe Geralt isn’t the only one turned on by this.

“*Fuck*,” Jaskier swears as his head falls back against the wall. He gets lost in the sensation for a good few minutes - because Geralt is being *relentless* - before he manages to ask, and it sounds fucking *strangled* when he does, “What did she taste like?”

Geralt moans against him and breaks away with deep, telling, breaths. “Sweet,” he says succinctly. “Dangerous. Good.”

Jaskier groans, lost in the fantasy, picturing them fucking in this very spot - how Yennefer would look, how Geralt would sound, how it would *taste* - and he finds himself coming with a surprised, wordless shout not a moment later.

Soft kisses along his neck bring him back to himself and he draws Geralt into a long, slow, kiss. “Did you do this too?” he asks breathlessly. “After?”

“Hmm,” Geralt says thoughtfully, like he’s trying to remember. “No, she got distracted.”

“By what?”

Geralt chuckles against his throat and Jaskier bathes in the sound but before he can recover, Geralt is saying the utterly insane words, “By you.”

Jaskier’s thoughts come to a screeching halt. They had talked about Jaskier mere moments after they had fucked. Jaskier tries not to get ahead of himself but it’s very hard not to with knowledge like that.

He must look as startled as he feels because Geralt takes one look, laughs again, and then explains. “She appreciated the gift you gave her.”

Jaskier looks at him quizzically - *what gift?* - before Geralt brings one of his hands to his shaven face. Ah. In Novigrad. He had shaved Geralt in Novigrad with the very excuse of how much Yennefer would appreciate it. Finally an answer as to why she didn’t kill him in Talgon.

Jaskier flushes at the implication. “What did she...?” he’s so red now that he can see Geralt’s mouth twist in amusement as he forces himself to finish his aborted sentence, “What did she say? Exactly?”

“Hmm,” Geralt says again, recalling, as he traces his fingers over Jaskier’s face and lips and... “That she wished to thank you,” he says, “that you were...” he smiles then, deep and beautiful, “a good boy.”

“*Holy Melitele...*” Jaskier breathes, and feels himself get impossibly hard again. He can *hear* those words in her voice; feels the praise as if she’s there with them.

Geralt chuckles, apparently still very amused by Jaskier’s flustered attempts at speech. “I told you she had other qualities.”

Jaskier hits him playfully, remembering all too well the barbs he had exchanged about Yennefer both in and out of her company. “She definitely does,” he murmurs, remembering the soft look in her eye as they lay together in Talgon, remembering how she *saved his damn life* without so much as a complaint. Something warm finds its way into his chest.

“Hmm,” Geralt agrees, but there’s an impatient edge to it that causes Jaskier to realise that he let himself get distracted from Geralt’s own pleasure.

He looks down to see Geralt’s hardness pressing against his naked thigh and traces his hand down Geralt’s back just to feel him shudder under the touch. Then, he returns to the game at hand. “So what *did* you do afterwards?”

Geralt’s eyes flutter closed, but not in the blissful way that Jaskier has learned and loved, but in a *pained* way. He can tell by the furrow of his brow. “I fucked her.”

“And you...regret it?” Jaskier hazards.

Geralt’s eyes remain closed as he shakes his head. “No. It’s not... We were, at the time, not permitted to... She did not want to indulge in her feelings. I obliged.”

“Oh, Geralt,” Jaskier says, running his hands through Geralt’s hair and feeling him relax at the touch. Geralt craves affection. He thought Yennefer knew this too, but perhaps things between them were complicated by the djinn. He can’t imagine ever denying Geralt’s gentle touches. He can understand how they would be overwhelming though; he feels himself shaking apart every time Geralt’s calloused fingers bestow him with a single touch. Is that why Yennefer denied him so? Jaskier kisses the tips of Geralt’s fingers and asks sweetly, “How would you do it now? If you could?”

Geralt sighs and digs his head out of Jaskier’s shoulder long enough to look him in the eye. “I would...” he says, his eyes searching and sincere. “Enter her slowly. Take her deep. Tell her that I...” his eyes are still locked onto Jaskier’s, “That I love... her.”

Jaskier’s breath catches in his throat, longing to take the words as his own. Instead, he curls his fingers into a circle and places it against his hip in an invitation. “Show me.”

Geralt looks at him with curiosity and disbelief and Jaskier resolves it in the only way he knows how: by taking his lips between his own. Geralt sighs into the chaste kiss and then Jaskier feels his manhood pressing against his fingers.

Geralt makes love to his hand just as sweetly as he had described. When Geralt spills between them sometime later with a strangled sigh and open lips against his hair, Jaskier feels tears prick his eyes, craving the words that he so freely gave to her.

-

Geralt either doesn't notice or doesn't comment on Jaskier's reaction. They return to their bunks, hands entwined, and Jaskier is surprised when Geralt takes the one next to him and looks across at him with wide, soft, eyes.

Jaskier's heart aches at the sight and he can't take it, turning away to face the wall instead. He knew Geralt loved her, the words shouldn't have cut him so deeply, but it was the way Geralt looked at him when he said it, so fucking earnestly... it destroyed his entire perception of the witcher.

He knew Geralt was capable of love - Roach being the most prime example - but he didn't think he was capable of *expressing* it, not with words. But, there was the evidence. Geralt shamelessly declaring his love for the witch when he hasn't so much as apologised to Jaskier for... for -

If life could give me one blessing, it would be to-

No, he scolds himself viciously, he does not need to think about the fucking mountain right now. He told himself that Geralt had made amends, that he had apologised in the only way he knew how - through action, through kisses, through these little silent gifts of his - but, no, turns out, Geralt *can* speak otherwise and just hasn't done him the courtesy of doing so.

The thought burns him as he curls into himself and feels tears slip silently from his eyes.

He *wants* those words. He *wants* them.

-

By the next morning, the hurt has done what it always has done, and turned itself into song.

-

Days at Kaer Morhen follow a similar pattern. There is training in the morning and lessons in the afternoon and time together in the evenings. Sometimes Ciri will be occupied with Triss all day and it will be Vesemir duelling Geralt in the courtyard instead, or sometimes the witchers will leave to go hunting, or they will take Ciri's lessons into the mountains. It's a quiet, studious environment, and Jaskier does his best to fit in.

To keep busy, Jaskier finds himself undertaking housework and preparing dinner, though, he frequently finds himself distracted by the compositions in his head. He's been awfully inspired lately between the desolate setting and his affair with Geralt and it's showing in his

emerging repertoire. Composing also keeps him out of trouble; he fears if he didn't keep his hands busy with the lute, he would frequently disturb the studious atmosphere of Kaer Morhen by dragging Geralt indoors for a quick fuck.

He does, though, by night. If the others have noticed their frequent disappearing acts after sundown then it's not commented upon. Geralt's unwavering passion is flattering but all their intimate moments are stolen and secretive and he's starting to miss the lazy lovemaking that they could enjoy in Novigrad. It's also more apparent here that carnal activities are *all* that Geralt craves - there's nothing given to indicate romantic intentions. There's the occasional passionate kiss as they pass in the hallways but they read more like a promise for later than actual kisses for kisses sake.

Jaskier doesn't know if it's because Geralt is genuinely only interested in bedding him, or if it's because he just doesn't understand how to express physical affection otherwise. It's not like Geralt is particularly forthcoming about his past lovers, or even about Yennefer, so he doesn't know if this behaviour is normal for him or whether Geralt is drawing some kind of line specifically with him. He wants to ask, wants to push the boundaries - take his hand while walking, or brush a kiss against his cheek in greeting - but he's also so afraid of pushing him away that the bravest thing he commits to is the occasional, lingering, hand.

Instead, he takes whatever Geralt gives him, and tells himself not to expect more.

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By the eve of the third full day, the witchers are playing gwent and the girls are reading, and Jaskier sits amongst them on the long table, unwrapping the wooden recorder from the linen sheet. He has been taking her out once or twice a day, just readying the instrument, introducing her to the new climate and the moisture of his breath. He hasn't played the recorder in many years but he remembers how delicately you have to train a new (or in this case, old) woodwind instrument and he daren't rush the poor girl.

He barely has his lips over the mouthpiece, a couple of rudimentary notes sounding, when Geralt's tankard clatters to the floor. His stool screeches against the floor as he jumps to his feet, eyes full of flame and fury, and then a sudden, unbearable silence falls over them.

Jaskier instinctively (stupidly) tries to fill it. "Not a fan?"

Geralt's jaw tenses, his lips twist into a growl. Jaskier hasn't seen him this angry in *years*. Not since - *no, don't think about it* - and this time he doesn't even know what he's done to deserve his wrath.

Geralt strides towards him and snatches the instrument out of his hands. Their eyes meet and there's something happening behind the walls that Jaskier can't even see yet alone interpret. Jaskier has gotten so used to reading him that the sudden guardedness stuns him from even protesting as Geralt marches out of the hall and into the cold night outside, the old recorder in his hand.

Jaskier's heart aches and he feels sick with it as he's so callously transported back to that damn day and that damn dragon and *if life could give me one blessing* -

Jaskier looks back at Vesemir, stunned, in search for an explanation.

The old witcher shrugs, uncaring for Jaskier's heartbreak. "Don't take it personal, kid," he grouches. "Some things should just stay buried. That damn flute included."

"It's a recorder," Jaskier protests weakly.

Vesemir merely shakes his head and downs the rest of ale.

-

Jaskier nearly goes after Geralt countless times that night. He can imagine him strolling the mountains by moonlight, or just sitting in the watchtower wistfully, or lying on the cold ground, letting the insects crawl all over him, and he can't stand the thought of any of them. He doesn't know what he's *done* but he wants to fix it and he can't if Geralt doesn't even give him the courtesy of his company. Jaskier is angry and hurting and by all rights should want to *punch* Geralt for his brutish actions - and, okay, maybe he does a little - but he's mostly just fraught with worry. Something must have triggered that reaction, something that he doesn't understand.

Eventually, the doors creak open and a solitary figure steps through; his steps burdened, his fury long since dissipated. Jaskier is unsurprised when he walks past the bunks and towards the library. His safe space.

Worry gnaws at Jaskier until he can no longer resist the temptation and pads towards him in his stockinged feet. Geralt is hurting and he doesn't know *why* but the instinct to pull him into his arms is still the same. He has one foot on the base of the ladder when a voice calls down, curt, and meek, and hurt - "Don't."

Jaskier sighs, his forehead resting against the vertical wood, as his heart aches and aches and *aches*. Geralt hasn't rejected him in so long - *not since... no, don't think about it* - and he almost forgot how much it hurt. Rejection is an old wound of his, one that he never really learned how to heal from. He told himself that he had forgiven Geralt for the harsh words on King Niedamir's mountain but seeing that anger directed at him, again, and just as unwarranted, brings it all back to him. He hasn't forgiven him at all, he realises, he has just let Geralt kiss the pain away like balm on an open wound.

"Not tonight," Geralt amends.

A little of the hurt eases in his chest even as tears still sting his eyes. *Not tonight*, is not forever. He breathes out shakily, trying to dislodge the sob that is caught in his throat, and turns back to his cold, empty, bunk.

He barely sleeps at all that night, tossing and turning, remembering and hurting, and nearly returning, and it's torturous. He saw the walls again. He heard the anger. Things that he thought were behind them. But seeing them again makes him question what the fuck he's even doing here; makes him think that all those little things that implied Geralt cared about him were a lie, that may this *is* just a fuck to him - insignificant and fleeting - and he *hates* it.

He's been in this godforsaken fortress for three days and cried *twice* and he resolves that if Geralt pushes him to it a third time then he's leaving - snow, or no snow.

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The next morning, he writes another song.

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It takes Geralt two full days to come to him. It's cloudy but dry and Jaskier is funnelling his heartache into lute strings as he sits amongst the crenelations in the ramparts singing softly amongst the birds. He almost doesn't notice Geralt at first, not until a shadow falls over the notebook from which he composes his masterpiece.

Jaskier swallows his nerves and cranes his head to look back at him. It is some consolation that the witcher looks about as wretched as he feels. If he felt any less smarted by his rejection, he might even fall for those puppy-dog eyes. But then, Geralt tilts his head towards the castle in an invitation.

Of course. The man wants to fuck this out. Of course he fucking does. Otherwise he'd have to use his damn words to communicate for once and Melitele knows we can't have that -

"I'm not in the mood," Jaskier bites, and returns to his composition, pen scratching against the page in a way that he knows irks Geralt. He didn't think there would come a day when he would reject Geralt's advances, but lo and behold, all it took was the banishment of a beloved instrument and two days of silence for him to remember what a brute his friend can be. "If you want to explain or godforbid *apologise* for your ill-mannered behaviour then you'll have to use some damn words for once," he demands with another flick against the page that makes Geralt wince. "I know you're capable. You can communicate very well when you put your mind to it," he says bitterly, trying not to remember how verbose he was when it came to Yennefer.

He hears Geralt sigh and shift his weight from foot to foot but Jaskier won't deign to look at this pitiful routine, mostly because he knows he will crack if he sees it; his instinct always to ease Geralt's awkwardness, not be the cause of it. In fact, this whole "ignoring Geralt" thing comes entirely unnaturally to him - even after the rejection on King Niedamir's mountains Jaskier had continued singing Geralt's praises - but this time, Jaskier will not be so forgiving.

A moment passes. Then another. Eventually, Geralt steps forward. He sits before Jaskier, nestling between the wide crenelation with him until they face each other, their backs braced by stone merlons, their bent legs meeting in the middle a hair's breadth apart.

Geralt doesn't acknowledge this closeness, instead looking out over the ruins and the valley before them. Jaskier realises, belatedly, that the wooden recorder rests in his hands; Geralt's fingers are moving over it meditatively as he summons his words. "I'm sorry."

Jaskier narrows his eyes. He wanted that word, but he wanted it to sound sincere at least, he wanted it to have *depth*. Jaskier tosses his notebook aside to lie with his lute, ready to pry out every single word from this taciturn man if he has to. "What else?"

Geralt's jaw clenches. He doesn't like being rushed. "It was... unexpected."

Jaskier sighs dramatically, resting his head back against the tall merlon. "Geralt, please tell me I'm entitled to more than a three word apology. I've heard more than that when I was balls deep inside-"

"*Jaskier*," Geralt growls, and it sounds pained enough that Jaskier deigns to look him in the eyes for the first time during the conversation. What he sees there sparks a little guilt within him. Geralt's brow is furrowed and his lips are twisted and his eyes are pained, and it's enough for Jaskier to conclude that Geralt is clearly struggling to say something very important here. He's trying to address whatever it is that lies beyond his walls.

"Sorry," Jaskier concedes, "Take your time." He looks down at the folded hands in his lap so he doesn't have to look at Geralt as he takes however long it takes to say what he needs to say. Patience. He can practice patience.

He doesn't know how long passes as the birds sing and the breeze ripples Geralt's shirt but, eventually, he speaks.

"The recorder belonged to a witcher named Callum. He was... my friend."

"Oh," Jaskier says, numbly. The last remnants of his anger towards Geralt fade as the meaning penetrates. "Geralt, I'm so sorry." He'd been so wrapped up in his own demons that he hadn't paused for longer than a single moment to consider Geralt's. He said there were ghosts here. Jaskier should have listened to the words being spoken between that; known that those ghosts were *his*. "I acted thoughtlessly," Jaskier apologises. "I assumed the 'waste not, want not' philosophy applied to everything here. That was naive of me. I should have asked, I should have-"

"When you..." Geralt interrupts fiercely but then his sentence just trails into nothingness; his face twisting into something unnameable.

Jaskier frowns, trying to puzzle out the meaning. He drops his voice to a whisper and asks gently, "When I... played?" he hazards, indicating the instrument still cradled in Geralt's lap.

Geralt shakes his head, eyes closed, and Jaskier doesn't want to imagine the horrors that he sees. "When you *touched* me..."

Jaskier's voice catches on the meaning. He doesn't mean any touch, he means *the* touch, when Jaskier was feeling brave and foolish in Novigrad and his fingers had trailed down in the bathtub... leading to the beautiful discovery of how sensitive Geralt is inside, how he dearly loves to be fucked. He remembers Geralt's reaction at the initial touch. He had frozen. Entirely stock still. Jaskier had assumed in distaste or repulsion until he saw Geralt's eyes, black as midnight, and realised it wasn't in fear at all but in a desperate, buried *want*.

He had never spared a thought to consider exactly why Geralt had buried that desire so deep.

"It was the first time," Geralt confesses. "Since him."

Jaskier's eyes fall to the instrument being turned over and over in Geralt's hands and sees it in a whole new light. It had belonged to Geralt's *lover*. And he had thoughtlessly taken it for his own. No wonder Geralt reacted so instinctively, so violently; no wonder he tore the thing from Jaskier's hands. His anger, this time, was perfectly warranted.

"What, uh," Jaskier tries, and finds himself parched, "What happened to him?"

Geralt shrugs and looks out over the keep. "What happens to all of us, eventually. He got killed. A griffin, I think it was. I only heard the account second-hand but... I visited his grave once. Townsfolk were kind enough to give him that at least. Lyria. On the road between Scala and Aldersberg. The outskirts of a village named Junna. A mound and a stone plaque. There were little white flowers already growing on the soil. By now it's probably at one with the earth."

Jaskier can't help the sad smile that pushes at his lips, only Geralt would include a detailed description of a gravesite amongst such a confession. "How old were you?"

Geralt's eyes don't stray from the horizon. "Young. We were barely more than children when we started-" he moves his hand in a gesture that Jaskier is probably meant to interpret as something intimate. "At the time, it meant little to either of us. It happened often, in these walls, on the road... sometimes brothers in arms formed a new meaning. It was permitted as long as we didn't grow 'attached'. It is difficult for witchers to form emotional attachments in any case so -" Another abandoned sentence transformed into a hand gesture that no doubt Jaskier is meant to gleam something from. "He had only been on the path for a few years. I don't think he was even thirty when he passed."

"*Fuck*, Geralt," Jaskier says, at a loss for words. "I'm so sorry."

Geralt shrugs, *again*, like his pain is just something to be dismissed. "It was a lifetime ago. Near a hundred years have passed. And, as I say, it was not as - I did not feel as-" he hesitates again, this time his hand moving between himself and Jaskier. "The sight of it - your playing - was unexpected," he repeats. "But not... necessarily... unwelcome."

Jaskier smiles at the genuine apology; at the sheer volume of words given to him and him alone. Geralt disclosing his ghosts to him with such loquaciousness is unheard of. Then, something even more monumental happens as the instrument is very carefully, very reverently, offered to him.

"Geralt," he cries, "I can't-"

"He would want it to be played again," Geralt assures him with earnest eyes. His walls are down again and Jaskier can see past to the tenderness below. He genuinely means it.

"It would not... hurt you?" he asks, even as his gaze covets the instrument, "To hear it again?"

Geralt shakes his head and moves incrementally until his leg is resting against Jaskier's. The warm weight, the gift of it, is all it takes for him to be truly forgiven. "I want to hear it. I want to remember."

Jaskier nods his head sincerely and reaches forward to take the proffered instrument. He reveres her with a whole new appreciation now he knows the instrument's owner and its history. He wonders if he can give Geralt a gift in return. "What did Callum used to play?"

Geralt frowns as he tries to recall but Jaskier is pleased to see there is much less sorrow in the furrows of his brow than there was a scant few minutes ago. "Music from his homeland. Skellige."

"Which clan? Do you know?" Jaskier asks. He had studied Skellige folk as it happens but he remembers that there's a cultural difference between the islands, each with their own stories and musical preferences. He wants to get this right, if he can.

Geralt closes his eyes this time, as if he needs to delve deeper in his memories to retrieve the information. "Clan Drummond, Ard Skellig."

Jaskier nods as he tries to recall the fingering for music he has not played in nearly a decade. He's a man of many talents though, and as the first note sounds, the tune seems to come back to him. It's a mournful but hopeful song, one that he hopes eases Geralt's distress.

He plays only a handful of bars, testing both Geralt's resolve and the instrument's capabilities, before returning the recorder to his lap. Geralt has the most curious expression when he looks back at him, his eyes are closed again, as if he's somewhere else entirely, but when they open, they pierce directly into his own and are so earnest, it seems impossible that he was anywhere else but here. "Hmm," Geralt murmurs, but Jaskier is able to translate it as familiarity.

Jaskier smiles sadly and leans his leg further against Geralt's, letting him know that he's here with him. "There's words to the song. Did Callum ever sing it to you?"

Geralt shakes his head but his eyes are pleading in a way his voice never is. He *wants* to hear it. Jaskier is happy to comply, he always is, as he begins to softly sing the words he remembers. Some of them are lost to him, and Melitele knows it's not his best language, but he can recall the phrases in Common at least, and the general gist of the sounds outside of it.

When he's done, Geralt is looking at him with the same earnest eyes. He cares for this man, he really does. Jaskier wants nothing more than to hold him for the rest of his days. Keep him safe. Keep him happy. And in this tender moment, he allows himself to believe Geralt might want that too.

He shakes the sentiment away as Geralt asks, "What does it mean? It sounds... sad."

Ah, Geralt. *Sad*. The only word his limited vocabulary no doubt has at hand. "It's about a woman whose lover goes to war... or, to fight in general... I don't really remember if I'm being honest. But she misses him and as much as she wants to support him she also wants him safe and to be with her. It's less 'sad' and more yearning, I suppose."

Geralt grunts but it seems thoughtful, not dismissive. Their legs are still pressed tight together as they look out over the valley. The sun will set soon. It will become too cold to sit outside much longer.

Jaskier bumps his knee against Geralt's and when he has caught his attention, inclines his head towards the interior.

Geralt frowns, as if he's trying to work out what Jaskier is offering and if he wants to partake. For once, he doesn't think sex is what either of them need.

"I thought you might like to go to the library while the others are occupied," Jaskier explains. "It'll be quiet."

Geralt's face twists again and Jaskier hates that he still can't read the expression, but then, Geralt is leaning forward and taking Jaskier's lips softly between his, and Jaskier realises that the pained, confused expression was Geralt trying to express his thanks.

Then, Geralt holds out his hand in invitation.

-

They climb the stairs to the library and Geralt lets Jaskier stay with him for hours. They mostly lie there in silence, sometimes touching or kissing, sometimes Jaskier singing softly while Geralt dozes. It's soft. Peaceful. Jaskier revels in it, and in the knowledge that Geralt wants him to stay. These little moments of affection are what Jaskier has been missing. He knows he has a reputation as the type to enjoy one activity and one activity alone but he loves this too, especially with people that he's come to care for. When they're tangled up in each other, exchanging nothing but lazy kisses and reverent touches, Jaskier can almost delude himself into thinking that they're courting, not just fucking, and it sends a nervous, fluttering, warmth through his gut.

Geralt is waking up from a doze, his lips tracing sleepily over Jaskier's collar bone when he murmurs, "I didn't know you played other instruments."

Jaskier smiles into his hair. "I take my profession seriously, Geralt. If you can wield more than a sword, then it cannot be that much of a stretch for you to imagine that I play more than a lute."

Geralt's hand runs across his chest, threading through the soft hair he finds there, until his arm is entirely across Jaskier's chest. There's a small smile on his lips that Jaskier has missed dearly. "If you play instruments like you play your lovers, bard, then I will not be surprised to hear you have a score of them."

Jaskier flicks his fingers against Geralt's back in protest but it feels more like hitting rock than making any real impact. Geralt retorts anyway, biting his teeth playfully against Jaskier's nipple.

Jaskier cuts off the curse word that surges to his tongue and tugs Geralt's hair between his teeth instead. "You are right," he admits, as the assault turns into a caress, "In that I have had a few dalliances-"

Geralt snorts.

“-with various instruments. But I only make room in my heart for a few. And I only, truly, love one.”

Geralt hums against him - the metaphor no doubt lost on him as it always is. But that's okay; it makes the confession safer, secretive, and Jaskier can taste the word 'love' on his tongue like the first draft of a composition; just to know how it feels.

-

That evening, Ciri and Vesemir get into an argument about “what is necessary for her education” which Geralt and Triss naturally weigh in on, and Jaskier is left sat there, gormless, by the sheer idea that so many people care about her education when his parents didn't even congratulate him when he got into Oxenfurt.

Eventually, they stumble across the crux of the matter. Vesemir's academic teaching can be very... dry. Ciri longs to be in the mountains or in the courtyard, honing what she feels are more “practical” skills, and not wasting time on “dull, dusty tomes”.

Triss is arguing, “Your knowledge of history came in handy in Talgon,” when Ciri retorts, “I knew the story of the gems from a song, not a textbook,” and an epiphany dawns on him.

“Oh,” Jaskier says, as the solution becomes apparent. He feels their attention turn to him as he asks, “What was the subject today?”

Vesemir grunts. “Wraiths.”

“Alright,” Jaskier says, nodding, as the plan formulates in his mind. “Give me the book and by tomorrow, you'll have your song.”

Vesemir frowns but nods towards the library where the book must have been abandoned. Jaskier takes his silent permission and leaps to his feet, lute in hand.

He used to partake in challenges like this all the time in his days at the Academy. You'd be given a topic and a structure and have to compete against your peers for the honour of being crowned the best songwriter. It was exhilarating to write under such pressure again, trying to pen at once both the most educational and most artful verse.

He must get lost in composition, working by candlelight, because the next thing he knows, Geralt is pushing a tankard of wine into his red, swollen, fingers. A silent instruction to take a break.

Jaskier replaces the lute willingly with the tankard as he takes several mouthfuls of the offering, and, shockingly, it's as he's doing this that Geralt presses his lips against his hairline. The softest touch. Barely a whisper. It could be disguised by his movement to kneel on the floor beside him, an accidental meeting of lips and skin, if Jaskier was not so painfully optimistic.

“Others asleep?” Jaskier asks between mouthfuls.

“Hmm,” Geralt says in the affirmative.

And then, because this whole thing wasn't bizarre enough, stretches his arm behind Jaskier. Jaskier leans into the proffered support, his back aching from being hunched over his notebook so long, and embarrassingly might let out a whine of contentment at the sudden comfort it brings.

"How's it going?" Geralt asks, indicating to his open notebook, and by this third sign of uncharacteristic behaviour, Jaskier is beginning to think he may be dealing with a doppler. But, no, he looks across to Geralt and sees him looking just about as awkward by this discussion as he expected, and it reassures him somewhat.

"I'm nearly there," Jaskier replies, having disconcerting amount of difficulty in tearing his eyes away from Geralt - cheekbones torchlit and delectable - and eventually succeeds. "I just, uh, need to write the verse about moon wraiths."

"Hmm," Geralt says, pondering. "Do you need me to check for accuracy?"

Jaskier twists in his arms, unable to contain his excitement. "Would you?" Geralt has never offered such a thing, probably because it would involve actually paying attention to his music, but now Geralt shrugs as if it's no trouble at all. *Not always*, Geralt had said in Novigrad, and it felt like a confession. Here, now, is further evidence. Geralt doesn't seem to mind his compositions at all.

Wary of their sleeping comrades, Jaskier sings under his breath, the lute as quiet as he can make it, and is pleased when Geralt only has seven notes for him. Seven, for Geralt, is barely even a criticism.

When his eyes are failing him and the composition is as finished as it can be in the hazy hours of the early morning, Geralt tugs him up the stairs and into his bedroll. He falls asleep to the sound of Geralt's slow, steady heartbeat.

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Ciri sings the song all morning long and Vesemir doesn't grumble as much as usual and Geralt gives him this secret, proud, smile, that makes Jaskier overflow with an emotion he daren't name.

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Jaskier's been at Kaer Morhen for nearly two weeks now and he feels like he's adjusted fairly well. He's allowed to spend his days composing if he also undertakes chores. He has written Ciri another two songs and Vesemir is even starting to toss him textbooks the day before to aid his compositions.

Since their discussion about Callum, Geralt has become almost *tactile* with him, and it's becoming routine to let their hands linger when passing weapons or to curl up in the same bedroll at night. In fact, Jaskier is more likely to receive these kinds of attentions than the carnal kind now. He loves it more than he can say. He feels bold enough, even, to brush a kiss against his cheek in the broad light of day and it feels like he's won the grand tourney when Geralt readily accepts it. Of course they've snuck away a few times to indulge their base

desires but whatever desperation that seemed to have possessed them soon after their arrival seems to have dissipated.

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It's the first clear day all week and the witchers have been focusing on target practice. There's dummies set up in the courtyard and across the ramparts and a whole host of weapons to hit them with. The others are in the courtyard when Jaskier is strolling across the ramparts, trying to find a word to rhyme with "striga" when he nearly trips over the basket of arrows. Beside them lies a beautiful, old, longbow.

It's been awhile since Jaskier was last cajoled into an archery competition but he remembers the mechanics of it well enough. He glances over to the courtyard, checking that all residents are present and accounted for, before he lifts the weapon into his hand and notches an arrow into the string.

The first arrow lands, but into the right-hand side of the dummy's chest, which is rather tragic considering that Jaskier had been aiming for its head. Every bow is different however, and for the second arrow, he adjusts his aim to the bow's preference, and is pleased when it lands solely in the centre of the head.

Jaskier grins and is about to boast his success to the witchers in the courtyard below when he feels a warm presence behind him and then hot, rapid, breaths against his neck.

Fuck.

Did Geralt just sprint all the way up here?

Jaskier huffs in amusement and leans back against the hard, familiar, chest of his lover. He knows all too well the conversation that is to come and heads Geralt off at the pass. "Yes, darling, I know how to shoot an arrow."

There's a puff of hot air against his neck that might be disbelief or amusement as Geralt's hands come to rest against his on the longbow - the weapon still held before him horizontally, ready to load another arrow.

He answers the unasked question, "I'm of noble birth, Geralt," he reminds him because, yes, the witcher knows this but it's on the unspoken list of banned conversation topics like Blaviken and that time Geralt walked in on him passionately fellating a count. "I had to train in a sport and considering my ineptitude at swordsmanship," which Geralt *definitely* knows first hand from their first and only training session in that arena, "and the utterly barbaric sport of jousting, I chose archery."

There's a grunt against his neck and Jaskier is about to drop the bow and turn round and demand that Geralt verbalise for once before Geralt presses his body closer against his and Jaskier is bestowed with a different kind of present. Geralt is *hard*. His manhood is pressing against Jaskier's buttocks in a very enticing manner and it renders Jaskier momentarily speechless.

Geralt's hands are still on his and carefully, ever so carefully, he moves their joined hands until the longbow is clattering to the ground, forgotten, and his arms are wrapped around Jaskier instead.

"Oh," Jaskier breathes shakily. He hadn't understood before. Not really. But there's no mistaking Geralt's interest now. Jaskier thinks back to Geralt's stunted words regarding his languages, his curiosity about his education, his black eyes after killing a drowner, the way he stopped talking mid-sentence when he saw his armour being mended, his unreadable expression when he penned that song about wraiths. Geralt wasn't *surprised* by Jaskier's talents; he was *turned on* by them. *Fuck*. Jaskier aims for light and teasing when he says, "You know, I'm starting to think you have a bit of a competence kink," but his voice shakes and the tone doesn't land, especially not when Geralt's lips start trailing up his throat and his hips grind purposefully against his.

"Use my bow," Geralt growls and the words are so fucking insane that Jaskier has to ask for clarification. "Longbow doesn't fit in the saddlebags," Geralt says. "Can't take it on the road."

"Right."

"So have my crossbow."

"*Have?*" Jaskier squeaks, his mind battling with both the absurdity of Geralt giving him yet another gift and the somehow even more absurd implication that Geralt intends for them to be on the road, together, for the foreseeable future.

Geralt grunts in affirmation and drags his teeth over Jaskier's pulse point in an utterly delightful way. Jaskier snakes his arm up around them to push his fingers into Geralt's hair, and he makes that little sigh of contentment that *undoes* him...

"We should..." Jaskier murmurs, trying to grasp the last of his sanity, "Take this inside. Before your ward takes notice." He inclines his head towards the courtyard, reminding Geralt that he cannot, however much he would like, be ravaged in broad daylight on the ramparts.

Unusually - especially considering his obvious interest - Geralt doesn't immediately jump at the opportunity. Instead, he runs his hands up and down his waist and Jaskier leans his head back on his shoulder so he can glimpse at his concentrated frown. "In a moment," he murmurs. "But first I want to..." he starts, and Jaskier watches the process of thought being translated to words. He wants to hear them; trusts that Geralt will speak them now too. *Give your heart to me, I will keep it safe*.

"Tell me," Jaskier whispers his encouragement. He assumes something filthy is about to fall from Geralt's mouth so he's surprised when Geralt softens - in multiple senses of the word - against him instead.

Geralt closes his eyes and wraps his arms back around Jaskier, pressing them together tightly. "I wanted to apologise."

Jaskier frowns. "For your outburst the other day? Geralt, I told you, it's fine, I-"

“No,” Geralt says firmly. “For before.”

“Before?” Jaskier frowns and finally turns in his arms to face him, needing to see every aspect of Geralt’s expression. “Before what?”

Geralt sighs, his eyes still closed, but his brow furrowed. He always needs time to process emotions, that’s okay, Jaskier will wait as long as it takes. He cups Geralt’s face as he waits, thumbs stroking over his cheeks as if to reassure Geralt that he’s not going anywhere, because he is, in fact, not going anywhere.

Eventually, Geralt opens his eyes and looks at Jaskier sincerely, though his jaw is clenched in a manner that betrays the difficulty of the conversation. “Before... here. In Talgon. For thinking that you can’t take care of me. You can.”

“Geralt-” Jaskier whimpers as his heart aches at the confession, all his hopes spill out messily between them. Geralt *trusts* him. It doesn’t matter if Geralt is referring to his skill with a crossbow or his skill with his heart - he wagers the witcher prioritises these things differently anyway - but the acknowledgement of their partnership makes the little rivulets of hope take flight. “I will,” he promises sincerely. “I’ll take care of you-”

But Geralt is shaking his head viciously, not done yet, it seems. His hands are clenching against Jaskier’s sides as if he can’t decide whether he’s clinging on or trying to let go. His face is twisted in anguish and it looks like he wants to bolt, and Jaskier has no idea what could be tearing him apart so utterly until he forces out the words, “In the fucking mountains, after the dragon hunt-”

Jaskier sucks in a breath. He is not equipped for this conversation. Nope. No way. He’s been suppressing for almost two years. It’s not something that can be casually-

Geralt rests their foreheads together and the movement is enough to dislodge his panic and actually see the earnestness in Geralt’s eyes. Remembering that day isn’t easy for him either.

“I was cruel to you. Unnecessarily. I was angry-”

“I know.”

“-and hurt-”

“I know.”

“-and I didn’t mean-”

“I *know*,” Jaskier says, letting a little laugh escape as he cradles Geralt’s head in his hands. “And I’ve forgiven you-”

“No, you haven’t.”

Jaskier sighs, not expecting to be caught out in the lie. He wanted to. He has tried to. But given his reaction to Geralt’s outburst the other day it seems that he hasn’t forgiven Geralt as much as he’d thought. “No,” he concedes, dropping his hand. “I suppose I haven’t.”

Geralt's hands are on his waist again, stroking in that reassuring way of his; his silent little way of urging them through this.

"I..." Jaskier starts, but then finds he can't look at Geralt as he confesses this. "It hurt. What you said. It made me feel like..." he shakes his head, trying to suppress the tears. Unwanted. He had felt *unwanted*. He licks his lips and tastes salt and knows that he has failed. "I never wanted to be a burden to you."

Geralt slips two fingers under his chin and encourages his head to rise until their eyes meet. But when they do, Jaskier is also surprised to find their lips pressed together. "You're not," Geralt assures him afterwards. "You never were."

Jaskier huffs in disbelief, remembering how cheerfully ignorant of Geralt's wishes he had been in the first few days, or even years of their acquaintance.

"I mean it, Jaskier," Geralt says gruffly, and Jaskier looks to his eyes again, needing to see the truth in it. "I appreciate your company. Even when I don't show it well. I..." his fingers trail across his cheeks and Jaskier's eyelids flutter closed of their own accord. "I acted like it never happened and that was an insult to both of us, I'm sorry."

For the first time, it sounds like a genuine apology. Jaskier can *feel* the sincerity to them in a way that is normally reserved for desperate kisses. He can't stop looking into his eyes. He wants to fall into them. Geralt kisses him again. He feels light. Like a weight lifted. Like he could soar with the wispy clouds above them.

He doesn't ask what brought on the apology, in the same way he didn't need to ask why Geralt has taken to sharing his bedroll at night. He had been so raw and vulnerable with him that day they discussed Callum that it shed a light on their first coupling here. "*It's this damn place,*" Geralt had said, "*And you.*" It made no sense at the time but now he sees the importance of it. This place was his home, and he had invited Jaskier into it. The walls have fallen. Any boundaries dismantled. The vulnerability Jaskier never thought he'd see is now bestowed upon him with words as well as kisses, as if Geralt trusts Jaskier to keep them safe.

"You are not a burden, Jaskier," Geralt reassures him sometime later as they lie naked and entwined, "You are a gift."

Chapter End Notes

Ooops? It got mushy?

The song Jaskier plays/sings for Geralt is [Siúil a Rún](#) which will come back with more potency later. I owe my thanks to [gonewitchering](#) who introduced me to this beautiful song.

As for the recorder, I owe that to my girlfriend who made the very astute observation that Jaskier would take his craft seriously enough that lute wouldn't be his only

instrument.

Also, not make this nerdier than it already is, but I have a headcanon that each of the Skellige Isles are the equivalent of a different celtic nation? So that's why Jaskier wanted him to specify which clan because, yeah, I'd like to think he knows a few songs from each culture.

Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

man, that last chapter was intense. Oh well, back to the porn

warning: some readers might find this chapter distressing because it involves saying goodbye to Roach. She doesn't die, don't worry! But Geralt does part ways with her for good. I love our girl dearly but she is somewhat of an emotional crutch for Geralt and sometimes in the name of character development you've gotta do some really mean things. So. Yeah. Flame me in the comments, I totally deserve it.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“You’re telling me,” Jaskier gasps as Geralt’s lips graze over a lovebite on his neck, “that this whole time there was a bed - a *proper* bed - here in Kaer Morhen that we just weren’t using?”

Geralt grunts and hoists Jaskier away from the wall and carries him across the room towards the luxurious bed. Geralt is mightily impatient after his confessions on the barracks, either he needs to fuck out the vulnerability that he had just displayed or it was simply a sign of stopping every three paces on the way here to make out against the nearest surface. Literally. Three times through the corridors, then at the base of the tower where Geralt had once fucked his hand and confessed his love for Yennefer, and then all the way up the staircase...

As Geralt tosses Jaskier onto the silk sheets, a sudden familiar scent hits him at the same time Geralt says -

“It’s Yennefer’s.”

Fuck.

Jaskier tears his eyes away from Geralt - a hard thing to do given that he’s currently stripping naked - and looks at his surroundings in dismay. The cabinet. The make-up table. The fact that there’s even a four-poster queen-sized bed at the top of a derelict tower in the first place.

Fuck.

“So... are we just not gonna talk about this?” Jaskier half-asks, half-moans, as Geralt climbs back on top of him and divests him of his own clothing.

“What?”

“Your obvious desire for a threesome, Geralt.”

Geralt fixes him with a glare but doesn't stop rutting against Jaskier's thigh which kinda defeats the purpose. Then there are teeth biting into his neck again and Jaskier can only moan as Geralt marks him up and keeps scenting him on Yennefer's sheets but gods if he doesn't love it.

Then Geralt is reaching for whatever lubricant he can source on Yennefer's bedside table and looking at him with a question in his eyes.

Oh.

Geralt hasn't been inside him since the very first time in Novigrad, Jaskier realises. As soon as they found out just how much Geralt loves it, they've barely done anything else. Even if they're just trading blow jobs, there's sometimes still a stray finger that slips inside the witcher... *gods*, the way he moans when he does...

But, it seems fitting, given Geralt's latest possessive streak that he wants to return to this, and who is Jaskier to deny him? He wants to give Geralt everything that he wants. A coy smile spreads across his face as he realises something else, "Darling," he purrs and drags his hands up Geralt's chest, just to see the way Geralt squirms at the pet name; all flustered and pained as if he can't decide whether he hates the sensation or loves it. "Please don't tell me you are still holding onto the silly belief that you can only fuck me on a four-poster bed? Because I *promise* you," he says with a low, sultry voice, "that I have no such qualms."

Geralt seems to grow even more flustered and mutters against his chest like it's some great embarrassment, "I want you to be comfortable."

Jaskier finds himself laughing at the absurdity of the statement and has to run his fingers gently through Geralt's hair so he won't think it's at his expense. "I love that you are such a romantic--"

Geralt grows as if he opposes the word but Jaskier doesn't know what else to call it when a man you've fucked five ways to Sunday for the last two months still hesitates to take you in the same fashion.

"-but please know that I would have you in any manner. I would have you ploughing me against the ramparts at midnight, or in a bedroll at the side of the road, or even against these freezing cold castle walls if you so desired--"

Geralt's muffled moan into his chest is enough to confirm that he would desire these things too.

"-I'd have you slow and teasing until I'm begging, or hard and fast until I'm *screaming*, because if you need it, I want to give it to you," Jaskier concludes, stroking his hair given that his face is still hidden to him. "I want to be with you in every conceivable manner," he assures Geralt, and then falls into a near-panic a moment later when he realises how true those words are. He swallows his nerves and steers himself back to specificity. "Including being fucked. Here and now. If I did not make that explicitly clear."

He feels Geralt's smile widen against his chest and then he's rising onto his arms again and looking down at Jaskier with open, unguarded, eyes. He loves that he gets this now, that he can look into Geralt's eyes and see behind his walls without the fear that he will be rejected.

Geralt leans down and kisses him so reverently that Jaskier's toes are tingling with anticipation by the time he's through. When Geralt rears back, he takes Jaskier with him, until they are kneeling on the bed and Geralt's slick fingers are pushing against him.

Geralt takes his sweet time taking him apart with his fingers, his eyes never leaving Jaskier's face. Jaskier sighs at every movement, feeling horrendously mushy under Geralt's attentiveness. Their trysts here have always been rushed and secretive, snatched moments whenever they are free from their companions, but now, they have the luxury of comfort and time and solitude and the sun is still an hour away from setting and bringing with it their evening responsibilities.

Jaskier is high in the haze of it and finds himself asking, "So, was I right?"

"About what?" Geralt murmurs, his eyes still not leaving Jaskier's face.

Jaskier is about to speak when he's broken off with a gasp; Geralt finding that sweet spot inside him. "Two things, actually," he amends. "First," he breaks off with another gasp, "The competence thing."

Geralt smirks and breaks his reverent gaze only to drag teeth tantalisingly across Jaskier's shoulder. "Does it surprise you?" he asks, eyes flickering to him briefly, and then away again.

Jaskier mulls this over the best he can while he's being thoroughly fucked and concludes, "No? At least, it's no more surprising than anything else. I just..." he moans, filthily, as Geralt adds another finger. "If I knew," he says with some determination, "that some rudimentary archery skills was all it took for you to bed me so beautifully," another gasp, "then I may have tried it some years ago."

"Hmm?" Geralt asks, teasingly.

"Oh, you're probably right," Jaskier concedes, with another involuntary gasp. "Then I would have had to admit to being a noble and-" another "-you might have hated me."

"Already knew," Geralt murmurs, with another nip of teeth to his skin.

Jaskier smiles, sensing the truth to the words. Geralt probably knew he was of noble birth the moment they met and was perfectly content to just ignore the matter as well as Jaskier. "Then maybe," Jaskier amends, rocking back on Geralt's fingers, "the error is not mine at all, but yours."

Geralt growls at this and once again, Jaskier trails his fingers through his hair to relax him.

"I'm just saying," Jaskier murmurs, "I'm a very talented man. Maybe you should have paid more attention to me earlier."

“Maybe I should have,” Geralt says, and it should be a jest, it should be, except that Geralt sounds so fucking earnest and his eyes so intense that Jaskier thinks he might have accidentally stumbled across the truth of it.

The horrendous truth is that they’d both been blind fools for twenty-three years. Jaskier did not realise he desired him. Geralt did not see (or did not want to see?) what was right in front of him. They are both such utter, *utter*, fools.

Before he can process the implications of this, Geralt is removing his fingers and rolling them over, until Geralt is lying on his back with Jaskier astride him.

“You want me to ride you?” Jaskier asks with curious delight.

The words alone seem to do something for Geralt as he groans beneath him and his hips stutter up to meet his thighs, pressing his length against him.

Jaskier can’t resist the urge and dives down to take Geralt in a passionate kiss. Geralt returns as good as he gets until it feels more like fucking than kissing.

Jaskier breaks away and looks down at the beautiful sight of a flustered, wrecked, witcher below him - white hair splayed, amber cat-eyes widened with lust, spit-slick lips and mouth open in a gasp. *I love you*, he thinks, with a clarity that terrifies him. Jaskier has always fallen for people hard and fast but this is different... deeper. The dark of the deep ocean instead of waves breaking against the shore. It’s terrifying. And intoxicating. And being the brave fool that Jaskier is, he wants to dive right in.

Jaskier rises back on his haunches and settles onto Geralt’s manhood with the same slow determination that Geralt had used to open him. His hands fall onto Geralt’s toned chest for leverage and Geralt’s hands fall to his hips as they move together as perfect and as synchronised as his best compositions.

“What’s the other thing?” Geralt murmurs.

“Huh?” Jaskier asks, because he had been very much distracted by the feeling of Geralt inside him.

“Earlier. You said there were two things.”

“Huh,” Jaskier says, this time stunned by the knowledge that Geralt is *initiating* conversation, and during sex no less. This is already an uncharacteristically verbose encounter and Geralt wants more? Miracles never cease. “The other thing... right. Right.” He gives himself a moment before attempting to communicate it. “Yennefer,” he says, but the name catches on a moan and he resents a little how good it sounds.

The name seems to have done something for Geralt too; his fingers digging into his hips hard enough to form bruises. Jaskier’s movements stutter a little as he recovers.

“Was I right?” Jaskier asks, and it comes out strangled as Geralt meets his movements. “Do you want...?”

“You know I desire both of you.”

“That’s not what I’m asking.”

They move together for another minute before Geralt says, “I thought you didn’t like her.”

“Eh,” Jaskier says, distracted for a moment as Geralt moves particularly delightfully, and then comes back to himself. “Put it this way - I still think she’d eat me alive, but I’m starting to think that’s not such a bad thing.”

Geralt chuckles, strained as it is through the lense of their building pleasure.

“That is to say... I’m not...” Jaskier really wishes Geralt had a grasp of metaphor and understood his declaration the other day in the library. *You are right in that I have had a few dalliances with various instruments. But I only make room in my heart for a few. And I only, truly, love one.* He doesn’t know how to say it otherwise without saying too much. “I do not feel for her as you do,” he settles on. “But I cannot deny a certain... attraction.”

Geralt smirks with a little sparkle in his eyes and it’s fucking adorable and Jaskier is too wrecked to cope. “You would be willing?”

Jaskier grinds back against him, as deep as he can manage, and assures him, “I would be *more* than willing.”

Geralt is gazing up at him in awe and Jaskier has to bite his lip to hold back the praise he wants to give in return. Geralt shows affection through actions. Jaskier shows his through words. One is definitely more dangerous than the other in this situation.

Jaskier picks up the pace until neither of them can speak and after, when they’re both spent and too wrung out to move, Jaskier notices Geralt tuck his head between his shoulder and the sheets and take a shuddering inhale, taking in the scent of both his lovers. Jaskier may have teased him for it earlier, but it’s been nearly a month since they left Yennefer and he knows he misses her.

Jaskier cradles Geralt in his arms and runs his fingers up and down Geralt’s arms to comfort her. “She’ll be okay,” he says. “She’s too terrifying not to be.”

Geralt snorts a laugh and finally digs his face out of the sheets to rest his head against his shoulder.

“Besides,” Jaskier says, as he presses a kiss into his hair. “You know the first thing she’ll want to do is come here and berate us for ruining her bedsheets.”

Geralt smiles against him.

“So, I wouldn’t worry. She’ll be here as soon as she is able.”

Geralt hums in agreement and Jaskier closes his eyes, content to doze now he knows Geralt is taken care of. But then, Geralt is murmuring his own words against his chest. “What I said earlier...”

“Hmm?” Jaskier asks, cracking one eye open to look down at him as Geralt starts tracing nervous patterns on his chest.

Geralt catches his eye, just briefly, before returning to his invisible artwork. “You are not a burden, Jaskier... You are a gift.”

“Oh.”

It’s not the right word, it’s not anywhere near, but it’s all Jaskier can vocalise as his heart brims with love he can’t voice. He cards his fingers through Geralt’s hair as he turns the phrase over and over in his mind but by the time he’s thought of something to say, Geralt is dozing soundly against his chest.

-

The next morning, Jaskier finds Geralt at the stables muttering something or other to Roach. It’s not an unusual sight - both of them check on their horses frequently - but there’s something in Geralt’s tensed shoulders that indicate that this is not a regular visit.

Geralt senses him approaching, as always, and looks over his shoulder at Jaskier in a silent invitation to join him.

Geralt’s hand is stroking down her flank as he speaks. “We should make a visit over to Aedd Gynael before the first snow falls. Get some supplies for winter,” he says, with a nod at Jaskier’s borrowed clothing, “and you some new silks.”

“These rags not doing it for you?” Jaskier teases, leaning back against the stall so Geralt can admire the drab, monotone, coarse fabrics for himself.

Geralt raises his eyebrow before returning to grooming Roach.

“Don’t tell me you miss my fabulous sense of style?” Jaskier jests. “What was it you always called my dublets? ‘Garish?’ ‘An offence to the senses?’”

Geralt smirks, knowing full well that Jaskier is not exaggerating. “As much as I stand by my earlier sentiments, I must admit that seeing you dressed otherwise is deeply unsettling, like a peacock with no feathers, or a lark with no song.”

“Thank you?” Jaskier replies hesitantly because he’s fairly sure there was a compliment buried in there somewhere. “And, I admit I would appreciate the opportunity to return to my finery; these coarse fabrics do nothing for my sensitive skin.”

“Is that so?” Geralt asks with a teasing smile, despite the fact that he clearly has no interest in furthering this discussion. “We could leave today, even,” he muses, tilting his head to the sky - grey, but dry.

“Alright,” Jaskier says, a bubble of excitement rising at the thought, “I’ll ready Belle and call for Ciri-”

“No,” Geralt snaps, too sudden and too raw. Jaskier’s enthusiasm drains just as quickly as he begins to suspect that this isn’t about his wardrobe at all.

Geralt’s hands resume their practised grooming but they’re determined; the result of thoughts transmuted. Jaskier eyes Geralt warily as he waits for him to explain himself.

“Just us,” Geralt requests, eventually, looking over his shoulder at Jaskier. “It should just be us, and Roach, as it used to be.”

He returns his attention to Roach before Jaskier can interpret the distant expression on his face. Jaskier doesn’t quite know what to do. Ciri would so dearly love to escape for a while, and Jaskier has, while braiding her hair and writing her music and exchanging courtly gossip, idly fantasied about taking the girl to a marketplace. He suspects they would make excellent shopping partners. He tries, feebly, to change Geralt’s mind. “The markets are renowned. Ciri would love-”

“No,” Geralt repeats, but this time his jaw clenches in that way that means he is not accepting criticism at this time. “It’s you, or no one,” he states, and Jaskier’s traitorous heart flutters a little at the implication. Perhaps sensing Jaskier’s love for Ciri, he then softens, “We can return with her another time,” he murmurs, “But for what I must do... she should not be there.”

Jaskier frowns and steps cautiously towards him. They have finally reached the crux of the matter it seems. He lowers his voice as he takes the comb from Geralt’s pack and starts untangling Roach’s mane as Geralt continues to brush her down. Geralt is always more likely to talk to him if his hands are busy - occupied hands, loose thoughts - and this way Jaskier is able to watch him for the visual clues his voice may not convey. “And what, exactly, are we there to do?”

Geralt used ‘I’ but Jaskier very purposefully uses ‘we’ to remind Geralt of what he disclosed the evening before. Geralt trusts Jaskier to look after him; therefore whatever he must do, Jaskier will be doing also.

Geralt’s hand briefly comes to cover his own over Roach’s mane and squeezes, as if he might actually understand Jaskier’s unspoken meaning, before he returns to his work. The brush makes several more methodical passes before Geralt speaks again. “Retiring Roach from duty.”

Jaskier’s heart breaks at the weight in Geralt’s voice - this whole scene reads differently now: the reverence of Geralt’s grooming, the soft whispers to her that he had interrupted, his insistence that it just be the two of them... Geralt is trying to say goodbye.

“Oh, Geralt,” he says. Empathy overflows from him as he reaches out and presses his lips firmly against Geralt’s forehead. Geralt stills beneath him, one hand coming up to cement the hold; craving the comfort even without stepping away. Geralt loves Roach more than anyone. Roach probably holds more of his secrets than anyone else in his life. She’s been Geralt’s constant companion for over twenty years, and although Geralt has told him she’s not the first in her line, that “every horse I have is called Roach”, something like this still cannot be easy. Jaskier loves Roach too, of course, but Jaskier loves fast and often and is very used to saying

goodbye. His love, undoubtedly, also does not run as deep as the witcher's. "Of course I will go with you."

He pulls away after a moment and returns to his task when his eyes catch on a new scar against Roach's neck and a hot coil of guilt twists in his gut. He licks his lips, suddenly dry-mouthed. "Is this because of...?"

He can't bring himself to finish the sentence, but Geralt looks across at him and seems to hear his unspoken words. He's shaking his head. "It's not your fault, Jaskier."

The coil loosens, slithers away. Geralt never says anything he doesn't mean.

"The journey north didn't help matters, especially in the hands of those brutes," he says, and Roach stamps her feet perhaps in an imitation of what she would like to do to the Nilfgaardians that captured her. "But it's been on my mind the best part of a year. She is old and has worked hard; her last years ought to be spent in peaceful retirement, far away from the Path."

Jaskier nods, his fears assuaged. "Then I shall gather our belongings."

-

Their journey south to Aedd Gynael is wet and miserable and given their reluctance to ride Roach it takes them a couple of days. Geralt seems to go about this somber business with a dedicated slog and his usual meditative silence. When Jaskier senses his grief building to unattainable levels, he will entwine their hands, or slip into Geralt's bedroll, and once or twice, much to his relief, Geralt reaches out before his grief even becomes palpable. They still haven't talked about what this means or how they feel but Geralt is tactile with him in a way that feels less like purposeful, thoughtful, gifts and more like a natural, constant, giving and it makes Jaskier's head spin with possibilities.

-

Aedd Gynael is just as wet and miserable as their journey towards it. It's hailing when they arrive and it looks like it's been raining here for weeks if the overflowing rivers are anything to go by. Everything is sodden and desolate and as soon as they've stabled Roach, Jaskier is dragging Geralt into the warmth of a tavern.

They bathe in the steaming communal baths and drink by the roaring fire and Jaskier plays enough to cover their expenses and then Jaskier is taking him upstairs and fucking Geralt as tenderly as he dares against the straw mattress. He's been so gentle with Geralt this week that he's waiting for him to demand something else but Geralt must really be hurting because he seems content to accept Jaskier's emphatic lovemaking, over and over again.

-

Jaskier wakes at dawn to the sound of - lovely, more hail - and the sound of gathered armour. He stirs and rolls towards the source of the noise, too exhausted to open his eyes, but wanting

to be closer to Geralt nevertheless. “Is it time?” he mumbles. He’s not awake, but he will be, if Geralt needs him.

He’s not expecting the dip in the mattress or the lips against his temple or the gentle hands in his hair but he thinks maybe he should have been. He smiles and sleepily leans into the touch.

“No, not yet,” Geralt confirms. “I’m just going to the armourer. Go back to sleep.”

“Mmmhmm.”

-

Jaskier dozes until late morning, comfy and lazy, and doesn’t rise until he hears the sound of the door opening and sees the blood on Geralt’s hands. Jaskier is startling out of bed and stumbling over towards his witcher before he can so much as process the fact.

“I’m fine,” Geralt says, waving Jaskier’s concerned hands away as he deposits his freshly repaired (and slightly bloodied) armour by the door.

Jaskier huffs and puts his hands on his waist, indignant. “Why is it every time we’re staying somewhere nice and you say something innocent like ‘just popping to the market, dear, nothing to worry about’ you come back hours later covered in gore?”

“I’m hardly ‘covered in gore,’” Geralt gripes, and proves his point by running his hands through the basin of water.

Jaskier breathes a sigh of relief at the sight - it’s not his blood, at least, most of it isn’t - and Geralt wipes a wet rag over the remaining specks of red on his face.

“Regardless,” Jaskier states. “An explanation wouldn’t go amiss.”

There’s the smallest hint of a smile on Geralt’s lips as he tugs off his blood-splattered shirt. “I have a new past-time.”

“Boxing?”

“Something to that effect,” Geralt shrugs before lying back on the bed. Just when Jaskier fears he’s going to have to return to the old prying words gambit, Geralt asks, “Remember the man I met in Cunny?”

“The not-vampire?”

“Hmm,” Geralt says in the affirmative.

“He gave you that potion-”

“Quicksilver,” Geralt provides.

“-yes, the very one that I highly suspect saved my life back in Talgon.”

Geralt raises an eyebrow at Jaskier.

“Ciri,” Jaskier says in way of explanation as he joins Geralt on the bed. The truth is, he’s heard several retellings of the events in Talgon but Ciri’s was the most helpful - details like *you should have seen his face, Jas*, and *Yennefer nearly died to save you* - you know, the important things.

Geralt merely grunts and shuffles over to accommodate Jaskier kneeling beside him. Jaskier, as always, finds his hands in Geralt’s hair.

“So what of this man?” Jaskier asks. “Was he the broker of this, what I imagine, was a very one-sided fist fight?”

Geralt smiles crookedly, in that way that means he’s amused but he won’t deign to admit it, as his eyes slip closed under Jaskier’s gentle ministrations. “More or less,” Geralt allows. “He works for a guild - the Red Guild they call themselves-”

“You mentioned,” Jaskier says, recalling their conversation on the way to the Kingfisher in Novigrad. “The ones that free broken souls from the clutches of abusive men.”

“Hmm,” Geralt confirms and then absently amends, “Not just men.”

“Right,” Jaskier says, because of course anyone is capable of being a monster, just as anyone is capable of being caught as a victim. “I remember,” Jaskier huffs a laugh. “My first instinct was to tease you about it. Your whole philosophy of staying out of petty human affairs... and the way you routinely thwart your own rules, but then I...” he looks down at Geralt’s soft, open, expression and sees now what he had seen then; an honest desire to do good, “I saw this,” he says with the softest touch against Geralt’s cheek, “and realised that you only ever involved yourself when it came to unjust suffering, and I simply couldn’t bring myself to tease you for something so noble.”

Geralt’s eyes flutter beneath him and open again, wide in wonder. Sometimes it simply baffles Jaskier that no one has thought to see this beauty before. All those people who see Geralt’s battle-worn body, his piercing eyes, and the walls around his heart, and didn’t think it worth their time to see what was inside. *Look at what you’re missing*, Jaskier wants to say, *You’re missing the most beautiful sight on the Continent*.

“You gave them money didn’t you?” Jaskier asks. “The large sum you deposited as soon as we arrived in Novigrad?”

“I did.”

“You didn’t tell me you’d also volunteered your services.”

Geralt raises his eyebrow and frowns in that way Jaskier used to read as ‘surprised’ but is now well-versed enough to read it as ‘horny’ and rolls his eyes. “It’s hardly a great deduction,” Jaskier chides. “You come back with blood on your hands and not a single regret in your eyes, rambling about the Red Guild-”

“I was not ‘rambling’ -”

“-you were, my sweet, but if you could do me the favour of confirming my suspicions-”

“Yes,” Geralt grumbles, “I offered my services.” Then he looks across to Jaskier warily. “Is that... agreeable?”

Jaskier sighs and shifts his legs until he can brace himself over Geralt’s prone body. “Darling,” he says, and Geralt makes that delightful distraught expression again at the petname, “If it’s possible, I respect you more now than I have ever done so before.”

Geralt looks up at him with an earnest expression as his hands find their home on Jaskier’s waist. He tugs Jaskier down for a slow, teasing, kiss. He expects it to lead to more because they’re in a bed and Geralt is kissing him and this is usually how these things go, but then, Geralt ends the kiss and doesn’t make a move to further their engagement, just lies there looking up at Jaskier like he hung the moon.

Oh, Jaskier realises, this is new Geralt. Tactile Geralt. He just wanted a kiss for kisses sake. That is... unbelievably lovely. The realisation is so moving that Jaskier immediately has to ruin Geralt’s intentions by leaning down for a kiss of his own, just as sweet, just as tender, and it warms him tremendously when he feels Geralt sigh with happiness against his lips.

-

Geralt leaves sometime later to ask the mayor of the town about a contract - “easy coin,” Geralt had grunted, “would be foolish not to take it” - and Jaskier finally makes his way to the tailor to remedy his wardrobe. He is there for quite some time, regaling tales of his gallantry and heroics to the attentive seamstress as she amends his new clothes with pins and then with stitches.

He is halfway through lamenting the loss of his (quite frankly hideous) amulet that his lover had bestowed him some years ago, when said lover walks through the door. Geralt’s fixed frown slips into something else when he catches the end of the tale.

“Didn’t know you still had it,” he murmurs, just as the seamstress raises her head to address the new customer. “I don’t need tailoring,” he informs her before she can ask, “I’m just here for the bard.”

She grunts and returns to her work, and Jaskier is able to return to the matter at hand.

“‘Did’ being the operative word I’m afraid. It was in my lute case, which has, by now, no doubt been stripped for parts by that brutish blacksmith of yours. I know you didn’t ‘give’ it to me as such but-”

“No, I did,” Geralt interrupts.

Jaskier senses the seamstress look between the two of them with barely restrained curiosity and Jaskier finds that he’s curious too. “You...did?”

"It was a... present," he says with notable difficulty. "A protective charm. You were meant to wear it. Perhaps if you had there wouldn't have been a knife pressed to your throat in a shitty fishing village just last month."

"Oh," Jaskier says, suddenly feeling very dense. A protective amulet. That was very sweet, and very thoughtful, and was actually much more in character than his previous assumption. "That makes sense."

Geralt shrugs, as if Jaskier's accidental refusal of his gift (that he didn't realise was a gift) doesn't bother him in the slightest but Jaskier can read the tension beneath and the hurt it belies.

"I'm sorry," Jaskier says, and notes that the seamstress has stopped mid-stitch to observe their squabble. "I didn't realise."

"I didn't tell you," Geralt counters. "I didn't want you to-" he waves his hand in a frustrated gesture "-make a thing of it."

"Right."

"Not because you-"

"Right."

"But because I-"

"Right."

Geralt grunts.

"Geralt?"

"Hmm?"

"Thank you."

Geralt lifts his head and catches his smile and Jaskier sees the remaining tension ease from his shoulders.

"I'm sorry I didn't use your gift as intended but I can hardly be blamed considering that it was the ugliest medallion that I've ever had the misfortune to see. Truly," he emphasises to Geralt's puzzled expression, "Horrendously ugly."

"Like the jumper," the seamstress unhelpfully pipes up.

Jaskier sighs in frustration and wipes his hands over his eyes, not wishing to see Geralt's expression when he realises exactly how much he has divulged to this stranger. "Yes, Cathy, thank you, like the jumper."

"It's practical," Geralt counters. "It doesn't need to be *pretty*."

“Pretty is my profession, if you recall,” Jaskier says, quoting that conversation they had back in Novigrad. “It matters to me.”

Geralt grunts, and then he’s turning tail and heading out the door without another word. Jaskier turns back to the seamstress with a puzzled expression, but she only gives him an understanding look and a shrug. “Men,” she grunts, at once both an exasperation and a curse.

“Quite.”

-

Jaskier feels much more himself when dressed in new court-worthy clothes. It may not be the highest finery - only a pair of fitted cotton breeches and a pale blue doublet over a clean white shirt - but after being clad in scratchy century-old fabric for the best part of a month it feels divine.

He finds Geralt in the stables. He’s fishing for a compliment, honestly, when he approaches (if Geralt desired him in those drab clothes then he ought to look utterly ravishing in these fine silks) but unfortunately Geralt’s attention is fixed solely with Roach. He’s petting her and murmuring to her and feeding her a carrot. He’s tempted to leave them to this quiet moment but once again, Geralt glances over his shoulder and invites him in.

“I found a buyer,” Geralt informs Jaskier as he continues spoiling the old girl. “On the outskirts of town. A mother of three children. The eldest wants to learn to ride, with the intent of selling their goods in Ard Carraigh next year. They have a cart but no...” Geralt trails off, overwhelmed, and rests his head against Roach’s with closed eyes and a deep, shaking, exhale. Jaskier rests his hand on his back in solidarity and Geralt takes another breath before rising and attempting the sentence again. “They have a nice paddock. Plenty of space for her to roam. Shelter. And a daughter willing to learn tack.”

“Sounds ideal,” Jaskier says earnestly, and looks to Roach. She’s a smart girl - she will have sensed the mood, if not the occasion - but she looks perfectly content. It’s the best they can hope for.

“I don’t want to buy another yet,” Geralt admits softly, his attention still on Roach. “We can do that in the Spring.”

“Okay,” Jaskier says sincerely, “Whatever you need.” He rubs another comforting circle on his back. “When are they expecting us?”

Us, again, Jaskier states on purpose. He will not let Geralt face this alone.

Geralt relaxes beneath his palm, as if he recognises the gesture. “Tomorrow morn. Come with?”

“Of course,” Jaskier says and brushes a kiss against Geralt’s cheek. “Take your time, I’ll be in the tavern when you’re ready, trying to raise enough funds for dinner.”

-

Jaskier is very much looking forward to performing a full set tonight while Geralt takes Roach on one last contract. Jaskier only had energy for a handful of songs last night which was barely enough to sate his appetite. He had missed this dearly while locked up in Kaer Morhen - the energy of a captivated audience, the passionate (drunken) singing of patrons, and the clink of coin landing in his purse as tribute to his talents - performing gives him a thrill that is impossible to sate elsewhere.

It is so pleasant, indeed, that what comes afterwards jars him severely. It's late. Geralt has already slunk past the rowdy crowd to their room upstairs and Jaskier is at the bar, attempting to charm the lovely bartender Phillip into bestowing them a free bottle of wine, and has mostly succeeded, when he catches the grumbling further down the bar -

"That freak is in town again. The white haired one."

A sound of disgust, and then, "Thought they locked 'em all up for winter."

"Wish they'd lock 'em all year round. Freaks like that shouldn't be allowed to roam. Dangerous folk. No matter what that prissy bard preaches-"

At that, their eyes lock. The three brutish men, several pints in, and Jaskier.

That little thrill of danger tingles down Jaskier's spine. Geralt is normally here to hold him back in these types of situations. He'll grunt "ignore them" and physically drag Jaskier away before he can get his claws in.

However, this time... this time Geralt is not here.

"Got a problem, freak-lover?"

Jaskier smirks as he steps towards them. "Maybe I do, gentlemen. Maybe I do."

-

Jaskier returns to the room sometime later with a split lip, a forming bruise on his cheek, and aching, bloody, hands.

Geralt takes one look at him from where he reclines in the bed and sighs with resigned disappointment. "I heard a scuffle downstairs, I should have assumed you were involved."

Jaskier laughs and is dismayed to find that the motion hurts a little. Ah, the kick to his ribs. Yes, he remembers that now.

Geralt frowns and rises from the bed to walk towards him. "Funny," he says, as he studies the damage to his cheek with gentle, prying, fingers, "Didn't think we'd been in this town long enough for you to put your sausage in the wrong pantry." He scents him, as if trying to track down the perpetrator. "The seamstress?"

Jaskier blames the injuries for how long it takes him to process that question. "What? No? I-" he shakes his head - *ow* - as he understands the connection being made. "Cathy's lovely but... no. Why do you always assume that that's what happened?"

“Because,” Geralt says with an exasperated but fond look, “That is, usually, what happens.”

Jaskier takes a moment to study Geralt’s face. He genuinely doesn’t seem to be put off by the idea of him laying with someone else - there’s no judgement or jealousy there, only concern about the resulting bruises. Given Geralt’s reluctance to discuss these matters, he didn’t actually know until this moment if he was permitted other dalliances while entangled with Geralt, but it seems that despite his possessiveness in bed, he doesn’t actually seem at all controlling outside of it. Jaskier could have had an affair with Cathy this afternoon and Geralt would have been perfectly okay with it. Jaskier feels a weight lift from his shoulders as he brushes his lips against Geralt’s in a silent thank you. Being monogamous, even with Yennefer in the equation, would not suit either of their lifestyles, he knows.

Geralt steps away to wet a rag in the basin of water and then looks over his shoulder and states, “It was a slight then.”

“What?”

“If it was not an affair, then it was a slight. What did they say this time?” Geralt grunts as he takes Jaskier’s hands softly between his and starts cleaning the fresh cuts on his knuckles. “That you sing worse than their wives’ strangled cats? That they prefer the songs of one Valdo Marx? Whatever it was, I’m sure it was not worth *this*,” he says pointedly as he tests the flexibility of each individual finger and Jaskier winces with every movement.

He *knows* him, Jaskier realises with awe. Geralt cared enough to remember not only the name of his most hated rival, but also remembers word for word the feedback that Jaskier received after his first bardic tournament. When did he tell Geralt that story? Sixteen years ago perhaps? Seventeen? And Geralt *remembered*. Jaskier suddenly feels very warm and flustered under Geralt’s ministrations.

“On the contrary,” Jaskier gasps as Geralt turns his attention to his cheek, spreading healing salve over the purpling bruise, “It was very much worth it.”

“Hmm?”

Jaskier huffs a laugh. “Don’t worry. It was mild as these things go. I’ve heard a lot worse said about you but I...” he hesitates at the same time that Geralt’s fingers hesitate on his cheek. Geralt catches his eyes as if to ask ‘it was about me?’ but of course it was about him. Jaskier never sees red the way he does when ungrateful clots insult his witcher. And today, of all days, he wasn’t having it. “Did you complete the contract?” he asks, before Geralt can ask for the unsavory details.

Geralt grunts and nods. “Wraith.”

“That’s all I get?” Jaskier teases. “‘Wraith?’ Geralt, I’ve heard more compelling tales from-”

“How many men?”

“Three. Was it a nightwraith or-?”

“You took on *three*-?”

“Yes, but if you recall, I didn’t say it ended particularly well-”

“How did it end then?”

“With that lovely bottle of red smashed over the head of one of them and Phillip ordering the lot of us out the bar before they could retaliate further. So this *wraith*-?”

But Geralt is kissing him soundly before he can voice his question and Jaskier isn’t one to turn down such a wonderful kiss. Geralt breaks away with another inquisitive sniff and a resulting sigh. “That’s why you smell like wine,” he deduces.

Jaskier hums distractedly as he lets his hands wander over the plains of Geralt’s body. “Yes, I imagine the poor fellow is still out cold where I left him, lying face down in a puddle of wasted wine and blood-”

He’s cut off again by Geralt’s urgent lips against his and it’s so intoxicating that soon Jaskier forgets entirely that he was trying to prise a story out of the man. It was only a wraith. No great loss. Geralt leads him back towards the bed, their mouths only parting long enough to shuck clothing and Geralt asking - “Are you well enough for-?”

Jaskier slaps his hand away from where it had been hovering protectively over his sore ribs. “Just cuts and bruises, my dear. Nothing that will keep me from loving you.”

He meant *making love to you* but if Geralt notices the slip of tongue then he doesn’t say anything as he lets Jaskier crawl atop him and trail kisses down his abdomen.

“Will you-?” Geralt asks. The aborted sentence catches Jaskier’s attention immediately as he rises to eye-level once again.

“Tell me,” he encourages.

Geralt’s eyes flutter shut and then open with a new determination. “I want to forget about tomorrow. Whatever it takes. I won’t sleep otherwise.”

Jaskier nods sincerely, knowing that Roach’s upcoming departure must still weigh heavily on Geralt’s mind. “We could try-” he doesn’t know how to explain this, so he does what Geralt always does and relies on actions instead as he grasps Geralt’s wrist in his hand and squeezes hard, almost painfully.

Geralt groans in a very good, very encouraging way. Good. From Jaskier’s experience, being submissive with the intensity he’s suggesting is a very effective way to silence the mind. The best sleep he ever had was after five hours of being on the receiving end of such treatment.

“Yes,” Geralt says, and then, “I trust you,” which brings Jaskier’s thoughts to a rapid, stumbling halt.

Jaskier curses empathically and then trails his hand lovingly through Geralt’s hair as if to demonstrate how much this means to him. Trust doesn’t come easy to Geralt, he knows.

Geralt said he trusted him to take care of him back at Kaer Morhen but this is the evidence of that, here and now. He strives to be worthy of it as he takes Geralt in his hands and does his best to dismantle him.

-

It works like a charm. Geralt is passed out afterwards; breathing deep and rhythmically with burn marks around his wrists from where he was bound and a reddened hole from where he was fucked. Jaskier doesn't know if it was the actual sex that did it, or the gentle aftercare afterwards - Geralt barely keeping his eyes open as Jaskier cleaned him and petted him and whispered all sorts of praise into his ear - but, regardless, the man sleeps deeper than Jaskier's ever witnessed.

Jaskier gives himself a few minutes to admire the rare sight before Geralt's hands sleepily wander in search of him, and he allows himself to be pulled into an embrace, following his lover into slumber.

-

When Jaskier wakes the next morning, Geralt is still blissfully asleep beside him. He doesn't want to wake him but he also knows Geralt will want as much time with Roach as possible before they depart. After a moment of deliberation, he makes the excruciating decision to wake his sleeping lover. Jaskier alleviates his dismay for the situation by bestowing kisses down along Geralt's spine until the witcher stirs to wakefulness somewhere near the curvature.

"Hmm?" Geralt asks, sleepily reaching behind him to grasp Jaskier's hair and tug him upright.

Jaskier eagerly follows, utterly enamoured with sleepy, tactile, Geralt and starts kissing his neck instead. "It's morn," he murmurs against the skin.

Geralt mutters a dismissal, but then, a palpable tension builds in his shoulders when he must be awake enough to realise what awaits them.

"It's only minutes past dawn," Jaskier assures him before Geralt can ask, petting his hair soothingly. "But I thought you might like to see our girl one last time before she goes on her next adventure."

Geralt turns his head across the pillow and looks at Jaskier with sorrowful, yet earnest, eyes. "Thank you," he whispers, still rough from sleep, and Jaskier kisses the rare words from his lips.

-

Jaskier combs and braids Roach's mane with great care while Geralt attends to everything else. Jaskier would never normally say that Geralt gets "anxious" or "antsy" but in the hour leading up to Roach's departure, he struggles to find any other words to describe Geralt's uncoordinated, harried, movements.

“You know she doesn’t care for your needless hair styling,” Geralt snaps when he clocks what Jaskier’s doing. If Jaskier wasn’t so well-versed in Geralt-speak and didn’t know where his anger truly stemmed from, that comment might have hurt. He knows better now though. Geralt only lashes out like this when he’s feeling insecure.

Jaskier sighs, and ties off the minute braid in her hair, before picking out another top segment further down the mane to repeat the process. “Then allow me to annoy her for one last time.”

Geralt grunts, and the next pass of his brush is strong enough that Roach breaks from Jaskier’s hold to snort her disapproval at him.

Jaskier laughs, glad to have her on his side, as he ducks to allow her neck to pass over him again. He returns diligently to his work and when he hears Geralt’s brush fall back into his regular rhythm, adds, “It’s my way of saying goodbye, Geralt. You get to leave your tack and your saddle. If the best I can give her is this, then allow me to give it,” he requests softly, stroking her flank so he doesn’t have to look at Geralt’s derisive expression.

“That is... very thoughtful,” Geralt muses, and when Jaskier looks, there’s not a shred of derision in his countenance.

-

The family are as lovely as Geralt had described and the daughter is prancing around the paddock with excitement when they arrive. The girl takes to weaving flowers through Roach’s braids while the mother and Geralt exchange coin and advice and the eldest son examines Roach for damage.

Roach accepts the girl’s touch and the boy’s scrutiny with barely a protest. Jaskier doesn’t know if he is personally to blame for wearing the mare down with his endless enthusiasm over the years or whether it is simply the cumulation of years that has gentled her. The mare’s behaviour now mirrors that of a doting grandmother; one who watches with tired amusement as toddlers clamber over her; knowing that their clumsy hands are indicative of love, not ill-will.

Roach deserves a peaceful retirement and Geralt has managed to find her just that. There will be no monsters here. There will be shelter and a loving family. It’s all any of them can hope for in the end.

Geralt watches with a stern expression and folded arms as the boy takes Roach for an experimental trot round the paddock. She doesn’t hesitate or falter once with her new rider on her back and after a couple of minutes of faultless riding, Jaskier watches Geralt’s jaw unclench.

“She’ll be happy here,” Jaskier states. “She’s already happy.”

He knows Geralt must see it, but sometimes it’s beneficial to hear your own thoughts out loud. Geralt nods and calls back to the mother. They secure the deal.

-

For a while, they lean against the fence, watching in contemplative silence as Roach is acquainted with her new family at the far end of the paddock. Jaskier purposefully presses their arms together on the railing, wordlessly reminding Geralt that he's not alone in this. Geralt asked him to come for this very reason - he needed the support and Jaskier is here to provide it.

He hopes the distant sound of children's laughter and the outline of Roach being well groomed ease whatever anxieties he still has over her retirement. It was the right decision.

"I am glad," Geralt says eventually, breaking the silence, "That Yennefer did what she did."

Jaskier huffs a laugh. "You might have to narrow that down, my friend. Yennefer does a great many things. Most of them ill-advised and otherworldly," he jests, because he cannot speak of Yennefer and *not* jest.

Geralt smiles crookedly, amused, but not admitting it, as his eyes follow the outline of Roach as she's led to the stable. "In Talgon," Geralt clarifies. "And in Rinde. She extended your life, and did so again. I am... glad of it."

"Oh," Jaskier says, genuinely caught off-guard. They haven't even discussed his new lease of life. He was glad when Yennefer told him too, of course. Every mortal wishes for more time, especially if there is a great love they wish to stay for, but he hadn't given it much thought past the opportunity to spend more time with Geralt.

He's trying to find the words to reply, and trying to puzzle out the connection between Geralt's statement and their current predicament when Geralt takes the explanation upon himself.

"I am not sure I could have said goodbye to you in the same manner."

"Oh," Jaskier says again, the pieces slotting together painfully as the stable door closes behind Roach. Geralt did not want to see Jaskier get old and die.

"Truthfully," Geralt says, with a little wrinkle on his brow and his hands clasped firmly in front of him, "That might be why I held back all these years. Knowing that day would come."

Jaskier hums in thought and presses himself even closer to Geralt in what wordless comfort he can offer. "I don't know why that thought didn't occur to me before..." he whispers, because he had never once considered that Geralt's emotional distance during their acquaintanceship was born of anything other than annoyance. "Lovers bestowed different lifespans...the witcher cursed to watch the mortal grow old and die... I should have thought of it," he muses. "It would have made an excellent ballad."

Geralt snorts in amusement, taken off guard, and Jaskier playfully bumps their shoulders until Geralt is jostled from his meditative stance against the gate.

"Come," Geralt says, holding out his hand in invitation. "To the market."

Jaskier frowns, but takes the hand nonetheless. “You don’t want to say goodbye?” he asks with an incline of his head towards the stable.

Geralt shakes his head. “I’ve said all I can say, and done all that I can do. She knows that she was loved, and will be again.”

“Holy shit, Geralt, that was actually something approaching poetic.”

Geralt smiles in that dorky, lopsided way of his, and tugs on Jaskier’s hand. “Are you coming or not?”

Jaskier nearly trips over in his eagerness to get to him. “Yes, yes, you impatient man. No need to nag.”

-

Geralt holds his hand all the way back to the village as if he needs something to hold onto after letting go of Roach’s reins. Jaskier’s smart enough not to comment on it but when they approach the market square and their hands reluctantly untangle, he stays close enough to Geralt that their fingers can still occasionally brush as they walk. It’s raining, light and constant, and it’s easy to hide wandering fingers under cloaks.

“Distract yourself for a minute,” Geralt requests as he turns towards a nearby street. “I need to tend to something.”

“Oh no,” Jaskier says, hooking his fingers until Geralt’s sleeve and tugging him back towards him. “No, no, no, no, no you don’t.”

Geralt frowns, as if he doesn’t understand Jaskier’s reluctance.

“This is the thing! That you do!” Jaskier exclaims, with arms wide and flailing enough that he nearly sends a passing lady’s basket of vegetables flying. “I am *not* pulling slyzard teeth from your thigh or cleaning siren guts out of your hair again,” Jaskier protests with hands on hips, knowing that he will certainly do those things and more.

Geralt frowns. “We’re far too north for slyzards and sirens only inhabit the coast-”

Jaskier throws up his hands in frustration because the name of the beasts hardly mattered when he was trying to make a *point*. “You’re doing that thing where you say ‘oh, I’ll just be a minute’ and come back covered in gore. I was having a perfectly pleasant morning without this being sprung on me. So, please, can whatever beastie awaits you, please await some more, preferably until I know that you’ve eaten something more substantial than a tankard of ale and a crumb of bread.”

Jaskier finishes his rant with hands on hips, mindless of the drizzle dampening his hair no doubt making him look more like a drowned rat than a scorned lover. But, Jaskier won’t allow it. Geralt has had an emotionally fraught day and the last thing he needs is to get roped into a contract, unarmoured, with no more than a dagger strapped to his thigh, and a potion on his belt. He simply won’t tolerate such tomfoolery.

Geralt, however, is looking at him with a small, amused smile.

“What,” Jaskier bites.

Geralt reaches forward and tenderly strokes his cheek, moving with it a wet strand of hair that had clung to the warm skin. Jaskier’s irritation drains out of him at the loving touch. He wonders if Geralt has any idea at the sheer scope of the power he holds over Jaskier.

“I assure you,” Geralt says, “That this time I do mean to be precisely one minute. If I am any longer than five, I give you permission to drag me out of the third door on the right and force some stew down me. Are you satisfied?”

Jaskier swallows as he suddenly finds his mouth watering at the very idea of manhandling Geralt with the intent to take care of him. Maybe last night did a little something for him too. “Very,” he answers with a cracked voice, and if Geralt smells the lust emanating from him then so be it.

Geralt merely smirks and steps forward a fraction of an inch until he can brush his lips against Jaskier’s cheek, the sight hidden by the bellowing hoods of their cloaks. “I’ll be two minutes,” he promises.

Jaskier glares after him, not having escaped his notice that the promised “one minute” has already escalated into “two”.

Nevertheless, he occupies himself for a number of minutes browsing the market stalls and buying little treats for Ciri and a few more necessities for winter. When Geralt returns to him a few minutes later, there’s a small sappy smile on his face that Jaskier knows better than to question.

-

They eat. They pack their bags. Jaskier gives another sincere apology to Philip for last night’s fisticuffs (there is still a noticeable dark patch on the tavern’s wooden floor) and then they are heading south again through - lovely, more hail.

By nightfall, the hail has turned gentler and colder into light snowfall and by the time Jaskier is slipping into his bedroll by the dwindling fire, he has resorted to wearing the damn ugly jumper again, just to keep warm. Geralt sits beside him, sharpening his blades after the rabid dogs they encountered, but mostly, Jaskier thinks, just keeping him company.

Jaskier, despite his intentions, does not sleep. He is too cold and too restless.

Geralt raises an eyebrow after some time of tossing and turning and puts aside his sword. Jaskier thinks he’s making a move to join him until Geralt pulls something else from the saddlebags. A bottle of wine.

“Holy Melitele,” Jaskier breathes, sitting bolt upright to pry the bottle from his hands. He checks the label, the vintage, but it’s exactly as he thought. “This is the bottle I was so kindly

gifted last night. The one that now paints the floor of that tavern... and likely, now I think of it, also the inside of the brute's skull."

Geralt smirks and he uses his penknife to uncork the bottle. "The very same," he says, offering Jaskier the open bottle. "I sourced a replacement from the bartender."

"Not for free I imagine," Jaskier says and he swigs straight from the proffered bottle. *Gods*, that was worth the wait.

Geralt chuckles, probably at how ridiculous Jaskier must look deep in the throes of ecstasy from some very mediocre wine. "No, I think the man swindled me for about triple its worth."

Jaskier rolls his eyes and pushes the wine back into Geralt's hands, who obligingly takes a sip, before passing it back. "Then why did you do it, you fool?" Jaskier asks. "Not that I'm not enjoying this fine vintage-" he says, taking another swig, "-but it's hardly worth what it is at regular price, yet alone at such inflation."

Geralt shrugs and looks ahead at their dwindling fire. "I thought it would make you happy."

Jaskier ducks his head to hide the unconscious indulgent smile that spreads wide across his face and when he's recovered, takes another swig of wine. "It does," he confirms. "It has. I'm very happy."

Then it's Geralt's turn to duck his head, but he does it much smoother than Jaskier, busying himself with the bag at his feet. "I must admit," he says coyly as Jaskier takes another swig, the alcohol warming his body pleasantly, "that it might not have been my only motivation."

Jaskier laughs bodily, resting his weight against Geralt as he does so. The snow is falling between them and he can't resist the urge to hold out his palm and watch it dissolve on his fingertips. "Wanted to get me drunk?" he teases. "You know I need no such incentives to lay with you, you beautiful, beautiful, man."

Geralt flushes, and wrestles the bottle out of Jaskier's grip for a drink of his own, before returning it to his outreached hands. "I thought it might make this easier."

"Make what easier?" Jaskier slurs, the alcohol apparently already having its intended effect as he leans against Geralt, sleepy and warm.

Geralt sighs, as if steeling himself, and then something is being placed into his lap. Jaskier frowns and puts the bottle aside to examine it. "What's this?" he asks, clumsily picking up the leather bundle but when he turns to Geralt, he's looking away, distancing himself. It is an answer he must puzzle out on his own then.

Jaskier sits upright again and blinks a few times until his eyes adjust to the detail in the darkness. It's some kind of weapon. Not one he's seen in Geralt's possession before though. Jaskier frowns and examines the leather sheath and its strappings. It's a dagger. No, smaller than a dagger. Barely more than a knife. Designed to be strapped to the ankle, perhaps. Small enough to escape notice. The leather is a dark brown and the sheath is engraved with something - a bird in a garden, music notes rising from its open beak - and this is miraculous

enough until Jaskier lays his eyes on the bone handle of the knife. Dandelions, bluebells, gardenias. The same flowers that spread into the garden around the bird. The engraving is intricate and beautiful and is truly one of the most wondrous sights Jaskier has ever beheld. He pulls the blade from its sheath and tests it against the pad of his thumb, finding that the slightest indentation is enough to draw blood. Sharp. Very sharp.

Of course, he reasons with amusement, even the most beautiful gift from Geralt would also be practical.

“Geralt...” he whispers, unable to tear his eyes or his fingers away from such a magnificent gift. “It’s beautiful. You mean to give this to me?”

Geralt clears his throat. “If it is to your liking.”

“If it’s to my...? If it’s to *my*...?” Jaskier can’t bring himself to fail the question three times and shakes his head instead. “Geralt, I’ve never seen a weapon this exquisite. I have no idea where you found it and I-”

“Got it made special,” Geralt grunts. “Not the blade but the...” he waves his hand at the leather in his lap, “the rest of it. You said you needed pretty. I got you... *pretty*.”

The word sounds foreign in his mouth but the sentiment is strong and true. Geralt truly went to all this effort so that this time, Jaskier wouldn’t mistake his gift for some disposable trinket. Geralt thought if he made it *pretty* that Jaskier would actually make use of it. This is the closest to a love letter that Jaskier will ever receive from the taciturn man and he holds it close to his heart as he sheathes the weapon and immediately puts it to use.

Geralt eyes him as he straps the knife to his ankle and nods in approval when it’s fitted. It’s a perfect fit, feels natural too, like no other blade ever has in Jaskier’s possession.

“Next time they come for you,” Geralt says sincerely, “They won’t be able to *take* you.”

Jaskier sighs, overcome. He didn’t realise his capture had unsettled Geralt to this extent, but it’s more than that; it’s a direct confirmation that Geralt has taken back what he said in Talgon. *Don’t do that again - Getting caught. Playing hero. Coming after me. Any of it.* He trusts him now. He knows Jaskier will return for him. The gifting of a weapon is a silent way to state his support.

“Thank you,” Jaskier whispers, laden with meaning. He gives Geralt a watery smile when he finally meets his eyes. There’s still a wariness - a shyness, almost - in Geralt’s eyes. Jaskier doesn’t understand why at first - Geralt has given him many gifts and never with this much fanfare - but then he realises the difference. This *is* with fanfare. This is very much with purpose. With intent. This is a *declaration*.

Jaskier looks across to Geralt’s nervous expression, his eyes cast to the ground, as Jaskier traces his fingers over the artful engravings and he realises exactly what kind of declaration this is.

Love.

Geralt cannot yet speak it out loud. He's toying around the idea like Jaskier did with that damn lute metaphor in the library. Geralt feels it but does not yet have the strength to say it - words being so hard for him to grasp. It's not that Geralt has been keeping words from him, it's just that he's been speaking a different language.

Geralt's love language is actions and gift-giving. Jaskier's is music and words. They've been speaking at cross purposes. Jaskier's been waiting for words to assure him that they're on the same page but he shouldn't have been, he realises, he should have been waiting for this.

He takes another swig of wine, needing the liquid courage, before he turns back to Geralt.

He needs to return the gesture in kind, in *his* language.

"I would like to travel with you in the Spring," he says, a nice safe start, something that Geralt has already implied will happen.

Geralt looks at him eagerly, and a bit confused, probably trying to parse the logic that brought Jaskier from knives to forward planning.

"For as long as you'll have me," Jaskier adds, a little more daring. He takes another sip of wine. "In whatever manner you'll have me. I am... yours."

He lets the words linger between them. Emotions addressed but not directly voiced. A delicate line they walk. Jaskier wants to say more but things still seem too tentative between them to push. An acknowledgement that they both want this, that they both *feel* this, is all that they need for now.

Geralt, ever so slowly, raises his eyes to Jaskier's and nods.

Jaskier releases the breath he was holding and takes another swig. He sees now why Geralt thought wine would ease the way. "Phew, that was intense," he exclaims, leaning back dramatically against Geralt as he had been before this entire conversation started. "You know you don't have to say anything now, right? Just let me know, when you can, what this is for you. I'll wait. For now, just... keep showing me." He grins and tilts his head up until he can see Geralt's soft expression looking back down at him. "I like it when you show me."

Geralt smiles coyly and lowers his head until he can capture Jaskier in a sweet kiss.

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Months later, on a mountaintop in the early morn, Geralt will say those words to him. He will say "my heart is with you" and Jaskier will know exactly what it means. But for now...for now, all Jaskier needs are Geralt's loving touches and the gifts wrapped around him. Geralt loves him, and respects him, and trusts him... and he shows him every day.

The dagger design is lifted with kind permission from [Oh Barren Valley by Rarae](#). You'll learn about significance of the design when we're in Geralt's POV later. Spoiler: it's sappy.

A few of you have asked & I can now confirm - There's two installments left in this series. Next, Yennefer and the OT3 scene of your dreams, and lastly, Geralt's POV so you can witness just how mushy he's become.

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!